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Sand & Solitude

Eleven miles from the mainland, Matagorda Island can be reached only by boat, making it the ideal place for fishing, birding and beachcombing away from the crowds. *by Casey Kelly Barton*

Folks don't just drop by Matagorda Island State Park on their way somewhere else. A haven for 19 species of endangered or threatened animals, the park is isolated by design (it is a wildlife management area) and by geography—an 11-mile boat ride from Port O'Connor, the nearest town. But it is just this isolation that makes Matagorda such an intriguing place to visit.

The island, one of the many barrier islands along the coast, has been around only about 5,000 years, but they've been eventful ones. Long before Europeans arrived, Matagorda was occupied by the Native American Karankawas, who gathered oysters and fish. When would-be settlers arrived, the Karankawas defended their land vigorously, but ultimately were driven out. Anglo-American settlers moved there in the 1830s and raised cattle and other livestock until the government took over in 1940. Property owners' land rights were condemned in the interest of national defense, and the U.S. Air Force used the island as a bombing and gunnery range. With such a history, Park Superintendent Ronny Gallagher said, "The place is not pristine," but it is making a comeback. A wildlife refuge was founded in 1971, and the park currently is co-managed by Texas Parks and Wildlife, the Texas General Land Office and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

A trip to Matagorda starts, one way or another, with a boat ride. Private boats can go to the island, or visitors can take the Parks and Wildlife ferry boat, which makes regular runs from Port O'Connor, where passengers can buy tickets at the park's office.

Passengers travel 45 minutes to an hour through the place where settlement gives way to nature. On the mainland side of the Intracoastal Canal, there are marinas, docks and beautiful beach homes flying Texas flags, along with a U.S. Coast Guard station and, farther down, some industrial storage tanks. On the other side cattle graze amid the grass and scrub brush, and birds coast overhead.

Before the ferry reaches the island's shore, it stops so crew

members can reel in a net they've been dragging. This is something they do just about every trip, according to Gallagher, to show visitors what's swimming in the waters around them.

"We get a lot of brown and white shrimp, croakers, hard-head catfish, crabs, young flounder and sometimes a stingray," he said.

A crew member gingerly removes small fish and crabs from the net and places them in a bucket of sea water. Children and adults alike move in to touch the fish and ogle the crabs. When everyone's curiosity is satisfied, the animals are returned to the Gulf.

Matagorda's appearance is deceptively sparse. The tallest point is a 23-foot-tall dune. Vegetation generally consists of giant cord grass, sawtooth cord grass, black rush, gaillardia, sunflowers, mesquite and salt cedar.

A maximum of 150 people per day can ride over on the ferry. Visitors scatter quickly for a little solitude on the beach. Because of the isolation and lack of amenities, visitors are advised to bring water, a hat, sunscreen and mosquito repellent.

A truck and a bus shuttle visitors to the Gulf-side beach. The visitor center near the dock has restrooms and showers, and here and there on both the bay shore and the Gulf beach there are shade sheds—some with picnic tables—to offer a respite from the sun. Near the visitor center

is a rustic bunkhouse, where visitors can stay the night if they don't feel like camping on the beach.

The beach itself is not raked or maintained in any way except for twice-yearly beach cleanups. Visitors are responsible for carting out their own trash, and the beach looks pretty clear except for scattered clumps of bottles, wood and the occasional lawn chairs that wash up from the Gulf of Mexico. Gallagher said the trash can be from as far away as Mexico, Galveston or cities along the Colorado River.

"It's an education problem," he said, pointing to a cluster of bottles. "We have to teach our children that anything that goes on the ground will end up in the water." Among the shells and beach debris, sharp-eyed beachcombers can spot divots in the sand where feral (wild) hogs dig for sand crabs.



Above: A mountain biker traverses the sand with his tackle.
Opposite: A solitary angler enjoys Matagorda's isolated beach.

