

By land or by water, sojourners seek out

# Bolivar Peninsula

By Tracy Peeters



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If Simón Bolívar had visited the Texas peninsula that bears his name, he no doubt would have marveled at the sparkling beaches, plentiful fishing, and countless species of birds that make their homes on its shores.

These same sights delight visitors nearly 200 years after Bolívar's time. Like a friendly hostess, Bolivar Peninsula extends an open invitation to city-weary sun-seekers, anglers scouting a lucky spot to cast a line, and birders hoping to record a rare migrant passing through.

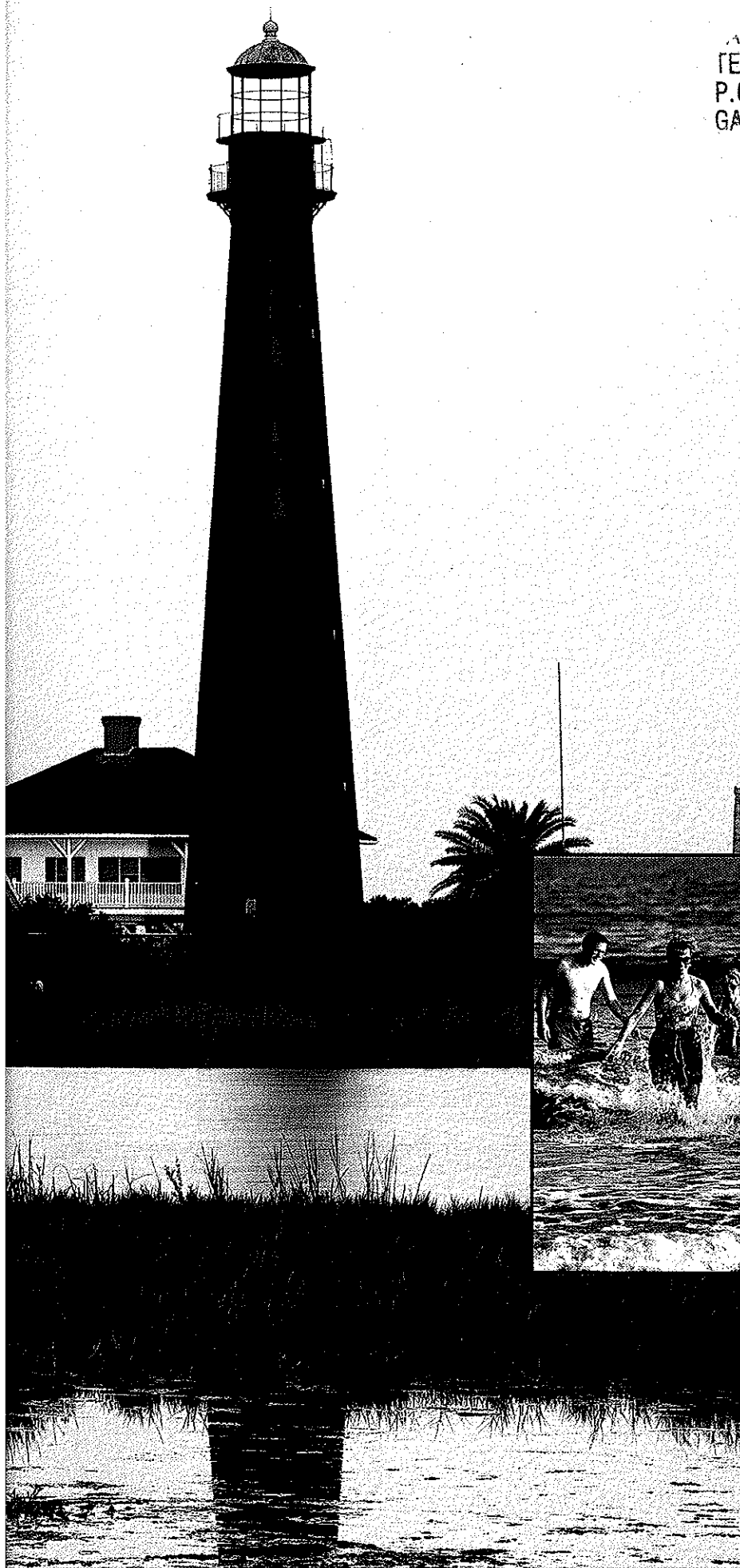
Colorful clusters of vacation homes and shrimp boats affirm Bolívar's reputation as a charm-

© Bob Parvin



The 117-foot Bolivar Lighthouse, built in 1872 to guide ships into the Port of Galveston, remains an impressive landmark on the upper Texas coast. Just 15 minutes from Galveston by ferry, Bolivar Peninsula's three bird sanctuaries, first-rate fishing, and 32 miles of beaches prove perfect for a family getaway. Above, the Spauldings of Duncan, Oklahoma, take advantage of the calm waters of East Bay to make some waves of their own.

