

# King Ranch Trip

March 3-4, 2013

by Tom Morris

Six members of the Cradle of Texas Master Naturalists went to Kingsville, Texas to the world-renowned King Ranch for historical, birding, and wildlife tours and topped it off with a Whooping Crane tour out of Port Aransas.

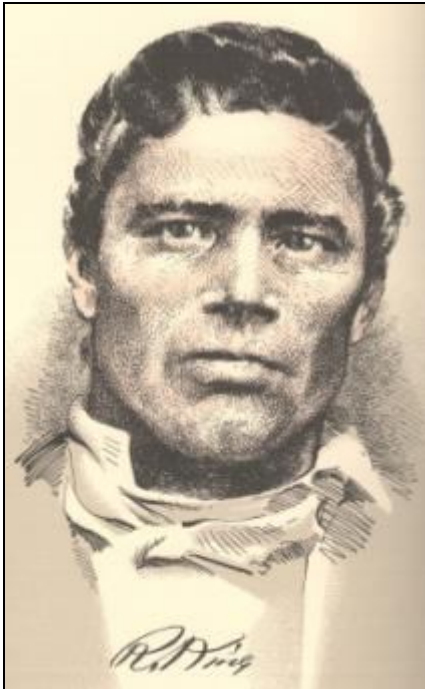
Angelika Fuller, Jerry Krampota, Tom Morris, Pam Peltier, Pete and Peggy Romfh toured the ranch, and Dick Schaffhausen joined us in Rockport. We were fortunate to have Barbara Rapstein (Kirby's daughter) as our guide for the birding and wildlife tours. She led us to 65 species of birds in just a small portion of the Santa Gertrudis division (one of four divisions totaling 825,000 acres).



## A little history

The King Ranch was founded in 1853 by Richard King (1824-1885), a river boat captain. Born of Irish immigrant parents in New York he was indentured to a jeweler in New York at the age of 9, but he didn't like this business. At the age of 11 he stowed away on a boat to Mobile, Alabama. Now he was at the mercy of his captain who took a liking to him. He became a cabin boy who succeeded in learning this trade so that he eventually became a captain himself. He was taught to read/write and to handle numbers by generous captains and sent to Connecticut one year for a formal education while living with his captain's family. He met Mifflin Kenedy, another river boat captain in 1843. They became friends and Kenedy wrote to King in 1846 to hurry to Texas. The US and Mexico were at war, and led by Zachary Taylor had occupied Matamoros and needed supplies on the Rio Grande. King arrived in May 1847 and was very successful in safely navigating the treacherous river with loaded down river boats (steamships). King, Mifflin Kenedy and Charles Stillwell formed a partnership and became wealthy. Their headquarters was in Brownsville. Stillwell is known as the developer of Brownsville. Kenedy became the office manager, while King ran the river boats.

In 1852, King rode by horseback 165 miles to Corpus Christi to attend a "Lone Star Fair" due to attract thousands. He traveled through the barren land between the Rio Grande and the Nueces River through what the Spaniards called the "wild horse desert"



**Captain Richard King - Tom Lea**

and the Mexicans had named it the "desert of the dead" due to the lack of water in this no man's land. After

traveling about 120 miles through a tall grass prairie, he came to a flowing stream called Santa Gertrudis Creek, the first body of flowing fresh water since leaving Brownsville. He saw potential, but was still a river boat captain. He met a Texas Ranger, Legs Lewis in Corpus and they decided to start a cattle ranch together. King bought this land (15,500 acres) along the creek in 1853 from the heirs of a Mexican family who had abandoned the property after the 1836 revolution by the Texans. The price - \$300 or less than 2 cents per acre! King split the ownership with Lewis who operated the ranch for both. King married Henrietta Chamberlain, the daughter of a Presbyterian minister, in Dec 1854 in Brownsville. They spent their honeymoon on the ranch in a small wooden house that had become the ranch headquarters. It was a four day drive from Brownsville in a carriage. They traveled with an armed escort through this wild country. King eventually purchased the rights to the rest of the ranch through partnerships and direct purchases.

The ranch was completely dependent on rainfall to supply water and natural impoundments to collect this water. Cattle will only graze about a mile away from a water source.

