

# Photographers Guide to The Pungo Lake & Mattamuskeet Wildlife Refuges During Winter

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The time period of December through February is one of the ideal times to photograph birds during their migration through Eastern North Carolina. The Pungo Unit of the Pocosin Lakes Refuge and the Mattamuskeet National Wildlife Refuge offer limitless opportunities to observe and photograph tundra swans, red-winged black birds, bald eagles, grebes, northern harriers, snow geese, sandhill cranes, and many others. Bears are also in the area but may not be as active as during the Spring, Summer and Fall.

To facilitate communication in real time, we urge you to register on the CNPA-Triangle website so that everyone planning a trip can communicate with others about their planned itinerary and real time wildlife observations, via email, text messages or phone calls. We'll send out the list of attendees to the group.

The following sections give suggestions about good viewing locations, equipment accommodations and other information.

**Based on recent reports from photographers, your primary target for best photo ops should be Pungo.**

## **Photographic Opportunity Locations**

**(See attached Maps)**

### **Pungo Unit of Pocosin Lakes Refuge**

*Be aware of areas that are closed to all access from the beginning of November through the end of February. There are signs posted clearly marking these areas. There is no access to Pungo Lake other than the blind and observation deck during those months.*

- The blind at the end of the trail on Pungo Lake from South Lake road is a good spot to photograph the Snow Geese or Tundra Swans in winter if they are on that end of the lake. If you see a lot of Snow Geese, wait a while to see if they will all take off and move at the same time. **(Covid-19 Note:** The blind is small, so there's probably only room for one photographer household at a time to maintain social distancing.)
- The best locations largely depend on what fields have been planted. Last winter there wasn't any corn planted in the fields on North Lake (Bear) road, so there weren't any bears or birds there when we checked.

- Large flocks of red-winged blackbirds can be seen in many of the fields throughout Pungo.
- There are often Northern Harriers hunting over the fields at Pungo and Bald Eagles perched in the trees.
- The fields on **Pat's road** before entering the refuge often have Swans, Geese and blackbirds. We have had good luck there in the late afternoons with the flocks of Swans and Geese, but you never know if they will choose those fields. If they are on the East side of the fields, you can go back out to 45, take a left onto Refuge Road and then the first left on Van Staaldulnen road and go past the Maintenance area and the fields will be on your left.
- **Pungo Lake Observation Deck** (In the early morning, before sunrise, many of the swans and geese are on the lake. Then, shortly after sunrise they tend to take off in large numbers) [35.6933, -76.5421](#)
- **Impoundment at West Lake Rd. and South Lake Rd.** (Great place for sunrise over the impoundment with lots of Tundra Swans and Snow Geese, Northern Shovelers, Grebes, and Sandhill Cranes sitting on the lake. After sunrise, you will also see birds flying in and landing on the water) [35.7130, -76.5788](#)
- **North Lake Rd** (Some people refer to this as Bear Rd. You cannot drive on this road, but park at the gate and walk the path. If you are lucky, you will see some bears wandering about in the winter, but it is remarkably easy to see them in late spring/summer) [35.7352, -76.5713](#) Sometimes the snow geese will feed in the fields adjacent to this road. I've often seen a bald eagle hang out in the trees adjacent to road down toward the "tunnel".
- Also, look for birds settling in the spent corn fields scattered in the refuge. This is especially fun in the late afternoon light as they fly in large numbers and create quite a cacophony.
- **Redwing Blackbird flocks** - they may show up anywhere on the refuge and are fun to shoot.
- **Front fields between Pat's Rd and Van Staaldulnen Rd** - May see bears before and just after dawn. Can see snow geese, swans and blackbirds any time. Snow geese often flock here just before sunset.
- Other tips: Tundra swans take off and land into the wind, just something to pass on to others for positioning/shooting expectations. My favorite conditions at the "swan pond" at West and South Lake Rds are late afternoon with clear skies and a light southerly wind. If positioned on South Lake Rd, they swans will be taking off toward you with the setting sun at your back. But be watching for snow geese overhead. They often spend the afternoon on Pungo Lake and then take off near sunset to feed. If lucky, they'll land in the front fields off Pats Rd.
- Note that the refuge will often close roads after heavy rains, such as West Lake Rd, that provides access to the swan pond. So visitors should check weather reports before heading down.

