



March 2017

## Matagorda Island Restoration Project Restores 2,300 Acres

The Coastal Bend Bays & Estuaries Program (CBBEP) is excited to announce the completion of the Matagorda Island Restoration Project. The project was funded by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service through a General Land Office Coastal Impact Assistance Program grant (\$700,000), and Coastal Conservation Association of Texas (\$70,000), and included 4 levee removals, 2 culvert repairs, and 1 new culvert, restoring water flow and circulation, improving water quality, and increasing wildlife abundance and diversity to 2,300 acres of emergent estuarine marsh.



Matagorda Island, October 2016.

Accessible only by boat, Matagorda Island is a 38-mile long barrier island located off the coast of central Texas, between the cities of Port O'Connor and Fulton. Habitats found on the 56,668 acre island include gulf beach and low dunes on the eastern shoreline, coastal prairie with freshwater emergent marshes in the interior, and an estimated 15,000 acres of intertidal estuarine emergent marshes on the western boundary which provide critically important habitat for birds like the endangered Whooping Crane. Since 1979 the island has been under the protection of U.S. Fish and Wildlife



## Matagorda Island Restoration Project, Continued.

Service - Aransas National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR) and Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, who have managed the island for public use, wildlife, and habitat, but the island has a rich and varied history.

Originally inhabited by nomadic Karankawa Indians, the island has been host to many things, including the town of Saluria, civil war fort, coastal retreat, bombing range, coast guard station, a ranch and even a rocket launch pad, but that history has left its mark. Relict airplane runways are still intact, the lighthouse still stands, and though abandoned, the homes of the Wynn family where President Roosevelt once sipped juleps with Toddie Wynn Jr. still remain. Some things nature can retake, grass can grow over the old runways and rocket launch pads can be removed, but some types of alterations do not wither away with time.

In the 1950's an estimated 15,000 acres of marsh on Matagorda Island was negatively impacted when large portions of the estuarine marsh were sectioned off with constructed levees so they could be drained for cattle production. The area remained in this condition until the late 1970's, when several dozen culverts were installed in an attempt to restore natural hydrology to the marsh. Since that time, many of these culverts have collapsed or become clogged, to the point where tidal exchange in the marsh has become severely restricted or eliminated, impairing water quality and negatively impacting habitats.



New culverts under levee restore hydrology to marsh.

CBBEP has been working with ANWR for many years to assess the health of marsh and adjacent habitat, identify and prioritize Action Item locations, develop an Adaptive Management Plan (AMP), and implement on-the-ground restoration actions as recommend by the AMP. With the AMP in hand and the support of our partners, removal of the levees and culvert repairs began in 2011.

“Restoration projects in remote reaches like this one have many challenges, and this one has been no exception. Thanks to the vigilant efforts of our contractors and partners, 2,300 acres are benefitting from this five-year effort,” said Rosario Martinez, Senior Project Manager for the CBBEP.

On a recent trip out to the island with our partners from ANWR and the CCA, the restored areas were teeming with fish and wildlife, Whooping Cranes were feeding and preparing to depart for their breeding grounds, and the water was flowing freely.

“CCA Texas continues to work with partners up and down the Texas coast to restore and create marine habitat. The Matagorda Island Marsh Restoration project is helping restore historical flows through thousands of acres of rich marsh in and around Matagorda Island. These flows are important to the surrounding ecosystems on many levels and CCA Texas is happy to be a partner in this effort.” said John D. Blaha, Assistant Director, CCA.



Whooping cranes utilizing restored area, March 2017. Photo: Lisa Laskowski.

## Matagorda Island Restoration Project, Continued.

Matagorda Island is resilient, and we have taken a great first step towards returning the estuarine marshes to their prior grandeur. With a plan in place, hopefully one day we will see the marshes again like Karankawa did, rich in resources and unrestricted by the alterations of the past.



Project partners Jake Herring (CBBEP), John Blaha (CCA), Rosario Martinez (CBBEP), and Felipe Prieto (ANWR) pause for a photo during recent site visit.

For more information on the Matagorda Island Unit of the Aransas National Wildlife Refuge you can visit <https://www.fws.gov/refuge/Aransas/about/matagorda.html>

For more information on the CBBEP visit [www.cbbep.org](http://www.cbbep.org).

The Coastal Bend Bays & Estuaries Program is a non-profit organization dedicated to protecting and restoring bays and estuaries in the 12-county region of the Texas Coastal Bend. CBBEP is partially funded by the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

For more information about the Coastal Bend Bays & Estuaries Program, contact Kathryn Tunnell at (361) 336-0304 or [ktunnell@cbbep.org](mailto:ktunnell@cbbep.org).

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