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Local News

Getaway: Wildlife abounds along the Calcasieu

Pay a visit to Sam Houston State Park, and get in touch with nature for only \$1.

by Cheré Coen

Sam Houston State Park

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The sound of turtles fleeing into water sounded around every turn of the trail as I made my way along the west fork of the Calcasieu River. Above, silhouetted against a bright blue sky, great white egrets flew while red-headed woodpeckers enjoyed a feast of insects among the dead giant trees killed by the recent hurricanes.

As I turned a corner, another tupelo lagoon was exposed, and a deer spotted me. Obviously used to visitors, she sauntered — albeit cautiously — back into the woods.

It was another quiet afternoon in Sam Houston State Park, located just north of Lake Charles. The 1800-acre park offers several types of camping, great picnicking sites and places to launch boats and fish on both the Calcasieu and Houston rivers.

But I was there for the hiking. The Old Stage Coach Trail, damaged from the recent hurricanes, had been closed for repairs, but is now available to hikers in a slightly altered form. The trail is believed to be a portion of the Old Spanish Trail and follows the Calcasieu River beneath a variety of tree species and a cacophony of bird songs. Because Lake Charles is part of the spring and fall migratory bird path, it is not unusual to spot numerous bird species along the way.

The Old Stage Coach Trail takes a relaxing loop toward the river, then connects to the larger Longleaf Pine Trail, a good two-hour hike that makes a giant circle of the park. There are several shorter trails that remain close to the camping areas, some which stick to the river and others that head through the woods. All are a delightful respite from the harried world.

During the two days of my visit, I spotted several species of ducks and birds, a couple of wandering deer and tracks of what could have been armadillos. There are wild boars roaming the park, although park rangers assured me they haven't been spotted lately. Still, it's wise to keep an eye out and avoid approaching these wild animals.



Photos by Cheré Coen

Sam Houston State Park is accessible to all levels of walkers, thanks to a network of wooden walkways.

Visitors will also spot warnings against feeding alligators although they aren't seen very often within the park either. Occasionally a young alligator will make its way from the river into one of the lagoons, the park ranger told me, but they are quickly identified and removed.

Sam Houston offers both wood and cinder block cabins at affordable rates and all come stocked with linens and kitchen utensils. Most offer a variety of sleeping arrangements, such as bunk beds and sleeper sofas, so the cabins make for great weekend outings, retreats or family reunions. Several along the river offer screened porches with chairs for sipping coffee and watching the water slip by.

Other camping available is RV slots and tent sites, all located near the lagoons and riverside. And all camping options include outdoors fire rings.

Day use admission to Sam Houston is \$1 per person. Cabins cost \$70 a night and campsites with water and electricity are \$16 with premium site \$18. Seniors and those with Access Passports receive a discount.

To reach Sam Houston State Park, travel Interstate 10 from Lafayette toward Lake Charles. Take Exit 33 and travel north along Hwy. 171. Turn left on Hwy. 378 (Sam Houston Jones Parkway) until you see the signs and then turn into the park.

Area restaurants are limited to fast food and a few sit-down establishments, so it's wise to bring your own food. Since the cabins don't have TV or Internet access, this is a great opportunity to cook a meal, take a hike and play games with the kids.

Upcoming events

May 16: 10 a.m. talk on "Animal Homes," to discuss habitats and search the park grounds for signs of animals.

May 23: 10 a.m. talk on Louisiana Snakes.

May 30: 10 a.m. hike of the Old Stage Coach Trail Hike.

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