## Lake Mattamuskeet

- Note that the Visitor Center may not be open and bathrooms at this location may not be available. Check before you travel to this area if this is important to you. Check the hunting season schedule before going. Access to areas beyond the Visitors Center at Mattamuskeet is closed on a few mornings when hunts are being held. If you are there during hunting season, consider wearing some blaze orange item and staying in the open. Expect to see assorted birds including herons, variety of ducks, otters, deer, etc. Easy to drive through.
- Iconic Mattamuskeet trees on the lake is great sunrise/sunset shot.

## Good locations include:

- **Wildlife Drive Entrance** (Follow the road around the refuge and jump out of your car anywhere along the way for lots of photo ops) 35.4629, -76.2116
- **Drainage canals on the South side of the lake**
- **Mattamuskeet Lodge** (pumping station and a nearby bathroom, if open) 35.4518, -76.1746
- **Lake Mattamuskeet Observations Deck** (Here is where everyone shoots the stand of trees out in the middle of the lake on Route 94. From the deck, the trees are to the East, so it is another nice spot for sunrise) 35.4866, -76.2132
- **Swan Quarter (Town) Bay Overlook** (Lots of old fishing boats along the way to this overlook. There are pelicans and other fun birds to find here) 35.4029, -76.3400
- **Engelhard (Town) Docks** (Another fun place to shoot old boats and birds ... Pelicans, cormorants etc) 35.5068, -75.9931
- **Downtown Plymouth** including the riverfront, Maritime Museum and Railswitch Nature Trail. **Vernon James Research Center** outside of Plymouth: Early morning shoot for eagles and other raptors.

## Accommodations, Availability of Food & Restrooms

If you genuinely prefer to stay overnight in the area, here are a few contacts for accommodations. However, due to the current pandemic situation, there have been mixed reviews about some of these accommodations regarding sanitation of rooms and mask wearing, or not, of the staff.

- **Contact info for the Holiday Inn Express in Plymouth** 840 US

Highway 64 W, Plymouth, NC Phone: 252-793-4700

- **Contact info for the Rodeway Inn and Suites in Plymouth**

510 US Highway 64 E, Plymouth, NC Phone 252-793-5006

- **Contact info for the Sportsman's Inn, Plymouth** 990 US  
Highway 64W, Plymouth, NC Phone: 252-793-3095

There are also other motels in the area and B&Bs in Plymouth, Washington, Belhaven and other areas.

There are a lot more options in Washington and Edenton for restaurants compared to Plymouth, a nice historic downtown and houses in both towns. Plymouth is closer to Pungo (25 mins vs. 40 mins to Washington or 55 minutes to Edenton), but if you're at Pungo in the winter for sunset, you're leaving early anyway, so the extra time isn't much of a factor as there is still plenty of time to get back and have dinner at a reasonable hour.

But, there is another approach: you might want to consider a long day trip.

- Pungo is about 2 1/2 hours from the Raleigh area. This is a good option if you aren't comfortable staying overnight in a motel. If you're willing to miss sunrise, then you don't have to leave very, very early, can get there by mid-morning and in the spring/winter sunset is around 5:00-6:00, so you don't get back too late.

Photographers have had good success on some of these trips seeing bears during the day in May, October & November. In late November the Tundra Swans were also there. If you do this in the summer it can be a long day if you are staying for sunset and probably worth staying overnight.

### **Restaurants or Carry Your Food with You**

Many of the restaurants are closed for normal in-house service but many offer take-out including the usual collection of fast food restaurants in Plymouth (Wendy's, McDonalds, Burger King, Bojangles, Pizza Inn, The Duck-Thru convenience store/gas station at Rtes 64 and 32, etc.) If the pandemic situation worsens, restaurant availability may change. The most predictable plan for eating would be to carry all of your food with you for all meals and have a picnic in your vehicle. There is also a Foodlion in Plymouth on Rt. 64. The Holiday Inn Express has microwave ovens & mini refrigerators.

