

Prologue

February 17, 2006.

The skies are sunny on this Friday morning at the landing by channel marker #68 along the Intracoastal Waterway (hereafter referred to as the ICW). This day is the climax of a warming trend, and is enlivened at 10:30AM by a steady southwest wind. I am alone at the landing, and the quietness is etched with the rustling of palmetto fronds and the cries of oystercatchers. The falling tide beckons the launching of the trusty *Kingfisher* for the familiar passage to Bull Island. *Kingfisher* is soon rigged and closehauled, and two tacks put us outward bound in Anderson Creek. A kingfisher on a bamboo stake flies off as we pass on the way to the bay. On the starboard tack and with daggerboard full down, *Kingfisher* is easily accommodated by the high tide on the crossing of Shortcut Shoal into the mouth of Bull Creek. Tacking off and on along the marsh to avoid the outgoing tide, we beat up in the steady light breeze to an easy landing at the public dock on Bull Island. I speak to Wayne, a US Fish and Wildlife Service staff, before securing *Kingfisher* and stepping off the dock onto land. Shorts are in order for this annual celebration of my birthday on the island. Throughout this day, as in many recent moments, my thoughts drift with the southwest breeze toward the north – the many islands and waterways I plan to explore in the next several years.

After a loop to the Summerhouse dike and past the island cemetery, I peek into the Dominick House, and am impressed with the long overdue restoration of this building. Floor sanding is underway, and large bags of pine dust sit on the porch. The newly installed and painted cedar exterior transforms this building from eyesore to attraction. The plan is for several rooms to be open to the public as a visitor and interpretative center. I talk briefly with workers inside, and my alligator agenda comes up. After some gator talk, I head north with my thoughts on the Old Fort Road, cutting through to Sheep Head Ridge Road, and then east to a section known as Alligator Alley. Alligators small and medium are present; I do not stop long but head for the address of the alpha alligator of Bull Island, now infamously known as “Alligatorzilla”, a name penned in a Post and Courier news article. Though I have passed his location many times in the past, I recently learned of his presence. I still must head up Lighthouse Road until I reach the large berm on the left before the next split in the road. Chris Crolley of Coastal Expeditions oriented me to this alligator’s lair, and he encouraged me to get photos if I was fortunate enough to see him. He recently placed a four-foot stake on the alligator’s usual sunning spot as a means to get a measurement of this reptile, with estimates of his length ranging between 13 and 20 feet. I did decline Chris’s suggestion that I also take along a tape measure.

I climb a worn path up the steep left side of the berm, and directly across a small pond is a huge alligator, perhaps forty yards away. Yet I am mistaken, for as I look to the right I undoubtedly see the alpha alligator. It is of a breathtaking size virtually unimaginable. I see the four-foot stake and note that it has been pushed over to about a forty-five degree angle. After several photos with my camera, I consider a closer look. I

see the right side of this finger of Jacks Creek has a small island almost connected to the land where I stand, and note that a downed cedar tree has bridged the gap of about ten feet. Selecting a recently cut eight-foot long wax myrtle stave for both balance and perhaps defense, I cross the cedar bridge to the island. I am no longer on a high berm, but right next to the dark colored water. I approach closer to the still unmoving animal. Its slowed metabolism has it soaking up the solar warmth and allowing this still distant approach (over thirty yards) for some closer photos. Mission accomplished, I return to the top of the berm to sit for lunch in the warm sun. A coughing spasm brought on by a bite of sandwich ill swallowed has Alligatorzilla and its neighbor moving and in the water – whether due to feeling threatened or stimulated by the sound of wounded prey, I don't know. But as I recover I watch this magnificent reptile slowly climb back out of the water with its black and glistening torso, and long tail never quite leaving the water.

It is a short walk to the Boneyard, and a transition from one magical world of wildlife to another. The white birds putting on a show with their terrific dives for fish are northern gannets. An eagle cruises by as I pick my way through the skeleton forest around the point to the north, soon encountering the array of deposits on the beach, including cockles, whelks, sand dollars, pieces of brick (most likely pieces of the lighthouse foundation), and a fossilized whale vertebrae. But away to the north, and hidden from my vision but assembled in my consciousness, is an archipelago of islands I have just begun to visit. On very clear days on the Northeast Point of Bull Island, I have picked out the low-lying islands stretched out to the east and accented by two lighthouses. The previous month I stood on one of these islands, and from the vantage point of Raccoon Key I discerned the much higher profile of Bull Island to the south.

After skipping across the shallow inlet, I cross to the Jacks Creek dike, ever closer to the approaching Atlantic, and continue my walk around the impoundment. Arcing around Jacks Creek to the southwest, I observe a raft of white pelicans take off with my approach. Soon past the Old Fort and into the maritime forest, a dead water moccasin, turkey tracks, and sightings of fox tail squirrels mark the passage along the road. Seeing Alligatorzilla today is just one of several new discoveries for me in the last year on Bull Island. These include a significant shell midden, and a brick cistern of the house of Clarence Magwood on the southern end of the island, shown to me by his son Andrew. I also made a passage at high tide from Back Creek to Bull Narrows near Price Inlet. Though I have far from exhausted the wonders of Bull Island, I still have my sights set on the islands to the north.

I set sail at 4:15PM, about dead low tide, for the sail home via the ferry passage. Men gather oysters on the bank of Bull Creek as I tack up the waterway, making the turns through the creeks in low water. I ignore the rule “red right returning” to explore a substantial creek curving back to the main passage, passing a hunched over oysterman in waders. In the last section curving to the southwest before the ICW, a barge is hard aground. The cargo includes a load of treated lumber and pilings, and a large orange excavator brought along to move earth in a major project to change water flow on Bull Island. The unusual vessel doing the pushing is the small trawler *Mermaid Adventure* hailing from Bennett's Point, SC. A dog on this vessel barks and growls at me as I tack by in the slowly flooding tide. As *Kingfisher* makes the ICW we bear off. With a gentle wind and increasing following tidal flow, this last short leg of this sail north is simple, and barely requires my presence to steer. On passing I exchange greetings with some

fisherman casting from their boat on the east side of the waterway, and one comments on how peaceful my passage appears. I concur, but shortly the calm is shattered by a resounding bang! *Kingfisher*'s bow is the blast's epicenter - I have struck head-on the piling of channel marker #69. Violently jarred from my meditation, I jump up as *Kingfisher* slides to port of the marker, and the boom and sail are fixed to the piling as the tide and wind continue to press us tighter. I give a vigorous yank to disengage my boom, sail, and sheet from the piling, but the friction both rains exposed barnacles onto the deck and slices the sail near the boom with some resulting peepholes. The need for a window in this old sail is embarrassingly apparent.

So humbled again on the water, I finish my sail by dragging into the pluff mud at the landing. I am relieved to find no hole in the bow. Repair of the holes in the sail, and completion of a laundry list of other needs for *Kingfisher* and gear, are in order in preparation for a series of voyages to the archipelago of Cape Romain and the Santee Delta. I have made initial trips into these waters to the north already this past year, both on *Kingfisher* and with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service turtle conservation program. The set of trips I envisage will touch on many of these islands, islets, and waters. I will call on a collective of individuals for this venture, both drawing on their experience and knowledge, and tagging along on their professional endeavors. As I plan research and voyages in the archipelago, I anticipate the experiences waiting to unfold.