

Introducing:

Rivergator

Middle/Lower Mississippi River Water Trail

with:

The Wild Miles:

A 1155-MILE JOURNEY THROUGH THE HEART OF AMERICA

by "Driftwood" John Ruskey, August 2014



Wild Miles:

Looking at a map of North America you will inevitably be drawn to the bottom center of the continent where a meandering blue line broader than any other of the blue lines gracefully loops southward and empties into the Gulf of Mexico. It reaches out with long fingers and tentacles of other skinny blue lines which branch out eastwards and westwards from the Rockies to the Alleghenies encompassing the second largest catchment basin in the world. Along the way this line carves elegant river bends and giant oxbow lakes. One of the loops goes twenty miles to make one mile. This enchanting blue line marks the Lower Mississippi River, the largest river on the continent. Its big muddy waters and wide floodplain create a paradise for paddlers, birders, and anyone else seeking the solace of the wilderness. Expansive swaths of green are seen parallel to the loopy blue line and indicate the extensive and healthy bottomland hardwood forests still surviving between the levees. (Discounting the last 235 miles of the river below Baton Rouge where it leaves the wilderness and enters the intensely industrial port of New Orleans, also known as Cancer Alley).

The origins of these waters are found upstream in America's Heartland, St. Louis, where the Upper Miss confluences with the Missouri to form the Middle Miss. The Middle Miss separates the Pawnee Hills from the Ozarks and then meets the green waters of the Ohio at the southern tip of Illinois to form the Lower Miss. It is now the biggest volume water in this quadrant of the earth. You can trace this mysterious curvy blue line deep into the gut of America, the Deep South, down to the Gulf Coast. This valley was once an inlet of the Gulf of Mexico, then a glacial floodplain, and later a thriving jungle of 22 million acres. Even after it was settled, its forests cut, its back channels cut off and main channel vigorously maintained; even still the river rules the landscape with unimaginable power, annually rising and falling fifty vertical feet with fluctuations of millions of cubic feet per second, which prepares the stage for an unlikely setting in wilderness travel.

The wonderful thing about the Lower Mississippi River is that it's still wild. You will see some industry and agriculture between Cairo and Baton Rouge, but for the most part your experience will be big water, big forests, big sandbars, big bluffs and big skies! Does this sound like Alaska? Or Lake Superior? Or Puget Sound? Yes -- but it's not. It's nothing but the muddy big river, the biggest river in North America, and the longest stretch of free-flowing waters in the Lower 48.

There are 105 Wild Miles on the Middle Mississippi River between St. Louis and Cairo, and 515 Wild Miles on the Lower Mississippi River between Cairo and Baton Rouge, which means that 71% of the scenery viewed from canoes or kayaks paddling down that stretch of river looks & feels "wild" (www.wildmiles.org) Wild Miles are the places along the river where nature predominates and nothing is seen of mankind save passing tows (and other river traffic) and maybe a tiny hunting camp or a single fisherman buzzing by in a johnboat. These are places where the landscape is filled with giant islands bounded by endless mud banks and sandbars, where the river is overseen by big skies and where the sun sets uninterrupted by buildings or wires. These are places where the big river predominates with creative wild beauty, each high water results in shifting sand dunes and re-made sandbars. These are places where only deer and coyote tracks are seen along the sandbars and enormous flocks of shy birds like the white pelican and double breasted cormorant are comfortable enough to make landing for the night, and once endangered species like the interior least tern and pallid sturgeon have regained a foothold in a healthy landscape. These are places where it's dark and quiet at night, where the stars fill the skies like brightly shining jewels poured out on a dark purple velvet blanket, almost as thick & vibrant as the night skies of the Great Plains or the Rocky Mountains.

America has an opportunity to find the "wilderness within" by recognizing and preserving the Wild Miles in the center of the country. And it just so happens that the gigantic floodplain of the Mississippi creates these Wild Miles. These places have been preserved mostly by neglect, by the power of the river, by its catastrophic rises & falls, and the danger of building anything within its floodplain. Moreover, in light of recent flood cycles and the declining population of the lower floodplain, this area is receiving attention as one of the best places to restore native bottomland hardwood forests, and re-open back channels with notches in the old dikes. Restored forest creates habitat for wildlife, improved water quality, a buffer to flooding, and is an important means of reducing the Gulf of Mexico's "dead zone," caused by nutrient runoff into the river. For this reason the recent efforts to permanently close the New Madrid Birdspoint Floodway would have a detrimental effect on the entire Lower Miss, at the very least in flood control.

Rivergator

We are working on a 4-year project to describe the Lower Mississippi River for modern day human-powered explorers, namely canoeists, kayakers, stand-up-paddleboards, rafters, row-boaters and other users. We are creating a very detailed written guide called the *Rivergator: Paddler's Guide to the Lower Mississippi*. The title *Rivergator* is derived from the national best-seller *The Navigator*. *The Navigator* was first published in 1801 by Zadok Kramer, with twelve subsequent printings. *The Navigator* described the Mississippi Valley for pioneer settlers streaming out of the Eastern United States in the first great wave of continental migrations that eventually led to the settling of the Wild West. Thomas Jefferson and other leaders were fearful that the French or the English would get there first. With the Lewis & Clark explorations and the introduction of the steamboat to the Mississippi River in 1812, Americans followed the big rivers up and down through the heart of the country, and *The Navigator* was their guide. In this spirit I have adopted the name *Rivergator* with the hope that Americans will rediscover their "wilderness within," the paddler's paradise created by the Lower Mississippi River. And that the *Rivergator* will be adopted by successive generations of canoeists and kayakers, and will be re-written as the river changes. Zadoc Cramer also invented the numbering system for Lower Mississippi River Islands, a system that survive to this day.

