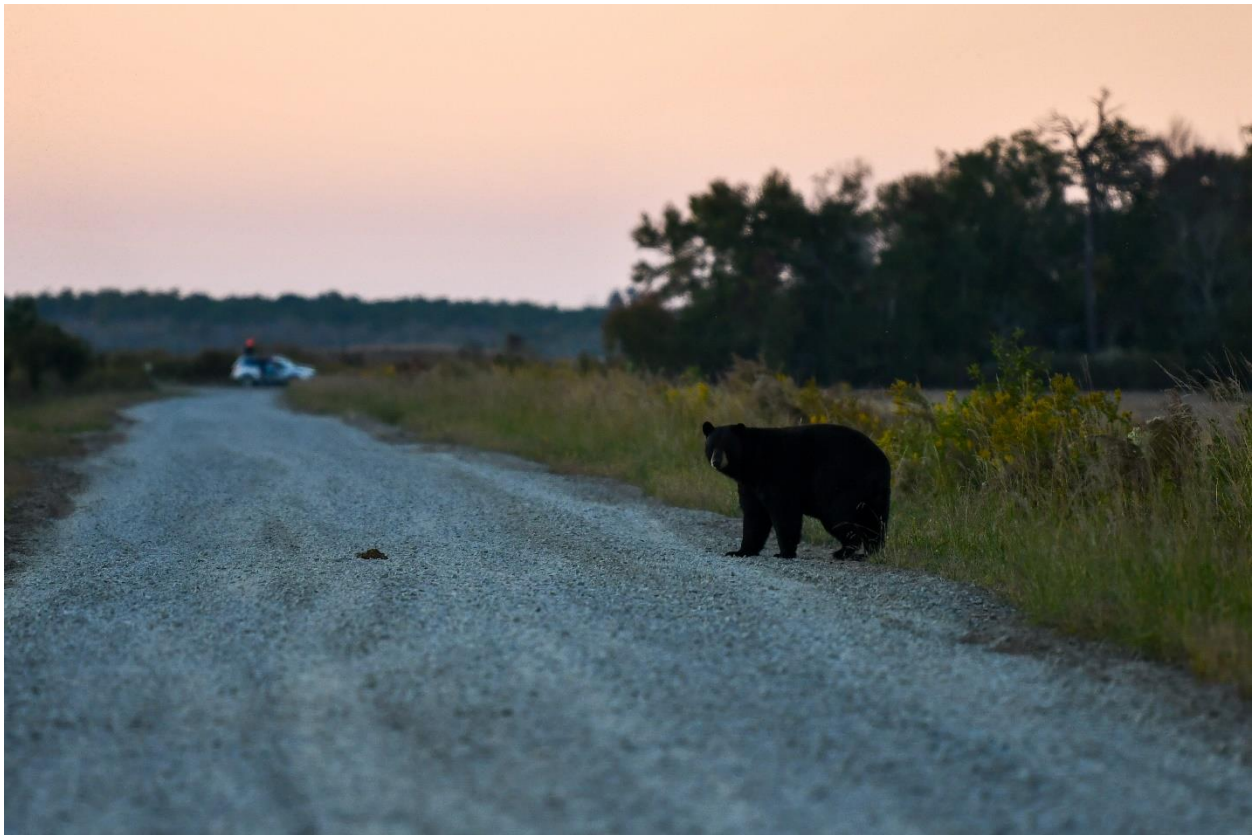


In between work trips I had the chance to take a long weekend in the Outer Banks, North Carolina with my wife. Because we had never been to the Outer Banks and because she is a good sport, but not quite as into mammal watching as I am, we mixed several hours of targeted mammal watching with other activities. We drove Friday morning from Raleigh to Manteo for an excellent lunch at Avenue Grille and Goods before entering the Alligator River National Wildlife Refuge for a guided kayak tour booked through Outer Banks Kayak Tours. Our guide Joe happened to be the company founder and it was just the three of us. We met at the end of Buffalo City Rd and put in the water on the edge of Milltail Lake. The 2 hour trip skirted the edge of Milltail Lake then paddled up the creek that connects Milltail and Sawyer Lakes. After exploring Sawyer Lake we returned to the starting point via the canal that parallels the Sandy Ridge Trail. We saw 4-5 alligators and numerous turtles but no mammals. The weather was perfect and we were the only people on the water and Joe was a perfect balance of insightful and interesting while letting us just enjoy nature. Upon completion we walked the ½ mile Sandy Ridge Trail to it’s end and back seeing a couple of Eastern Gray Squirrels and startling another critter that we heard rustling away through the brush but did not see. I only brought by 70-200mm lens and a 1.4x teleconverter rather than my 200-400mm lens due to the packing constraints of sandwiching this trip in between two work trips so my photos aren’t as good as I’d hoped.



