

Swamped by nature

Caddo Lake State Park makes an ideal base for exploring a vast, murky maze of sloughs, ponds and bayous surrounded by thick cypress forests and teeming with life / SURVEYING OUR STATE PARKS

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CADDO LAKE - As we skim along the surface of Caddo Lake on an 18-foot Go Devil swamp boat, the still water reflects moss-draped bald cypress trees like a mirror.

We seem to be floating over green glass.

Great blue herons and great egrets take graceful flight as we approach, as if to show off their monumental wingspans, then stop to strike an elegant pose, silhouetted on cypress branches.

Tour guide John Winn turns his swamp boat off a main boat road and into a narrow passage of the backwaters he knows so well. The boat's bow gently parts the aquatic plants. Winn shuts off the outboard motor and I hear only the soft splash of turtles sliding off logs into the greenish-brown water and the baritone call of a lone bullfrog.

The experience is a sure cure for noise pollution, Winn says.

Winn's operation, Caddo Outback Backwater Tours, is three miles outside of Caddo Lake State Park in East Texas, where we are staying. Although it has hiking and nature trails through oak, magnolia and pine forests, this park is focused on its namesake, the only naturally formed lake in Texas.

A concession within the park offers pontoon-boat tours and rents canoes. A fishing pier and boat ramp also are popular. And the park represents an ideal base for exploring more of the vast lake.

This 28,000-acre maze of sloughs, ponds and bayous probably was formed by a huge logjam on the Red River. These days, though, the water level is maintained with a dam.

Winn grew up on Caddo Lake, quitting school in the 10th grade to work as a fishing and duck-hunting guide. "All my time was spent out here on the water," he says. In his 20s, he went into construction work but yearned to get back on the water. He decided to offer excursions, but not the tourist-filled, pontoon-boat type. "I thought, why don't I get people back in these areas that people don't get to see," Winn says.

So six years ago, Winn began conducting private, custom tours for two to four passengers, plying the backwaters he knows so well. He specializes in photo tours.

Learning about nature

Winn introduces us to a black vulture he's named Harriet, who makes a nest every year in a duck blind. Then he glides past a large, sturdily constructed beaver dam. He says he tried to take one apart as a kid. It took forever and by the next day, the industrious beaver family had rebuilt. We're surrounded by what resembles a grassy field of aquatic blooms - and cypress trees growing right out of the water. Sometimes the white blossoms are so thick they look like a fresh snowfall.

My husband laughs as a gigantic dragonfly lands on my shoulder. Turns out, it's nature's stamp of approval: "That means you're a good person," Winn says.

Life below the surface presents a whole other ecosystem: The melange of aquatic plants and root systems - lily pads, alligator weed, American lotus pads, duckweed and moss - looks like a watercolor painting derived from a green palette, save for the pops of yellow and white blossoms. The flowers close up tightly every afternoon against the summer heat only to open again in the morning.

Caddo Lake's 100 miles of boat roads are so circuitous that at night Winn has often encountered lost boaters who are delighted to see him. I ask if there's anywhere on Caddo Lake, which covers portions of Texas and Louisiana, that's safe or pleasant to swim. His answer should be "Are you out of your mind?" but he's too polite.

Instead, he explains that conditions are not ideal for a dip. Alligators are around, visible and active at night. And the water looks as thick as pea soup. If you touch bottom with your feet, you'll sink into muck up to your ankles. If you're wearing clothes, they'll come out stained.

The naked truth

But plenty of water skiers find the wider, less murky areas of the lake inviting. And Winn hasn't always followed his own advice. "You haven't lived until you've gone skinny-dipping in something like this," Winn says. "I've been in the water a lot of times, sometimes by choice. The thing about this boat here is I can get through just about anywhere, even through mud. But if you're stuck, you're stuck. So I've had to strip down naked to turn the boat around.

Back at the park, we rent a canoe and paddle peacefully into Saw Mill Pond, which takes us out to Big Cypress Bayou, all part of the lake system. Winn says boat and water-ski traffic on weekends can be intense on the bayou, which resembles a river. But on a Monday in early June, we don't see much human activity.

On the way back, we find a shady spot and drop a worm-baited line into the water, trying for one of those reported 71 species of fish said to inhabit Caddo Lake. Eventually, we pull up not a bass, but a small bream. Still, a fish is a fish, and satisfied, we toss it back.

Evening brings a fiery sunset over the swamp, which we watch through the trees from an Adirondack chair on the huge air-conditioned, two-bedroom cabin. A little bird with a big work ethic is building an elaborate nest under the eaves.

We grill steaks outside as the sun's glow fades to a star-studded black and the night creatures begin to sing.

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PLANNING A TRIP

Getting there: From Houston, take U.S. 59 north to Marshall. From Marshall, take Texas 43 to FM 2198. Go east for a half-mile to Park Road 2. Caddo Lake State Park is 15 miles northeast of Marshall.

Hours: Day-use guests must leave at 10 p.m.

Admission: \$2 per person per day. Admission is free for visitors younger than 13.

Contact: www.tpwd.state.tx.us/spdest/findadest/parks/caddo_lake/#sch

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CADDO LAKE STATE PARK

REPORT CARD

Recreational highlights: Fishing, bird-watching, boat ramp, canoe rental, waterfront camping, hiking, water skiing, playground, picnic sites.

Fishing regulations: A fishing license is needed for fishing from any type of boat. No license is needed if fishing from shore within the park or from the park fishing pier.

Facilities: A recreation hall with a capacity of 100 is available for day-use rental.

Trails: Several miles of hiking trails and interpretive nature trails.

Wildlife: Waterfowl, including great blue herons and great egrets; black vultures, bullfrogs, nutria, alligators, white-tail deer, frogs, beaver, snakes, turtles, squirrels, armadillos.

Guided tours: Pontoon boat tours of Caddo Lake are available most days through a concession near the fishing pier.

Canoe rental: \$22 for four hours.

Tent camping: 20 sites for tents only with water. Some sites have water views.

RV camping: 18 sites with electricity and water; eight sites with full hookups.

Shelters: Eight screened-shelter sites have picnic tables and electricity inside.

Restrooms: Yes, with showers. Clean, but they've seen better days.

Cabins: Nine cabins built in the 1930s were renovated three years ago and equipped with air conditioning, comfortable furniture, sheets, towels and quilts. Larger cabins also have kitchens, including small refrigerators, stovetop burners and microwaves. They also have fireplaces inside and grills and picnic tables outdoors. Housekeepers supply fresh towels daily, but bring beach towels for outdoor activities. Also, bring dishes, cutlery, cookwear and paper towels. The cabins are about a half-mile from the lake.

Visitor center: Located near the entrance; it includes a gift shop featuring books about Texas parks, birds and Caddo Lake's history. An exhibit explains the park's natural features.

Pets: Allowed on a leash, but not in the cabin area.

Wheelchair access: Two cabins are accessible.

Wi-Fi: No.

Cell-phone coverage: Good outside, but not inside the cabins.

Food and gas: A grocery store/gas station is located just outside the park entrance.

Overall rating: 4 stars (on a 4-star scale).

- EILEEN McCLELLAND