

## There's a New Island Off the Coast of North Carolina

“Shelly Island” is a mile long and 300 yards wide, but it's hard to say how long it'll be around



Drone image of Shelly Island (Chad Koczera)

By [Jason Daley](#)  
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Visitors to North Carolina's Outer Banks know the area is dynamic. From year to year, the barrier islands and sand spits continually change shape, expanding, contracting, and sometimes disappearing all together. This year, however, there's been a bigger change than usual, [Craig Welch reports for \*National Geographic\*](#). A new island about a mile long and 300 yards wide has appeared off the tip of Cape Point in Cape Hatteras National Seashore.

The strong currents and tides in the Outer Banks create and destroy new sand bars and islands all the time. But local historian Danny Couch says the new island is special. “It's a hoss,” he tells Welch. “Every 10 to 15 years we'll get something that's pretty dramatic. But this one is the largest one I've seen in my lifetime.”

The dynamic nature of the beach comes from its position near the [confluence](#) of two strong currents: the [Gulf Stream](#), a north-flowing warm water ocean current stretching from the Caribbean to the Northern Atlantic, and the [Labrador Current](#), a cold, south-flowing current. This meeting of currents causes rough waters in this region, which constantly shape and reshape the sandy shores.

As [Jeff Hampton at the \*Virginian Pilot\*](#) reports, as late as April the island was just a bump in the ocean. But by Memorial Day, the feature had formed. That's when Janice Regan and her grandson decided to beachcomb the sandy island, finding a mother lode of pristine shells. They dubbed the place "Shelly Island," a name that is spreading.

But such shell hunting is not recommended on the island. Though many visitors are crossing the 50-yard strait from Cape Point to the Island, Hampton reports, officials are cautioning that visitors should not swim or walk to the island. A strong rip current rushes through the area. Sand sharks and stingrays have also been reported in the waters, and hooks from decades of fishing at the popular spot could litter the seafloor, Hampton reports.

"Travel to the sandbar is best accomplished by experienced kayakers or paddleboarders that are using appropriate floatation and [are] mindful of the strong currents in the area," Dave Hallac, superintendent of the Cape Hatteras National Seashore, tells [Francesca Street at CNN](#).

This rapidly changing region grows even more unstable with a bit of energy from a storm. "There are times when we've had hurricanes or tropical storms where certain sections of the beach just start to disappear," Hallac tells Welch. "In other sections, I'll see something sticking out of the sand and realize it was the top of a sign that had been standing at eye level."

The fate of the newest island is unclear. It could continue to grow in the coming days, and may eventually connect with Cape Point. Or it could disappear overnight. As Mark Dowdle, deputy superintendent of Cape Hatteras tells Welch, it's just another day at the Outer Banks.

#### **About Jason Daley**

Jason Daley is a Madison, Wisconsin-based writer specializing in natural history, science, travel, and the environment. His work has appeared in *Discover*, *Popular Science*, *Outside*, *Men's Journal*, and other magazines.

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