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Dateline: ANAHUAC, Texas

Art: MAP(S): (Staff graphic) ANAHUAC: Home of Gatorfest; PHOTO(S): (Photos by BARBARA DAVIDSON/Staff Photographer) 1. Randy Brazil places his order at Fontenot's Cajun Creole Kitchen during Anahuac's Gatorfest. Like many of the food vendors at the festival, Fontenot's offers a gator-meat specialty - in this case, gator creole sausage. 2. Seven-year-old John Berdon Cox shows off his first gator kill, while family friend and ranch owner Ralph Leggett watches. In the marshlands east of Houston, alligators are an uneasy neighbor and a reason for a celebration for the residents of Anahuac. 3. Seventeen-year-old Laura Garvin smiles at the audience after being named second runner-up in the Gatorfest Queen pageant. Kendall Martell (right) was named first runner-up. 4. Jorge Vasquez (left) helps gator hunter Larry Janik load a near-13-foot alligator into a trailer to be taken for processing. 5. Teresa McComb gives her 9-month-old grandson, Conan, a bird's-eye view of a harvested gator during the festival. 6. Festivalgoers check out the nearly 13-foot-long gator on display. 7. Ashliegh Oviedo and Leah Flippo enjoy a performance by Kevin Fauler during the Gatorfest. 8. David Kelly helps John Berdon Cox during the 7-year-old's first gator hunt. 9. A just-harvested gator is carried to the festival's "funeral" tent where it will be displayed on a bed of ice. Although hunting is the big draw of the festival, education is a key component, says publicist Sheila Brandon. "It's about keeping the population, the marshes healthy."

Correction:

Notes:

Text: ANAHUAC, Texas - A truck towing a horse trailer pulls into Fort Anahuac Park on a recent steamy Saturday evening. Several men jump in the trailer and pull back a tarp covering two dead alligators.

"This is the big one," says one man. A wave of anticipation ripples through the crowd. Adults and children press against the fence for

a better look.

It takes five men to lug the biggest of the two gators far enough out to tie a rope through the mouth and around the jaw. They hook the rope to a chain on a scale, and with the touch of a button the alligator rises slowly into the air.

"Get back, back up!" someone shouts. "Just in case that big boy comes to the ground." Just then, the chain holding the animal groans a bit and the reptile's mammoth head begins sliding down out of its noose.

The crowd murmurs a collective "Ooooh!" and backs away.

"Go behind the front legs," K.J. Lodrigue instructs the men as they retie the animal.

The gator is finally hoisted off the ground. Slime drips from the corners of his mouth as it rotates slowly on the chain. The smell is thick: rotten meat, swamp grass and marsh water.

Welcome to Texas Gatorfest, the festival that put the town of Anahuac, population 2,000-plus, on the map. Each year, tens of thousands of people are drawn to the coastal marshlands of Texas by the music, pageantry, food and spectacle of a weekend that centers on alligators and their harvest.

Gatorfest is a chance for visitors to learn about gators, eat gator delicacies and party. For folks from Anahuac, it's a homecoming.

"A lot of people from my class ... come back, see what everybody is up to," says Michael Cerrone, 24, a Navy recruiter living in College Station. "It's like a once-a-year reunion."

The only times he has missed Gatorfest were the two years he was stationed in Italy. "I've brought a lot of people from out of town to this and they love it," he says. "And they always come back."

Birth of a festival

In the late '80s, people in Anahuac were looking for a way to boost their economy and put their town on the map. The state, in 1984, had reopened alligator hunting. Organizers put that together with the saying that gators outnumber people in Chambers County 3 to 1 - and Gatorfest was born.

In 1989, Gatorfest's first year, the state Legislature designated Anahuac the Alligator Capital of Texas. Chambers County has about 40,000 wild alligators today, according to Mr. Lodrigue, a Texas Parks and Wildlife biologist. He's on hand this weekend to help with the Gator roundup and gather data on the gators' population and the harvest.

The hunters and their prey are the spectacle of the weekend, but the most important thing is "that baby alligator in the education tent," says Sheila Brandon, the festival's publicity chairwoman. Through Gatorfest, organizers hope to also educate people about alligators.

"It's about keeping the population, the marshes healthy," she says.

