



In Search of El dorado

A daily journal of my travels and adventures in my.....Search for Eldorado

Hello to Family & Friends **Thursday, January 28th 2021**



It was a much better night, thank you.

I decided to take a respite from museums and buildings and cities and get back to nature for a day. See if I could get my trip mojo back.



My first stop is the “Big Tree” in Rockport, the one I was on my way to yesterday with the wrong directions and then sunset. I’m glad I waited, it’s much more picturesque in this light. I don’t think it’s as big as the Major Oak, in Sherwood Forest in England. Yes, truly, I have been in the real Sherwood Forest, and Nottingham. This was back in the late seventies. I think I may have turned 19 while I was in England. This one is easier to get a picture of.

Both Roadside America and Atlas Obscura state that there are all sorts of signs around the tree claiming it’s the ‘Texas Champion Live Oak’ and ‘over 1,000 years old’ and poetry, as though the tree is speaking. The only sign I saw is the one above. There is a lot more info on Atlas Obscura if you’re interested. Don’t blame me if the link doesn’t work.

<https://www.atlasobscura.com/places/the-big-tree-rockport-texas>



There are currently no fees at this time. Enjoy *your* refuge!

This also means 'no one around to answer your questions'

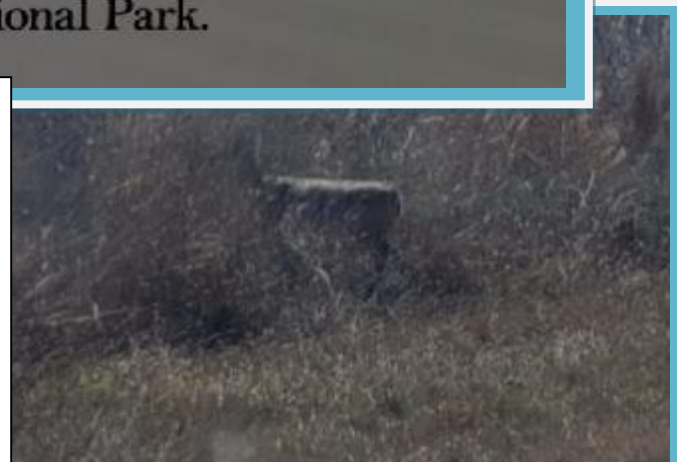
Welcome to **Aransas** National Wildlife Refuge

Aransas National Wildlife Refuge is home to a wide variety of wildlife, including more than 400 species of birds. The whooping cranes here are part of the only naturally migrating flock in North America. They arrive in late October and depart mid-April for their perilous journey 2,500 miles north to nesting grounds at Canada's Wood Buffalo National Park.

Questions such as – If there is a 'flock' that nests here during the winter, how come we only see two or three birds?

Right - A deer disappearing into the brush. I did see three of them.

Ironic story – As I drove back into Rockport in the late afternoon, Tom Tom took me into a city park where I surprised seven deer.





