

CRUISIN' CAROLINA

Fock 3: Bulls, Devils, and Mr. Hoppy

North Carolina's Official State Mammal is the squirrel. You can hear what it sounds like at ([Squirrel](http://www.naturalsciences.org) – www.naturalsciences.org). I don't know if that also means that they are an official redneck stew ingredient or not.

Their Official State Bird is the cardinal. ([cardinal](http://www.naturalsciences.org) – same URL) Very nice sounding bird. Very pretty and noble bird too. But it just reminds me of St. Louis. Or Louisville, Kentucky. Or Stanford. It seems way too red for NC. I'm sure the NC Staters will be bullshit to read that. They must get so sick of Carolina blue, like UNC is the only game in town.

The Official State Reptile is the turtle (no sound available – what sound does a turtle make anyway?). How exciting is that? Did the committee seek out the most ordinary and bland animals it could find? A squirrel and a turtle?? Other Official NC Stuff:

Tree: Pine

Flower: Dogwood

Dog: Flowerwood. Just kidding. Really, it's the Plott Hound.

Vegetable: Sweet Potato. NOT the yam. The Sweet Potato.

Rock: Granite. I guess they just took that one for granite.

Hahahahahaha.

Shell – yes, they have an Official State Shell: Scotch Bonnet

Beverage: Milk.

Motto: *Esse Quam Videri* – Latin for “To be, rather than to seem.”

North Carolina seems large, but is only ranked 29th in area and barely larger than New York. It does, however, rank 10th in population, which is kind of surprising since it's not exactly teeming with large cities. Charlotte, its biggest metropolis, only ranks 26th among US cities. North Carolina is home to more people than Connecticut and Colorado *combined*, but it has fewer people than the city of Bogata, Colombia.

Many times, when I would find myself in a kind of empty zone, where nothing was particularly engrossing about the surroundings, I would give the CD player and cassette deck a break and tune in local radio, just to see what kind of vibes these country folk get in their daily lives. There were some surprises, and some programming that was just odd enough to get me to give a listen.

On this ride out of NC, some National Public Radio station was broadcasting a concert by the Berkshire Highlanders Bagpipes from Tanglewood, in Lenox, Massachusetts. Now, maybe it was because it was from Tanglewood, an idyllic performance venue where I have let my mind waft away with mellow music on more than one occasion. Or maybe because it was bagpipes, and hence, a heritagal bleating in my bloodstream. It doesn't matter why I homed in on this broadcast, I don't need reasons when I'm solo on the road. There was nobody there who would grimace and say “shut that shit off!” I listened to it because, in the freedom of my solitude, *I could!* I even turned up the volume. I cranked the goddamn bagpipes! Windows down, and cruisin' Carolina with bagpipes blaring.

And, of course, I was gesticulating like a conductor with their rises and falls. I was even playing the air-bagpipes. Try that sometime. You feel like a goddamn idiot. Cheeks all puffed out, fingers wobbling in the air in front of you, and your left arm rumpatumps or some other dumbass thing because you realize that you never paid attention to exactly what a bagpiper does. But the music wails, and you air-billow it out air-majestically in your air-kilt.

The bagpipes ended and the crowd gave enthusiastic applause. An announcer came on stage to say a few syllables, and ended up introducing a man without really saying what the man was going to do. I stayed tuned. I knew that's what the sponsors would have wanted me to do.

The man turned out to be a storyteller. And he spun a lengthy yarn about Mr. Hoppy, “a Norwegian bachelor farmer” who lived in Pennsylvania or something. He said the phrase “Norwegian bachelor farmer” as if we would all be familiar with that ilk. Like the audience would all say, ah yes, “a Norwegian bachelor farmer,” I know the type well. Perhaps some even rolled their eyes, began to gather their belongings for an early exit, and muttered, ohhh jeezus, another “Norwegian bachelor farmer” story.



In truth, one “Norwegian bachelor farmer” tale would be enough for me, but, again, I did not touch that dial. I can only imagine how Patrick, Cliff, Richie, Nooch, Ed, Dugg, Sharon, Bobby, Kelzo, Doug T, Dash, Bash, or Ban would have dealt with this choice of program. No way for the first few, especially Cliff. Gawd, he would’ve been on that button before you could say “Norwe—”. Kelzo too.

Ed, always the eclectic one, would’ve let it ride and given it a fair chance. In the end, he would’ve panned it, but he would’ve seen it through.

Patrick and Richie would have taken it as a signal: well-radio-sucks-let’s-talk-now, and would’ve begun a conversation right over it. Doug T probably would’ve too, but with a little roly-eyes *WTF is Rick listening to now?*

The 515 crew – Dash, Bash, Ban – would have fired it up, sucked it down, and loved every bizarre minute of it. As I did.