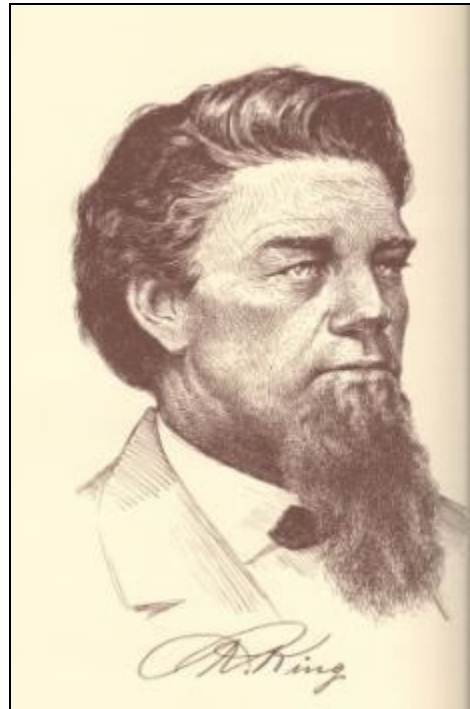
Travelers were welcomed at the ranch and no one was turned away from food or shelter. Texas Rangers were frequent guests as they patrolled this area fighting bandits intent on stealing cattle or anything of value. One visitor was Robert E Lee while stationed near the Rio Grande in 1857. His advice was "buy land, and never sell". Richard King took that advice. Before he died in 1885, he had acquired 614,000 acres.

In 1854, King acquired 12 leagues of land comprising most of the Santa Gertrudis division for \$1,800 from the sole heir of the de la Garza tract of 53,000 acres. To acquire the additional land over a period of years, King had lawyers in Brownsville and Corpus Christi involved in finding landowners and descendants of nearby desirable properties and making the deals. Sometimes there were several generations to be contacted and 60 heirs were not unusual on some of the older properties.

Richard and Henrietta King had five children - Henrietta "Nettie" - 1856, Ella Morse - 1858, Richard II - 1860, Alice Gertrudis - 1862, and Robert E Lee King - 1864.

During the Civil War, King had aided the Confederacy with transporting cotton to the Rio Grande then downstream to Matamoros where the cotton was sent to Europe. To avoid the Union blockade of the Rio Grande, the cotton was transferred to a Mexican company on boats registered in Mexico - all owned by King and his partners. When Union troops temporarily came up the Rio Grande, King was one of their priority targets, but he escaped.

After the Civil War, ranchers had to contend with cattle rustlers and many vacated their ranches due to safety concerns due to the lack of an army presence in South Texas.



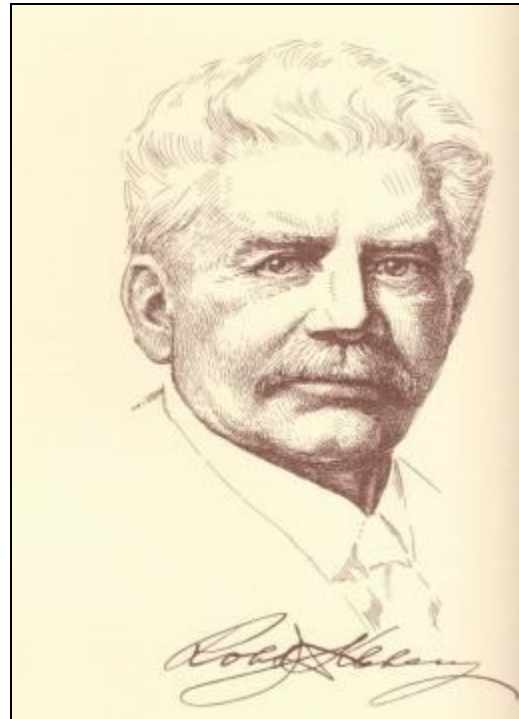
**Richard King - Tom Lea**

The Texas Rangers had been disbanded during reconstruction. The King Ranch had to protect itself. The Texas Cattlemen's Association was formed to help combat the lawlessness. From 1866 to 1869 it was estimated King Ranch losses amounted to over \$2,000,000. The demand for beef led to great cattle drives from Texas to railways such as Abilene, Kansas. Hundreds of thousands of cattle were sold and sent on their way to a beef hungry northeast. In 1870, 350,000 cattle were sold in the stockyards with the King Ranch contributing tens of thousands. A cow in Texas was worth about \$11 a head, but \$20 in Kansas and the brokers got \$30 a head in Chicago. King picked his trail bosses, signed a contract with them and they shared in the profits. They were motivated to get all of the cows to market.