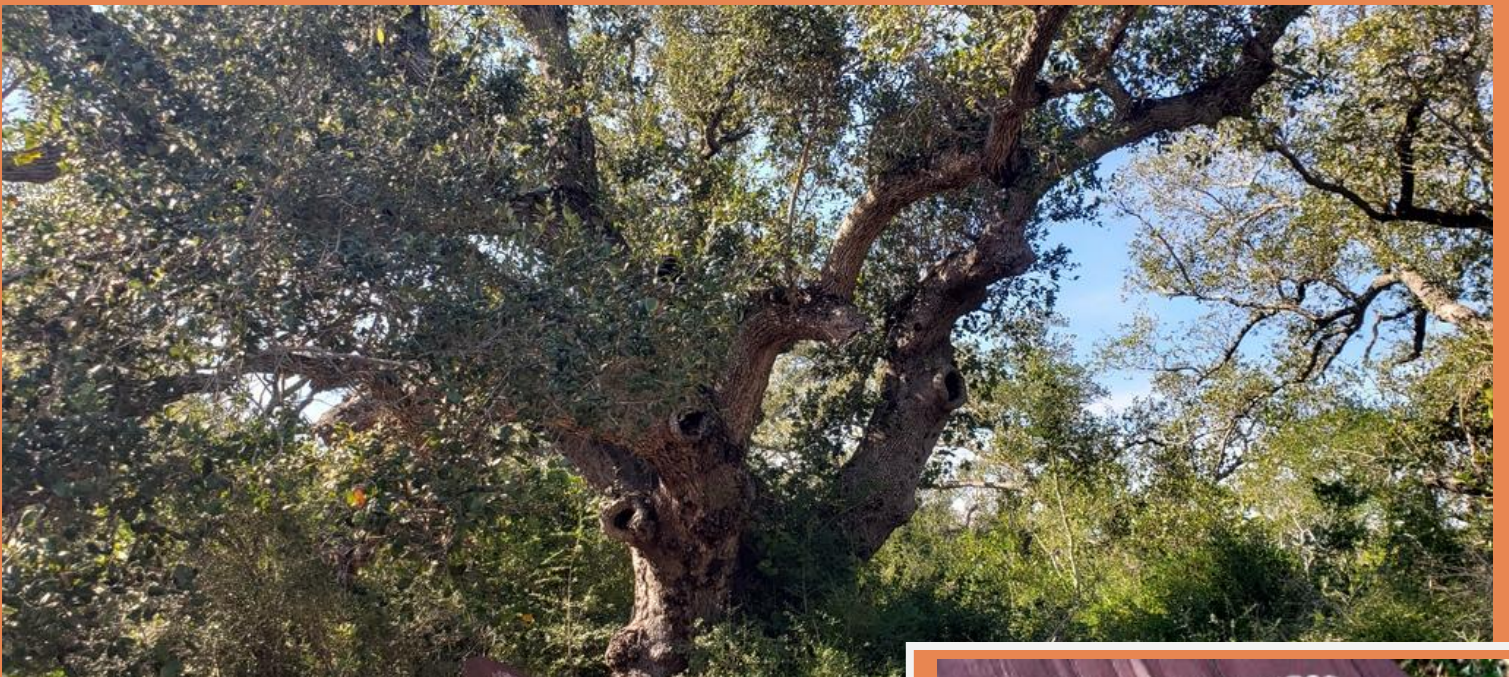
Dagger Point above was just a trail through the scrub, nothing special. Jones Lake is just an elevated observation platform on the edge of a small lake.



Well, here are three birds. The two in the water I'm not sure of. The one on the far shore is, I think, a white heron. He has the same neck as the one at Sea Center Texas. The one in the air is a turkey vulture. There is a fourth, a duck behind the reeds. A couple on the platform told me that last year when they were here, the bank was lined with alligators.



I'm just full of stories today. Parked where I left the RV was another RV that took off before I did on my bike. They were parked at the Dagger Point trailhead and I passed them on the trail. I hit the road first and they passed me. I passed them at Jones Lake but they caught me at the Whooping Cranes. I passed them on the loop road, then they passed me. When I arrived back at the RV they were there, but left before I did.



This is not the same “big tree” as page one, I’m about 40 miles north. Maybe Texas just needs to be more creative with naming things. Like Sherwood and the “Major Oak.” I do like the sign though. I always like when they do that with tree rings – Magna Carta Signed; America Discovered; The Civil War; FDR elected President. Stuff like that. For me it creates a better awareness of time, rather than just labeled as 500 years old.



Yup, I’m a little out of order here. I stopped at the Whooping Crane platform first, then did the Big Tree Trail from the backside, which starts from here and follows that boardwalk into the woods.



Follow the ramp for an exceptional viewing opportunity of the surrounding landscape. On the way, stop at the landings and explore the different levels, or canopy layers, of the oak motte (or grove). Wildlife tend to live at varying levels of the canopy. Head up to discover more!



I stopped here for lunch before making the arduous climb to the top. Below left are more turkey vultures. There were about five or six of them. Below – the plastic spikes and wires they use to keep the birds from landing on the hand rails.



I don't think it's working.

You are overlooking Mustang Lake and the Blackjack Peninsula is behind you. On a clear day, you can see the Gulf Intracoastal Waterway and Matagorda Island.



WHOOPING CRANE

Whooping cranes are one of the rarest birds in North America. At nearly five feet, adult "whoopers" are the tallest birds in North America. They have a wing span of nearly seven and a half feet yet only weigh 15 pounds. You may see whooping cranes in the saltwater marshes of Aransas from mid-October through mid-April. Usually, a pair can be seen from the observation tower.