So, Mr. Hoppy was, of course, one of these “Norwegian bachelor farmers”, whatever the hell that means. He was from Norway, he lived alone, on a farm. I guess. Doesn’t sound overly compelling.

But it rolled on and on smoothly, just like the road. After about fifteen minutes, a gun became involved, though it was never fired, just wielded with belligerence in a crowded bar by Mr. Hoppy because the others were trying to tell him what he could and couldn’t do on his own land.

Well, it turns out that old Mr. Hoppy, like all Norwegian bachelor farmers, was doing some odd things up in his lonely farmhouse. Nothing randy, mind you, just odd.

When somebody snuck up to spy on him through his Norwegian bachelor farmhouse window, he saw a long dining room table, with bizarre guests. Each seat was occupied by a scarecrow-type body with a large pumpkin for a head. The pumpkins had been carved or drawn to mimic the features of the town’s prominent people, and Mr. Hoppy walked around the table, in a mildly animated state, speaking to each pumpkin in turn, and by name, telling them what he thought of them.

Then the story ENDED! WTF???

The guy must’ve taken a bow or something, because, after a disbelieving pause, the audience slowly began to clap. After a bit, the storyteller, made some closing remarks about the show, and the program was over.

Norwegian bachelor farmer, my ass. I put the CD’s back on.

The Roadrage route was through the narrow part of NC. Several prior travels had braved the fat end, closer to the coast. Neither route affords much in the way of diversion, so occasionally, it behooves the roadtripper to seek diversion. Taking the Durham detour from I-95, for instance, was a good break.

Durham is most renowned as the home of Duke University, a fine school that rebounds well, and is solid at the free throw line. Like most colleges, they also dabble in academics. This, though, did not concern me as I steered Max onto campus. It was aesthetics I sought. I had no idea what Duke would be like. Certainly the surrounding neighborhoods of Durham were ordinary enough, though nice. The town itself didn’t radiate affluence; it was a tad shabby, but it was a still a good number of steps above ghetto.

Also, it was the home of the Durham Bulls minor league baseball team that had gained notoriety in the recent (at the time) movie *Bull Durham*. Though the movie was great, I wonder how proudly Tim Robbins boasts about that line of his resume. Clearly, he has played nobler characters since. I think Costner is probably comfortable with it, since he was the hero and all that. Plus he got the girl (Susan Sarandon) at the end.

And, speaking of resumes, I wonder how many times Susan Sarandon gets asked about her breakthrough role as Janet Weiss in *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*. And, even more extreme along those lines, I wonder if Tim Curry found work easier or harder to get after being Dr. Frank N. Furter – the sweet transvestite himself -- in that same cult classic film?

But I digress. The Bulls weren’t in town that summer afternoon, but the stadium looked true to the movie. Or perhaps the movie was true to the stadium. Actually, with the bright fresh paint and such, I



think the stadium benefited quite nicely from the movie. I'm sure neither was true to the pre-movie stadium.

Pulling into Duke's campus is pretty nice. You face a long straight, driveway that slopes down and then upward to the main tower. Trees abound, and the architecture is that classic collegiate style that just makes you feel smart by looking at it. Deeming the campus worthy of a tour, I parked Max and went for a run. You can cover a college campus pretty well with a half-hour jaunt. I toured the dorm



areas, the classroom areas, the big lawns where students probably hang out when school is in session, and then came to the focal point of the tour, the track. Impressed I was that it was in a stadium. Wallace Wade Stadium, in fact.

Steeply sloping grandstands swept down from what I thought to be almost-ground-level, and into a deep, three-sided bowl, to the track surface. It looked great. And the lines on the field made it clear that the track program magnanimously allowed their poor cousins in the football program to share the stadium with them for fall afternoon games. Nice to see such cooperation among teams.

An open gate at the stadium's open end afforded me the opportunity to run a lap around the track before angling back to Max. It must be damn cool to perform in a stadium like that, full of 34,000 cheering fans. Gotta be quite a rush.

It must really suck, though, if you do something *stupid* in front of all those people. Having them jeer at you, and point, and laugh, and your dumbass miscue is shown on the huge screen scoreboard over and over again, so everyone can see just how big a LOSER you really are.

But I guess that would be considered "the negative view." So my glass is half empty. Bite me.

As I neared the very end of my run, a sign caught my attention, as signs are intended to do. This one was a small and meek sign that simply indicated the direction to Duke Gardens, which is a large and beautiful botanical garden that borders campus.

Botanical gardens are good for running for three main reasons: (1) they tend to be pretty empty and very peaceful, (2) there are plenty of pretty things to look at, so taking your time makes you look like a naturalist rather than like a lazy slug, and (3) they simply abound with those good-for-the-soul negative ions. It was a nice way to extend the run by a third-of-an-hour, and give me bonus clear-conscience time.

