

Gators & Freighters Day 3

**Friday, Oct 23, 2015 - Bayou Goula Towhead
Baton Rouge to the Gulf of Mexico
*Lower Mississippi River Dispatch No 210***

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For the completion of the [www.rivergator.org](http://www.rivergator.org)

*1 million words describing the Middle & Lower Mississippi River for paddlers  
and others.*

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Greetings from Bayou Goula Island, the morning of day 3 of the "Gators & Freighters" Expedition. (we've seen both!) I am waking up in the pre-dawn light with Orionids streaking down through cloud-dappled skies in a mostly dark place, an anomaly in this otherwise very crowded stretch of river with 200 petrochemical plants in 140 miles of river(!) But even here amongst the chaos a great horned owl lulled me to sleep, and the distant crying of a coyote awoke me. With the exception of a tiny glimmer seen upstream over Pleasant Point (from the Willow Glen Power Plant) and a few individual light from a single dock across the river, and a periodic roaring from somewhere in the vicinity of White Castle, this is a wild place, no tracks here on the sand but animals and wind-blown leaves. We found a narrow inlet parting the broad sandbar of this island from its main forested body, and made a beautiful camp on a sandy shelf opposite a muddy plateau composed of layers borne and laid by millennia of river flooding. This might be our last "wild" camp until we reach the Gulf. One of the *Queen* emerged from the darkness above Palo Alto Landing and silently slid by downstream around the island, her lights blinking on and off melodramatically (sp?) through the young willows covering a small mounded rise at the top of the island.

This is exactly why we are making this expedition down Chemical Corridor, through the busiest and most dangerous stretch of river on the entire Mississippi. Our official Rivergator recommendation is for paddlers to take the Atchafalaya Route. But we know most of you will want to follow the Mississippi through New Orleans anyway. And so we are determined to find the best landings and campsites, and describe these busy waters so that your journey will be safer and more enjoyable. We also intend to help you find the prettiest places -- and isolated pockets of wilderness like this one -- within the roaring industry of Southern Louisiana.

Let me introduce the voyageurs: On board this final expedition we have two seasoned adventurers, Ben Quaintance and Robert Landreneau. Robert frequents the Atchafalaya Basin and is a social worker from Lafayette. He has paddled with us Quapaws in several Bluz Cruzs, and at the last Phatwater, and we are glad to have his level-headed strength in the canoe. Ben recently lost his wife, but is keeping her spirit alive (and their intended retirement wishes to travel and see the world) by making long trips like these. He paddled the Upper Mississippi from Lake Itasca to Winonah, MN this very summer. So he will have bookended the Mississippi, with only the center section missing now.

Donovan Hohn is writing a book about the Mississippi as a follow-up to his brilliant *Moby Duck**. Like me he is away from his wife and kids, a tricky balance of the heart, torn between a loving home and the call of the wild. He recently published a piece in the [New Republic](#) defending our great inspiration, naturalist and conservationist, Henry David Thoreau (not to mention poetic writer and free thinker!) **Moby-Duck: The True Story of 28,800 Bath Toys Lost at Sea, and of the Beachcombers, Oceanographers, Environmentalists and Fools, Including the Author, Who Went in Search of Them.*

Paul & Michael Orr are two friends who are saviors of the Lower Mississippi River, indeed of all of southern Louisiana. They are following in the footsteps of their mother, Marylee Orr, who the Pope must have been thinking about when he wrote the Laudato Si. They are both seasoned sailors, and naturalists, and walk the earth softly and with a keen curiosity. Paul is also the Lower Mississippi Riverkeeper.

From Quapaw Canoe Company is Mark River and Zoe Sundra. Zoe is our newest voyageur. On land she is our “secretary of the river,” and is

also a textile artist and recorded singer/songwriter. You all know River, our lead guide and teacher. He oversees our youth programs in Clarksdale, and is also the southern leader for the 1Mississippi campaign. He is captain of one of the canoes. Quapaw graduate Chris Staudinger (“Wolfie”) joined us for this stretch, and boy are we glad to have him! I see him scribbling down notes so maybe, hopefully, you will hear his rich and colorful voice in one of these expedition updates. He is from here, and has the feel.