We spent the remaining 2.5 hours of daylight driving the dirt roads of the refuge. At first we stuck to the “Wildlife Drive” marked in red on the map above. We passed a number of more primitive roads that led into the fields because the signs indicated that the roads were closed even though the gates were opened. Later, after seeing another vehicle driving on one of the roads I pulled up closer to the sign and read the small print that the roads were only closed for a few months in the winter. That opened up the refuge quite a bit. Driving down Osprey Rd my wife saw the tall grass moving along the side of the road and asked me to stop. A few seconds later a black bear emerged onto the road 20 yards away. As it looked at us I rolled the window down to take a picture but it had disappeared before I could snap a picture. River Otters are apparently common in the many canals that parallel the roads but the thick vegetation limits your view as you drive along. We didn’t make a committed effort to stop and watch from points where you could look down the canals for any real distances and struck out on the otters.

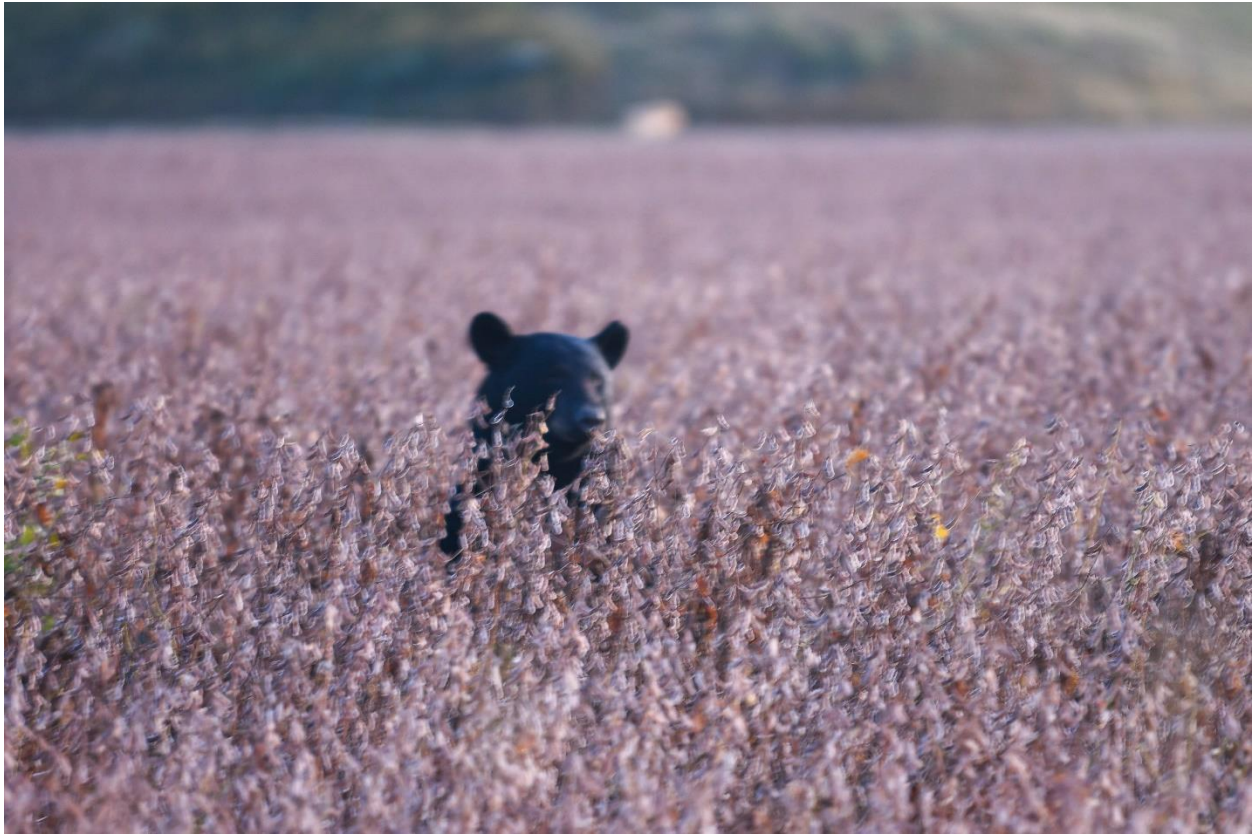
Driving along the Long Curve Road SE towards Grouse Rd we saw large black bears at some distance out in the fields. Most of the areas adjacent to the Wildlife Drive on the north side are fields. Some appeared to be actively cultivated while others looked like nothing had been planted in quite a while. I was told that those who farm in the refuge have requirements either to leave some of the crop unharvested or not to plant the entire space. Turning NE on Grouse Rd we came to the intersection with Bear Rd and of course there was a bear ahead of us where the road looked to have been abandoned. Turning NW on Bear Rd there were a couple of vehicles ahead of us stopped on the road. As we approached we realized there was a black bear on both sides of the road. We were at the back of the line for pictures but still enjoyed watching them for 10 minutes. By the end of the evening we had seen 9 black bears.



