



# CAMDEN COUNTY

## Gateway to the Wild

By John Manuel

Cover Photograph courtesy of David Thurber

Document photographs by John Manuel and Roger Waldon

**CAMDEN COUNTY: GATEWAY TO THE WILD**



**Lower Pasquotank River**

The fortunes of Camden County's residents have always been shaped by their relationship with the natural environment. This is a unique place - - blending a history of people making a prosperous living off the land with the opportunity to become a regional center for outdoor recreation. This narrative describes the County's natural treasures, and offers directions to three "gateways" that provide easy access to the wild.

## **A Brief History**

The earliest settlements in Camden County were situated along the creeks and rivers, as those provided the easiest and often the only means of travel. For much of the 18th, 19th and even 20th centuries, residents made their living from the land, farming the flat high ground in the center of the County and harvesting timber from the swamps. Today, only 5.6 percent of County workers are employed in agriculture, forestry, fishing, or hunting. Yet forest, swamp, and farmland still predominate, and polls indicate that a majority of residents want to maintain that rural character. At the same time, residents want more to do in the County in terms of recreation and community activities, and they want more local job opportunities.

These goals can be mutually achieved by preserving, improving access to, and actively promoting key natural areas with an eye toward increasing their use, building a sense of community, and attracting investment in supporting businesses and services. Camden County's long-range plans seek to protect environmentally sensitive and scenic areas, with a particular focus on the areas listed below.



**Indiantown Creek**



**Agricultural Land,  
Northern Camden County**





**Entrance, Dismal  
Swamp State Park**



**Canoe Access, Dismal  
Swamp State Park**

#### **Realizing Her Bear Ambition**

By Amber Nimocks

Edited from

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When North Carolina opened Dismal Swamp State Park earlier this year, I couldn't wait to explore it. I knew I was going to see a bear in there. I just had a feeling...

The bike path, an old logging road, is a tunnel through the tall trees...I glance down the path and see a slender, brown figure off in the distance. The deer sees me, turns its fluffy white tush in my direction and bounds back into the forest. I keep staring down the long tunnel dark blob on the side of the path, against the trees, beyond where the deer had been. I grab my binoculars.

"That," I say quietly to myself as the blob comes into focus, "is a bear."

To my delight, the bear turns so that I can see its profile and wanders into the middle of the path. Its four thick legs are silhouetted against the light coming from behind it, its rump starkly outlined...It pauses and looks right at me. A tinge of panic flutters my heart as I think how fast a bear can run. Then I recall that the park's bears are shy of humans...The bear stands sniffing and scraping in the path for perhaps a minute more, then bounces back into the brush.

## **Key Areas**

Following are descriptions of six key areas of Camden County, each contributing to the environmental character of this area: the Dismal Swamp State Park, the Dismal Swamp Canal and Welcome Center, the Dismal Swamp Canal Hiking and Biking Trail, the Pasquotank River, Joy's Creek, and the Indiantown Creek / North River corridor.

### **Key Area: Dismal Swamp State Park**

Camden County benefits from having a large portion of its best natural areas already under legal protection. Over 20,000 acres of the Great Dismal Swamp are located in Camden County. The Dismal Swamp State Park contains 14,443 acres of this swampland. The park includes an active visitor center, over 20 miles of hiking and biking trails, and a small canoe/kayak launch allowing access to the canal. The park has plans to provide tent and RV camping in the future, with access from Horseshoe Road. This additional entrance will provide a land based access into the park and allow for expanded park hours.

Logging has shorn the Dismal of most of its old bald cypress and Atlantic white cedar, but the park is heavily forested, and both cypress and cedar have favorable conditions for re-growth under the stewardship of the state park staff and volunteers. The Dismal provides protected habitat for a wide variety of wildlife, including approximately 300 black bears. Biologists believe this is one of the largest populations of black bears on the East Coast, and the chance to see one of these in the wild is something the County can use to attract visitors (and hunters), just as Dare County has done with the red wolf.

By virtue of its proximity to the Hampton Roads metropolitan area, land in the vicinity of the state park is being sought after for development. A large multi-use development, Camden Plantation, is planned on the east side of U.S. 17 across from the park entrance. When complete, Camden Plantation will include 1,600 residential units and 160,000 square feet of retail stores.

