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New trails a fun way to get lost on Caddo Lake

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Kayaking has always been a sport that has had great allure for me. There is serenity to gliding along, low to the water, feeling the surge of power with each stroke and the instant response to a change in direction. I don't have much experience at it, mainly because I don't own a kayak.



Kayakers and canoeists can follow markers as they explore the mossy depths of Caddo Lake. Photo: TPWD

Following the old adage "I can borrow better than I can buy," I did indeed borrow a kayak from a friend so I could do some shallow-water fishing along the Gulf Coast. The kayak was a "sit-on-top" model, which means exactly what it sounds like. You sit on top of the kayak rather than down deeper in the hull. It makes it easier to swing your legs over the side and stand in the shallows; you're not climbing out of anything, you're simply dismounting.

It is also, as I found, easier to flip over. Many of my friends accuse me of trying to fish upside down; it's their way of getting a cheap laugh at my expense. But I haven't been deterred, especially now that the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department has recently opened 10 new paddling trails.

Paddling trails are not new to the department. There are several along the Gulf Coast and on several river and lake systems in the state. In fact, the new trails bring the total to 48, and that accounts for more than 400 miles of marked waterways for canoeists and kayakers. There are several in the Fort Worth area, including Bridgeport, Lewisville, Arlington and Grand Prairie.

But the new ones are at Caddo Lake in deep East Texas. It is a mysterious place where bald cypress trees, dripping with Spanish moss, cast dark shadows over waters that are crowded with lily pads and other flora that are unrecognizable to outsiders. In other words, it can be spooky.

This is a place that salutes its bottomland hardwood forests and innumerable wandering channels. Wildlife experts say there are 216 species of birds on the lake and 47 mammals.

They take particular delight in counting out the 90 varieties of reptiles and amphibians. Who could resist a place that advertises peregrine falcons, alligator snapping turtles and Rafinesque's big-eared bats? That's quite a lineup without even delving into all the ghost stories that round each slough and rest along the bayous.

"It's a beautiful area and it's a place where people have been hesitant to canoe or kayak on because they feared getting lost," said Shelly Plante, nature tourism manager for TPWD and a member of the department's paddling trail team. "We didn't want to put up huge signs or anything that would ruin the natural experience, but we needed something that would make each trail identifiable. We wanted them to be guided experiences."

What they decided on was color-coded, reflective arrows along each trail. "If, for example, you want to paddle the Hell's Half Acre Trail, you would look for the red arrows," she said. "You have to keep an eye out for them, but there are maps at each access site and you'll know what you're looking for."

The trails begin at several points around the Caddo Lake area, but a number of them start at Backwater Jack's RV Park near Karnack, the birthplace of Lady Bird Johnson and not far from the historic town of Jefferson. If you'd like a good idea of what the waters of Caddo Lake look like, the RV park has a great video on its website, backwaterjacksrv.com.

Plante said the paddling trails all around the state have been very successful. "We only have anecdotal evidence, we haven't done any studies, but we have received positive response from the communities around the trails. They have told us that they've seen lots of vehicles with kayaks on top, and that business has been good at local restaurants and other businesses. They all seem to be very happy with the program, and we continue to get calls from areas that want to add trails."

For more information, go to tpwd.state.tx.us/paddlingtrails.