

Brazoria National Wildlife Refuge is sanctuary for all

Enjoy the 50th anniversary celebration at the Brazoria National Wildlife Refuge and marvel at huge American alligators.

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By Gary Clark

Walking the trails at Brazoria National Wildlife Refuge near Freeport makes us realize that the place not only harbors birds, but it's also a sanctuary for people.

What a respite from our busy lives, gazing across a native coastal prairie with bluestem grasses, shallow freshwater ponds, saltwater marshes and a woodland perimeter. The 45,000-acre refuge replenishes every living thing,

including us.

The refuge, celebrating its 50th year, is a haven for migratory birds and wintering waterfowl. Cackling geese, quacking ducks and diverse songbirds, including grassland sparrows that breed in Northern states and settle into the refuge November through February.

The Brazoria refuge offers exciting exploration year around because it provides a home for songbirds like loggerhead

Nature continues on D3

The event

What: 50th anniversary of the Brazoria National Wildlife Refuge

When: 9 a.m.-4 p.m. Nov. 12

Where: Refuge entrance at 2022 County Road 227, Freeport

Activities: Van tours, kayaking, demonstration of flying hawks, butterfly- and bird-watching, crabbing and re-enactments of historical events.

Cost: Free

Event information: refugefriends.org

Refuge information: fws.gov/refuge/Brazoria

Nature: Take a driving tour of the refuge

Nature from page D1

shrikes and meadowlarks; wading birds like herons, egrets and spoonbills; mammals like deer, rabbits and foxes; and reptiles like placid turtles and fearsome alligators.

Excursions begin at the Discovery Center Building, where a sheltered pavilion overlooks Big Slough Marsh.

A boardwalk leads over the marsh's bulrushes and cattails for a view of the meandering freshwater stream called Big Slough (pronounced slew) that twists through the refuge, recharging prairies and marshes.

Pied-billed grebes and American coots play peekaboo in the stream's

dense vegetation, while a marsh wren pops up like a jack-in-the-box in the cattails.

The 7.5-mile driving tour winds like a lasso through the refuge. Olney Pond spreads out to the left, attracting multitudes of wading birds, from herons to egrets and ibises. Winter waterfowl, like green-winged teal and ring-necked ducks, visit the pond, named for the olney bulrush.

Farther along the road is a pullout with an observation platform overlooking Cross Trails

Pond on the left and Salt Marsh and Mud Flats on the right. Scores of snowy egrets or masses of snow geese may well up from the marsh against the backdrop of Freeport's refineries on the distant horizon.

Drive the road slowly and stop at all 14 numbered signs. Watch the skies for raptors like Northern harriers, swooping low over the marsh in a hunt for mice, rats and gophers. An eagle could surprisingly sail overhead on mighty wings before suddenly

diving down to seize a pond duck.

The Brazoria refuge provides essential habitat for wintering waterfowl, said project leader Jennifer Sanchez of the Texas Mid-Coast National Wildlife Refuge Complex. But more important, it's a naturally functioning ecosystem and haven for all migratory and resident wildlife — and a place for people to “get outside” into nature.

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