### **Key Area: Dismal Swamp Canal and Welcome Center**

The 22-mile-long Dismal Swamp Canal runs parallel to U.S. 17 and forms the eastern boundary of the state park. The canal has great historical and practical significance. It was hand-dug by hired slave labor between 1793-1805 to connect the Chesapeake Bay via the Elizabeth River in Virginia with the Albemarle Sound via the Pasquotank River in North Carolina. For nearly a century, the canal hosted a steady stream of boats carrying lumber, shingles, farm products, and passengers. In 1929, it was sold to the federal government and is now maintained by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers as an alternate route for pleasure boaters traveling the inland waterway. The oldest continually operating canal in the U.S., the Dismal is on the National Register of Historic Places and is a National Civil Engineering Landmark.

The Dismal Swamp Canal is one of the natural treasures of the County. It is bordered by trees along its entire length. Wildlife, including bears and bobcats, are frequently seen crossing the canal. Turtles, fish, and the occasional alligator reside in the waters. The canal is the site of the annual Paddle for the Border, an event that attracts some 350 canoeists and kayakers for a day-long paddle from the Welcome Center to the Virginia border. This event is indicative of the recreational potential of the canal beyond its function as a transit for larger sailboat and yachts.

The Dismal is on the National Register of Historic Places, designated as a Civil Engineering Landmark, recognized as part of the National Underground Railroad to Freedom Program, and part of the North Carolina and Virginia Civil War Trail.

The Dismal Swamp Canal Welcome Center on U.S. 17 receives more than 500,000 visitors per year. Owned by the N.C. Department of Transportation, the Rest Area and Welcome Center provide facilities for the traveling public and tourism information for the region and state. The Center offers a quiet, shaded viewing area of the canal and 150 feet of free docking for overnight stays.

#### **Key Area: Dismal Swamp Canal Hiking and Biking Trail**

In 2005 Camden County opened the first leg of the Dismal Swamp Canal Hiking and Biking Trail. This paved trail runs in the green space between US 17 and the canal from South Mills to the Dismal Swamp Canal Welcome Center. Using the swing bridge across the canal, hikers and bikers can connect with 20 miles of trail and dirt roads in the state park.

Currently, the Hiking and Biking trail ends at the Welcome Center. The County hopes to secure funds to extend this trail 3.3 miles north to the Virginia state line, where it would tie into the proposed trail system in Chesapeake, Virginia. Plans to extend the existing eight mile trail in Virginia, both south to the North Carolina state line and to the north to Deep Creek, Virginia would provide riders with approximately 20 miles of uninterrupted trail alongside the scenic canal.

#### **Key Area: Pasquotank River**

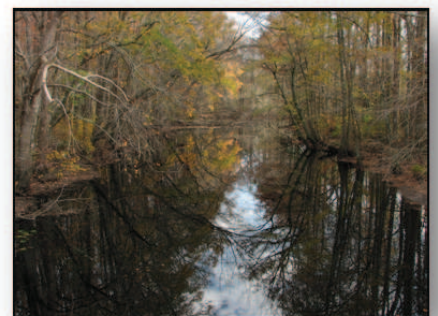
The Pasquotank River heads up in the southern reaches of the Dismal Swamp and meanders through commercial timberland before intersecting with the Dismal Swamp Canal below South Mills. From this junction to Elizabeth City, the Pasquotank grows to several hundred yards in width. It is bordered on both sides by lowland hardwood forest protected from development by virtue of being within the 100-year floodplain. The portion of the river below the junction with the Canal is part of the Intracoastal Waterway and is considered by many recreational boaters to be the most beautiful section of the entire Intracoastal Waterway. Below Elizabeth City, the river widens to several miles and is effectively part of the Albemarle Sound.



**Canal through Great Dismal Swamp**



**Paved Trail**



**Upper Pasquotank River**

**A Merchant's Tale**  
*Vision for the Future*

On their way to the Outer Banks, the family from Virginia Beach passed the sign for the Dismal Swamp Welcome Center, State Park, and Hiking and Biking Trail. They decided to return on a Saturday in May, eager to get some exercise and explore this region with the storied past. They rented bikes from a shop in Camden Plantation, crossed the footbridge over US 17 and rode the paved trail to the Town of South Mills. There, they read the display about the Civil War battle for the lock at South Mills, and learned that it is the oldest continuously operating lock in the U.S. They ordered ice cream from the soda shop on Main Street and watched a sailboat come down the Intracoastal Waterway and go through the lock.

Seated next to them at the ice cream shop was a couple from Washington D.C. They were staying at the bed and breakfast in South Mills and had spent the morning paddling a canoe up nearby Joy's Creek. The next day, they planned to "paddle the loop," an 8-mile circle route encompassing the canal below the lock and the Pasquotank River. They were looking forward to eating at the barbecue restaurant in town, sitting out on the deck, and watching the boats come down the canal.

