

MATAGORDA - Natural Wonder in Texas

Story and Photos by Melissa Wolcott and Al Martino

Nature lovers (particularly bird lovers), if you haven't made plans for a Christmas vacation yet, pack your binoculars and head to Matagorda, Texas for an incredible birding experience. This area lays claim to some of the finest bird watching anywhere, especially at that time of the year.

We recently flew in to Houston, via Continental Airlines, and drove about 1 1/2 hours south to Matagorda County, which is located along the Gulf of Mexico. It is a huge area of land (this is Texas, after all) and is terrific for fishing as well as birding. Miles of farm land, ranches, rice fields, and oil wells here and there dot the landscape of the county.

We stayed in Bay City, at the Cattlemen's Motel—slogan "A Great Place To Kick Off Your Boots". Indeed, it is a casual, comfy place inhabited by guests who want to get down to the serious business of fishing, bird watching, and/or relaxing.

The birding event we mentioned is called "The Matagorda County Mad Island Marsh Christmas Bird Count", and is conducted yearly by the National Audubon Society over a 16 day period. The Tampa Bay area may have the Super Bowl Champs of Football, but Matagorda holds the current "Super Bowl" of birding title, and has for 6 years in a row. Each year birders from all over the country descend on the area, and enjoy sighting and counting the birds for Audobon. Last year 243 species (4,464,515 total birds) were counted in an area encompassing a 15 mile radius. There are 600+ bird species in North America, so around one-third of all possible birds were sighted at that time in Matagorda County—quite amazing. The county is on the Gulf of Mexico, and divided by the Colorado River, creating an ideal spot for many bird species. Winter is the best time for bird watching because of migration—some come in from Alaska. They "bottleneck" their way through Texas on their way south. Even some birds from Siberia were spotted (so they say).

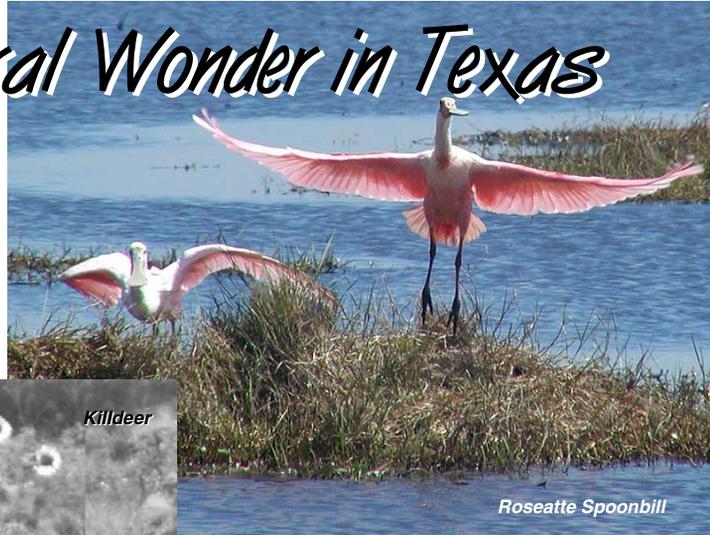
Audobon's Christmas bird count happens all over the world, beginning the week before Christmas.

Matagorda County's impressive Nature Conservancy of Texas has 7,000 acres of marshland, and



includes the beach, bayside, wetlands, and prairie lands, so alligators, snakes, deer, coyotes, bobcats, armadillos, box turtles and skunks can also be seen. When we visited, we were treated to a spotting of some feral pigs darting through the grass, as well as some box turtles basking in the sun.

We also visited the Matagorda Birding Nature Center, which is a lovely area of 34 acres on the Colorado River, and includes nature trails, bridges, wetland areas,



wooded areas. It also has six gardens: hummingbird, butterfly, herb, cactus, rose, and palm. The center uses adult probationers for labor on the grounds, which is an excellent use of prisoners' time and they are learning some skills.

The "Herb Garden Lady", Doris Watking, told us some interesting uses of the different herbs they grow. One of which was using fresh lemon verbena leaves in pound cake. She said to just line the pan with the plant's leaves, and when cooked, turn the cake over so the leaves are on top. They are edible and give a nice

flavor and look to the cake. (We'll let you try it first!) We also learned that the Prickly Ash Tree was used by Native Americans for toothaches—they rubbed bark on their teeth, and it numbed the pain. Remember that the next time you're in the woods with a toothache.

For the angler, the Texas Gulf Coast is reputed to have some of the best fishing in the country for waders, flats, fly and deep sea fishermen. There are many waterways, and plenty of boats and equipment for hire. Some of the fish that abound in the waterways are redbfish, speckled trout, grouper, snapper, black drum, and wahoo. Or, if you just want to enjoy the water, you can rent a kayak or canoe and explore the area.

Opening in the fall of 2004, will be the 1,600 acre Matagorda County Nature Park and Preserve, which will feature an 85-room lodge, learning center, boardwalks and trails. Located near the mouth of the Colorado River, there will be opportunities for visitors to go hiking, canoeing and kayaking.