At the same time, entire families can enjoy everything from kiddie rides on the midway to country music in the beer garden, from watching a beauty pageant to examining alligators dead and alive.

The festival will gross about \$500,000, with profits going to a long list of local charities and civic groups. The total economic impact on the town is estimated at \$1 million, says Ms. Brandon.

"I'd like to see 30,000 people come this weekend," she says.

The queen

On Friday evening, in a building several blocks away from the park, a cloud of hairspray drifts out of a classroom. There, a half-dozen teen girls apply finishing touches to hair and makeup.

Laura Garvin, 17, sits still while her mother arranges caramel-colored strands of her hair. Laura has competed in pageants since she was 6 months old and was in the pageant last year, but didn't win.

This evening, Laura has her eye strictly on the scholarship money. She plans to attend the University of Texas at San Antonio and become a trauma nurse.

The pageant is open to girls in grades 10 through 12 in Chambers County. The Texas Gatorfest Queen receives \$750 in scholarship money, \$700 in savings bonds and about \$300 in gifts. She gets to represent Anahuac for the next year at other Texas events.

Laura has lived in Anahuac since sixth grade, and this is her first time to not work at the festival, she says. It's her senior year and "I just want to kind of hang out with my friends at Gatorfest."

By 7 p.m., 20 girls have lined up in the hall behind the Anahuac Middle School Auditorium. A dizzying collection of scents rustles forth from pink, aqua, red, black, lilac and purple evening dresses.

Four young men from the U.S. Army Recruiting Station in Baytown escort the girls one by one onstage to introduce themselves. Afterward, the girls each answer a question for the judges, and then parade before them one last time.

In the end, Shannon Smith, a petite 15-year-old sophomore with braces, is crowned Gatorfest Queen. Laura wins second runner-up. "I'm proud of Shannon. ... It's a friend," she says. "It's easier that way."

Then, yanking off her red stiletto heels, she says, "I'm going to Gatorfest. Cross Canadian Ragweed's playing!"

Gator on a stick?

Saturday arrives with skin-clinging humidity. In the food area, the smell of grease hangs in the air. Vendors offer gator sausage, gator po' boys, gator on a stick. But the experts disagree about the meat's flavor and the best way to cook it.

In his booth, Clay Dean, 43, fries balls of gator meat until they're golden brown. Mr. Dean took up alligator hunting when the state reopened it. But hunting was one thing; eating the meat was another.

"The first time we hunted we took some, cooked it and it wasn't any good," says Mr. Dean. "It's a white, nonflavored meat. Kind of like chicken."

Even now, "I really don't like it, to be honest with you," he confesses. "It's meant for selling, not for eating. It's a novelty. ... like rattlesnake at a rattlesnake festival."

In the Roundup area, Jay Francis, 51, has just dropped off his catch. His jeans are covered with mud and slime and he carries a knife on his boot. He'll hunt just about anything - rabbit, dove, deer, alligator.

"Baby, I can cook," he boasts. "Let's talk about fried alligator. People can fry alligator, and alligator will turn you off. If you don't know what you're doing.

"In the alligator tail, you got a tube. It's about yay long." He stretches out his hands to indicate the length of the tenderloin. "We slice that up about a quarter-inch thick. I take my little meat hammer, beat it." Then he mixes some milk and sugar.

"Marinate the alligator in sweet milk for one day. Add seasoning and flour, get your grease hot," he says, and fry it up. He pauses dramatically. "There is a danger, and I got to warn you: People have been known to bite a piece of their finger off 'cause it's so good."

The kids

In a tent near the hunters' area, John Davis, 7, of Dayton, Texas, touches a dead gator that has been put on ice for people to examine

more closely. When asked how the animal feels to the touch, the boy says, "Like a duck foot."

"I definitely want my kids to be outdoorsmen," says David Davis, the boy's 33-year-old father. "I want them to care about the outdoors and to care about the resources - to help protect the resources and preserve them but also to use them."

Hunters and fishermen pump money into the economy and natural resources with license and equipment purchases, he says. "Just this year, I probably spent close to \$1,000 on hunting and fishing equipment"

In the Alligator Education Tent, Amos Cooper of Texas Parks and Wildlife staff discusses gators with children and adults.