The merchants who had recognized the potential for the natural resources to attract a clientele of outdoor recreationists considered themselves lucky to have gotten in early. They lived in South Mills and Camden Plantation, respectively enjoying the chance to own an historic home and to live in a mixed-use development with modern amenities.

The Pasquotank River has generally good water quality and supports healthy populations of largemouth bass, bream, crappie, and perch, as well as springtime runs of striped bass. It is identified as part of the Albemarle Region Canoe Trails System, with mile markers placed at intervals from the Morgans Corners Road bridge crossing on downstream. Above Morgans Corner Road, the narrowing river is periodically blocked by fallen trees, which discourage its use by boaters.

There are only two public access points to the Pasquotank River in Camden County, both at the southern reaches of the river. There is a public boat ramp on Sawyers Creek, a tributary of the Pasquotank. Sawyers was once considered the port of entry for Camden County (the courthouse was located on high ground 200 yards from the creek), but was too small for high draft boats and was eventually disregarded as a commercial waterway. Lamb's Marina, a private boatyard on U.S. 158 between Camden and Elizabeth City, allows the public to use their ramp free of charge. A third boat ramp can be found at the end of Shipyard Road, midway up the Pasquotank. That ramp is currently chained off by local residents and is treated by them as a private access.

**Key Area: Joy's Creek**

Also spelled "Joyce" Creek, Joy's is a small stream in the center of Camden County named after early settler William Joy. Joy's is navigable by paddle craft downstream of Tar Corner from the bridge crossing on Old Swamp Rd to its juncture with the Dismal Swamp Canal near South Mills. The creek passes through a narrow band of woodlands behind residential neighborhoods and is kept clear of trees by the Joy's Creek Association. Residents prize the creek as a magnet for wildlife including beaver, deer, osprey and bald eagles. There are no public boat ramps on Joy's Creek.



**Joy's Creek**



### **Key Area: Indiantown Creek/North River**

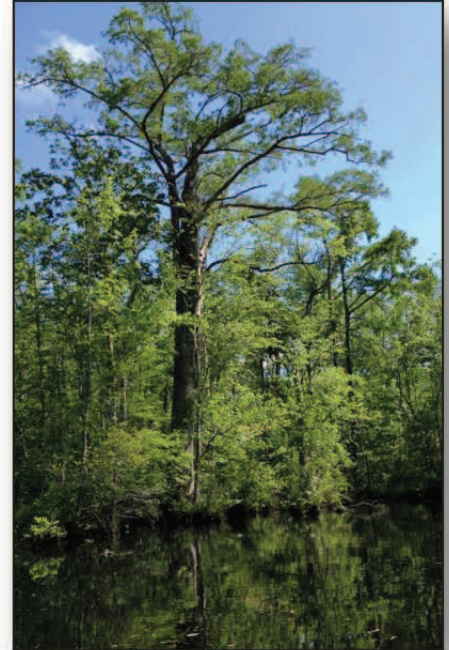
Indiantown Creek, which becomes the North River, forms the eastern boundary of Camden County. The creek derives its name from a small reservation that the Lords Proprietors established in 1704 for the native Yawpim Indians. The reservation lasted only 70 years and no trace of the settlement remains.

Indiantown is an exceptionally beautiful blackwater creek with high water quality. It is lined with large bald cypress trees, some of which may be as many as a thousand years old, according to the N.C. Natural Heritage Program. Starting in 1997, The Nature Conservancy acquired more than 7,000 acres of land along the creek/river in Camden and Currituck Counties. This has been incorporated into the North River Game Lands, a 15,000-acre block of forested swamp managed by the N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission (WRC).

Indiantown supports a variety of wildlife. Turtles and snakes crowd the logs, while largemouth bass, bream, crappie, and yellow perch lurk in the waters. (The state record yellow perch was caught in Indiantown Creek.) Neo-tropical warblers, including the common Prothonotary warbler, as well as the rarer black-throated green warblers, Swainson's warblers, and worm-eating warblers may be seen along the banks. The North River is frequented by osprey, bald eagle, and a variety of seasonal waterfowl.

The Wildlife Resources Commission manages 53 acres of impoundments at the end of Indian Island Road for waterfowl hunting.

