

@the outdoors



An alligator patiently waits for a chunk of chicken after being called for feeding time recently at Capt. Ron's Gator Park, Petting Zoo and Gardens in Uncertain. Ron Gibbs, the park's owner, is shutting it down in October. Michael Cavazos @play Photo

@play

Gulpin' gators

Caddo Lake petting zoo offers reptiles, botanical garden and more, but only through summer months

By Christina Lane
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UNCERTAIN — Want to see an alligator at Caddo Lake? You can do just that until the fall.

Ten alligators reside at Capt. Ron's Gator Park, Petting Zoo and Gardens on the same property as Ron Gibbs' home at 3346 FM 2198 in Uncertain. The gator park is in its third season, but this will be its last.

"I'm a retired sea captain. My dream was to build a beautiful garden and share it with the public," Gibbs said.

Many East Texans know Gibbs as the captain of the Graceful Ghost steamboat at Caddo Lake. He got the idea for the gator park years ago from visitors who took rides on his steamboat.

"One of the first questions people ask when they board the Graceful Ghost is 'Are we going to see any alligators?' One of the last questions they ask is, 'What else is there to do?'" Gibbs said.

The captain decided to give the public exactly what it wanted — an opportunity to see alligators and have something else to do on a Caddo Lake visit.



Michael Cavazos/@play Photo

An African pygmy goat is one of the non-reptile animals at Capt. Ron's Gator Park, Petting Zoo and Gardens.

"There was a Baptist church on the market for years, and I looked at the pond behind it and thought that would make a great gator pond," Gibbs said.

He bought the property, converted the building into a home and began work on the park.

He acquired 10 alligators but wanted more for children to do. So he started work on a petting zoo filled with exotic animals, including Pygmy goats, Vietnamese pot-bellied pigs, peacocks, a coatimundi from Central America, an African spurred tortoise from the Sahara Desert, an alpaca, a ferret, rabbits and many species of chickens including soft feathered Silkies and Araucanas from Brazil.

Gibbs' passion is plants, so he also wanted to have a garden on the property filled with beautiful varieties of tropical and local plants, fruits and

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IF YOU GO

What: Capt. Ron's Gator Park, Petting Zoo and Gardens

Where: 3846 FM 2198, Uncertain

When: 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. Wednesday through Sunday

Cost: \$8 for adults, \$6 for children younger than 12, \$5 per person who also takes a steamboat ride

Information:
www.captainronsatorpark.com or (903) 789-2100

Zoo

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flowers.

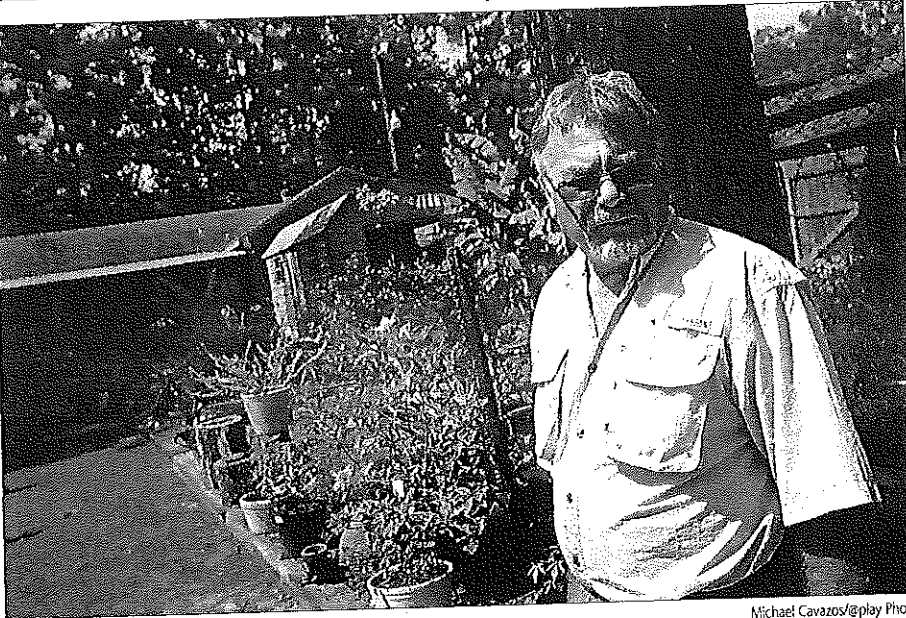
A picnic area and barbecue pit on the premises can be used for free by patrons who want to have a party or cook out while visiting the park. Admission to the park is \$8 for adults, \$6 for children younger than 12 or \$5 per person for those who also take a steamboat ride.

Gibbs has continually added to the park each year since its inception. This year, he added a train ride around the premises and was working on a waterfall.

He learned about a month ago that his home insurance was being canceled because he had an alligator park open to the public on the same property as his house.

"Because I built it around my home, I can't get insurance," he said. "They squished my dream like it was a bug."

Gibbs is negotiating with a potential buyer to move the gator park and petting zoo to another location in East Texas; however, he intends to keep the park open at Caddo Lake for the remainder of the season. He intends



Michael Cavazos/@play Photo

Ron Gibbs looks at the plants recently at his Capt. Ron's Gator Park, Petting Zoo and Gardens in Uncertain on Caddo Lake. Gibbs also operates the Graceful Ghost steamboat tours on the lake.

to keep his gardens full time for his personal enjoyment.

"This will be open until the fall," he said. "The gators go dormant in October. We'll be open until then."

When the weather gets cool and alligators stop feeding, they dig a den in the bank of a pond and burrow there until the weather warms back up, typically in March, Gibbs said.

For those who come to the gator park, Gibbs makes sure they get to see alligators. He feeds the animals

and offers visitors a bit of gator food for them to toss over the fence for the alligators, who are eager to come out of the pond at dinner time. The park features a watching deck for visitors to observe the feeding.

He's also learned a bit about alligators himself since running the park.

"They have the strongest stomach acid of any animal," he said.

He also noted that an alligator can outrun "anything on earth" for the first 75 feet as long as it's running in a

straight line.

"If you're being chased by an alligator, make a sharp right turn. They cannot do 90-degree turns," he said.

They also fear humans until they have grown accustomed to them, which mostly comes from developing trust at feeding time, Gibbs said.

"Every week more and more people are finding out about us," Gibbs said. He estimated about 200 people visit the gator park each week during the summer.

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