The next morning my wife slept in a bit while I returned to the refuge before sunrise in hopes of glimpsing a red wolf. To the NE of Bear Rd there is a landfill which combined with the fields affords the bears ample food opportunities. While I didn't see bears in the landfill, over the course of my visit I saw several in the nearby fields and didn't see any indication that they were fenced to keep bears out. Driving that stretch just as the sun rose I saw a bear's head protruding above the unharvested grain.

The bear was standing on its hind legs with only its head visible in the tall vegetation. It was just a bit dark for a good photo. It watched me warily then began walking towards the road.





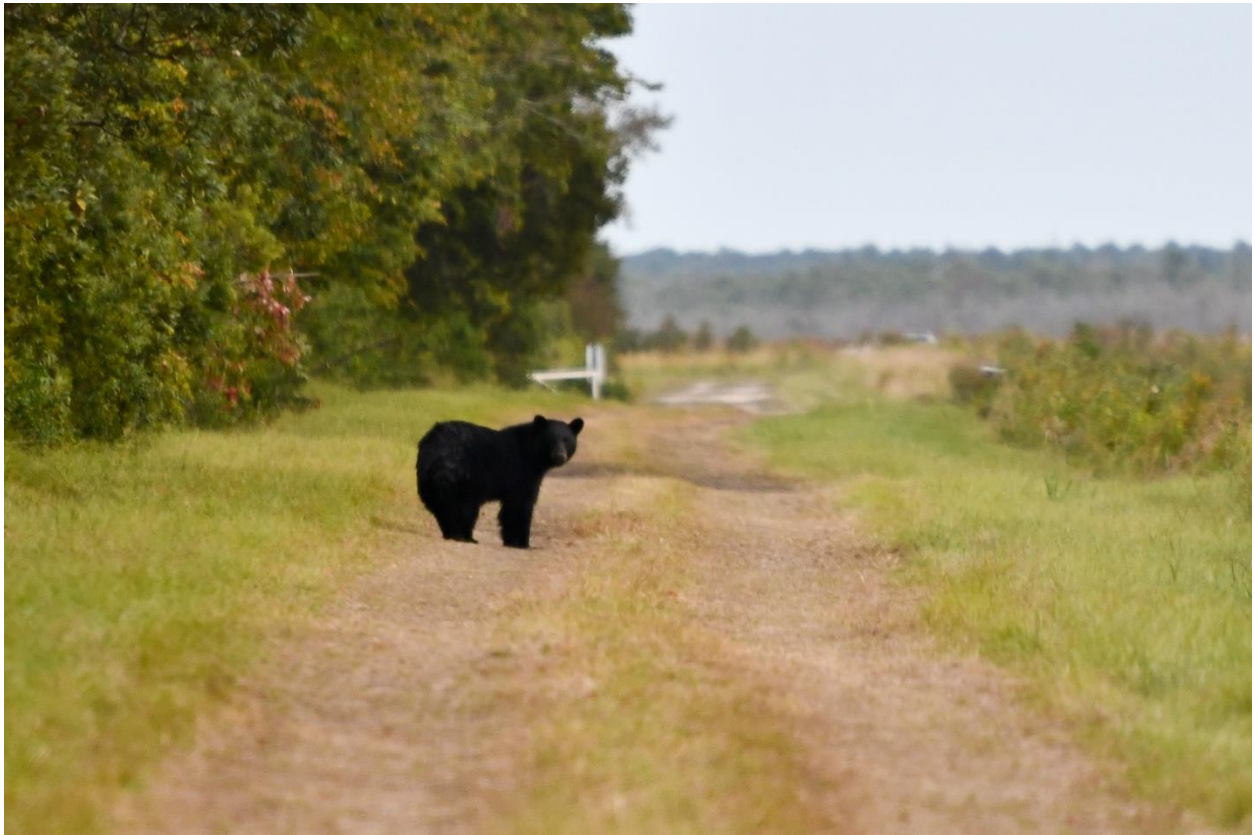
I caught a white tail deer in good light in another field and another distant black bear, but no wolves.



After a full day exploring Kitty Hawk, the Wright Brother Memorial, and a lighthouse, our afternoon hang gliding lesson was cancelled due to the high winds so we were able to make another run to the refuge before dark. We focused on the northern perimeter of the fields and quickly found another bear. Somewhere near Gadwall Rd we came upon a couple who were scanning a field with binoculars. When we rolled down the window to ask if they were having any luck we were surprised to hear, "There's a red wolf in the field." It had disappeared from view a minute or two earlier but there was no reason not to wait and see if it would reemerge from the overgrown vegetation. He described where the wolf was last seen and our patience was rewarded 7 minutes later when it stepped forward into an open patch. For less than a minute it sniffed through the grass and then it was gone. My wife