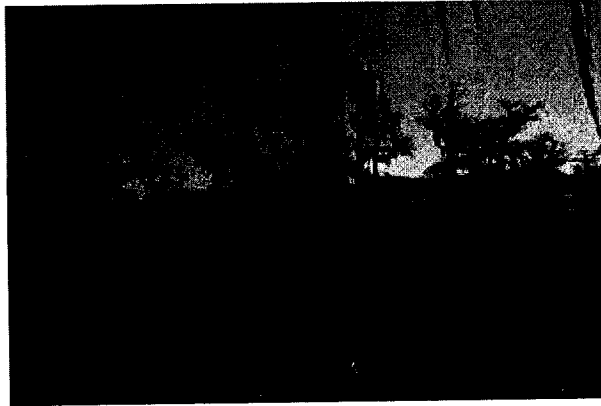


Nature helps local anglers find big bass



A patch of cypress trees, Spanish moss hanging from their limbs, rise from Caddo Lake's surface. Photo: Courtney Case

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An air of mystery surrounds Caddo Lake, which is, ironically, often referred to as the only honest lake in Texas. Many factors contribute to its mystique. Almost too many to count, in fact. It can be felt in the maze of sloughs, bayous, and ponds that comprise the lake's swampy waters. It can be felt in the thick bald cypress trees that spread out across the nearly 26,800 acres the lake occupies at its normal water level, and in the tangle of aquatic plants that thrive within them. It can be felt in the quaint cabins found at the lake's state park, some of which were constructed in the 1930s. And in the teeming fisheries and exotic waterfowl habitats the national wildlife refuge protects there. Peregrine falcons, bald eagles, alligator snapping turtles and alligators themselves. They have all called the lake home at some point. Caddo's shoreline tells its true story, though.

Straddling the border of Texas and Louisiana, it's also known as "the invisible lake" because the shoreline offers very few vantage points with a view of open water, especially on the Texas side. From overhead, it looks nothing like today's modern man-made reservoirs that shape the perceptions of what people believe a lake should look like. It's not smooth lines and rounded curves. It's all jags and bends and curls and slices, like pieces of a complex puzzle incorrectly connected together. In a way, like some parts of Texas' border itself. The splotches that gather enough water get their own names, many of which evoke the Southern culture that permeates the lake's region.

There's Stumpy Slough, Alligator Bayou, Perch Gap and Clintons Chute, all of which sit on the northwest tip of Big Lake (the main body of water). Then there's Whangdoodle Pass, Jackson Arm, Goose Prairie, Buzzard Bay and Whistleberry Slough, which all reside on the Texas side.

On the northern side of Back Lake, which rests on Caddo's far west side, jut limb after limb of narrow appendages that penetrate into a small island, like finely cut bones of a small bird's wing. Canals such as these signify Caddo's honesty, which is anchored in its natural formation.

Caddo Indian legend tells of a giant flood that caused the lake to form. Another theory, supported by 19th century geologist Sir Charles Lyell, suggested the waters partially owed their origin to the New Madrid earthquakes of 1811. Scientists now speculate floodwaters blocked by massive log jams on the Red River backed into the Cypress Bayou watershed to form the lake. Either way, the theories of its beginnings only further propel its mystical wonder. Texas has just 166 bodies of water commonly considered lakes. Only one of them is naturally-formed. It's Caddo. East Texas' own prehistoric insect frozen in an amber capsule of history, a fossilized preservation of time.

"I've really kind of had a lifelong love affair with Caddo Lake," said Jack Canson, a Marshall native and filmmaker who has been working on a documentary and an additional book-related project about the lake for the better part of the last five years. The movie, which Canson expects to finish this summer, is tentatively titled - and appropriately so - 'Mysteries of Caddo Lake.' A former Hollywood scriptwriter, Canson, 65, grew up near Caddo and knows these mysteries as much as anybody.

The longer he has spent on his current project, the deeper he has plunged into the history of the lake, which has taken him into studies on the Caddo Indians, the Ark-La-Tex oil boom of the early 1900s and the steamboat days that soon followed, when the lake was a part of a navigation system that carried paddle-wheelers up the Mississippi River from New Orleans and sometimes as far inland as Jefferson.

Accounts exist from that time period of warring vigilantes, a thriving pearling business and vessels that transported beer through the dry county. "Caddo was a very big part of my life growing up here," Canson said. Along with many other Piney Woods natives. Recently, a couple new plot twists have introduced themselves to Canson during the time of his research. One of them was welcome. The other, not so much. Not for a movie maker that cared about his movie's subject much more so than he did about the movie itself.

An air of fear settled around Caddo Lake in 2006. That's when the first sprout of *Salvinia molesta*, more commonly known as giant salvinia, was discovered in the lake. The floating fern from southern Brazil is currently one of the most problematic plants in Texas, according to Texas Parks & Wildlife. The green nuisance damages infested lakes due to its fast-spreading nature by quickly outgrowing and replacing native plants that provide food and habitat for local animals. The aquatic plant was originally found on the Louisiana side of the lake, but it quickly found its way across state lines.