There is one public boating access to Indiantown Creek at the bridge crossing on Sandy Hook Road (this is technically in Currituck County). There is a private boat ramp at the end of Garrington's Island Road, which leads via Crooked Creek to the North River. The landowner allows the public to use this ramp, although it is small and generally known only to local fishermen. With the owner's approval, the County plans to ask the Wildlife Resources Commission for funds to improve that boat ramp and provide parking.



**Cypress on Indiantown Creek**



**Canoeists on Indiantown Creek**

## **Gateways to the Wild: A Blueprint for Enhancing the Enjoyment, Use, and Economic Impact of Key Natural Areas**

As detailed above, Camden County has an abundance of well-protected natural areas and outdoor recreational spaces. Three Gateways—one in the north, one in the middle, and one in the southeastern part of the County—provide access to all of these areas.

### **Gateway 1: The Dismal Swamp State Park, Canal, Welcome Center, and Bike Path**

There are few places in the nation that can boast public access to 20+ miles of bike path, 20+ miles of an historic canal, and 100,000 acres of wilderness all from one spot. That is what Camden County has at the intersection of the Dismal Swamp State Park, the Dismal Swamp Canal Welcome Center, and the Dismal Swamp Canal Hiking and Biking Trail. While each of these is owned and managed by a different entity, the combined resource presents a seamless collection of recreational opportunities.



**Albemarle Regional Canoe Trail Marker**



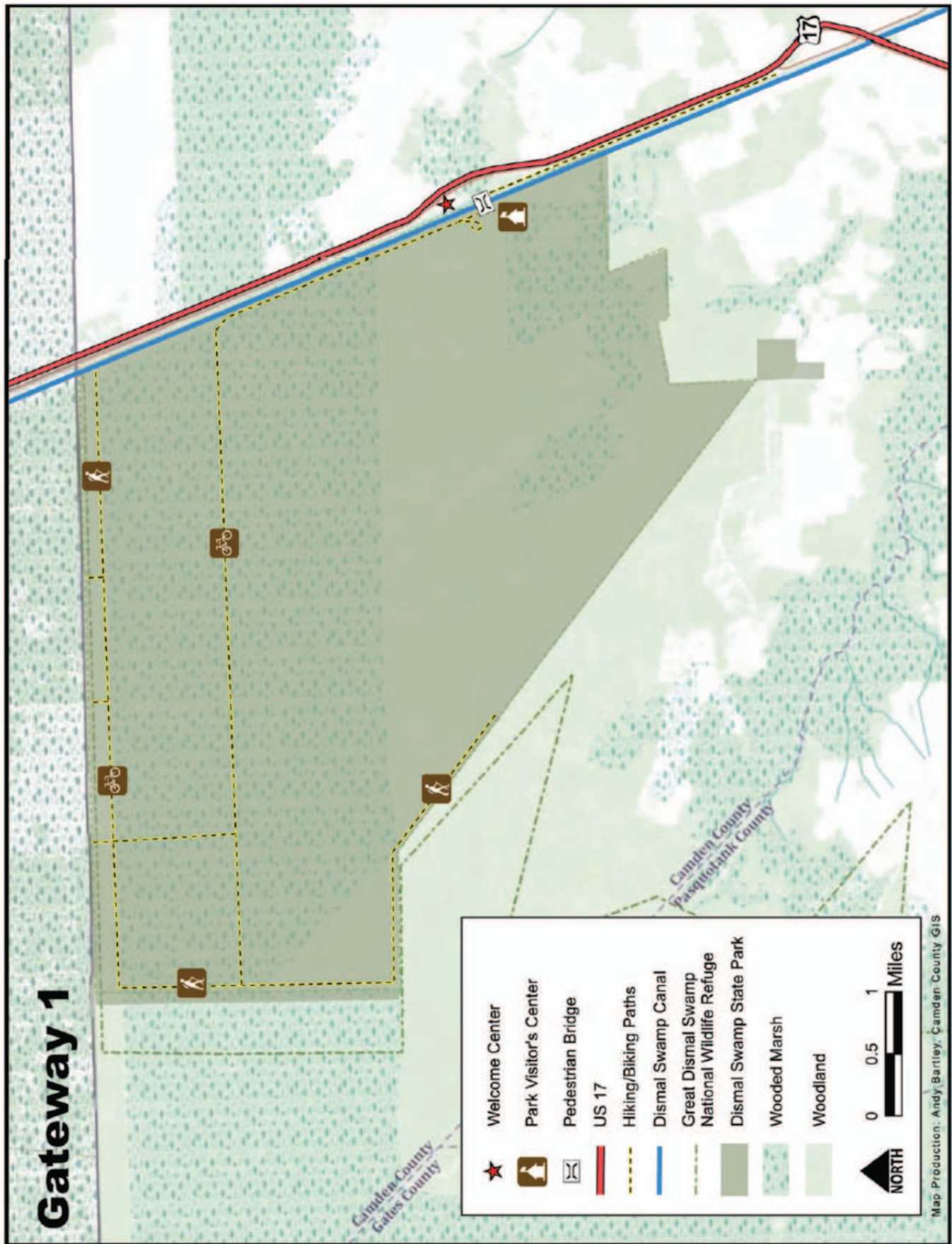
**Canal Docks, Dismal Swamp Welcome Center**

