

Texas Coast

Fins, Feathers and Fun!

Photos & Story by Terry Smith

Barb and I were itching to get out of town. We got a new motor home early this year and so far had only taken it out one time. Florida is a favorite spot of ours, but the relentless hurricane season put it off limits. We decided to check out the Texas coast.

I was intrigued by a small article I read in *Sea Kayaker* about kayaking around the Corpus Christi area. We made reservations for two weeks in an RV park in Fulton (about 40 miles north of Corpus Christi) and were off.

We arrived in Fulton in late afternoon. Our "camping" spot was nestled among a grove of beautiful live oaks. We stopped at a marine supply shop by the harbor and picked up a waterproof fishing map of the area (highly recommended). Our plan was to mix day paddles with some sightseeing. There turned out to be no shortage of possibilities for both.

Lighthouse Lakes

Our first paddle was to be the Lighthouse Lakes Trail, an area of water trails marked by the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department (TPW). The area is located just west of Port Aransas. The trails wind around the salt marshes and tidal flat areas. Here we quickly found out several key facts about the area: the water is shallow, navigation in the tidal flats can be difficult and the abundant shallow oyster beds are hard on kayaks.



A Great Egret & a Great Blue Heron—often seen together

We tried navigating the entry points for a couple of the trails, but were turned back by the shallows. The tidal range here is extremely small (about 8 inches at the time), but that 8 inches can make a great differ-



Barb entering Cove Harbor

ence in the passage of the trails. We opted for cruising along the Aransas channel, which was dredged to allow powerboat traffic. The boat traffic was light and we got our first taste of the stunning variety of shore and water birds in the area.

For a good aerial photo of the trails, visit the web site http://www.quintanna.com/mtnsports/SeaKayaker/tpwd_lhsetrail.html.

Aransas River

Our next paddle was a section of the nearby Aransas River. After thrashing around, we finally found a put in at a small, secluded boat ramp under a bridge on US 77. The river was slow moving with a deep sandy bottom. The banks were wooded, sometimes densely, completely hiding the surrounding farm land. We saw several alligators, but usually from a distance. They would slide below the water as we approached. Occasionally we would surprise one sunning on the shore. We never saw another person the whole paddle. With a shuttle, it would be a great trip to go all the way into Copano Bay from the US 77 bridge.



Barb on the Aransas River

Copano Bay

Copano Bay was only about ½ mile from our campground. We launched from a nice beach near the Copano Bay Bridge and explored around Goose Island State Park. We then backtracked and cruised the bay. The wind seemed to be present every day and made the water rough, especially in the afternoon. On the way back, we spotted a pair of bottlenose dolphins. Barb was excited and we tried to paddle closer to them. They had nothing to do with us and swam away. Little did I know a monster had been created.

Aransas National Wildlife Refuge

We decided to take a sightseeing day. The Aransas National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR) is the winter home of the only wild, migratory group of whooping cranes in North America that follow their historic migration route. The still-endangered four-foot-high birds arrive in late October to spend the winter feasting on blue crabs. ANWR is also home to an astonishing variety of birds, deer, javelinas, coyotes and gators. There are a number of neat hiking trails mowed through the jungle-like vegetation.

The ranger told us that while hiking we “should give way to any gators that cross our paths on the trail” – let me write that down so I don’t forget. And did we ever see gators! They seemed to line the banks of every pond. Unlike the ones on the Aransas River, these big guys wouldn’t give an inch as we approached (cautiously) to photograph them. The most vicious creatures of all were the insects. The environmentally friendly insect repellent we brought was a bad joke. This was strong DEET country. We were eaten alive by the “skeeters”. Barb was stung by a strange bug that stung like a wasp and removed a chunk of skin to boot.

The refuge is huge and we got only one very distant glimpse of a whooping crane. The other wildlife we saw made the visit well worth the while. The next day we chartered a skiff to take us for a closer look at the whoopers. We saw several pairs, including two pairs with their four foot tall “babies”. We got close enough to hear their eerie calls.



A friendly? Gator in Aransas Refuge area

Shamrock Cove

We learned how important “cuts” are. A “cut” is a dredged channel dug to allow power boats passage

through the numerous shallow areas in the tidal flats. The Gulf Intercoastal waterway is a large cut and is the major shipping route, but there are also a myriad of smaller cuts.

