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Just like old Texas

Wildlife refuge ready to kick off at Caddo Lake



By GLENN EVANS

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KARNACK — A former home for the engines of war tucked in the Pineywoods is returning to its past.

"It's going to look like Texas did before it was a Republic," Caddo Lake National Wildlife Refuge Manager Mark Williams said, embarking on a short tour of the shuttered Longhorn Army Ammunition Plant outside Karnack.



Kevin Green/News-Journal Photo
(ENLARGE)

Taking over: 'Those of us who grew up here in East Texas have seen how the hyacinth and hydrilla have created major problems, but the giant salvinia will be fatal. This aquatic plant expands like a thick green mat across the lake surface, crowding out native vegetation, depriving marine life of sunlight and oxygen, effectively killing the lake and disrupting local tourist and agricultural economies. Giant salvinia damages or destroys ecosystems and threatens water supplies in many parts of the country, including our neighbor Louisiana. We will not stand idly by and fall victim to the same fate. Caddo Lake is the

ideal proving ground for a plan of attack against giant salvinia; its march across the country must end here.' — U.S. REP. LOUIE GOHMERT, R-TYLER, WHO TOURED CADDO LAKE IN SEPTEMBER WITH LOCAL, STATE AND NATIONAL OFFICIALS

"We'll have hunting out here," he said. "We'll have wildlife observation and birding. We'll have wildlife education, and we'll have horseback riding."

A three-year burn cycle, conducted by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, will accomplish clearing work that once was naturally performed by occasional wildfires. The controlled burns will begin after a timber sale in July 2008 to thin the growth.

Their goal is to restore the refuge to a time when riders could negotiate the forest from Jefferson to Nacogdoches without ducking a limb, their line of sight clear beneath the first-growth canopy.

"There's going to be broom sage" carpeting the floor, Williams said. "And the grasses that grew in here naturally — the native grass'll come back."

Williams' description of a pristine forest might sound over-grand when one considers the World War II-era bomb-making facility was an Environmental Protection Agency Superfund cleanup site when it closed in 1994. Fashioning the ordnance that helped defend the country through every war between 1941 and 1994, and later destroying the Pershing missiles built there, left the 8,490-acre plant site bubbling with a devil's brew of chemical solvents, heavy metals and other pollutants. The migrating mixture threatened teeming wildlife in adjacent Caddo Lake as well as in the 1,200 acres of wetlands inside the plant area, according to the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality.

Add the potentially live explosives hiding here and there amid the old sumps and bunkers, and the area once seemed as likely a wildlife refuge as downtown Baghdad.

Nearly 7,000 acres of the site have passed EPA muster and have been transferred from the U.S. Army to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, which will oversee the Caddo Lake National Wildlife Refuge.

"Here in just a little bit that will be about 7,500 acres," Williams said.

The cleanup included the wetlands, which are part of an eco-system that earned a Ramsar Treaty designation as Wetlands of International Importance in 1994.

In November, site managers from many of the 22 American Ramsar areas — there are 1,676 worldwide in 156 countries — will come to Karnack. The managers will swap ideas on wetlands management and share tips to make the new wildlife refuge a success for all its stakeholders, humans included.

"We'll all get together and talk — how can we do better?" President of the Caddo Lake Institute Rick Lowerre said. "Anything we can do to help sort of promote the right kind of tourism, educate people about the wonders of Caddo Lake and the beauty that's a big part of it.

"It's a fantastic place. It's going to be a fantastic place, not just as a wildlife refuge and hunting and fishing. It's got so many historic aspects to it. There aren't a lot of big public spaces in the area."

Some sections, particularly near the old Shops Area that was the center of production, will remain in Army hands when the rest of the refuge tentatively is slated to open to the public in Spring 2008. The danger there is not unexploded bombs, but a sort of underground pollution bubble called a plume. Most of the plume is the solvent, perchlorate, used to clean the machinery that once kept 2,400 workers humming around the clock seven days a week.