

## THE GUNNING RIVER

“Welcome to the Edwin B. Forsythe National Wildlife Refuge, where more than 43,000 acres of southern New Jersey coastal habitats are actively protected and managed for migratory birds,” reads the brochure from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

The Barnegat National Wildlife Refuge, almost centered by the Gunning River, is a large part of the Edwin B. Forsythe. “The refuge’s location in one of the Atlantic Flyway’s most active flight paths makes it an important line in the vast network of national wildlife refuges ...” Who was Edwin B. Forsythe? A New Jersey conservationist congressman.

West of Harvey Cedars on Long Beach Island, and nestled between populated areas of Manahawkin and Barnegat, the Gunning River lies at the lower end of Barnegat Bay. Most notable is the pristine, original state of this river. No homes, bulkheads, marinas, or any other signs of civilization. Rather sadly any old homes and gunning shacks were torn down after the Gunning River became part of the Barnegat National Wildlife Refuge on June 21, 1967. The history of the river may be gone, but the primitive beauty remains.

Boating the Gunning River can only be done by powerboat at high tide. And at ones own risk and discretion. The mouth is marked on Nautical Chart #12314, Sandy Hook to Little Egg Harbor as marsh with depths of 1’ – 3’. Soon the Gunning River narrows considerably and is barely visible from one serpentine curve to the next. Balancing between not going aground and figuring out our next turn kept us extremely alert. A few times we “hit” dead ends and had to carefully turn around or back out. We did not want to disturb the native seagrasses on the bottom or hurt our engine.

Birds seem surprised to see our boat, not flying away until the last minute. Stately white Egrets strained their necks as they hunted for a meal, the backdrop of healthy green marsh accentuating their color. Black ducks hugged the banks while a pair of swans eyed us from around a bend in the distance. Laughing and Herring Gulls cackled away over the sound of our outboard. Geese fussed at us swimming just out of distance. More difficult to spot was a wading Great Blue Heron, obscured by the reflection of the sun in the water.

Fish jumped and we could see numerous crabs in the shallow water. In the heyday of charter boat fishing from the 1910’s through the 1940’s lower Barnegat Bay and the Gunning River was the place for captains to take their customers. Supposedly it is still one of the best crabbing areas in all of New Jersey. Crab pots bobbed in the easterly breeze. But we never saw another boat or person.

Small tributaries went off to either side. A large pond seemed to be at the end of a southern one. Could it be fresh water? We never got close enough. Signs were everywhere telling us to keep off the protected land (but not designated land, rather confusing), and stating hunting instructions. We had no desire to trek off in either the marsh or highland for fear of mosquitoes, flies, and ticks. Just to see such beauty was quite enough.

Off in another direction we got to within 100 yards of the tree line before stirring up too much bay mud. Approaching from the land side of the Gunning River by car or on foot is the Barnegat Observation Platform, built in 1999. Migratory birds can be observed in the spring and fall.

Old timers and locals tell stories of an old house up in a high part of the Gunning River where the best moonshine was once made. Also back when hunting shacks lined the river and men like Dr. Todd entertained their friends as much as they gunned. And then there is the crazy one about the World War II German submarine that supposedly found itself aground – sighted by a blimp headed to Lakehurst of course – at the mouth of the Gunning River. No doubt many tales and more truths lie beneath the surface of this brackish river.

Home to numerous birds, sea critters and smaller ones along the food chain, the Gunning River has not changed in hundreds of years. Under the muck there are probably some relics from the Lenni Lenape

Native Americans who were the first people to summer along the Jersey shore. Time washes over the Gunning River as does the tide from Barnegat Inlet.