Altogether over 500,000 King Ranch cattle made it to market on these cattle drives.

A lawyer in Corpus named Robert Justus Kleberg had impressed Richard King after the young lawyer defeated King and his lawyers in a court case. King didn't hold a grudge - he hired him that day to handle his ranch business. He married Alice Gertrudis King in 1886 after King's death in Apr 1885 in San Antonio at the Menger hotel. All of the ranch assets were willed to Henrietta King with the long time friend and former business partner Mifflin Kenedy as co-executor. Robert Kleberg was later given full custody over the assets as Kenedy saw things were in good hands and Henrietta King agreed. The size of the ranch doubled to over 1,250,000 acres under Kleberg's management. He brought in water wells that allowed more of the ranch to carry livestock and not suffer as severely in droughts. He and his family led the King Ranch into the modern era. He and Henrietta King helped organize Kingsville when the railroad finally came through. The town of Kingsville was deeded over to the railroad, but the organization and development of the town had a Kleberg/King imprint. The railroad meant no more long cattle drives to Missouri or Kansas and cheaper rates for needed supplies. When new county

lines were drawn, Kleberg was the natural name choice for the area including the northern portion of the King Ranch. His son, Bob Kleberg continued the reign until 1974 and was instrumental in bringing oil and gas exploration to the ranch which brought the ranch out of debt for good.



**Robert Kelberg - Tom Lea**

## **The Ranch**

The current ranch is over 825,000 acres and has over 500 windmills and artesian wells that support 85,000 cattle and over 3,000 horses. The average rainfall is less than 26 inches and they are in the midst of an extensive drought (year 19 of an expected 25 year drought cycle). We observed the dry Santa Gertrudis Creek and reservoirs. The pastures were mostly brown with a few green pastures.

The family ranch house is shown below. The following picture shows how dry the area was in a horse pasture with the ranch house in the background.



**Ranch House - King Ranch Post Card**



**Horse Pasture - no grass - Tom Morris**

Most of the water for the cattle and horses is pumped and piped to concrete water troughs. In one natural slough, the water was about gone and there were over 30 alligators - small ones huddled together with no place to go.



**Alligators at Swimming Hole - Peggy Romfh**



**Longhorns - Tom Morris**

You will notice in the background of the above picture the blooming Huisache (*Acacia farnesiana*).

This brushy plant only grew along the banks of the Santa Gertrudis Creek when Richard King first appeared in 1852. The land was covered by tall grasses. When it rained, the creek was clear - no dirt was lost to erosion because of the native grasses' absorption power. That soon changed when cattle came upon the scene. Some were imported from Mexico who carried seed in their system. The fruit is not all that good for wildlife, but the cows during the many dry spells would eat it and spread it even more. Soon the King Ranch became covered with scrub brush. They have an extensive program now to remove the brush and plant grasses for grazing.

In the early 1800's eight species of salt cedar were introduced into the United States from Asia. Three of these became invasive. They were introduced to the Rio Grande and several other rivers in the southwest. With dams and other flood control measures installed that prevent natural floods, conditions were ideal for the establishment, growth, and propagation of salt cedar (*Tamarix ramosissima*). This invasive plant was spread by cattle much like the Huisache.



Longhorn eating Huisache - Tom Morris

The following shows some of the equipment used to remove brush. They actually remove the root system with special equipment. They use large chains to scrape the brush first. You can see brush on either side of the cleared row in the middle. That is the way they intend to leave it for now. The brush offers shelter for wildlife such as deer, peccaries, rabbits, etc. The removed brush is burned on site.



**Clearing Brush - Tom Morris**

The fencing is different from most ranches. They do not use barbed wire. The King Ranch use a fence that is wildlife friendly - not too high for deer to jump over and not too low to keep small animals from crossing under. The fencing is designed to keep the cows and horses contained, but not the wildlife. Look at the fence below that shows some Northern Bobwhite. The bobwhite can fly, but prefer to walk around unless they are spooked. They are looking for insects that they can find near the ground.





