



JULY/AUGUST
2011

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ABOUT THE COVER

The heavily glaciated north face of British Columbia's Mount Robson is a stunning backdrop to the even more alluring landscape of Mount Robson Provincial Park. The park, along with its eastern neighbor, Alberta's Jasper National Park, make up one of the world's largest blocks of protected land.

PHOTO BY DARWIN WIGGETT/FIRST LIGHT ASSOCIATED PHOTOGRAPHERS/PHOTOLIBRARY

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TEXAS TWOSOME

BY KAREN EAKINS



**Padre Island National Seashore and Corpus Christi
make a perfect Lone Star State pairing.**

NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

That first wave of warm gulf water smacking into the tiny turtle was the equivalent of a shot of espresso. As a cheer went up from the crowd of 150 onlookers, the silver-dollar-size creature began to scramble frantically for the water and its first swim.

More of the 90 or so Kemp's ridley sea-turtle hatchlings followed their leader, gaining ground then getting knocked farther back by waves, only to dig harder and faster in response. The crowd oohed and gasped with each animal's victory and relapse until a final round of applause rang out 45 minutes later as the last gnarly-shelled baby slid into the surf and, tiny head bobbing, paddled for the big, bad world.

It may have been just another sunrise at Padre Island National Seashore for the National Park Service rangers, Turtle Patrol volunteers and us onlookers, but for this batch of hatchlings, it was Independence Day.

Run, Baby, Run

In many folks' minds, the words Padre Island conjure spring breakers, booze and bikinis. But those who stay near Corpus Christi will find Padre Island National Seashore, which boasts an entirely different environment. The world's

longest undeveloped barrier island, consisting of more than 130,000 acres of beaches, tidal flats, grassland and sand dunes, Padre has been a destination for family beach-goers, anglers, campers, windsurfers, birders, beachcombers, nature lovers and nesting Kemp's ridleys—the smallest and most endangered sea turtle in the world—for decades.

A small park entrance fee (valid for seven days) gains visitors access to 70 miles of beachfront, as well as the three-quarter-mile Grasslands Nature Trail, the hypersaline lagoon Laguna Madre, and the Malaquite Visitor Center, which features an information desk, natural and cultural history exhibits, two observation decks, and a sundries and souvenirs store. All vehicles can travel the paved North Beach area and the road south to Malaquite Visitor Center. More than 60 miles of South Beach are accessible beyond that, but a four-wheel-drive vehicle is required after Milepost 5 because the paved park road ends.

While all these features are here year-round, the nesting and, later, hatchling Kemp's ridleys are only here April through August. Because life has been hard on these turtles, a strong conservation and recovery program was mounted, and now volunteers comb Padre—the U.S.' most-important



Corpus Christi Museum of Science and History's replicas teach visitors about life aboard the *nao* (cargo ship) *Santa Maria* and the caravel (fast-moving ship) *Pinta* (top), while nearby at the Texas State Aquarium, the favorite water activity involves a bottlenose dolphin (above). Bleu Frog Mercantile (right), attached to Hester's Cafe & Coffee Bar, is an eclectic mix of gifts, antiques, jewelry and gourmet food.

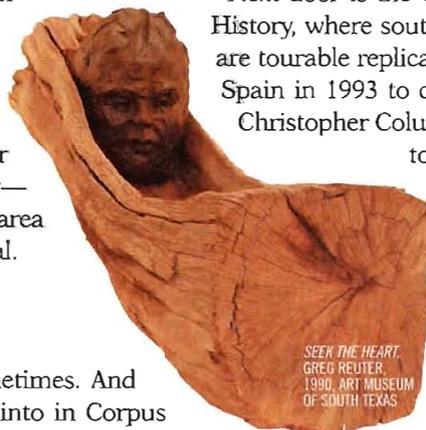
Kemp's ridley nesting beach—to bring the eggs into shelter, where they gestate for a spell. After the clutches begin to hatch and enter an active state called a frenzy, they are gathered into blackened boxes to be hauled to the seashore.

They are set about 50 feet from shore in order to imprint this stretch of beachfront on their little brains. (The females will then return here 10 to 15 years and 100 or so pounds later to nest and lay their own eggs—males spend their lives at sea.) They are sheltered by Turtle Patrol volunteers holding a net overhead and more volunteers in the water waving streamer-draped poles to guard against swooping seagulls that would love to pick off a baby for a tasty snack. Onlookers are not allowed to wear white or use flashlights or flash photography—the babies must see the sun as the brightest area and head for it in order to accomplish the goal.

And accomplish it they did on this day.

Corpus Calling

Visitors have to get out of the water sometimes. And when they do, they'll find plenty to plunge into in Corpus



SEEK THE HEART,
GREG REUTER,
1990, ART MUSEUM
OF SOUTH TEXAS



Christi. A cool, quiet respite can be found inside the Philip Johnson-designed, white-concrete-and-shell-aggregate Art Museum of South Texas; a Ricardo Legorreto-designed wing added additional space topped by 13 rooftop pyramids. Visitors to this fine-arts home overlooking Corpus Christi Bay will find pre-Columbian pottery and Nicaraguan metalwork, art of the American West, and numerous galleries filled with regional, national and international artworks.

Next door is the Corpus Christi Museum of Science and History, where south Texas' story is the highlight. Included are tourable replicas of the *Pinta* and *Santa Maria*, built by Spain in 1993 to commemorate the 500th anniversary of Christopher Columbus' first New World voyage. The non-tourable *Niña* is moored at the Lawrence Street T-head marina downtown.

The line out the door speaks to the Texas State Aquarium's popularity. Situated next to the USS Lexington Museum by the Bay—home of all things military—the aquarium is one of those sneaky places where children learn without knowing it. More than

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250 species of animal life educate and entertain—kids love the stingrays soaring through the water in a touch tank and the perky, intelligent river otters, while adults are mesmerized by the 35-foot viewing window into the 125,000-gallon aquarium. But the hands-down favorites are clearly Shadow, Kai and DJ, Atlantic bottlenose dolphins who thrill audiences multiple times daily.

When it comes to food, Mexican and seafood are plentiful, but eating breakfast at the cozy Hester's Cafe & Coffee Bar was like eating at home—if I were a better cook. This old, reclaimed office building blazed with bright turquoise, warm coral and golden yellow walls is filled with bronze drop lights, soft rock, and lots of natural light and local folks. Food includes homemade granola, yummy scones and gourmet omelettes. The don't miss: Griddle Toast, freshly baked challah bread dunked in egg batter and secret spices, sprinkled with cinnamon and sugar. Bleu Frog Mercantile next door is well worth a spin through after eating.

The smell of fresh waffle cones cooking grabbed me by the nose at the door of Snoopy's Verandah, the ice-cream parlor adjacent to Snoopy's Pier, an old fisherman's-hangout-style eatery under the JFK Causeway between Padre Island and Corpus Christi. Kicking back to watch the boat traffic with a dip of Texas' own luscious Blue Bell ice cream is a perfect capper to a steamy day at the beach.

● *Karen Eakins is features/copy editor of Home & Away.*

Planning Your Trip

For Eakins' slide show, visit *Home AndAwayMagazine.com*. To see a hatching release—scheduled every few days from approximately late May through early August—call the Hatching Hotline at (361) 949-7163 and visit www.nps.gov/pais. Be flexible to allow for nature's timing. To learn more about the area, go to www.visitcorpuschristi.tx.org, then contact your local AAA Travel agent or AAA.com/travel to make vacation arrangements.

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