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Texas State Relay Service
1 800/735-2989

For information on the
National Wildlife Refuge System
1 800/344-WILD

October 2000



Black-necked Stilts
Photograph by F.G. Prieto

**U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service
Texas Parks and Wildlife Department**

Matagorda Island

*National Wildlife Refuge
and State Park*



The Matagorda Island National Wildlife Refuge is part of the Aransas National Wildlife Refuge Complex, one of more than 500 refuges throughout the United States managed by the Fish and Wildlife Service.

The National Wildlife Refuge System is the only national system of lands dedicated to conserving our wildlife heritage for people today and for generations yet to come.

On the Edge



Spectacular sunrises and sunsets. Billowing cloud banks. An endless horizon. The limitless Gulf of Mexico. A bright beach beckoning to the vanishing point. Tiers of wind sculpted sand dunes. A smell of salt, rasp of sand, caress of onshore breeze. A thunder of wings, the wail of a coyote, the recurrent shush of the surf. An island universe bent on its own course. Matagorda Island.

Matagorda is a 5,000-year-old ribbon of sand, piled in place and held poised there by the sea. Contoured by prevailing south-easterly breezes and opposing gusty northers, Matagorda Island is reshaped by occasional violent storms.

The island is 38 miles long and varies from 3/4 to 4 1/2 miles in width. Along its outer shore, the clean slash of white beach meets the waves rolling in from the Gulf of Mexico. On the opposite side; quiet bays lap into the labyrinth of inlets and oyster reefs that border the salt marsh. Tidal passes define the tips of the island: Pass Cavallo on the north and Cedar Bayou on the south.

Sunset over Mesquite Bay

Photograph by F.G. Prieto





Laughing Gulls

Photograph by F.G. Prieto

Tidal passes serve as migration routes for aquatic creatures whose life cycles span both Gulf and bays (brown and white shrimp, blue crabs, southern flounder, and red drum). These passes convey Gulf water to refurbish and cleanse the land-locked bays, and they act as escape routes for marine life when the shallow bays get too cold or too salty. Cedar Bayou is a designated fish pass by Texas Parks and Wildlife Department. As such special regulations apply.

From Bay to Surf

Built by the sea, Matagorda Island is divided into a series of distinctive life zones oriented parallel to the beach. Salt marsh is intertwined with mud flats; oyster reefs and shallow open water stretch along the bay side. Both finfish and shellfish abound in marsh shallows, providing food for clapper rails, long-legged wading birds, shorebirds, and other migratory birds.



Giant Land Crab

Photograph by
F.G. Prieto



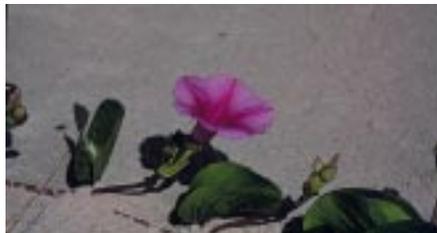
Magnificent Frigatebird
Photograph by F.G. Prieto

At the high tide line, marsh meets grassland. The interior of the island is carpeted with a stunning waist-high sea of grasses: Gulfdune paspalum, marshhay cordgrass, Gulf cordgrass, and seacoast bluestem, blend with some 80 other species.

The grasses are intermixed with a variety of herbs, trailing vines, sedges, and wild flowers. White-tailed deer, eastern meadowlarks and wolf spiders populate the humid grasslands.

Between grassland and beach lies the dune field. This undulant zone of shifting sand is sparsely vegetated. The dunes are capped with picturesque clumps of sea oats, swaying upon 20-foot peaks. Goatsfoot morning glory and evening primrose trail down the dunes toward the beach. Sand wasps, horned larks, and occasional badger live in the desert-like dunes.

*Goatsfoot
Morning Glory*
Photograph by
F.G. Prieto



*Crested
Caracara*
Photograph by
F.G. Prieto



The sand dunes are separated from the sea by a gently sloping sandy beach about 250 feet wide. Tough pioneer plants like sea purslane, beach fimbry, and sea rocket dare to colonize the inland edge. Ghost crabs and sanderlings scurry across the sand. Coquina clams burrow in the surf zone and Portuguese man-o-wars ride the Gulf swells.

On the Move

Positioned in a bottleneck on the Central Flyway, Matagorda Island is a critical staging area, a stopping off place, for flocks of migrating birds. In autumn the island is a springboard from which many southbound species launch across the Gulf of Mexico; in spring it is the sought-after landfall for exhausted northbound migrants. At the peak of bird migration the numbers of birds on the island can change dramatically in just a few hours.

*Aplomado
Falcon*
Photograph by
F.G. Prieto





Yellow-breasted Chat

Photograph by F.G. Prieto

**Endangered/
Threatened
Species**

Species diversity is at its highest during the spring and fall migrations. Spring migration is more intense because birds are driven by instinct to reach their nesting grounds. Clumps of salt cedars and scattered mesquite trees suddenly come alive with colorful songbirds: tanagers, grosbeaks, buntings, orioles, vireos and a bewildering array of wood warblers. Swallows and goatsuckers, flycatchers and kingbirds, kinglets and gnatcatchers, thrushes and thrashers, and waves of hurrying sparrows can all be found.

