

Aransas National Wildlife Refuge
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<http://southwest.fws.gov>

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1 800/735-2989

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National Wildlife Refuge System
1 800/344-WILD

U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service
<http://www.fws.gov>

February 2005



U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

Aransas

National Wildlife Refuge





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

—Aldo Leopold



Roseate Spoonbills

Photograph by John Magera

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 59,000-acre refuge 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 390 different bird species.

*(Left) Marsh at
Sunset.*

Photograph by John
Magera

*(Right) White-
tailed Buck*

FWS photograph



Why So Many Birds?



Eared Grebes

Photograph by
John Magera

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



Whooping Cranes
FWS photograph

Once nearly extinct, whooping cranes appear to be on the upswing, from a low of 15 in 1941 to over 450 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 slowly establishing a new non-migratory flock in Florida 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 around 200 birds. By mid-April, they depart in pairs or small family groups for a hazardous journey 2,400 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 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 information about commercial boat tours to see the cranes and other birds, 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.

Whooping Crane Stats

Height: 5 feet

Wingspan: 7 feet

Weight: Males 16 lbs;
females 14 lbs

Call: A trumpeting *kerloo*
ker-lee-oo

Flight Speed: 35-45 mph

Did you know? Cranes mate for life. Courtship dances appear to keep the pair bond strong.



Whooping Cranes

Photograph by Tom Stehn



Observation Tower

Photograph by John Magera

Things to do at the Refuge

Take a 16-mile Auto Tour Loop



*Freshwater
Ponds:
Alligator Abode*

You are invited to take the auto tour, walk the trails, stop by our Visitor Center, walk up the observation tower, wander along a boardwalk through a marsh, and picnic overlooking San Antonio Bay.

A 16-mile, paved auto tour loops through brushlands, grasslands, oak mottes, and brackish and freshwater marshes. Look for trailhead signs and exhibit panels along the way.

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.

Wildlife Watching Tips

Dawn and dusk are the best times to see wildlife.

In warmer climates, 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 and reduce the animal’s natural wariness of people.

Cars make good observation blinds. Drive 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.



Burning Meadows to Save Them

Prescribed Burn FWS photograph

The refuge protects these meadows from invading scrub species through controlled or prescribed burning. Fire, while often considered destructive, can be used as a management tool to rid areas of invasive species and rejuvenate grasslands.



What's a Motte?

A motte simply describes a grove or clump of trees. Along the tour loop, you'll see mottes of live oak and redbay. You may wonder why these trees growing in old sand dunes appear stunted and gnarled. They are warped by the prevailing gulf winds that shape the entire landscape.

Mottes form thickets that hide deer, javelinas, and feral hogs. Coyotes, bobcats, and raccoons stalk the mottes looking for prey.

Live Oaks Photograph by John Magera



Walking Trails



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



Giant Swallowtail

FWS photograph

Rail Trail
(.3 mile)

Waterbirds, from rails to bitterns, lurk in the reeds lining Thomas 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)

A very short walkway leads to a section of Thomas Slough where alligators live and can be readily observed. On sunny days alligators will come out of their dens to bask on the bank.

Oystercatcher
FWS photograph



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. There are two observation platforms equipped with telescopes. If you are lucky, you might see a crane family feeding in the marshy salt flats. Watch, too, for egrets, roseate spoonbills, pelicans, and possibly a raccoon.

Birding Trail #1
(.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.

Bay Overlook
(.1 mile)

This trail offers a breathtaking view of San Antonio Bay.



Dagger Point

Photograph by John Magera

Dagger Point Trail (1 mile)

Choose from a short loop or a longer hike winding through an oak/redbay forest. One of the few hills on the refuge offers an excellent bay vista.

Birding Trail #2
(.6 mile)

This trail crosses a mixed grassland, home to loggerhead shrikes, and savannah and white-throated sparrows. Enter an oak woodland next, a haven for songbirds. To the right, the trail leads to a pond with a nearby photo blind. To the left, it winds through the woods along the bay.

Jones Lake
(< .1 mile)

A very short, paved walkway leads to a platform overlooking the lake and alligator hangout. 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 connects to the observation tower boardwalk.

Hog Lake Trail
(<.1 mile)

A short walk leads to a platform overlooking the lake. Look for alligators, night herons, black-bellied whistling ducks and purple gallinules here.



Javelinas
Photography by Tom Stehn

**Walk up the
Observation Tower**

In addition to crane watching, the tower offers a panoramic view of San Antonio Bay and Mustang Lake.

**Birdwatch from
a Boardwalk**



A boardwalk made of environmentally friendly recycled “plastic lumber” leads you through a salt marsh to the shore—a terrific spot for watching waterbirds. Look for blue crabs in the water below the boardwalk. This is the whooping cranes favorite food. The boardwalk connects to Big Tree Trail.



Alligator. FWS photograph

Stop by the Visitor Center

The Claude F. Lard Visitor Center offers refuge information, exhibits, and wildlife programs. The Friends of Aransas and Matagorda Island NWR's operate a nature bookstore. The center is open daily 8:30 a.m.- 4:30 p.m. (closed Thanksgiving and Christmas).

