



## **The Importance of Preserving the Understory and Vines in the Maritime Forest**

The canopy of Bald Head Island's unique, globally imperiled, maritime forest provides protection from hurricanes. The tops of trees in the forest protect homes and nature from wind shear. Forest roots hold the island's soil together similar to rebar in a concrete foundation. Without our forest, the island would be much more susceptible to the damaging effects of storms. Our two to three hundred year old live oaks and some half a century old laurel oaks are part of the equation that sustains the island during battering coastal storms.

The understory and herbaceous layer of the maritime forest makes up another important part of our forest. It is here where you find diverse and rich plant life. Understory plants enrich the soil through decomposition. The understory plants also provide a wind-buffering function at ground level.

Bald Head Island's latitudinal position supports both northern and southern species of plants. Important understory plants include vines such as Coral Honeysuckle, Muscadine Grapevine, Smilax, Trumpet Vine, Virginia Creeper; trees such as American Holly, Dogwood, Ironwood (Musclewood), Red Cedar, Laurel Cherry, Yaupon, Red Bay and Sweet Bay, Dwarf Palms and Cabbage Palms; and the herbaceous layer including American Beautyberry, Southern Wax Myrtle, Serviceberry, mosses and lichens. You may see some of these as weeds all are needed to have a healthy forest habitat.

Since the understory vegetation supports a larger variety of plant species, it also supports a larger variety of animal species. For example, the Palmedes Swallowtail butterflies, several species of dragonflies, Yellow-Rumped Warblers, Green Treefrogs, Carolina Anole, Grey Fox, and White-tailed Deer are all residents of Bald Head Island that have direct relationships with the understory layer of the forest.

Removing vegetation from the understory area to 'open up' your yard or landscape will also open up the area to the negative impacts from salt spray. For these plants, exposure to salt winds causes the plants to dry up, losing their leaves and eventually dying. When you clear out around your home and reduce the understory vegetation you take out good quality soils thus weaken your trees ability to protect your home.

Vines too play an important role. The vines and herbaceous plants intertwine, further developing the structural integrity of the forest and forming pockets of vegetation that provide a base for songbirds to build nests. The vines twist around the canopy and are the secret to wind protection. These vines actually weave together the canopy so blowing winds don't penetrate through the top layer and keep homes, plants, and animals below safe and protected.

Please do your part by limiting removal of understory vegetation and allow your land to be as natural as possible. This approach will protect your investment and the whole island's well being. If you have questions about how to best protect your home and our island please call the Biologists at the BHI Conservancy. We would be happy to visit your yard and provide you with tips to best manage your wild landscape, be it dune, forest or marsh.

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