

# 3 *Days in the Field* / By Kathryn Hunter

DESTINATION: CADDO LAKE

TRAVEL TIME FROM:

AUSTIN — 6.25 HOURS / BROWNSVILLE — 12.25 HOURS / DALLAS — 3.25 HOURS

HOUSTON — 4.25 HOURS / SAN ANTONIO — 7.75 HOURS / LUBBOCK — 9 HOURS / EL PASO — 13.75 HOURS

## Primeval Paradise

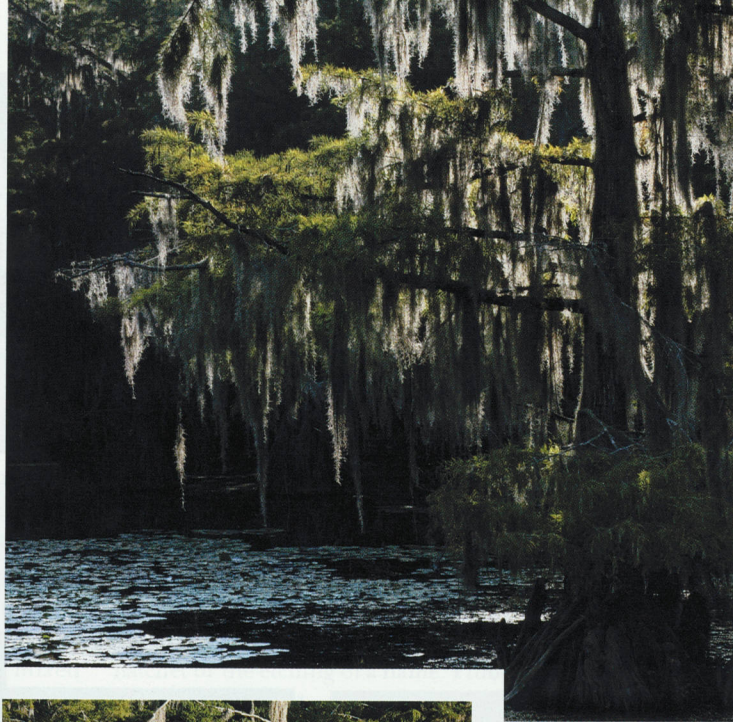
*A magical world unfolds under draperies of Spanish moss at Caddo Lake.*



A serene sunset  
through the cypress  
trees at Caddo Lake.

**Caddo Lake is an old place**—you can feel it in your bones. The cypress swamps are nearly primeval, a setting where you might expect to find dinosaurs and wicked elves, a landscape where you could easily lose yourself in the twisting of sloughs and bayous and backwaters where strange creatures have evolved to plumb these dark, shallow waters.

A mounted paddlefish (*Polyodon spathula*)—a prehistoric-looking fish with a long spatula-like snout, skin like a catfish and cartilage like a shark—hangs above the front desk at the visitors center. Paddlefish, the oldest surviving animal species in North America, existed before the dinosaurs. Although they can grow



Clockwise from top left: the barred owl (with its “who-cooks-for-you” call) is one of three owl species at Caddo Lake; Spanish moss drapes a cypress tree; a track in the mud provides evidence of alligators; canoeing is one of the most rewarding ways to explore the lake.



TOP RIGHT AND BOTTOM CENTER © JEFF PARKER; TOP LEFT © LARRY DITTO; BOTTOM RIGHT © GRADY ALLEN

to be 7 feet long and weigh up to 200 pounds, the state park visitors center’s specimen is on the smaller end. Its 4-foot span and odd shape are enough to make you stop and take a second look, though.

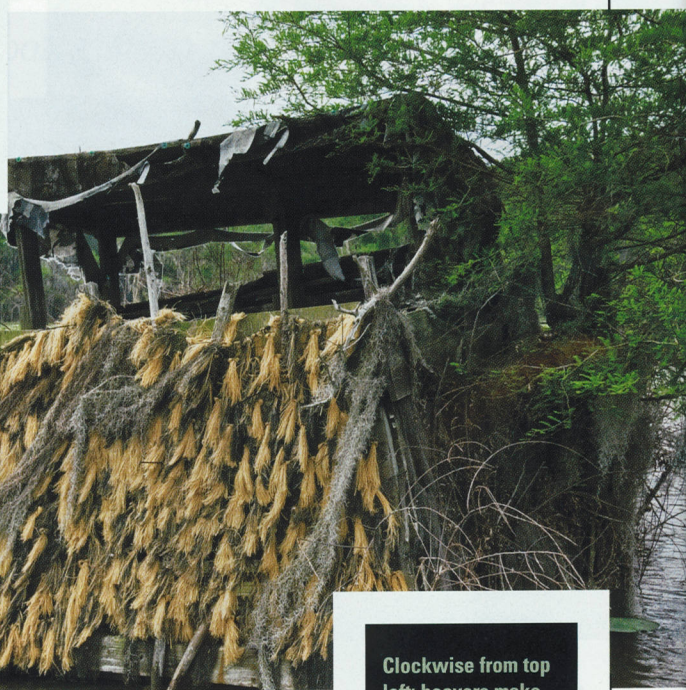
“When people walk in and see it, they think it’s not a real fish,” park ranger Chris McCord says. But this is no jackalope with a borrowed set of antlers. The paddlefish is a native of Caddo Lake and the Red River system, and it is currently considered a threatened species. McCord says that work is being done to re-establish its habitat in parts of the lake, and that catching or harming a paddlefish is strictly prohibited. Fortunately, you’re unlikely to catch one on a baited hook, as paddlefish feed on plankton.