While at the Refuge, whooping cranes spend the winter primarily in the estuaries and salt marshes where they feed on blue crabs, fiddler crabs, clams, snails, and invertebrates. They also eat insects, acorns, and assorted plants including Carolina wolfberry.



Whooping cranes are one of the rarest birds in North America. At nearly five feet, adult "whoopers" are the tallest birds in North America. They have a wing span of nearly seven and a half feet yet only weigh 15 pounds. You may see whooping cranes in the saltwater marshes of Aransas from mid-October through mid-April. Usually, a pair can be seen from the observation tower.

While at the Refuge, whooping cranes spend the winter primarily in the estuaries and salt marshes where they feed on blue crabs, fiddler crabs, clams, snails, and invertebrates. They also eat insects, acorns, and assorted plants including Carolina wolfberry.

ies, each
usly defend
is in size which
with other cranes.

immer, female
ly, only one chick
nd their entire first
ng taught what to
and the migration
Bend.

Whooping crane
(*Grus americana*)

During the winter at Aransas, each adult crane pair will vigorously defend a territory of about 250 acres in size which results in frequent disputes with other cranes.

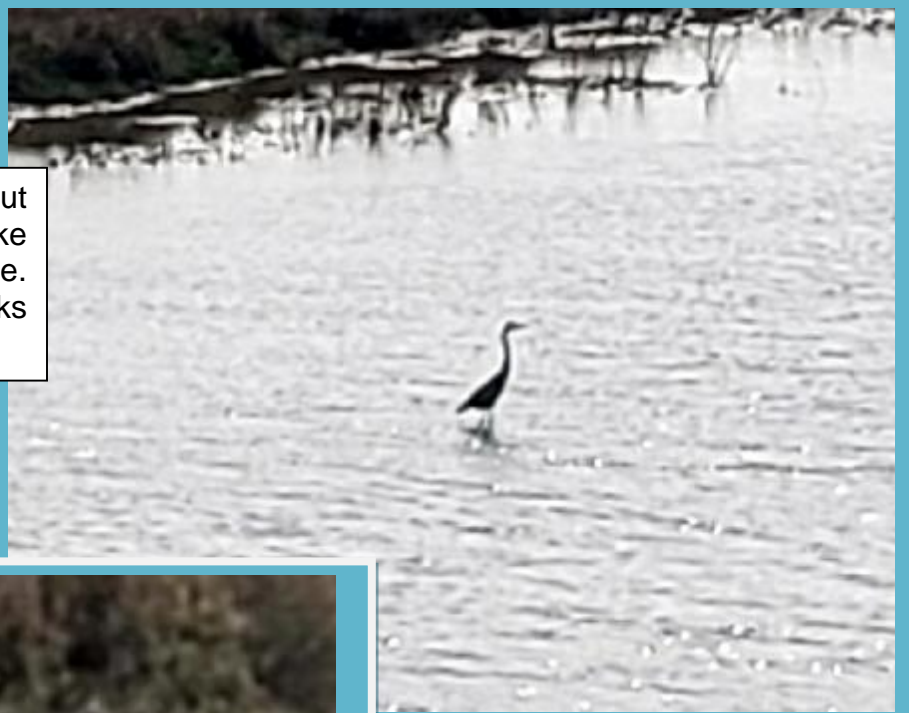
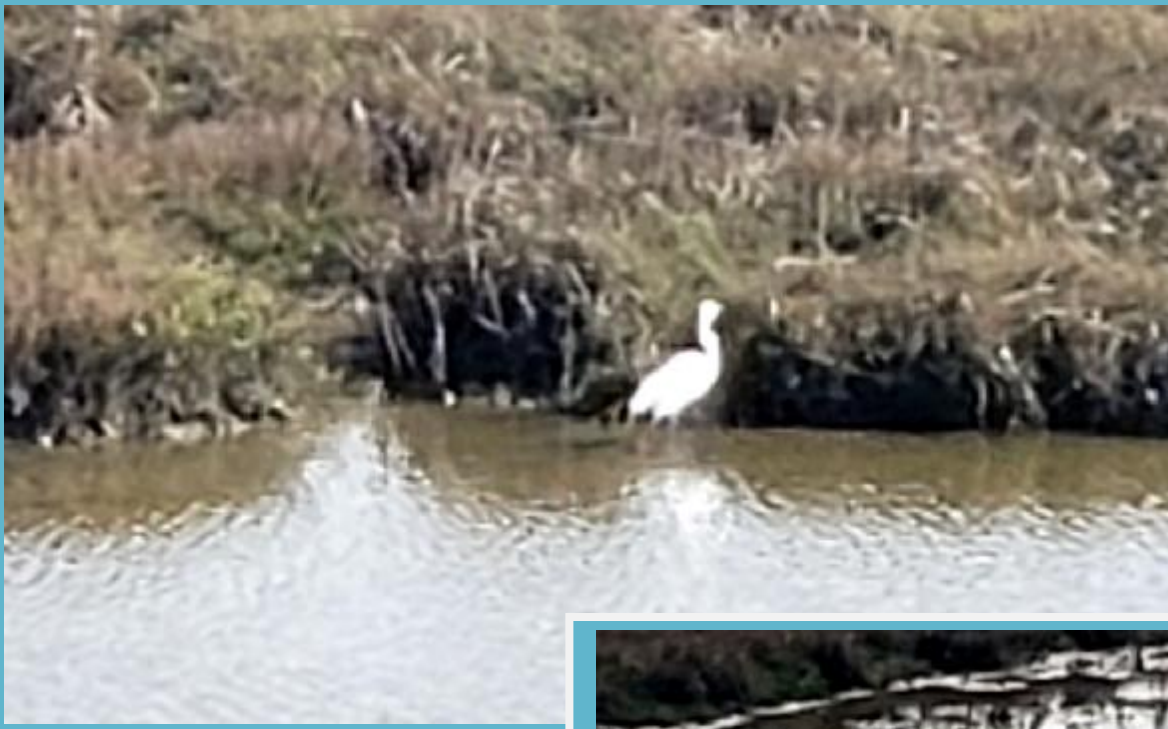
While in Canada for the summer, female cranes lay two eggs. Usually, only one chick survives. Juveniles will spend their entire first year with their parents being taught what to eat, how to avoid predators, and the migration route to the Texas Coastal Bend.

