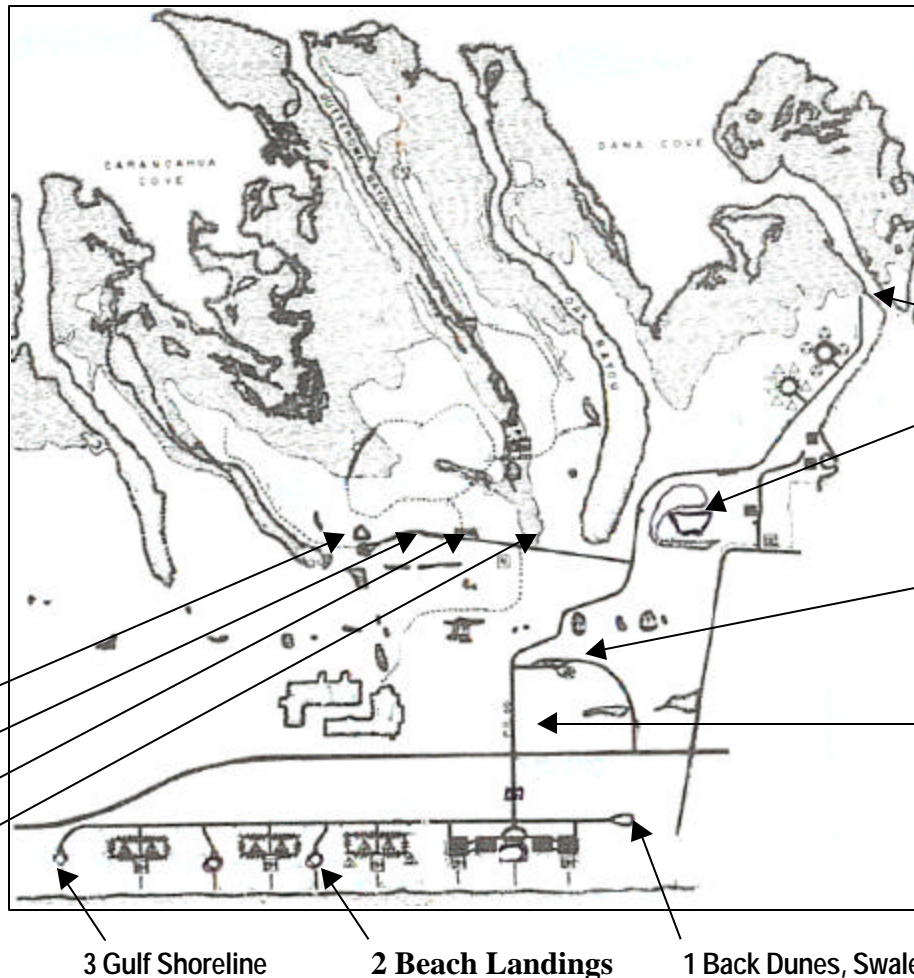


## Driving Tour of Points of Interest

### Galveston Island State Park

**Pond, History** 9  
**Oak Mott** 8  
**Observation** 7  
**Bayou, Wetlands** 6



11 - Karankawa  
Reef View  
10 - Amphitheater  
5 - Nature Center  
4 - Prairie

3 Gulf Shoreline

2 Beach Landings

1 Back Dunes, Swales

Galveston Island State Park offers visitors a rare intimate view of a barrier island ecosystem. The park contains a mosaic of coastal habitats that host a surprising variety of wildlife and is visited by birds from throughout the eastern hemisphere during spring and fall migration seasons. The park has 1998 acres, 180 overnight camping sites and 60 day-use sites. There are three parking areas with beach access and cold showers along the park's 1.5 mi. Gulf frontage and 4 miles of nature trails with an observation platform, boardwalks and photo blinds on the Bay side. Approximately a half million people visit Galveston Island State Park each year and you are one of them - Welcome!

**1. Back Dunes & Swales** - Here you can see the result of hurricane winds having pushed dunes landward and formed troughs. Flooded by seawater in the storm, these low tracts of marshy land over time were transformed to freshwater swales, populated by huge bullfrogs and a variety of birds and animals. In the future we hope to construct an accessible trail with boardwalks and a gazebo for viewing wildlife in this area of the park. The gazebo will also afford a platform from which to sit and contemplate the beach and surf. *(Turn around and continue on this road to the short road in between the first and second campgrounds.)*

**2. Beach Landings** - On the beach at the eastern border of the park is the spot where the Cabeza De Vaca's barge is believed to have foundered in the surf on a cold November day, 1528. De Vaca, the first European to set foot in Texas, was second in command of the ill-fated Narvaez expedition for the conquest of Florida. Upon completion of their mission, finding that the sustaining ships were gone, they built barges and searched the coastline. Of the 247 who set out from Florida, 40 landed naked and near death on Galveston Island. After eight harrowing years and 6,000 miles over mostly unknown reaches of North America, four found their way back to civilization.