"We went from virtually less than 100 acres of it in 2007 to 1,100 acres by 2008 and 3,200 acres by 2009," said Tim Bister, TPWD's Region 3 inland fisheries biologist, which includes Caddo and Lake O' the Pines. "And that was with some spraying going on." Additionally, it blocks out sunlight by creating a thick mat on the water's surface, thus decreasing oxygen levels available to fish underneath. The dense mats of leaves also inhibit angling, boating and other water-related recreational activities. Even when the plant dies, its decomposition sinks to the lake's bottom and lowers dissolved oxygen even further. In other words, the plant - which is outlawed in the United States - basically lays siege to unsuspecting waters. Even in death.

As a board member of the Greater Caddo Lake Association and a consultant for the Caddo Lake Institute (a non-profit educational group), Canson - along with his cohorts - took the plant's presence personally. Through their urging, a government-approved herbicide spray program was initially introduced. In June 2007, a little more than \$30,000 was raised to erect a two-mile barricade net to protect the mostly unaffected western part of the lake on the Texas side. Although it wasn't foolproof, the fence held its ground.

"In my opinion, that was very effective as far as it went," Canson said. "It stopped a lot of it from getting into that part of the lake, which was the more vulnerable side." The raging storms from Hurricane Ike laid waste to that solution, though. "The posts were taken up and all of that," Canson said. "The storms blew that thing to pieces. That's when our giant salvinia problems got much worse."

A 10-day trail of mechanical removal was the next counterattack. The strategy was executed without any mechanical failures - which was the main concern heading into the attempt, due to the lake's unique landscape.

It also offered immediate relief, but, at the same time, it had its drawbacks. "If you don't have a way to protect that area that you have mechanically cleaned, it's just as vulnerable the day after you've cleaned it to wind-driven or wave-driven giant salvinia as any other place," Canson said.

Also in 2007, weevils that feed specifically on the plant and had proven to be an effective combatant in certain South American countries were introduced, but the East Texas winters proved to be too cold for their survival. Mother Nature's frosty hand made up for that this past winter, though.

The 16.17-pound, record-setting largemouth bass Keith Burns yanked out of Caddo on March 20 marked the biggest fish caught in Texas in more than a decade and shattered an 18-year lake record. Not only did it bring an element of excitement back to Caddo, but it also provided a glimpse of a turning point in the lake's fight with giant salvinia. Following a particularly harsh winter for East Texas that saw two snowfalls in addition to high precipitation levels, the invasive plant simply washed away as the levels subsided.

"We were pretty lucky this winter," Bister said. "Not only did we have very high flood levels, but the duration of the high water was just amazing," Canson added, saying that all of the elements lined up perfectly for Caddo to naturally combat the pest. "The combination of those mats being broken up and then having the cold temperatures at the same time, it was almost like a perfect storm," Canson continued. "Not only was it redistributing it, but you also have the secondary effect of diluting it and making it more vulnerable to extreme cold conditions." Soon enough the water levels began falling. And the salvinia did with it.

"It was just a line of vegetation going over that spillway," Canson said. "The amount that went out of that lake, from my judgment, was just enormous." Keats Mullikin, the longtime outdoors reporter for this paper who has lived on the lake's shores nearly his entire life, also noticed a significant difference. "The lake right now looks better than I've seen it in a long time," he said. "It sure is nice now to not look out there and have to see a solid mass of that stuff."

Just as quickly as the fern washed down the waterway, the anglers began returning to the lake. And soon enough, a record was broken.

That's not to say Burns wouldn't have caught his fish had the salvinia remained in its previous state. Who knows? But there is no denying the lake presents itself better to anglers without the floating pest around.

"There's no doubt," Bister said. "Because these plants are floating, you could go fish a place you like one day and the wind will change direction and it'll be covered with plants the next day. It's certainly going to cause problems for anglers with areas where they might like to fish."

About 40 miles to Caddo's northwest, Mother Nature was also affecting Lake O' the Pines. Although the cold didn't play much of a role, it didn't really need to, since giant salvinia is not much of a factor there. Instead it was the rainy weather. Over the course of 2009, the lake hit three separate high water marks which were caused by an abnormal amount of rainfall during a short period of time. "This past October was the third-highest level on record in the history of the lake," said Robert Henderson, a natural resource specialist for the lake. The high mark topped at 243.5 feet above sea level.

It wasn't until recently that the lake's pool finally dipped back down to its normal mark of 228.5 feet above sea level. May and August of 2009 also saw high water levels. The continual fluctuation of the water level can sometimes make it hard on anglers, Henderson said.

"It will cover different tree stumps and cover up into the campgrounds, including the picnic tables," he said. "It really creates a lot of different obstacles. There are just so many things hidden under the water that aren't normally there, so you really have to use a lot more caution."

While high water levels don't necessarily make for better fishing, Henderson said it could provide fish with more feeding opportunities, which might make them more accessible once the water level begins dropping.

"When the additional land gets flooded, it will wash things into the lake that the fish like to eat," Henderson said. "The fish will come up and feed on the insects in the grassy areas."