Currently, Camden County has completed 4.5 miles (3 miles paved trail with 1.5 mile 5 foot extension to the South Mills Village along Highway 343.) This connects to another 20 miles of hiking and biking paths in the State Park. Still incomplete is the 3 mile section running along the canal to the Virginia border. Once this is complete, bikers will have access to another 22 miles of trail running all the way to Chesapeake, VA.

In conjunction with the development of Camden Plantation, County engineers have discussed the construction of a footbridge across US 17 connecting the Plantation with the Bike Trail. This would allow hikers and bikers easy access to retail businesses in that development.

County residents have said they want more community activities. The Friends of the Dismal Swamp State Park is a non-profit group that offers the public a chance to get involved in supporting a tremendous, and largely untapped natural resource. The Friends' mission is to provide educational resources for the Dismal Swamp State Park. They do this by raising money through the sale of products at the Visitors Center, through membership, donations and by sponsoring events ranging from "insect safaris" to the popular "Paddle for the Border." The Friends maintains an active web presence on Facebook through which it advertises events and invites participation and comment.





## Gateway 2: The Upper Pasquotank

Driving south from the town of South Mills on Bingham Road, one arrives at a bend where the road parallels the Dismal Swamp Canal. The grassy bank here serves as an informal put-in for car-top boats. From this point, one can explore three distinctly different waterways—the Dismal Swamp Canal, the upper Pasquotank River, and Joys Creek.

The Dismal Swamp Canal is wide and straight, perfect for kayakers or rowers in sculls. By connecting with the Pasquotank River, paddlers can do an 8-mile loop heading upstream on the river to a crossover back to the canal and the access on Bingham Road.

