



Exploring the
Sportsman's Paradise

BEST OF LOUISIANA OUTDOORS

BY CHRIS HOLMES

ONE OF SEVERAL nicknames bestowed upon Louisiana, "Sportsman's Paradise" is emblazoned on the state's vehicle license plates, splashed across websites and printed on stickers, T-shirts and koozies. It is a bold statement. Considering the immense popularity of hunting and fishing across the United States, does Louisiana warrant that self-proclaimed distinction? Given the diversity of fish and wildlife, the uniqueness of the environment, heritage, as well as liberal seasons and harvest limits, the answer is a resounding yes.



LEARN TO HUNT

Hunting is heritage in Louisiana. However, many kids are now more familiar with video games than they are with ducks and deer. Also, some older folks may have wanted to try hunting, but didn't have the chance. In an effort to preserve the tradition of hunting and conservation, the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries created the Louisiana Hunting Heritage Program. It matches apprentice hunters with experienced hunting mentors. The program affords novice hunters the opportunity to learn and experience wildlife and the outdoors as only a hunter can. wlf.louisiana.gov

Louisianans are steeped in a culture of hunting and catching. Of course it stems from generations of old when subsistence on the creatures of the Bayou State was a natural part of survival. Though times have changed, a deep passion for field sports and the nourishment they provide still comes with respect and value. Nearly every activity and celebration in Louisiana can be tied to food, none more revered than that which is self-gathered and prepared. Hunting and fishing trips are as much about the meals they ultimately produce as they are about the passion for the sport.

Recreational opportunities for take-and-eat are near limitless. Freshwater fish, inshore and offshore saltwater fishes, crabs, crawfish, shrimp, deer, turkey, rabbits, ducks, geese, frogs, squirrels, alligators, doves, quail, hogs, coots, snipe, rails, woodcock and yes, even nutria. If it runs, flies, swims or crawls, you can bet we've found a way to capture it and make a meal of it.

Sitting at the southern end of the Mississippi Flyway, the state's diversity of habitat makes it arguably the most important state in the country for wintering waterfowl. Louisiana's wide variety of habitat and feed, has sustained millions of migrating waterfowl for hundreds of years. The state consistently ranks in the top tier for waterfowl take in the country and in some years, the harvest in Louisiana alone has exceeded the total number of ducks killed in other flyways.

Two premier lodges offer first-class waterfowl hunting, accommodations and dining. Honey Brake in central Louisiana is an exclusive facility on 20,000 acres of the old Louisiana Delta Plantation. It is a duck hunting experience like no other. Further south in Buras, Cajun Fishing Adventures has been providing excellent waterfowl adventures for nearly 40 years. Don't let the name fool you, fantastic fishing is a big part of the company's business, but the waterfowl hunting is unmatched. Because surf and sky provides a more rounded dinner table, "blast and cast" is an option for sportsmen wanting to duck hunt in the morning and fish in the afternoon.

As a direct benefit from the state's oil-and-gas-driven economy, the infrastructure of rigs and wellheads in the

Gulf of Mexico has cemented Louisiana as a world-class destination for offshore fishing. What makes this area so special? The myriad oil and gas production platforms act as vast artificial reefs that sustain complete ecosystems and provide habitat for virtually every creature that lives in the Gulf. Billfish, tuna, swordfish, king mackerel, dolphinfish (dolphin, mahi-mahi) and a variety of deep-bottom-dwellers swim the Gulf waters off the coast. The near shore structures hold large populations of snapper, amberjack, cobia and many other tasty sport fish. Though inedible, tarpon offer great sport and are

they take their first deer, Peace imparts two bloody handprints on the angler's chest after their first tuna hits the deck. The marks are both a rite of passage as well as an homage to the magnificent beast that just gave its life.

Louisiana is not generally thought of as a whitetail deer hunting destination. However, it is a popular species for residents to hunt and they are abundant in many areas of the state. Archery season lasts four to five months depending on the particular area, and lengthy firearms seasons provide ample days for hunters to get afield and fill their freezer with



the namesake of the Grand Isle Tarpon Rodeo – the oldest fishing tournament in the United States.

Tuna is the king of Louisiana's offshore sportfish. Captain Peace Marvel (yes, there really is a Captain Marvel) of Peacekeeper Charters in Venice, is world-renowned as a tuna fishing icon. If you are talking tuna, all you have to say is "Peace" and everyone knows who you are talking about. Many of the varied methods of catching tuna in the Gulf were either created or refined by Peace. He is a perfectionist, fanatic, comic and stern teacher, all rolled into one. Tuna virgins beware. Much like the ritual of applying blood to a hunter's face when

venison. Liberal limits allow hunters to take up to a maximum of six deer each per season.