Endangered whooping cranes spend their winters at Aransas National Wildlife Refuge and their summers in Wood Buffalo National Park in the Northwest Territories of Canada. While in Canada, crane pairs will breed and lay eggs in nests of cattails or bulrush.

In late September, whooping cranes begin migrating 2,500 miles south to the Texas Coastal Bend.

For many of you the green arrow is most important. That's the 'Reintroduction Population Migration Route' from Florida to Necedah NWR, not too far from Lake Arrowhead.





I'm not too sure about the one above, but the one to the right looks pretty much like the info board drawing above. Maybe. Scrolling back and forth, the tail looks different on this one.

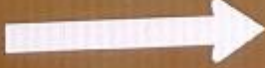


This one looks like a Blue Heron to me, not a Whooping Crane. As I mentioned yesterday, I am not a bird guy.

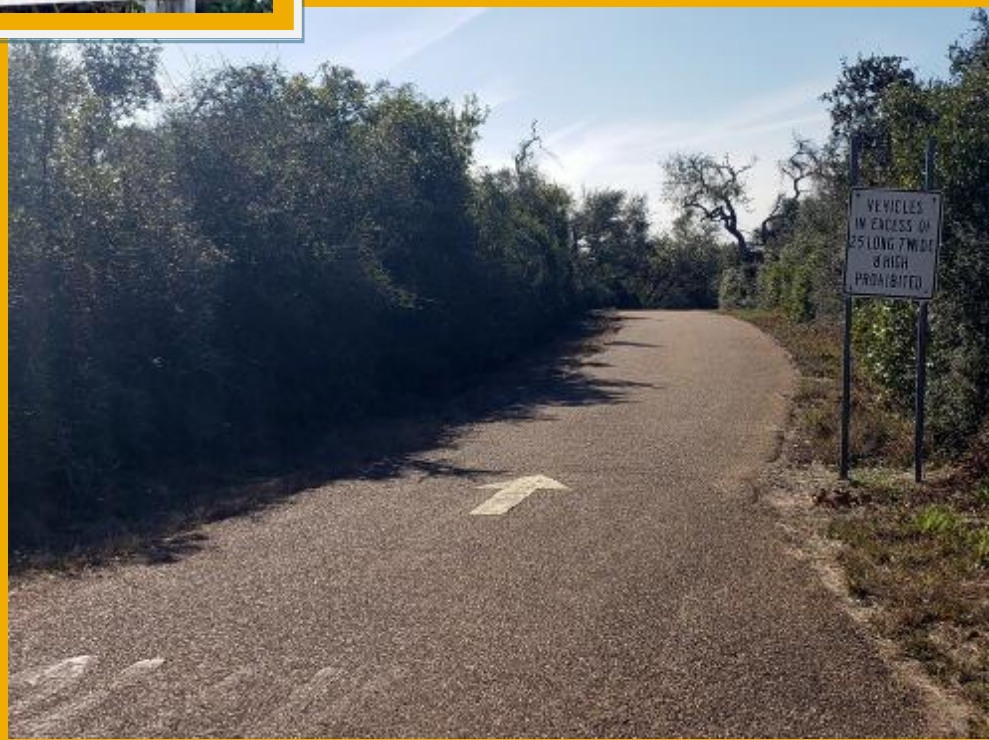
This one is a long ways away, and he still looks huge. Could be two of them in this picture.



