

THE
LAKES
LESS PADDLED

A GLOBE-TROTTING
PHOTOJOURNALIST RETURNS
TO THE RIO GRANDE VALLEY
RESACAS OF HIS YOUTH

Text and Photographs
by Erich Schlegel



BACK IN 1975,

times were simple on Acacia Lake Drive. Our family had just moved to Brownsville from Mexico City. I was a 10-year-old fisherman who, while in Mexico, used to practice casting with my Zebco rod and reel into the empty lot next door. After the move north, I found myself living the dream on an oxbow lake, Resaca de la Guerra, and fishing every single day. I felt like I'd landed on Gilligan's Island. For me, it was paradise.



Opening image: Carlos Nuñez paddles Resaca de los Cuates in Los Fresnos. Above, photographer and author Erich Schlegel, pictured here in 1975 in Brownsville, says these watercraft on the shore of Resaca de las Antonias (left) reminded him of his own resaca explorations as a teenager.

THE OXBOW LAKES,

or *resacas*, as they are known in South Texas, are a series of old Rio Grande channels that split off like the fingers of an outstretched hand into the Gulf of Mexico and Laguna Madre bay. These shallow waterways—rich with birdlife and semitropical vegetation—have long ago been cut off from the main river, forming meandering river-like lakes that flow through the eastern corner of the Rio Grande Valley. Many people don't even know they exist.

To me, the *resaca* meant freedom, a path to adventure. During my junior high and high school years, I spent seemingly countless days fishing for largemouth bass and catfish from my backyard or from the bridge down the street. I found solitude and independence on the water with the various watercraft I owned over the years, including an inflatable raft, a Styrofoam boat that could be paddled or sailed, a Sunfish sailboat, and a 12-foot, flat-bottom aluminum boat with a Mercury 10-horsepower outboard engine. I also paddled my surfboard, training to surf storm swells that hit the coast during hurricane season.

Since those days, I have traveled the world as a photojournalist, documenting everything from war zones to Olympic Games to an Amazon River paddling expedition. And I go back to the Rio Grande Valley many times a year for work and play.

Most recently, in May, I made a nostalgic return to the *resacas* and launched my canoe by the bridge on Acacia Lake Drive. I paddled behind our old house, and all of those childhood memories came flooding back. The jungle-like shoreline resembled the rainforest I had experienced on the Amazon. And when I posted photos of my trip on Facebook, many friends asked if I was doing a story in Costa Rica.

All these years later, the palm trees still angle out almost horizontally over the water on Fort Brown *Resaca*. Town *Resaca* still flows through the Gladys Porter Zoo and downtown Brownsville. Thick patches of mangroves still line the banks near my old house. Native and migrating birds—like Altamira orioles, plain chachalacas, great kiskadees, green jays, and painted buntings—still flock to the thick tropical vegetation along the banks.

However, some things have changed. Those flocks of native birds now include pairs of squawking red-crowned parrots that



VIEWS FROM THE RESACAS

A view of Resaca de las Antonias from the 30-foot-tall birding tower at The Inn at Chachalaca Bend in Los Fresnos. Inset, Erich Schlegel puts in at his childhood fishing spot on Resaca de la Guerra.

have relocated from Mexico. Birders have largely replaced the anglers that once lined the banks, some of whom have moved on to fish the salt waters of the Laguna Madre and the Gulf.

What was home for me then is different in some ways, but the feelings evoked by being on the water are still the same.

Taking a cue from the book *The Road Less Traveled* by M. Scott Peck, these resacas could be called “The Lakes Less Paddled.” It takes an individualistic streak to bypass the clearer, greener waters of nearby South Padre Island, but if you do, you will enjoy an experience you can’t get anywhere else in Texas. Adventurers, birders, kayakers, paddle-boarders, and anglers (with their families) will be rewarded by these hidden gems.

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A handful of locals ply these waters, which average three to five feet deep. At sunrise or sunset, local landscape photographer Carlos Nuñez paddles his standup paddleboard on the resaca behind his house, looking for just the right angle for his next picture. He has exhibited his images at the Historic Brownsville Museum and shares them regularly on Facebook.

“Resacas are unique to South Texas,” says Carlos. “They have cut out a path for centuries. This perspective has fed my imagination, drawing me to capture their many moods.”

Danny Cuevas, a student at the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley, knows those moods well. He offers kayak tours around Brownsville and educates his clients about life on the resacas—“always an adventure,” he says.

Through their steadfast efforts, both Danny and Carlos bring much-needed awareness to these waters and share the wonderment of the resacas, the secret paradise of South Texas. ★

Intrepid photojournalist Erich Schlegel credits his childhood explorations of Rio Grande Valley resacas for “developing the sense of adventure and discovery that I have today.”

See the following pages
for sites along the resacas.



SUNSET SILHOUETTES
reflect on the tranquil
waters of Resaca de la
Guerra in Brownsville.



● In Los Fresnos, **The Inn at Chachalaca Bend** offers luxury accommodations on Resaca de las Antonias. The B&B has six rooms in the main house, along with a separate and luxurious three-story private lodge. Birders have access to a nature trail and 30-foot-tall birding tower that stands above the ebony and palm trees. www.chachalaca.com.

● For local travel information, start with the **Brownsville Convention and Visitors Bureau**, 956/546-3721; www.brownsville.org.

