



U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

Aransas

National Wildlife Refuge

Welcome: Whooping Crane Stronghold

The bugle of an endangered whooping crane echoes across the far reaches of the marsh. Only at Aransas National Wildlife Refuge do North America's tallest birds find an enduring winter stronghold.

Here, too, pelicans, herons, egrets, roseate spoonbills, ducks, and geese dine in brackish waters and salt marshes teeming with fishes, blue crabs, and clams. On shore, javelinas, bobcats, and deer wander oak woodlands. Alligators peer from still waters of ponds and sloughs. Ringed by tidal marshes and broken by long, narrow sloughs, this 115,000-acre refuge complex sprawls mostly across the Blackjack peninsula, where grasslands, live oaks, and redbay thickets cover deep, sandy soils. Storms and waters of the Gulf of Mexico constantly shape this vital refuge, home to over 400 different bird species.

Why So Many Birds?

Whooping cranes join throngs of other migratory birds that settle on tidal marshes stretching before them like huge banquet tables. Strong winds push the bay waters over low-lying shores, forming fertile, brackish tidal marshes among short, salt-tolerant plants. Mild winters, bay waters, and abundant food provide a winning combination for water-loving birds. Brilliantly feathered songbirds—tanagers, painted buntings and warblers—descend here on their journey north to breeding grounds after a winter in Central America.

If you visit Aransas NWR in April or May just after a “norther” blows through, you might witness a songbird fallout. During such events, birdwatchers have counted up to 33 species in 15 minutes around the Refuge Visitor Center.

Whooping Cranes: A Rare Splendor

“When we hear this call we hear no mere bird. He is the symbol of our untamable past.” —Aldo Leopold

Once nearly extinct, whooping cranes appear to be on the upswing, from a low of 15 in 1941 to over 500 cranes in North

America today. Despite a worldwide concern for their protection, the cranes still teeter on the brink of extinction.

At Aransas NWR, the elegant birds share the intracoastal waterway with oil tankers and the potential threat of deadly spills as well as the threat of natural disasters. Fortunately, intensive efforts are underway to establish a new non-migratory flock in Louisiana, where the species once nested, and a migratory flock in the eastern United States.

In fact, Aransas NWR hosts the largest flock of wintering whooping cranes in North America with over 250 birds. By mid-April, they depart in pairs or small family groups for a hazardous journey 2,500 miles north to nesting grounds at Wood Buffalo National Park in Northwest Territories, Canada.

When and Where to Watch Cranes

From late October to mid-April, crane families feed in the saltwater marshes. Boat tours may offer the best views. Often, you can see a family of whooping cranes from the 40-foot Observation Tower, which is equipped with telescopes. For commercial boat tour information, call the Rockport Chamber of Commerce at 1-800/242-0071. Additional birding information is available from Port Lavaca Chamber of Commerce at 1-800/556-7678.

Things to do at the Refuge

You're invited to take the auto tour, walk the trails, fish off the pier, stop by our Visitor Center, walk up the observation tower, and relax overlooking San Antonio Bay.

Take a 16-mile Auto Tour Loop

As you drive inland from coastal waters, salty flats give way to freshwater ponds fed by rains. Alligators, turtles, frogs, snakes, and birds find havens in ponds of all sizes. Notice how slight changes in elevation help determine which plant communities exist. Bluestem and other prairie grasses dominate the grasslands you see rising above the marshes.

Walking Trails

If you can, take time to stretch your legs along several miles of walking trails. You'll find observation platforms, spotting scopes, diverse plants and wildlife, and stunning panoramas of the bay. The trails are listed below in the order you encounter them along the auto tour loop.

Rail Trail (.3 mile)

Waterbirds, from rails to bitterns, lurk in the reeds lining Tomas Slough. This grassy trail parallels the long, narrow pond that is home to alligators as well. Listen for the *kuk-kuk-kuk* of yellow-billed cuckoos along the way.

Alligator Viewing Area (<.1 mile)

Take a short walk up the ramp and look for alligators in Tomas Slough, one of the few freshwater resources on the refuge. On sunny days, you may see an alligator basking on the bank. Listen for frogs calling, and look for fish swimming in the water.

Heron Flats Trail (1.4 miles)

Freshwater sloughs, shell ridges, oak forests, and tidal flats harbor both common plants, as well as unique plant communities. You'll find two observation platforms equipped with telescopes.

If you're lucky, you might see a crane family feeding in the marshy salt flats. Watch, too, for egrets, roseate spoonbills, pelicans, and possibly a raccoon.

**Please note that a portion of this trail (past the 2nd observation deck) may be underwater. If so, this trail will not make a loop.*

Songbird Loop (.1 mile)

Listen to a spring songbird serenade as you wander this short, woodland loop. Look for painted buntings, black and white warblers, prothonotary warblers, and summer tanagers.