Who is *the Rivergator* written for?

The Rivergator is written by paddlers for paddlers. It will open the river for local experienced canoeists who have always wanted to paddle the Mississippi but didn't know how or when or where to start, such as canoe clubs, kayak clubs and outdoor clubs, outdoor leadership schools, friends and families, church groups and youth groups. It could be used by the Girl Scouts for a week-long summer expedition down the Middle Mississippi below St. Louis, or a group of Boy Scouts working on their canoe badge in the Memphis area. It could be the guide for a group of high school students from Helena who want to get on the river at the mouth of the St. Francis for an simple daytrip. Paddlers seek out new places to explore. You could read *the Rivergator* during the winter months from your home and by spring snowmelt you could be making your first paddle strokes on a life-changing adventure down the Mississippi! *Rivergator* will help you get there if you're a long-distance canoeist who started at Lake Itasca, or a kayaker who is coming through south after paddling the length of the Missouri River from Montana's Bitterroot Mountains. You could be a stand-up-paddleboarder who put in at the Great River Confluence of the Allegheny and Mongahela Rivers and follow the Ohio down to the Mississippi. On the Lower Mississippi all of the rules of the river change as the waters get bigger, more unruly, more difficult to predict, and tougher to paddle. No more calm waters contained behind the locks and dams. Hulloo big towboats pushing huge fleets of barges!

We paddlers are all the same whether traveling by canoe, kayak, paddleboard, raft or row boat. We look for the same kinds of currents on the river, and enjoy the same kinds of remote islands. We are slow, but efficient. We know the river better than any other river pilots, at least the pieces of river we have paddled on. We have more in common with towboats than motorboats. Regardless of what you paddle, *the Rivergator* will help you find the essential landings and the obscure back channels that you would otherwise miss. It will help you safely paddle around towboats, and choose the best line of travel to follow around the head-turning bends and intimidating dikes, wing dams, and other rock structures. It will identify which islands to camp and which to avoid, and where the best picnic spots are found and where blue holes form. It will lead you to places of prolific wildlife and mind-blowing beauty. It will help explain some of the mysterious motions of the biggest river in North America. It's written for paddlers, but is readable enough to be enjoyed by any arm-chair adventurers including landowners, hunters, fishermen, communities along the route, historians, biologists, geologists, and other river-lovers. The river is the key to understanding the history the geography and the culture of the Mid-South. It's the nation's first high speed "router." It connected our ancestors much like internet does today. It's the original American highway, migration route, freight route, newspaper route, and trade route. But it's also a church, a sanctuary, a playground, a classroom. The river is the rock star, *The Rivergator* is merely a guide to help you interpret and enjoy the songs of the river!

So what is it like actually paddling on the Lower Mississippi River? What is the experience from water level, over the gunwhales of your canoe or over the deck of your kayak? So far we have completed 926 miles of the 1155 miles total of the Rivergator, covering the wildest of the wild river from St. Louis down through Ozarkian bluffs, down the Pawnee Hills, through the Missouri Bootheel, along the Chickasaw Bluffs into Memphis, through the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta to Vicksburg, and down the Loess Bluffs/Louisiana Delta to Baton Rouge. Next year we will add in the coastal reaches down the wild Atchafalaya, the river of trees, and the industrious "chemical corridor," the only section with no wild miles in it. Here is a synopsis of the highlights along the way:

St. Louis to Caruthersville

The journey begins in the heart of America, where the muddy, silty waters of Montana mix with the clearer waters of Minnesota, at the confluence of the "Big Muddy" Missouri and the black tannin rich waters of the Upper Mississippi. After confluencing the river rolls along rhythmically between the limestone bluffs of the Missouri Ozarks and the granite Illinois Pawnee Hills, and then burst into the bottomlands of the Missouri Bootheel. The Appalachian green waters of the Ohio River pour into the muddy brown waters of the Mississippi at the southern tip of Illinois (Cairo) forming the Lower Mississippi. The combined waters now roll along bouncing back and forth between the Kentucky Hills and the Missouri Bootheel past Reelfoot Lake and on southward into the largest and longest floodplain in North America. Once 22 million acres of bottomland forest, now mostly leveled for agriculture, the remaining floodplain preserved between the levees bordering the big river creates a vibrant ribbon of life thriving with deer, coyotes, possum, coon, beaver, turtles, gar, sturgeon, egrets, thrushes, warblers, hummingbirds -- more mammals, amphibians, birds and fish than any other single habitat in this region of mother earth. This dynamic landscape parallels the river for almost a thousand miles downstream to the Gulf of Mexico and is known as the Wild Miles.

