



# Big Slough Trail Guide

## *Brazoria National Wildlife Refuge*

### Welcome

The Big Slough Trail is five-eighths of a mile in length and loops back to its beginning near the boardwalk. While about 45 minutes are needed to cover the entire trail, three shorter trails cut across the main loop to allow hikes of approximately 15, 25, and 35 minutes. You may find that mosquito repellent, binoculars, and plenty of water will help make your time on the Big Slough Trail and throughout the refuge more enjoyable.

Please stay on the trails and remember that the snakes, alligators, and other wildlife are residents here. Please keep your distance from these animals. Remember, we are visiting *their* homes!

The trail is named for the Big Slough, a freshwater lifeline that runs through the prairie, marsh, and woodland habitats on the refuge. These habitats are valuable to birds and animals, which live here year round as well as those that migrate through or spend the winter.

Feel free to take your time and enjoy the sights, sounds, and smells. Numbered Stops on the trail correspond to information in this brochure. There are benches located along the way. As you walk the trail, watch for the interpretive signs.

### Stop 1

Move slowly through the area. Look behind you. You might see a great blue heron search for his lunch. You'll hear the familiar sounds of moorhens cackling from every direction. Hundreds of species of animals and insects depend on the wetlands for food, water, and a place to have families in a protected environment.

Watch the food chain in action! Thick clumps of plants such as grasses, sedges, and rushes are abundant. There is also a large supply of cattails and water lilies. These plants are essential to maintain an abundance of fish, algae, and insects. Birds and mammals feast on plant roots and tubers.

Frogs and crustaceans fare well here too. And, of course, this is an excellent home for the resident alligators.

### Stop 2

The spring air is rich with the smell of honeysuckle, one of the first flowers to blossom. These early bloomers are important to insects and hummingbirds, which survive the winter with a scarcity of pollen. Lizards, birds, and other wildlife feed on the abundant insects that are attracted to the honeysuckle.

Unfortunately, this exotic honeysuckle is also harmful. As you can see, it is a prime example of imported landscaping gone out of control. It blankets an area, climbs through trees, and chokes out native plants, causing major habitat loss.

Chinese tallow trees are another type of exotic plant. Tallow trees grow and multiply faster than the native trees, and like the honeysuckle, they can gradually choke out essential native plants.

### Stop 3

Watch your step! Both the eastern cottonmouth and the rattlesnake appear here from time to time. They bury themselves when the weather is hot, but when it is wet and marshy, they like to sun themselves on the trail. Rat snakes and water snakes are common here and are a significant part of the refuge food chain. They help keep the rodent populations in check and are a food source for larger mammals.

### Stop 4

Mosquitoes are usually plentiful on this refuge! To avoid the frequent winds, they find shelter beneath the canopy of trees. As an important part of the food chain, they benefit wildlife, which find them trapped on the water surface. Bats, birds such as purple martins and chimney swifts, and dragonflies gobble them up in mid-flight. Their abundant numbers leave them free to feed on us as well as plants, cattle and coyotes. The animals are probably miserable since they can't escape the mosquitoes and they don't have access to repellent!

### Stop 5

Native Americans used various plants for food, medicine, and other purposes. Berries from the palmetto were eaten and the leaves shredded to make string or rope. Both the fruit and the flat stems (which look like leaves) of the prickly pear cactus were eaten, and the leaf-like

stems were made into bags. The wood of the ash tree was made into bows. Leaves from the yaupon bush were toasted and boiled to make a caffeine-containing tea, which was also a purgative. Even the bark of the willow tree was chewed to relieve headaches. These are only a few of the numerous uses of local plants.

### Stop 6

The torn up ground and grass in this area is courtesy of our feral hogs, which are domesticated hogs gone wild. During the war for Texas' independence in the 1830s, many settlers released their hogs and other livestock as they fled to escape the Mexican army. Today, Texas is home to millions of wild hogs. They threaten wildlife and habitat, and even damage the dikes used by the refuge for water management. Feral hogs tear up large areas of ground in search of food. This is called "rooting." When it is hot, they root and wallow in the mud. It cools them off and gives them protection from insects.

### Stop 7

The northern cardinal and mockingbird are the most common sight here. In nature and in city life their presence is a link to the wild untamed world we live in. "Bob-white, bob-white," the resident quail can be heard singing its own name. In spring and summer, you can hear them close to the pavilion. In the fall and winter, they gather together to feed and sleep. You might easily be startled when you scare up a flock hiding in the vines and undergrowth.

### Stop 8

The amount of water in the marsh fluctuates according to the seasons. It rises during heavy rains and often disappears during dry periods. Seasonal wetlands are important even though they may be saturated only for short periods during the year. People often fail to recognize their value because they don't look like typical wetlands.

### Stop 9

Wetlands even aid in flood control. Floodwaters can spread out, slow down, and be "sponged up" in wetlands, reducing flood damage to the environment. Wetlands also act as natural filters by catching runoff water and allowing bacteria and other organisms to break down pollutants, protecting our drinking supplies. They also serve to trap silt, recharge ground water,

supply stock for fisheries, and provide recreation for humans.

### Stop 10

In this area grows a reminder of the Great Depression. It is called “poverty weed,” or Baccharis. This weedy shrub was well known for its rapid expansion onto deserted farms and ranch lands during the Great Depression. Even today, it must be burned to keep it from spreading and taking over native grasslands and prairies. It does provide good shelter for certain birds, insects, mammals, and rodents, but we must maintain a balance of habitat to accommodate all wildlife, which need the grasslands and prairies to survive.

### Stop 11

Have you noticed any butterflies out and about today? As caterpillars and cocoons they supply food for other insects, toads, salamanders, birds, and small mammals. By observing the wide variety of flowers you can see which ones are favorites for different species of butterflies. While their lives are quite brief, butterflies are important pollinators for many types of vegetation.

### Stop 12

If you are lucky, you may spot a resident coyote or bobcat. These meat-eating mammals need plenty of room and good shelter to raise their young. During the day, watch the treetops for sleeping raccoons and opossums. You might see swamp rabbits, skunks, and armadillos taking refuge under tree roots or even in the brush piles along the trail. These creatures are all nocturnal, which means they are asleep during the day and awake and feeding at night. For that reason their existence can go unnoticed unless you happen to see their footprints or scat (droppings).

### Stop 13

There is no need for bagged fertilizer in these parts! The natural process of death, decay, and decomposition leaves the soil rich and productive. Rotten logs, fallen leaves, and dead vegetation fall prey to moisture and decay. Bacteria, fungi, lichens, and insects aid in the decomposition until all is returned to the soil.

### Stop 14

This land often becomes parched from the summer heat and lack of rain. The trees and native grasses have deep penetrating root systems. These trees and smaller plants stop growing and reproducing in order to survive the harsh conditions. This land was once all coastal plains and marshes. The bois de arc tree, also known as the Osage orange, is often found here, as is the sugar hackberry.

### Stop 15

During fall migration, hundreds of thousands of birds are here! They leave their northern breeding grounds and arrive here to spend the winter. Birders regularly count more than 200 species during the Audubon Society’s annual Christmas bird count. With yearly counts like these, we are able to detect serious declines in particular species and see that other species are maintaining or even growing in population. Coastal woodlands and freshwater marshes

like the ones on this trail are vital to the survival of wintering and migrating birds and waterfowl. It is here that migrating birds rest and replenish the fat needed to make their spring and fall trips across the Gulf of Mexico.

We hope you enjoyed the Big Slough Trail. If you have not driven the auto tour, we encourage you to try that next!

October 2008