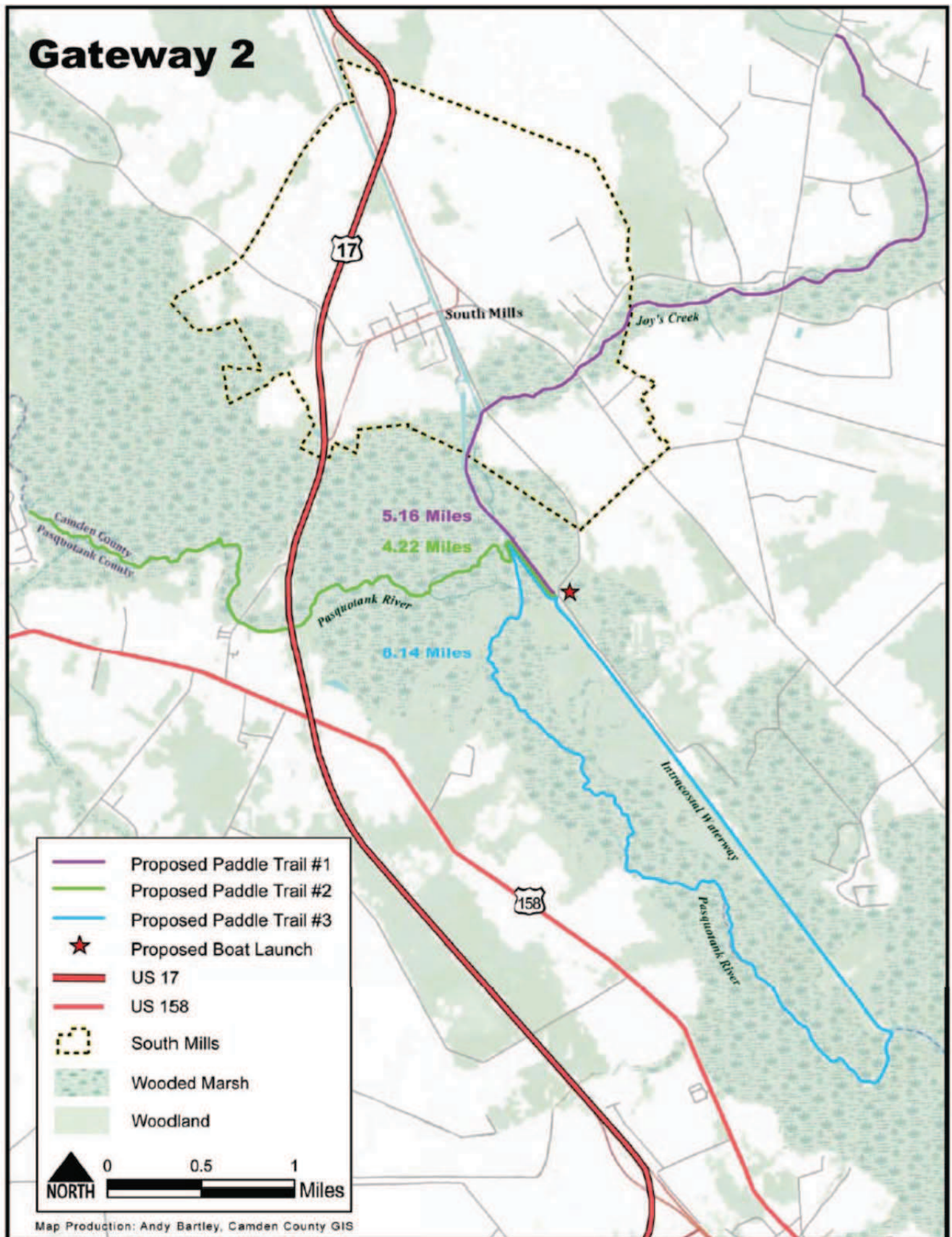


**Pasquotank River Portion of Intracoastal Waterway**

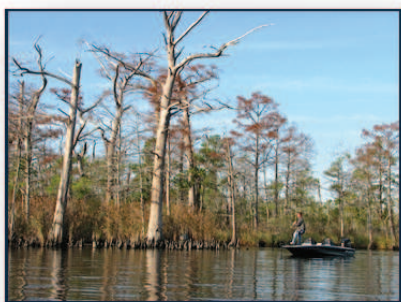
A second option is to paddle upstream on the Pasquotank River. This is a winding waterway through a wooded floodplain, best suited for canoes. Depending upon how recently trees have been cleared, the Pasquotank is navigable for approximately 4.5 miles up to its headwaters in the Dismal Swamp.

Just upstream from the Bingham Road access, Joy's Creek flows into the canal. This creek is kept clear of trees by the Joy's Creek Association and is navigable for some 5 miles up to the second Old Swamp Road bridge crossing.









**Sport Fisherman, North River**



**Boat Ramp on  
Indiantown Creek**



**Canoeing on Indiantown Creek**

### **Gateway 3: Indiantown Creek/North River**

South of US 158, the highway bisecting the center of Camden County, two-lane roads crisscross wide open fields planted in soybeans, rye grass, and corn. Garrington's Island Road leads from these fields to the edge of a vast swamp bordering the North River and its headwaters on Indiantown Creek. A favorite of local anglers, and listed in the Albemarle Region Canoe Trails System, Indiantown and the North River combine intimate views of an ancient cypress forest with wide open tidal waters.

Indiantown Creek is accessible via a public boat ramp at the bridge crossing on Sandy Hook Road. The North River is accessible via a man-made canal at the end of Garrington's Island Road. The boat ramp here is privately-owned, but is open to the public free of charge. The ramp is scheduled to be enlarged and complemented with a formal parking area.

