

New 'River Gator' guide seeks to introduce more paddlers to grandeur of Lower Mississippi River

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Credit: The Commercial Appeal

Scenes from a five day trip down the Mississippi River with John Ruskey, founder of Quapaw Canoe Company and writer of the new paddler's guide to the lower Mississippi, "River Gator".

SUNRISE TOWHEAD, Ark. — The two bald eagles flew off in a huff, and who could blame them? They had been comfortably settled in the sand along the Mississippi River, dining on a flathead catfish, when our canoes appeared out of the mist and prompted their retreat to a perch in the trees.

It is late afternoon on a gray, dismal November day that promises to get even worse. The drizzle that has peppered our ponchos steadily intensifies as a cold front approaches. Tonight, the wind will whip around from the north and temperatures will dive into the 30s.

After pulling our canoes ashore, we hastily look for places to set up tents. Like the eagles, we head for the trees.

Another day has drawn to a close on a canoe trip intended to mark the rollout of an online paddler's guide to the Lower Mississippi called the "River Gator." With its detailed descriptions of potential campsites and channel conditions at different river stages, it is modeled somewhat after "The Navigator," the guide for settlers that was written by Zadok Cramer in the early 1800s and that assigned islands numbers that are still in use today.

The new guide, found online at rivergator.org, is a project of the Lower Mississippi River Foundation, whose founder, John Ruskey, also heads the Clarksdale, Miss., outfitting service known as Quapaw Canoe Co. Using \$85,000 from private foundations and other sources, the group is slated within another year to complete its description of the Lower Mississippi River Trail, which covers the 1,155 miles of free-flowing, dam-free water from St. Louis to the Gulf of Mexico.

The "River Gator" will complement a larger effort known as the Lower Mississippi River Resource Assessment, a study led by the Corps of Engineers. The Corps is expected to report its findings next year to Congress, which then could decide whether the river warrants additional funding.

"Our ultimate goal is the overall health of the river," Ruskey said.

"The more people are on the river, the more they care about it, and the more things they notice. Paddlers see the river differently than anyone else."

A 50-year-old Colorado native with long, graying hair and an explorer's bushy beard, Ruskey fell captive to the Mississippi's spell while rafting down the river more than 30 years ago. Since then, he has led many trips on it in long voyageur canoes that he built from cypress based on designs used by the first European explorers of the river.

His love for the Mississippi notwithstanding, Ruskey knows the river is a hard sell for many people. Fear and even revulsion are common reactions to the notion of paddling the river.

"Ninety-nine percent of the people the only time they see the river is from a bridge. It's always in an industrial zone, there's rock along it. It looks scary."

Rev. Andy Andrews, dean of St. Mary's Episcopal Cathedral in Memphis, is among the participants in the early November canoe trip inaugurating the "River Gator," which covered more than 80 miles between Tamm's Landing in Lauderdale County, Tenn., to Memphis. While growing up in Greenville, Miss., he, too, heard admonitions about the Mississippi.

"I was told to stay off it," said Andrews, who nonetheless water-skied on it during high school.

By educating the public about the recreational opportunities of the river, Ruskey said, "we can turn that paranoia into respect and doing things the right way."

The launch of the "River Gator" follows the recent completion of a recreational fishing guide to the river by the Lower Mississippi River Conservation Committee. Angeline Rodgers, acting coordinator for the LMRCC, welcomes the paddling guide and canoe trail.

"I think the water trail is a phenomenal idea ...," she said. "I think that this is a great way to show that you can get out on the Lower Mississippi River and that it's not just a highway for barges."

That the river is more than a commercial waterway becomes apparent almost immediately during a canoe trip. Just downriver from Osceola, Ark., Ruskey leads the paddlers into an outlet channel on the Tennessee bank that connects the Mississippi to a large oxbow lake and surrounding wetlands.

"This is where the river breathes," he said. "It flows in when it's rising and flows out when it's falling — purified."

Beyond the Memphis metro area, dense forests crowd the river, and the shoreline brims with wildlife activity.

Eagles, hawks, pelicans and kingfishers soar overhead, while at night coyotes unleash a deafening chorus, and beavers make distinctive, echoing sounds by slapping the water with their tails. On one chilly morning, as fog rose from the water, two river otters could be seen surfacing and diving not far from shore.

For all its swirling eddies and strong, shifting currents, the river seemed mostly benign and canoe-friendly during the trip. But barge traffic was steady, and the towboats — especially the fast-moving, three-propeller express vessels — could create 4-foot swells several hundred feet away. By early evening, the surface typically was glassy smooth, but during the last afternoon, in front of Memphis, a strong southerly wind coupled with wake from towboats made for an uncomfortably choppy ride.

Even at low water, the Mississippi is a half-mile wide in many areas. And at one spot covered during the trip, near Fulton Landing at the base of one of the Chickasaw Bluffs, its depth exceeded 110 feet, according to a hydrographic survey by the Corps.

The "River Gator" captures some of the Mississippi's grandeur. "The top end of Brandywine opens up like a yawning great blue heron ...," begins one passage.

In other sections, the writing is more spare and utilitarian, as with this passage describing Richardson's Landing in Tipton County: "Huge sandbar at low water, small at medium, completely disappears in high water. Best picnicking top end."

The Mississippi's wild fluctuations — it typically rises and falls 40 feet during the year — presented a special challenge for the "River Gator" project. Broad sandbars that provide excellent camping during low water vanish during river rises, and secondary channels that offer tranquil routes behind islands can dry up when the Mississippi falls.

The guide contains descriptions for low, medium and high water.

"It's probably more difficult than any river in North America because it fluctuates so much," Ruskey said.

Difficult as it might be, the "River Gator" project should attract more paddlers, and therefore more interest, to the Mississippi, he said. Ruskey notes that it was the canoe and kayak crowd who helped save the Buffalo River in Arkansas.

"We're never going to have a (federally designated) Wild and Scenic Mississippi River," he said. "But hopefully, paddlers, fishermen, hunters, the barge industry and other users can enjoy the same river."

Diana Threadgill, president of the group Mississippi River Corridor-Tennessee, said recreational use of the river already is on the rise. "You see kayaks out there every day now," she said.

The "River Gator" and other efforts to attract users to the river are "going to have a direct economic impact" on the area, Threadgill said.

But despite all the effort Ruskey has put into the guide, he knows it can't do the river justice.

"River Gator' is just the description," he said. "The river is the real thing."