**Northern Bobwhite and King Ranch Fence - Pete Romfh**

Like most of Texas, the native prairie grasses have disappeared due to overgrazing, plowing or development. Overgrazing in the past was a problem for the King Ranch. Where do you find a grass that grows quickly in the hostile environment of South Texas? The King Ranch imported grasses and the King Ranch Bluestem (*Bothriochloa ischaemum* var. *songarica*) is one example. It originated in South Africa and the Mediterranean area. I understood the King Ranch got their initial plants (seed) from Brazil. You can see it along our local 288 highway north of Lake Jackson. It is very invasive. Many of our pastures have become infested. It is not a very good plant for wildlife - AgriLIFE Sciences states it is fair for wildlife and grazing. It mainly serves the purpose of erosion control in our area.

Coastal Bermuda (*Cynodon dactylon*) is another grass used extensively on the King Ranch. It is another non-native grass originating from North Africa, Asia, and Australia. It is also an invasive grass. Native grasses good for grazing are: *Andropogon gerardii* (big bluestem), *Schizachyrium scoparium* (little bluestem), and *Andropogon glomeratus* (bushy bluestem). However, these require a wetter climate than available in South Texas.

## Our Tour



Jerry Krampota, Tom Morris, Barbara Rapstein, Pam Peltier, Angelika Fuller



**Auction Arena - Tom Morris**



**Barbara Rapstein - Tour Leader - Tom Morris**

Barbara is gathering signatures before leading us out on Birding and Wildlife Tours



**Office - Tom Morris**

We saw Santa Gertrudis cattle - the first new breed (1940) of cow in the United States, many longhorns, Santa Cruz and other hybrids that were developed in an effort to satisfy an ever changing meat market. The Santa Gertrudis is a cross between Brahma and English Short Horns that had been bred over several generations on the ranch and only the best were chosen for breeding. The combination generated a breed that was drought and disease resistant with good marketable beef.

We witnessed new calves minutes old with mother in process of cleaning them and urging their first steps in "calving pastures." We also saw Crested Caracara planning their approach to find leftover afterbirth. There were Crested Caracara everywhere on the ranch. Our tours took us on about 35 miles jaunts through just a small portion of the ranch.



**Santa Gertrudis - Tom Morris**

We saw several groups of wild turkeys with the Toms displaying a couple of times, three groups of northern bobwhite (which was unusual), more peccaries than I have ever seen, two Audubon orioles, several greater kiskadees, vermilion flycatchers, green jays, pyrrholoxia, hundreds of sandhill cranes, thousands of grackles, brown headed cowbirds, starlings, and scores of bronzed cowbirds. Some of the wildlife pictures follow:



**Wild Turkey Toms (Rio Grande subspecies) - Tom Morris**



**Green Jay - Pete Romfh**



**Curve-billed Thrasher - Pete Romfh**



**Wild Turkey Hen (Rio Grande subspecies) - Peggy Romfh**



**Crested Caracara (doing their thing) - Peggy Romfh**

We only saw a few mammal species other than livestock, but we saw lots and lots of deer and javelinas (collared peccary). The King Ranch had developed a unique deer feeding fence system to keep javelinas and feral hogs from getting to the food.



**Collared Peccary-Pete Romfh**

There were two concentric rings of fences surrounding the feeders. The outside fence was high, but low enough for deer to jump over. The inside fence was low but very strong to keep out the javelinas. Below is one buck inside a fenced-in feeder. The low fence is in the foreground and the high fence is in the background.



**White-tailed Deer - Tom Morris**

The King Ranch was a very enjoyable adventure. Some of the highlights not covered above included a video in the museum which showed the interior of the ranch house, eating at Young's Pizza and Big House Burgers which served more than pizza and burgers, the enormity of the oil and gas operations on the ranch, their conservancy plans in action such as their fencing and preserving scrub vegetation. At one time the gas processing plant on the ranch was the largest in the world. Most of the roads on the ranch are oil and gas operated and maintained. All gates meet the King Ranch criteria for closure. The "bump gate" design was invented on the King Ranch by an oil field worker. About one-fourth of their income today is from oil and gas, as well as similar income each from tourism, livestock, and agriculture. The largest citrus grower in the US is the King Ranch on properties in Florida.