© Laurence Parent



The teeming waters surrounding Bolivar Peninsula lure anglers to cast lines for trout, redfish, and golden croaker. Others gig for flounder from the shallow marshland facing Galveston Bay.

ing seaside getaway and thriving fishing community. Plenty of the peninsula's activities center around its 32 miles of beaches, three bird sanctuaries, and more fishing than you can shake a pole at. But Bolivar's historic sites and legends reveal a lively past replete with Indians and explorers, heroes and heroines, rebels and outlaws . . . and even tales of pirate gold.

**B**olivar Peninsula, which supports the five communities of High Island, Gilchrist, Caplen, Crystal Beach, and Port Bolivar, extends southwest from Texas' upper coast and separates the eastern part of Galveston Bay, called East Bay, from the Gulf of Mexico. Colonels Warren D.C. Hall and Henry Perry explored the 25-mile-long peninsula in 1815 and later established a base there to fight for Mexico's independence from Spain. They named it for the hero who successfully led much of South America's struggle against Spanish rule, though Simón Bolívar (1783-1836) never set foot on the skinny strip of land.

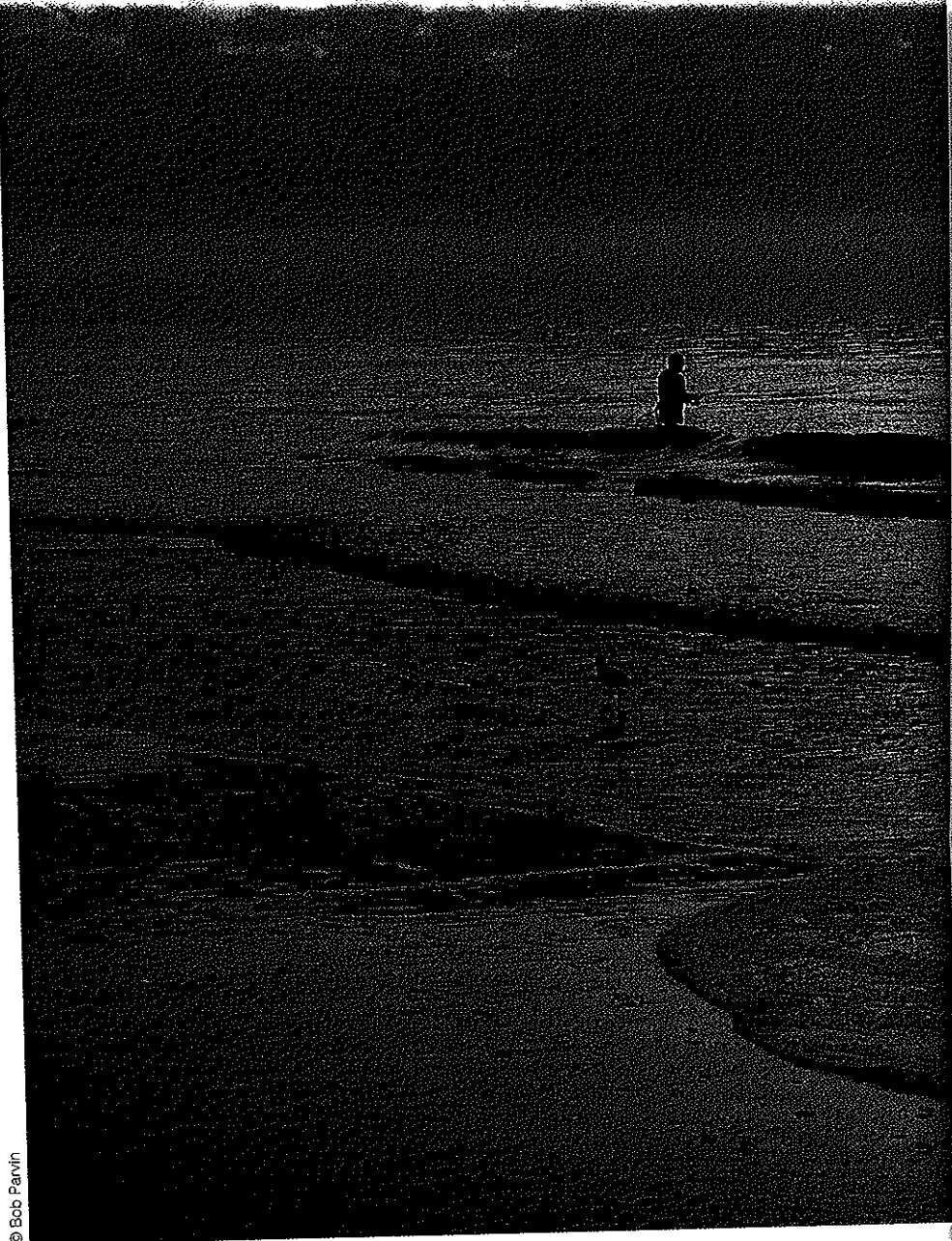
Of course, getting there proves considerably easier for today's visitors than for the peninsula's 19th-Century explorers. Five free ferries operated by the Texas Department of Transportation travel the narrow corridor known as Bolivar Roads between Galveston and the peninsula.

