

Caddo, the friendly quiet

Enjoy company of nature at lake and its accompanying state park

By Pamela LeBlanc
AMERICAN-STATESMAN STAFF

CADDO LAKE STATE PARK — From the back of a canoe in the swampy murk of Caddo Lake, I've got one eye peeled for alligators and water moccasins, the other for Bigfoot.

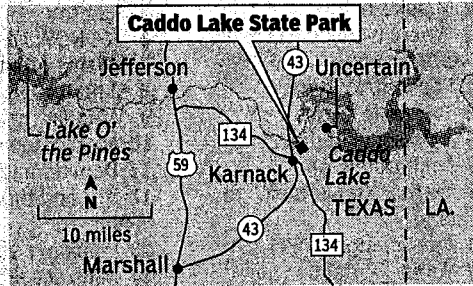
Park Ranger Chuck Hubbard doesn't seem fazed, though, even when we have to drag our boat out of the water to get around a beaver dam that's blocking our passage.

The mud sucks at my shoes as we shove off again, into a moody gray-green expanse that reminds me of textbook drawings of a primordial swamp.

Hubbard, the resource interpretive specialist at Caddo Lake State Park, canoes these waters often, gliding between cypress trees slung with Spanish moss (which isn't a moss at all, but related to the pineapple, he tells me) and listening to the nonstop orchestra of chirping birds, croaking frogs and splashing fish.

I joined him this morning for an introduction to the park, where I'm staying in one of nine stone and log rental cabins built in 1934 by the Civilian Conservation Corps.

Before we set out, Hubbard gave me a quick tour of the park's Visitors Center, where I pressed a life-sized model of a bullfrog in the new interpretive exhibit and listened to it bel- low, then admired a photo of a paddlefish, an



Driving distance: about five hours from Austin.

Best time of the year to go: spring or fall

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odd-looking and threatened resident of the lake.

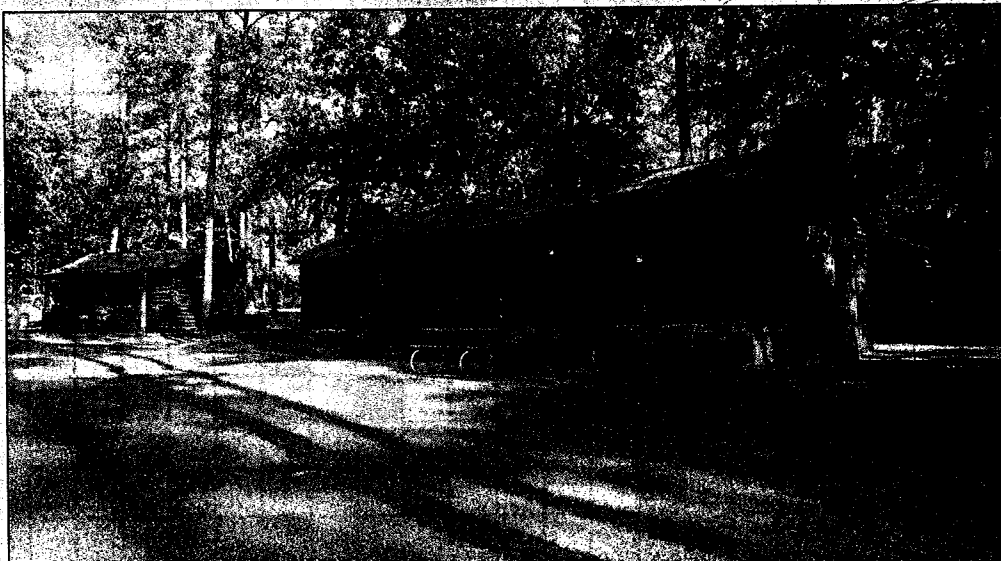
We stopped at the public boat ramp to watch some locals head out with fishing poles and bait buckets, and took a quick drive through the campground, where you can pitch a tent,

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rent a screened shelter or park a recreational vehicle. Then we picked up a rental canoe at the park's marina and set off from Saw Mill Pond.