Getting There



Matagorda Island State Park is open year around, with the TPWD ferry running Thursday through Sunday and holidays. (Check with the park for current schedule.) There is no park admission charge for day use. The fee for the ferry is \$10 for adults and \$5 for children under 12, and reservations are recommended. Private charter services also are available in the Port O'Connor area; contact the park office for a current list. Shuttle service from the dock to the Gulf beach is \$2 per adults and \$1 for children under 12.

Primitive campsites are available for \$4 per night (for up to four people), and the bunkhouse costs \$12 per person per night. The park office is on the Intracoastal Canal at S. 16th and Maple Streets in Port O'Connor. School field trips and group tours are available by arrangement. For more information or to make ferry reservations, call 512-983-2215. To reserve the bunkhouse, call 512-389-8900.

The island holds a special allure for birders. There are brown pelicans, great blue herons, whooping cranes and many other species that live here year around or visit, including the endangered peregrine falcon, during migrations. Least terns use the abandoned Air Force runways as nesting sites, building right on the tarmac. Gallagher said a birdwatching group counted 89 species near the visitor center last spring. Park staff offer birding tours at different times of the year, which are increasingly popular.

For those more interested in the water, fishing can yield such catches as bonnethead sharks, black drum, red drum, spotted sea trout, flounder and the occasional tarpon, which must be released. The park also offers tours focusing on beachcombing and sea life. The Kemp's Ridley sea turtle sometimes appears in the surf, but Gallagher noted no nests have been found on the island so far.

Many other reptiles call Matagorda home, too. Apart from the American alligator, which frequents deep freshwater ponds and tall grass stands, there are several types of snakes (including rattlesnakes)

and the threatened horned lizard. While the prospect of 'gators and rattlers might be alarming to some, Gallagher reminds us this is a wild place. Rather than do battle with the dangerous creatures, park staff give them a wide berth.

"I know there are snakes out there," he said, gesturing to a field of high grass and salt cedar, "and I don't want to find them." So far, the common-sense approach—recommending that visitors stay out of the island's tall-grass areas—is working. Gallagher said there have been no alligator attacks or snake bites at the park. (The hands-off policy extends to roadway courtesy. Horned lizards like to bask in clearings and often are found on the service roads. Staff and visiting workers know to yield the right-of-way to these prehistoric-looking critters.)

Warning signs caution people not to feed the alligators, intriguing but potentially dangerous carnivores. "What people don't understand," Gallagher explained, "is when people throw food to the 'gators, their scent is on that food, and the 'gators could learn to equate the scent of humans with food."

Away from the beaches, people can trek down the main road that traverses 23 miles of the island before it dead-ends. While the trail appeals to some bicyclists, many prefer riding along the beach where it is cooler.

From the dock, the lighthouse is about a 3¹/₂-mile walk down the road (a shuttle also is available). Made of black cast iron plates carted down the island by mules and bolted together at the site in 1878, the lighthouse was designed to be hurricane-proof. Decommissioned at the beginning of the decade, the aging structure is owned by the Coast Guard. It is locked for safety reasons, but Gallagher hopes it can be open to visitors in the future. Nearby, nearly hidden by clumps of sunflowers, are the foundations of the old lightkeepers' homes and family members' graves.

The small graveyard is one of five known burial sites on the island. Kept clean and neat by park staffers, it is surrounded by barbed wire to keep out the

feral hogs that root up dirt and vegetation all over the island.

Visitors are not likely to spot one of the feral hogs, because the animals spend their days lounging under salt cedars around ponds, waiting until nightfall when they come out and forage. Gallagher said visitors are most likely to encounter mammals such as white-tailed deer, raccoons and the occasional coyote, although they are shy of humans, too.