During the 15-minute ride, you can leave your car to feed the laughing gulls wheeling around the ferry's stern or climb up to the observation deck. From there, you may spot the ruins of the *Selma*, an experimental, concrete World War I-era vessel that was abandoned in the bay in the early

**A**s the tide ebbs and flows in the Gulf of Mexico, a variety of shells wash up on the peninsula's beaches, including sand dollars, periwinkle, whelk, and moon shells.

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© Stephan Myers





1920s (see *Speaking of Texas*, January 1993). On the horizon, enormous cargo ships bring grain and raw materials into the Galveston, Houston, and Texas City ship channels. Alert observers sometimes spot porpoises cavorting in the ferry's wake.

Once you debark the ferry, take Texas 87, which runs lengthwise down the middle of the peninsula, to get to its five communities. At the southern tip, Port Bolivar offers a glimpse of the peninsula's largest shrimp fleet. Crystal Beach, Bolivar's largest community, sports a concentration of restaurants, ample beach access, and the Crystal Palace Resort, the area's largest motel. Tiny Caplen boasts fine old beachfront homes, including a stately residence known as "The Breakers," built in the 1880s with lumber the builder shipped from Florida and then floated to shore for lack of a better way to transport it. One of the most popular fishing sites on the coast lies near Gilchrist. And High Island, the northernmost community and the highest point on Bolivar Peninsula, once supposedly served as a playground for pirates. Today, High Island welcomes songbirds — and bird-watchers — to two of the peninsula's three Audubon Society sanctuaries. (The other lies near Port Bolivar.)

For a preview of the fishing available on Bolivar Peninsula, turn left on French Town Road immediately after you leave the ferry. "Gigging for flounder is especially popular here," says longtime resident Mary Metzke. The marshy expanse facing Galveston Bay also provides spots for crabbing and plenty of shorebird-watching. In the shallow water along the road, you'll



John Battalio of Bryan scans the treetops at Boy Scout Woods bird sanctuary at High Island, one of three sanctuaries operated on the peninsula by the Houston Audubon Society. During spring migration, from mid-March through mid-May, birders may spot painted buntings, orioles, and many other songbirds.



spy herons, egrets, and even cotton-candy-pink roseate spoonbills.

The peninsula's most recognizable landmark, the Bolivar Lighthouse, rises out of the marshland just before you reach Port Bolivar (see *Texas Highways*, February 1989). Built in 1872, the 117-foot lighthouse guided ships into the Port of Galveston until 1933, when it was replaced by the Galveston Jetty light. Even today, according to T. Lindsay Baker's *Lighthouses of Texas*, the Bolivar Lighthouse remains an important daymark on marine charts for navigators. When the hurricanes of 1900 and 1915 battered the Texas coast, lightkeeper Harry C. Claiborne sheltered and fed scores of storm refugees within the round tower's iron walls.

**H**istorical roots descend layers deep on Bolivar Peninsula.

During the Civil War, Confederate soldiers dismantled a lighthouse tower dating to 1852, probably to use the iron in the war effort. And old Fort Travis, near Port Bolivar and the ferry landing, is the last in a series of military fortifications in the same area.

Four concrete batteries built from 1898 to 1941 form the focal point of 60-acre Fort Travis Seashore Park, a site that beckons campers, fishermen, and picnickers, as well as history buffs. In spring and summer, pink and white oleanders dance above grassy expanses, providing a peaceful setting for the imposing fortifications, now minus their artillery. Campsites, cabanas, picnic tables, and barbecue grills scatter over the site where troops once drilled.

The site of Fort Travis, which was named for Texas Revolution hero William B. Travis, has occupied a strategic location for two centuries of Texas military history. Mexican, Confederate, and U.S. soldiers in two world wars have fortified the site. No longer needing the fort after World

War II, the government sold the property in 1949. In 1976, it became Fort Travis Seashore Park.

For an impressive view of ships plying the Gulf of Mexico, climb the concrete steps to the top of Fort Travis' Battery Kimble, built in 1917. Gazing over the water, you can almost imagine keeping watch for enemy ships during the two world wars. The battery's guns had a range of 17 miles. Perhaps the only surviving battery of its kind, it was one of more than a dozen built in the United States and on Corregidor Island in the Philippines.

During the Civil War, a Confederate installation, Fort Green, sat on the site. A half-century earlier, in 1815 and 1816, Colonel Henry Perry and then Francisco Xavier Mina, each planning to rid Mexico of Spanish rule, had established outposts at the location. With the same goal in mind for Texas, Dr. James Long of Natchez, Mississippi, led a group to the peninsula in 1819 to oppose the boundary established by the Louisiana purchase.