195 miles of the Middle Miss from St. Louis confluence to Cairo. 112 miles of the Lower Miss from Cairo to Caruthersville. 307 miles total. Put in at Columbia Bottoms (Missouri River) or

Maple Island (Upper Mississippi) and paddle into their confluence which forms the Middle Mississippi River, the muddy Missouri winning in color, but the Upper Mississippi usually the larger of the two. Continue on under the Great Arch through St. Louis and downstream (now on the Middle Mississippi) to the Ohio River confluence and onward. The twenty mile long St. Louis Harbor is the most industrial stretch of river until Baton Rouge, and requires safe paddling for expert paddlers only. The Middle Miss carves a wide elegant valley in between the Pawnee Hills of Illinois and the Missouri Ozarks, bouncing back and forth between broad swaths of rich forested floodplain and steep outcroppings of rock and bluffs. The bluffs rise majestically and form striking backdrops and strongholds of river industry (such as power plants, gravel and cement operations, and grain elevators) as it courses southward through Kimmswick, Crystal City, and then again at Brickeys, Sainte Genevieve, again at Trail of Tears. At Grand Tower bluffs crowd the river on both sides and Tower Rock rises prominently out of one side of the channel creating swirling water dervishes that command careful attention for the paddler. Below Cape Girardeau the river bounces off Cape Rock, and then dives through the last of the Middle Miss bluffs below Thebes where it cuts through the hard granite Pawnee Hills and explodes into the floodplain below with two giant bends of river colorfully named Dogtooth and then Greenleaf. At Cairo Illinois the Ohio River and the Mississippi meet, shake hands and continue on downriver as the Lower Mississippi River. The river is still muddy. At this point the Mississippi becomes the biggest volume river in North America. Continue on 108 miles of the Lower Miss to Caruthersville with the Kentucky Bluegrass Hills on your left and Missouri Bootheel on your right. The chalky Loess Bluffs of Kentucky border the river at Wickliffe, Columbus and then Hickman, and then fall away as the river edges westward into the ever-widening floodplain, up to sixty miles wide east to west. At Bessie's Bend the entire Mississippi makes a giant 20 mile loop to cover one mile of distance, the biggest and most prominent bend on the entire Mississippi River system (New Madrid at its crown), so big it can be seen from outer space. You can paddle pieces of this section as daytrips, overnights, long weekends, or do the whole thing with a two week expedition including Sainte Genevieve, Grand Tower, Tower Rock, Cape Girardeau, Trail of Tears, Thebes, Cairo, Hickman, Reelfoot Lake, Bessie's Bend, and Caruthersville.

Caruthersville to Memphis:

113 miles of the big river from the paddler-friendly town of Caruthersville, Missouri to the thriving metropolis of Memphis Tennessee, the largest city south of St. Louis. Along the way you'll paddle over mud that's over 6,000 feet deep and an entire loess bluff caving into the river. You'll see towboats and fishermen and a few crusty river towns like Osceola and Randolph. You'll camp on beaches the size and feel of Caribbean beaches, and paddle through narrow chutes with lush overhanging willows and cottonwoods. You'll be hemmed in by revetment and dikes in one place, and then released into long sections of the main channel with no levee -- where the floodplain forest/wetlands are still connected directly to the river, creating an incredibly vibrant ecosystem of bayous, sluices, chutes, pools, and back channels overflowing with wildlife. In some places you might think you're in the Amazon jungle for all the mud and trees, in other places you might be overwhelmed by the large agricultural landscapes, or by a couple of sprawling steel plants. In one special location you'll think you've discovered a land of the lost where the Mississippi River meets Utah (at the base of the startling candy-colored ridges and buttes of the 2nd Chickasaw Bluff).

The river here rolls out of the Missouri Bootheel and into the wild floodplain between Tennessee and Arkansas. It's so wild that no levees are needed for 60 miles along the left bank side of the river from Moss Island to Memphis! This section is full of tributary rivers with deep woody bottoms, strange colorful mud slides, and dozens of islands and back channels to explore, many protected

within wildlife refuges and state parks. Deep woods are protected along the way, classic bottomland hardwood forests where cypress, oaks, sweetgums, tulip poplars, cottonwoods and sycamores soar over a hundred feet above the open forest bottoms, in places pulling long trailing cascades of wild grape vines upward into the canopy, while shorter trees like paw-paws, river birch and silver maples fill the bottoms and forest edges. Extensive willow forests crowd the lowest elevation places closest to the water, along with innumerable flowering and fruiting bushes and vines like trumpet vine and poison ivy. Edible plants such as dewberry, thistle and stinging nettle, and many other wild greens can be collected in the forest fringes and added to the paddler's food stores for fresh flavors and nutrition. There is some heavy industry along the way, a couple of noisy steel plants and a giant power plant (below Osceola), and some busy grain docks and two harbors -- none of which you'll want to camp near. Nevertheless your hard paddling will be rewarded again and again with fabulous views of the Chickasaw Bluffs along the Western edge of the state of Tennessee and adjacent bottomland hardwood forests, including the colossal cliff-bluffs at Fort Pillow (1st Chickasaw Bluff), the astounding colorful chalky glacier of mud above Richardson's Landing (2nd Chickasaw Bluff), Meeman-Shelby State Forest (3rd Chickasaw Bluff) and finally the sweeping view of the Memphis skyline, including the Memphis Bridge and the Pyramid, and downtown Memphis (which straddles the 4th Chickasaw Bluff). The vista from the river is unparalleled! Points of interest include Obion River, Moss Island Wildlife Management Area, Nucor Yamamoto Steel, Island 30/Osceola Back Channel, Hatchie River Bottoms, Meeman-Shelby Forest State Park, Hickman Bar, Loosahatchie and Wolf Rivers, the elegant "M" Bridge and finally the eye-popping view of skyscrapers over the Beale Street Harbor and Landing. The vista from the river is unparalleled. You've never seen downtown Memphis if you haven't viewed it from the river!