teased me that I was glad the hang gliding had been cancelled and at that point I didn't argue at all. From the distance it was just barely visible with the naked eye and in my blurry photos I had to zoom in on the LCD screen to verify that it was even in the frame. Its color was unmistakably that of a red wolf and blended in remarkably well in the autumn field.



We drove around the full perimeter of the field hoping to see the wolf on the other side but instead found yet another blackbear. This one stood on its hind legs but unfortunately the auto-focus didn't catch the bear while he was still standing.



On our way back to Raleigh on Sunday afternoon we were a bit too early for the bears to be very active. There were a number of birders in the refuge and they kept asking if we had seen the sandhill crane which apparently was more exciting to them than the potential of seeing the red wolves. We eventually did see the crane and I caught an interesting interaction with a great blue heron which admittedly made for a nice photo-op.





While we only saw 4 mammal species in the refuge it was well worth the effort to add a new lifer carnivore species and you can't ever really see too many bears. I can't think of a more accessible place that has such a high concentration of bears. The terrain and road access was not really what I had expected. The most similar experience I've had would be driving the fields around Jaguarland with Nick's Adventures in Bolivia.

Mammal Species List (not so technical or scientific, 4):

Black Bear (15)

Eastern Gray Squirrel (10+)

White-Tailed Deer (4)

Red Wolf (1)

Other Animals of Note:

American Alligator

Sandhill Crane

Roadkill:

Mink

Virginia Opossum

Raccoon

Timber Rattlesnake