Carlos Nuñez (www.cnunezimages.com) photographs migrating birds from the tower at The Inn at Chachalaca Bend.

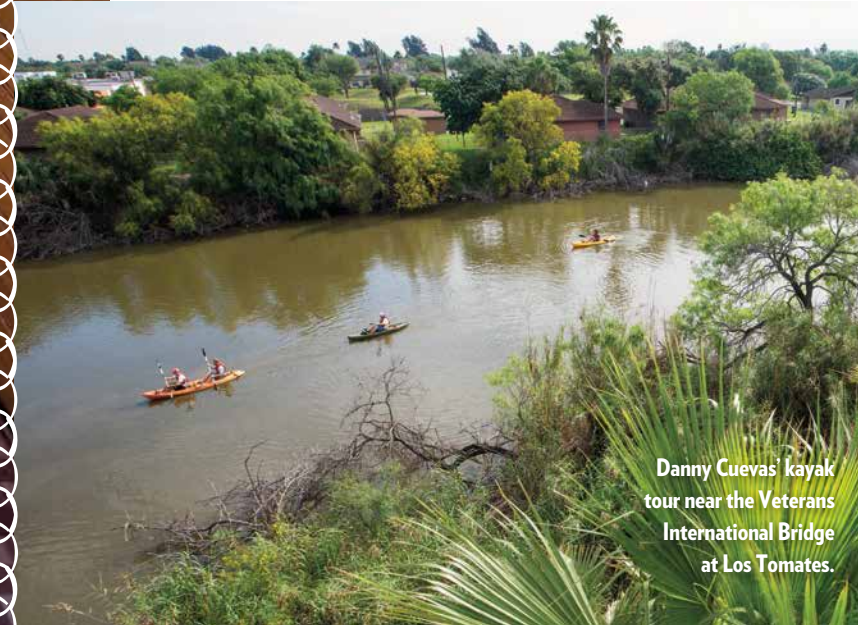
RESACA RECREATION

Rio Grande Valley resacas are former distributaries of the Rio Grande that flow toward the Gulf of Mexico in extreme South Texas. Located mostly in Cameron County, the resacas meander through Brownsville, Los Fresnos, Bayview, and San Benito. According to Buford Lessley, a University of Texas Rio Grande Valley graduate research assistant in biological sciences, there are more than 70 river miles of resacas in Brownsville alone.

“Resacas were created by floods from hurricanes and tropical storms,” says Gladys Porter Zoo Director Pat Burchfield. “The inundations would carve out these oxbow lakes, which would be cut off after the flooding receded, and those became known as resacas. Brownsville, Bayview, San Benito, and some of our adjacent communities have maintained resacas as aesthetic waterways and water storage for irrigation.”

● Resacas can be accessed throughout the cities and county at various locations. Explorers can easily launch a kayak or canoe on just about any of these waterways on public easements where the road meets the water. The town of **Bayview** has some particularly easy access points with breathtaking views.

● University of Texas Rio Grande Valley student Danny Cuevas offers **kayak tours** in Brownsville, sharing his expertise of the area’s flora and fauna. Danny has a fleet of sit-on-top plastic kayaks that are stable and easy to paddle, and also offers a list of public launch sites at www.southtexas paddlers.com.



Danny Cuevas’ kayak tour near the Veterans International Bridge at Los Tomates.



Tricolored heron, Gladys Porter Zoo

● The **Gladys Porter Zoo** opened in 1971 along Town Resaca, which flows through downtown Brownsville. The waterway forms a natural boundary for the exotic species of animals found at the zoo. Bridge walkways span the zoo grounds, which have also become a sanctuary for such native species as chachalacas, egrets, herons, cormorants, and black-bellied whistling ducks. www.gpz.org.

● **Sabal Palm Sanctuary** in Brownsville is a favorite with nature lovers. The 557-acre wildlife refuge lies adjacent to the Rio Grande. Primitive trails lead to excellent bird blinds on two resacas. Bring insect repellent and wear long sleeves and pants. The bugs can be bad, but the birding is out of this world. www.sabalpalmsanctuary.org.

● For breakfast and lunch on a resaca, try **Lola’s Bake Shop & Bistro** (www.lolabakeshop.com), featuring morning pastry delicacies and healthy deli sandwiches for lunch. For dinner, check out **Cobbleheads Bar & Grill** (www.cobbleheads.com), which serves a variety of Philly cheese steak

sandwiches, Tex-Mex plates, and seafood with a Mexican twist. Both Brownsville eateries have decks over the water.

● **Resaca de la Palma State Park** in Brownsville has several resacas that attract a variety of birds and other wildlife. Volunteer docents lead weekly nature walks. www.tpwwd.texas.gov/state-parks/resaca-de-la-palma.

● History buffs will appreciate the **Resaca de la Palma National Battlefield** in Brownsville, the site of a battle in the U.S.-Mexican War. On May 9, 1846, U.S. Army General Zachary Taylor led his troops in a battle against a Mexican army in a dense brush along the low ravine of Resaca de la Palma. General Taylor’s victory secured the Rio Grande as Texas’ southern border. Over the years, the battlefield has been used as a sugarcane field, a citrus grove, and even a polo ground, but in 2011 was acquired by the National Park Service. The 34-acre site now offers a self-guided interpretive trail describing the stages of the battle. www.nps.gov/paal/learn/historyculture/resacadelapalma.htm.