

# COAST MONTHLY

## Off the beaten path

by **SUE MAYFIELD GEIGER** on MAY 26, 2018

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TURTLES SUN THEMSELVES ON A LOG PROTRUDING FROM THE POND IN THE SEABROOK WILDLIFE REFUGE AND PARK. PHOTO BY JENNIFER REYNOLDS

Seabrook’s conservation efforts result in surprising wildlife refuge

“It’s not something you would normally come across in Seabrook, Texas,” said Kevin Padgett when describing the city’s Wildlife Refuge and Park.

Padgett, director of public works for the city, prefers to call the 41 acres — 700 Red Bluff Road — more of a habitat than a park and is proud of the conservation efforts that went into the design of the area in 2011, he said.

Seabrook, with a population of more than 13,000, is home to 19 parks that encompass 200 acres of green space and contain 13-plus miles of hike and bike trails. That’s no small feat considering the easterly portion of the city backs up to the Port of Houston, the original owner of the 41 acres.

“It was former Seabrook Mayor Robin Riley who was instrumental in the final acquisition of the property, ultimately donated to the city by the port,” Padgett said. “From there, the Open Space and Trails Committee was involved in the development process of the land.”



A SEABROOK RESIDENT WALKS ALONG A TRAIL IN THE PARK. *PHOTO BY JENNIFER REYNOLDS*

Although the trail inside the refuge is just more than a mile, its path hugs a drainage easement fed near Galveston Bay, eventually winding into the woods lush with trees and a sizable pond.

“A variety of wildlife occupies the area — birds, boar hogs, rabbits, rats, deer, coyotes, snakes and an occasional alligator,” Padgett said. “We do not feed them and we encourage residents not to feed them, because this is their natural habitat. Their food source is here, so signs remind visitors that this is a wildlife area and the area is for that wildlife.”

After acquiring the property, it was important to the city to make minimal improvements to the undeveloped land, he said.



A POND IN THE WILDLIFE REFUGE PROVIDES A PLACE FOR BIRDWATCHING OR QUIET REFLECTION. *PHOTO BY JENNIFER REYNOLDS*

“We took a brush hog and cleared walking trails, making sure to go around the pond,” Padgett said.

Crews only mow an adjacent prairie yearly to keep the larger trees and shrubs from growing. This fall, crews will plant milkweed to attract butterflies and bees to pollinate plants.

Although the refuge is abundant with trees, various saplings have been donated to create more greenery — 80 percent being shared between the refuge and the adjacent Robinson Park. They include a variety of oaks, cedar elms, pecan, sycamore, black gum, bald cypress and hundreds of loblolly and cherry bark oak seedlings.

Very old majestic oak trees are at the Red Bluff Road entrance. You can begin the hike there or enter through Robinson Park off Todville Road. Cross a bridge and take a stroll along the drainage easement where wildflowers bloom and white ibis are usually wading in the water. Follow the trail into the woods that takes you to the pond; sit on a nearby bench to relax and reflect awhile. A family of deer might wander by. Listen for the red-bellied woodpecker or the sweet sounds of a northern cardinal.



“We’re a part of the Prairies and Pineywoods West Wildlife Trail, so there are five spots in Seabrook on their national database that encourage bird watching,” Padgett said. “One is in the Wildlife Refuge; two are in Pine Gully Park, one at Hester Garden Park and the other at McHale Park.”

The city on its website describes the setting of vast open fields and the deep dappled forests as the perfect scene for some Thoreau-like introspection.

“We still hear from local residents who are surprised that they are able to interact with a deer, come within 100 feet of an osprey or a family of baby hogs running with their mother,” he said. “But we have it here and we encourage everyone to come out and explore, and get off the beaten path.”



KEVIN PADGETT, THE DIRECTOR OF PUBLIC WORKS FOR SEABROOK, LISTENS TO A BIRD'S SONG NEAR THE ROBINSON PARK ENTRANCE TO THE SEABROOK WILDLIFE REFUGE AND PARK. PADGETT, WHO HAS BEEN WITH THE CITY FOR 26 YEARS, IS PROUD OF THE CONSERVATION EFFORTS AND THE HIKE AND BIKE TRAIL SYSTEM THAT RUNS THROUGH THE CITY. *PHOTO BY JENNIFER REYNOLDS*