

Camille Cut is no more. A look at new changes to the barrier islands of the Mississippi Coast.



It's time to order new signs and update the brochures, because for the first time in 50 years, there's no longer a Camille Cut or an East and West Ship Island.

Millions of dollars have been invested and millions of cubic yards of sand dredged to close the gap between the two parts of Ship Island. The cut's been there since Hurricane Camille tore through in 1969 and left a 2.4 mile break.

Nature was trying to heal the split in the island, 11 miles south of Gulfport and Biloxi, said Dan Brown, superintendent of the [Gulf Islands National Seashore](#). The two sections of island were within a quarter mile of rejoining when Hurricane Katrina blew in, he said, opening a 3.5 mile cut.

The National Park Service normally would not fill a breach, Brown said, but in this case nature was not able to heal the cut.

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A project was proposed to save the smaller east part of the island so that it wouldn't disappear as [Isle of Caprice did](#) in the 1930s, and to create more area to better protect the mainland from future storms.

"This came about because of Hurricane Katrina and the incredible damage it did to the Mississippi Gulf Coast," Brown said.

THE FIX

A [\\$400 million plan](#) — the [second largest](#) environmental restoration project in the 100-year history of the National Park Service — is under way on Ship Island, said Justin McDonald, senior engineer with the Army Corps of Engineers in Mobile, Alabama. The only larger project was in the Florida Everglades, he said.

The riskiest part of the whole project was getting the rift closed quickly with the water flowing in and out of the gap, he said. The first phase connected the two parts of the island with a slip of land 5 feet above sea level and 500 feet wide. The last grain of sand was placed Feb. 8. The next phase of the contract is about to begin, and he said it will raise the new land by 2 more feet and widen it another 500 feet.

All of the dredge material is coming from 20-35 miles away, he said, primarily from south of the island. It's loaded onto barges that are too large and heavy to come up to the beach. The boats pull to within 4 miles of Ship Island, and the sand is pumped ashore.

A third phase will go out for bids this summer to restore the south shoreline of Ship Island's eastern end, he said. From start to finish, the sand replenishment will take about three years, and he said once that work is complete, dune grass and other vegetation will be planted on what was the Camille Cut to help stabilize it.

"We're not saying this thing won't breach again," he said. It's happened twice before in recorded history. But he said this project puts enough sand back that hopefully nature will be able to close the next rift.

COME ON OUT

In this 50th anniversary of Hurricane Camille, boats now have to go around one side or the other rather than through Ship Island.

Boaters will find less chop as the fill offers protection from the waves, even for big boats and barge traffic, said Capt. Louis Skrmetta, who transports thousands of people to the island each year aboard [Ship Island Excursions](#).

The excursions begin March 16 out of Gulfport and then run daily from Biloxi and Gulfport starting May 11. The last excursion on the fall schedule is Oct. 27.

“The most beautiful beaches in Mississippi are out there on those barrier islands,” Skrmetta said, and the joining of Ship Island creates a stretch of beach for “a nice, long, beautiful hike.”

The National Park Service maintains Fort Massachusetts on the island along with restrooms and a picnic shelter. The Army Corps has two more years of sand placement on Ship Island, and the Park Service is still trying to figure out how much public access to allow to the eastern part of the island until the work is done, Supt. Brown said.

The western part of Ship Island is open and a ceremony to mark the fill of the Camille Cut is being planned, he said. For now the public is directed to stay off the east portion of the island and away from the area where barges and heavy equipment are working, which is flagged and marked.

WILD LIFE

Many locals have never set foot on the barrier islands and tourists may not know they are there or how to get out to them.

“By being so inaccessible, the islands are protected from overuse,” said Skrmetta.

The Park Service provides a [list of approved charters](#) to the islands on its website, and as nature-based tourism grows, so does the opportunity to discover the natural beauty of the islands.

Shore Thing Charters takes people out to the Gulf of Mexico to fish year-round, said Capt. Sonny Schindler, and now is introducing birding with the [Cat Island Experience](#).

They will take individuals and families to the island for a day of birding on 24-foot and 26-foot boats that are fast and stable and have a shallow draft so they can pull up on the beach, Schindler said. They've had people ask to split their day between fishing and seeing the birds.

"We can easily do that," he said. Or for the full Cat Island Experience, the company now offers an all-inclusive two-night or longer trip for six or more people — complete with a stay in one of the few houses on the island.

Experts go along on the trip to point out the birds they see. On a recent 2-mile morning walk down the beach on Cat Island, Coast naturalist Mark LaSalle with LaSalle Consulting, and Robert Smith, coastal program coordinator for Wildlife Mississippi, discovered a treasure of seashells and dozens of different birds.

"We saw probably 80 species," Smith said, such as whimbrel, oystercatchers, reddish egret, terns, osprey, common loons and white and brown pelicans. "You can come and bird the beach," Smith said of the South Mississippi mainland. "You'll see a few birds." Spend a day on the islands in the spring and fall, when the birds are migrating, and he said it's an unforgettable experience.