### **Restrooms (Plan Ahead!)**

There is a rest area with restrooms on the East side of Plymouth on Highway 64. Several service stations are in Plymouth. There are no restroom facilities at Pungo. The Refuge has placed a port-a-potty just behind the maintenance shed, but there are plenty of trees and wooded areas. As noted in the section on Mattamuskeet, restroom facilities may not be open.

## Vehicle

If it has been raining recently or if I know it's muddy by checking with others, a 4x4 vehicle might be desirable. Even with the 4x4, it can be too muddy at Pungo in the winter to risk trying to navigate the cutover road from Canal D to get to the impoundment on West Lake/South Lake. You don't want to get stuck there.. Bring some boards, shovels and a tow strap just in case, though I have not had to use them yet. Most people drive 2WD or AWD vehicles and most passenger cars and vans are fine if the roads are dry. The roads at Pungo are dirt so if you don't want your car to get dinged up or dirty then this isn't the place for it.

For example, vehicles typically used by photographers include 2WD Explorer, AWD Honda CRV, AWD Highlander, Toyota 4x4 pickup, 4WD GMC Sierra and a few 2WD vehicles if you are careful to stay out of mud holes.

**Caution** if using a GPS or Google Maps when going to Pungo. GPS will often direct you through some farm roads on private property that end up at locked gates with no access to the refuge.

## Camera and Other Equipment

Here is a collection of camera equipment used by a few photographers who frequent the area.

- 14-24mm, 24-70, 24-105mm or 24-120mm for landscapes and wide angle photos of the birds on the lake or in the fields in winter.
- 70-200mm for medium telephoto needs
- 200-500mm or 100-400mm for wildlife and birds and add a 1.4x or 1.7x teleconverter when needed for more range. A crop frame body for more reach, although sometimes the wildlife can be quite close.
- 500mm f4, 500mm PF f5.6, 600mm, 800mm for even longer reach.
- There are also macro opportunities for insects and flowers.
  - 100-400 for this, sometimes adding an extension tube if I need to focus closer.
  - Also a 100mm or 105mm macro.
  - A ring flash or flash mounted on camera bracket can be handy.
- Handholding is commonly used to be able to react quickly while sitting in

your vehicle.

- When you have time to set up outside of your vehicle, a tripod with a ball head, or a gimbal head for longer lenses provide steady support for low light situations.
  - Monopods are also useful and can be set up quicker.
- Filters. ND filter (6 or 10 stop) when photographing sunrise at Lake Mattamuskeet if there's any wind to smooth out the water and capture the movement of the clouds (if any).
  - Polarizers can also be useful to cut the glare on the water as you're photographing birds or to enhance the sky.
  - Just be aware that the polarizer will slow your shutter speed, so compensate if necessary.
- A pair of binoculars to watch wildlife behavior even when they are too far away to photograph. They also help to confirm that the dark spot in the field you see, is actually a bush and not a bear.
- Long pants and waterproof hiking boots (even in the heat of the summer)

