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A Cow in the Bayou

Fishing stories are normally about how many fish were caught or how big they were. Not this one! This fishing story starts out at the marsh surrounded boat launch at the end of Bayou Lacombe.

An August fishing trip on Lake Pontchartrain will certainly start off hot and muggy. It was a Saturday morning and my parents and I were going for some redfish and speckled trout. We launched the boat and started slowly idling through the bayou. Long beaked birds were fishing along the banks and mullet were jumping in front of the boat.

“You know I’m going to catch more fish than you,” I confidently claimed.

“Not today,” Dad muttered after adjusting his hat for the ride out. “I think your Mom may out fish us both today.”

“We both know that isn’t going to happen,” I answered while checking Mom’s facial expressions for disapproval.

Upon exiting Bayou Lacombe and entering Lake Pontchartrain, the south wind had picked up causing angry white caps as far as we could see. The bow slammed into the rolling waves causing a shower of water to rain over the boat. Mom was wet and not happy.

“Why don’t we just fish in the mouth of the bayou? It’s much calmer,” I suggested.

Within an hour at the mouth of the bayou, I had caught a keeper red fish. My dad caught two speckled trout and my mom caught a flounder. The next hour brought nothing. When the fishing slows, I entertain myself by asking Dad lots of questions. This is where my fishing story takes a turn.

“Are there any manatees out here?” I asked. I’m not sure why the subject of manatees popped into my head.

“There are signs to watch out for them over at the Mandeville launch, but I have never seen one,” he replied.

“It would be so cool to see one.”

Another half hour went by and only a couple of hardheads were caught. I proceeded to ask Dad lots of questions. Mom continued fishing and listening to our conversation. Or maybe she was off mentally shopping somewhere in New Orleans. We were debating whether to leave or make a few more casts.

We were all facing and casting towards the marshy shoreline and the lake was to our back. The lack of fishing action had each one of us daydreaming of another place. Behind us and from the water came a noise that had never been heard before. The noise was deep and dark and not of anything that lives in the water. It was scary. It was unnatural. This sound should not be coming from the water. Dad’s facial expression went to a look of “What the ...?” I didn’t want to turn around. The evil sound made me picture a monster with its head and neck sticking up out of the water and taking deep breaths before it attacked its helpless prey.

Slowly we all turned around at the same time to see what was about to attack us. I was quickly comforted that there was no neck and head of a sea monster hovering above me with large teeth and drool dripping from its mouth.

“Look,” Dad said with the sound of relief in his voice. “It’s a manatee.”

I couldn’t respond with words. The manatee’s grey, whiskery snout was sticking out of the water and taking breaths. The scariest real-life sound I ever heard was coming from a manatee. The strangest thing was that I had just asked Dad about them a half hour ago. With a couple of splashes it sank back into the dark waters of the bayou.

I had never seen a manatee before except in pictures. It was exciting and shocking at the same time to see one of the most harmless creatures next to our boat. We had talked about them in school and I knew that sadly they were going extinct. I started asking Dad some more questions.

“Do you know much about manatees?” I pondered.

“I know a little. They are mammals and herbivores, which means they only eat plants such as grasses and algae.”

“Cool, so we could throw lettuce out from our sandwiches and they would eat it?”

Laughing, he replied, “You can try, but I think he’s gone. Speaking of grass,” Dad added, “I also heard that people call them sea cows.”

“Sea cows? Why do they call them that?”

"I guess because they are big, slow, hang out in groups, and eat grass."

"Do you know anything else," I asked.

"Well, I don't think they have many predators. I also read that it takes 18 months for their babies to be born."

"Wow, that's a long time to carry a baby around. I heard in class they were going extinct. Do you know why?" I kept asking.

Thinking about it for a minute, he replied, "I have heard and read many different reasons for their decline. For instance, when a boat goes through the water, the sound is at a frequency that manatees cannot hear. So they don't try to get out of the way and the propeller would cut into their back making them bleed to death or eventually become infected and kill them."

"That's sad. I hope Darth Vader makes it out into the lake safely."

"Darth Vader?" Dad questioned.

"Yeah! His breathing sounded just like Darth Vader's. That's what I named him."

"Ok", Dad said. "Consider yourself lucky to have seen one up close. I imagine they are getting ready to migrate back down the Florida for the winter. They'll swim back up this way next year and maybe you'll get to see another one."

My friends at school always ask me about my fishing trips. I always have a story to tell because something always happens on our trips. This fishing story was different. I told them that while fishing, I saw a cow in the bayou.