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Wetlands navigation

CHEYENNE BOTTOMS — I learned egret feathers were once literally worth more than their weight in gold.

And black-necked stilt chicks can swim about two hours after hatching.

I learned that Thursday while touring a world-renowned marsh with a well-spoken tour guide that was an expert historian, ornithologist, anthropologist and several other "ologists" as well.

And he was about six inches wide and plugged into my car's power outlet. I was sampling Great Bend's GPS Ranger program.

Sponsored by the city's Convention and Visitors Bureau and a state grant, the program leads visitors on audio and visual tours from their own cars.

The units attach to the inside windshield and are available at four local motels and the CVB office.

Tours of Cheyenne Bottoms and the nearby Wetlands and Wildlife Byway are on the same unit. It's \$10 per day or free for motel guests.

It's money well spent for those who aren't skilled naturalists.

Pre-programmed GPS coordinates trigger video images and audio that plays through the car's radio.

The content varies from basic directions to access Cheyenne Bottoms to impressive educational elements about the famed wetlands.

The hour-long tour is designed for users to pull over to watch the small screen in the particular area.

We got off to a good start when I pulled over and the unit educated me on great blue herons, pelicans and cormorants. Looking out, I saw all three in the immediate area.

Wildlife wasn't overly common or diverse on my tour because I was between major waterfowl and shorebird migrations.

Written by Ted Cable, of Kansas State University, the audio script was educational and detailed.

As well as covering every kind of wildlife from rattlesnakes to whooping cranes, the tour offered education on wetlands ecology, Cheyenne Bottoms history and the importance of hunting to the system through the years.

The video that accompanies each segment is often impressive, though a bit hard to see on the small screen.

I had a hard time looking at the screen, though, when there was so much of the real thing outside the car.

The tour ends at the Kansas Wetlands Education Center, a relatively new facility with some impressive displays.

The GPS tour of the bottoms took a bit longer than the projected hour. I got caught once driving too fast and the GPS triggered a new presentation before the one already running was complete.

Since I drive the roads regularly, I only did a partial tour of the Wetlands and Wildlife Scenic Byway. I wish I'd have done more so I could have kept listening to the Ranger.

The GPS tour uses Native American mythology to explain things such as animal adaptation, the importance of the wind and the uses and importance of many prairie plants and wetlands.

It's a cool and fun way to present the information. To me, at least, listening to the stories was more entertaining than the drive.

For information or reservations, call 877-427-9299 or e-mail cvb@visitgreatbend.com.

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