

## ***A Morning on Matagorda Island***

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Mother Nature has done some of her best work on this day. It's not quite seven, a stress-melting morning, with a few purple clouds, silver-lined in the brightening sky before me. I'm driving alone up Middle Road on Matagorda Island in a turtle patrol ATV, heading northeast. Matagorda, a 38-mile-long barrier island of the Texas Coastal Bend, historic home in turn to Karankawa Indians, Texian settlers and ranchers, a WWII army air base, and a rich man's hunting retreat, now serves as part of the Aransas/Matagorda Island National Wildlife Refuge Complex with Texas Parks and Wildlife managing the north end as a state park. Accessible only by boat, the island with its tall, black lighthouse, boasts not a single permanent, human resident. I rejoice in the good fortune of finding myself here.

Today, I must meet the Coast Guard personnel who asked to see a life raft we turtle patrollers found washed up on the beach yesterday. They will motor over in a boat from Port O'Connor to the dock at the north end of the island and I, along with a USFWS employee, will drive them in two ATVs down the beach to the raft. I guess they want to identify it, figure where it came from, ensure there are no bodies in it—something like that. We looked it over carefully yesterday, however, and it appears to have just gone adrift.

Along the way, as I travel northward, I am embraced by the beauty of this place. The still-young sun hides behind a cloud in the eastern sky, sending fans of rays to earth, sliding boards for angels, and promising its usual July heat as the day gets older. But now the air flowing over me feels cool and morning-pleasant. The island creatures in all directions stir as my noisy machine and I intrude on their prairie refuge. I think how nice and quiet a bicycle would be.

Alongside my road, morning dew bends the stems of prairie grasses, lush from the wet spring and summer, and belly-high to a horse in places. Indian blankets, *gaillardia pulchella*, those hardy, colorful wildflowers of this coast, line my road, punctuated here and there by stands of tall, soft, silver-leafed sunflowers, *helianthus agrophyllus*. These, along with coast sunflowers, *helianthus debili*, Mexican hats, *ratibida columnifera*, and others, delight my eye with reds and yellows in the sea of green.



Bobwhites in pairs appear before me where they skitter, scurry ahead on quickie feet, reluctant to leave the road for the thick grass, and only taking to the air in their shallow ascent when I'm almost touching their tails. Rapid wingbeats curve them quickly out of my path. Mourning doves hiding in the grassy center of the road wait until I'm impossibly close before their wings whistle them up and out of the way. Meadowlarks (eastern? western? Texas is in the middle?) flutter, flutter, pause, flutter, flutter, pause, flashing their white-accented tails as they escape the intruding human and his machine.

And then a single echelon of brown pelicans passes low across my road, undulating over hills and valleys of air. The big birds in their angled line synchronize perfectly in rising and descending flight. They travel from their bay roosting place on an oyster shell island to the Gulf beach and a mullet breakfast in the surf. Later in the day, the pelicans will rest in groups on the hard-packed sand, just where the wavelets die while straining to slide a few more inches up the beach. I dislike disturbing them as I patrol there, sorry to make them rise and burn calories that have been hard-won in their breakneck dives during the morning. I feel especially bad when driving into the breeze because they inevitably turn into it also as they take off, and then after a few hundred meters, settle on the shore, only to have me continue in my approach and disturb them again and again. My mission will take me on, though, scouring the sand for the tracks of nesting Kemp's Ridley sea turtles, much more endangered creatures than the pelicans. But still, I'm sorry to vex the birds.

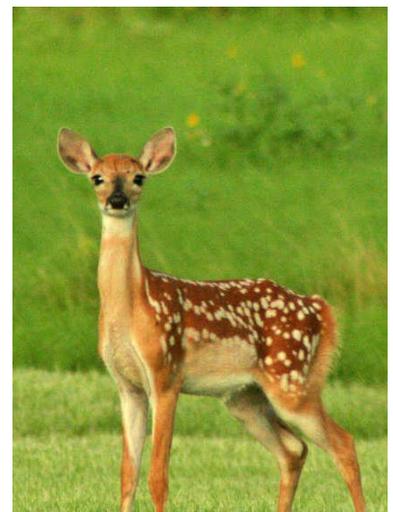


The Kemp's have brought three other volunteers and me to the Island this week. For eons the female turtles have crawled ponderously upon the Gulf-side beach, across the wet, hard-packed sand in search of a place to dig a nesting cavity. After depositing perhaps more than a hundred eggs and carefully covering the cavity, each turtle returns to her element, the sea, leaving the nest forever. If all goes well, in 50 to 60 days, tiny hatchlings emerge from the sand and they, too, crawl to the sea.

