

State's only natural lake is home to varied wildlife |By JULIA ROBB, News Messenger|

Today's article on Caddo Lake State Park is part of an on-going series that looks at the state of Texas' parks by Cox newspapers.

Caddo Lake, Caddo Lake State Park's main attraction, is probably the most treasured, fought over & thought over body of water in Texas. It is certainly the state's only natural lake, and looks more like a South Louisiana swamp, featuring bald cypress trees towering above shallow green water dotted with lily pads.

Alligators inhabit the lake – located in Harrison and Marion Counties, and in Louisiana – as do bald eagles, turtles, snakes (including the water moccasin), nutrias and beaver, according to naturalists.

A steamboat operator reported in 2005 she had spotted an ivory-billed woodpecker flying through one of the lake's bald cypress forests. Many naturalists and bird-watchers believe the ivory billed woodpecker, once believed extinct, can still be found in wilderness areas.

Caddo is so rich in wildlife species that a 6,000-acre national wildlife refuge has been created adjacent to the lake and will soon be open to the public.

Marshall resident Jack Canson, who is filming a documentary about the lake, said it is "Spellbinding because of its natural beauty. And it's easy to get a sense that you are in a part of the world that has not changed much at all from the time when our ancestors were there.

"There are so few places like that."

Birders flock to the lake to spot exotic species and fishermen enjoy the large-mouth bass fishing, although scientists have said the bass population has ingested fairly high rates of dangerous metals (as have many East Texas bass, among others).

Texans have enjoyed the lake for years, thanks, in part, to cabins built by the Civilian Conservation Corps between 1934 and 1937. More cabins were subsequently built. (see accompanying story).

Caddo was probably created by a 1800 log jam on the Red River, scientists and historians believe, but it was dammed in the early 1900s.

Much of the lake's natural water source was eliminated when Lake 'O the Pines was built in the late 1950s, lake advocates believe, and Caddo is now dependant on Cypress Bayou to bring sorely-needed water from Lake 'O the Pines.

About four bayous still supply a natural water flow to Caddo.

But the lake's average depth is only 8 to 10-feet, and it is often more shallow, depending on rainfall, according to lake statistics, supplied by the state park.

That curtailed water flow is the crux of a problem.

Scientists believe Caddo is not getting enough water when the lake needs the water – such as summer months, when droughts often occur – which leads to invasive species, such as water hyacinth and hydrilla. Both plants are water weeds which suck up the lake's oxygen content. The low oxygen content leads to fish kills and areas in the lake which cannot sustain aquatic life.

Invasive water plants also choke the boat lanes. An aggressive spraying program is expected to help control the water plants, local organizations believe.

Both local and national organizations, scientists and universities have also banded together to address the lake's water flow problems, studying how much water Caddo actually needs, and when it needs it most.

But other local interests have made Caddo a strong point of contention, to put it mildly.

In the early 1990s, Harrison County residents fought over a proposed canal leading from the lake to the Red River. Supporters believed the canal would reopen navigation to the lake and other possible ports. A coalition of Caddo Lake organizations strongly opposed the canal, which they believed would destroy the lake's ecosystem. The idea was eventually dropped.

Lately, local businessmen proposed that land adjacent to the lake be used for economic development rather than be transferred to the Caddo Lake National Wildlife Refuge, as had been originally planned. Lake advocates met the idea with outrage and it was also defeated.