Oak Sanctuary (.1 mile)

Walk this short trail towards San Antonio Bay and experience the mystery of a 500-year old oak tree. What might you find hiding in its branches, or seeking its shade? The oak is covered in mustang grapevine.

Dagger Point Trail (1 mile)

Hike a winding trail through an oak/redbay forest. One of the few hills on the refuge offers an excellent bay vista.

Jones Lake (< .1 mile)

A very short, paved walkway leads to a platform overlooking the lake, another potential alligator hangout. The water in this lake comes entirely from rainfall. If the lake is holding water, look for great egrets, snowy egrets, little blue herons, purple gallinules, and coots. You might even see white-tailed deer swimming across the lake.

Big Tree Trail (.7 mile)

Encounter some of the refuge's largest live oak trees along this woodland loop that includes an observation platform with a spotting scope and stairs down to the bay shoreline.

Walk up the Observation Towers

In addition to crane watching, the two observation towers (20' and 40') offers a panoramic view of San Antonio Bay and Mustang Lake. Both towers are fully accessible with gently sloping ramps.

Relax in a Motte

An area with several picnic tables is nestled in an oak motte overlooking San Antonio Bay. This is one of the best places to view spring warblers. Set up a scope for the best views of shorebirds and waders along the shoreline. Survey the bay for waterfowl.

Come to the Visitor Center

The Visitor Center offers refuge information, exhibits, environmental education, and wildlife programs. The Friends of Aransas and Matagorda Island NWR's operate a nature bookstore. The center is open 7 days a week (October 15-April 14) and Wednesday-Sunday (April 15-October 14), 9:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m.

Fee Schedule



A recreational use fee is required. Visitors must pay fees and register each day. Fees collected at the refuge are used to improve public use services and facilities. "America the Beautiful" senior, annual, access, and active military passes, as well as Annual Aransas and Federal Duck Stamps are accepted and available for purchase at the Visitor Center.

18 years and under, entrance is free
\$3 – one adult in a vehicle
\$5 – two or more adults in a vehicle
\$25 – commercial vehicle (van or bus) with up to 20 people
\$50 – commercial vehicle with 21 or more people

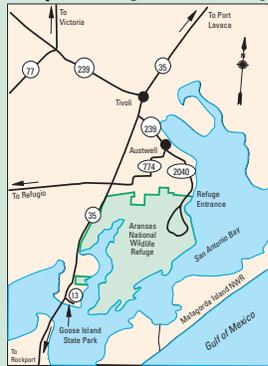
Aransas National Wildlife Refuge Public Use Area

Walking Trails	Mi(KM)
① Rail Trail	0.3 (0.5)
② Heron Flats	1.4 (2.2)
③ Songbird Loop	0.1 (0.2)
④ Oak Sanctuary	0.1 (0.2)
⑤ Dagger Point	1.0 (1.5)
⑥ Big Tree Trail	0.7 (1.2)

Entire Auto Tour	16.0 (25.75)
VC to Observation Tower	5.0 (8.05)

	Observation Platforms
	Restrooms (Tower and Picnic Area)
	Fishing/Shoreline Access (April 15 - Oct. 15)
	Year-round fishing at Fishing Pier Area only.

Map of Refuge and Vicinity



Hunting

Archery and firearms hunts for white-tailed deer and feral hogs may be held in late fall or winter. Youth rifle hunts are also available. Contact the refuge in early summer for information.

Fishing

Wade fishing access to San Antonio Bay is open April 15 - October 14 at the Fishing Pier Area and Big Tree Trail. Kayak and canoe launching is permitted from these points April 15 - October 14. Year-round pier and wade fishing access are open at the Fishing Pier Area only.

Help Us Protect the Refuge

The Refuge Public Use Area is open daily from 1/2-hour before sunrise to 1/2-hour after sunset.

For your safety and protection, please observe the following regulations:

- Observe speed limit of 25 mph and watch for wildlife crossing roadways.
- All vehicles must be street legal and remain on designated roadways.
- Feeding animals is prohibited.
- No alcohol is permitted.
- No littering. Please take your trash with you.

- Bicycles are permitted on the 16-mile paved tour loop only. No off-road bicycle use is permitted.
- There is no public camping on the refuge.
- Pets must be leashed at all times.

For Your Safety and Comfort:

- Alligators and venomous snakes are present; watch your step.
- Stay on trails. You may encounter ticks, bees, chiggers, and poison ivy. We recommend insect repellent.
- The closest place for fuel is Tivoli (14 miles). You'll find food, motels, and campgrounds 35 miles away in Rockport, Port Lavaca, and Refugio. There are also RV campgrounds in Austwell (6 miles) and at Hopper's Landing (3 miles).

For Further Information:

Aransas National Wildlife Refuge
P.O. Box 100
Austwell, TX 77950
361/286-3559
361/286-3722 FAX
Texas State Relay Service: 800/735-2989
www.fws.gov/refuge/aransas/