
WHERE THE WILD THINGS ARE

On Georgia's Cumberland Island, a true treasure hunter presides, creating jewels from natural wonders, one precious find at a time



Jewelry artisan and Carnegie descendant Gogo Ferguson designed this creation featuring a 14-karat gold rattlesnake jawbone pendant strung on red stick coral with a large vermeil crab claw clasp. Opposite: Ferguson scavenges for shells with her dog, Lilly, on Cumberland's shore.

By
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GOGO FERGUSON

crouches on the wide, white-sand beach of Georgia's Cumberland Island, turning a conch egg encasement over in her hands. Holding the spiraling, translucent strand up to the sun, she runs her fingers across its rubbery surface and wonders aloud whether she will transform it into earrings or a necklace. The foot-long piece is too big and fragile to fit in her pocket, so she wraps the strand around her neck. In the distance, two of Cumberland's 100 wild horses, descendants of those brought to the island by the Spanish in the 1500s, graze placidly on sea oats bending in the breeze.

It's here, on the barrier island's 18 miles of shoreline—one of the largest wilderness areas in a National Seashore on the East Coast—that the slender, sinewy jewelry designer and fifth-generation Carnegie descendant forages for natural treasures. She also explores the forests of palmettos, thickets of resurrection ferns, and fields of centuries-old live oaks with branches that extend like the outstretched arms of a ballet troupe for found shells and scutes, shark teeth and vertebrae that she will turn into acclaimed wearable art for a boldface clientele that includes Jimmy Buffett, Carly Simon, the Clintons, Mikhail Baryshnikov, and designer Nicole Miller.

Her work has evolved from pieces made of original shell and bone to re-creations of her beach finds, made by "lost wax casting," a process that involves filling a mold with gold or silver. For the marriage of Carolyn Bessette to John F. Kennedy Jr.,

Gogo designed the wedding bands—snake rib cast in gold. "I get everything from Cumberland," she says. "I have such a sense of place here, and from that comes my sense of design, part of my soul." Born Janet (her first words were "go go," she says, and they stuck), she has walked this shore since childhood summers spent on the island. Even then, she loved to adorn herself with the small bones and shells lining the beach, like the Timucua Indians who once lived here.

Cumberland's more recent history is intertwined with Gogo's family: During the late 19th century, her great-great grandfather Thomas Carnegie (Andrew's brother) bought the island, and built a 58-room turreted stone castle called Dungeness. He turned the property into a Gilded Age wilderness playground shared with alligators, hogs, armadillos, and 335 species of birds. As the children in the family grew up, they built a handful of grand homes amid the wild oak forests awash in lacy Spanish moss. Greyfield, a Gatsbyesque mansion originally built for Gogo's great grandmother Margaret Carnegie, became an inn in 1969. The family donated most of the island to the National Park Foundation in 1972 to protect it from development. Greyfield is the only inn on Cumberland, and run by Gogo's brother; their families are the only two living on the island full-time. The other 30 residents include park rangers and members of Greyfield Inn's staff.

A painting of Gogo's grandmother Lucy Ferguson, wearing a bandana and buck knife, hangs in Greyfield's living room. "Everything I know about Cumberland Island I learned from my grandmother," Gogo says. "She used her buck knife to kill the rattlesnakes that invaded her chicken coop." Lucy taught the young Gogo how to skin a snake, rub it clean with coarse cornmeal, slather it with Pond's cold cream,



Opposite, clockwise from top, left: The designer in her favorite habitat; found shells and skulls alongside family photos in Gogo's home; a conch egg encasement; armadillo shell cast in sterling silver

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See and shop Gogo's collection, such as these beachcombed shells and bones cast in gold, at gogojewelry.com. Opposite: A painting of Gogo's grandmother Lucy Ferguson in the living room of Greyfield Inn, the island's only stay



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Clockwise: A sea oats necklace and earrings cast in silver and gold; Gogo at home; a spiny murex conch cuff; the ruins of Dungeness, the original Carnegie home



and mount it on a piece of wood. “Being with my grandmother was like spending time with Peter Pan,” says Gogo. “From the moment my two brothers and I woke up, she had us hiking, horseback riding, or learning how to recognize the footprints of an alligator or of a bird on the dunes. She took us out at night to watch the loggerhead sea turtles lay their eggs. She filled us with such a sense of wonder; she was like a mother owl who taught us how to really see nature.”

Visitors to Greyfield Inn come to experience that same natural wonder, and beginning in the late '70s, the inn's guests became Gogo's jewelry clients. “I had a captive audience, because once guests were bitten by Cumberland, they needed to take a little something home to remind them of the place,” says Gogo, who moved to the island with her young daughter

in 1978 after a divorce. Returning to her childhood love of hunting, gathering, and adorning herself with the island's strewn shells and bones, it seemed a natural progression to start making wearable art from the objects that washed up on the beach. Her first piece was a necklace of rattlesnake ribs strung together with simple fishing line. Before long a wealthy visitor placed a \$10,000 order (Christmas presents for his friends and family), and her business took off. Today, her jewelry sells from \$55 to \$12,000 and up.

Gogo designs from the upstairs studio of her island home, built near the inn 25 years ago with recycled beams, planks, and windows. Here, the natural world inhabits each wall and surface: Drawer pulls and doorknobs are made from shark vertebrae; the towel racks are deer antlers. Turtle shells, alligator scutes, dolphin

vertebrae, seashells, shark teeth, and more rest on tables, spill out of buckets, and fill the seemingly endless drawers. A woolly mammoth's tusk and a Megalodon shark's tooth remain from the last Ice Age, found on this wild expanse.

At age 64, Gogo continues to stroll this shoreline for the incredible gifts that appear every six hours with the tide. “I want my legacy to be as a conservationist, as a designer, and as someone who really valued Cumberland,” Gogo says. “We are now seven generations on Cumberland; the most important thing we can do for future generations is to teach people how to protect the land.” ■

New York City-based writer Margie Goldsmith has visited 130 countries on seven continents, and written about them all. This is her first piece for Coastal Living.