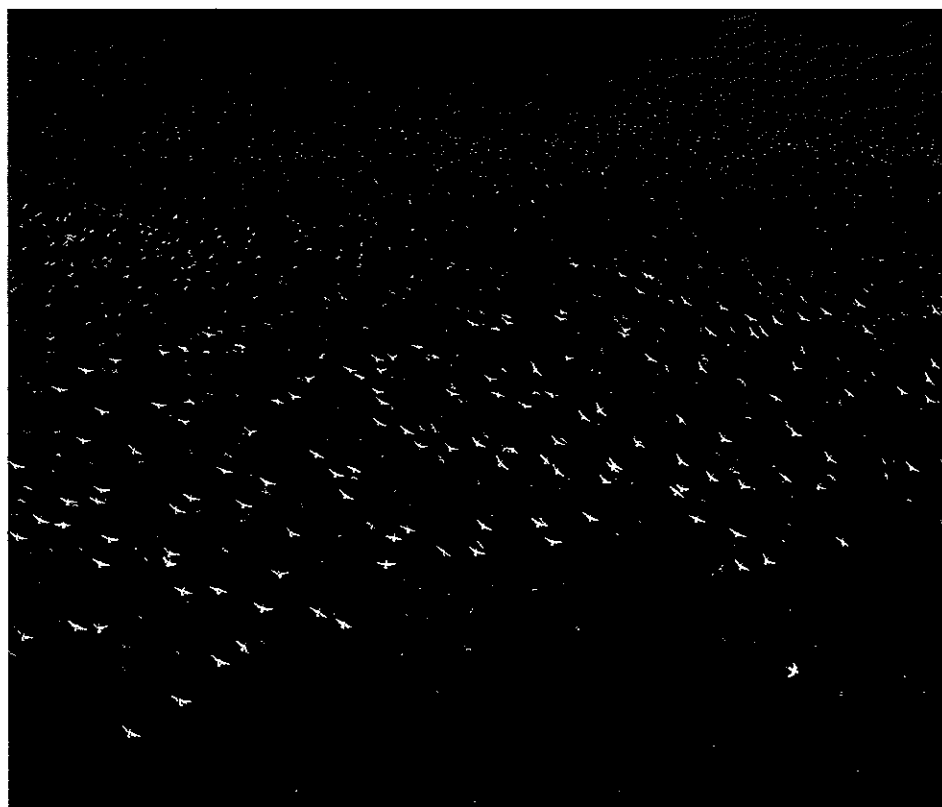
Before they could strike at the Spaniards, Long and his force of a few

hundred tangled with Karankawa Indians — members of the same nomadic tribe that had rescued Alvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca when his ship washed ashore in the area in 1528.

Although Indians on Galveston Island threatened his outpost, Long marched off to join the ill-fated rebellion at La Bahía Presidio (now Goliad) in the fall of 1821. He left behind his pregnant wife, Jane, a former debutante; their young daughter, Ann; a black servant woman, Kiamatia; and a small number of troops to protect them.

**F**aced with bitterly cold winter weather and a shrinking food supply, the soldiers drifted away. But Jane, stoically enduring the hardships and the threat of attack, refused to leave the settlement until she heard from her husband. To make potential enemies on Galveston Island believe that the fort was still defended, she and Kiamatia fired a cannon every morning. Sometime during this period, Jane gave birth to another daughter, Mary James Long.

The group remained on the penin-



**S**horebirds abound on Bolivar Peninsula, especially near Port Bolivar, where Bolivar Flats Shorebird Sanctuary shelters more than 100,000 roosting birds in the summer.



**F**ive free ferries operated by the Texas Department of Transportation carry passengers and cars between Galveston Island and Bolivar Peninsula, 24 hours a day. Laughing gulls and porpoises often accompany the ferries on their 15-minute trips to the peninsula's southern tip.

© Laurence Parent

**W**aterproof waders allow anglers to cast their lines to spots inaccessible from shore. Other prime fishing spots include Rollover Pass, the five-mile-long North Jetty, and piers all along the peninsula.

sula until the following July, when Jane learned that her husband had been killed. Because Mary is believed to be the first Anglo child born in the state, Jane entered the annals of history as "The Mother of Texas."

Another legendary figure in Peninsula history had become acquainted with the Longs before their move to Bolivar. Jean Lafitte, a flamboyant privateer, met James Long in Galveston, from where Lafitte operated his business in the early 1800s. Before Long's move to Bolivar Peninsula, he had tried to enlist Lafitte's help in his rebellion.

**L**afitte's reputation easily spanned the waters separating Galveston and Bolivar Peninsula. Stories tell how the pirate and his crew threw parties in the grove of oak trees that covered what is now the community of High Island, a salt dome so named because, at 47 feet, it is the highest point between

Port Bolivar and Sabine Pass. Supposedly, Lafitte buried treasure there, though no one has yet reported find-

ing it. Fellow Frenchman Charles A. Cronea, a veteran of the Battle of San Jacinto who served as the pirate's cabin boy for a time, settled on the peninsula. His grave, capped by shells, lies in the High Island Cemetery.

