

# 2024 Caddo Lake and Solar Eclipse Trip Report

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## Caddo Lake State Park Canoe Trip

The April 8, 2024 solar eclipse offered a rare opportunity to fit in a canoe trip while witnessing a celestial event that will not be coming back to the US for another 20 years. Caddo Lake and the Big Cypress Bayou area offered 12 Colorado canoeists the opportunity to explore cypress filled bayous, swamps and sloughs. Henry Williams' summary of the trails, the put-in and take-out, trail length and float times to help plan trip can be obtained [HERE](#). Since the group was planning on paddling for 5 days, Henry's document has a spreadsheet that offered possible combinations of trails for each day. The wonderful thing about this area is the ability to link different trails to make your paddle adventure as short or as long as you wish. For this trip we chose to paddle between 4 and 7 miles per day. That got us off the water between 1:00-2:30, often because of the wind, which left the group with lots of time to go birdwatching, hiking or exploring the quaint town of Jefferson, Texas.

We based ourselves at the Caddo Lake State Park campground reserving 7 campsites—a mixture of tent, electric (some with bug shelters) and full hook up sites—costing a very reasonable \$10-\$25 but you did have to pay an additional daily park entrance fee. We also appreciated the free showers and the stacks of split firewood fire wood next to a donation box. Sites had to be reserved 5 months in advance.

One of the biggest appeals of the area was the opportunity to experience a boating environment very foreign to anything offered in Colorado. It was a gorgeous landscape of Spanish moss covered cypress trees standing in water while displaying their many “knees”, knobs of cypress roots raising a few inches to a few feet above the water. These knees became difficult and often impossible to paddle through on the edges of the lakes and sloughs so getting out of your boat for any reason became an opportunity for a wet exit. Strategic bathroom and lunch breaks had to be timed with handy boat ramps or the rare beach or opening along dry land.



Navigating these paddle trails was fairly easy so long as you kept the next sign post in sight. The trails were mostly well signed with a symbol of a canoe paddle, an arrow pointing to the next sign, and a different colored background for each trail. Maps with boating trails were available for \$10 at the Visitor Center. In addition to the paddle trails there is a whole series of Boat Roads marked by letters and numbers. These boat roads are much wider and deeper allowing motor boats a clear way through the swamp. We were lucky not to have much traffic during the week but weekends at Caddo Lake are full of power boats and fisherman intent on bass fishing. All but a few motorboat drivers were great about slowing down the moment they got near us which was a good thing since many of their boats could spray water up to 8 feet high as they zipped down the waterways which could easily swamp our canoes and kayaks. Even when they slowed down we often turned to face their wake for fear of being tipped over.





Water fowl and song birds were abundant but it was much easier to hear than to see them. The birders in our group were delighted with sighting of birds with names we couldn't pronounce. But even us non-birding types were enthralled by the very accommodating pileated woodpecker (an elegant 16" tall black and white bird with a flaming red crest) letting us ooh and awe over him for several minutes. Other bird sightings included: cormorants, white egrets, great blue herons, American coots, osprey holding a fish in one talon, barred owls, and a wide assortment of ducks. Turtles were also in abundance.



The surrounding area is lush with green trees and plants but not so much on the bayou. The grey cypress trees covered in grey Spanish moss gave the overall appearance of a ghostly water realm but hints of the coming spring with its mats of green water plants, including beautiful flowering water lilies, were just starting to appear. The cypress trees were leafing out at the top and the bushes that are able to take hold at the base of the cypress were turning bright green. This will be a very different place in just a couple of weeks and apparently in the fall the water level is so much lower and choked with vegetation that many of these waterways are hard to paddle and impossible for boats with motors to get through.

Caddo Lake State Park was a perfect place to launch day trips to explore the Caddo Lake/Big Cypress Bayou area. Caddo Lake is a huge lake and we only touched a small portion of the western section located in Texas. The eastern half is in Louisiana and from the map it looks like a bigger body of water though it does have a number of interesting looking arms that may be fun to explore in a canoe.

We met at the Sawmill Pond parking lot next to the campground at 9:15 am every morning and caravanned to the put ins/take out only 10-15 minutes away. The put ins, an assortment of public and private land, each had its own fee ranging from \$3-\$5 per boat on private land to \$12 per person for an annual pass for the Wildlife Management Areas that one can get online or at the Visitor Center.