No matter how it happened, the lake's records eventually began falling, first on March 20 with James Hollis' 13.2-pounder and again on March 26 with Carl Clark's 15.13-pounder. Roy Woods, who lives near the lake, said it was just a matter of time before the records began falling after the TPWD began stocking the lake with Florida largemouth bass in the mid-1980s. Woods was president of the Lake O' the Pines Chamber of Commerce when the lake was stocked. "It's starting to pay dividends now," he said. "When the lake was stocked, the record was around nine-and-a-half pounds and within three years it went to 10 (pounds) and it just kept getting bigger from there."

While the two fish snagged at Lake O' the Pines were its first two ever entered into the program, Burns' bass at Caddo also marked its first official lunker in more than a decade.

TPWD biologists agree that phases such as that are common at most Texas lakes.

"I think when you look at the record books, the only lake that's been producing ShareLunkers consistently in terms of actually having entries is Lake Fork," said Mukhtar Farooki, fisheries biologist for the San Angelo district. Even Lake Fork, though, which has produced more than four times as many ShareLunker entries than any other Texas lake since the program's inception in the late 1980s, has gone through its share of dry spells.

Of the 502 fish entered into the program, 246 of those are from Fork. But most of those catches came in the 1990s, during the lake's so-called glory years. Since 2000, Fork has yielded only 57 lunkers, including years of just one in 2001 and three in 2008. Joe Cermele, a bass editor for Field & Stream magazine, said overfishing could contribute to such cycles on lakes as productive as Fork. "As the population grows, lakes become overfished, habitat is lost, I'd say there is a good chance fish that size might not continue to thrive naturally forever," he said.

While Fork's production has tapered off since the start of this century, other lakes, such as Allen Henry, near Lubbock, have seen sharp rises. Henry, which ranks second overall in the program with 25 entries, produced nearly all of those in a three-year span, with nine lunkers each in 2005 and 2006, before falling to only two in 2007. The lake has had none since then. One of the lakes in Farooki's region, O.H. Ivie, has stolen the spotlight during this lunker season.

Entering the year, the West Texas lake hadn't produced an entry since 2002. All it's done since then is churn out nine, tying Henry for the second-most recorded by a single lake in a season.

"We saw signs of it last year where we had two ShareLunkers caught outside of the program season (which meant they weren't eligible for the program)," Farooki said. "It was a bit of a surprise the manner in which it came, though."

After four fish were registered from Ivie during the season's first six months, the lake caught fire early this month with a pair reeled in April 2, followed by one on the 5th, another on the 6th and then one on the 9th, which wound up being prestigious catch No. 500 in the program's history, netting Sam Callaway a \$6,000-plus check.

"I think the chase to number 500 drove that," Farooki said. "Especially as Ivie was producing a lot of fish as we got into the late 490s. I think a lot of people were thinking, 'Ivie's probably going to do it,' and that drove the visitation rate up."

Just like Caddo and Lake O' the Pines, though, Ivie had to suffer through a handful of dormant years before breaking into the lead role. And like its brothers on the opposite side of the state, Mother Nature also played a role in its production.

"When you're talking about West Texas lakes, the reason why these cycles are so pronounced is because of water levels," Farooki said. "We're subjected to these drought conditions and then when the rains come, a new reservoir comes about."

If nothing else, the area's recent record catches have certainly increased activity on the two lakes within the last month. "It seems to have given our fishing traffic a kind of shot in the arm," Henderson said. "With it being spawning season, we pretty much get a good crowd anyway, but it (the increase) was noticeable." With KYKX's Big Bass Bonanza coming to Lake O' the Pines on May 1-2, the timing was also impeccable.

"We always get a lot of people out here pre-fishing for that event, too," Henderson said of the annual bass tournament, which is put on by the Longview country music radio station and is the biggest either area lake sees each year.

Last year, around 800 people registered to fish the tournament, which offers a prize of \$105,000 to the angler that catches the biggest fish. The prize includes a brand new Skeeter bass boat.

"Registration is definitely up over last year," said the tournament's director, Harlen Lobley. "I can tell you there's been a lot of excitement over the lake records." Lobley said that about 90 percent of the tournament's participants pre-register, meaning the participation rate will likely make a jump this year. "It's very exciting around here," Lobley said. "The fishermen are excited, and that kind of leaks throughout the building."

The story is the same at Caddo, minus the big tournament. "I've seen more people fishing on Caddo on the Texas side than I have in the last several years," Canson said. "And they're catching them, too."

The lake's supporters aren't in blissful oblivion, though. They know the salvinia problem still exists. "We got a huge break, but nobody is entertaining the illusion that the problem is solved," Canson said.

What it did do, however, was offer a much-needed sigh of relief, and a shimmering ray of hope for the lake's future. It also caused Canson to think twice about how to end his documentary. "This time last year, I kind of thought (the salvinia) would be the conclusion," he said. "Kind of like a lake in peril. But then nature comes along and it makes me rethink how to treat all of that."

Those interested will just have to wait and see which ending Canson chooses.

As for now, it will have to remain a mystery.