

Bird Photography Site Guide – Port Aransas, TX and environs

Overview

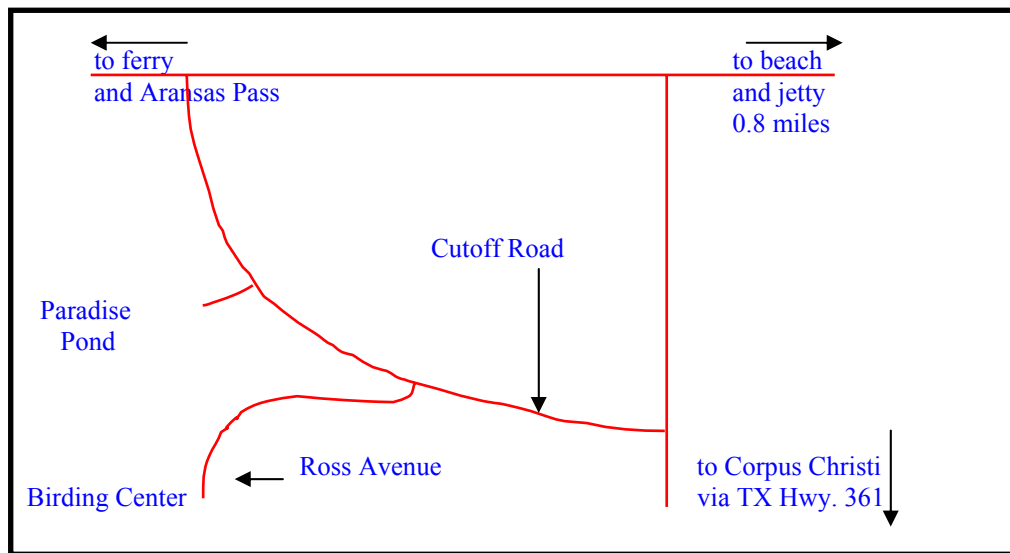
Port Aransas, TX is located on the northern end of Mustang Island, less than an hour's drive from Corpus Christi. It has been known as a birdwatching hotspot for many years because of the variety of habitats in the area. The beach and jetty area has always been good for avian photography. In the last few years boardwalks for birding have been constructed in two areas within Port Aransas. These boardwalks are superb locations for avian photography for a wide variety of resident and migrant species.

Getting to Port Aransas

Port Aransas is easily reached from the two different locations – Corpus Christi or Aransas Pass. Corpus Christi has a modern airport served by several major airlines. Several flights arrive and depart each day from Atlanta, Houston, and Dallas-Fort Worth.

If you choose to fly into San Antonio, Port Aransas is about a 3.5 hour drive. If you choose to fly into Houston, Port Aransas is about a 4.5 hour drive.

From the Corpus Christi airport, travel east on TX Hwy. 44 for approximately 2 miles, take TX Hwy. 358 for approximately 14 miles toward Corpus Christi and Padre Island. TX Hwy. 358 turns into TX Park Road 22 in the small community of Flour Bluff. Stay on the highway. **DO NOT EXIT THE HIGHWAY TOWARD THE NAVAL AIR STATION.** Continue on the highway across a long causeway over the Laguna Madre and Intracoastal Waterway. About one mile after crossing the causeway and a high bridge, turn north on TX Hwy. 361 and proceed 17 miles to Port Aransas. This route is also the best if driving from points south or west of Corpus Christi (e.g. the Rio Grande Valley or San Antonio).



From points north (e.g. Houston) enter Aransas Pass on TX Hwy. 35 Business. In the center of town, turn left (east) on TX Hwy. 361 toward Port Aransas. Approximately 5 miles after leaving Aransas Pass you will take a free ferry for the last few hundred yards. The ferry runs 24 hours 7 days a week. At most times there will be only a few minute wait for the ferry. However, on Friday afternoons and evenings and during and before holiday weekends longer waits might be encountered.

Regardless of how you enter Port Aransas, follow the map above to get to the specific bird photography locations.

Port Aransas is a small town, with a permanent population about 3,000. The distance from the ferry to the Birding Center is only 1.2 miles and the distance from the Hwy. 361/Cutoff Road Intersection to the Birding Center is only 0.9 miles.

Access

The three locations described below are all public areas open at all times. Only one area has any kind of fee associated with it. That is the beach-jetty area. Regulations require a beach parking sticker (\$6 annually at the time of this writing) for all vehicles parked anywhere on the beach. These stickers can be purchased at any of the many convenience stores located in Port Aransas. Personally, I visited and parked on the beaches for many years without purchasing the beach parking sticker and never had any difficulty.

