

The bewitching waters of Caddo Lake

Wildlife and storied past haunt the swamps and coves

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By JANE SUMNER / Special Contributor to The Dallas Morning News

UNCERTAIN, Texas -- As befits a living museum of antebellum homes, Jefferson claims a regular gaggle of resident ghosts. The East Texas tourist destination even touts its spooks on guided tours. But nearby lies a mysterious haunt that harbors more eerie shades of a shadowy past: Caddo Lake.

In fact, the spirits begin crowding in as soon as Caddo Outback tour guide John Winn pushes off at sundown from the dock. Depending on what he tactfully calls "the size of my customers," his 18-foot tour boat can carry four adults and a small child or two into the lake's storied past.

Hailed as "the four-wheeler of outboards," the 27-horsepower Go-Devil is ideal for Caddo, whose 26,800 acres are split between Louisiana, where the lake is more open water, and Texas, where it's shallower, swampy and filled with water plants.

Designed to navigate in just such conditions, the Go-Devil can slide over fallen logs and cut through thick aquatic vegetation. A sprawling maze of boat roads and towering bald cypress dripping spectral green-gray Spanish moss, Caddo is no place to break down or get lost. And, Mr. Winn says, he's lost count of the number of stranded, nail-biting boaters he's rescued.

"Most of the time I just happened across them," he says. "Some of them were really happy to see me. Nobody who's not familiar with Caddo wants to spend a dark night on it."

But a night on the lake with Mr. Winn at the tiller is safe moonlit magic. Trust the warm, friendly swamp rat to find his way around places with names such as Big Hole, Goose Prairie and Whangdoodle Pass.

It's a quiet rush anytime, but Caddo really comes alive with what he calls "the local night life" at dusk. That's when its 50 species of mammals, including beaver, nutria, raccoon, mink and white-tailed deer, begin to stir in the wilderness and black water.

"Night is the time, too, when some of the reptiles come out to do their thing," he says. Caddo is home to 53 species, including 17 kinds of turtles and 30 kinds of snakes. About half of the state's 63 amphibian species can be found in Caddo.

It's another world -- strange and forbidding but enchanting, too. Night is also when the tree frog chorus trills, basso profundo bullfrogs garrump, and great horned and barred owls hoot across the sloughs and bayous.

"To those more accustomed to concrete and asphalt," Mr. Winn says, "night tours offer a bit of adventure with the mystery of what lurks in the shadows."

In his 35 years on the lake, the guide has seen some awesome sights at night. He's watched as bull alligators battled in the water, ducked as lightning danced around his boat in storms and lain transfixed across a seat as showers of meteors crisscrossed the sky.

But the times he likes best, he says, are the simpler ones. "Those are the times when you are just grateful to be in such a place and to be a part of it." Like in summer, when, he says, thousands of yellow, white and violet blooms dot the lake. "To me, Caddo is more than a place of outstanding beauty. It is part of my soul."

In 1993, the lake was designated "a wetland of international importance" under the Ramsar Convention. The result of efforts by environmentalists, including rocker Don Henley, the designation helped sink a project by the U.S. Corps of Engineers to channel through the lake for a barge canal from Daingerfield, Texas, to Shreveport, La.

"In the day, you see Caddo and her beauty with clarity," Mr. Winn says. At night, it's a whole different feeling. If you think it looks mystical in daylight, go see it under the stars. From his perch at the back of the boat, the guide can rattle off the lake's 44 rare, threatened or endangered plant and animal species, its more than 250 species of birds that either make their homes on Caddo or migrate through and, of course, the 71 species of fish that, he says, make this the most diverse fishery in Texas.

He also can describe in graphic detail the Great Raft, a massive logjam of debris on the Red River that once blocked the mouth of Big Cypress Bayou, creating Caddo Lake. And he can tell how destruction of the Raft by the U.S. Corps of Engineers in 1873 lowered water in the lake and Big Creek Bayou and signaled the end of Jefferson as the state's second biggest port. The last steamboat left in 1903.

If asked, he can conjure the lake's peaceful, friendly namesake -- the native Caddos -- a tall, tattooed people who sold their lands, about a million acres, for \$80,000 to Uncle Sam in 1835.

"They became nomadic for a time," Mr. Winn says, "until they were finally granted some land in the Indian Territories in Oklahoma."

And he can spin tales about the bloody time when this region of disputed boundaries and no laws was known as the Texas Badlands. In the 1840s, opposing bands of vigilantes, the Moderators and the Regulators, roamed the countryside in what amounted to a civil war.

Growing up, Mr. Winn felt most at home at Caddo. "It comforted me when I was lonely," he says. "It fed me when I was hungry, and it taught me things I couldn't learn anywhere else."

Four years ago, headaches and high blood pressure sent him back to his first love: the lake. Only, much of what he'd done before to earn a living were now things of the past.

That's when he decided to try something different. "I didn't want to do the typical tour, which is on pontoon or larger boats with frequent schedules. Typically, those tours are on the more open waters of Caddo. I wanted to get people back into areas of Caddo where few people go, where wildlife is abundant and less intruded upon."

And he wanted to lead more-personal tours. "Ones that people won't soon forget," he says. He'll go out during the day, at twilight and at night. Depending on water conditions and the weather, his basic tour lasts about an hour or so, but he'll stay as long as the client wishes. Birders and photographers like to stay longer, he says.

"The number one comment I get about Caddo," he says, "is that it looks like a place where dinosaurs could have lived. I find that I never get tired of Caddo. Every time I go out, I see something different. If you're willing to tune out the outside world and let its wonders sink in, you'll feel the spirit of the lake. It's the spirit of a place that time forgot."

Jane Sumner is a freelance writer in Dallas. When you go

Caddo Lake State Park is open daily, year round. Admission: \$2 per person 13 or older. Contact: 903-679-3351; www.tpwd.state.tx.us/park/caddo. Camping and cabins available.

For those not wanting to rough it in the park, nearby Jefferson offers several hotels and many bed-and-breakfasts. Contact: www.jefferson-texas.com.

For more information: Caddo Outback Backwater Tours charges \$40 for a two-person, one-hour-plus backwater tour, day or night. It's \$10 for each additional person, with children younger than 13 half-price. Longer tours are available. Contact: 903-789-3384; www.caddooutback.com.

Resource: Caddo Lake Area Chamber of Commerce: 1-866-282-2336 or 903-679-3500.