Memphis to Helena:

73 miles. After exiting the Chickasaw Bluffs the Mighty Mississippi flows southwesterly in giant meandering loops into the verdant and fantastically fertile Mississippi Delta. This is the land that gave birth to the Delta Blues, and was once the cotton kingdom of the world. Its forest was America's Amazon, millions of acres of deep woods now removed for farmland. Paddling past downtown Memphis you'll swish under the last three bridges and some industry along the south bluff, and then you'll quickly return to the wilds of the Lower Mississippi with nothing but forested islands, big river and big open skies as your scenery. Leaving Tennessee and entering Mississippi the paddler is welcomed by a long line of casinos that rivals Atlantic City, but which you'll see little evidence of as you paddle behind long chains of islands in the same area, although you should stop for a visit to the Tunica Riverpark Museum. The river carves elegant S-curves through deep woods as it meanders through Commerce Bend, Mhoon Bend and Walnut Bend, and then wanders down through a floodplain fifteen miles wide to the mouth of the St. Francis River. The St. Francis is the biggest west bank tributary downstream of St. Louis (until you reach the White, and then the Arkansas Rivers, further downstream). Spectacular wildlife viewing and birding are found at the Tunica Runout (entrance to Tunica Lake) and the mouth of the St. Francis River. The big river engulfs mind-boggling swaths of muddy landscapes as it is forced southerly by the strange geophysical anomaly Crowley's Ridge, which parallels the Mississippi out of Missouri. Buck Island invites exploration, picnicking or camping, and Helena, Arkansas commands the base of Crowley's Ridge. As result of the high ground Helena is the only population in between Memphis and Vicksburg (300 miles) that sits right on the main channel. Visit the Delta Cultural Center, or coordinate your adventure with one of the world's greatest celebrations of music, the King Biscuit Blues Festival (October). Canoeists, SUPs and kayakers will find provisions, maps, gear, and paddling tips at Quapaw Canoe Company in Helena, as well as water and Wi-Fi.

Helena to Greenville: Lower Arkansas and Big Island: the wildest of the wild

126 miles. You are entering one of the wildest places in North America. Not because it's so quiet, or so remote. Actually there is a lot of activity here from the Helena Harbor, and Friars Point, and the Rosedale Harbor, and from all of the hunters and fishermen that frequent the area. Indeed it's not the absence of humans here or lack of human activity that makes it feel wild. Instead it's wildness comes from the meeting of two great rivers, the Mississippi and the Arkansas, and the dynamic shifty landscape created at their junction. The last 40 miles of the Lower Arkansas Valley is so flat and flood-prone -- and the river waters so unpredictable -- that the Army Corps never attempted to make it navigable, but instead created access through the nearby White River by carving the 12-mile long Arkansas Post Canal through the deep woods. As result the Lower Arkansas runs untamed as a young tiger as it approaches the big mother river the Mississippi.

If there was any question before, all doubts will now be erased: you are on the B-I-G R-I-V-E-R. The beautiful word Mississippi is derived from the Ojibwe name misi-ziibi, meaning "Long River", or gichi-ziibi, meaning "Big River." The awe-struck DeSoto expedition called it "El Rio Grande" the big river. You often hear it called the Father of Waters, although I prefer the name "Mother River" on the Lower Miss because it runs so wild and has so many moods, and simultaneous gave birth to the productive Lower Mississippi Valley. Paddlers in Natchez have named it the "Phatwater" and celebrate its greatness with an annual forty-five mile challenge.

Whatever you call it, the big muddy river dominates the landscape more proudly and pervasively than any of the many forces that combine, multiply & divide over the middle of America. The sun rises and sets. The moon rules the night sky for a time and then is reduced to a sliver, and then ends its cycle as a pale ghost. The wind blows itself into gusts and gales and then subsides and stills. The forests explode in greenery through the warm months and then become naked barren brown & blacks in the cold. The passage of severe thunderstorms comes & goes. Hurricanes threaten for a season. Only the river remains present -- forever strong, unruly, untransmutable. It fluctuates only in scale, from low water to high water to flood, but its inherit character remains constant.

The 1475 mile long Arkansas River drains all of the Great Plains from Kansas down to the Texas Panhandle, including most of Oklahoma, and everything west to the continental divide of the Colorado and New Mexico Rocky Mountains. It's the biggest and longest tributary of the Lower Mississippi River (and the largest drainages basin), its water volume sometimes swells to 200,000 cfs during flood water stages. This makes it one of the five largest and longest rivers in the continental United States. But even so the rugged Arkansas pales in comparison to the mother Mississippi which easily spills over its banks and up the levees up to 2,200,000 cfs during flood stage, a ten-fold order of difference. This is equal to 16.5 million gallons of water flowing past your Lower Mississippi River camp per second. In the one hour it took you to build a fire and get supper started 6 billion gallons flowed by. In a good night's sleep 72 billion gallons gurgled merrily downstream towards the Gulf of Mexico.