For the most part, park staffers have little contact with the animals. Apart

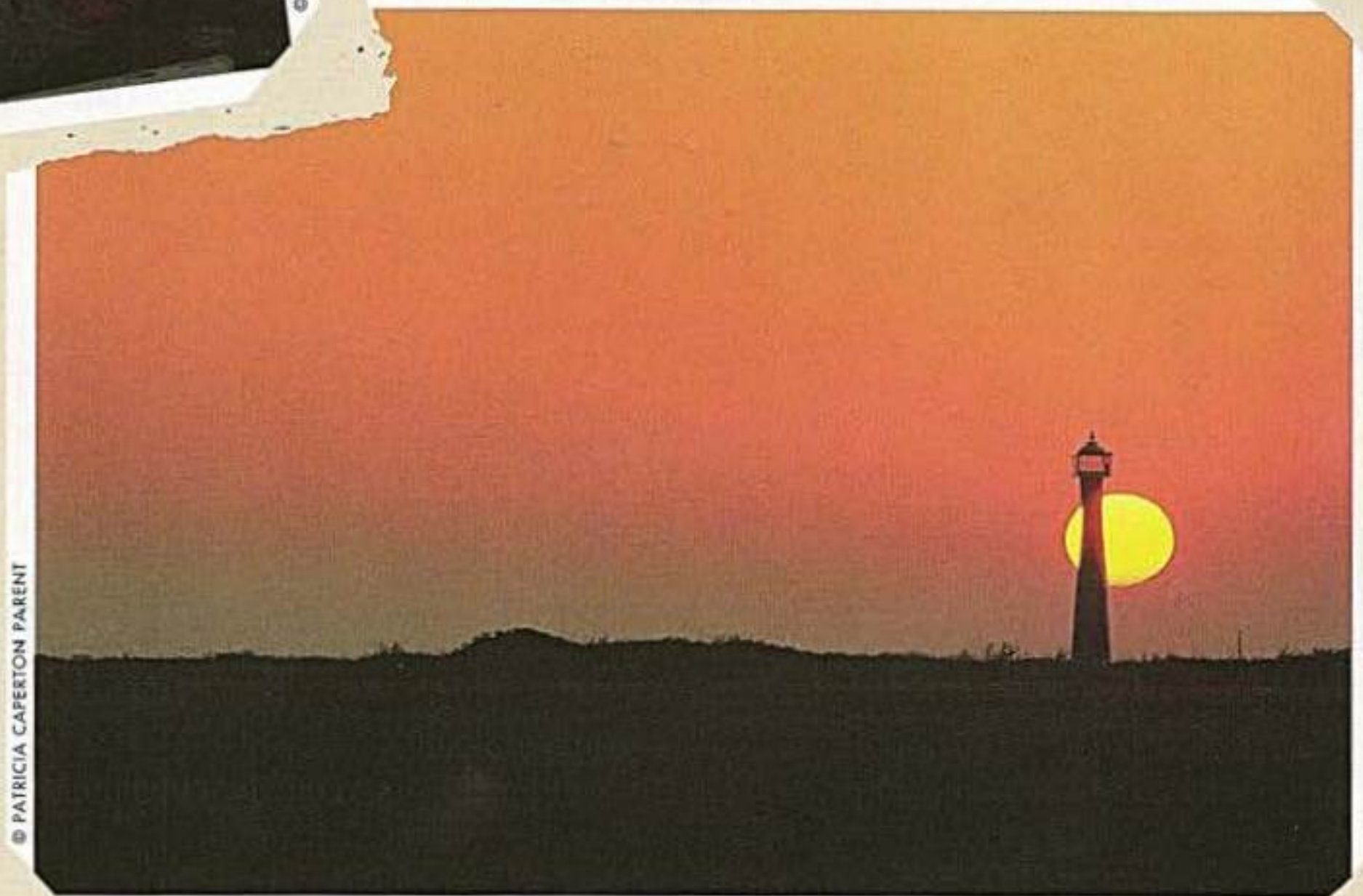
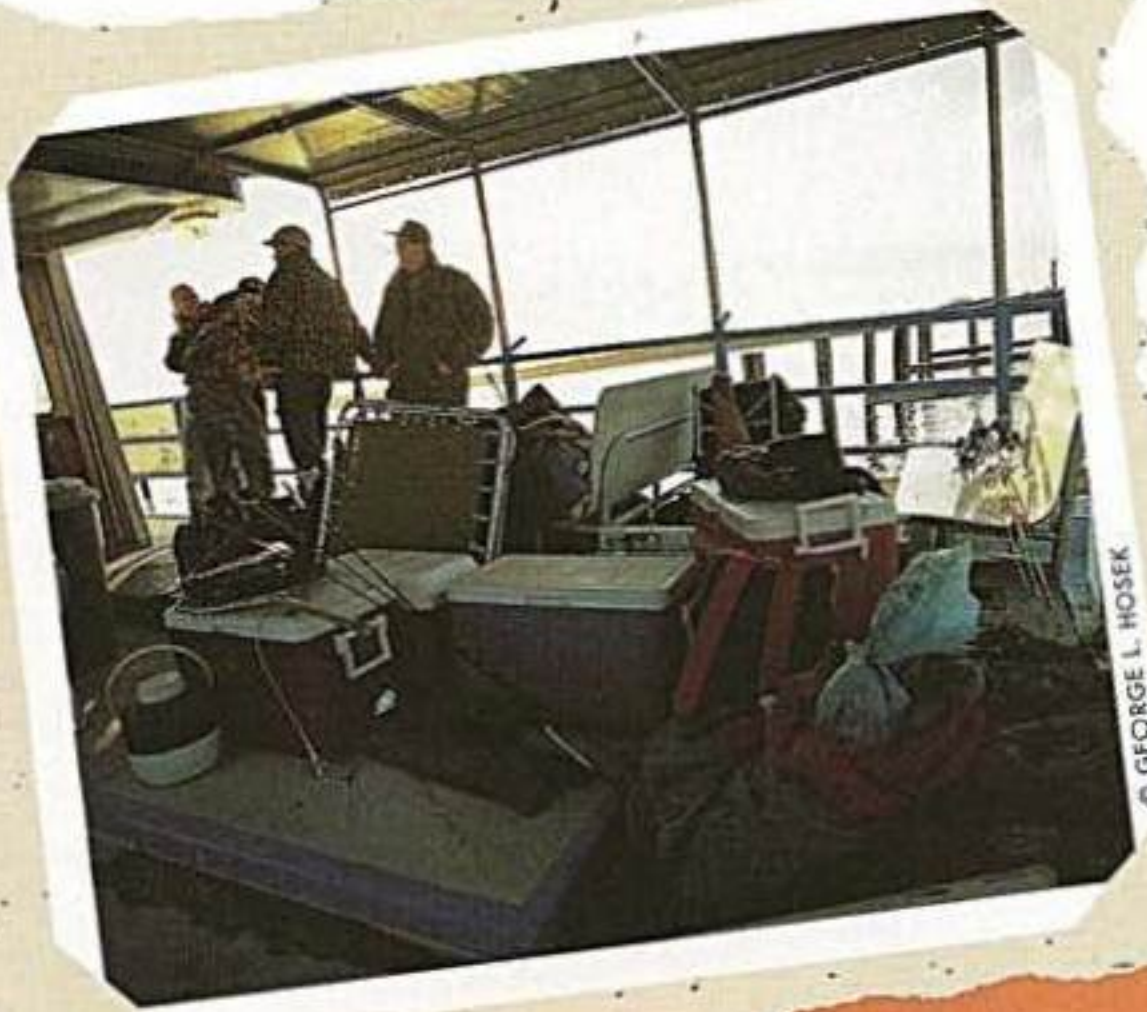
from counting and tracking the whooping cranes and peregrine falcons that come to Matagorda, park staff don't manage, tag or monitor the island's other endangered animals. Gallagher and his staff operate under the philosophy that the wildlife will do best with minimal human interference.

The exception is hunting season each winter, to manage wildlife populations on the island. Deer are hunted for three weekends in December. The number of deer allowed to be taken is determined

by biologists, who fly over the island each October to do a count. Duck hunting is permitted on weekends throughout the season, and the park's destructive feral hogs are hunted in January.

Gallagher has been at Matagorda Island State Park for 10 years and loves the solitude. "The best part about coming to Matagorda is being able to hang out on the beach without 100,000 cars driving by," he said. ★

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Above Left: Bring everything you're going to need for a day at Matagorda—there are no concession stands or other amenities on the island.

Above: The lighthouse has been in place since 1878.