Auto Tour Loop



One more funny story, at least for you guys, I didn't think it was so funny. I knew it was a nine mile loop road. Up to this point, markings on the road had me at 4.5 miles. As I hit the one-way loop, it came to me, I still have nine miles to go, then even more back to the RV. Oh well, in for a penny, in for a pound.



Have
YOU
Seen a
Javelina ?

Not yet. I had hoped to see one in Big Bend National Park with Morgan a couple years ago, but no luck there. With about seven miles to go, I am still hopeful.

Javelina

Javelinas walk on two main toes on each foot which is similar to an antelope's foot. When looking at feral hog tracks you may see two additional toes on the backside of each foot.

Feral hog

Invasive!

Aransas NWR has also become home to feral hogs, which cause damage and root up the soil. The Refuge is working to eliminate them. Many years ago, Russian boars were introduced to the area as hunting game. When they mated with domesticated pigs, feral hogs were the result.

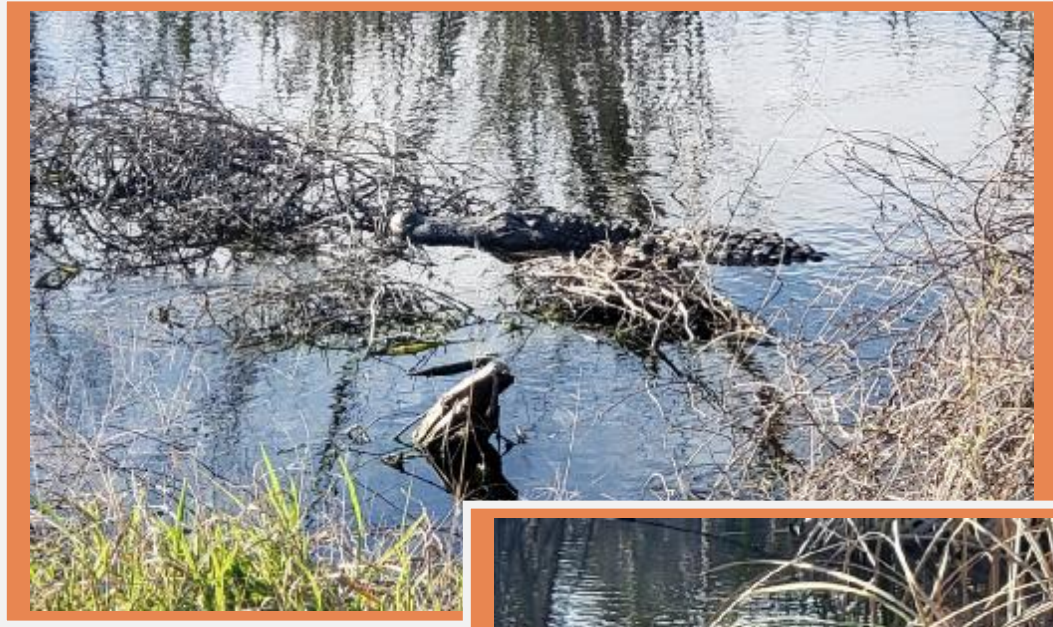
Feral hogs have many babies in a litter (the record is 16), can have up to three litters in one year, and can begin reproducing at just six months of age. If a single feral hog had three litters of 15 babies in a year, how many babies would they have? And what if all of *those* hogs had babies the next year?



