Crawfish
And other beauties of the swamp

By M. Scott Morris
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CATAHOULA — Greg Guirard cuts his boat around sharp corners when skimming through Cocodrie Swamp to check his crawfish traps.

"Whoa! Look at that," he said, making his passengers duck their heads, even though the cypress limb was too high in the tree to cause a real threat.

Guirard navigated a maze of stumps, trees and branches. It wasn't a maze to him. He remembered each obstacle from the last time he emptied his crawfish traps and the many times before that.

The author of "Atchafalaya Autumn" and "Cajun Families of the Atchafalaya," Guirard has spent a good sum of his time writing about and taking photographs of the basin. These days, however, he's thinking about his crawfish catch.

Just a few weeks ago, Guirard was plucking dead crawfish out of his traps. Low water levels meant the crawfish didn't have enough nutrients to keep them healthy.

"When there's not a lot of oxygen in the water, they don't feel well, so they don't get around much," Guirard said.

The water level at Butte La Rose was 8.6 feet April 27, while Friday's reading was listed at 13.5 feet.

As heavy rains continue to fall in the Midwest, the water in the basin is expected to crest May 28 at or above 17 feet, which would be equivalent to water levels in the basin this time last year, said Herbert Juneau, area engineer with the Lafayette area office, U.S. Army Corp of Engineers District, New Orleans.

"The water just came up recently, and it takes a while for the crawfish to adjust to new levels. At least, that's what I hope," Guirard said after hauling up a relatively meager catch.

Guirard doesn't depend on crawfishing to make a living. Commercial crawfishermen spend roughly 10 hours a day to operate more than 400 traps, while it takes Guirard a little more than three hours to check his 190 traps.

Henry "Gudrun" Carroll of Minnesota and Greg Guirard of Catahoula.

"I choose to crawfish here because it's so beautiful," he said while a cypress limb brushed against his head. "If this were a good place for crawfish, there would be a lot more crawfishermen here."

Guirard chose his trap sites based on the way sunlight shines through cypress trees, intersecting with shadows on the brown waters of the bayou. Checking traps also affords him a regular opportunity to see diamondback water snakes and listen to wood ducks.

"You hear that whistle?" he asked. "It's the sweetest thing you're going to hear in nature."

The people who earn their living from the Atchafalaya Basin also enjoy the beauties of the swamp, but the life now includes added pressures, Guirard said. Chinese crawfish are undercutting the market value of the local crop. Local crawfish retail about $6 a pound, while Chinese crawfish sell for approximately $3.25 per pound, said Gabe LeBlanc, plant manager for the Acadiana Fishermen's Co-op in Henderson.

LeBlanc said there just aren't as many crawfish to process as usual. He estimated that crawfishermen are now bringing approximately 30 percent less crawfish to the co-op than this time last year.

"If you'd asked me a few weeks ago, that would've been 50 percent," LeBlanc said.

Low water levels also mean there aren't as many places for fishermen to set their traps. LeBlanc said. Crawfishermen should be able to space their traps farther apart as higher water levels allow boats access to other parts of the swamp, he said.

"We're hoping to see more crawfish then," he said.

The crawfish season usually lasts from December to early July, but it varies from year to year. As long as boats can reach the traps, crawfishermen can harvest their crop.

Back in 1993, when heavy rains in the Midwest merged the melting snow and surged down the Mississippi River, crawfishermen in the Atchafalaya Basin hit themselves a big time.

"Some people never stopped crawfishing back then. They went straight from one season to the next," Guirard said.

But the pickings aren't that easy this year. Fishermen must adapt to conditions, and make the best of any season, no matter what the crawfish do.

"That can mean moving 400 or more traps, but they do it," Guirard said. "They keep looking for a place the crawfish are running or they don't survive."