But all has not gone well. In the past several decades. Man, with his taste for turtle eggs, his fishing nets in the sea, and his introduction of feral hogs and fire ants to this land, has reduced the numbers of Kemp's to frighteningly near extinction. As part of the mission to save this ancient creature, we volunteers search during the nesting season for tracks leading to just-laid clutches of eggs, and then radio for assistance to excavate the nest and remove the eggs to an incubation facility where they can safely develop. Many biologists and volunteers work at this task and there are now indications that the population of Kemp's may be slowly increasing. Many years of recovery lie ahead, however.

Back on my road I see deer grazing on the prairie grass, little bothered by my passing unless quite close. Then they bound as if on springs to put a bit more distance between us. Occasionally I see a fawn whose still spotted coat tells me of his recent arrival on the island.

The curved backs of feral hogs sometimes rise above the grasses, a sight I do not enjoy. The hogs are terribly destructive, rooting holes big enough to break the axle of an unwary driver's machine if he's going too fast. They tear up the beach down to the tide line and any Kemp's nest left undiscovered by a patrol on the beach would likely be destroyed by these invasive animals. I'm sure other native creatures suffer from the hogs' relentless search for food, and it's unfortunate that even with repeated efforts to control their numbers,



the hogs continue to prosper and reproduce by the hundreds. Human folly introduced them to this island and surrounding country in the first place, and now we pay the price in lost biological treasure.

A jackrabbit leaps to life and bounces ahead of me. He thinks I don't see him when he flattens his foot-long ears against his back. But, worried that he's missing something, he pops one antenna-ear erect, then both, then down again, over and over, as he bounds ahead, maintaining just enough speed to keep a few yards between us. He's even more reluctant than the quail to leave the smooth track of the road, and I chase him for half a mile before his fatigue convinces him that the tall grass is better than this. I wonder if he stays on the road because he can use his speed unhindered to escape a hungry coyote, whereas in the tall grass, the advantage may go to the coyote. A partner patroller and I observed a chase like that at another time on the partially overgrown runway of the old air base on the north end. Seeing us, the coyote gave up the chase. I don't know if the jackrabbit would have won that race had we not interrupted it, but if I was a betting man, I think he's the one I would put my money on. As a kid on the back of a quick-footed quarter horse, I chased more than one without any success at all.

I pass the upper end of a cordgrass-lined cove that reaches almost to my road from the bay, visible far across the grassy prairie on my left. Startled fish push up v-shaped wakes, mullet probably, but that big one might be a redfish. The noise and vibration of the ATV alerts them, or maybe it's my lengthy shadow cast over the water by the low morning sun. I think of stalking reds while wading with my rod in shallow coves like this. It's a primal exercise and my favorite fishing. The fish have the advantage, but that makes an infrequent success all the sweeter. No fishing for me today, though, as I push on up the road.

A flock of ibises feeds across another cove, and over my shoulder, the sun highlights the scandalous pink of a pair of roseate spoonbills. What must the other birds think of these showoffs? No one else in the feathered community of this island would be caught dead in a get-up like that. Even the delicate and prissy avocets, starkly black and white with reddish-tan accents in their breeding plumage, aren't as outlandish as these characters. No other wading bird except the flamingo wears colors like this, and of course flamingos are foreign to this place, which excuses them.

I reach the curve in the road where water stands close alongside and a pair of black necked stilts worry over their three long-legged, gray, fuzz-ball offspring. I see the first one, then the other two, as mom and pop flutter up and cry their displeasure at me. As I inch by, two babies stand safely off the roadway, while the third, a bit closer, runs alongside me. In his excitement he tips over like one of those wire-legged toy chicks that you see in a child's Easter basket. The little stilt lies on his side and looks up at me as I quickly move on so that his worried



parents can rescue him. How do those little guys survive each night with the prowling coyotes, bobcats, raccoons, hogs, and God knows what else roaming near? Fledging, if it comes, will be a miracle.

I'm nearing my destination. I haven't seen a Texas horned lizard (*phrynosoma cornutum*) this trip, but on an earlier jaunt did spy one and stopped to look him over. Not since my childhood days in Wharton County had I enjoyed the sight of a "horny toad." We used to capture them, relatively abundant in those days, put them in a sand-filled wash tub and feed them big, red ants. It took a few years in adulthood for me to realize I never encountered the little lizards anymore. An old friend recently



volunteered his opinion that imported fire ants exterminated the native, larger red ants, and the horned lizards went with them. That sounds like a reasonable explanation, but I don't know if any experts agree. I reached the point where I thought I would never see another horny toad, but then upon volunteering here on Matagorda Island, found that a few still live here, another unexpected treat from this special place.

The sun has climbed, more than an hour has passed, and I park at the dock to await my guests. I look forward, after they have gone, to an afternoon patrolling the beach, and hope for one last turtle for the season. The day and the island have provided a sensual feast already, though; I really don't need more. What a lucky man I am.