Twelve endangered or threatened bird species and seven species of reptiles occur on Matagorda Island. The best known of these is the whooping crane. From late October to mid-April, thirty or more of these stately birds stalk the salt marsh. Brown pelicans, reddish egrets, and white-tailed hawks all maintain stable populations. Northern aplomado falcons have been reintroduced on the island since 1996. The first successful nest occurred in 1999.

Horned Lizard

Photograph by
F.G. Prieto



Although the Texas horned lizard has declined enough to be ranked as threatened by the State, these unusual creatures scamper blissfully along shell roads on Matagorda. Alligators can be found in nearly all freshwater ponds, and five of the world's eight species of sea turtles cruise the offshore shallows.

Matagorda In History

The Karankawa, who lived along the coastline between Galveston and Corpus Christi, were probably the first human inhabitants on Matagorda Island. When La Salle's ship, the *L'Amiable*, sank in Pass Cavallo, in 1685, he and his crew came ashore and planted the French flag on the island. Spanish exploration occurred in 1793 when Captain Juan Cortez found the island inhospitable because of mosquitos and flies, and called the island "purgatory".



Matagorda Island lighthouse at sunset

Photograph by Lynn B. Starnes

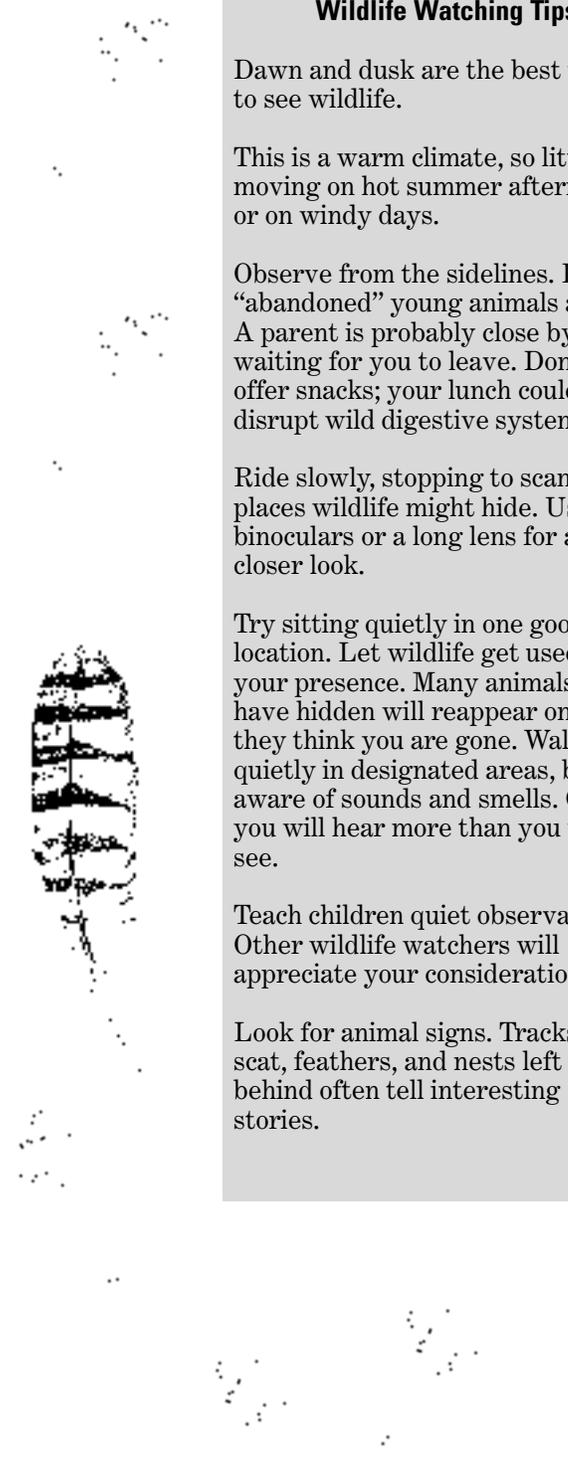
Two towns, Calhoun and Saluria, were established on the north end of the island. Calhoun, established in 1839 as a customs port, quickly declined. The town of Saluria, established in 1847 survived the Civil War, but later succumbed to hurricanes in 1875 and 1886. The Matagorda Island lighthouse, built in 1852, stands as a reminder of yesteryear.