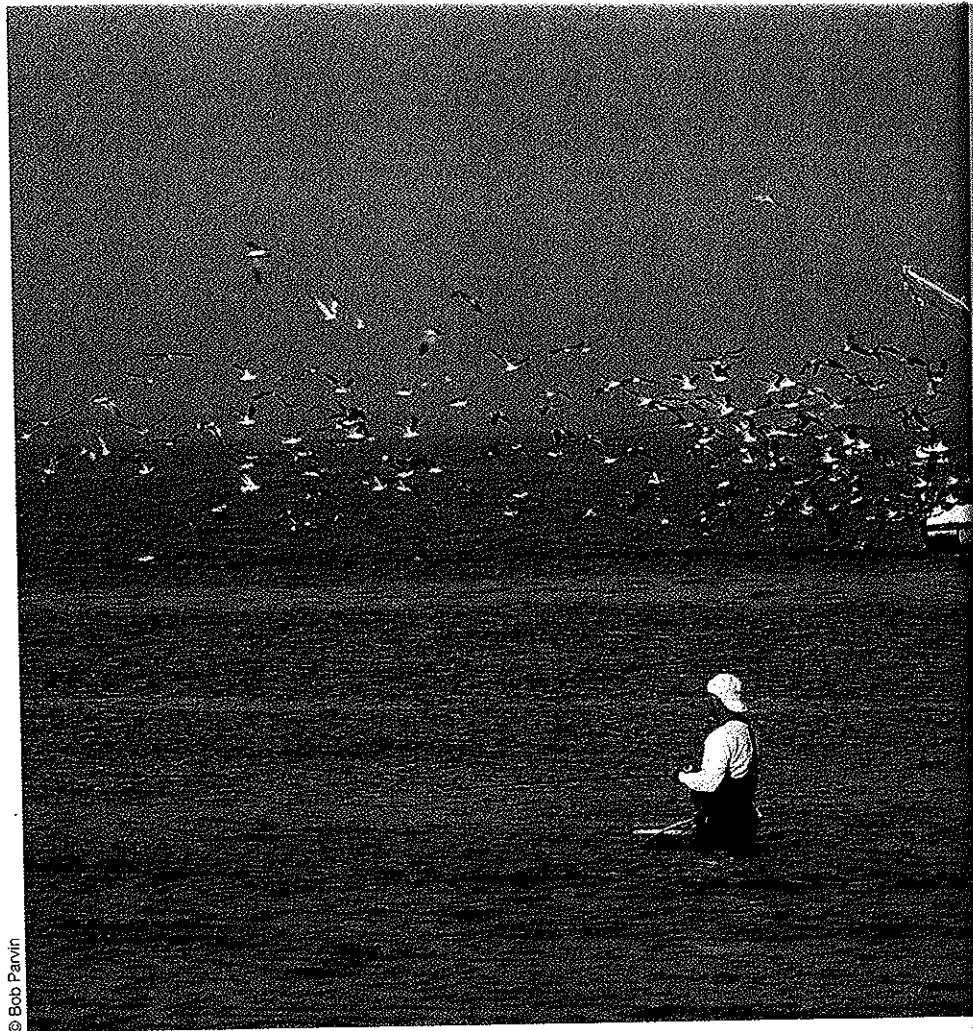
Today, those who seek a different sort of riches have better luck. Bolivar's beaches, particularly on the Gulf side, yield sand dollars, periwinkle, whelk, moon shells, and sometimes large conchs. Diligent beachcombing may even turn up Indian artifacts, fossilized teeth of prehistoric animals, and other curiosities.

Shell hunters find ready company as they explore the peninsula's sandy expanses. Visitors can drive through colorful seaside neighborhoods right onto the beaches along the peninsula's Gulf side to set up barbecue

**T**his vibrant blue grosbeak numbers among the tens of thousands of songbirds that make springtime visits to High Island's Smith Oaks and Boy Scout Woods sanctuaries.

© Bob Parvin

© John and Gloria Tvelen





into East Bay, where waiting boats transported the loot to the mainland.

The Texas Game and Fish Commission cut the channel in 1955 to increase the flow of salt water into East Bay, allowing fish and other marine life to thrive there. The pass benefited anglers, and today, flounder, trout, redfish, and golden croaker run thick in the fall.

Surefooted fishermen also cast their lines from the pink granite and limestone boulders that make up the North Jetty, which juts almost five miles from the southwest tip of the peninsula into the Gulf of Mexico. A concrete walkway extends for two miles along the narrow stone barrier, one of two built by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in the late 1800s to help protect the entrance to the ship channel from an overload of silt. Fort Travis Seashore Park boasts a fishing pier as well. Other anglers fish and crab from The Pier in Bolivar (near the ferry landing), or from Meacom's and the Dirty Pelican piers between High Island and Gilchrist.

If you prefer your catch already cleaned and cooked, a number of restaurants serve sea fare. At Stingaree Restaurant, across Texas 87 from

Crystal Beach, you can linger over a plate piled high with batter-fried, boiled, Cajun-style, or barbecued crabs while gazing across the Intracoastal Waterway. At Shirley's Bait Camp in Port Bolivar, grassy grounds and picnic tables lure those hungry for seafood and plate lunches. Gilchrist's Corner Cafe offers a full menu plus fresh-baked bread and pastries. Also in the Crystal Beach area, Zebs Seafood and CrabHouse, DeCoux's Restaurant, Mama Teresa's Flying Pizza and Italian Restaurant, Marsha's Takeout Junction (where barbecue and burgers are favorites), and Qik Chick (with fast-food fried chicken, burgers, and sandwiches) offer other choices.

