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U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

Aransas

National Wildlife Refuge

Heron Flats Trail



Welcome to the Heron Flats Trail

1

Welcome to the Heron Flats Trail. Here you can look for the native plants and get an overview of the area from the observation platform. This trail takes you along a series of ancient oyster shell ridges that border the salt marsh.

Mesquite

2

Learn to recognize **mesquite** ("muh-SKEET"); it occurs all across Texas. Lacy leaves throw a dappled shade, and long brown pods yield beans relished by coyotes and javelinas.

Salt Cedar

3

Across the slough you can see the pendulous, light green foliage of a dense clump of **salt cedar.** These natives of Asia, introduced into this country for windbreaks, have spread into low-lying areas and along bay shores throughout the Coastal Bend.

Cordgrass

4

The thick mat of grass with a cowlick profile in the slough is **marshhay cordgrass.** On the other side of the trail, **Gulf cordgrass** grows in robust, waist-high clumps.



Groundsels

5

The several spindly trees here are **groundsels.** Few trees can withstand the rigors at the edge of the salt marsh, but groundsel manages. Look at the oyster shell ridge beyond the slough to see what a difference elevation makes. None of the plants on the ridge can survive where the groundsels reign.

Saltmarsh Bulrush

6

The grass-like plants bordering the marsh are **saltmarsh bulrush.** Here you have a look at the many other salt-adapted plants in the marsh and the dense growth of woody plants (collectively called "chaparral") that caps a mound of shell on the edge of San Antonio Bay.

"Pricklies"

7

Here is an assortment of "pricklies"— the cactus is **Texas prickly pear**. Behind it is a fierce-leaved **Spanish dagger**. Nearby find a shrubby **agarito** with leaf margins extended into sharp points.

Spanish Dagger

8

Another **Spanish dagger**. Don't get too close; those stiff leaves are dangerously sharp tipped! Large candelabras of waxy white flowers in early spring yield finger-sized woody fruits chock full of flat black seeds.

Netleaf Hackberry

9

These two gangly **netleaf hackberry** trees are probably not happy here on the edge of the salt marsh. You will see much finer examples on higher ground. Touch the upper side of a leaf from tip to base to feel the sand-papery texture.

Mexican Persimmon

10

Many birds and mammals eat the sweet, marble-sized black fruits of **Mexican persimmon**. Feel its smooth branches and notice the tufts and swirls of gray-green **lichens** ("LIKE-ens") that decorate the limbs.

Common Reed

11

Common reed is a gigantic grass that grows along sloughs and bay shores. The Karankawa Indians who once roamed this area used sections of this cane to fashion arrow shafts.

Mustang Grape

12

You have just left the lower outer oyster shell ridge and are beginning the center, higher and drier one. The heavy woody vine scrambling among the shrubs is **mustang grape**. It is very common on the refuge and usually produces a bountiful crop of purple grapes. Birds and mammals swallow them whole, enjoying the sweet pulp underneath the acrid tasting skin.

Lime Prickly Ash

13

You can recognize **lime prickly ash** by catclaw prickles, scalloped-edged leaflets, and the strong citrus smell of its foliage. Crush a green snippet and inhale the stimulating aroma.



Netleaf Hackberry/Texas Torchwood

14

This great, gnarled tree is a **netleaf hackberry.** Compare it to the anemic hackberries near the salt marsh. The dark green shrub with crinkly-edged leaves is **Texas torchwood**, so called because it contains oils that cause it to burn readily. It is living near the northern edge of its range here.



Tanglewood

15

Tanglewood forms thornless walls of interlocking zig-zag branches along much of this trail. Early in February, while most other plants are still winter dormant, tiny greenish-yellow flowers with sprays of red anthers erupt along its bare branches.

Pearl Milkweed Vine

16

Look for a vine with paired, heart-shaped leaves. You might find its flower—pale green with a pearly spot in the center. This is **pearl milkweed vine**. In late summer its spindle-shaped pods open to release fine bristly puffs that parachute the seeds away on the coastal breeze.

Turk's Cap

17

If the **Turk's cap** here bear their waxy red flowers or flattened apple-like fruits, you can't miss them. Look for thigh-high plants with broad rounded leaves with all the main veins radiating from their base. The flowers are attractive to hummingbirds and butterflies.



Coast Live Oaks

18

You have just crossed Cattail Slough and gained the third shell ridge. Sit on the bench awhile in the shade of a fine grove of **coast live oaks**. The soil here is dark and rich and covered by thick litter of decaying leaves, a more protected habitat than the open, younger ridges. If you missed Turk's caps at the previous station, try again here.

Tree Huggers

19

Look up into the dead live oak tree arching over the trail. Can you find two different plants growing on its branches? **Ball moss** clings tightly in gray tufts; **Spanish moss** hangs down in thick festoons. Both of these plants produce flowers, so neither is a "true moss." **Greenbriar**, a vine with green, thorny stems, occurs here and along the remainder of the trail.

Mexican Buckeye

20

The shade-loving **Mexican buckeye** has multiple stems and large compound leaves with lance-shaped leaflets. It is decked with delicate pink flowers in early spring and produces three-lobed, brown seed capsules in summer. The marble-sized black seeds that fall from the capsules are poisonous to people. (Drawing on front cover.)

Dwarf Palmetto

21

There are two native palms in the state of Texas; the **dwarf palmetto** is one of them. You can't miss its stiff, dark green, fan-shaped leaves. In summer this plant sends up a wand of small papery flowers that transforms into clusters of bun-shaped black fruits; their sweet dry pulp is favored by many kinds of wildlife.



True Moss

22

The craggy bark on this storm-tossed coast live oak is covered with a luxuriant carpet of **true moss**, a primitive plant that reproduces by spores rather than by flowers and seeds. Moss can withstand dry conditions, but it will be at its finest with frequent rain showers. Notice the thick brown vine growing up this tree; look up for the bright orange funnel-shaped flowers of **trumpet creeper**.

Black Willow

23

This granddaddy **black willow** has gotten so large that its limbs are breaking from their own massive weight. A thicket of more normal-sized willows lines the edges of Thomas Slough.

Yaupon

24

Migrating robins and resident mockingbirds compete for the bounty of red berries produced by **yaupon** (YO-pahn) each autumn. One of the most common "understory shrubs" (those living in the shade beneath trees) on the refuge, it is growing here in a grove of hurricane-ravaged coast live oaks.



Scrambling Vines

25

Close out your walk with a couple of scrambling vines. This patch is mostly composed of **pepper-vine**, with glossy, dark green leaves and grape-like fruits that change from lilac to purple as they mature. Woven through the pepper-vine are prickly stems of **dewberry**. In early spring dewberries sport bright white flowers; by late spring a variety of birds and mammals gobble up the sweet black berries.