Below the Arkansas everything increases proportionately: the face of the river, the pools between the shoals, the size of the islands, the sweep of the sandbars, the length of the willow forests, the depth of the muddy banks. Even the narrows are less narrow. As you look downstream you will find an enlarged expanse of muddy brownish greenish water rolling & tumbling through incrementally bigger river bends. There are a few smaller tributaries downstream, notably the Yazoo and the Big Black, but none effect the scale of the big river as significantly as the Arkansas. Here the Mississippi River swells to its mature fullness and happily fills its wide valley with the gurgling

waters of a nation, everything in between Montana and New York State, everything from the Rockies to the Appalachians, from the Smokies to the Alleghenies, from the New Mexican Plateau to the Cumberland Plateau, from the Great Plains to the Eastern Woodlands, and through the heartland, the midwest, the mid south and deep south, and most famously from the North Woods (Lake Itasca) to the Coastal Marshes of the Gulf of Mexico (Birdsfoot Delta).

For the paddler this largesse can be at turns enlightening and frightening. It can inspire you to new perspectives and motivate life-changing decisions. It is often overwhelming. Most paddlers grit their teeth and paddle hard just to get through. And yet there is another solution to the largesse, and that is to slow down and enjoy this stretch for its wildness and expressions of beauty. But it doesn't come easily. You have to look close to find it. You have to go deep within and find a spiritual or philosophic place within your soul to deal with the global scale complexities. You have to change your focus from "gettin there" to "being there." It can subdue you to the point of boredom, and leave you confused and feeling utterly alone to the point of despair. You'll never feel more challenged; you'll never be more humbled.

Greenville to Vicksburg

You are now paddling down the last 100 miles of the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta, from Greenville, the Queen City of the Delta, to Vicksburg, the Gibraltar of the South, at the confluence of the Yazoo River. After escaping the industrious Greenville Harbor and paddling past Warfield Point you'll quickly round Vacluse Bend and be propelled under the new Greenville bridge and go flying past some grain elevators in Arkansas. And then you'll quickly return to the wilds of the Lower Mississippi with nothing but forested islands, big river and big open skies as your scenery. Continuing downstream the Mighty Mississippi continues south in more miraculous meandering loops through the phantasmagorically rich and fertile Mississippi Delta. The blues musician Muddy Waters was born near Rolling Fork, and a thriving blues and arts scene survives in Greenville. There are no tributaries along this 100-mile stretch of river, as result the water gets cleaner and cleaner the further downstream you go from Greenville (no point-source pollution), and by the time you enter Vicksburg the sandbars are almost completely free of trash and the water at its cleanest since leaving the state of Minnesota! The Mississippi floodplain forest was once America's Amazon, but millions of acres of trees have been removed for farmland. Remnants of the deep woods are protected along the river between the levees by the extreme rises and falls of the big river. Giant oxbow lakes are found on either side of the river, notably Chicot Lake (largest oxbow in North America), and the oxbow congregations found at Possum Chute/Old River and Chotard/Albermerle/Eagle Lake/Paw-Paw Island. The river carves elegant C-curves and S-curves through deep woods as it meanders through Kentucky Bend, Sarah's Chute, Marshall Cut-Off and then wanders down through its deepest woods above the mouth of the Yazoo River, the "River of Death." Here the big river engulfs mind-boggling swaths of muddy landscapes as it is forced south-southeasterly by Macon Ridge, which parallels the Mississippi out of Arkansas into Louisiana. Paw Paw Chute, the Old Yazoo and Forest Home Chute contain a thriving ecosystem of bayous, sluices, chutes, pools, and back channels which inhale the richness of the river during its annual floods and exhales with clean water and healthy populations of plankton. This relationship maintains the river's health. The fish from this section are remarkably healthy. The big river slams headlong into the towering Vicksburg bluff at the Yazoo confluence and here ends the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta. Possible alternate route through Paw Paw Chute for expert paddlers only. Vicksburg is the best place in this stretch for resupply and reconnoiter. Paddlers will want to visit the Mississippi River Museum located inside the *MV Mississippi* towboat, as well as the National Military Park, and Vicksburg's many other offerings.

Vicksburg to Baton Rouge

207 miles of remote wild river with very few landings and lots of deep woods, ever larger and larger loopy-loops of river, and giant islands commanding the channel which split the big river into its many lacerated chutes and alternate routes. Spanish moss draped cypress palmetto bottom forests and magnolia viney draped hillsides are gothic reminders that you are descending into the subtropics. This is the homeland of great native societies as honored at Grand Village of the Natchez and Poverty Point Historic Site, and was the superhighway of the Quapaw, the Houma, the Tunica, the Natchez and all of the other great pre-columbian civilizations. The Atchafalaya splits off below Fort Adams to join the Red and Ouchita Rivers with one third of the daily average flow of the Mississippi, providing an alternate route for ocean-going paddlers. The river here curves through extensive Louisiana bottomland hardwood forests with striking prominences of Loess Bluffs to the east at Vicksburg, Grand Gulf, Bondurant, Natchez, Fort Adams, Angola, Port Hudson and Baton Rouge. Fantastically rich back channels abound during higher water levels following ancient braided channels in and out of chutes, parallel drainages, tributaries and oxbow lakes notably at Yucatan, Rodney, Old River/Vidalia, Glasscock, Lake Mary, Raccouri, Profitt Island and Devil's Swamp. During low water the sandbars grow exponentially to become the size of ocean beaches and are important habitat for waders and waterfowl of all types including wood storks, anhinga and the roseate spoonbill. The interior least tern has successfully recovered and is being delisted as an endangered species because of these healthy sandbar habitats, while endangered pallid sturgeon are recovering their numbers in the back channels, many of which have been re-opened through the LMRCR notching project. Spectacular birding is found at St. Catherine Creek WMA, and the co-champion North American bald cypress can be seen at Tunica Hills. More than anywhere else along the Lower Mississippi the feeling of the ancient, endless, brooding, bottomland hardwood jungle pervades along this section of river and makes for safari-like adventures for the few who brave it in human-powered vessels. Wild boars over run many of the islands and Alligators abound in all tributaries and slow-running channels. Invasive big head carp leap over the bow of your canoe, and slap your shoulder while you slap the water with your kayak blade in terror of their surprising antics.

