A plum of a park

Glenn Gauvry is a fan of the humble Beach Plum Island Nature Preserve, where he keeps an eye on the horseshoe crab population.

Photograph by Kevin Fleming

No lifeguards. No bathhouse. No cold sodas, and no hot dogs. No boardwalk over the dunes. No beach sweeper. When you're paying the same entry fee as you would at other state park beaches, why would you want to go to the forgotten park, Beach Plum Island Nature Preserve?

It's out of the way. Although the southern tip of the 129-acre barrier island is visible if you're looking across Roosevelt Inlet from the Lewes side, you have to drive a ways to reach it: 9 miles north on Route 1 to Broadkill Beach Road; 5.9 miles east to Bay Shore Drive; then 1.9 miles south to the one-lane park entrance.

The amenities in the small graveled parking lot consist of two portable toilet stalls and a tire pump. And the parking lot is closed from Jan. 1 to Feb. 28.

So, what does this part of Cape Henlopen State Park offer that's worth the price of admission?

The bay side of Beach Plum Island is known for its surf fishing, specialty beachcombing, glimpses of wildlife and optimistic signs for conservationists.

The fishing has always been hot there, says Glenn Gauvry, who has lived on neighboring Broadkill Beach for 10 years and recalls seeing the narrow Beach Plum Island shoreline crowded with pickup trucks.

Wildlife can delight a visitor. During a midweek excursion in early September, a young red fox was seen playfully hopping and rolling in the dunes until disturbed by the approach of an amateur photographer.

Although that September visit took place just after Tropical Storm Ernesto, which should have brought in lots of treasures, the beachcombing was almost a bust. Striated in black and white by tide-arranged pat-

Beach Plum Island: the forgotten park

terns of seaweed and other debris, the beach offered little to get excited about.

"Fossils, mainly; interesting stones," says Gauvry of the bayside prospects.

What was noteworthy, and initially distressing, were the hundreds of horseshoe crab shells, most of an immature size, strewn across the beach by the storm's waves.

But that's where the optimism comes in for conservationists. Although storms can churn up the shallow waters, where young horseshoe crabs live, more likely the shells seen on that day were molts, empty shells abandoned by the growing crab. Gauvry, an advocate for horseshoe crab sanctuaries, says an adult female molts (sheds its shell) about 18 times before reaching adulthood.

"The level of molting we're seeing is an encouraging sign," says Gauvry, addressing the concern that overharvesting of the horseshoe crabs by watermen seeking bait has adversely affected other species, most notably the shorebirds that annually feed upon crab eggs laid in the sand. This year, during a spawning survey, a large number of young crabs were seen on the beaches. "That implies to me," says Gauvry, "that the population is rebounding."

A rebound period lasts about a decade because a horseshoe crab takes nine years to reach sexual maturity.

If you're curious about whether a shell on the beach is a molt, says Gauvry, pick it up and check it out. On a molt, you can typically spot a fine split on the front part of the shell's edge.

As for the beachcombing, there are no absolutes. Although the overall experience on that September day was disappointing, the long drive was justified by the last-minute discovery at the high-tide mark of a triangular, flat piece of blue sea glass — the only souvenir taken home.

Unforgettable. ■

Just flip 'em

Photograph by Kevin Fleming

Glenn Gauvry is the founder and director of Ecological Research and Development Group, a nonprofit organization based in Lewes since 1995. The group's goal is to protect horseshoe crabs through education and by forming community-based sanctuaries at beaches where residents demonstrate supportive behavior.

"We really believe that the heart of conservation lies in the heart of people" rather than in federal mandates, says Gauvry, who is proud that along the Delaware Bay, the horseshoe crab's main spawning ground, five communities have agreed to be horseshoe crab sanctuaries: Broadkill Beach, Fowler Beach, Slaughter Beach, Pickering Beach and Kitts Hummock.

Slaughter Beach was on the bandwagon long ago, adopting the horseshoe crab as a mascot in the 1980s. The ancient critter's image is prominent on the town's stationery, flag and vehicles.

The benefit of the group's "Just Flip 'Em" education campaign in the sanctuary zones is simple, according to Gauvry. If a horseshoe crab gets overturned by the tide during its spawning mission, it might have difficulty righting itself. More than likely, it'll die from heat or from the pecking of hungry shore birds. It's safe to pick it up by the edge of its shell and turn it over. The claws can't hurt you. If you flip 'em, says Gauvry, the benefit is less mortality for the species and better beaches with less odor and fewer flies.

"In habitat conservation," says Gauvry, "the most significant factor is a community's willingness to be counted."

The group also sponsors a spawning survey and various other outreach programs. ■

For more information on the Ecological Research and Development Group, visit www.horseshoecrab.org.