Dutch pirates used the Island as a rendezvous point in the early 1600s as no doubt did other pirates who operated in the Gulf including Henry Morgan, Captain Kidd and Blackbeard. Legend has it that pirates sometimes tied lanterns to the backs of burros and led them along the beach, hoping seamen would mistake them for passing ships and founder. The privateer Jean Lafitte, who made his home on the east end of Galveston Island in the early 1800s, hunted in the vicinity of Galveston Island State Park and fought a battle with Karankawa indians at Three Trees about three miles east of the park on Stewart Road.

Beaches along the west end of the Island were also used as debarkation points for the illegal importation of slaves who were then smuggled inland to work the Texas cotton plantations. And during Prohibition schooners from Cuba, Jamaica and the Bahamas anchored off the coast where liquor was off-loaded into small powerboats for delivery to spots along the miles of deserted beach for shipment to cities of southwestern and central states. The Beach Gang, led by mobster Ollie J. Quinn, landed most of its goods on West Beach, possibly on the park's own strip of shoreline. *(Return to road and take a left to the dead-end and toward the beach)*

**3. Gulf of Mexico Shoreline** - Look past the surf and imagine the past when Spanish galleons, pirate ships or German submarines cruised near the horizon. Today the Gulf off the park's shoreline is populated with sailboats, shrimp boats or drilling rigs. One can often see Dolphins cavorting (scientists have identified a West Galveston pod that is joined by other pods when the fishing is particularly good). You can also see pelicans and terns diving for their catch. Brown Pelicans can dive straight down at 40 mph and have a special air-filled sac to cushion the shock. They very nearly became extinct, but have made a dramatic recovery since DDT has been banned. Sandpipers and other shorebirds cruise the surf for worms (you can generally determine how deep each species' particular delicacy is buried by how long the beak is). And, of course, several species of gulls populate the shoreline performing their

garbage collection chores. But the great majority of living things on our beaches are out of sight – burrowed underground to escape the hazards of surf, currents, shifting sand and baking heat. *(Return to the park entry road and cross Hwy. 3005 to Gulf side of park)*

**4. Texas Coastal Prairie** - On either side of this point you can view a remnant of the original upland tall grass and lower saltgrass native prairie that once surrounded Galveston Bay. The “Sea of Grass” was so vast and tall that one could lose his way if he left established trails. Even this small acreage, though changed by cattle production and the introduction of non-native invasive plants such as Chinese tallow trees, is still filled with a wonderful variety of grasses and wildflowers. Over 60 percent of bird species of North America can be found on Galveston Island at some time during the year. Park staff and Friends of Galveston Island State Park volunteers participate in Project Prairie Bird, an annual bird count in prairies of the State. This environment is also home to raccoons, opossums, coyotes, field mice, rabbits, toads and snakes. Park staff and volunteers work to restore and extend the park’s prairie by eliminating invasives and mowing to somewhat mimic the grass-renewing effects of prairie fires and buffalo grazing.

**5 Nature Center** – Our nature center is open every weekend from 9-5. If it is open you may want to stop in for a visit and learn more about the park’s environment, birds, animals and seashells. *(Once past the nature center, take the first road to the left)*.

**6. Bayou & Wetlands** - The open water you see on your right is an inlet from Galveston Bay, Oak Bayou, surrounded by estuarine (tidal fringe) wetland. These vegetated marshes are found between the open Bay and uplands all along the west end of our barrier island. Wetlands are one of the world’s most endangered yet essential environments, protecting our water quality by efficiently filtering surface water before it is released in groundwater or rivers. Coastal wetlands also serve as a nursery for the fish and shellfish that support the \$400 million wholesale commercial fishing industry as well as the \$2 billion Texas saltwater sport fishing industry. Wetlands reduce the severity of floods by acting as natural detention areas, reduce shoreline erosion and stabilize banks, and provide habitat for birds and animals. These in turn support the fastest growing segment of the tourism industry, wildlife watching - in 1996, 3.8 million U.S. residents spent \$1.2 billion watching wildlife in Texas. *(Now proceed to the parking lot on your right)*

