

Louisiana to Host National 4-H Wildlife Contest

The Wildlife Habitat Evaluation Program (WHEP) is a National 4-H activity that Louisiana will host for the first time from July 19-23. The Wildwood Resort near the town of Zwolle, La. in Sabine parish will be the host site for the event. WHEP is one of the contests that are held each year on the LSU Baton Rouge campus at the 4-H University program in June. Parishes can send up to two contestants each and the top four overall winners are eligible to compete in the National competition.

The WHEP competition involves several components that are intended to teach 4-H youth how to manage our wildlife resources. Wildlife identification and a general wildlife knowledge quiz, along with implementation of specific wildlife management practices and an oral defense of these practices, are all components of the WHEP competition. In addition to the wildlife management skills that participants learn, WHEP teaches teamwork, communication skills, critical thinking, confidence building and career guidance. Approximately 10,000 4-H youth participate each year in WHEP competition across the United States. A preview of this year's contest in Louisiana can be found at www.whep.org

New Methods Approved for Controlling Feral Hogs and Coyotes

The Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries (LDWF) Wildlife Division is now issuing night shooting permits for coyotes and feral hogs. The permits are available only in situations where livestock, agricultural crops or forest seedlings are being damaged. Applicants must have attempted previous control methods on the property such as trapping or day-shooting to apply for the night shooting permits. Permit applications are available through any of the LDWF regional offices. A list of LDWF regional offices and contact information is available at www.wlf.louisiana.gov. Permits are issued for up to seven consecutive calendar evenings, and individuals must be holders of a valid Louisiana basic hunting license and are subject to background checks through the LDWF Enforcement Division.

LWFC Approves Amendments

The Louisiana Wildlife and Fisheries Commission (LWFC) approved an amendment that will provide an eight-day deer season with or without dogs on U.S. Forest Service (USFS) land known as the Kisatchie National Forest in Central Louisiana from December 19-24 and December 26-27. The amendment will further require deer hunters to obtain a special USFS permit and have their dogs properly identified and fitted with tracking equipment. Deer hunting with the aid of dogs has become more of a contentious issue in recent years because of the breakup of many large tracts of hunting land into smaller size areas. In some instances, dogs will chase deer onto and across adjoining properties where individuals are engaged in still hunting. Representatives of the USFS were opposed to the special season, contending that even though these were public areas, the Louisiana Dept. of Wildlife and Fisheries did not allow the use of dogs for deer hunting on any of their public wildlife management areas.

A second amendment will continue to allow the take of raccoons and opossums all year long but with an increased daily bag limit from one to two.

Free Outdoor Recreational Opportunities in June

The Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries (LDWF) and the Office of State Parks (OSP) will jointly sponsor a free weekend of recreational opportunities during the first weekend in June. A free fishing weekend on June 6 and 7, along with a free day-use admission to any Louisiana State Park on June 6 are available for any Louisiana resident or nonresident. The basic fishing license requirement will be waived by LDWF on June 6 and 7 as an opportunity to introduce people into the sport who have never fished or to give others a chance to come back to the sport. The free day-use access to all state parks on June 6 is part of the agency's 75th anniversary celebration.

Wildlife Species Profile

Wapiti (*Cervus canadensis*)

Wapiti, better known as elk, are not thought of as a wildlife species with any connection to Louisiana. Historically, elk were once found throughout portions of the southeastern United States. When Europeans began their westward expansion across our continent, they encountered small numbers of elk in northern Georgia, West Virginia (the Allegheny Mountains), Tennessee and northern Louisiana. Records have established that surveyors working around Grant parish in central Louisiana in 1829 documented the presence of elk in the area. The killing of a bull elk near Mound, La. in Madison parish was also recorded in a letter to the editor of a local newspaper in 1842.

Although elk occasionally ventured as far south as Louisiana, they were never widespread or common anywhere within our borders. The introduction of 20 wapiti near Urania, La. in LaSalle parish in February of 1916 was the only known attempt at reintroducing the animal back into Louisiana. This attempt failed, but our neighboring state of Arkansas has had success with establishing wild populations in the northern areas of the state along the Buffalo National River.

Between 1981 and 1985, 112 elk from Colorado and Nebraska were released near Newton County, Arkansas. The herd expanded onto public and private lands, allowing the first public elk hunts in the state to take place in 1998. In Louisiana, American elk are now found only as captive individuals in "high-fence" game operations.

Elk are distinguishable from mule deer, which are sometimes found on or near adjoining habitats in the western United States by their much larger size, immense



antlers in the males and a large yellowish-white rump patch. With the exception of the moose, the American elk is the largest of the North American deer in weight. The neck is heavily maned, and the head, neck, legs and under-parts are dark brown.