We went out on a 57-foot "Floating Classroom", called the Karma, which is operated by the Texas marine Advisory Service. Students learn about marine biology and ecology in the Gulf of Mexico. Do you know how to tell the difference between a male crab and a female crab? ...and no, we're not setting up a joke. Turn the crab over and examine the shape of the apron on the underside. The male has an apron shaped like the Washington Monument and the female has an apron shaped like the Capitol in Washington. You can now use this information to dazzle your friends.



photo courtesy Frank Johnson - Matagorda Birding Nature Center

The Matagorda County Museum tells the history of the area, starting with the historical building it is housed in. Built in 1917, the impressive structure began it's life as a post office, and the marbled floors and arched woodwork are still in place. The exhibit shows ancient fossils, Indian lore, and early Matagorda County settlers. The French explorer, LaSalle attempted a settlement in the early 1600's. His ship, the LaBelle, sank in Matagorda Bay in 1686. The discovery of the ship in 1995 was hailed as the greatest find in decades. Artifacts from the ship are on display at the museum.



The Matagorda County Museum

We enjoyed the Children's Museum housed in the basement of the building. It is a wonderful "hands-on" recreation of a turn-of-the-century frontier town. Children can dress up in period costume and play in a general store, toy shop, school house, post office, and even a jail. They can interact with their parents using antique items and props on display.



The Children's Museum

A short walk from the museum took us to the Bay City Antique Mall, where many dealers display their wares in 12,000 sq. ft. of space. Melissa poked around the antique glass, books and jewelry, while Al found a wonderful overstuffed antique chair to nap in. A good time was had by all.

Across the street from the Antique Mall is the Main Street Coffee Bar, a unique place that began as a hair salon, and, to meet the demands of patrons, expanded to become a delightful spot for lunch. They serve delicious fresh salads and sandwiches.

One of the docents from the Matagorda City Museum met up with us and drove us around the area, pointing out places of interest. Zia Miller is a "Real Texan", a multi-generational Matagordan—and a hoot! She informed us "You never ask a Texan how much land they have, or how many head of cattle they own"—right after we asked her how many head of cattle she owned. Like a lot of Matagordans, she wears many hats—volunteers at the museum, is involved in running the local post office, writes a local newspaper column, AND owns land, cattle and the occasional

oil well. Twice a year since 1919, around March and November, a Texas family has been driving hundreds of cattle from ranches to the Matagorda Peninsula. The 3 day trek takes them through towns to the mouth of the Colorado River, where the cattle swim across the channel. They spend the winter grazing on salt grass, then in the spring they return home before the hurricane season. If you've never seen a cattle drive, that sounds like another good time to visit the area.

We found dining in Matagorda County to be pretty casual, with emphasis on food quality and quantity, and a lot of family owned establishments through several generations. Victoria's Mexican Restaurant served a Tex-Mex cuisine, and at the K-2 Steakhouse, we had generous portions of beef.

We checked out several Bed & Breakfast homes during our visit, and one stand-out was the Moonlight Bay B&B, a 1910 bungalow home with a spectacular view of the bay. The decor in their annex is unusual, in that they've chosen a '40's literary motif instead of the more common Victorian theme.

The rooms are decorated and named after literary figures' works, such as Fitzgerald's "The Great Gatsby", and Lindburgh's "A Gift From The Sea". The food was exquisite with such delights as Crab Acapulco over Lemon Couscous, and Strawberries Romanoff.



Moonlight B&B with 1940's themed rooms.



Continued on next page

the Fun Ships **Carnival**

SUPER OFFER!
For Accent On Tampa Bay Readers

Cruise On Carnival's Newest & Largest Ship
CARNIVAL GLORY
Sailing From Port Canaveral, FL Jan. 10-17, 2004
Visiting Nassau, St. Thomas/St. John's, St. Maarten

Rates from \$399 per person, double occupancy plus \$139 port tax & \$44.42 government tax/fees

Contact: Terry L. Steele ACC
Anchors Away Cruises and Tours
1-800-527-8666 X203
For reservations & Information