That hole in the bushes looks like a nice entrance to a lair, or at worst a path through the brush. It's hard to tell in this photo, but the whole area was torn up, I assume from the Feral hogs as it mentions above. There were spots like this along both sides of the road all the way from the entrance.



Well, after about 15 miles riding and a couple hiking, I made it back to the RV. I stowed the bike away, decided on my next stop, than thought I would add another hike to see some gators. I thought the fellow to the left might be a King Fisher, but I looked it up and realized I was wrong. I didn't notice the long legs until just now when I blew up the photo. Not sure what he is.



This guy is pretty sneaky. Can you find him? Not much more than his eyes and nostrils showing above the water line.

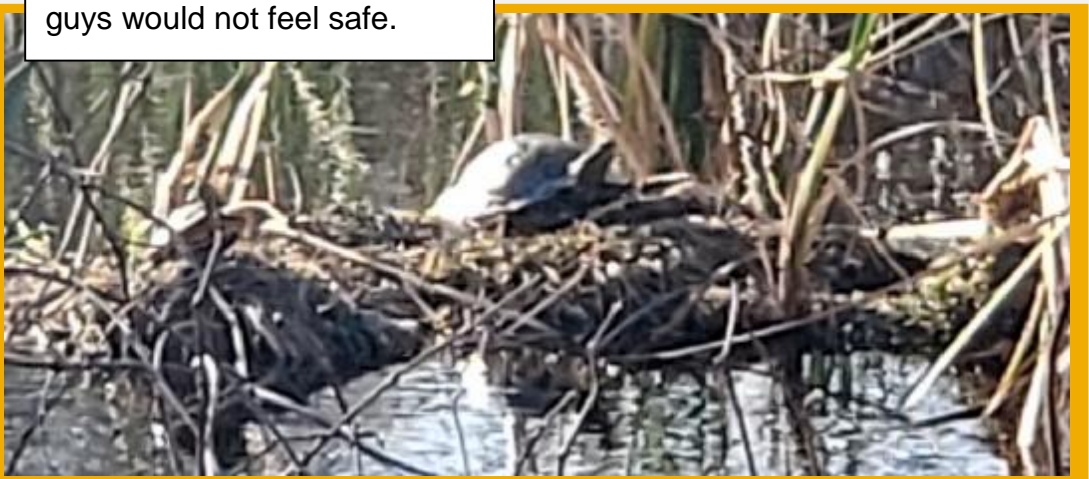




Your guess is as good as mine. But I like the reflection shot below.



I am going to assume that alligators do not like turtle on the half shell, otherwise these guys would not feel safe.



The King of the Marsh

American alligators are apex predators. Other than humans (or another alligator), nothing will kill and eat an adult alligator. What adaptations make alligators such successful hunters? They are extremely fast swimmers, can move up to 30 miles per hour in short bursts on land, and use their powerful jaws to crush their prey.

My last stop before leaving the refuge is the alligator viewing platform. Being the only one there, I said hello to this big fella as I leaned on the railing. He's about nine feet long and seemed to rotate so that his head was straight on to me rather than sideways, as if he heard me and might be expecting a snack.

Alligators have the fiercest bite of all the predators. Scientists discovered these reptiles have more power in their jaws (3,700 pounds per inch) than lions or sharks.

Steve Hillebrand / USFWS





As I moved down the platform looking for more gators, this young one swam up. It was pretty neat seeing him use only the back and forth motion of his tail to propel himself along, his legs just appearing to hang limp but be swept backwards by his forward motion.



He took up this parallel post, and now it seemed like they were both waiting to be fed.

Fulton Mansion

state historic site

Back to Rockport. If I had been earlier I could have made an appointment for a tour. But it's an old house. I've seen old houses before. But it looks great.



Parked at another WalMart for the night, this one in Rockport. They actually have designated truck and RV spaces, each one eighty feet long.

The breeze off the Gulf is chilly and the low tonight is supposed to be in the 40's.

Tomorrow I will visit Port Aransas.

It was a good day. High temp of 60 made it very comfortable for riding and hiking. It felt good to not be in a building for a change. Not sure when my next real outdoor possibility will be. Corpus Christie, Padre Island, Brownsville. Maybe Padre Island, that's a National Seashore. Free camping on the beach. Only time will tell.

Biking *and* hiking. I'm pooped.

Until next time.....