Vicksburg marks a significant change of geography for the Lower Mississippi River paddler. Vicksburg heralds the end of the Mississippi Delta and the beginning of the Mississippi Loess Bluffs. From here down to Baton Rouge there are no continuous levees on the East side of the river because of the high ground created by the bluffs, which approach the river and then retreat along various tributaries like Bayou Pierre, Coles Creek and the Big Black River. The Yazoo-Mississippi Delta technically ends at the mouth of the Yazoo River, also known as "the River of Death." This junction also marks the first left bank tributary since the Wolf River (and Noncannah Creek) in Memphis, 300 miles upstream!

Leave from the landing at the foot of Clay Street and float out of downtown Vicksburg on the river that drains the Mississippi Delta, the Yazoo "the River of Death." Enter the main channel of the Mississippi with the best views you'll ever have of the I-20 Bridge and the scenery around Centennial Bend. Unparalleled views of the Vicksburg Bluffs, the Bluffs at LeTourneau, Grand Gulf Bluff and the islands and back channels along the way including Sargent Point, Togo Island, and the mysterious mouth of the Big Black River. Sweeping views of Grand Gulf Nuclear Power Plant. Float past ecologically-diverse Yucatan Lake, a rich habitat for everything from songbirds to alligators! Paddle around Hardscrabble Bend past the mouth of Bayou Pierre and Civil War site Bondurant (Petit Gulf Hills), and continue downstream in the strong current of the Mississippi as it winds between islands and sandbars, back channels and bayous (accessible depending on river level).

Below Waterproof, Louisiana, the river meanders along with spectacular views of the Natchez Bluffs, an ever-changing scene of unending skies, jungle forests, Victorian mansions and moody riverscapes.

The Atchafalaya River: Best Route to the Gulf

The 150 mile long Atchafalaya River makes for an enticing alternative for paddlers who want to avoid the heavy industry awaiting them below Baton Rouge. Imagine paddling down the richest and largest river swamp in North America as opposed to paddling down the busiest and largest inland port in the world! Unless you are dead-set committed to the traditional Mississippi route, most paddlers would do best to take the Atchafalaya route. Paddlers can enter the Atchafalaya Canal right bank descending above Shreve's Bar at mile 304 through the Old River Lock and Dam. The Atchafalaya is a distributary of the Mississippi and Red Rivers. One third of the average daily flow of the Mississippi passes down the Atchafalaya, which makes it the shortest big river in America. At nearly one-million acres, the Atchafalaya Basin is North America's largest riverine swamp. It contains monstrous ecosystems of marshland, bottomland forests, lakes, bayous, and estuaries. The Atchafalaya (Native American for Long River) offers a baseline for big river health and ecosystem vitality. The Atchafalaya Basin is a key estuary for nesting, breeding, and migration of 250 bird species, 60 species of reptiles & amphibians, and it is also the life-support system for close to 100 species of fish. One of the most profound aspects of the Atchafalaya River is its ability to improve water quality as the river runs its course to the Gulf. (Its muddy deltas are examples of how the Mississippi River should be working below New Orleans, but isn't because the Mississippi River water is not allowed to filter through the brackish wetlands, having been cut off by levees and canals) The disappearing coast of Louisiana is being saved along one of the Atchafalaya distributaries, called Wax Lake. The Wax Lake channel is creating a totally new delta as the sediments of a nation fall out of the muddy flow and congeal to form fresh land.

Baton Rouge to New Orleans to Venice

The last 225 miles of the Lower Mississippi River is also the most dangerous and most demanding. Warning: for expert paddlers only. The fecund wilderness of the sprawling Mississippi River floodplain disappears above Baton Rouge and is replaced by a chaotic global shipping lane. You will have to paddle several hundred miles of choppy crowded water sharing the main channel with sea-going freighters, cargo boats, re-supply vessels, and endless fields of barges as they fleet up for the long distance journey back up the river. Commonly known as Chemical Corridor, but also described as "Cancer Alley." Paddlers might want to add an oxygen face mask to their equipment list here and maybe a haz mat suit. Seriously. You will be camping next to refineries and chemical plants, and lots of coal-fired power plants. More toxins are dumped in the river here than any other piece of river in America. No more remote camping, no more swimming, no more quiet sections of river teeming with wildlife. This is a section of the Mississippi you paddle just to get through it. Some highlights include a possible pull-out for fresh chickory coffee and powder-sugar dusted beignets at the Moonwalk in Jackson Square (mile 95). While you're at it, resupply with Po-Boys and fresh fruit & veggies in the French Market. And then head on downstream towards Venice, the Head of Passes, where the Mighty Mississippi splits into a maze of channels through the birdsfoot Mississippi Delta. Paddle down one of the channels to the Gulf and camp with a view towards South America. The next day turn around and paddle back upstream to Venice, or hire a fishing boat for a shuttle.