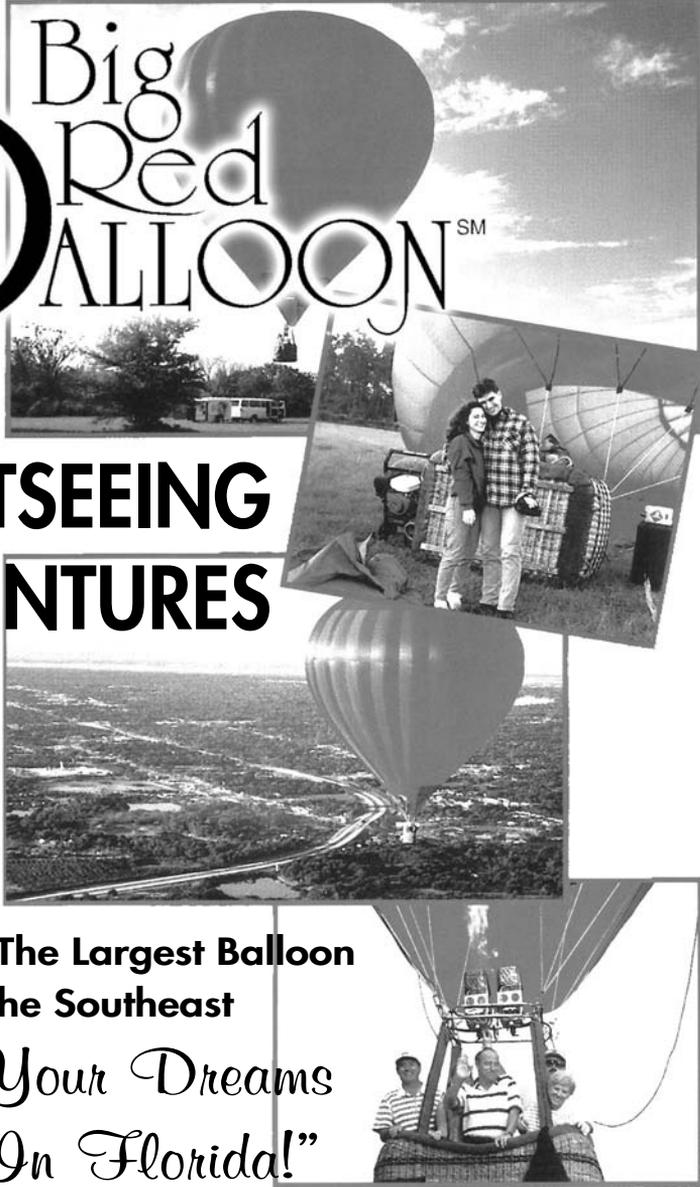
BOOK TODAY!
DON'T MISS IT!

ANCHORS AWAY

CRUISES & TOURS

Big Red BALLOONSM

SIGHTSEEING ADVENTURES



Featuring The Largest Balloon
In The Southeast

*"Let Your Dreams
Soar In Florida!"*

Save \$**30** per couple on all
Gift Certificates
purchased by Sept. 30th
813-969-1518

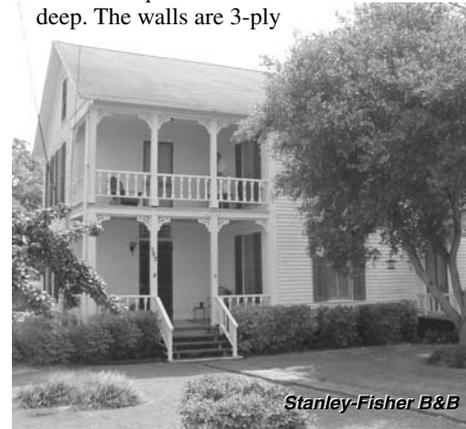
The Oldest and Largest Hot Air Balloon Ride Company in West
Central Florida, Operating Year-Round, Seven Days a Week
www.BigRedBalloon.com



MATAGORDA

Natural Wonder in Texas - Con't

The oldest house in Matagorda is being renovated as a B&B, the Stanley-Fisher House. Built in 1832, it has managed to survive many floods, hurricanes and other forces of nature. The foundation blocks are made of native materials including oyster and sea shells. The blocks are belled underground about 4 feet square and 6 feet deep. The walls are 3-ply



Stanley-Fisher B&B

cypress with one set of boards laid vertically, the next horizontally, and the 3rd diagonally. One hundred seventy one years and counting! Maybe we should look into that form of construction for our vulnerable Florida homes. The current owners are playing on a summer 2004 opening.

If you want to "kick off your boots", relax, bird watch, fish, or drive some cattle, the place to be is Matagorda County!

If You Go:

Continental Airlines - 1-800-525-0280
The Matagorda County Mad Island Marsh Christmas Bird Count - www.matagordabay.com/birding
Nature Conservancy of Texas - (361) 972-2559;
<http://nature.org/wherewework/northamerica/sates/texas/>
Matagorda Birding Nature Center - www.mcbnc.org/
Floating Classroom Program - (979) 863-2940; <http://texas-sea-grant.tamu.edu>
The Matagorda County Museum - 2100 Ave. F., Bay City, TX 77414, 979-245-7502;
www.baycity.org
Cattle Drive - www.matagordatexas.com/cattle-drive.htm
Bay City Antique Mall - 1913 Seventh St., Bay City, TX 77414, 979-245-4117.
Cattlemen's Motel - 905 Ave. F., Bay City, TX 77414; 979-244-2829
Moonlight Bay Bed & Breakfast - 506 South Bay Blvd., Palacios, TX 77465;
www.moonlightbaybb.com
Stanley-Fisher House - St. Mary's St., Bay City, TX, 979-863-2920.
Main Street Coffee Bar - 1822 7th St., Bay City, TX 979-245-4105.
Victoria's Mexican Restaurant - 2416 Avenue F, Bay City, TX 77414
K-2 Steakhouse - 1701 8th St., Bay City, TX 77414