

The End of the

ROAD

► **The hard**, wadable sand redfish flats of the Lower Laguna Madre are among the largest in North America.

► **BRIAN IRWIN**
Photo | Ben Paschal

*Texas **redfish** at Laguna Madre*



V VISITING ARROYO CITY, TEXAS, FEELS LIKE YOU'RE AT THE END OF THE EARTH.

The small hamlet rests at the terminus of Texas Farm to Market Road 2925, and is adjacent the Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge. There is no gas station in town. The only option for supplies or booze lies in a few shops, which serve up all you need sprinkled with an occasional attitude as prickly as the pear cactuses that line the road.

Signs like “HIPPIES USE BACKDOOR” [sic] and “NO CHANGE, NO EXCEPTIONS” dangle from weather-beaten shingles or from rickety cash registers. When I made my \$3.50 purchase, the cashier shot me a bristly look and said, “Four dollars. Unless you have change, we round up.”



► **Male red drum** attract females with a deep thrumming noise created by vibrating a muscle in their swim bladder. They sometimes make the same sounds when you catch and release them.

Photo | Brian Irwin

While some of Arroyo's denizens might have a barb or two under their capes, overall they are a very pleasant bunch. With a boat on every other lawn, many of them are in Arroyo City for the same reason I am—to fish the adjacent Lower Laguna Madre, a lagoon of staggering proportions that holds what is arguably the most expansive white sand redfish flat on the planet. Other Gulf states offer stellar redfishing indeed, but the unique environment, breadth of species, and

amount of vast terrain make the Lower Laguna a redfishery that is without peer.

Ben Paschal is a confident guide. A mere 26 years old, he is my pipeline to the reds, his specialty on the flats of the Lower Laguna Madre, Spanish for “Mother Lagoon.” The sole fly-fishing-only guide who actually lives in town, he's cut his teeth on the waters of Alaska and Patagonia, but these days, guiding exclusively in his home state, Paschal pursues all things redfish.

The Lower Laguna Madre is a 6-mile-wide, 50-mile-long estuary with an average depth of 3.6 feet. It's flanked to the east by South Padre Island, most reputable as a bastion for misbehavior during Spring Break season. But on the Laguna there's no MTV fanfare nor raucous parties, rather a slice of raw wilderness that stands in ironic contrast to the aforementioned.

The western border of the Lower Laguna Madre is largely comprised of wilderness. The Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge stretches for scores of miles along this border, fading into a string of private ranches like the King Ranch, which is almost three quarters of a million acres of brushcountry, wandering javelinas, and swirling shorebirds.

Paschal and I were on the flats by sunrise each morning. Roseate spoonbills, giant herons, and swooping ospreys flirted with the coastline or hovered over clumps of vulnerable baitfish.

Mullet occasionally rocketed out of the water, fleeing from hungry reds, black drum, and the occasional monster spotted seatrout. Everything is just a little bigger in Texas than elsewhere, and the trout are no exception. Trout in the 2-foot range aren't uncommon, but getting them to eat is difficult, arguably as challenging as

landing permit on fly. The Lower Laguna Madre is home to the “big girls” and holds the Texas state record on fly: 15 pounds and 37 inches.

The Lower Laguna Madre is a salty place, more so than the ocean. As one of only a half dozen hypersaline lagoons in the world, it's considerably more saline than the open sea. There's a paucity of inflowing fresh water, and this fact leads to the estuary's designation as a negative estuary, one where seawater flows into the lagoon to water it down, rather than the opposite. Its shallow depth and arid shorelines promote brisk evaporation.

The eastern half of the lagoon consists of Bahamian-style hard sand flats with little vegetation. The western half is more verdant, the floor cloaked with fragile seagrass. Over 80 percent of all the seagrass in Texas resides in the Laguna Madre system, which is comprised of the Lower Laguna Madre and the neighboring, and similarly sized, Upper Laguna Madre.

Red Drum

The evening of my arrival we hit the sand in search of reds. The sun was setting and the birds were clustering over pods of tailing reds. I'd never caught a redfish before, nor even seen one, but was awestruck at their positions and behavior. They were clustered in a pod of a dozen or so, their tails waving in the wind as they churned up the bottom and burrowed for dinner. A pack of gulls hovered overhead, gliding in classic opportunistic fashion. I cast to the pod, stripped, and came up empty. The second cast I laid down with a gentler forward stroke. As my line unfurled and the fly popped over my terminal loop, my line came tight—and shot off into the sky.

