

# Padre Island

National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior



National Seashore  
Texas



For years, legends have been told of great treasures hidden on Padre Island and just off its shores. The stories are of fortunes of gold and silver carried by Spanish galleons lost at sea and of vast sums of money and gems buried in the sand. However, there are natural treasures just as great—perhaps even greater—to enjoy in Padre Island National Seashore. Located along the south Texas coast, this sparkling preserve by the sea embraces 65.5 miles of white sand-and-shell beaches, picturesque windswept dunes, wild landscapes of grasslands and tidal flats teeming with shore life, and warm offshore waters. The national seashore is the longest stretch of primitive, undeveloped ocean beach in the nation.

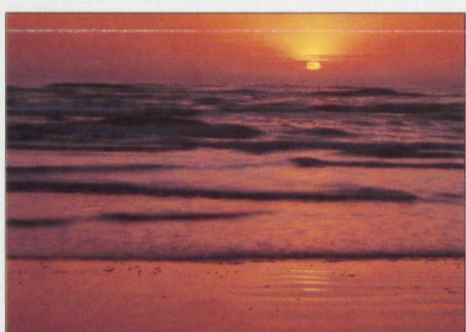
Throughout this coastal wilderness you can enjoy the riches of relaxation and recreation. If you're a beach-lover, the sun, sand, and surf of Padre Island are ideal for swimming and sunbathing almost all year. If you enjoy fishing, you can choose between the Gulf of Mexico and the shallow, extremely salty waters of Laguna Madre—both are renowned

for their bounty of game fish. For those who delight in the discovery of a seashell of exquisite design, or a peculiar piece of driftwood, there are miles of shoreline for beachcombing. Campers can wake up to the sights and sounds of water and island birds such as gulls, herons, and ducks that live by the water's edge. If it's adventure and a chance to get away from it all that you seek, you can hike or drive a 4-wheel-drive vehicle along almost all of the long roadless Gulf beach. For those who like to study the past, Padre Island has a history of small Indian bands that once hunted and fished here, shipwrecks, hurricanes, cattle ranches, and oil and gas exploration. However you spend your time at Padre Island National Seashore, the rewards will be generous.



A laughing gull, shown in summer plumage, has a call like a high-pitched laugh.

Dunes (above)—©James P. Rowan; gull—©George H.H. Huey



Beach: battered by waves, tides, winds, and storms.



Dunes: created by sand, wind, and stabilizing plants such as the goat's foot morning glory.



Grasslands: protected inland areas of vegetation and brackish pools fed by washover.

## PROFILE OF A BARRIER ISLAND

Padre Island is one of a chain of islands that stretches along the Atlantic and Gulf coasts of the United States from Maine to Texas. These islands are barrier islands, so-called because they guard the mainland from the direct onslaught of storms. On many of these low-lying islands humans have left their mark: homes, lighthouses, fishing villages, vacation resorts. But on Padre Island it is the handiwork of nature that is most evident.

Like all barrier islands, Padre Island is a dynamic place where you can witness change—change wrought by the gentle touch of breezes, the relentless crashing of waves, the rhythmic coming and going of tides, and, most dramatically, the violent battering of tropical storms and hurricanes. The many environments of Padre Island—beach, dunes, grasslands, and tidal flats—are shaped and reshaped daily in response to these natural sculptors. You can see the signs of change everywhere: sand blowing in the wind, new seashells deposited by a wave, a washover channel cut into the

island by the power of a great storm. Another more subtle change that is occurring, according to scientists, is the slow expansion of the entire island toward the mainland as winds and storms deposit sand on the island's west side.

The plants and animals of Padre Island are well adapted to the ever-changing nature of their native home. Sea oats, for example, thrive here. This wild shore plant is a pioneer species, one that moves into areas of loose, blowing sand, where few other plants can grow, and takes root. With the sand anchored by roots, other plants take hold and dunes grow, sometimes to heights of 30 or 40 feet. The dunes are held in place unless something destroys the plants. A particularly fierce storm can do it. People can do it, by trampling the grasses or driving over them; that's why hiking and driving in the dunes are prohibited.

Among the wildlife that flourishes on the island are many birds that live here year-

round or visit seasonally. Along the beach you may watch laughing gulls circling overhead, sandpipers skittering back and forth on shore searching for crustaceans, or terns, herons, and egrets flying by. In the shallows of Laguna Madre you may see flocks of white pelicans patrolling for fish. Inland, on the dunes and grasslands, killdeer, meadowlarks, and sandhill cranes live.