When the I-95 route was abandoned in favor of the inland route, the Durham-Duke detour was no longer a viable diversion. But, Rand McNally never runs out of options. Duke Power State Park appeared on the map, as if by magic, just off I-77, the very first time I tested that road. It was a fulfilling stop.

Not majestic by any means, and with no real catchy attraction to make it noteworthy beyond a fifty-mile radius, DPSP boasts a large lake with plenty of powerboat access, and miles of narrow, snaking, hiking trails that allow for leisurely running. There was also a campground among tall birch and some-other-kind of trees, with a fairly modern bathhouse that had ample hot water in the showers. It was another roadtrippin' bonanza.

Being at about the halfway point of the Boston-to-Florida trips, it was a timely respite. Max and I would pull in to an empty spot at the all-but-deserted campground – it was hardly peak season on most of those trips – go for a run along the trails that hugged the lake shore, finish with a charge up the final hill, dry on the shore in the cool sunshine and light breeze, take a free steamy shower, and whip up a few sandwiches for a little picnic before resuming the ride. It was two hours to move the limbs, awaken the heart and lungs, cleanse the body and mind, and commune with nature.

Grand place, DPSP.



The Carolinas are hot places in summertime, even hotter than DC. On an early roadtrip, we passed some bridge construction on a mid-July day. Workmen were pouring concrete for a new overpass or something. A couple were in waders, thigh-deep in liquid cement. Sun beat down from above, and heat rose in waves off the surface. As I drove along in my A/C comfort, I thought to myself, could there be a hotter job anywhere?

A little more than an hour later, an answer came: yes, there IS a hotter job. Another construction crew was laying fresh asphalt. It was going down real hot, and looked like it would stay soft for days in this swelter. Those guys must've sweat out a few quarts that day.

God bless the crews who keep the US highways in smooth sailing condition for guys like me. What good would cruise control be if the roads were crappy? How enjoyable would roadtrippin' be if the highway were jarring you with ruts and cracks and chuck holes every mile or so?

Nothing is so nice as a freshly paved asphalt highway. Even the lines are crisp and bright. The tires cozy into that smooth surface and cuddle the road as you drive. You can just hear them go

Yummmmm....

The noise drops to almost nothing, and at night, as the asphalt seems to absorb all light from the headlamps, it's easy to imagine that the road is not even there, and that the van is like one of those shuttles floating across the surface of the moon in *2001: A Space Odyssey*. The lines zip by like floating beacons, and your shuttle zooms through the equal blackness of road and sky.

One time, driving from Boston to Canaan NH, well after midnight and under a brilliant full moon, the newly-paved road teased me into turning off my lights. The lunar glow in this clean mountain air was almost bright enough to read by. Even the dashboard lights were turned off. The van hummed contentedly,



and the peace was delightful. I could see everything, mainly because there was so little to see. There was no traffic for miles. It was great.

It was so great, in fact, that I totally forgot that my lights were off. I must have driven fifteen miles like that. Only when I saw a car on the other side of the divided I-93 flash his high beams, did it occur to me that I was dark-driving. I put my lights back on, but did so somewhat regretfully, feeling that some little freedom had just vanished. I love driving.

Like I said, my tax dollars go to the roads. Amen.

Most meals on the road are cold cut samiches or tuna samiches (low budget dining). These big juicy fried chicken breasts were my "splurge." Outside the northeast, it seems that every supermarket deli would have a nice bin of fresh hot fried chicken pieces, and the price of a succulent breast was as low as \$1.09.

Many times I would stand outside the van, soaking up the sun in a hot parking lot, just voraciously wolfing down this chicken. Bird bones and crispy batter bits flew, while I made gluttonish grunts and moans and gasped for breath between mouthfuls.

Here in Brevard, I pulled into the neighboring gas station and ate while Blue Man drank. I was just about finished ravaging and slobbering over my hot hunk o' chicken, and I looked up to see a horse staring at me. It was in a trailer, about eight feet away, with its head sticking out the side opening, and it was riveted on my eating display, probably mortified that my fellow humans would have said that I was "eating like a horse."

And thanks to my local Rochester supermarket, Wegman's (yes, we sometimes referred to it as Smegma's), I didn't have to buy soft drink for the whole month. Right before I left, as I was doing a little stocking up for the road, I turned into an aisle, and was faced with a display sign that I did not believe: "6-packs, Coca-Cola products, \$.88 each." Yes! Eighty-eight cents a SIX-PACK. Christ, a can costs a dollar in some machines! So, I stocked up. A couple of cases of Coke Classic, a case or two of Sprite,



and a few cases of Country Time Lemonade – 9 cases in all, 216 cans! I barely had room for them all in the van. What a deal.

Ahhh, my Scottish ancestors would be proud of my thrift. Hoot, mun!