

Refuge opening ceremonies set for Saturday

By DD Turner, News Messenger

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KARNACK — Once a site for creating destructive power, the Caddo Lake National Wildlife Refuge has been given a new lease on life as a site of protection.

The refuge sits on what was once the Longhorn Army Ammunition Plant, which opened during World War II and produced Pershing II missiles, Sergeant rocket motors and artillery shells for the Army up until the early 1990s.



Courtney Case/News Messenger

[\(ENLARGE\)](#)

A creek runs through a small area of lowlands inside the Caddo Lake National Wildlife Refuge in Karnack.

Now it will be a protected home, under the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, to more than 220 species of birds as well as amphibians, reptiles and fish.

It's been a long time coming since the transfer of 8,500 acres of land began in 2000 to the opening of the refuge to the public this week.

There were five Superfund sites on the land when it was transferred that needed to be remediated before the refuge could be opened.

"There are still some areas that will be closed to the public because they haven't finished the clean up," said Williams.

The grand opening event will take place at the visitor's center starting at 10 a.m. Saturday with a host of dignitaries expected to take part, including Chris Pease, region chief of the National Wildlife System for Fish and Wildlife Service; Aaron Archibeque, refuge supervisor for Oklahoma and Texas, also with Fish and Wildlife; Addison D. Davis IV, deputy assistant secretary of the Army; William K. Honker, deputy director of the Water Division for the Environmental Protection Agency; U.S. Rep. Louie Gohmert; and Texas State Reps. Bryan Hughes, Tommy Merritt, Mark Homer and Stephen Frost.

A special invitation has been extended to former employees of the Longhorn/Thiokol plant.

Members of the Caddo Indian Culture Club of Binger, Okla., will perform a ceremonial blessing and will perform traditional songs and dances.

The refuge bears the name of the tribe and Williams said two Caddo large mounds were still inside the refuge.

There will also be exhibits by Bass Pro Shop and various state agencies, such as the Texas Forestry Service and Texas Parks and Wildlife Department.

Refreshments and activities for children such as face painting will also be included, and people can take tours or walk the trails until the festivities conclude at 3 p.m.

There also will be a silent auction, give aways and musical performances by Bobby Oliver, Rickey Maxey, Dr. Robert Spencer and Grady Lee.

HABITAT MANAGEMENT

Management of the land to create habitat for migratory species and to benefit the indigenous species is the main job of the Caddo Lake National Wildlife Refuge staff. Among the tools that will be used to accomplish this goal are controlled burns in the upland areas that will eventually take out the hardwoods, leaving only the pines and a more open space over time. Quail enjoy a more open space with seeds, explained manager Mark Williams. Turkey can feast better and deer enjoy the open space and the food it provides them.

In addition, there will be hunts on the land. A deer hunt is already planned to collect baseline biological information, which allows the managers to "maintain a healthy herd population," said Williams. The hunts are necessary because "things have been skewed by the lack of predators," he said. "We manage to maintain balance."

There are also acres of bottom land forest. One thing they will be studying is the transition species between the bottoms and upland forests.

MILITARY HISTORY

A bunker on site was used to test rocket motors, said Williams. The building is still standing as are many of the blast walls from other buildings in other parts of the park.

This was the site where, in 1988, 600 dignitaries from 14 NATO countries, a team of Soviet Union inspectors and then-Vice President George H.W. Bush observed the elimination of the Pershing II missile as part of the Soviet-United States Intermediate Range Nuclear Force Treaty.

RECREATION

The refuge will offer a driving trail as well as walking trail. "The trail is nine miles long and it is a really neat trail," said Williams.

In addition, an equestrian trail is being developed by Dr. Bill Stephenson of Longview, a member of The Friends of the Caddo Refuge. The park will be open during the "daylight hours," said Williams. There will be no overnight camping in the park, except by special-use permit for groups with an educational purpose.

SPECIES CONSERVATION

It's about the animals and managing the land for their protection.

The refuge is home to more than 220 species of birds, 22 species of amphibians, 46 species of reptiles and 93 species of fish and is considered a biologically rich ecosystem.

The main purpose of the refuge will be the management of habitat for migratory birds, fish and other wildlife, said Mark Williams, refuge manager.

WETLANDS PROTECTION

The refuge houses a creek where at least one alligator usually can be seen.

The refuge is also home to seven species of bats, including the eastern big-eared bat that is considered a rare species that can be seen during the twilight hours.

In 1993, Caddo Lake was named a Ramsar site under 1971's "The Convention on Wetlands of International Importance, Especially as Waterfowl Habitat" signed by the United States in 1987.

The treaty encourages nations to conserve wetlands and provides conservation guidelines, training and access to financial resources, according to Ramsar literature. It is one of only 13 such sites in the United States and among more than 1,300 worldwide.

RANCH RENOVATION

The old Starr Ranch home still stands on the refuge near the banks of Caddo Lake.

Williams said the Friends of the Caddo Refuge organization is seeking funds to restore the home, which he said could be used to house visiting scientists.

FIRE STATION

A fire station was built during the time the U.S. Army owned the property and is being repurposed for use by Caddo National Wildlife Refuge staff. There are sleeping quarters for visiting scientists and members of different state and federal agencies, a kitchen where meals can be prepared, office space and a recreational area.

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