Other animals, though not as readily observed, also inhabit the island; among them are coyotes, black-tailed jackrabbits, lizards, Western diamondback rattlesnakes, and, in the intertidal zone along the beach, ghost crabs and ghost shrimp. The underwater life of the offshore waters of the Gulf of Mexico is just as abundant, as is that of Laguna Madre, a fertile nursery for saltwater fish.

The world of Padre Island is a natural world of change and extraordinary variety and richness. It is the world of the barrier island.

White pelicans congregate on a spoil bank.



©George H.H. Huey

## ACTIVITIES ASHORE AND AFLOAT

There are many ways to see the sights of Padre Island and to enjoy its many seaside pleasures. One is by **driving** along the scenic roads and sandy beaches. All vehicles can travel on the 8.5-mile paved park entrance road, North Beach, and the first five miles of South Beach. Four-wheel-drive vehicles can continue "down island" from South Beach another 55 miles to Mansfield Channel. The soft sand and slippery shells can make the going tough along this stretch of the beach, so carry emergency tools. Before you take your first 4-wheel-drive trip on Padre Island, talk with a park ranger about what to expect. The dunes, grasslands, and tidal flats are off-limits to vehicles, as is the Malaquite Beach area. The noise of the surf may drown out the noise of your engine; be careful when approaching others. Obey posted speed limits, the limit on the beach is 15 miles per hour unless otherwise indicated. Vehicles must be state-licensed and display a valid state safety inspection sticker. The use of all-terrain vehicles (ATVs) is prohibited in the park.

Another way to explore is by **hiking**. The Grasslands Nature Trail, a 0.75-mile loop trail, winds through a grasslands-and-dunes area. A guide pamphlet is available at the trailhead. Mosquitoes inhabit this area, so bring insect repellent. Western diamondback rattlesnakes, though rarely seen, are found here, too. Hiking across the dunes is discouraged.

Beach hiking can be slow going but rewarding, especially if you like **bird watching** or **beachcombing**. Look for some of Padre Island's 350-plus bird species. Collect shells and other treasures of the sea; live animals and objects of historical or archeological value cannot be taken. Summer mornings, winter and spring days at low tide, and after a storm are the best beachcombing times. Metal detectors are prohibited.

Warm Gulf waters and the hot Texas sun are ideal for **swimming** and **sunbathing** all year except January, February, and March, when chilly temperatures can occur. Swimming is permitted along the beaches, but lifeguards are not on duty. **Surfing** is not permitted at Malaquite Beach. Never go in the water alone, and beware of dangerous currents, undertows, Portuguese men-of-war, and stingrays.

Other ways to enjoy the water are **boating**, **waterskiing**, and **windsurfing** in Laguna Madre. Small power boats, fishing boats, sailboats, and other small watercraft can navigate its waters. The launching and use of jet skis is prohibited in the park.



The park's only boat launching ramp is at Bird Island Basin. Inflatable boats up to 12 feet long may be launched into the Gulf of Mexico at any location south of Milepost 5 on South Beach. Boaters should carry nautical charts and keep an eye on the weather and other boaters.

**Fishing** is an all-season sport on Padre Island. Catch redfish, speckled sea trout, black drum, and whiting in the Gulf, while in Laguna Madre you may pull in sheepshead, croaker, and flounder. A Texas state fishing license with a saltwater stamp is required.

Other year-round activities are **camping** and **picnicking**. Malaquite Beach Campground, a developed campground for tent and RV camping, overlooks the Gulf. Primitive camping is allowed at designated sites along Laguna Madre and all along the Gulf beach except in the Malaquite Beach area. Campfires are permitted on the beach. At Malaquite campground and Bird Island Basin, fire pans are required. Keep your fires under control and well away from dunes and grasslands vegetation. Put fires out completely with water before burying them. Picnickers may use shaded tables in the Malaquite Beach area, or simply spread out a blanket on the beach. All pets must be leashed. No pets are permitted on the visitor center deck or on the beach immediately in front of the visitor center.



Laguna Madre is ideal for windsurfing and sailing. Use only small watercraft to navigate this large but shallow body of water.



Padre Island's ocean beaches are ideal for swimming, sunbathing, strolling, and beachcombing for shells and other treasures.



A popular pastime is surf fishing in the Gulf of Mexico. All you need is a pole, bait, and Texas state fishing license with a saltwater stamp.

# Exploring Padre Island

## SEASHORE SITES AND SERVICES

Fees are charged for entering the park, camping in the Malaquite Beach campground, and using Bird Island Basin. Camping is limited to 14 days throughout the park, except at the Malaquite Beach Campground, where camping is limited to 30 days. Camping permits are available at the Malaquite Visitor Center.