**7. Observation Platform** - If you exit your vehicle and climb the wheelchair-accessible platform you’ll be rewarded with a view across wetlands to the Bay. The black line you see in the water near the shoreline is an expanse of geotubes (huge sand-filled socks) placed there to halt further shoreline erosion. The geotubes have served so well in smoothing wave action that the water has clarified, allowing recovery of seagrass beds - Galveston State Park now has the largest seagrass bed around the bay – over 50 acres. Looking to the left you may spot a grid of terraces planted with cordgrass as part of the marsh restoration. You’ll spot a few shorebirds – egrets, spoonbills, herons, terns, white pelicans in summer as well small migrating birds and an occasional hawk or white-tailed kite. The trail to the right of the observation platform will take you in ¼ mile to a boardwalk where you can get a close-up view of wetlands’ cordgrass and possibly see crabs skittering across the mud (crabbing is allowed in the park – those over 17 year old must have a fishing license, available at the park office). *(Just past and to the left of the observation parking lot is the next site, an oak mott.)*

**8. Oak Mott and Resident Caracaras** – Derived from a Spanish word, a mott is a small stand of trees surrounded by prairie. Although this one was planted after the park was established, early settlers planted most of the oak motts in Texas as shelter around their homes. For the past four years, a pair of Crested Caracaras has nested here and produced two to three fledglings. From January through June, one or both of the pair can often be viewed from the road on a high perch or swooping elegantly through the air searching for prey. Fledglings leave the nest in early April and, until they become fully independent, and might be spotted on branches close to the nest awaiting delivery of the next meal. Although you may exit your vehicle for a closer look, please be quiet, stay away from the nesting tree and do not make overt movements that might threaten the birds. *(Now drive on to the end of this road)*

**9. Freshwater Pond and Some History** – On your right is one of the park’s 20 or so freshwater ponds, essential to wildlife, especially to those thirsty birds who have migrated across the Gulf of Mexico. When the park gets hurricane flooding this pond becomes brackish, but gradually recovers to its original freshwater state, evidenced by the presence of cattails and ducks. Freshwater ponds support pond life quite different than our brackish estuarine wetlands – turtles and frogs do not like salty water, nor do alligators (the park has a 7-footer and perhaps it’s mate in one of its larger ponds). This small perfectly round pond is of particular interest. It was dredged in 1893 to be surrounded by homes in the planned town of South Galveston. Streets were laid out, lots platted, and a railroad connecting the town with Galveston begun. A racetrack with grandstand seating for 6,000 had already been constructed, a railroad bridge to the mainland across Karankawa Reef was proposed, and the Alta Loma Hotel and zoological garden was planned to front on Lake Como (edging the park’s northeast boundary). However, the grandiose plans were never fully realized. Streets returned to pasture, the railroad bridge was never built, the racetrack was abandoned and the city rail line collapsed in the 1900 Great Storm. Only the pond remains. At the end of this road a canoe-kayak launching area is planned to allow improved access via Jenkins Bayou to the great birding near the restored wetlands at the end of the inlet. *(Now turn around, return to the T intersection of park roads and turn left to complete your tour.)*

**10 Outdoor Amphitheater** - To your right across from another freshwater pond is the Outdoor Musicals Amphitheater, which closed in 2001 and is now for sale. Ranch owner Maco Stewart left his rangeland on which the amphitheater and park are now situated in trust to be developed as a park after the death of his children. Texas Parks and Wildlife Department purchased the park’s land from the heirs and developed it as Galveston Island State Park, which opened in 1975, the Moody Foundation built the amphitheater in an agreement with TPWD. The hacienda-style Stewart mansion which served as the ranch house is hidden behind the amphitheater on Stewart Road. *(Now continue down the road past park staff housing on your right and campsites on your left to the end of the road, fronting on Galveston Bay with Lake Como on your right and a fish-cleaning kiosk on your left.)*

**11. Karankawa Reef** – At the end of the road across the mud flats and off the last point of land lays Karankawa Reef, now under water even at low tide due to subsidence (but well known by boats with deep hulls). The reef is named after the once powerful Karankawa (Carancahua) Indians who inhabited the Gulf Coast region at least through the 1840s. These Indians reportedly could wade on the reef to the mainland. Tall, naked, coated with shark oil to repel mosquitos and with faces tattooed using oil seepage for color, the Karankawas were feared by other tribes and early settlers (reportedly they were ceremonial cannibals, believing they could thus gain their enemies’ valor). Karankawas were excellent bow fishermen and canoeists and lived a nomadic life on barrier islands

and coastal mainland. By 1860, decimated by disease and conflicts with settlers, the few remaining Karankawas left and were intermingled with other populations and they disappeared as a distinct tribe.

**Hope You Enjoyed the Tour Brought to You by Friends of Galveston Island State Park**