Dena Schulte wades into her studies
By MARIE CONSTANTIN

It's almost midnight in a Cameron Parish marsh. Dena Schulte's hip boots are barely keeping her jeans dry as she tries not to stumble in the mud trail that leads to an alligator's nest just yards ahead.

With each step, Schulte steps almost up to her knees in the foaming, dark-brown muck, which gives off a pungent odor like a cattle barn.

However, the "Gator Lady," a nickname given to her by the 32-year-old LSU graduate student by locals, maintains her balance with a walking stick in one hand. With the other, she swats away swarms of mosquitoes, gnats and beetles that are drawn to the tiny light strapped around her forehead. The light helps her pick her way through a small portion of Lacassine's 21,736-acre National Wildlife Refuge.

Thick fields of marsh grass, which at times reach her shoulders, keep her and the LSU field assistant who follows a few yards behind from stepping off the trail that leads to the nest. It's there that Schulte has been monitoring alligator nesting temperatures since June, trying to verify whether the sex of alligators is determined by the temperature the eggs reach during their two-month incubation period.

Schulte, who as a 4-year-old used to ride on her dad's back as he grabbed bullfrogs at night, said, "I'm not waiting 60 years to have a good time. I'm doing now what I want to do."

As a youngster in the little German settlement of Hamann, Mo., doing what she wanted to do meant getting out of "boring parties" planned by her older sister, Sylvia, and running down to the creek near the house to look for "organisms."

"I wasn't interested in being around people," Schulte said. "We had a creek down by the house, and when it flooded it was neat because snakes would come up in the yard. I was always curious about the natural world around me."

"My dad was always showing me things. He is a real outdoorsman. He would always have field guides to look things up in. By the time he told me his Red Cover, I'd be down at the creek."

Since 1972, Schulte has been going to school. She has a bachelor's degree in wildlife management and is now working toward her master's degree in the same area of study.

When she graduated, she said she hopes to make a contribution to wildlife with her knowledge of the environment and with her wildlife art, which she works at in her spare moments.

Her current battle for an education has not been easy. For three consecutive years she had to stay away from school and take odd jobs because she could not afford tuition.

"I always knew what I wanted to do," she said. "It was just a matter of finding a way to do it."

As a graduate student, LSU is now paying her $500 a month for an assistantship in the wildlife

(Continued on Page 18)