

Take a trip back in time in East Texas Piney Woods

Experience adventure, history and alligators

By **JUNE NAYLOR**
Special Contributor

Just east of Dallas lies nature's playground, a region long known as the Piney Woods. A road trip through the generously green and often hilly, forested expanse stretching from the Texas-Arkansas-Louisiana junction southward nearly to Houston delivers a wealth of discoveries for families.

Instead of amusement parks or four-story shopping malls, the Piney Woods provides lakes and creeks on which to canoe, kayak and fish; parks with horseback riding

and bicycling; and millions of acres of woodlands that are crisscrossed with hiking trails.

For more fun, find a vintage railroad, a great small zoo and spooky alligator habitats. Just point the car toward East Texas and let your adventure unfold.

Northeast Piney Woods

Caddo Lake — east of Dallas, on the Texas-Louisiana border — is the only naturally formed lake in Texas. Primeval in appearance, its deeply shaded, twisting sloughs provide days of intriguing fishing, canoeing and kayaking, best done with a guide or very good map. Definitely book a private guide to show you where some of the state's 100,000 alligators

live.

Take a tour on the replica paddle-wheeler called the Graceful Ghost, an eerie sight in the fading light of day and a great way to learn more about the lake's complex history. Eat fried catfish and hush puppies at Big Pines Lodge, near Caddo Lake State Park's entrance, where some guests arrive by boat. Camp out or reserve one of the restored Civilian Conservation Corps-era cabins.

If you nab one of the four Creole-style cottages at Lafitte's Landing, near Karnack, you're within walking distance of Lafitte's Caddo Grocery & Cafe, selling smoked-sausage po' boy sandwiches, pecan-smoked pork ribs and pulled pork sandwiches.

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The Graceful Ghost begins one of its daily tours on Caddo Lake near Uncertain.

An hour's drive northwest of Caddo, 500-acre Daingerfield State Park sits in quiet pine-hardwood forest with a pretty tree-lined, spring-fed lake. There's lots of swimming and fishing, as well as paddle boating, canoeing, kayaking, hydro-biking and flat-bottom boat rentals.

Take a picnic to enjoy in one of the timber-and-stone shelters from the CCC era, and walk it off on the 2½-mile hiking trail around the lake. Cabins and a group lodge are in the park, too.

Mid-Piney Woods

Tyler, which lies less than 90 minutes south of Daingerfield, promises to be more beautiful than ever in late spring. That's when the Municipal Rose Garden goes into brilliant bloom, showing off a vast new replanting.

Springtime in Tyler also brings the festivities surrounding the annual Azalea & Spring Flower Trail, happening March 20 through April 5.

At any time of year, the Caldwell Zoo — one of the best small zoos anywhere, known for its natural, open habitats — remains a prime place to explore.

Newer reasons to visit Tyler include the multiple zip-line opportunities, letting you see the Piney Woods from high in the trees, and stand-up paddle boarding on Lake Tyler.

An hour's drive south of Tyler, the Texas State Railroad's depot in the town of Palestine is the boarding site for a great trip through history. Originally established in the late 1800s, the vintage train takes you east though 26 miles of dense woods that bloom with beautiful dogwood trees in springtime, to the depot in Rusk.

Bring your own lunch or pre-order a box lunch to enjoy on board during the 90-minute ride. At the Rusk end of the line, there are campsites, picnic tables, a 15-acre fishing lake, tennis courts, horseshoes, a short nature trail and a water playground.

Southern Piney Woods

Less than an hour southeast of Palestine, in the Davy Crockett National Forest, you can

hike along a trail that follows the historic El Camino Real. Historic sites there detail the American Indians and early Spanish missionaries who made their homes in the area.

At Mission Tejas State Park, the Rice Family Log Home, built in 1828, provides a window into the past. You can camp at Mission Tejas and picnic at one of the CCC-built areas.

Huntsville State Park sits about 75 miles south of Mission Tejas in the Sam Houston National Forest. The park's Lake Raven provides fishing for catfish, bass and crappie, and you can rent kayaks, canoes and paddle boats, while keeping an eye out for the alligators living in these waters.

Horseback riding is a popular option, as is hiking on the 21 miles of trails through the woods. Like virtually all of the state parks, this one offers geocaching opportunities.

Drive an hour east through Sam Houston National Forest to Lake Livingston State Park, where loaner tackle is available in an angler program. The lighted fishing pier is a big hit with kids who want to try to pull in bream, catfish and white bass.

There is camping in the park, too, and horseback riding stables operate here, as well. In summer, a swimming pool is open in the park.

Nearby, the Alabama-Coushatta Tribe welcomes visitors who want to see how American Indians live today.

Eastward an hour, 730-acre Martin Dies Jr. State Park sits just south of the Angelina National Forest and Sabine National Forest, close to the Big Thicket National Preserve. This is the destination for paddling the four marked trails on B.A. Steinhagen Lake, and the canoeing and kayaking options await also on the Angelina River.

Bicycle rentals let you explore the park, too, as do woody hiking trails. Cabins and shelters are available for rent.

Allow at least one day for exploring Big Thicket National Preserve, known as the biological crossroads of the continent, where nine different ecosystems thrive. Some 40 miles of hiking trails treat you to sensory wonders, and pad-

dling trails of lengths from 5 miles to 21 miles immerse you in natural beauty.

Before or after the canoeing, kayaking and hiking, enjoy a big Southern lunch of fried chicken, chicken and dumplings and cobbler at the Pickett House at nearby Woodville. It's the perfect fuel for a Piney Woods road trip.

June Naylor is a Fort Worth freelance writer.

When you go

■ For details on Caddo Lake, Daingerfield, Mission Tejas, Huntsville, Lake Livingston and Martin Dies Jr. state parks, visit tpwd.texas.gov/state-parks.

■ Lafitte's Landing, caddolodging.com

■ Big Pines Lodge, bigpineslodge.com

■ Tyler attractions, visittyler.com

■ Texas State Railroad, texasstaterr.com

■ Big Thicket National Preserve, nps.gov/bith

■ The Pickett House, heritage-village.org/pickett-house.htm



Tyler Convention & Visitors Bureau

Spring in Tyler brings a bounty of blooms, especially at the Municipal Rose Garden.