**T**hough Bolivar's shoreline lures loads of fishing fans, the peninsula also holds a special place in the hearts of birders. The Houston Audubon Society operates three sanctuaries on the peninsula, one that har-

**P**aying their respects to their favorite local crustacean, thousands of revelers descend upon Crystal Beach in May to celebrate the Texas Crab Festival with cookoffs, crafts, dancing, crab legs contests, and crab races.

© Gail Murphy



grills or soak up the sun. Water-lovers can plunge into their element in the surf or in the freshwater pool at the bottom of a water slide in Crystal Beach, about 10 miles from the ferry landing.

**B**oat ramps and marinas abound on both the Bay and the Gulf sides of the peninsula. Surfers can catch a wave in the Gulf, while skiers prefer East Bay. If a horseback ride on the beach sounds appealing, two stables, one at Crystal Beach and one in Gilchrist, can supply mounts.

Folks who prefer to fish find great casting spots all over Bolivar, including Rollover Pass, a 1,600-foot-long channel that slices through the peninsula at its narrowest point between Caplen and Gilchrist. Smugglers from the time of Jean Lafitte supposedly eluded customs officials on Galveston Bay by unloading barrels of Jamaican rum and other goods onto the Gulf side of the peninsula, then "rolling them over" the narrow strip of land



bors shorebirds and two that serve as refuges for migrating songbirds.

Bolivar Flats Shorebird Sanctuary lies on 550 acres near Port Bolivar. During the summer, the tidal mud flats and salt marshes shelter more than 100,000 roosting birds, including gulls, terns, Wilson's plovers, and willets. About 36 species use the flats as a migratory stopping point, and thousands of birds winter there.

"Bolivar Flats is one of the most

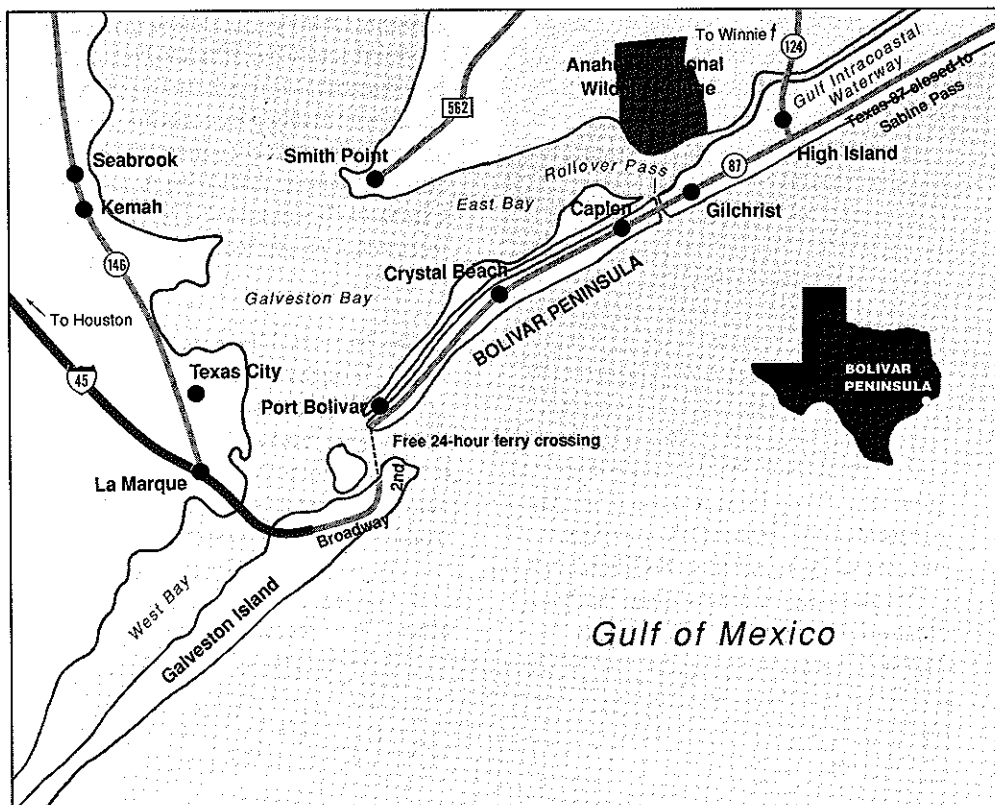
spectacular birding spots in the nation," states Winnie Burkett, vice president in charge of sanctuaries for the Houston Audubon Society.

At High Island, the oak motte and dense thickets of the Smith Oaks and the Louis B. Smith (known as Boy Scout Woods) sanctuaries may not hide pirates' treasure, but during spring migrations, they conceal winged jewels of every description. Warblers, painted buntings, orioles,

grosbeaks, flycatchers, and hummingbirds number among the tens of thousands of songbirds that find food, shelter, and rest in the two refuges.

