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Sports News

Levee along coast of Algiers has diverse scenery

Wednesday January 21, 2004

Jack Curry Jr.

A walk on the Mississippi River levee along the lower coast of Algiers just a few miles from downtown New Orleans is two hikes in one.

Commerce and industry dominate the view to the north and west. Silhouettes of oil refineries on the east bank and a river full of ocean-going freighters, crew boats and tugboats tell the story of a bustling port nearby.

Yet to the south and west, away from the river, and the view is different. Here stands of bottomland hardwood forest and a broad batture with trees, shallow ponds and brush is home to raccoons, red foxes and other wildlife. Sparse housing along the four miles of River Road that parallels the levee along with the pastures and an occasional horse stable give the area a rural, wild feeling. River Road ends at the Audubon Center for Research of Endangered Species (ACRE). The levee that runs through ACRE is closed to the public.

"The levee is a great place to see wildlife along the river," said Katie Brasted, who is working to include the levee along the River Road in Algiers in a series of trails connecting the undeveloped public lands of Plaquemines and Orleans parishes in lower Algiers.

"Last week was the first time I ever saw an alligator on the levee. It was a small one, probably only five feet long, and probably on its way to the river," said Brasted, who began to push for a network of trails through lower Algiers four years ago.

Brasted hopes dozens of miles of trails that can be used by hikers, bicyclists, walkers, joggers, bird-watching enthusiasts and horseback riders can be developed from the levees and other public and semi-public lands in lower Algiers. In addition to the wealth of natural history preserved in the area, trail users would be able to visit the ruins of a sugar mill, the site of a colonial-era fort and several bunkers from World War II.

For now there are no facilities on the levee. The only parking is an unmarked

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gravel area off River Road as it turns to parallel the levee. The increased use of the area by bird watchers could bring in grant money to post signs informing visitors about the birds, said Brasted, who rides through the area often on horseback. Native species such as osprey, hawks, egrets and herons are common visitors to the levee.

The levee is one of 177 spots nominated to be included in a detailed guidebook on birding sites to be published by the state. Up to 120 sites will be chosen for the book.

Brasted's trail dreams will probably first become reality in Plaquemines Parish. The Regional Planning Commission is set to begin an environmental assessment soon of a planned park and up to eight miles of trail on parish property near the Belle Chase Primary School

Brasted said she is lining up volunteer labor to put in bridges along the trail as soon as the environmental statement is completed. "The park is slowly evolving into a reality," said Brasted. For more information, go to www.woodlandstrail.bizland.com.

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