Elk cows will usually give birth to a single calf in early June after a gestation period of 8 to 8½ months. Unlike white-tailed deer, elk twins are extremely rare. When young are able to travel after 2 to 3 weeks of age, cows and calves congregate on summer home ranges. Mature bulls usually form their own groups on summer ranges while younger bulls are mixed in with the cow/calf herds until early September.

In terms of economic importance, American elk have the same status in many western states as does the white-tailed deer in the southeastern United States. The flow of dollars into many small western towns during the short elk hunting season exceeds the money flow for the rest of the year. Contributing to these western economies are many Louisiana hunters who annually make the trek out West to hunt elk. I've made the trip on several occasions myself and, although never successful in bagging an elk, the opportunity to experience hunting in some of the most spectacular scenery in the United States has always been more than enough reward.

Critter Corner

Muskrat (*Ondatra zibethicus*)

Musk rats are members of the new world rat and mouse family Cricetidae. They are also the largest rodents in the subfamily Microtinae, which has a large range. Individuals are found from near the Arctic Circle in the Yukon and Northwest Territories, down to the Gulf of Mexico and from the Aleutian Islands to the East Coast down to Georgia.

Musk rats spend most of their lives in aquatic habitats where large partially webbed hind feet and a laterally flattened tail give them excellent swimming capabilities. The smaller front feet are adapted primarily for digging and feeding. Adults on average will weigh around 2½ pounds with light gray to silver belly fur and dark tan to reddish-brown fur on the ventral side of the animal.

A large upper and lower pair of incisor teeth is continually sharpened against each other and is well-designed for gnawing and cutting vegetation. A valvular mouth allows the animal to close its lips behind the incisors and gnaw while submerged. Musk rats have a gestation period of 25 to 30 days, and females in the southern portion of the range commonly produce five to six litters per year. Litters may contain as many as 15 young but generally average between four and eight. Births can occur at any time of the year, although peak periods for southern populations are from October through March.

The vast areas that muskrats inhabit are a testament to the wide range of aquatic sites they occupy. In almost any place where food and water can be found year-round, they will be present. This includes streams, ponds, lakes, marshes, canals, roadside ditches, swamps and beaver ponds. In shallow water areas where vegetation is plentiful, they will use plant material to construct houses. In other areas where plant material is less available, dens will be constructed along ditch banks and levees.

Damage and control measures. The burrowing activity of muskrats is the primary cause of property damage. In recreational farm ponds, this can cause a weakening of the levee that can result in water loss or even an eventual collapse of the levee itself. In agricultural enterprises that require water impoundment, muskrat burrowing can cause problems. Rice farming is the most prominent agricultural operation threatened



by these rodents, although advances in underground water delivery systems and laser leveling of fields has reduced their impact in this enterprise.

Musk rats are primarily herbivores, and coastal marshes are often damaged by expanding muskrat populations that can destroy plant ground cover, which leads to coastal erosion and land loss.

Trapping is the most effective control measure that landowners can use when attempting to reduce muskrat populations. Body-gripping Conibear-type No. 110 size traps are the most effective tools for trapping muskrats. When set in active runs near water sources, trapping success is quite high. Federally registered toxicants are also labeled for control of muskrats, but these are usually only available for use by government agencies involved with nuisance wildlife control responsibilities.

Removal of nuisance muskrats causing property damage can be performed year-round, although these animals cannot be pelted and sold unless taken during the trapping season by individuals with a valid trapping license. In Louisiana, the meager recorded take of 218 muskrat furs during the 2008 trapping season, at an average price to the trapper of \$1.58 each, is minuscule when compared to earlier years. During the 1940s muskrat production numbers in our state reached more than 8 million furs with average prices of \$1.50 each. This demise in no way reflects the excellent quality pelt obtained from these animals but rather overall fur enterprises throughout the United States.

Plant Species Profile

Southern Crab Apple (*Malus angustifolia*)

Southern crab apple grows to be a small tree with leaves 1 to 1½ inches long by one-half to three-fourths inches wide. Foliage is dull green above and lighter green below. Leaf margins are serrated, and the leaf base is a distinct wedge shape. Spur shoots, which are short, compact branches with little or no internodal development, are usually present on the stems. The tree produces showy flowers that are approximately 1 inch in diameter and are pink or white. Flowers are in clusters of three to five in early March.

Southern crab apple has a pome-type fruit that resembles a small apple. Fruits are three-fourths to 1 inch in diameter and flattened at the ends. They turn yellow-green upon maturation in September. Southern crab apple is widely distributed in Louisiana. Preferred habitats include small stream bottoms and roadsides in the uplands. The species is absent from the Mississippi River floodplain.

A host of wildlife species will feed on southern crab apple fruit, making the plant an excellent choice for long-term wildlife plantings where a quality soft mast producer is desired. The fruit is also a highly prized commodity for home-made jellies and jams.



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