To join us later in the expedition is Mary Ann Sternberg, author of the classic *Along the River Road: Past and Present on Louisiana’s Historic Byway*, and Dean Klinkenberg, author of the *Mississippi River Traveler* series.

Now a suffuse salmon warmth is spreading underneath the layers of clouds over Point Claire (looking east across the back channel of Bayou Goula Towhead) becoming peachish and then reddish towards its extremities. Waterfowl are seen everywhere around us, ducks, egrets, herons, taking advantage of the receding waters. Fiery bright lines finely etched into the face of the river indicate vigorous fish and amphibian activity underneath. The mosquitoes are thick and ravenous. But the coffee is hot, and Irish oats will fill any empty places as we pack and ready ourselves for the challenging day ahead.

Most paddlers are an independent lot, and will do it on their own regardless. Which begs the question of the Rivergator -- why do we keep exploring when we could be safe at home with our loved ones? And Why the Rivergator? Why describe this less attractive route to the Gulf of Mexico (through Chemical Corridor) when we could be only recommending and describing the much safer and serene Atchfalaya?

Well, it's for the places like this one we have discovered, the small but beautiful Bayou Goula, caught in between the cracks of civilization and the spread of industry up the Mississippi. A flower growing in between the cracks in the concrete. Tender places easily bulldozed or paved over. We feel the need to find them and share them, along with all of the possible routes and dangers involved. So that you, dear readers and dear paddlers, you can at the very least gain a little insight as to what's here, and hopefully make your best decisions thereafter.

Yours in service of the Big River,

"Driftwood" John Ruskey



Baton Rouge to the Gulf of Mexico

Day 2- Manchac Point to Bayou Goula Towhead-19 miles

Morning comes slowly on Manchac Point, as I gaze out my tent at the sky. Is it the glow from the industries, or the crescent moon, keeping the night illuminated? The visibility throughout the night kept me staring off the bluff at the Mississippi River. I marvel at the fact that I could see everything. Constant towboat traffic occasionally rocked me to sleep, but the night continuously had me checking the time, thinking the sun would rise soon-not wanting to be late to prepare breakfast.

The sun finally shows its presence as the crew slowly exit their tents to the smell of bacon and eggs. After breakfast, everyone took the time to write in journals and look over maps, eventually making it to their tents to pack up and start the day. I stayed by the fire stuffing two roast with garlic, and brazing them in olive oil, to be slow cooked all day in the canoe.

We launch our boats and start the Medora Crossing, and to our surprise, two towboats are in the main channel. One going upstream and the other downstream, so we have to make a decision. My initial thought was no-not wanting to tire my crew to early, but the other boat says, "Let's do it!" The upstream tow was further away than the downstreamer, but we had the current and boats pointed downstream at a 45 degree angle on our side. The adrenaline kicked in and my paddle dug in deep, as the downstream tow gives us a warning horn. We make the crossing with plenty of time to spare, as a bald eagle greets us on the other side as we head towards Plaquemine Bend. We dodge the car ferry and take the back channel of Plaquemine Island, as another bald eagle points us in the right direction.

We continue on and make the Granada Crossing and head towards St. Gabriel Bend. We eat lunch at Point Pleasant, as a alligator watches us from the water adjacent to the sand dune. This is the first time I've seen an alligator on the main channel of the Mississippi River. It must have heard about www.rivergator.org and came to check us out. After lunch

we tried to get close for a picture , but it submerged never to be seen again.

We see our evening camp in the distant, while making the Bayou Goula Crossing, heading towards Bayou Goula Towhead where we would camp for the evening. Two fisherman on the east bank yell out, "Where y'all headed?" We respond , "the Gulf of Mexico." They repeat with amazement, "the Gulf of Mexico?"

We take advantage of the early camp. Some bathe, some explore, and I focused my attention on the garlic roast. We enjoy a meal of garlic roast, red cabbage salad, cornbread, and roasted potatoes, with salad dressing of olive oil, soy sauce, apple cider vinegar, and cumin. After dinner the wind dies slightly as the sun disappears in the horizon and the mosquitoes chased us to our tents.

- Mark River



What awaits us around the next bend? Next installment tomorrow.

For photos and more reading, go to www.rivergator.org

Lower Mississippi River Dispatch

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