The Mississippi connects the two big river cities of Louisiana in a lyrical curving passage of heavy industry, commercial traffic, ancient trade routes and colorful history. Put in below the State Capitol

in downtown Baton Rouge and embark on this epic journey downstream through proud parishes and storied places like Bayou Manchac, Bayou Lafourche, Saint James, La Place, Audubon Park, and Algiers, passing by old channels that the Mississippi used to follow to the Gulf of Mexico, camping on the very last mid-channel islands on the main stem Mississippi River (Plaquemine & Bayou Goula Towheads), alongside the busiest concentration of graineries & refineries in North America, lots of scrap steel operations and stinky plastics production plants, more strange repulsive smells than you'll ever paddle through anywhere else in the world, except maybe the German Ruhr, or the Chinese Yangtze. The industrial wasteland is fortunately broken up with views of old catholic church steeples rising razor sharp over the levee, and by architectural wonders in bridges like the Huey P. Long, and the Greater New Orleans Bridge (last Bridge on the Mississippi River). You will paddle along the ancient routes of the great tribes of North America, whose rumored riches were later pursued by Cabeza de Vaca & Hernando DeSoto, little did they know that the wealth was contained in the land itself and the omnipotent river meandering through. The Cajuns journeyed by big canoe along these waters after being expelled from Acadia and found their new homeland in the bayous & prairies of South Louisiana and made a cultural paradise and music almost equal to the excitement & tragic beauty of the river. Nothing will match the romance of a river arrival into New Orleans. Imagine making a landing directly into the French Quarter on the levee at the Moonwalk, with the St. Louis Chapel projecting heavenward from Jackson Square, Jax Brewery on one side and the French Market on the other. The campsites can be creative & challenging, sometimes in the proximity of power plants, sometimes on the levee, sometimes on muddy riverbanks.

Contrary to all expectations, the river seems to get younger as it approaches its final destination, getting deeper, more mysterious, more mystical, and more playful, allowing industry and commercial transportation only on its surface all the while remaining aloof and keeping its power and beauty hidden down deep just beyond the complete ambitions of humanity. Oftentimes paddlers are challenged by abrupt right-angle bends and a fast moving freighter nearby, paddlers beware at Forty-Eight Point, Bringier Point, Point Houmas, Helvetia Point, Brilliant Point, College Point, Magnolia Point, and Forty-Eight Mile Point. The river is deep at these bends, over 200 feet in places. The natural deepest hole in the entire Mississippi Drainage is off Algier's Point (opposite Jackson Square), where it dives to 250 feet deep.

Most Rivergator sections are at least 90% wilderness and no more than 10% industry. In this section of river, the converse is true, with at least 90% heavy industry and maybe 10% woods and wetlands. Any journey down the Mississippi is a journey filled with superlatives, the biggest, the widest, the greatest, and etc -- this section of river is no different, except instead of just being the biggest and best of nature, it is the biggest and the most gargantuan of post-industrial America. While not for everyone, this section of river, if approached with a good measure of precaution and careful planning, can be the education of a lifetime and an exciting adventure that truly can't be equaled anywhere on earth.

Warning: for expert paddlers only. Note: if you have successfully paddled from the headwaters, you are now expert by light of the fact you got this far. Still, all paddlers should exercise extreme caution and patience. Paddle wisely. Use sailor's sixth sense. Avoid during hurricane season. Go to shore and stay there in any bad weather or troubling situations.

Venice to the Gulf

20-30 miles. Depends on your route. The choices include South Pass, Southwest Pass and Pass LaOubre. What a joy to paddle the last ten miles of the Mighty Mississippi past Pilot Town to the

legendary Head of Passes, mile -0- of the Lower Mississippi River. For through-paddlers, reaching the Gulf is like reaching the South Pole. Months of planning, paddling, long hot days and cold windy nights, weeks of rain and headwinds, millions of paddlestrokes and countless muddy campsites have brought you to the end of a significant pilgrimage spanning several distinct geographic regions. Your stamina and hard paddling have brought you down the longest and largest river in North America. Your quickest and quietest route to the Gulf is to take the South Pass and make landing on one of the muddy beaches past the lighthouse. Celebrate your expedition as appropriate, and if the weather is good make camp and stay for the night to fully relish the experience. Hitch a ride back with a friendly fisherman, or paddle back under your own steam. After completing thousands of miles of river, the upstream paddle will be a breeze! Best practice: before leaving Venice check the weather first and make note of wind speed and direction. In a south wind you might want to avoid the South Pass and instead opt for the Pass LaOutre or SW Pass. In strong west winds avoid the Southwest Pass. In South winds over 25mph stay in Venice until it calms.