If you have the opportunity, take a King Ranch tour and visit their museum. Visitor Center is located at 2205 W. Highway 147, Kingsville, 78364 (361-592-8055)





**Visitor Center water feature - Jerry Krampota**



### **King Ranch Bird Feeder - Green Jay location - Jerry Krampota**

"The thing that I was impressed with was the overall diversity of wildlife in what was otherwise a very dry environment. It was hard to believe that only a couple hundred miles away from Houston and Brazoria County we saw a wealth of species that we don't usually see. The green jay, black-crested tufted titmouse, great kiskadee, pyrrhuloxia, curve-billed thrasher, and bronzed cowbird were examples of the birds that were particularly exciting to see. As always, whether the birds were perched on fences, cactus, in cow pens, or along ponds and waterholes, it seems that knowledge of their habitats is important to finding them in the wild." - Peggy Romfh

"Great wildlife experience...since they make a significant amount of their income from "hunting" , how much of the wildlife, like turkeys, quail, javelinas and deer are enhanced, i.e. by feeding and/or introduction from outside areas....doesn't really matter from our viewing perspective but may not be typical of the surrounding areas outside the Ranch. As far as the small songbirds, I feel what we saw is typical of the surrounding area, wouldn't you agree? I'm still confused about Barbara's comment about the lake level dwindling because the gas plant was shut down. I just don't know how that much water could be turned loose from the process, unless it is turned loose just to enhance the wildlife. There can be several reasons the water flow has been discontinued, from outage of the electrical substation to repairs on the pumps/piping associated with water supply. I tend to feel the lack of water is primarily due to the drought and not primarily to the gas plant shutdown. Either way, it's not that big a concern but it is having an impact on the wildlife. I'm still unsure as to why we spent so much time at the cattle feedlot but then I guess I'm prejudiced toward a breed of birds that "freeloads" its parenting responsibility! Just kidding! All in all, I enjoyed the King

Ranch experience and considering they are in the middle of a drought period and the locale is in the Dead Horse Desert, my summary is that it was a positive experience! "-  
Jerry Krampota

Thanks go to the hearty Master Naturalist group who took this adventure to the King Ranch - a lot was done in a day and a half. It was a pleasure to share some fun, some history, and see part of the ranch firsthand. Everyone contributed to the success we had on this trip.

Thanks to Pete and Peggy Romfh and Jerry Krampota for sharing their photos and for Peggy's help in proofreading and making helpful suggestions and correcting typos and grammatical errors.

We saw 65 species of birds during our day and half at the King Ranch. Thanks to Barbara Rapstein's knowledge of the ranch and good hearing - our total was much to her credit.

Respectively submitted,  
Tom Morris  
6/2/2013

**King Ranch Bird List**   **Bolded are birds not typically seen in Brazoria County**

Blue-winged Teal  
Northern Shoveler  
Northern Pintail  
Green-winged Teal  
Northern Bobwhite  
**Wild Turkey** (Rio Grande subspecies)  
American White Pelican  
Great Blue Heron  
Great Egret  
Green Heron  
Black-crowned Night-Heron  
Black Vulture  
Turkey Vulture  
Cooper's Hawk  
**Harris's Hawk**  
White-tailed Hawk  
Red-shouldered Hawk  
Red-tailed Hawk  
Sandhill Crane  
Killdeer  
Greater Yellowlegs  
Lesser Yellowlegs  
Least Sandpiper  
Long-billed Dowitcher  
Wilson's Snipe  
Rock Pigeon  
Eurasian Collared-Dove  
White-winged Dove  
Mourning Dove  
Common Ground Dove  
**White-tipped Dove**  
**Greater Roadrunner**

**Golden-fronted Woodpecker**  
**Ladder-backed Woodpecker**  
Crested Caracara  
American Kestrel  
Eastern Phoebe  
Vermillion Flycatcher  
**Great Kiskadee**  
Loggerhead Shrike  
White-eyed Vireo  
Blue-headed Vireo  
**Green Jay**  
**Black-crested Titmouse**  
Ruby-crowned Kinglet  
Northern Mockingbird  
**Long-billed Thrasher**  
**Curve-billed Thrasher**  
European Starling  
Yellow-rumped Warbler  
**Olive Sparrow**  
Vesper Sparrow  
**Lark Sparrow**  
Savannah Sparrow  
Northern Cardinal  
**Pyrrhuloxia**  
Red-winged Blackbird  
Eastern Meadowlark  
**Western Meadowlark**  
Brewer's Blackbird  
Great-tailed Grackle  
**Bronzed Cowbird**  
Brown-headed Cowbird  
**Audubon's Oriole**  
House Sparrow