What makes High Island such a prime location for avian activity? For birds migrating from Mexico's Yucatán Peninsula in the spring, the thick clusters of trees offer the first distinct land feature in more than 600 miles. When the weather is good, only weaker birds may seek shelter in the sanctuaries; most fly inland to larger expanses of woods. But after battling bad weather on the Gulf, whole flocks may descend on High Island at once, a phenomenon called "fallout."

*Freelance writer Tracy Peeters remembers riding the ferry from Galveston as a child, and she enjoyed revisiting Bolivar Peninsula to research this story.*



## When...Where...How

Bolivar Peninsula, featuring the towns of Caplen, Crystal Beach, Gilchrist, High Island, and Port Bolivar, lies along the upper Texas coast, 56 miles from Houston and less than three miles north of Galveston Island. **The area code for the peninsula is 409. Please call ahead regarding wheelchair accessibility.**

The Texas Department of Transportation operates free 24-hour ferry service between Galveston and the peninsula's southern end. To reach the ferry from Galveston, take Interstate 45 until it dead-ends into Broadway, and follow the signs, turning left onto Seawall Blvd., then left onto Second St. You can avoid a long wait in the summer months by getting there before 10 a.m.

You can also reach the peninsula from its eastern end by driving south on Texas 124 from Winnie (at Interstate 10 between Houston and Beaumont) to High Island and turning west on Texas 87. From High Island to Sabine Pass, Texas 87 is closed due to erosion caused by storms.

The following is but a sample of what Bolivar Peninsula has to offer. For more information, write to the Bolivar Peninsula Chamber of Commerce, Box 1170, Crystal Beach 77650; 684-5940. The chamber office, on Texas 87 in Crystal Beach, opens weekdays from 10 to 2.

The annual Texas Crab Festival takes place at Gregory Park in Crystal Beach May 6-8, 1994. For information, contact the cham-

ber of commerce.

Bolivar Flats Shorebird Sanctuary, a few miles from the ferry landing, can be reached by traveling south on Rettilon Road (that's "no litter," spelled backwards), toward the beach. Admission: Free. Both Smith Oaks and Boy Scout Woods sanctuaries lie near Texas 124 at High Island; \$2 donation is requested. Write to the Houston Audubon Society, 440 Wilchester Blvd., Houston 77079-7199; 713/932-1639.

The spring migration takes place from mid-March through mid-May. You can spot smaller groups of birds during the fall migration, from July through November.

### Accommodations

Fort Travis Seashore Park is on the south side of Texas 87, about a mile from the ferry landing. The park rents six cabanas (which include a small picnic table, a sink, and electricity) for \$15 per night. Campsites cost \$10 per night. Larger tables, grills, showers, and restrooms are outside. The park also offers a playground, a fishing pier, and beach access. Write to the Galveston County Beach Park Board, 613 19th, Galveston 77550; 409/766-2411.

The peninsula offers several motels, including the Crystal Palace Resort Motel (Box 1251, Crystal Beach 77650; 684-6554 or 800/284-6554), Joy Sands Motel (Box 1226, Crystal Beach 77650; 684-6152), Ocean View Motel (918 Church St., Gilchrist 77617; 286-5864), Fisherman's Cove Motel (Box 575, Port Bolivar 77650; 684-8567), and the Gulfway Motel (Box 307, High Island 77623; 286-5217).

Birder's Haven Resort (2081 Winnie, High

In a fallout, many of the songbird species of the eastern North American forests are represented at High Island. "More and more, we're realizing that these migratory stopovers are as important as breeding areas," says Winnie Burkett, "because, without rest, the birds couldn't continue their journeys north."

Even non-birders enjoy the sanctuaries. Benches scattered throughout provide peaceful places for contemplation, and a butterfly garden at Boy Scout Woods showcases monarchs, Gulf Coast fritillaries, swallowtails, and skippers.

As the spring bird migration draws to a close, flocks of humans descend on Crystal Beach each May for the annual Texas Crab Festival (May 6-8, 1994). The peninsula celebrates its tasty natural resource in a three-day

island 77623; 286-5362) offers group lodging (two bunk beds in each room), with a fully equipped shared kitchen, TV/VCR room, and washer and dryer, near the Smith Oaks Bird Sanctuary at High Island.

Hundreds of beach houses are available for rental from local real estate agencies. The chamber of commerce can provide a list of agencies and homes.

