Don't miss nature show outside of Angola's gates

ST. FRANCISVILLE (AP) — Angola is a place most of us never will understand or know much about. It is surrounded on three sides by the Mississippi River and closed off by the wild Tunica Hills.

St. Francisville is the nearest town, 20 miles away. In this void are some of the most beautiful offerings of nature in Louisiana.

To truly appreciate the seclusion of the area, one has to venture off down the side roads of La. 66. Just south of the scenic byway, the 6,000 acres of the Tunica Hills Wildlife Management area are filled with bluffs, shaded ravines and plant and animal life that are more typical of the Ozarks and Appalachians than Louisiana.

The aptly named Solitude Road leads to the remote Cat Island National Wildlife Refuge, while Highway 969 takes visitors to the wild creeks and waterfalls of the Clark Creek Natural Area.

One can imagine it would be difficult to escape the wilds of Tunica without a vehicle: Jagged rocks, deep ravines and steep slopes could make crossing the area by foot a difficult task. The natural boundaries seem to be reason enough why most of those who attempt to escape look for other ways out. In one escape attempt, two inmates hid inside the tank of an air compressor. In another, inmates commandeered a vehicle and crashed it through the front gates. None were successful in the long run.

If it weren't for the guards pacing the boundaries on four-wheelers and peering through binoculars, one could almost forget it's a prison.

Believing that an idle prisoner can become a troublemaker, wardens make sure every able-bodied inmate at Angola works.

With schedules like those on the outside, they work the "Farm" under the usually blazing Louisiana sun for payment of 4 to 20 cents an hour. Former city residents, many of whom have never been outside of their hometowns, till fields and harvest crops beneath the watchful eyes of guards on horseback.

It's hard to fully comprehend the rural nature of Angola until you drive through its gates. As visitors take the road to the rodeo grounds, they see acres of hills, shaded patches of forest, white picket fences, chirping birds, blooming flowers and blue skies.

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Not far from the entrance is a massive "cage," where the festival is run by inmates.

Just inside the rodeo grounds, the adjoining arts and crafts fair has become almost as popular with visitors as the rodeo itself. Talented inmates, many of whom work on their crafts year-round, display their handicrafts and haggle on prices. They make and sell everything from handmade furniture and curio items to religious plaques and fine leather products including purses and belts. Those who want their own Angola apparel without a lifelong commitment can buy a shirt or hat.