Photo Location #1 – Port Aransas Birding Center

The Birding Center is a large pond/wetlands area located at the discharge of the Port Aransas wastewater treatment plant. It is home to numerous species of birds, many of which can be easily photographed. You will see large brown signs directing you to the Birding Center just as you leave the ferry landing or as you come to the first traffic signal as you enter Port Aransas from the south.

It is a morning location at all times of the year because of the light. I usually try to arrive shortly before sunrise. Park in the free parking lot immediately adjacent to the wastewater treatment plant and follow the sidewalk to the boardwalk. The walk from the parking lot to the far end of the boardwalk is only a few hundred feet and is easily managed even when carrying heavy tripods, cameras, lenses, etc.

I have seen photographers with anything from point-and-shoot cameras to consumer video cameras to professional 35 mm gear with 600 and 800 mm lenses. For 35 mm users, I would recommend focal lengths of 300 mm or more. Longer lenses will be very useful. Fill-flash would also be helpful. All your photography will be done from the sidewalk, adjacent lawn and the boardwalk. While on the boardwalk photographing birds on the water or in the marsh, getting low will greatly improve your photos. Kneeling, squatting, or laying down on the boardwalk will allow you to shoot between or under the side rails of the boardwalk. Kneepads might be helpful for this. When many people are on the boardwalk, vibration from footsteps is sometimes a problem.

In addition to the birds mentioned below there are two other critters that inhabit the area. The first are nutria (a large muskrat-like animal). They are often seen with their young and can be easily photographed. The second critters of possible interest are alligators – including one large individual (approximately 9 feet in length).

Winter (November through March) is probably the best time to visit. Large numbers (thousands) of wintering ducks are present. Green-winged, Blue-winged, and Cinnamon Teal, Northern Shovelers, and Ruddy Ducks become very used to all the people and spend a lot of time within just a few yards of the boardwalk and are very easily photographed. Great and Snowy Egrets, Tricolored Herons, Roseate Spoonbills, American Coots, Common Moorhens, Black-necked Stilts, American White Pelicans, Black-bellied Whistling Ducks, Double-crested and Neotropic Cormorants, Great-tailed Grackles, Red-winged Blackbirds, and Yellow-rumped Warblers are also easily approached and photographed. Large numbers of Redheads and Northern Pintails are present, but these birds tend to stay long distances from the boardwalk.



Laughing Gulls, Forster's Terns, Caspian Terns, Northern Harriers, White and White-faced Ibises, and Roseate Spoonbills are good flight-shot possibilities (particularly from the tower located about half way out the boardwalk). Other species seen less often are Fulvous Whistling Ducks, American Avocets, both Night Herons, American Bitterns, and Brown Pelicans. Soras are often seen in good position for photography for the first hour or two after sunrise. Virginia and Clapper Rails are seen less often.



Spring (April and early May) has many of the same birds, plus migrating songbirds and shorebirds. The trees and bushes along the sidewalk leading to the boardwalk can have any of many species of warblers. A better location for these birds is the Paradise Pond Birding Habitat, which will be discussed later.



Shorebirds such as Dowitchers, Stilt Sandpiper, Wilson's Phalarope, and Pectoral Sandpiper can often be found and photographed in the shallow water along both sides of the boardwalk.

Summer (mid May through mid-September) presents fewer opportunities. Probably the most interesting residents are Least Bitterns. Several pairs usually nest close to the boardwalk, and patient photographers who visit early or late in the day are often rewarded with good opportunities. Both egrets, Tricolored Herons, Roseate Spoonbills, Black-bellied Whistling Ducks and some American White Pelicans are still present. Nesting coots and moorhens are sometimes seen. Also seen during the summer are Magnificent Frigatebirds. On many mornings one or two of these birds will visit the area, offering good opportunities for flight shots.



Autumn (mid-September through October) is a season of change. Some of the ducks start to arrive, particularly after cold fronts come in from the north. Least Bitterns are probably long gone, but the summer birds mentioned above are still present.



Photo Location #2 – Paradise Pond Birding Habitat

This location is a boardwalk over a small fresh-water marshy pond (water level depends on the amount of rainfall). There is a large brown sign on Cutoff Road directing you to the habitat. At times during early April to mid-May it is an incredible migrant trap. There are many small trees close to the boardwalk, so photographing migrants such as warblers, orioles, tanagers, vireos, and others can be very good at times. At this time of year, cold fronts occasionally come in from the north. The first day or two after the arrival of the cold front is the best time.

A hand-held camera/lens combination (focal length of 300 to 400 mm) with fill-flash seems to be the best bet. Longer lenses and tripods don't seem to work too well here. First of all, when the birds are plentiful, so are the bird watchers and the boardwalk is crowded. Second, the birds are so close and the vegetation so thick that it is difficult to track the birds with a long lens.