Picnic in a Motte



A picnic area with tables, barbecue grills, potable water and restrooms 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.

Fee Schedule



Individual - \$3.00
Two people or more in a vehicle - \$5.00
Commercial vehicle up to 20 passengers - \$25.00
Commercial vehicle 21 or more passengers - \$50.00

Annual Permits

The refuge honors the annual or lifetime entrance permits listed below; however, all visitors are required to register daily at the Visitor Center.

Federal Duck Stamp \$15
Aransas Annual Pass \$15
Golden Eagle Passport \$65 or
National Park Pass Hologram \$15
Golden Age Passport \$10
(age 62 or older)
Golden Access Passport
(free with written proof of permanent disability)

Hunting



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

Fishing



From April 15 - October 15 wade fishing is permitted in San Antonio Bay from the five fishing access points identified on the Refuge map.

Help us Protect the Refuge

Pay fees and register each day. Fees collected at the refuge are used to improve public use services and facilities.

Walking off trail creates erosion and damages native vegetation. Please walk only on the established trails and use shoreline access points to enter the water.

Feeding animals is prohibited and causes them to become aggressive towards humans. Aggressive animals must be relocated. Help keep animals in their natural habitat.

The Refuge Public Use Area is open daily 30-minutes prior to official sunrise and 30-minutes after official sunset.



There is no public camping on the refuge.



Pets must be leashed at all times.



Observe speed limit of 25 mph and watch for wildlife crossing roadways.



No firearms are permitted (except for legal hunting).



Bicycles are permitted on the 16-mile paved tour loop only. No off-road bicycle use.

For Your Safety and Comfort



Alligators and poisonous snakes are present; watch your step.

We recommend insect repellent.

Stay on trails. Otherwise, you may encounter ticks, bees, chiggers, and poison ivy.



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 campgrounds and RV sites in Austwell (6 miles) and at Hopper's Landing (3 miles).



Friends of Aransas and Matagorda Island NWRs

Mission Statement



What Are We Doing?

The Friends of Aransas and Matagorda Island National Wildlife Refuges are dedicated to supporting and assisting the Aransas and Matagorda Island National Wildlife Refuge Complex in its goal of enhancing wildlife and its habitat and encouraging compatible wildlife dependent public uses of the refuges through educational, interpretive, scientific and other activities appropriate to the mission of these refuges.

Applying for federal and private grants to be used for specific projects on the refuges.

Developing and conducting interpretive tours and workshops.

Assisting the refuges in wildlife census and related management projects.

Increasing public and governmental awareness of the sensitive and unique nature of the refuges, and their vital roles to both wildlife and people.

Recruiting volunteers to help refuge staff with a variety of projects.

Working with local educators and civic groups to foster appreciation and support of the natural history and science of the refuge.

What You Can do to Help

You may help the Friends with your annual membership dues or you may choose to be more active by participating in membership meetings and work projects. Join us to make a difference!

For more information:

Friends of Aransas and
Matagorda Island NWRs
P.O. Box 74
Austwell, Texas 77950

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 | Bird Trail #1 | 0.1 | (0.2) |
| ④ | Bay Overlook | 0.1 | (0.2) |
| ⑤ | Dagger Point | 1.0 | (1.5) |
| ⑥ | Bird Trail #2 | 0.6 | (1.1) |
| ⑦ | Big Tree Trail | 0.7 | (1.2) |

Entire Auto Tour **16.0 (25.75)**

VC to Observation Tower 5.0 (8.05)



Observation Platforms

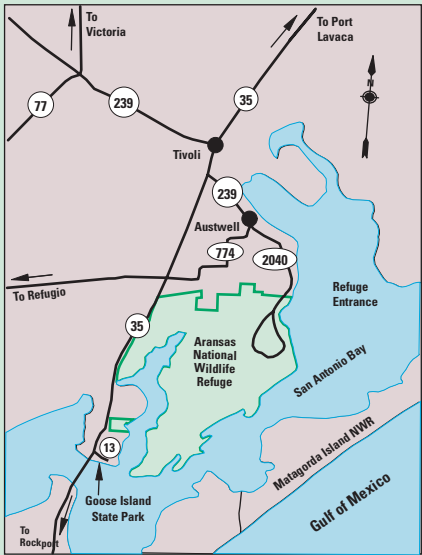


Restrooms (Tower and Picnic Area)



Fishing/Shoreline Access (Oct.15 - April 15)

Map of Refuge and Vicinity





Aransas NWR Facts

Where is it?

From the north, take Texas Highway 35, S to Texas Highway 239E. Proceed 5.5 miles via Highway 239E and FM 774W to Highway 2040E. Left on FM2040E and proceed 6.5 miles to Refuge gate.
From the south, take Texas Highway 35N to FM 774E. Proceed 9 miles to FM2040E. Right on FM2040E and proceed 6.5 miles to Refuge gate.

When was it established?

December 31, 1937

How big is it?

59,000 acres.

Why is it here?

To protect saltmarsh, coastal prairie and woodland for migratory birds and the vanishing wildlife of coastal Texas.



Whooping Crane chick and adult.
FWS photograph