Gators are nonaggressive animals, he explains. People are usually the ones who cause problems with them, not the other way around.

"You see one that's coming toward you, someone has been feeding it," he says. "He's lost his fear of humans, you need to contact us."

He fishes a baby gator out of a tank for people to hold. Lauren Escareno, 8, takes a turn. "It was squishy," she says afterward.

The big one

The most popular way to catch an alligator is to set out bait, such as raw chicken, overnight on a large hook at the end of a rope. Once a gator is caught, the hunter shoots it. It's one of the legal ways to hunt gators in Texas.

Of the gators brought in Saturday by hunters in their mud-spattered four-by-fours, the longest is not quite 11 feet 6 inches.

That is, until just before 6 p.m., when the truck towing the trailer pulls in and the men at the roundup area manage to hoist and weigh Larry Janik's catch.

The gator weighs in at 553 pounds and measures 13 feet from the curve of its scarred snout to the tip of its pointed tail.

"He lost an inch in the cooler last night," says Mr. Janik, 44.

But, he says, "I got one that's going to beat him by about a foot-and-a-half tomorrow."

He thinks he can get one that will break the state record of 14 feet 4 inches. Mr. Janik's biggest haul yet has been 13 feet 8 inches.

"I'm going on the state record tomorrow."

As night falls, the midway lights up in yellow, red, blue and green neon. Children eat cotton candy and candy apples.

People collect in the beer garden - the only place where alcohol can be sold and drunk - and wait for Cooder Graw to come onstage. With the first guitar twangs, a young woman in a short skirt and tank top begins to swivel her hips while holding her beer aloft. A man in jeans and hat puts his arm around a pregnant companion.

Deena Slawson, 32, and a friend emerge from the crowd laughing. This is Ms. Slawson's third Gatorfest.

"I like to listen to the bands," says the Orange resident. Meanwhile, her two children - "I got one here with me," - can enjoy the rides and games.

Outside the beer garden, blacksmith Larry Newbern sits in his booth. He does a half-dozen festivals a year, but this is his favorite.

"It's not as big as some," he says. "You have visitors from everywhere, but you don't feel like you're part of a commercial, city production."

At 10 o'clock, two hours before Gatorfest shuts down for the night, people still trickle in the front gates.

A dwindling demand

Sunday morning, Mark Porter, a refinery worker who lives in Anahuac, guides a boat along a canal. He's taking time before the festival to check the bait he set last night for a boy's first alligator hunt.

If he could, this is where the man with salt-and-pepper hair would be all the time, on the water among the salt brush, bullrush, cattails and marsh cane.

Mr. Porter, 49, has been the alligator buyer at Gatorfest for more than 10 years. He's also a licensed gator hunter, farmer, egg harvester and processor.

The price of hides has fluctuated over time, from about \$18 dollars a foot when gator hunting re-opened, to as much as \$71 a foot, says Mr. Porter.

This year at Gatorfest, he's paying \$12 a foot and less.

There's still a market for alligator hides, he says, but the demand for the meat has dropped.

For a while, "it was going for as high as \$18, \$20 a pound," he

says.

Now he's selling it for \$4 to \$5 a pound.

"The novelty wears off," he says. That, coupled with the fact that Texas is a sportsman's state instead of a commercial state where hunting and fishing are concerned, make him fear for the gator industry.

"I seen the rise and fall of the trapping," he says.

"I seen the rise and fall of the shrimping. I think I'm going to see the rise and fall of the gators."

Winding down

As Sunday winds down, people sit in chairs under trees fanning themselves. The men at the roundup canopy drip sweat as they weigh and measure alligators.

No one tops Mr. Janik's 13-foot-long catch yesterday, not even the man himself, whose big catch today measures 12 feet 6 inches.

The 20-day hunting season runs through the end of September. Hunters still have time to bag the one that got away.

It's midnight before festival organizers can crunch the numbers: 25,000 people have attended Gatorfest this year.

"Jeez, that's 50,000 muddy boots, sandals and tennis shoes," says Ms. Brandon. "We are so pleased."

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Photos by BARBARA DAVIDSON/Staff Photographer
Take a video visit to Gatorfest at DallasNews.com/texasliving.