



Gum Springs Trail, Winn District

Springtime in Kisatchie

Exploring Louisiana's forest

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WELCOME TO A WORLD of boulders and beaches, ridges and ravines, pine hills and prairies, creeks and bayous, even 20-mile views from mini-mountaintops.

Sky-high pines sing and sway all year in 600,000-acre Kisatchie National Forest, but spring's special, when the woodlands turn redbud pink and dogwood white, buds and blooms pop out on vines and shrubs, and the homeliest bogs come alive with pitcher plants

and wild orchids. Whether you come to camp, hike, fish, cycle or canoe, spring's décor will enhance your adventure.

The best way to learn the "Ranger Districts" is by exploring the trail systems, so take maps, take cameras, take binoculars, take water and take as many trails as you can. The five districts sprawl across Central and North Louisiana, each offering a fair share of the forest's 50 campsites, 400 miles of trails

and 15 Day-Use Areas, and all easily accessible from I-10 and I-20 via I-49 or scenic old state and U.S. highways,

The story of the forest really begins in 1908 when a young teacher from Reidheimer, at the northern tip of Natchitoches Parish, traveled to its southern tip to teach in the village of Kisatchie, spending her free time roaming the region's longleaf pine forest, studying the plant life and collecting pottery shards of the Caddo-Kichai. When the timber boom brought clear-cutting to Louisiana, she launched a letter-writing and newspaper campaign urging timber barons to moderate their cutting patterns, but soon the virgin pines were gone and Caroline Dormon – teacher by profession, horticulturist

by avocation and lobbyist by necessity – turned to urging the transformation of those denuded acres into a National Forest where woodlands could be profitably restored. Her voice was heard in the halls of the U.S. Forest Service, she became the first female employee of any state forestry department, and finally she was asked, appropriately, to pen the enabling act allowing Louisiana to benefit from the new federal policy of acquiring cutover lands for replanting.

When the dust settled, in a gesture of appreciation, not just one district but the entire Kisatchie Forest was named for the old stomping grounds of the schoolteacher-turned-activist.

Stop for maps and information at the Kisatchie District Welcome Center – on La. 117,



National Scenic Stream, Saline Bayou, Winn District.



Footprints in the sands of Kisatchie Creek

(318) 472-1840 – before entering the forest on the National Longleaf Trail Scenic Byway, which soon enters the district's Red Dirt National Wildlife Management Preserve. A turn-off at the hunters' Check Station leads through Coyote Camp to a stunning bluff-top view of the Kisatchie Hills National Wilderness Area, the most rugged terrain in the state. Accessible only by foot or horseback, its trails include 7 miles of the infamous ridgetop trail known as the Devil's Backbone.

Farther along 59 look for the head of the Caroline Dormon Trail, which winds 10.5 miles to a day-use area and camp beside the rapids of Kisatchie Creek. Next comes the turnoff to the Longleaf Vista, known for its high mesa-topped hills and hilltop picnic area with its sandstone gazebo, walls and stair steps. "Kisatchie Wold," the locally familiar term for those buttes and ridges, actually refers to the entire escarpment formation stretching from the Mississippi to the Rio Grande, the whole of it named for the Kichai Indians

who roamed most of its length.

The Catahoula District above Alexandria was one of the first "purchase units" funded when Congress realized the danger of timber famine, and this district played a unique role in the reforestation.

The Ranger Station – (318) 765-3554 – just off U.S. 167 on La. 8 is part of the old complex where the concepts of Richard Stuart, a pioneer of nursery-based forestry, were put into action to produce innumerable seedlings for the cause. His name lives on at Stuart Lake, created to supply water for the seed-pine orchards and experimental plantations, the saplings to be planted by "CCC Boys" in every district. The Civilian Conservation Corps, managed by the Army, arrived in 1933, created like the WPA to boost Depression-era employment but focusing on reforestry.

The seed orchards, now diversified, produce longleaf, shortleaf, slash and loblolly pinecones, while nearby the Gardeners for Wildlife (local

volunteers) maintain the big Hummingbird and Butterfly Garden and the Stuart Lake Nature Trail leads to a Day-Use Area and camp.

La. 122 leads north to Iatt Lake Observation Pier, a hotspot for migrating birds, "locals" like pileated and red-cockaded woodpeckers and furbearers like beaver and otter, and the nearby

Catahoula National Wildlife Management Preserve is open for hiking and camping in off-seasons.

Named for the nearby river, the Calcasieu District consists of two units, both managed by the Ranger Station west of Alexandria – 9912 La. 28, (318) 793-9427. That means two vast networks of trails, a double dose of camps and Day-Use Areas, plus endless fishing spots and hunting opportunities – known particularly for its turkey population, now enhanced by controlled burning in collaboration with the National Wild Turkey Federation.

The Vernon Unit borders the Ft. Polk Military Reservation where generations of U.S. infantrymen have trained for service, and a museum at 7881 Mississippi Ave., on base, tells of the pre-World War II maneuvers at "Camp" Polk and the modern-day mission of the fort.