Now, as we slip through the tea-colored water on our way to Big Cypress Bayou, we watch a blue heron flap overhead, a fish in its bill. Turtles plop into the water ahead of us, and an egret picks its way along the shoreline.

Caddo Lake is Texas' only naturally formed lake, created in the late 1800s when the backwaters of the Red River broke through a logjam, eventually covering more than 26,000 acres near the Texas-Louisiana border with water.

It doesn't look like any lake I've seen before.

The park, with 484 acres, was designated in the late 1930s. Though it has 2½ miles of hiking trails, the focus here is the water.

Caddo Lake is popular with boaters and fishermen who troll for bass, crappie, bluegill and catfish, just a few of the 91 species that call it home. There's a fishing pier in the park, and plans are in the works for a quarter-mile long elevated walkway that will extend from the pier to the bayou day-use area, where visitors can launch boats.

"It's relatively untouched and undeveloped," Hubbard says as we navigate around a cluster of cypress trees. Their roots, called knees, poke out of the water like doll-sized gnomes.

We wind lazily back into Benefield Pond, where Hubbard says he sometimes spots gators. We don't have any luck today — apparently the toothy reptiles are off snoozing someplace — but the slightly spooky allure of the place is still captivating.

Possum, scorpions, snakes, beavers, frogs, deer, raccoons, bobcats and coyotes all live in or around Caddo Lake. We listen to a barred owl call out a low-pitched "Who cooks for you" from a nearby tree.

Despite visitors, the park feels intimate. The animals outnumber the humans by far. Many of the park's visitors come from the Dallas-Fort



Pam Leblanc photos AMERICAN-STATESMAN

John Winn runs Caddo Outback Tours. On his metal boat with an outboard motor, he takes tourists through the swamp, telling stories that weave in the natural history and culture of the lake.

Worth area, just 2½ hours to the west. From Austin, Caddo Lake is a five-hour drive.

"You could be in this park with a couple of thousand people here and it would be almost like you were in the park by yourself," Hubbard says.

Be warned, though. It's steamy at the park in the middle of the summer. Spring and fall are better times to visit.

After my morning paddle with Hubbard, I set out to explore the nearby town — and that's stretching it — of Uncertain, where I meet John Winn, who runs Caddo Outback Tours. He guides tourists through the swamp on his Go-Devil boat, a low-profile metal craft with an outboard motor that can navigate these shallow waters with ease.

I'd get disoriented in a flash, but Winn grew up here, and he tells stories that weave the natural history and culture of this watery maze.

"A lot of people get lost here, a lot of people spend the night here without wanting to," Winn says, then pats the metal storage bin on the boat, which is stocked with tins of

If you go ...

Caddo Lake State Park, 245 Park Road 2, Karnack, 903-679-3351. Entrance fee \$2 per day, \$1 for seniors, free for children 12 and younger. Cabin, \$90 per night for two bedroom. Call 512-389-8900 for reservations.

Caddo Outback Tours, 903-789-3384, info@caddolaketours.com. Tours by appointment. Backwater tour, \$60 for two people, plus \$15 for each extra person.

Old Port Caddo Rentals and Tours at Caddo Lake State Park, 903-930-0075. Canoe rentals, \$10 per hour, \$22.50 for four hours or \$35 for 24 hours. Tours \$15 for adults, \$12 for seniors or \$8 for kids younger than 12.

sardines and Vienna sausages, just in case. He revs the boat's engine and we swirl away from the dock.

"Caddo's a mystical place. It has kind of a haunting beauty to it," he says.

We putter down a channel used by paddleboats in the mid-1800s to deliver cotton and other goods to the nearby town of Jefferson.