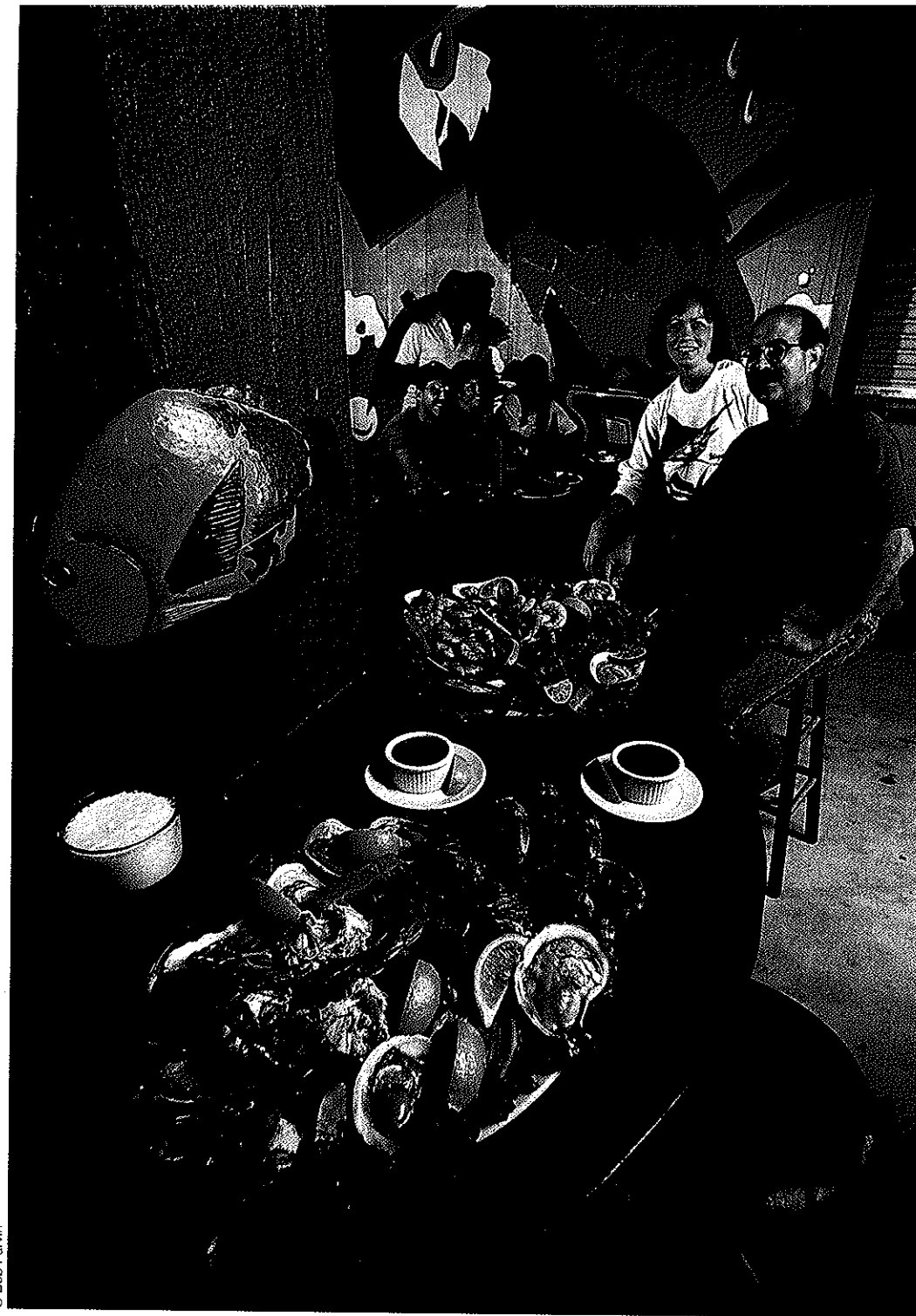
RVers can rent hookups at Las Palmas RV Park (Box 347, Gilchrist 77617; 286-5612), Hazel's RV Park (Box 289, Gilchrist 77617; 286-5228), or the Crystal Beach Drive Through and RV Park (Box 1480, Crystal Beach 77650; 684-4929).

#### Restaurants

Restaurants on the peninsula include Stingaree Restaurant (684-2731), Shirley's Bait Camp (684-9251), Mama Teresa's Flying Pizza and Italian Restaurant (684-3507), Farsha's Takeout Junction (684-4206), Qik Chick (684-4095), Corner Cafe (286-5683), Jabs Seafood and CrabHouse (no phone), and DeCoux's Restaurant (684-0177).

#### Books

To read more about Bolivar Peninsula or the Bolivar Ferry, look in your library or bookstore for *They Made Their Own Law*, by Melanie Wiggins or *Bolivar! Gulf Coast Peninsula* and *A Fascinating Voyage on the Bolivar Ferry*, both written by former Houston newsman A. Pat Daniels. You can also buy all three books at Gulf Coast Market in Crystal Beach (684-2400). T. Lindsay Baker's *Lighthouses of Texas* is available from Texas & M University Press (800/826-8911).



© Bob Parvin

fete that includes a crab cookoff, a crab legs contest, crab races, music, crafts booths, and dances.

Whether you're craving crabs or yearning to reel in croaker, or if you just want to hear the cries of gulls on the wind, Bolivar Peninsula fits the bill. Though you may not find pirate gold here, you'll leave with memories to treasure. ☐

**B**artender Susan Savage and owner George Vratis show off tempting platters of Stingaree Restaurant's oysters, crabs, shrimp, and fixin's. In typical peninsula style, the Stingaree serves its tasty food in a casual atmosphere.

# Texas

May 1994

\$2.00

## HIGHWAYS

