

‘A Living Museum’

by SUE MAYFIELD GEIGER on FEBRUARY 23, 2019 *Coast Monthly*



ARMAND BAYOU NATURE CENTER IS THE LARGEST URBAN WILDERNESS PRESERVE IN THE UNITED STATES WITH 2,500 ACRES OF NATURAL WETLANDS, FOREST AND PRAIRIES. IT IS HOME TO MORE THAN 370 SPECIES OF BIRDS, MAMMALS, REPTILES AND AMPHIBIANS. PHOTOS BY GARY SELOFF

Bayou, forest and coastal tall-grass prairies make Armand Bayou a natural place to learn

Mark Kramer has fond memories of swimming in Armand Bayou in his youth.

“It was a cool place to hang out for high school kids,” said Kramer, now chief naturalist and conservation director at Armand Bayou Nature Center. “We had rope swings set up, and there were always several groups of teenagers in the water. There wasn’t an alligator in sight, because they were on the Endangered Species list from 1967 to 1987.”

Today the gators are back — the largest one a bit longer than 13 feet — because of preservation efforts.

Armand Bayou, within Pasadena city limits, is a tributary of Clear Lake. Formerly known as Middle Bayou, it was renamed Armand Bayou Nature Center in 1970 in memory of Armand Yramategui, a naturalist and curator of Burke Baker Planetarium in Houston. Until the late 19th century, several Native American tribes lived in this region using the bayou area for hunting and fishing.



“Alligators have returned for several reasons, but mainly they’ve recovered to the point that Texas Parks & Wildlife Department allows a limited hunting season — although not here on the wildlife refuge — so, they’ve definitely made a comeback,” Kramer said.

Armand Bayou comprises 2,500 acres of vast marshes, miles of trails, wildlife and many educational venues that are family friendly.

Kramer sometimes can’t take himself away from the place, spending the night on occasion, he said.

Growing up with a love of nature, the Pasadena native was intrigued with the many open rural fields and ditches near his home, he said.



MARK KRAMER, THE CHIEF NATURALIST AT THE ARMAND BAYOU NATURE CENTER, WALKS DOWN A SUSPENDED PATHWAY OVER A MARSH AT THE CENTER. PHOTO BY STUART VILLANUEVA

“I caught crawfish, frogs, played on the prairie wetlands after a rain, and filled my wagon up with Gulf Coast toads and crawfish,” he said. “Even though I studied biology, Armand Bayou has been my biggest teacher, giving me the ability to observe, be still and learn from the land, as well as the people who have visited here.”

He considers Armand Bayou Nature Center the most beautifully preserved piece of natural land left in this area, and a perfect place for anyone seeking a nature tourism outing, he said.

“You’re entering a living museum when you come here because it captures the three representative ecosystems: a bayou, forest and coastal tall-grass prairies,” Kramer said. “So many endangered species, or what were endangered species in our youth, are now thriving right here in the middle of the most densely populated county in Texas. We have nesting bald eagles, river otters, brown pelicans, peregrine falcons, osprey, animals that we once thought might disappear off the face of the Earth before the Endangered Species Act.”

Bird-watching is an all-time favorite at Armand Bayou, which boasts a private rookery and coastal flatwoods forest.



“These forests are particularly important to migratory bird species, especially every spring and fall,” Kramer said. “We are on the largest migratory bird route in North America’s central flyway, which means every time we have that major push of diversity of birds going from North America to Central America, they come right through here. It’s become an ecological greenhouse effect. We typically document about 220 bird species right here at the nature center, many are woodland birds.”

A popular guided tour, Preserve Watch, is an adult program that starts with an hour-long lecture, PowerPoint program and an introduction to deepen the field experience. There are about 400 nesting pairs of birds to observe and some are pretty showy, Kramer said.

“Hérons and egrets exhibit a very unusual courtship display,” Kramer said. “They grow these beautifully long, elegant breeding plumes and they have the ability to hold them upright on their back similar to a peacock. Then they do deep-knee bends, crane their necks and it’s all part of the process of solidifying that they actually are going to raise young birds, which is a four- or five-month process.”

As the season progresses, visitors might also see nest construction, feeding of chicks and the chicks learning to fly. There are various programs designed to give children the opportunity to observe nature in action at Armand Bayou.



TREES ARE REFLECTED ON AN ALGAE-COVERED POND AT THE ARMAND BAYOU NATURE CENTER. PHOTO BY STUART VILLANUEVA

Various boat cruises also are popular, as are bat hikes, canoe tours, guided trail and photo hikes, night hikes and live farm demonstrations. Or, just bring your kayak and paddle down the bayou. And, of course, there’s always plenty of gators to observe — 55 at last count.

Kramer, an avid kayaker and angler, recounts the many fishing places where he had vacationed from Key West to Brownsville over the years, but none tops Armand Bayou, he said.

“There is something about being in the natural world that engages a different part of our brain,” Kramer said. “The pace of life is increasingly driven by the newest form of technology and has exacerbated that pace to where it seems like we can never turn it off or be still or be quiet. For me, engaging with nature is one of the easiest ways for me to do that, especially if I’m doing what I love most. To be on the water, fishing, bird watching, hiking. It puts me in a unique frame of reference that connects me to something larger.”