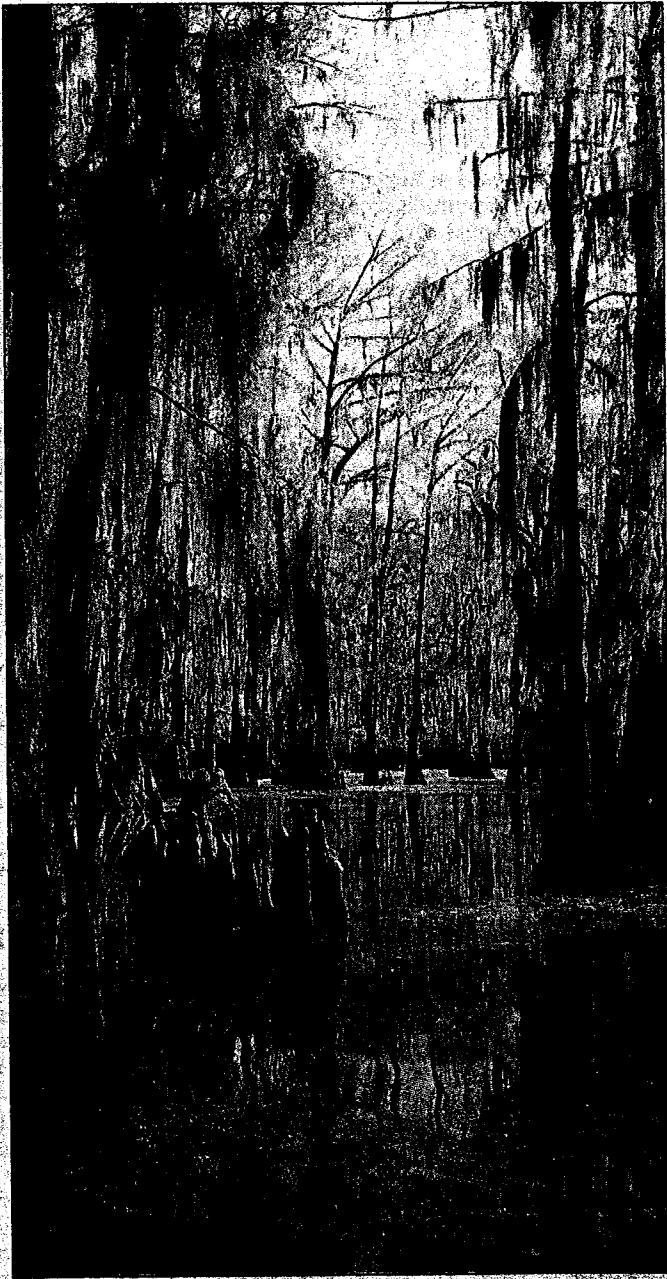
Winn points out mayhaw trees on the shore. Their marble-sized berries are used to make jelly, sold at the Caddo Grocery in Uncertain. (We stopped by for a few jars af-

terward. It tastes like a combination of apple, peach and apricot.)

We slice through patches of vibrant green duckweed and an old duck blind, where a vulture has set up residence. The knobby-headed bird pops out to eyeball us as we drift by.

He shares stories of his own life in this swamp, from the time when he was hired as a teenager, to catch turtles, to the nights he spent sleeping in duck blinds to get away from family troubles. This lake really was his backyard.

He speculates that the Ivory-



Along Caddo Lake are centuries-old cypress trees slung with Spanish moss.

billed woodpecker, now considered critically endangered and possibly extinct, might have lived here when he was a boy. He points out bald cypress trees that are 400 years old, and tells us that Spanish moss, like the gray strands that frost this whole swamp, was once used as stuffing in the seats of the Ford Model T.

Winn shares his worries about the lake's future, too. Giant salvinia, an invasive aquatic plant that creates surface mats that choke out the fish life below, is rapidly spreading through these waters.

As for Bigfoot, Winn's not a believer, but he's taken plenty of folks into this swamp to look for the hairy, legendary beast. The Texas Bigfoot Research Center was in nearby Jefferson until recently, and members gathered here annually, venturing into the lake in hopes of capturing a glimpse.

He cuts the engine of the boat, and we sit quietly for a few minutes.

