It's time to catch some alligator

Workers at Wayne Sagrera's alligator farm wrestle to flip over a 12-foot alligator in preparation for its skinning.

Month-long wild alligator harvest under way in coastal Acadiana

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INTRACOASTAL CITY — Alligator hunters gathered at Maxie Pierce's dock at dawn on the opening day of the annual wild harvest recently, checking hollow points and ice chests. It was choppy time, minus the hockey players.

Skimming over the swells in Vermilion Bay a few minutes later, caps turned backward against the wind, the men in the bateau headed for the bayou around Chenier Au Tigon.

Lester "Pee Wee" Gayneau of Henry checked his lines, baited with bloody chunks of butcher shop debris, although blackbirds really work best.

"It's the feathers," Gayneau said. "They blow around in the wind and attract the gators. Nobody knows why blackbirds work best. Maybe the gators have a taste for them."

The bait hangs on a hook the size of one's hand suspended above the water on a line held to a pole by a clothespin. Some baits, dripping red into brown water, are hung a couple of feet over the surface, where only the biggest, most valuable gators can go up after them.

When the gator chomps, the line slips out of the clothespin and the gator swallows the baited hook tied off on the bank around a tree root or something else stronger than a gator.

After that, it's all over but the crocodile tears. Tow the massive reptile toward the boat and hope it's tired itself out and won't lash bayou water and duckweed all over everybody.

"Pee Wee" uses a .357 Magnum to make the final kill. The former jockey rides to one side when he straps the big piece on, it's so heavy. Sometimes, when he's in a good mood, he uses a .38.

Gayneau's son, country and western singer Lynn Guyo, who uses the phonetic pronunciation of his family's name, is accompanied by his manager, Deke Little, and another promoter from Nashville, Tenn., making a video for Guyo's next release.

At Wayne Sagrera's alligator farm and skinning sheds in Mouton Cove, the hunters bring their harvest by the flat-bed and horse trailer full, each gator tagged through the tail. The state issued about 28,000 tags this year. Nearly all of them will be used, hunters said.

Russell Green of Kaplan has ridged, tapered tails and grinning jaws sticking up over the top of his pickup truck bed.

Richard Martin, a guy from Youngsville looking to buy jowl meat ("It's better than tail meat"), sticks his head between some gaping jaws, then vaults into the back of the pickup without spilling a drop of the beer he's holding. He is knee-deep in gators. "A lot of good sauce piquante here," he said.

Inside the sheds, a 12-foot monster hangs off either end of a stainless steel table. The skinners do their work on the rough, scaly plated hide with short, bone-handled knives.

Most gators are farm-bred — about 125,000 last year statewide with a value of nearly $10 million — compared to approximately 26,000 taken in the month-long wild harvest.

Prices are $18 per foot this year for 5-footers and above, down from $25 per foot last year and nearly $60 per foot in 1990.

"It's a combination of overproduction worldwide, a poor exchange rate from dollars with overseas buyers and a depressed market," Sagrera said. "There's still a misconception that these animals are endangered. They aren't. They're a renewable resource, like pine trees."

Back in the marsh, among the water hyacinths with their towers of lavender flowers bobbing in the bayou current, periscope eyes pop to the surface. A hunk of rank beet spleen wrinkles in the sun, ripening over the hook in green fly splendor.

Pee Wee is waiting.