Huge blue crabs return to Basin

By JERRY BREAUX
Advocate outdoor writer

Now that the “jimmies” — huge blue crabs that once migrated from the Gulf of Mexico to the Atchafalaya Basin in vast numbers — have reappeared, the question of where they have been for the last 20 years has resurfaced.

The obvious answer is, they’ve been in the Gulf. But where in the Gulf? They have not been massed offshore, otherwise shrimp trawlers would have scooped them up as incidental catches as they do female crabs which swarm in the Grand Isle surf each summer in the “berry,” or egg-laden, stage.

At the outset, one theory advanced to explain the puzzling disappearance of Spillway crabs — predominantly male, some with a 20-inch claw spread and pincers as big as bananas — was that they were physically unable to swim upstream anymore, to overcome the increasing velocity of Atchafalaya River current through the Morgan City-Berwick strait, their route inland from the Gulf.

Veteran Spillway sportfishermen consider that hypothesis invalid now, since the jimmies are back in significant numbers even though floodwater is funneled past Morgan City as swiftly as ever. Regardless, fishermen have other ideas concerning the exodus of blue crabs from the Spillway years ago.

One of them is Emile Mendoza, venerable 70-year-old outdoorsman who has been an on-the-scene observer of the swamp’s ups and downs for the past 25 years. He remembers the baffling behavior of blue crabs two decades ago, when thousands of them crawled out of the water onto the banks, laying like patches of blue and white carpet on the Bayou Pigeon shoreline near Willow Cove. Water level was very low at the time. Perhaps there wasn’t enough oxygen in it, or there was something about its chemistry they could not tolerate.

As much fun as they are to catch, and delicious as they are to eat, Spillway crabs are the bane of commercial fishermen. As Mr. Mendoza explains:

“Those big devils can tear up an expensive hoop net in a hurry with their powerful claws. If you’ve caught half a dozen jimmies in one of your nylon nets, for example, you’ve got that many holes to patch or else the catfish you catch will find the openings and escape the next time you set the nets out.”

As a hobby to fill time since his retirement from oil field work, Mr. Mendoza works for the swamp, as he puts it, fishing for catfish with hoop nets or trotlines, crawfishing, trapping fur animals. Right now he tends a string of crab pots, boxlike traps made of heavy-gauge wire that crabs can’t cut their way out of.

There isn’t much chance that hunting ducks, deer, squirrels or rabbits will ever again be as productive as it once was, but game fishing in the Atchafalaya Swamp is just as exciting now as it has ever been, and the sport is certainly being enjoyed by more people than ever.

Hopefully the reappearance of blue crabs this year will turn out to be a regular summertime migration and pump new life into the dormant sport of family crab fishing in the Spillway.

Crab fishing is one of the pastimes Emile Mendoza, self-styled citizen of the Atchafalaya Swamp for the past 25 years, employs to pass the time since his retirement.