More than 30,000 issued tags are expected to be filled.

MOUTON COVE — Pairs of periscope eyes popped to the surface of a slow-moving bayou in the marsh Wednesday to gaze at a ripe chunk of butcher shop debris hanging on a hook.

The baits that Lester "Pee Wee" Gayneaux of Henry hangs over the water on hand-sized hooks have blackbird feathers tied on with fishing line to flutter in the breeze and attract the attention of the 'gators.

"I don't know why 'gators like those blackbird feathers. They just do," Gayneaux said. "It's like the feathers on an artificial lure that draw fish. The 'gators like that motion. It makes them come see."

Jesus Ravera, left, and Samuel Primeaux struggle to load a 10-foot, 2-inch alligator into a trailer so it can be checked by Wildlife agents and iced down. The alligator, harvested on Pecan Island, was one of 25 brought in by Walter Wainright on the first day of the season.

Louisiana's monthlong wild alligator harvest began Wednesday and ends Sept. 30. Hunters in Acadiana's coastal parishes will wrestle the thrashing, prehistoric reptiles into boats not much bigger than the animals and bring them to skinning sheds like the ones at Wayne Sagrera's Vermilion Gator Farms here. Hunter Carol Patin unloaded an 11-foot monster at Sagrera's sheds, about as big an alligator as hunters are likely to encounter. "We'll see a 12-footer once in a while, but not too often," he said.

Hunters who go after the bigger, more valuable

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'gators hang their baits higher over the water, where only the larger animals can reach up and grab them.

The mechanics of the hunt are relatively simple. The 'gator lunges up to grab the bait line, which is attached to a pole with a clothespin or similar device. The clothespin releases the suspended hook, and the 'gator swallows it with the bait, which is attached to the end of a stout rope or other sturdy line tied off on the bank. Hunters can see at a glance which lines have caught the prey, which is towed by hand to the boat and killed with a rifle or pistol shot to the head.

State Department of Wildlife and Fisheries biologist Ruth Elsey, coordinator of alligator harvest research at Rockefeller Refuge in Grand Chenier, said hunters in the state's coastal zone are expected to fill nearly all of the more than 30,000 tags issues each year.

Plastic tags are issued to hunters based on documented active nesting sites and must be attached to the tail of each harvested 'gator to make it a legal catch. "We've had a couple of people who tagged out the first day," Elsey said.

That means the hunters with 20 to 30 tags caught that many 'gators Wednesday.

Iris Broussard, who has 142 tags to fill on the Miller estate property in the Pecan Island and Grand Chenier areas, said she's not close to tagging out yet. "The water is real pretty in the marsh with all the rain we've been having, but the 'gators were biting kind of slow for me today," she said. "It will pick up."

Sagrera said the wild harvest represents only about 15 percent of the state's annual production. Most of the approximately 200,000 animals processed for sale come from farms like his, where alligators are raised from eggs.

Mark Shirley, aquaculture specialist with the LSU Cooperative Extension Service, said the alligator ranching program, in which farmers return 14 percent of juvenile 'gators to the marsh each year, is a sound management tool that helps ensure the survival of the once threatened species.

"One of the important aspects of this program is its benefit as an economic incentive for private landowners to maintain and manage their wetlands," he said. "It's a conservation practice that impacts resources like waterfowl, fur, seafood production, storm protection and other environmental benefits."

Sagrera buys whole alligators and markets the hide and meat. Prices to hunters are about half of what they were last year, with 7-footers and above worth $15 a foot, with 4-footers worth $6 a foot.

"The meat market is real slow this year," Sagrera said. "If there was more of a market for the meat, I could offer the hunters more. The market for skins is also depressed for a number of reasons."

One reason is that during the three-year drought from 1998 to 2000, the 'gators all congregated where the little bit of water was, where they fought and beat each other up, Sagrera said. "Scarred hides are not worth as much, so the quality is still being affected today."

Tensions in the Middle East also have an effect on the alligator market in south Louisiana and worldwide, he said.

"Wealthy buyers from Middle Eastern countries get finished luxury goods from Europe, but when the political situation is volatile, the market dries up and buyers don't keep a big inventory," Sagrera said. "It's funny, but it's just another example of how everything is interconnected in one way or another."

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