Visitors come to Caddo Lake from all over the world. It is best to make reservations in advance because the park is often busy. The day after Thanksgiving, though cold, is no exception — when my family and I arrive, all the cabins are booked and the campground is nearly full. In spite of the multitude of visitors, however, the park is oddly quiet, and the first noise to wake you in the morning is often not your neighboring campers but the typical soundtrack of East Texas — a chorus of raucous crows and cardinals and the whistle of a train chugging by just beyond the park boundary.

My cousins Chase, 9, and Brooke, 12, attend the park’s “Owl Prowl” with me on Friday night. As the sun goes down, we sit in the outdoor amphitheater and wait for interpretive spe-

cialist Charles Hubbard to begin his presentation. Sitting next to my cousins, I feel very young myself, as if I’m on a school trip. However, it is the other members of the audience — all adults much older than I — who are the most vocal. As Hubbard sets up his projector and screen, they laugh, tell jokes and share anecdotes. To a late arrival walking up from the road below, one of the audience members, a Brit, shouts, “Bring the popcorn!”

As Hubbard starts up the slide show, the audience settles down. He shows images of each of the three species of owls found in the park, beginning with the diminutive eastern screech-owl. He plays only one of its three calls; the other two calls (particularly the “screech” the bird is known for) are confrontational and might draw the owl as well as its antagonists. The great horned owl is presented as the bully of the night world, so large that it is able to catch and consume wild turkeys and opossums. Like most birds, the great horned owl has no sense of smell; because of this and because of its size, it’s one of the only predators of skunks. And last but not least is the barred owl, a bird that communicates with humans quite freely: “Who-cooks-for-you, who-cooks-for-you-all,” it says.



**Clockwise from top left: beavers make their home at Caddo Lake; a beaver dam; an old duck blind looms out of the dark waters of the lake; the brightly colored prothonotary warbler is a favorite of bird watchers.**

This is the call that Hubbard plays after he leads us on a short walk to the boat ramp, having attracted a barred owl to that location several times before. But tonight the woods are strangely silent, and the star of the show doesn't attend. At one point a songbird in the dark woods sets up a piercing refrain of its own, as if to say, "Go away, I'm sleeping," or perhaps, "Don't eat me! I'm far too loud to taste good."

The "Owl Prowl" is a year-round program, starting at the amphitheater at dusk every Friday. Owls don't migrate, and they're much easier to spot during the spring, their mating season. I tell Chase and Brooke that maybe we'll see one on our next visit.

While fall may not be the best time of year to see an owl, it is one of the most beautiful and comfortable seasons to visit. There are few insects, and at the beginning of the season the cypress leaves turn a rusty orange color reminiscent of fire. On Saturday morning, we are among these beautiful old trees as soon as we push off the bank in the four canoes we've rented from operator Cindy Speight's Old Port Caddo Rentals. We are a motley crew teamed up in pairs — Chase and I, my mother and Brooke, my grandfather and 19-year-old cousin Jake, and my aunt and uncle bringing up the rear.

My mother and I have canoed here twice before, venturing up two miles of Big Cypress Bayou into the picturesque maze

around Hell's Half-Acre. I am excited to share with my family this place, aptly named, that took my breath away the first time I saw it, and every time since. Before we'd started the trip, we had decided that one group would go a shorter distance, turning around just after reaching the cypress swamp. But what I have failed to anticipate are the how-much-farthers and are-we-there-yets, which begin less than 15 minutes into our journey. I am accused of many grave injustices, including misrepresenting the distance. I begin to fear a mutiny.

Big Cypress Bayou is mostly dark, still water. It's lined with river camps and houses on one side, and on the other, with the Caddo Lake Wildlife Management Area. This part of the lake is not particularly scenic, but when you reach the cut that takes you to Boat Road C, you begin traveling beneath an archway of river birches leaning out over the water. And at the end of the cut, you are in another world altogether, one dripping with Spanish moss and mystery. Here there are cypress trees that are more than 350 years old, and often the surface of the water is covered with a green, deceptively thick cover of duckweed that opens up as your canoe passes through, and then closes behind you. You have to

follow the boat road signs or else risk losing your way.

