

Aransas Wildlife Refuge Has a Nearby Gem

With some background on area lands, this is Calhoun County Game Warden Mike Mitchell. Located just 27 miles southwest of here, the main entrance to our closest National Wildlife Refuge, the Aransas Wildlife Refuge, represents a true gem. But people might be surprised to learn that the sanctuary's 115,000 acres actually is comprised of five disparate units.

Impressively, one of these units, the Myrtle Foester Whitmire, is only 1½ miles southwest of Indianola. The Myrtle Foester Whitmire Unit is 3,440 acres of waterfowl paradise. Purchased on May 21 of 1993 for waterfowl management, shorebird habitat management, soil management and native prairie restoration, this resource is literally just around the corner from our listening area.

It includes cooperative farming, grazing, water level manipulation and prescribed burning as land management tools. Although currently closed to the public, there is a lot to learn about this important piece of land.

Specifically, the area is located at the end of the Guadalupe-Blanco River Authority's Calhoun Canal System, on lands that were once part of the historic Indianola port area. The unit serves as an environmental project by providing food, water and shelter for up to 20 percent of the Central Flyway's waterfowl population migrating to the Texas Gulf Coast.

When early migration starts in mid-October, you can see as many as 10,000 migrating birds on any given day, including whooping cranes. More than 40,000 pintail ducks have been seen in the area, as well as the mottled duck, whose breeding habitat is found in the unit. This critical habitat needs a reliable source of water to support the moist soils, wetland and native grasses the migratory birds, indigenous wildlife and endangered species depend upon.

The unit also contains 160 acres of environmentally friendly organic rice. This farming operation is one of only three organic rice farms in Texas that are certified to supply this product. The tailwater remaining on the rice fields after the regular growing season is available as a resource for freshwater-dependent waterfowl, wading birds, song birds and shore birds.

This unit is a cooperative effort of three groups, the Guadalupe-Blanco River Trust, the Guadalupe-Blanco River Authority, and the Aransas National Wildlife Refuge.

The Trust is a charitable, non-profit organization that promotes and encourages conservation, stewardship and enjoyment of the land and water resources of the Guadalupe River watershed and works to maintain the watershed's unique and irreplaceable natural heritage. Such a vision is increasingly important as planners and citizens work to maintain a suitable and proper balance among environmental, residential, industrial and agricultural interests and needs.

The Guadalupe Blanco River Authority (GBRA) is this area's river authority, which operates the Calhoun Canal System. The mission of the GBRA is to protect, conserve, reclaim and steward the resources of its ten-county district in order to ensure and promote quality of life for those it serves.

The Aransas National Wildlife Refuge was originally established by President Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1937. Overall the national refuge system is the only national system of lands dedicated to conserving our wildlife heritage for today and generations yet to come. It is meant to be a refuge and breeding ground for migratory birds and other wildlife and to conserve fish, wildlife and plants.

The Whitmire Unit seeks to gain practical solutions in a cooperative manner, addressing the need to preserve the area's natural resources and heritage and to provide an economically beneficial infrastructure in the Guadalupe River watershed.

To learn more about this great resource, see its website at www.fws.gov and type "Whitmire" into the search box. With some background on area lands, this has been Calhoun County Game Warden Mike Mitchell.

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