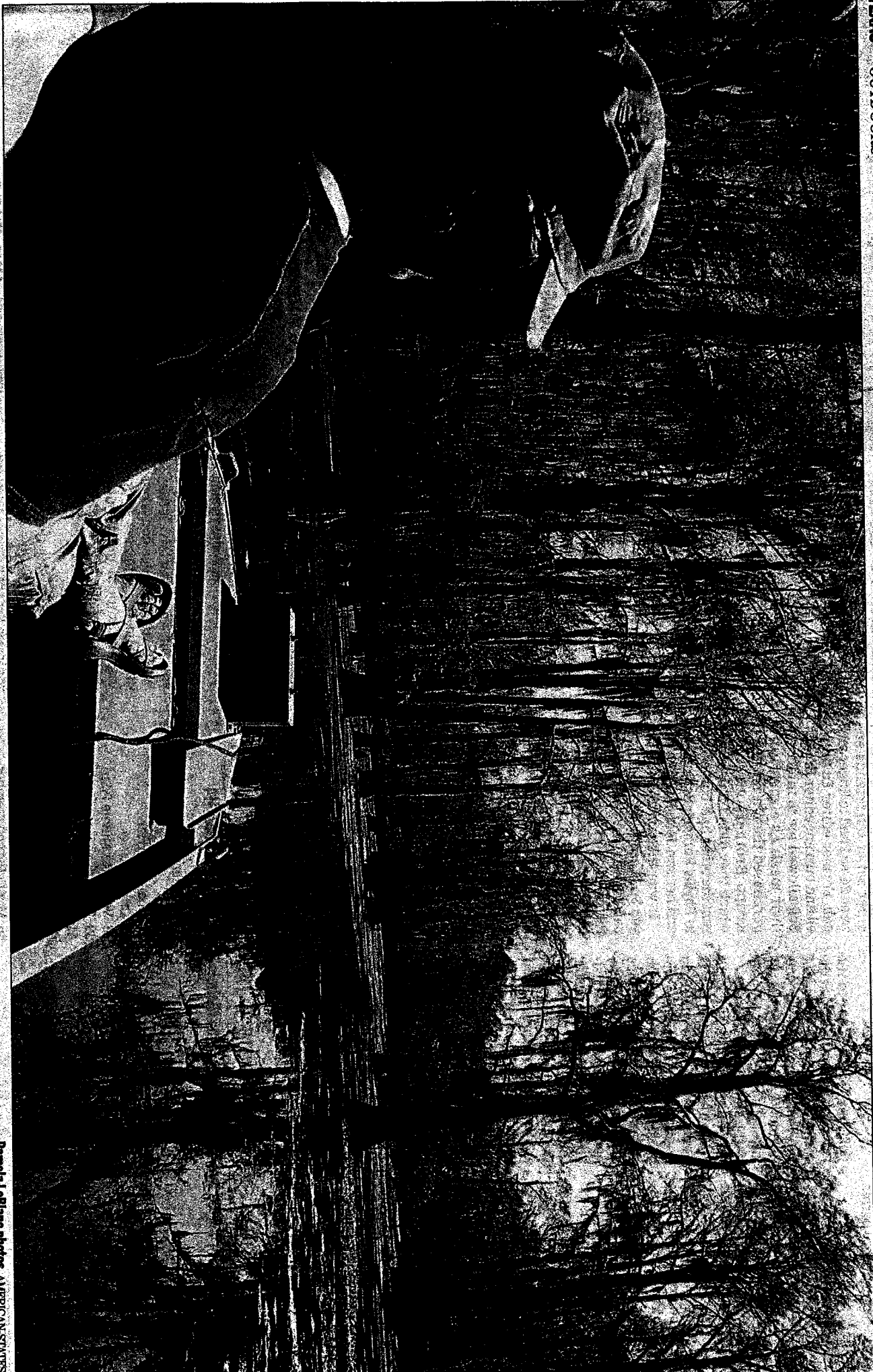
We don't see another boat, a house or any other people.

This world belongs to nature, and it's magical.

pleblanc@statesman.com; 445-3994

CADDO: Boaters will find plenty to fish at naturally formed lake

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Diane Coleman rides along on one of the guided boat tours of Caddo Lake, a good way to explore the area and its wildlife with locals. Caddo Lake is in East Texas near the Texas-Louisiana border.

Pamela LeBlanc photos AMERICAN STATIST