I'd hooked a gull. But the fish were still there. Paschal, with calm collectedness, passed me another rod and said, “I'll deal with the bird. They're not spooked yet. Get a red.” As he cut the bird free, unharmed, I led the fish less generously this time. My frame of reference was bonefishing, and although these fish are anything but easy, you don't lead them with quite the distance. With a cast and a strip I again came tight, this time with a redfish.

My loaner line twanged as it ripped toward the horizon. The skunk was washed away.

I pulled yet another red out of the same pod and landed a third before we retired to my rental house, one Paschal sublets on the cheap. It's a nice place, with fish lights on the dock to allow for seatrout plucking over cold beers. It sits on the shore of the Arroyo Colorado River, a few minutes' ride upstream from the Laguna, and only one house down from the entrance of the wildlife refuge.

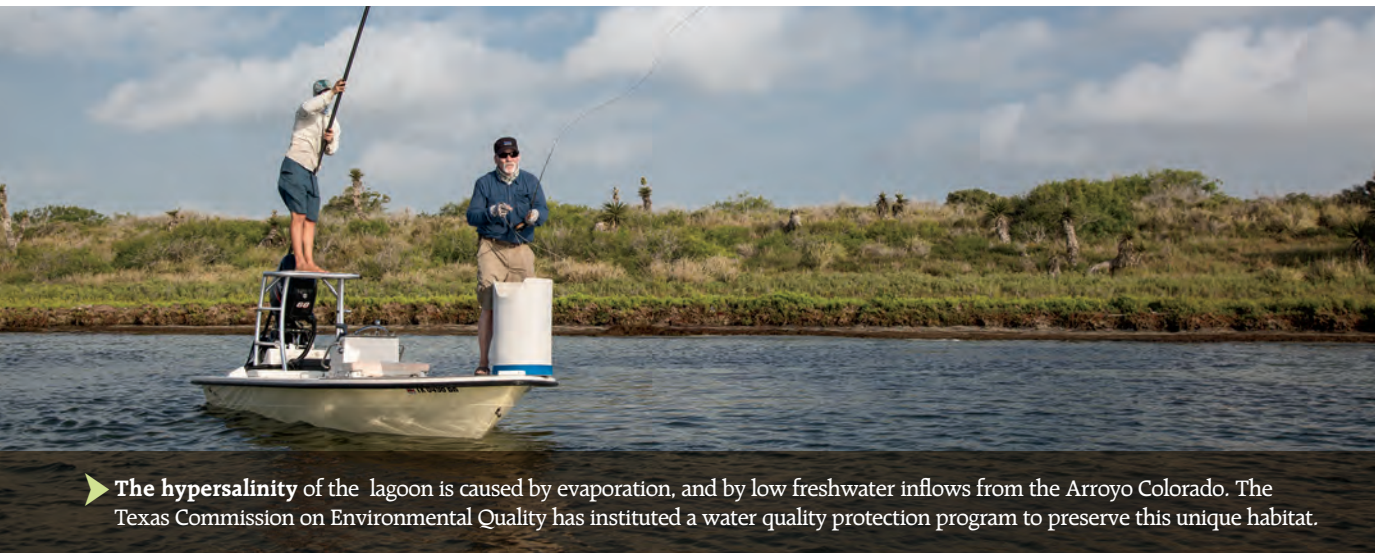
While this is a remote, quiet town, my neighbors were celebrating someone's quinceañera, a traditional Hispanic celebration of coming of age, akin to a bar mitzvah. My housekeeper had left a sheet of fresh enchiladas and tostadas on my table. And so I nibbled, sipping a Modelo beer under the dock lights, with the sound of authentic cultural music in the background. In front of me, moths swarmed. Baby tarpon rolled in the river. And the anticipation of the next day was rife within me.

In the morning we were on the water at first light. The wind was up, and on it sailed sheets of various birds. They piled onto small islands in the Laguna, picking at insects or dissecting mullet they'd caught. Despite 20 mph winds, we were able to feed a few reds, some nice ones in the 28-inch range. They ate discriminatively, and like other flats species, required patience, as only a small percentage of your shots would be successful. We got more than 30 shots a day, and by midafternoon most of them were on the hard sand flats of the eastern Laguna.

