Gator hunting in high gear

Season runs through Oct. 1

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MOUTON COVE — The annual 30-day season for hunting wild alligators in Acadiana and throughout the state snapped into high gear over the Labor Day weekend.

Hunters like Billy Broussard of Pecan Island and Lester ‘Pee Wee’ Gayneaux of Henry have been hauling the giant reptiles out of the marsh and coastal waterways since Wednesday. The season ends Oct. 1.

At Wayne Sagrera’s alligator farm here Sunday, hunters brought in their catch to be measured, documented by the state Department of Wildlife and Fisheries and skinned for the sale of hides and meat.

Guthrie Perry of the DWF office at Rockefeller Refuge said the state issued 29,626 alligator tags to 1,907 licensed hunters before the holiday weekend, a slight hike over 1997, but will hand out tags through Friday. “We’ll issue more than 30,000 tags this year, and almost all of them will be filled,” he said.

Hunters must attach a tag to the tail of each alligator harvested to identify it as a legal catch. Most tags are used because the number issued is based on documented active nesting sites, Perry said.

About 24,000 animals of the total state harvest will be caught in the coastal parishes, he said. Less than 20 percent of the state’s harvest is wild, with most alligators raised on farms like the one here.

Sagrera said he’s glad the season opened in the middle of the week this year. “I’ve been after them to do this for years, and they finally did,” he said. “It really cuts down on the heavy weekend traffic.”

Broussard landed his catch from the canals that border La. 82 in coastal Vermilion Parish, while Gayneaux ranged from White Lake to Chenier Au Tigre and back. Hunters use large baited hooks hung over the water and tied off on the bank. Snagged alligators then are killed with a bullet to the brain.

A former jockey who once rode an alligator (briefly) that suddenly came alive on the bottom of his mud boat, Gayneaux also is a year-round “nuisance hunter” called by the DWF to catch problem gators, he said.

DWF agent Ruth Elsey of Grand Chenier helped measure and record the harvest here Sunday. “Some gators are released from farms and have a smaller tag on their foot, so we’re able to record how much they grew, how far they traveled and the sex ratio of the harvest,” she said.

About 75 percent of harvested wild alligators are male. That’s by design, with the season held in early fall. “When the females are far back nesting in the little pockets in the marsh and the males are in the big canals and waterways where the hunters set their traps,” Elsey said. “It’s to help ensure the survival of the species.”

Stephen Sagrera hauls an alligator carcass in for processing. Alligator hunting season is open throughout the state until Oct. 1.

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