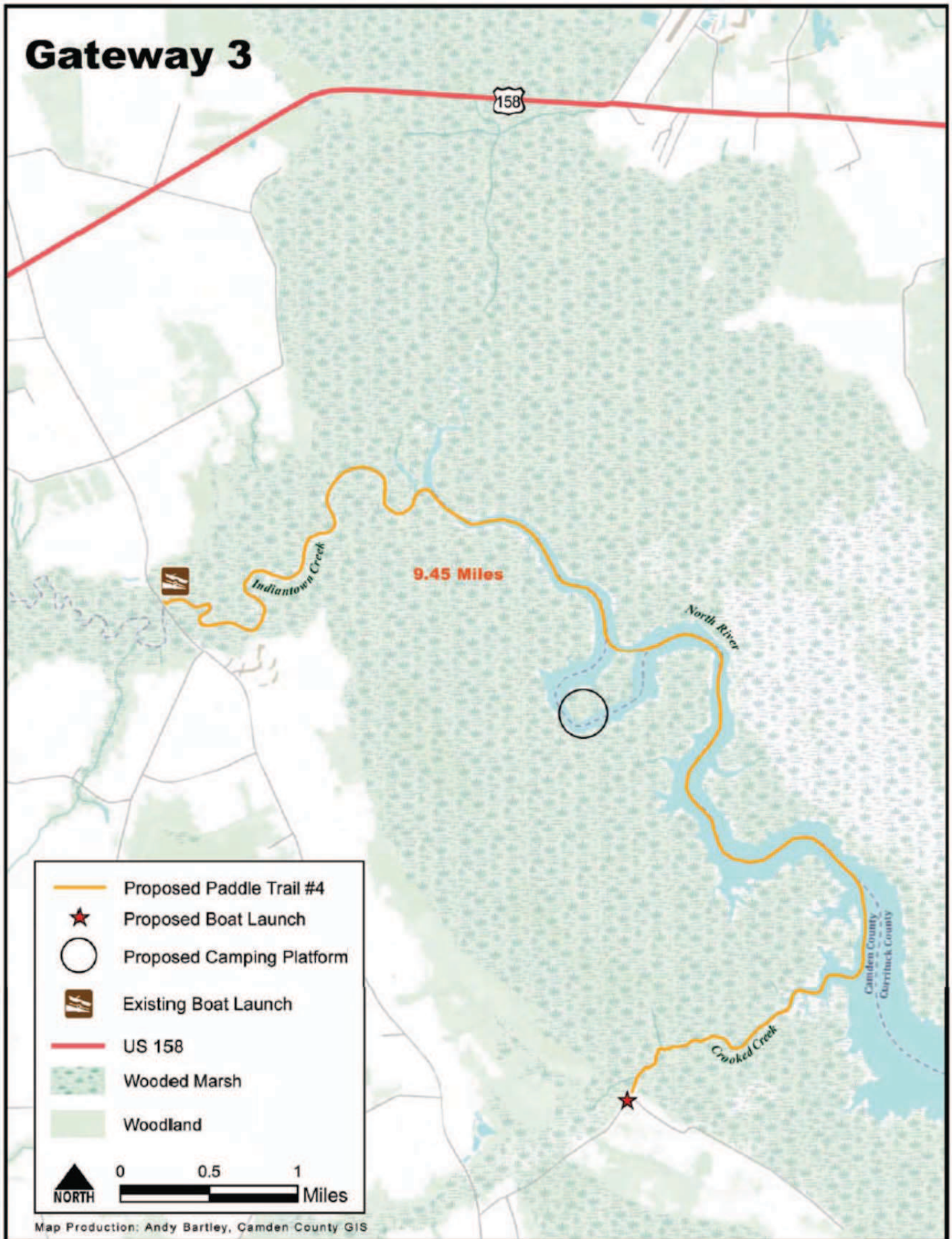
In the foreseeable future, visitors to the Outer Banks may have the opportunity to take guided kayak tours of Indiantown and the North River. The NC Department of Transportation is considering building a bridge from U.S 158 across the Currituck Sound to NC 12 on the Outer Banks. This would put eastern Camden County within a 30-minute drive of Corolla, and outfitters there have said they would welcome the opportunity to run tours to Indiantown should the bridge be built. Pending the necessary permitting and funding, the mid-Currituck Bridge could be complete by 2017.

Those exploring Indiantown and the North River will want to stop by the North River Campground located at the end of Garrington's Island Road. The campground has a gift shop and restaurant and is listed as one of the top 200 RV parks in the country. They may also want to visit the popular Belcross Bakery on U.S. 158 and the Topside Restaurant in Shiloh.