Just within the cypress swamp, we beach the canoes on a steep sand bank and begin deliberations. Brooke and all the women, and also Jake, decide to go on the longer, four-hour trip, following Boat Road S on the way back to make a loop. As Cindy Speight drives by with her pontoon boat tour, she points out to her passengers the marks an alligator had made as it slid into the water. We have unknowingly parked two of the canoes at an alligator amusement park.

There are many ways to see the lake and its vibrant array of wildlife, but canoeing is one of the quietest, and often the most fulfilling. There is little motorized boat traffic around Hell's Half-Acre, and amidst the cacophony of the frogs and water birds, you stumble upon the beaver dams, the alligators and the duck blinds looming out of the water like the abandoned homes of trolls or witches. It is easy to imagine oneself the first explorer here, a Caddo Indian or frontiersman cataloging the contents and bounds of an eerie swamp older than time itself.

Here at Caddo Lake, in the cypress swamps and mixed bottomland hardwood forest, there are many species of woodpeckers, warblers, water birds and birds of prey. The favorites of birders include the prothonotary warbler, bald eagle and wood duck, among others. And even when you can't see the birds themselves, you are surrounded by evidence of their presence — a downy woodpecker's call, which sounds like a baby's cry, or the holes driven into a sweetgum tree by enterprising yellow-bellied sapsuckers. Birders often employ the services of a local outfitter to visit and photograph different parts of the lake by boat, or, like my mother and I, attend

Charles Hubbard's Sunday bird walk that meets in the state park at 9 a.m. at the trailhead near the boat ramp.

"What Caddo Lake offers is a tremendous biodiversity that provides habitat suitable for a number of different bird species, both aquatic and terrestrial," Hubbard says. "When you have ecosystems that support plant life, that supports a variety of birds, and so in a small geographical area like this, you can see lots of different birds."

It will rain today — there is a mist hanging over everything, and the sky is a steely gray, as if an artist has rendered it to blend seamlessly with the horizon of Spanish moss and barren tree limbs. This is a place that makes you think of eternity, of both the enduring and ephemeral qualities of beauty.

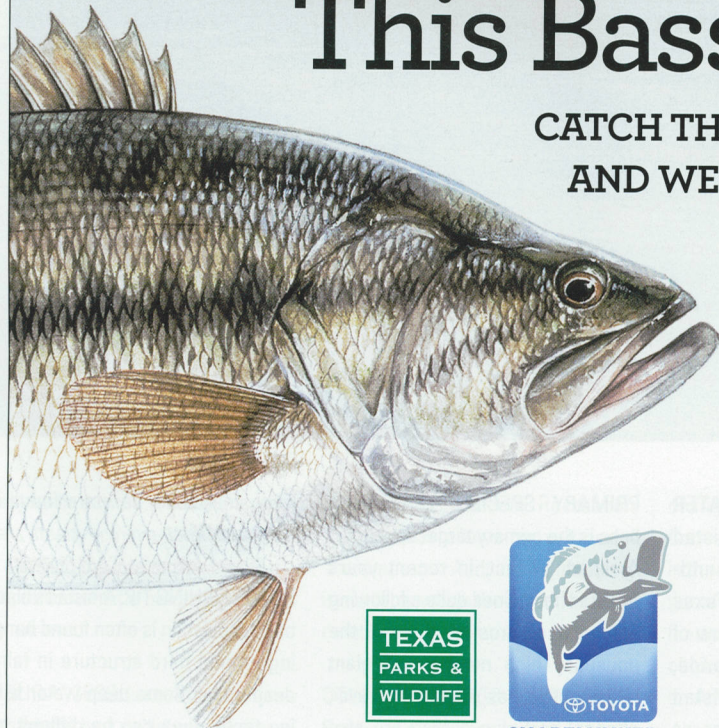
One of the last things Hubbard shows us on the walk is a large, very old oak tree. Its center is swollen in a "canker," a vicious mass infected by bacteria and slowly rotting away. The tree will die, he says. Often such infections enter the tree through marks that people cut into them, the stray blow of a hatchet or the etching of a name. Hubbard and other interpretive specialists teach people about parks and other special places so that these places will be appreciated and preserved. Like the oak tree, we can easily make our mark here at Caddo Lake, and destroy it forever, or we can protect it. After all, future members of our families need to see this place. ★

#### DETAILS

- Caddo Lake State Park, 903-679-3351, [www.tpwd.state.tx.us/caddolake](http://www.tpwd.state.tx.us/caddolake)
- Old Port Caddo Rentals and Tours, 903-930-0075, [www.texascanoerental.com](http://www.texascanoerental.com)

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