

“The Habitats of Barataria – Terrebonne: Their Importance to Migratory and Resident Birds”

Three hundred years ago – “limitless”

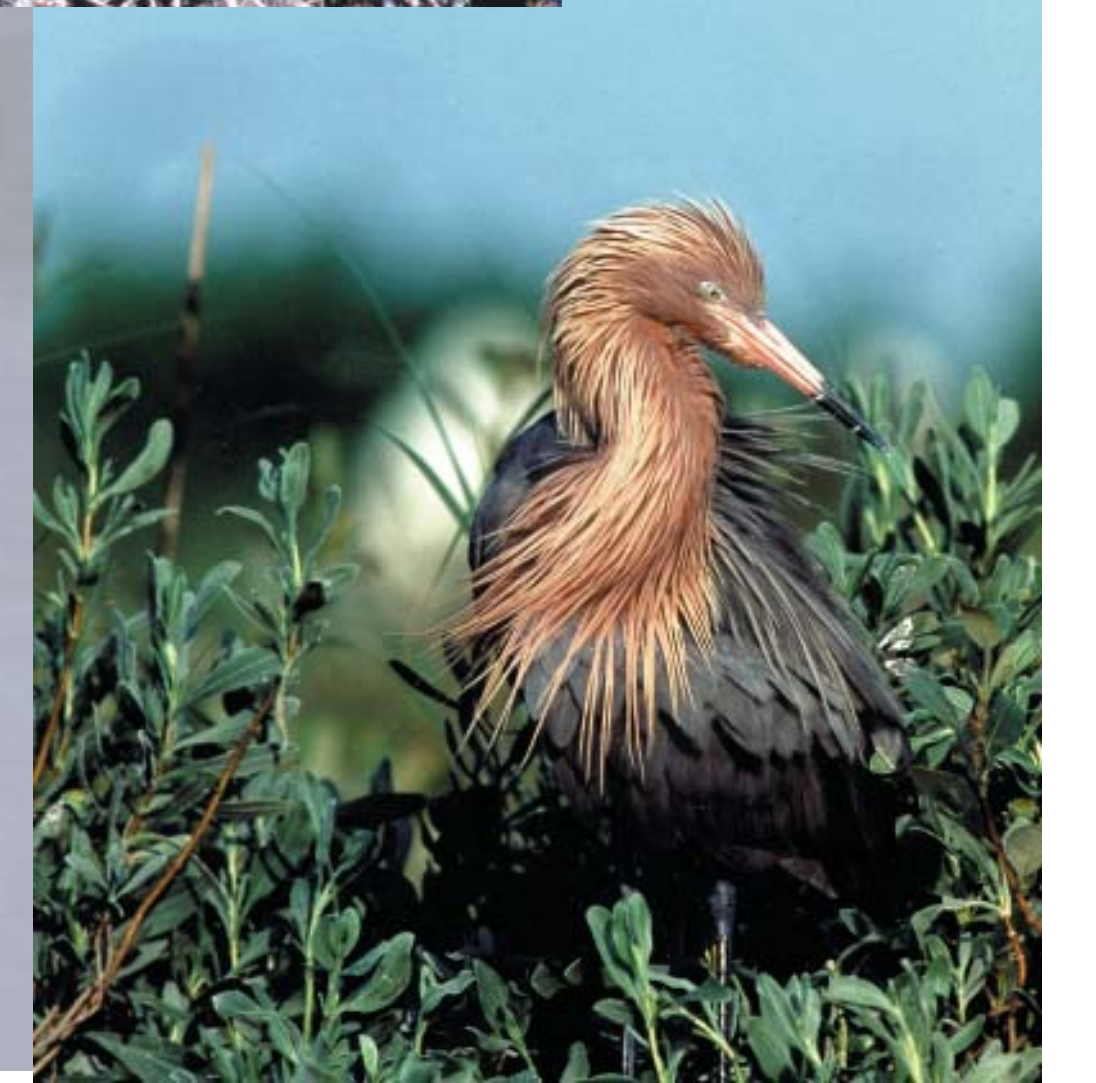
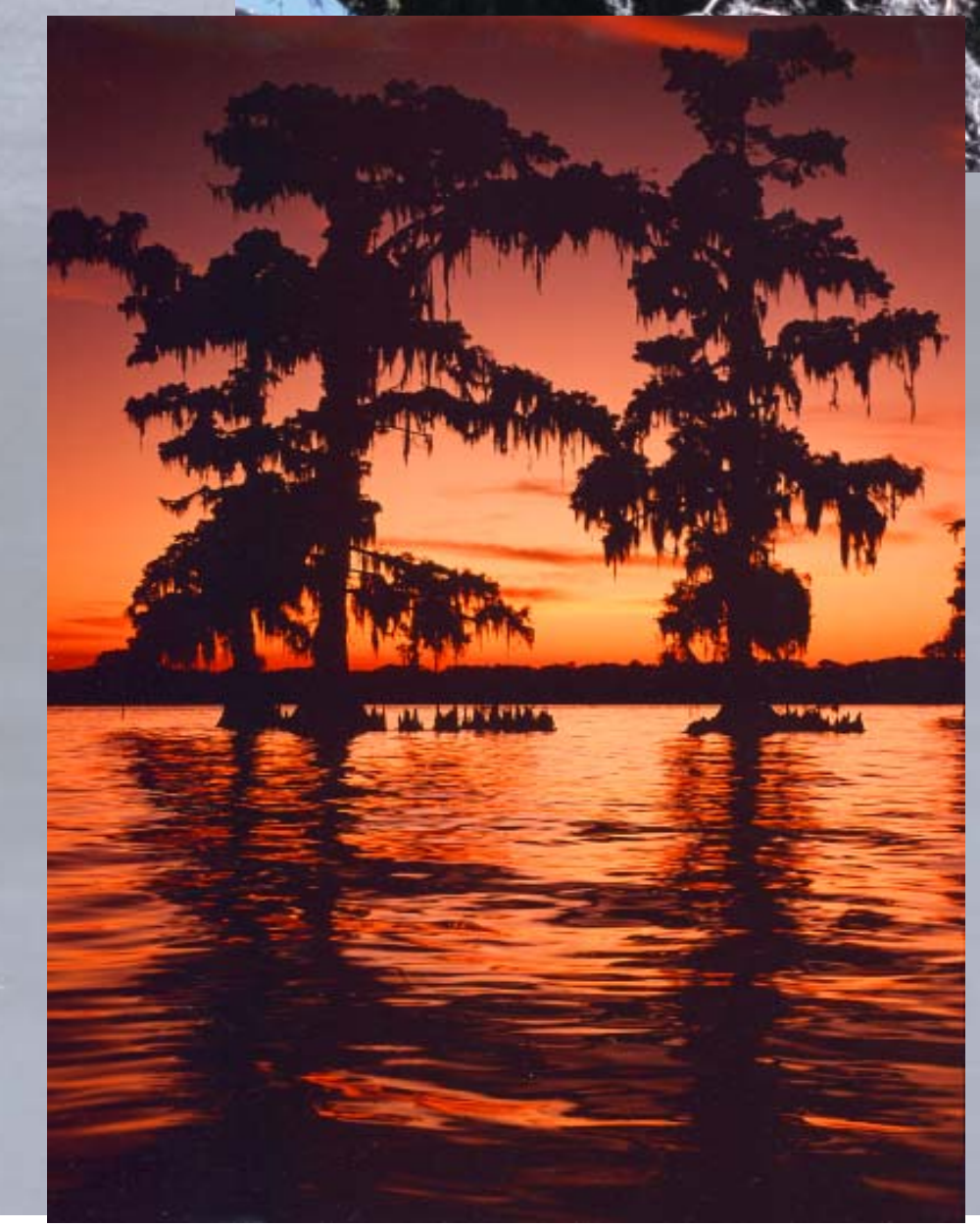
Three hundred years ago the French explorer Pierre Le Moyne, Sieur d'Iberville sailed over one of the many shallow sandbars that marked the mouth of the Mississippi River into a teeming wilderness paradise. Landing at what we now call Head of Passes, he went ashore, found a great quantity of game, “duck, geese, snipe, teal, bustards (wild turkey), and other birds”, and went hunting “a variety of animals such as stags, deer, buffalos (bison).” A short distance upstream Iberville climbed a willow and looked out over what we now call the Barataria-Terrebonne estuarine system. He saw impenetrable, endless marshes, dense canebrakes, limitless possibilities and resources. As he continued upstream, the river became cloaked in towering bald cypress swamp filled with thousands of Carolina parakeets. He met with the native Americans and traded with them for their bounty of bear, bison, and corn. He and the later French explorers learned of the opossum and pelican, and feasted on oysters, crawfish, shrimp, redfish, sheepshead, and sandhill cranes.

Iberville's observations mark the first written qualitative assessment of the living resources of southeast Louisiana. He was followed by a succession of explorers, missionaries, and finally scientists who recorded and measured various aspects of the system's animal populations.

Today – “productive and fragile”

We now know that Iberville's initial assumptions were incorrect - the resources and possibilities were not limitless and human interaction has caused serious detrimental effects not only to many species of animals but also to the landscape itself. Through time, people and nature have combined to alter this fragile ecosystem in many ways. In spite of these changes, Barataria-Terrebonne still maintains a tremendous variety of habitats and continues to be one of the most biologically productive places in the world. Part of this productivity is represented by the tremendous numbers of migratory and resident birds that are found throughout this region.

The birds pictured are only a few species of the hundreds that are known to Barataria-Terrebonne. Read on and learn of the bountifulness of coastal Louisiana, its natural places, and why this area is so important to many species of birds - not only those that reside here but also to the many migrants that pass through during different times of the year.



Photographs courtesy of Julia Sims