Arroyo Colorado

The sun was high and the water tepid as I released a nice redfish, which is the colloquial term for red drum. They're named that because when they become excited, or spawn, they belch a baritone noise that thumps like the sound of its namesake instrument.

As I dipped the fish back into its home water I contemplated the fact that this broad pan of a lagoon has very little water exchange. There are few inflowing fresh water sources, a primary one being the Arroyo Colorado.



► **The hypersalinity** of the lagoon is caused by evaporation, and by low freshwater inflows from the Arroyo Colorado. The Texas Commission on Environmental Quality has instituted a water quality protection program to preserve this unique habitat.

Photo | Brian Irwin



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► **Redfish** take a variety of patterns, from Merkins and Clousers to topwater poppers and spoon flies.

Photo | Brian Irwin

The Laguna is bordered on the east by the Padre Island National Seashore; its namesake is purportedly the largest barrier island in the world. Only a few land cuts through these islands allow seawater to exchange with the lagoon's water, and so the health of rivers like the Arroyo Colorado largely determines the health of the water in the Lower Laguna. And they both are at risk.

In 2001, the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department studied the fauna of the Arroyo Colorado, collecting over 23,000 vertebrates. They found that in the upper reaches of the Arroyo Colorado, the concentration of fish was alarmingly lower than the lower river. According to Mark Lingo, the department's Lower Laguna Madre Leader, "...water quality may be an issue in the upper portion of the study area." He cited low oxygen content as a primary factor in restricting the population of fauna in this area.

"Major increases in the amount of phosphorus entering a watershed can cause rapid increases in algal growth rates that can lead to the formation of algal bloom," stated Lingo. Phosphorus levels rise as a result of agricultural runoff, as it's contained in fertilizers, which are frequently used on the region's citrus groves and other farming plots. The resultant algae blooms consume oxygen and threaten the river, and subsequently the lagoon's, fish population. As a major fish nursery for the Laguna Madre's trout stock, and a water supply for the reds that spawn near the river's mouth, this ecosystem was once on the tenuous brink of irreparable injury.

The Texas Commission on Environmental Quality (TCEQ) has implemented a water protection program in response to threats to the river. A long-term project, the goal is to achieve decreased pollution of the waterway through a series of partnerships with landowners, habitat restoration, and

implementation of projects "intended to reduce storm water runoff, reduce sediment load and reduce the volume and velocity of the flow of the runoff in drainage ditches and the Arroyo Colorado." And although much has been done, the project has far from completed full preservation of the river. Today the Arroyo Colorado and the downstream lagoon still remain at significant risk. According to Lisa Wheeler at the TCEQ, despite valiant efforts, "An increase in the level of dissolved oxygen in the tidal portion of the Arroyo Colorado has been observed since the WPP was finalized in 2007."

The Laguna Madre is an exceptionally unique area. It's a region thick with wildlife, finned and otherwise. From the birds that throng the fragile islands that spot the lagoon, to the reds and trout that thrive beneath the surface, it's a true wilderness treasure. Unspoiled and unvarnished, the Madre is unlike any other coastal waterway in the United States. And once it's altered, it may never return to the pristine state it quietly boasts today.

When I loaded my rod to fire my last cast of my last day on the Lower

Laguna Madre, I double-hauled a short bit of line to pierce the wind, and placed the fly inches in front of a single cruising redfish. Two quick strips and the creature spun on a dime, ate, and yanked my line deep toward the sunset, my backing arcing in the wind like the twine on a flown kite.

I pulled the fish to my feet, unhooked the fly from its mouth, and lowered it to aerate its gills. As I slid it back into the water, it released a single drum. As if singing its song, or perhaps making a plea to return to the clear water where it lives and spawns, the subtle drumbeat faded into the wind.

The fish swam off toward the mouth of the Arroyo Colorado River. And when she arrives there, and if the water is adequately saturated with soothing oxygen, her progeny will survive to later roam the sand flats. And perhaps someday they will, if I'm lucky, again find my fly. ~

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► **Arroyo City** may seem like the end of the earth, but it's actually just the end of the road, and the start to fantastic flats fishing in the Lower Laguna Madre.

Photo | Brian Irwin