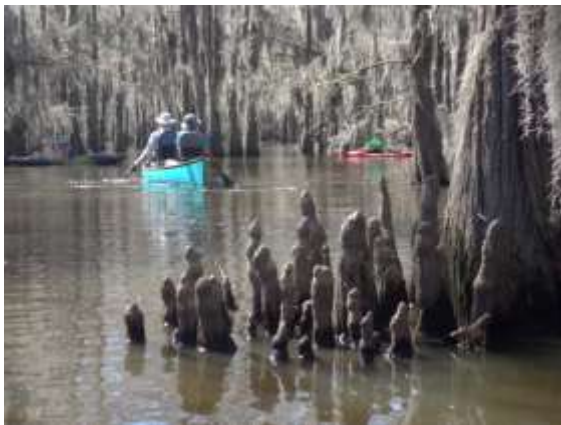
## PADDLE SCHEDULE

DATE	TRAIL	PUT IN	DESCRIPTION	MILES
4/2/24	Turtle Shell area	Johnson Ranch Marina (\$5 per boat). Had lunch on their nice covered balcony	This paddle included an assortment of paddle trails and boat roads crossing through narrow waterways to more open water. This is the area we saw the ospreys. We went north along Boat Road O and was able to glide through the trees at the edge of a large lake to get back to our main route. A strong wind came up so no one wanted to go out in the afternoon.	4.8
4/3/24	Hell's Half Acre	Caddo Wildlife Management Area (\$12 per person per year)	Leslie (who has boated this area many times) lead today's paddle. We started by following a short connecting trail marked by old license plates to the Hell's Half Arce junction and turned right. It is a beautiful area where you glide among the tightly spaced cypress trees following the gold arrows. We turned around at Big Cypress Bayou and came back up the trail to Goat Island campsite where we had lunch and saw hundreds of inch long frogs along the shoreline. Paddled back to the WMA boat ramp.	5.0
4/4/24	Cathedral and Government Ditch	Shady Glade Resort (\$3 per boat)	Went left along the western shore to a very pretty waterway called Cathedral. During the last mile that ended near a bridge we encountered a 2.5 mph current, not hard to paddle through but you knew it was there. Near the end where we turned around was the only large dry spot we found so we got out and had lunch. On the suggestion of someone at Johnson Ranch Marina we explored Government Ditch, a straight narrow waterway where a ditch had been dug but was abandoned. It wasn't anything to write home about at this time of year but later when the trees greened out and the leaves of the trees form a green tunnel it will be a magnificent sight to see.	5.2
4/5/24	Benton Lake and Clear Lake	Backwater Jacks (\$5 per boat). Has a long shaded picnic table where the group ate lunch	Turned left out of Backwater Jacks and paddled upstream (current was 2.5 mph) for 20 minutes/1 mile to the turnoff for Benton Lake. A beautiful lake where we were able to paddle the cypress groves along the perimeter of the lake taking whatever path you could navigate through the jumble of cypress trunks and knees. The silence and the beauty lead several people to mention how cathedral like this area is. We went back to Backwater Jacks to eat lunch and then went up the Clear Lake trail. The website description describes a much longer trail but we had to turn back when we came across a road with a no trespassing sign that crossed the waterway leading to Clear Lake. That was very disappointing since the area, like Benton Lake, was so beautiful.	4.1



4/6/24	Smith Slough and Carter's Chute	Caddo Wildlife Management Area (\$12 per person per year)	Went back to the Hell's Half Acre area but this time we took the Smith Slough down to the Big Cyprus Bayou before turning around. We again had lunch at the Goat Island campsite. This time after lunch we turned north and explored more of Carter's Chute turning around at a dilapidated looking bridge before coming back to the put in.	7.3
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We were very fortunate regarding both weather and bugs during this first week of April. This year the weeks leading up to our trip were in the 60's and 70's with nights in the 30's and 40's. When we first arrived we encountered almost no mosquitos but as the weather warmed with days in the 80's and light rainfall a couple of nights the mosquito population increased. A couple of our group members ran into chiggers that left large angry looking red bites around their ankles. Being from Colorado, the thought of being eaten alive by mosquitoes and other biting insects worried us way more than being eaten by an alligator.



Evenings gatherings were also a highlight of this trip. At our pot luck dinner 4 people made spectacular Dutch oven dishes such as chile rellenos, stuffed jalapenos wrapped in bacon, cheesy black beans and an apple crumble with a sweet liqueur sauce while others whipped up a bison shepherd's pie, cooked vegetable medley, salads, and so many other delicious items. The group took advantage of the warm nights sharing appetizers, gobbling down slices of Lava Cake with ice cream and Pineapple Upside Down

Cake with whipped cream while watching the twinkling firefly display in the surrounding woods...simply magical!



Another reason all of us liked the location of Caddo Lake SP was its proximity to the city of Jefferson. It is a small town made wealthy by being at the end of a historic trade route for goods coming by boat from the Gulf. It boasts a large number of stately looking southern homes and a downtown area with buildings that look like they belong in New Orleans. There is a nice 4x5 block shopping area with lots of antique stores, restaurants, ice cream and cupcake shops, plus a wonderful general store where those of us with grey hair can find the candies, toys, clothing, kitchen items, and food (complete with a working soda fountain) that we grew up with. Most of our group also visited the Jefferson Historical Museum with its elaborate model train, old tools, antique furniture and clothing and its huge display of barbwire. As the day temperature rose into the 80's it was the ice cream that drew us like flies to Jefferson's shops after we got off the water.



### **April 8, 2024 Solar Eclipse**

We left Caddo on April 7th and drove two hours west to the city of Canton that was located in the middle of the solar eclipse's path of totality where we had reserved lodging many months ago.

The morning of the eclipse started with heavy rain laden clouds but by 12:30 at the beginning of the 2 hour and 40 minute eclipse there were equal amounts of wispy clouds and patches of blue sky. Luckily during the 4 minutes of totality, when the moon fully covered the sun, the clouds cleared allowing us to see the entire solar light show.

It started with the "diamond ring" (upper right photo) as the last of the sun's rays disappeared. When the sun's corona is low you can see a couple of solar flare like objects called prominences. The last photo shows the sun's full corona in all its glory,