In addition to the great holdings of habitat and vegetation, the Roanoke is host to an assembly of cultures that have used its resources over time. Much of this heritage has been lost to modern conventions.

Here the Roanoke holds many secrets in its dark waters, hidden except for exploration by mankind.

Over the last several decades, East Carolina University School of Maritime History has surveyed the vast underwater archives of lost ships. Their discoveries have uncovered the telling of a time when schooners, warships and simple workboats once plowed the waterways.

Along the banks of the Roanoke lie a treasure of sunken watercraft. East Carolina University has identified a number of boats, some as large as 300 feet, lying in state away from everyday view.

At the eastern end of Railswitch Nature Trail, the Union gunboat, USS Southfield, is submerged near the shoreline. The ship was sunken by the ironclad CSS Albemarle in the Battle of Plymouth more than a century ago during the Civil War.

Artifacts from a recent dive on the Southfield are on display at the Port O’ Plymouth Museum, near the entrance of the trail.

For more information, see:
www.gowildnc.com
Washington County Travel & Tourism
(252) 793-3248

Railswitch Nature Trail is a partnership of:
Washington County Waterways Commission
Town of Plymouth
Albemarle R C & D
North Carolina Clean Water Grant
Washington County Extension Service
Washington County GIS
Washington County Soil & Water
Downtown Plymouth Development Association
Port O’ Plymouth Museum

Photos courtesy of the Nature Conservancy, M. Daniels, & Doward Jones Jr.
The Roanoke River begins a 400 mile journey in the Virginia mountains winding its way to the coastland of northeastern North Carolina. The town of Plymouth stands as the last passage of this remarkable waterway before emptying into the Albemarle Sound a few miles east.

Floodplains form as the river broadens and merges with the Cashie and Eastmost Rivers. The terrain creates a glimpse into a wonderland of habitat and flora. Labeled as one of the “Largest and undisturbed bottomland hardwood forest ecosystems on the east coast” by The Nature Conservancy, the region offers the visitor a unique engagement with nature.

Railswitch Nature Trail in downtown Plymouth provides an opportunity to explore nature’s majesty in a setting that is both remote and easily accessible. Located at the east end of Plymouth near the Port O’ Plymouth Museum, the trail borders the Roanoke River along an abandoned rail bed.

With just a short walk from the parking area, visitors are taken into a world where Mother Nature dominates the land and water as the busy sounds of daily life vanish.

Along the way, a boardwalk ventures off the trail through the woodlands ending as a window overlooking the river. Here on most evenings you can observe the otters fish and play, teaching their young the skills of survival. Bald Eagles, osprey and other great birds of prey fly overhead, gliding gracefully to the water in hopes of a catch.

Stand quietly and long legged shore birds will approach wading in the shallows of the shoreline. In the blink of an eye they grab a meal using their keen reflexes honed over time.

Listed on the North Carolina Birding Trail, the area is rich in songbirds, woodpeckers, waterfowl and migrating neotropical birds. A pair of binoculars and a little time will reward visitors with a sighting of our winged friends.

Travel further along the 1200 foot walkway and you will discover an offshoot into green vistas with a picnic table for a natural dining experience.

As the trail turns south, a marsh is filled with various plant life created by its captured standing waters. Here an overlook takes the visitor into a terrain of cattails and dragon flies as primeval as time allows.

The trail can be completed by walking southward to Main Street. From this point, turn right for a short, pleasurable walk returning to the parking area.

We hope you enjoy Railswitch Nature Trail on your visit to Plymouth. Be sure to also experience the Port O’ Plymouth Museum located west of the trail. Browse through the quaint village of late 19th century architecture where a friendly atmosphere prevails among the shopkeepers offering unique products and services.

Complete your experience with a visit to the 1866 replica of the Roanoke River Lighthouse and Maritime Museum on West Water Street. Here you can visualize life when the waterways intertwined with the cultures who inhabited these lowlands near the sea.