

Nature for the New Year

By Gary Phillips

Ilana and I fled toward the sound country on New Years Day, heading for the Atlantic flyway like a pair of ducks landing in a farm pond.

Taking a room in a cheap seaside hotel, we slept to the pounding ocean at night and explored National Wildlife Refuges during the day, green watery sanctuaries with evocative names like Alligator River, Pea Island, Swan Quarter, Pocosin Lakes.

We wandered on foot and bicycle in any weather, ready to be surprised, to be inspired by the alien, the beautiful: a giant tree, a sudden flurry of wings or, once, the solid appearance of a black bear and her cub down the end of a field.

We carried 20 lbs. of field guide, binoculars, a little bottle of brown whiskey; just the essentials.

Here are some of the creatures we ran across down east, in the wet green wilderness of the inner islands:



- Hooded Mergansers
- Tundra Swans by the thousands
- Snow Geese
- brave little Buffleheads

- Northern Pintail
- Green-winged teal
- Black Duck
- Great Blue Heron
- Northern Harriers hunting long open fields with red-tails
- tall white Egrets with yellow bills and black legs
- White Ibis
- Double-crested Cormorant
- Mallard
- American coot
- Tree Swallow
- Brown Pelican
- Kingfisher
- Pileated woodpecker
- Dowitchers hunting along the rainy coast
- and black bear
- Nutria/coypu
- And on the warmest day a sweet pile of painted turtles, resting in the sun.

Gary Phillips is a writer, businessman and former chair of the Chatham County Board of Commissioners.

ROCKY RIVER

continued from page 1.

For drought conditions they have a deep well and a drip-irrigation system. They have their soil samples analyzed in the fall, so they can plow in the amendments as needed, e.g., adjust Ph, Phosphorus, Potassium. The cover crops and feather meal (for nitrogen) are disked in before planting and provide additional nutrients.

Most farmers I've met tell of mistakes, hardships, and painful learning in their early years, but the Robersons' biggest problem was planting the tomatoes a little too close together. They were pleased that market customers returned for more of their heirloom Cherokee purple tomatoes and Bright Lights chard with its red, gold, orange, pink stems. They also enjoyed trading vegetables for baked goods and fruit toward the end of market day. Meeting other farmers and customers provided social life, as they were new in Chatham, having lived here only since fall 2007. Will grew up in eastern N.C. in "Little" Washington, near large commercial farms growing soybeans and corn, but he didn't associate those farms with food that people eat. Another reward for the Robersons is eating well. They also shared extra vegetables with neighbors and gave some to CORA for needy families.

Tabitha is involved in all aspects of their farm except driving the tractor. She and Will plan what they'll grow, and she helps figure out how many seeds they'll need, then plants the seeds for the transplants, which will germinate in the greenhouse. Heat is stored in water barrels at the back of the greenhouse (thermal massing).

He learned at Peregrine that there are two main ways a small farmer can sell his crops at retail prices – one is at farmers' markets and the other through CSAs (Community-Supported Agriculture), when the farm provides customer subscribers with a weekly basket of fresh produce. Will and Tabitha prefer taking everything they have to market.

They sent me home with generous pickings of kale, kohlrabi, and lively green onions. Tabitha worked part-time last year, and this year she has a full-time job with the Triangle Land Conservancy. Will urges others to grow their own food. "Chatham is definitely the right place to grow food," he says. "We're young farmers and have a lot to learn from others, so we're lucky to

be a part of such a thriving farming community full of good growers."

For more info contact Rocky River Farm at rockyriverfarm@hotmail.com and 919.837.5248.

Judy Hogan is a free lance writer, poet, and writing teacher, who sells goods at the Pittsboro Farmer's Market (April-November).



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