

Padre Island

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior



National Seashore
Texas



Located along the south Texas coast, Padre Island National Seashore protects the longest undeveloped stretch of barrier island in the world. The national seashore embraces 70 miles of sand-and-shell beaches, picturesque windswept dunes, seemingly endless grasslands, tidal flats teeming with life, and warm nearshore waters. Providing habitat to a wide variety of organisms, the national seashore is the most important U.S. nesting beach for endangered Kemp's ridley sea turtles, and is globally important for migrating birds.

Throughout this coastal wilderness you can enjoy the riches of relaxation and recreation. The sun, sand, and surf of Padre Island are ideal for swimming and sunbathing virtually year-round. If you enjoy fishing, you can choose between the Gulf of Mexico and the shallow, extremely salty waters of the Laguna Madre—one of only six hypersaline lagoons in the world. The Gulf beaches provide boundless opportunities for beachcombing. Campers can wake up to the sights and sounds of the surf and shorebirds. If you seek solitude

in nature, portions of the beach along the national seashore are open to vehicles, enabling visitors to reach remote camping and fishing locations.

For those who enjoy studying the past, Padre Island has a long, varied history—American Indians, extensive Spanish exploration and shipwrecks dating to the 1500s, even use as a U.S. Navy bombing range. In an interesting 19th-century coastal community, people struggled to survive by ranching, harvesting salt from the Laguna Madre, and building their homes out of the remains of ships and cargoes that washed up on the island beaches. 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 like 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 called barrier islands because they protect the mainland from the direct onslaught of storm tides. 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 the violent battering of tropical storms and hurricanes. The many environments of Padre Island—beach, dunes, grasslands, and tidal flats—are shaped and reshaped 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 through the island by the power of a great storm. Another more

subtle change 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 and takes root where few other plants can grow. With the sand anchored by roots, other plants take hold and dunes grow, sometimes to heights of 50 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 is why driving in the dunes is prohibited and hiking there is discouraged.

Among the wildlife flourishing on the island are many birds that live here year-round or visit seasonally. Along the beach you may see 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 the Laguna Madre you may see flocks of white pelicans patrolling for fish. In the dunes and grasslands you may find killdeer, meadowlarks, and sandhill cranes. The Gulf beach provides habitat for many shorebirds, including the threatened piping plover. Around 380 bird species have been documented here—almost 45 percent of all bird species documented in North America.

Other animals inhabit the island, among them coyotes, black-tailed jackrabbits, lizards, western diamondback rattlesnakes, and, in the intertidal zone along the beach, ghost crabs and ghost shrimp. Underwater life in the Gulf's offshore waters is abundant, as is that of the Laguna Madre, a fertile nursery for saltwater fish. Five sea turtle species live in the Gulf, and three of the species nest here each year.

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 small island built with dredged materials.

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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 5.5-mile paved entrance road. North Beach and the first five miles of South Beach can usually be accessed with 2-wheel-drive vehicles. However, at times 4-wheel drive may be required.

South Beach has over 60 miles of beach open to driving. Anyone traveling down the island south of Milepost 5 should use a 4-wheel-drive vehicle due to frequently shifting sand. The loose sand and marine debris can make the going tough along this stretch of the beach, so carry emergency supplies with you and be prepared for an extended stay if you become stranded. Cell phone reception down island is poor to nonexistent.

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 380-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 man-of-war, and stingrays. Other ways to enjoy the water are **boating** and **windsurfing** in the Laguna Madre. Small power boats, fishing boats, sailboats, and other small



Lightning whelk
NPS

watercraft can navigate its waters. The launching and use of personal watercraft are prohibited in the park. The park's primary 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 the 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 Bird Island Basin campground and on North and South beaches. Campfires are permitted on park beaches. However, at Malaquite campground and Bird Island Basin, fire pans are required. Keep your fires under control and away from dunes and grasslands vegetation. Extinguish fires completely with water and bury the remains.

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.



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



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



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

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 at one time, with a maximum stay of 56 calendar days per year. After each 14-day stay, camping equipment and vehicles must be removed from the park for at least 48 hours before returning. Self-registration is required for primitive camping. Kiosks for obtaining a permit are located at the entrance to South Beach and North Beach and also at Bird Island Basin.

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, cold water rinse-off showers, and a first-aid station. The camp store sells supplies, sandwiches, snacks, drinks, bait, fishing tackle, t-shirts, and souvenirs. 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 December 25. 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.

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. Rangers present evening programs at the campfire circle at the north end of the campground on a seasonal basis. Check the campground bulletin board or at the visitor center for program information. 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. For visitor convenience, a public pay phone is located in the campground.

Park Headquarters The administrative and maintenance facilities are located here. No public services are available.

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 primary 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 here.

Primitive Gulf Beach South Beach is a wilderness beach that is open to driving. It is over 60 miles long with the first 5 miles normally suitable for 2-wheel-drive vehicles. Note that 4-wheel drive is required south of Milepost 5.

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 through November.

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.

Padre Island National Seashore is one of over 390 parks in the National Park System. The National Park Service cares for these special places saved by the American people so that all may experience our heritage. Visit www.nps.gov to learn more about parks and National Park Service programs in America's communities.



Corpus Christi and other 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 County Park 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 Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge. For information on attractions and accommodations outside the park, please call the Corpus Christi Convention and Visitors Bureau at 1-800-766-2322.

More Information

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www.nps.gov/pais

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Saving Endangered Sea Turtles

Since 1978 Padre Island National Seashore has worked with other agencies in the United States and Mexico to bring the Kemp's ridley sea turtle back from the brink of extinction. About 60 percent of the Kemp's ridley nests found in the United States are found at the national seashore and nesting is increasing. Kemp's ridley and other sea turtle eggs found at the national seashore are removed from the nest site for protected care. The hatchlings are released on the beach and guarded as they enter the surf. As a result, thousands of baby sea turtles have had a chance at life.

You can help by being alert during the nesting season, March to September. Motorists are cautioned to watch carefully, since these turtles blend with the sand, often nest in the beach roadway, and are unable to move for an approaching vehicle. If you see a nesting mother, protect her from passing traffic, but remain in your vehicle or at least 20 feet away to her rear 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. Note the number on the tag. 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 video. Do not touch or restrain the mother turtle. Report the sighting immediately to a sea turtle patroller; or call the sea turtle researcher (361-949-8173 ext. 226).

Most hatchling releases occur between May and August and each year several are open to the public at no charge. The 24-hour Hatchling Hotline at 361-949-7163 to learn the date and location of the next release. Releases are usually held at dawn.