Giles Island Hunting Club near Ferriday, sits in the Mississippi River nearer the Louisiana side, but most of the land is considered to be in Mississippi. However, a Louisiana businessman owns it and either Louisiana or Mississippi hunting licenses apply. The nearly 10,000-acre private island is intensely managed for trophy bucks and is a deer hunter's mecca. Every hunt on Giles Island has the potential to see and kill the buck of a lifetime.

Feral hogs have become a great problem across the United States and

THE POOP ON PIGS

Domestic pigs were introduced into what is now the continental United States into Florida in 1539 by explorer Hernando de Soto. Thirteen pigs were captured in Cuba and released as a future traveling food source on expeditions. The pig herd accompanying the expeditions, not counting escapees, grew to 700 in three years. Those that escaped became the seed stock for what is now the country's massive wild or feral pig population.



they are known to inhabit at least 35 states, including Louisiana. Destruction to habitat, spread of disease and competition for food with native species such as deer and turkey has sounded alarm bells in wildlife agencies across the country. It is estimated that harvest rates of up to 70 percent annually are necessary just to keep their numbers in check. Wild hogs provide great sport and delicious pork.

In an effort to increase the number of pig hunters and decrease the number of pigs, Louisiana has relaxed laws regarding pig hunting. The use of aircrafts, boats, vehicles, dogs and hunting at night is typically illegal to take most game animals. However, classified as a nuisance, the laws allow all of these methods to help keep their numbers in control. In the traditional sense of hunting, such methods are not considered fair chase. This really is not about hunting, it is about killing and helping to control the population.

Wild hogs are omnivores and have adapted well to the marshy areas that cover much of south Louisiana. They eat virtually anything. More commonly seen plying the swamps and marsh for industrial operations or wildlife tours, several hunting operations have begun utilizing airboats as a fun and efficient method for hunters to kill wild hogs. Elite Airboat Hog Hunting, LLC just south of New Orleans has perfected the use of airboats for pig hunting and control. It is a hunt like no other – a combined swamp tour, educational seminar, trip to the grocery and thrill ride all rolled into one. The airboat is an effective tool to make it as easy and successful as possible.

Wild turkeys truly are a hunter and conservation success story. Unregulated hunting practices and subsistence hunting nearly eliminated the birds from the state in the early 1900s. Combined with heavy deforestation of prime habitat areas, the future for Louisiana's wild turkey was bleak. Peak estimates of up to one million birds in the 1800s was reduced to a mere 1,400 by the mid 1940s. Due to low populations in the state, turkey hunting was almost a lost art. However, aggressive live trapping and restocking programs allowed wild turkeys to make an amazing comeback in most areas of the state that have suitable habitat. State-wide population estimates are currently over

80,000 birds and well-regulated hunting is allowed in many areas. "Bird brained" is a misnomer when it comes to hunting turkey. Even the most skilled hunters sometimes end up with their hat in their hand. Matching wits with a wily Tom (male turkey) leads to ultimate satisfaction – or frustration. Wild turkeys are as delicious as they are cunning. Both Honey Brake and Giles Island mentioned above offer outstanding guided turkey hunts.

trout. Of course they have a fantastic lodge, delicious food, excellent boats and guides, but what is in that big metal building? A seaplane. There are fishing trips and then there are fishing adventures. All anglers have an exotic destination on their bucket list they dream about making. This is it – whether they know it or not.

Once launched, it is only a matter of minutes before the floats are up and the beautiful flight over the wetlands and



Toledo Bend Lake shares water and a border with Texas and was named the number one bass fishing lake in the country by *Bass Master Magazine* two years in a row. Anglers in search of double-digit bass are well advised to ply the waters of Toledo Bend. Living the Dream Guide Service in Many is the go-to for trophy Louisiana bass. Owner, Captain Jerry Thompson and his stable of professional guides know the lake and know where to find lunker bass.

When the owner's name is Captain Theophile (toe-feel) Bourgeois, you know you have found the real Louisiana deal. His namesake Bourgeois Fishing Charters is the place to go for redfish and speckled

coast of Louisiana begins. The destination is the Chandeleur-Breton chain of uninhabited barrier islands 60 miles from New Orleans at the easternmost point of the state. There you will wade fish for giant specks and reds in a Cajun fishing experience like no other.

In addition to utilizing the services of professional guides and lodges, privately owned land and leases are preferred by many hunters. However, there are roughly two million acres of public lands available for hunting and countless bodies of water for fishing and pursuing other tasty aquatic morsels.

The Sportsman's Paradise? As they say, It ain't braggin' if it's true.