

102 AND COUNTING: THE CORE SOUND CLUB RETURNS

BY BILL MORRIS

PHOTOGRAPHY BY SCOTT TAYLOR

On a blustery and overcast Friday six days before Christmas the temperatures are in the thirties with lows forecast to fall into the twenties. Beyond the harbor tucked into the Down East village of Davis a twenty-knot nor'wester has whipped Core Sound into a brown slurry topped by whitecaps.

It's the kind of day that makes most boat owners think about winterizing, but members of the Core Banks Club are eagerly loading gear over the transom of their 27-foot custom-built Harkers Island wooden boat. The handsome vessel, crafted from native juniper by the traditional master boat-builder Clem Willis, is fresh from refitting at the yard of Lloyd Pigott in nearby Gloucester.

"Y'all got your radios?" John Hagan shouts over the idling diesel motor. "You need any more warm clothes?" Wiry in build, with thin sandy hair and an intense but friendly manner, he is obviously the organizer. The others shout back at him, mocking his efforts with the sort of spirited hooting that only lifelong friends have the license to indulge in.

A cold rain starts to blow sideways just as the white boat's trademark flared bow clears the harbor entrance, but that only elevates the already gleeful mood. The men pile out of the lukewarm cabin to crowd one another in the wet cockpit and point excitedly past the bow at the ragged clouds descending over their destination – South Core Banks.

Why would this crew of successful, forty-something Greensboro businessmen display such a downright joyful attitude over the





prospect of a boat ride into the teeth of a massive cold front? The answer is in the nature of the gear they were loading, which included 12-gauge shotguns, camo raincoats, boxes of shells, and a young black Lab named Drake. With their guide, Capt. James Willis, at the wheel of the "CBC," the latest generation in the century-old Core Banks Club was going off on its inaugural trip in the perfectly miserable weather that duck hunters dream of.

Once safely across the sound, the men settled in, two for each blind, and they did what duck hunters have always done: scout the sky, try to stay warm, and talk non-stop while waiting for passing ducks to be fooled within range by the decoys bobbing on the surface.

"Core Banks Club, originally the Carteret Gun and Rod Club, was the oldest of the four duck clubs that were on Core Sound. And now we're the last," John Hagan says while sitting behind a screen of green bay myrtle branches shielding one of the club's blinds. A long succession of the simple six-by-six foot shanties have stood in the same spots for over a hundred years, near the edge of a shoal just west of where "the old club's" abandoned lodge sits rotting amid the spartina grass. In its heyday as many as 16 guests were served there in style by a full-time caretaker, cleaning lady, and cook. Pilots landed private planes on the now-overgrown runway, two generators kept the lights on, and a commercial ice-maker kept the fish cold and the martinis colder. The original structure lasted from the club's founding in 1902 until a Memorial Day weekend fire destroyed it in 1970. The present, abandoned structure was completed in time for duck season that same year. But now, in the low winter light of perfect duck weather, the barren gray building looks ghostly beneath a bower of low scudding clouds. It is U.S.

Government property, and has been since 1974, when the Cape Lookout National Seashore was formed. At that time the membership received a 25-year lease to continue using the site. When the lease expired, in November 1999, "the old club" effectively ceased to exist.

John Hagan couldn't bear such an abrogation of history – or stand the thought of not having a place to hunt and fish on Core Banks, this magical place first introduced to him thirty years

CUTLINES

before by his father. Together with another member, the late David Sachsenmair, Hagan formed a new legal entity, Core Banks Club, LLC, which in late 2000 purchased 10 acres of land on the mainland side of the sound. John's brother, Greensboro attorney Charles "Chip" Hagan, has joined, as did fellow "old club" member Claude Dawson, president of Dawson Textile Machinery. Lee King is founder/CEO of After Disaster, a firm that specializes in storm clean-up. Jim Bryan heads up Fairystone Fabrics, and Lee McAllister of Weaver Investments can fly his fellow members into Beaufort's Smith Field on board his company's Beechcraft Baron. John Hagan, Core Banks Club's president and treasurer, operates two businesses – a plastics recycling firm and a hydroelectric company – and he is also secretary of the non-profit North Carolina Wildlife Habitat Foundation.

After two years of planning and permits – interrupted at the last minute by Hurricane Isabel - the six charter members moved into their comfortable 1500 square-foot temporary clubhouse and quickly filled it with memorabilia rescued from the old place on the banks. The ten-acre wooded lot is home to osprey and egrets, deer, and for one day, at least, a coastal black bear. An existing narrow canal will offer access from the sound to a planned boat basin, and a pier will provide dock space along the property's 700 feet of waterfront. This year construction should begin on the reborn club's permanent headquarters, a three-story, 3,600 square-foot traditional clubhouse with an elevated screened gallery providing unexcelled views across the sound. The current structure will then serve as an annex to accommodate overflow guests during the busy summer vacation season.

"We knew it was going to be a hard project," says Lee King. "And we're not even close to completion."

A traditional duck hunting club has always been much more than just a place to stay warm during the six to ten weeks of winter waterfowl season, and Core Sound Club is no exception. With at least seven boats (including a single-car ferry), a brace of kayaks, a trailer full of fishing gear, and a four-wheel drive truck for making tracks on the beach, the club is completely outfitted for year-round family fun. The six members' families include a dozen boys and girls who already know how to make the sound and beach their summer vacation headquarters.

"When we lost the old club," says Claude Dawson, "all of the kids cried."

CUTLINES





CUTLINES

Sitting in their blinds, only a few hundred yards from the deteriorating ghost building that might have been their own legacy, it would be easy for the members of the Core Banks Club to complain bitterly about “the government” and its practices. Even though the 1974 members were compensated for their shares, it was and still is impossible to put a fair price on three acres of Paradise. But these men and their families know better than most the value of what the Cape Lookout National Seashore has preserved, the wildlife habitat

and the pristine beaches that remain for all to enjoy.

The club, too, is preserving the past so that it can be appreciated in the future. A program is on to collect decoys and other artifacts from “the old club” and donate them to the new Core Sound Waterfowl Museum on Harkers Island. Members have also donated directly to the museum and helped its director, Karen Willis Amspacher, attract several in-kind corporate donations.

“Our interest in the Core Sound Club is that it continues on with the hunting traditions that have been so much part of Down East’s history,” says Amspacher. “Hunt clubs were the first tourist destinations, and provided markets for local decoys as well as jobs for local men as guides, and local women as cooks.”

Honoring the past is the serious side of the Core Sound Club revival, but when the hunt is finished and the members gather in the cabin of their wooden boat the mood is jovial. Thanks to some good shooting there will be a feast of ducks on the grill. Amid the back-slapping revelry the retriever, Drake, is curled up at the captain’s feet, worn out from retrieving redheads and buffleheads. Behind the cold front the sky has cleared and the men once again leave the cabin’s warmth for the view from the open cockpit, where they stare up at the same bright array of winter constellations that have always guided the hunter home.