**Malaquite Visitor Center and Camp Store** The Malaquite Pavilion serves as the center of visitor services. There is a visitor center with an information desk, bookstore, and exhibits. There are also picnic tables, an auditorium, two observation decks, restrooms, rinse-off showers, first-aid, and a public telephone. A camp store sells supplies, bait, fishing tackle, and fishing licenses. The main level and the main observation deck are wheelchair accessible. Beach wheelchairs are available at the visitor center.

The center is open daily except January 1 and December 25, with extended hours Memorial Day through Labor Day. It has schedules of park programs, special events, and beach clean-ups. Pets (on leashes) are permitted in the park and on the beach but not on the visitor center deck. Events may be held on the deck with permission from the superintendent's office.

Malaquite Beach Campground is located within 100 yards of the gulf and has 50 sites—43 for RVs and seven for compact vehicles; 26 sites may be used for tent camping. There are no hook-ups, but there is a water-filling station and a sanitary dump station just outside the entrance. During summer and winter rangers present evening programs at the campfire circle at the north end of the campground. The campground is open year-round, first-come, first-served. No reservations are accepted. However, during most of the year plenty of space is available.

**Park Headquarters** The administrative offices and emergency contact station are here. No visitor services or facilities are available other than public telephones.

**Bird Island Basin** With shallow, warm water and a nearly constant breeze, Bird Island Basin is one of the top windsurfing areas in the nation. Rental equipment and lessons are available. Bird Island Basin also provides the park's only boat launching ramp into the Laguna Madre. Primitive camping is available.

**Yarborough Pass** This is a good area for wade fishing and bird watching. You can launch inflatable boats into the Laguna Madre from this point on the beach.

**Primitive Gulf Beach** Five miles south of Malaquite Beach begins a 55-mile stretch of Gulf beach open to 4-wheel-driving and primitive camping, as well as other recreational pursuits. Driving and camping are restricted to the beach. No visitor services are available in this remote portion of the park.

**Climate** Expect long, hot summers and short, mild winters. In summer, high temperatures average in the high 80s and low 90s°F, lows in the 70s°F, with afternoon and evening sea breezes. In winter, highs are commonly in the 60s°F, lows in the 40s and 50s°F. In spring and fall high temperatures average in the 70s and 80s°F, lows in the 50s and 60s°F. Throughout the year the relative humidity seldom drops below 70 percent. Rainfall averages about 28 inches a year, most of it near the beginning and end of the hurricane and tropical storm season, which lasts from June to October.

**Shoreline Trash** Most of the refuse found on the beaches is washed in by the Gulf currents. The national seashore has developed several programs to clean the beach, where both employees and the general public participate. For information or to volunteer to help, contact the Malaquite Visitor Center.

**More Information**  
Padre Island National Seashore  
P.O. Box 181300  
Corpus Christi, TX 78480-1300  
361-949-8068  
www.nps.gov/pais



Corpus Christi, Brownsville, and smaller area communities have a variety of visitor services, including many that the national seashore does not provide, such as lodging, gas stations, restaurants, and fishing tackle and bait shops. Padre Balli and Cameron county parks and Mustang Island State Park have campgrounds with hookups for recreational vehicles. Padre Balli also has a popular fishing pier—Bob Hall Pier. You can observe bird life at Aransas National Wildlife Refuge, where a scenic drive and trails are available, or at the less developed Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge. Stop at the national seashore's visitor center for more information on area attractions and recommended travel routes.

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**BEACH WATCH**

**Saving Endangered Sea Turtles**  
Padre Island National Seashore worked with other agencies in the United States and Mexico to bring the Kemp's ridley sea turtle back from the brink of extinction. Kemp's ridley and other sea turtle eggs found along the shore are incubated at park headquarters and the hatchlings released into the Gulf of Mexico. As a result, since 1978 thousands of baby sea turtles have had a chance at life.

You can help by being alert during nesting season, March to September, and reporting sea turtles on the beach. If you see a nesting mother, remain in your vehicle or at least 20 feet away until she has dug her nest and laid a few eggs. Then you may approach close enough to see if the turtle has a metal tag on her flipper or a round white spot on the shell (see above). Note the number on the tag and the location of the spot. Mark the nest by using material found nearby on the beach. Do not stick objects in the sand to mark the nest as this can damage the eggs. If possible take photos or videotape. Do not touch or restrain the mother turtle. Report the sighting immediately to a park ranger (361-949-8173, ext. 0); to a sea turtle patroller; or call the sea turtle researcher (361-949-8173 ext. 226).

Most releases occur between May and September and are open to the public at no charge. Call the 24-hour Hatchling Hotline at 361-949-7163 to find out the date and location of the next release. Releases are held at dawn at the north barricade of Malaquite Beach.