We (finally) located Wilson’s cut, a mile and a half long channel leading from Mustang Island out into Corpus Christi Bay. The banks of the cut are lined with a variety of herons, ibises, willets, curlews, egrets and other birds large and small. We reached the bay and paddled a couple of more miles to Shamrock Island. The horse-shoe-shaped island is protected as a bird sanctuary, so no landing is allowed. Brown and white pelicans own the island – there were many hundreds of them. One of the coves on the island is marked on our map with what has become a magical word – dolphins. We paddled along Shamrock Cove hoping to spot some but had no luck.

We crossed back to Mustang Island and had lunch on a sandy beach and watched the hordes of shorebirds forage and hunt. Fish abound in this area, providing a major draw for birds and humans alike. In fact, every other kayaker we saw was fishing. The locals looked at us like we were from mars when they learned we were paddling but not fishing.



See any pelicans in this picture?

We paddled out into the bay again and spotted a pair of bottlenose dolphins in the distance. As we moved towards them more of them arrived and approached us. What a thrill to have a pod of these amazing creatures playing in, around and under your boat! We spent nearly a half hour with them before they became bored with our slow, unmaneuverable boats and moved off.

Lexington and Padre Island

The next day, we drove to Corpus Christ wanting to paddle around the USS Lexington. The Lex is a WWII vintage aircraft carrier that is now a floating museum. One of our sightseeing days was spent touring the Lexington and visiting the Texas State Aquarium right next door.

We launched in a nasty wind that created some pretty rough water. We wanted to get photos of each other right at the bow of the ship, but the wind made that impossible. Cutting our losses, we decided to drive to Padre Island National Seashore and try our luck there. We paddled at Bird Island Basin, on the mainland side of the island. It is a hot windsurfing area, and for good reason. We fought the wind for a couple of hours before becoming bored. There are much better places to paddle nearby.



Terry (taken by Barb Smith)

Cove Harbor

Cove Harbor is a small town about 10 miles south of Fulton. We launched at a public ramp at the marina and set out for Traylor Island, one of a nearby band of small islands. As usual, the water near shore was shallow and covered with birds. Barb usually likes to paddle near shore and gets a little nervous in more open water. However, she was now bitten by the dolphin bug. We moved away from shore, despite the choppy 2-3 foot waves. We began frequently testing the water depth with our paddles, announcing when the water got "dolphin deep".

Our lunch spot was on one of the small islands where we watched a beautiful tricolored heron fish nearby. We turned back without seeing any dolphins. Just as we were nearing the turn back into the boat channel, they arrived. We spent another half hour playing with the dolphins. I tried to take some videos, but the rolling 3 foot waves and wind made that a little too interesting. I would have to censor most of my on-camera dialog. We returned to the marina happy.

Fulton Tour

The next day we opted to launch at Live Oak Point, only

a mile from our campground. The sky was crystal clear and it was dead calm. We paddled far out into Aransas Bay on water that looked like glass. We tried to find an exposed shipwreck that was marked on our map, but we didn't spot it. We were out more than 2 miles from shore near the Intercoastal waterway. I now know the secret to get Barb to leave the safety of the shoreline - tell her there are dolphins out there. We paralleled the coast up to Fulton Harbor, where we landed. We stayed close to shore on the return, looking at the fancy homes wrapped in the dense leeward-leaning patches of live oaks. It was a gorgeous day, but we felt a little empty. Because, of course, a day without dolphins is like a day without sunshine.

Wilson's Cut

It was our last paddling day. What did Barb want to do? "To go see the dolphins". We returned to Wilson's Cut and on the paddle out spent a lot of time photographing the amazing birds. We headed out into the bay and it wasn't long before our friends arrived. Barb had correctly noted that you don't find dolphins, they find you. She had also learned that we could keep them around much longer if we continued to paddle and turn. On our first encounters we immediately stopped and pulled out the cameras. Not much fun for the dolphins. We were much better at entertaining them now. We played until an approaching thunderstorm chased us back. The next day we had to leave.

The Texas Coast is a great place for a winter season getaway. The water is warm, the weather mild and the wildlife is exceptional. The numerous bays, islands and rivers can nearly always provide a protected paddle. The people we met were all refreshingly friendly. And did I mention there are dolphins?



A few of the dolphins.