Farthest navigable extension of the Mississippi River, the mouth of the river at the Southwest Pass. The Southwest Pass is the busiest out of all major river passes. But it also has the best flow (hence less paddling). As the river approaches the Gulf (and is drained off by its passes and other smaller openings to the Caribbean) it slows down and becomes sluggish, . The mud and wastes of 41% of America are deposited and become the Louisiana Delta. At least this is how it's supposed to work. This is what happens in the parallel drainage of the Atchafalaya, where the water is allowed to flow naturally as an alluvial delta into the shallow Gulf. Entirely within Plaquemines Parrish, the present day birdsfoot delta is a marshy, swampy land rich in oil, natural gas, mosquitoes, seafood and wildlife. And it's also disappearing. In 1908 the Southwest pass was made navigable year-round with a 40 foot channel by the placement of a series of jetties (placed perpendicular to the river current). Captain James B. Eads had previously opened the South Pass by this method (1875), and the Army Corps of Engineers copied his method in 1908 with the Southwest Pass, and then diverted most of the flow down this route. Eads' jetty method opened the passes to the seven seas, and led to the development of the Mississippi River system as the longest and heaviest used inland waterway system in the world. New Orleans (which previously was only accessible during high water) became America's second busiest port. There are plans afoot to increase the depth to 60 feet to accommodate supertankers. Meanwhile the oceans are rising with great concern for the entire Gulf Coast which would be inundated by the end of the century according to modest estimates.

Put in at Venice, and quickly float past "the jump," which was created when flood waters poured through a small canal dug by Venice fisherman in 1840. (The jump leads into Grand Pass and Tiger Pass). Ocean-going freighters, oil dock crew boats and fishing boats will be your companions as we paddle along past Cubits gap (opened by the Union Army during the Civil War) and Pilot Town. Pilot Town is an interesting water-bound enclave of Mississippi River Pilots. Here river pilots are taken aboard freighters to navigate them up the tricky channels of the Mississippi to New Orleans, Baton Rouge, and points in between. Immediately below Pilot Town is the "Head of Passes," the zero marker of the Lower Mississippi River. Here the river splits into three major channels or "passes" leading to the Gulf. Best route: South Pass to the Gulf. From here the lines of trees on either bank descend into muddy marshes and shorelines, the lines of land diminishing, and the expanse of the gulf becoming more and more a reality until the entire horizon becomes the gulf at the end of the jetties. This section can be challenging in high wind. In severe weather there is no choice but to take shelter and wait out the storm. (Note: in the event of any oncoming hurricanes it would be best to stay put in Venice, or better yet New Orleans or Baton Rouge, and await its

passing). There might be passing fishing boats and other local traffic, but all commercial vessels stay in the Southwest Pass.

Near here LaSalle claimed the Mississippi and all its contiguous lands for France after becoming the first European to float its length (1682). In the early 1800s an adventurous English traveller by the name Mrs. Trollope entered the Mississippi estuary and described the river “pouring forth its muddy mass of waters and mingling with the deep blue of the Mexican Gulf.” She declared that she had never beheld a scene so utterly desolate. “Had Dante seen it he might have drawn images from its horrors.” This vision might still hold true!

The Floating Sensation

However you do it be sure to stop paddling at some point and enjoy the sensation of floating along in the meeting of the big rivers. If the wind is contrary you might only be able to enjoy this for one minute. But on a calm day with no tows to navigate around you can float for miles. Floating with the flow of the river will enable you to best appreciate the dimension and scope of this landscape as you silently roll over the curvature of the earth and are buoyed along by the big waters. With a little imagination you can dwell upon all of the places this water has travelled from to reach here and visualize the big bends upstream and downstream that come together at this location like the forks of the world’s largest peace sign.

Big Trees and Floodplain:

The lower Mississippi River Valley was historically a vast expanse of bottomland and adjacent upland hardwood forests with scattered openings primarily created by fire, beaver, or large flood events by the Mississippi River and its tributaries. These openings were generally comprised of herbaceous moist-soil areas that created excellent waterfowl and other wetland wildlife habitat or giant switchcane that was almost impenetrable and an extremely important habitat component for a variety of wildlife species. Once covering 22 million acres in the Mississippi River Alluvial Plain, bottomland hardwood forests have decreased in extent to only 4.9 million acres. Extensive clearing for agriculture (i.e. soybeans, corn, or cotton) and urbanization are two of the primary reasons giant bald cypress and oak trees of pre-settlement times no longer exist. However, giant bald cypress and oak trees characteristic of yesteryear can still be seen on some of these sections of the Lower Mississippi.

Note to Developers:

Instead of building any new sites within these Wild Miles, please consider placing new industry and agriculture construction outside the Wild Miles -- and stay within those places already industrialized such as within one of the many harbors along the way. Or build it far enough behind the levee that it won't be seen or heard, or be directly connected to the river. Your children and grandchildren will appreciate your wise choice of placement away from these last remaining wild places in mid America and the Deep South.

For More Information:

This manuscript was originally published in the Lower Mississippi River Dispatch which is published by the Lower Mississippi River Foundation.

For detailed reading and photos concerning paddling the wilderness of the Lower Mississippi River visit www.rivergator.org.

For more information about the Wild Miles please go to www.wildmiles.org.

Selections from the Rivergator were included in the recent publication of *I AM COYOTE: Readings for the Wild* www.readingsforthewild.com

Upcoming article in Dec 2014 issue of *The International Journal of Wilderness*, www.ijw.org

RIVERGATOR:
the paddler's guide to the
LOWER/MIDDLE
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