Originally constructed near the town of Saluria, on Pass Cavallo, the lighthouse guided ships through the pass into Matagorda Bay. The lighthouse was not tall enough and an additional 24 feet of height was added in 1859. During the Civil War, the Confederate Army was ordered to destroy all the lighthouses in Pass Cavallo. The Matagorda lighthouse proved a formidable opponent. The light was removed and charges were set to blow up the structure. Only two plates were damaged in the explosion. In 1872, the lighthouse was restored and moved 1.5 miles inland because erosion threatened to undermine the foundation. Relit on September 1, 1873, the lighthouse shone until 1995. With modern day navigational aids the lighthouse no longer served its intended purpose. On December 31, 1999, through the efforts of the Matagorda Island Foundation, Calhoun County, Texas Parks and Wildlife and the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, the lighthouse was relit, and restoration began.



White pelicans

Photograph by F.G. Prieto



Wildlife Watching Tips

Dawn and dusk are the best times to see wildlife.

This is a warm climate, so little is moving on hot summer afternoons or on windy days.

Observe from the sidelines. Leave “abandoned” young animals alone. A parent is probably close by waiting for you to leave. Don’t offer snacks; your lunch could disrupt wild digestive systems.

Ride slowly, stopping to scan places wildlife might hide. Use binoculars or a long lens for a closer look.

Try sitting quietly in one good location. Let wildlife get used to your presence. Many animals that have hidden will reappear once they think you are gone. Walk quietly in designated areas, being aware of sounds and smells. Often you will hear more than you will see.

Teach children quiet observation. Other wildlife watchers will appreciate your consideration.

Look for animal signs. Tracks, scat, feathers, and nests left behind often tell interesting stories.

**Visiting
Matagorda Island**

The North End

Access to the island is by boat only. Texas Parks and Wildlife Department operates a passenger ferry to and from Matagorda Island four days a week and on some holidays. The ferry will carry passengers, bicycles and kayaks. The voyage is approximately 25 minutes.

From the Island's dock, visitors can walk or ride bicycles along the roads. A beach shuttle is available to take visitors to and from the beach located 1.5 miles from the dock. A number of special tours are available, including history, whooping crane and birding tours.

Boats docks are available for private boats.

Matagorda Island Ferry Schedule

Days of Operation	Depart Port O'Connor	Depart Matagorda Island
Thursday & Friday	9:00 am	4:00 pm
Saturday & Sunday	8:00 am 10:00 am 3:00 pm	9:00 am 2:00 pm 4:00 pm



Environmental education class
Photograph by W.H. McAlister

Viewing Whooping Cranes from a distance

Photograph by
F.G. Prieto



Things To Do and See

Fishing



Visitors can wade fish in the surf or in the bayside marshes. Bayside fisherman are encouraged to watch for whooping cranes during the winter and keep a distance from them so not to disturb these endangered birds.

Walking/Biking



Twenty-five miles of shell roadways and beach centered around the Island's Visitor Center are available for exploration. The lighthouse trail leads from the beach access road across the civil war trenches to the lighthouse.

Beach Combing



Beach conditions change throughout the year. Sometimes it is wide and smooth and at others it can be heaped with sargassum making travel difficult. Pick up a few shells or that "treasure" (hard hat, buoy, drift wood etc.) you just can't pass up. Just remember, if you take it off the beach, you take it off the island!



Coyote pups

Photograph by W.H. McAlister

*Black-shouldered
Kite*

Photograph by
F.G. Prieto



Birding



Texas Parks and Wildlife Department Park rangers can point you toward “hotspots”, including the “golden triangle” and Lighthouse Pond. Northern aplomado falcons, black-shouldered kites, scissor-tailed flycatchers, and roseate spoonbills will catch even a novice birder’s eye. Birding tours are available in the spring by Texas Parks and Wildlife Department.

Camping



Primitive camping on the beach or dock at the north end or at Cedar Bayou is available. Potable water is not available on the Island, so bring plenty.

Bunkhouse



Call Texas Parks and Wildlife at 512/389-8900 for information and reservations.

Hunting



The bayside marshes are open for waterfowl hunting. Opportunities for hunting dove, quail and deer on the Island are available. Contact Texas Parks and Wildlife Department at 512/389-8900 for information and regulations.

Fees	For reservations call 361/983-2215.
<i>Passenger Ferry</i>	Adults: \$10.00 Children (12 and under) \$5.00 Kayaks \$5.00
	
<i>Bunkhouse</i>	For reservations call 512/389-8900. Per Person: \$12.00 per night plus tax
<i>Primitive Campsites</i>	Per Site: \$4.00 per night 4 person maximum
<i>Kayak Rental</i>	\$25.00 per half day \$35.00 per whole day



Killdeer
Photograph by F.G. Prieto

**Matagorda Island
NWR Facts**
Where is it?

To get to the ferry landing from Galveston, take I-45 west to Texas City and State Highway 6 to Alvin. Turn left on SH 35 and follow it south to the intersection of SH 35 and SH 185, at Green Lake. Turn left and follow SH 185 to Port O'Connor. Turn right on 16th Street and go two blocks to the ferry landing. From Corpus Christi, take SH 35 north to SH 185. Turn right and continue the above directions to Port O'Connor.

When was it established? 1971

How big is it? 56,000 acres

Why is it here? To protect critical coastal wetlands for migratory birds and other wildlife.