## Maps Attached

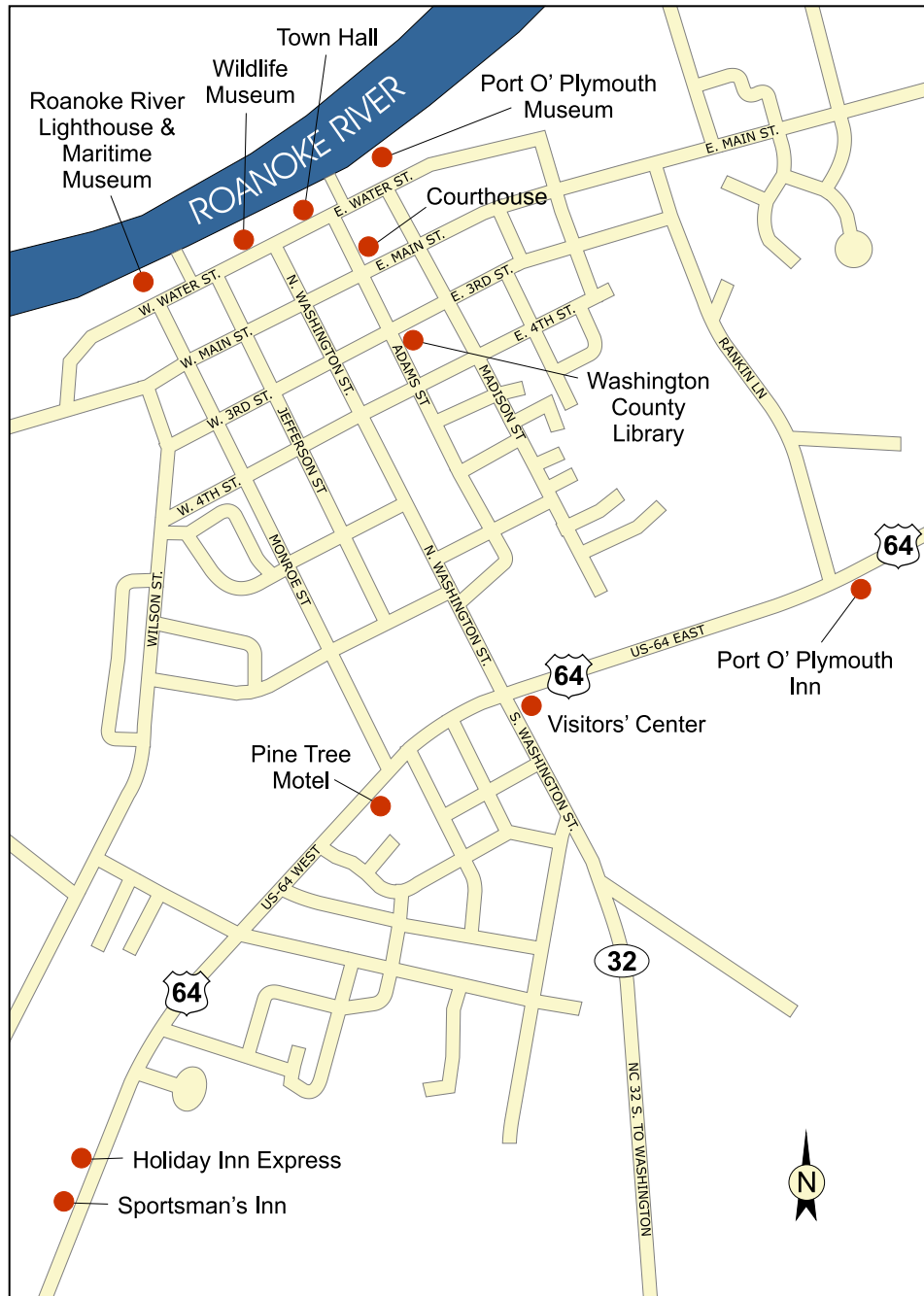
### • Plymouth Town Map

- **Plymouth to Pungo Entrance** The main way to enter Pungo is from the intersection of Hwy 45 and Pat's Road. Usually take Pat's Road north, which turns into Canal D road once it enters the refuge. You can take the Refuge road and turn left onto Van Staaldunin Road to access the backside of the fields on Pat's Road.

### • Pungo Lake Refuge

- **Mattamuskeet** From Pungo, take Hwy 45 South until it intersects with Hwy 264. Follow Hwy 264 to the South side of Lake Mattamuskeet. Or, take Hwy 264 from Washington to Lake Mattamuskeet.

# Town of Plymouth, NC









# Pocosin Lakes Refuge: Pungo Unit

## Legend

- Information
- Maintenance compound
- Observation areas
- Roads closed to vehicles from Nov-Feb
- Roads closed to vehicles
- Roads open to vehicles
- Pungo Unit boundary
- Duck Pen Wildlife Trail to Observation Point
- Areas closed from Nov-Feb
- Farm fields - closed Nov-Feb
- Moist soil units - closed Nov-Feb
- Pungo Lake - closed year round

## Observation points:

1. Hyde Park Obs Point
2. Pungo Lake Platform
3. Pungo Lake Obs Point
4. West Lake Road Obs Point
5. North Lake Woods Obs Area

Observation areas and routes may be subject to closure at management's discretion. Park along road edge.