The pond occasionally harbors Black-bellied Whistling Ducks, White Ibis, and Night Herons.

This area is definitely worth checking during spring, but not very productive during the rest of the year. Even during migration, the number of migrant birds present is highly dependent on the weather. As mentioned above, the first few days after a cold front comes in, especially if rain is associated with the front, will produce the most birds.

Photo Location #3 – Beaches along the Gulf of Mexico

The map shows how to get to the beach and jetty. With even the most ordinary rental car it is possible to drive on the beach in this area. When driving on the beach, do be careful about driving into soft sand. The best tip is to drive where you see tire tracks.

This area can be very productive during spring for Royal, Caspian, Least, Sandwich, and Black Terns. The ubiquitous Laughing Gulls are also present in large numbers. Ring-billed and Herring Gulls are also present. The photographer visiting this area will in all likelihood have opportunities to photograph Royal and Sandwich Terns and Laughing Gulls engaging in courtship behavior. The Caspian, Least, and Black Terns, and Ring-billed and Herring Gulls in this area are usually observed resting, but still make good subjects. The jetty can be good for flight shots of Brown Pelicans.



For gulls and terns on the beach my usual strategy is to visit in early morning, and park to the east (upwind) of the loafing birds. I will shoot from my vehicle or from a tripod close to the ground. Being upwind of the birds, they are facing me and light is at my back. One downside to this area at times is the large number of vehicles on the beach and the “tourists” who get a kick out of driving through the flocks of loafing birds. A long lens (500 mm and longer) is a must at this location.

If you drive from Port Aransas on TX Hwy. 361 toward Corpus Christi, you will notice several beach access roads. Most of the 20 or so miles of beach are accessible from these roads and driving on the beach is allowable in most areas. In the less frequently visited areas a groundpod can be very useful in getting good, low-angle shots of the gulls and terns mentioned above, plus American Oystercatchers, Sanderlings, Ruddy Turnstones, Willets, Long-billed Curlews, and Semipalmated and Piping Plovers. These birds are generally present year-round. In the autumn Red Knots and Black-bellied Plovers are very plentiful at times. Springtime migration brings the same birds, but they always seem fewer in numbers. Late afternoon seems to be the best time. Long lenses (500 mm and longer) are a must.

Safety Issues

As far as personal safety is concerned, I have never observed or heard of any problems with break-ins, unaccompanied females being bothered, theft of photo equipment, etc. at any of these locations. Because of the close proximity of these locations to town and residential areas, there is absolutely no need for GPS, cell phones, first aid kits, etc. It might be desirable to take drinking water, especially during the summer months. Sunscreen, hats, and sunglasses are highly recommended at any time of the year. Biting insects are rare, probably because it is nearly always windy in this area.

The town of Port Aransas is very “user friendly” for the visiting photographer. Ecotourism, and especially birding, is very important to the local economy. Birders are made to feel very welcome.

Weather

Spring and fall are usually very pleasant, in spite of the ever present wind (most often blowing from the southeast).

Summers can be very hot and are usually very windy. Daytime temperatures in the high 80's or low 90's are very common. Nighttime temperatures rarely dip below the high 70's.

Winter can occasionally be very cold and windy (temperatures in the 30's and wind-chills much lower). However, it is not uncommon for daytime temperatures at this time of year to be in the 60's.

Places to Stay

There are numerous motels, RV parks, and restaurants in Port Aransas. The nearest camping facility is Mustang Island State Park, about 13 miles south of town on TX Hwy. 361.

Local Resources

Port Aransas does not have a camera repair or equipment rental business. For those who shoot slide film, bring all the film you will need. A full service camera store (Roosevelt-Baker) is located in Corpus Christi.

Other Opportunities

The Rio Grande Valley, home to some great birding and bird photography spots, is a 3.5 hour drive from Port Aransas.

A Whooping Crane Festival is held in early February. Boat trips to observe and photograph Whooping Cranes depart from Port Aransas (and Rockport, about 30 minutes away) during the winter months. Neither I nor anybody I know has had a lot of success photographing the cranes from the tour boats.

The Port Aransas area is a fishing hotspot. Inshore fishing for sea trout and redfish, as well as offshore fishing for numerous species, are readily available.

References

Port Aransas website - <http://www.portaransas.org/>

Texbirds – A web site dedicated to bird sightings in the state of Texas.
<http://moonmountaingroup.com/texbirds/>

The Great Texas Coastal Birding Trail – This is a network of highways and roads on which good birding sites have been posted with signs. Maps are available from visitors bureaus or from Texas Parks and Wildlife. <http://www.tpwd.state.tx.us/birdingtrails/>

Acknowledgements

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