From La. 10 on the Vernon's south side, La. 399 leads north to Fullerton where a huge, abandoned sawmill remains as a landmark of mill-town days (also accessible from Fullerton Lake Campground via the Fullerton Mill Trail). The three loops of the Enduro Trail provide 30-plus miles for off-roading, the Ouiska Chitto Trail is reserved for hikers, bicyclers and horsemen, and



Pitcher Plant bog, Calcasieu District



Butterfly Garden, Catahoula District

together they attract many regular visitors from across the state. The Longleaf Scenic Area is convenient to hikers on the Ouiska Chitto and Big Branch Trails, and wildflowers are plentiful everywhere but especially at Drake's Creek Bog, Cooter's Bog and Wild Azalea Seep Area.

U.S. 165 below Alexandria skirts the Calcasieu's Evangeline Unit, and interpretive signs just inside the La. 112 entrance announce the headquarters area of Camp Claiborne, where a half-million troops trained as

paratroopers in Gen. Omar Bradley's 82nd and 101st ("Screaming Eagles") Airborne divisions, or in bridge and highway building, rapid trestle and rail construction and other specialties. Three loops of the Claiborne Trail access the vast and historic acreage of the old camp, providing 77 miles of all-purpose trails through upland pine terrain.

Below La. 112 and off U.S. 165 at Longleaf, the Southern Forest Heritage Museum – a restoration-in-progress mill whose full contingent of machinery and railstock

remains – is now adding a Louisiana CCC Museum in a log CCC lodge moved from nearby Alexander State Forest.

The State Forest (with its camps, trails and beaches at Indian Creek Reservoir) abuts Kisatchie around Woodworth, where the National Wild Azalea Recreation Trail begins its 31-mile trek through hills, flatlands and bottoms to the Valentine Lake Recreation Area.

From La. 28 at the north end of the unit, enjoy the hilly road and lake scenes on a drive to Kincaid and Valentine Lakes, and stay to enjoy some canoeing, skiing and beach time. For a short hike with a big payoff, follow the trail about 10 minutes west from Kincaid's Day-Use beach to temporary trail signs indicating an eagle's nest. Hard to find but, as Amy Richardson at Kisatchie Headquarters says, "Look high and look for something the size of a Volkswagen," and that works!

Caney District, the northernmost lands of Kisatchie, with its ranger station just south of



Biologist Steve Shively banding red-cockaded woodpeckers.

Homer – 3288 U.S. 79, (318) 927-2061 – consists of three units. The Middle Fork Unit and large sections of the other two are dedicated to hunting, but the Caney Lakes and Corney Lake Units also offer campgrounds and recreation areas. The Sugar Cane National Recreation Trail runs through the hills and bottoms of the Caney, passing scenic over-nighting areas like Beaver Dam Campground at Upper Caney Lake, and the Caney Recreation Complex consists of a variety of Day-Use Areas including a beach for swimming, volleyball or just basking.

Corney Lake Unit features boat launches, fishing piers and Day-Use Areas on its north and south shores, with grilling/picnicking facilities that are popular in the region for family gatherings. The unit is best known, however, for the rare opportunity it offers for duck hunting on public lands.

The Winn District Ranger Station – 8 miles west of Winnfield at 12319 U.S. 84, (318) 628-4664 – stands next door to the Gum Springs Recreation Area with its two horse trails (both wide enough for wagons). Riders see pine-hill and hardwood-bottom

terrain on both trails, and both cross sections of the Keiffer Prairie whose blooming season peaks in April. To drive to the prairie, which provides over half of the state's prairie acreage, head west on 84 and turn right on La. 560, left on 595 and right on 523, which crosses a major expanse of the bluestem grasses.

Above Winnfield, La. 126 heads west from U.S. 165 to Cloud Crossing Recreation Area on the banks of Saline Bayou, a National Wild and Scenic Stream called the most beautiful "blackwater" river in the nation (tea-colored as a result of tannins from vegeta-

tion leaching into slow-moving waters). The bayou provides a 20-mile canoe ride beneath a canopy of hardwoods and old-growth cypress, paralleled for the first 5 miles by the Saline Bayou Hiking Trail.

From Cloud Crossing La. 126 continues west to La. 9 at Reidheimer, and a mile north, Briarwood Gardens marks the birthplace of the preservationist who gave us Kisatchie National Forest. Now dubbed the Caroline Dormon Nature Preserve, it encompasses her log home, her "Writer's Cabin" and her lifetime collection of wildflowers and indigenous trees. ■

BEST BETS

Kisatchie Quarters: The U.S. Mint's "America the Beautiful" series of 25-cent pieces honors one national forest, park or monument in each state, five per year, and one of this year's five depicts a wild turkey flying across a backdrop of bluestem prairie and longleaf pines in Kisatchie National Forest. The little beauty will be issued in mid-April at ceremonies in Alexandria, with good words from dignitaries and free quarters for kids. For the date call Kisatchie at (318) 473-7160.

BEST TRAIL OF ALL

In 1963 when Kisatchie headquarters occupied its Forestry Center offices at 2500 Shreveport Hwy. in Pineville, it came into possession of two acres of sacred ground where to this day it preserves the ruins of the first LSU. Built in 1860, the "State Seminary of Leaning" was lost to fire in 1869, but each year hundreds of the faithful visit its masonry remains, now accompanied by historic markers and encircled by a pleasant walking path.