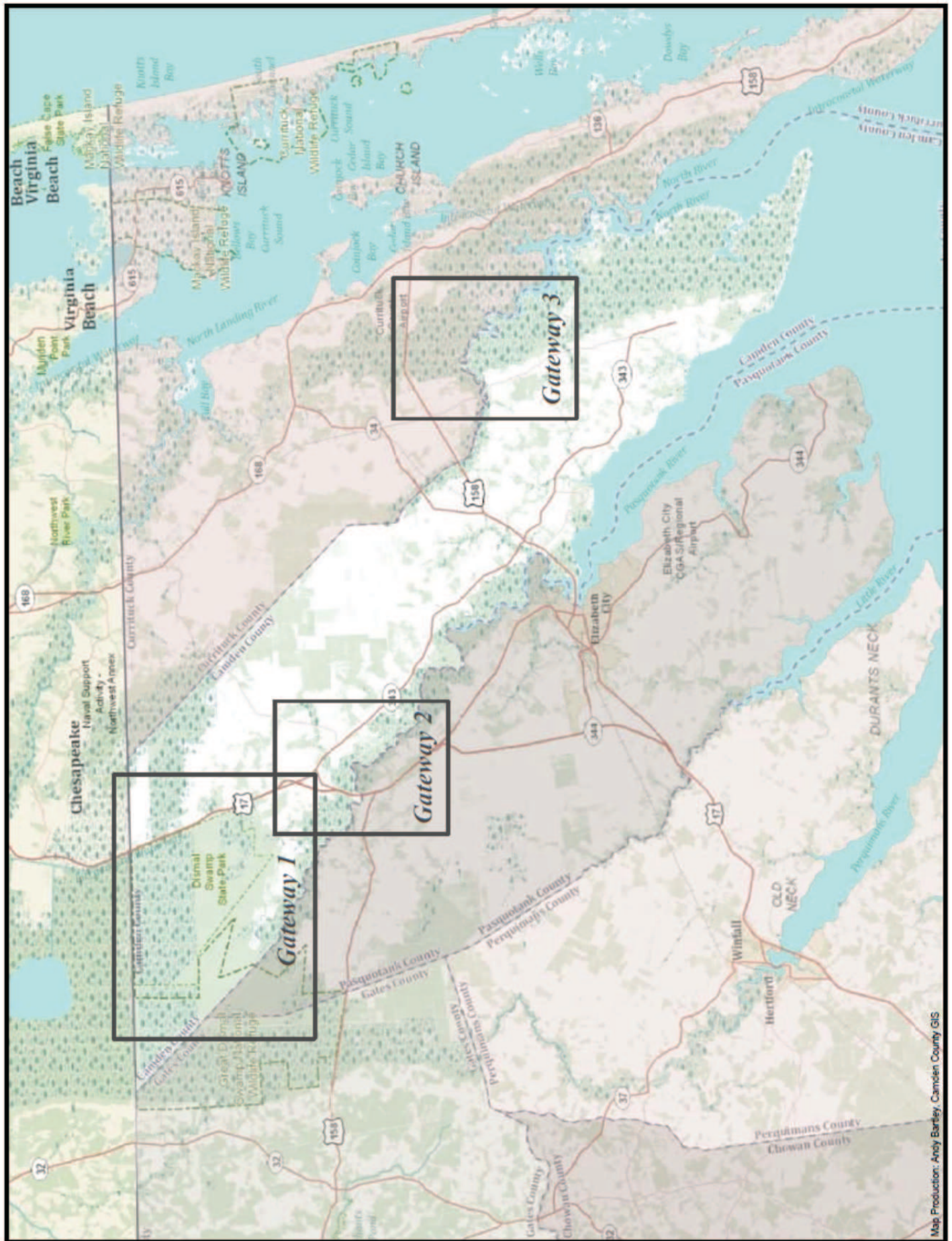


**North River Campground**

# Gateway 3









## Summary

Although well-known to a cadre of dedicated hunters and anglers, Camden County's natural areas are just being discovered by a wider audience of outdoor enthusiasts. The development of the three gateways will make these areas more accessible in the coming years. With a population of more than 1.7 million people in the nearby Hampton Roads Metropolitan area, the potential audience for outdoor recreation is large and growing. And the need for businesses to serve them is great. Camden County welcomes all those who want to explore, support, and serve the natural environment.

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**Crooked Creek Boat  
Access to North River**



**Bald Cypress on Crooked Creek**



The background image shows a swampy landscape. In the foreground, there is a body of water reflecting the trees and sky. The trees are mostly bare, with some showing autumn-colored leaves in shades of orange, red, and brown. The sky is visible through the branches of the trees.

## Did You Know?

- The Dismal Swamp is home to between 300-350 black bears, one of the largest populations on the East Coast.
- The Dismal Swamp Canal is the oldest continually operating canal in the United States.
- The North River Campground on Garrington's Island is ranked as one of the top 200 RV parks in the country.
- The cypress forest along Indiantown Creek is listed as a State Natural Area.
- The state record yellow perch was caught in Indiantown Creek.
- Slaves occasionally escaped from plantations in North Carolina and Virginia and lived in remote parts of the Great Dismal Swamp.