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## Paddling the Lower Mississippi River

Posted by: [Missouri Division of Tourism](#) June 19, 2014

By Tom Uhlenbrock

**Caruthersville, Mo.** – There was no brass band playing to greet John Ruskey and his five crewmates as they paddled their 30-foot wood canoe into [Caruthersville](#) to end an 11-day voyage on the [Mississippi River](#) from St. Louis.



Instead of trombones and tubas, lightning flashed, thunder boomed and rain fell. Lots of rain.

“That’s part of the adventure, you have to accept what Mother Nature throws at you,” said Ruskey, shrugging off the storm. “That becomes part of the stories that come off the river with you.”

Ruskey, 50, owns Quapaw Canoe Co. in Clarksdale, Miss., which made the handsome cypress strip canoe, dubbed “the Grasshopper,” that the travelers arrived in. The “voyageur canoe” is similar to the big boats paddled by early explorers and pioneers.

Ruskey also is director of the Lower Mississippi River Foundation, which he founded in 2011. The foundation’s mission is to spread the word about the beauty of floating the stretch of the Mississippi from its confluence with the Missouri north of St. Louis to the Gulf of Mexico.

Over the last two years, Ruskey has gathered information for his Rivergator, a paddler’s guide to the Lower Mississippi; it’s available free online at [RiverGator.org](#). The website currently has stories, photos, maps and information on the stretch from Caruthersville to Vicksburg, Miss.

“Most people only experience the Mississippi from a bridge, which always goes over an industrial area that is not attractive,” Ruskey said. “And the locals will tell you, ‘Don’t get on the river; it’s ugly.’”

“People just don’t think of the Mississippi as a place to go and enjoy the outdoors. But the fishermen know. It’s like a greatly held secret.”

Ruskey and his crew now have traveled the Mississippi from St. Louis to Baton Rouge, La., a total of almost 1,000 miles.

Along the way, they've accumulated data on camping spots, points of interest and potential obstacles, all of which will be posted online by Oct. 15. In 2015, they'll add 235 miles through New Orleans to the Gulf of Mexico to complete their Lower Mississippi Water Trail.

"We want to share the wild aspects of the Lower Mississippi River for paddlers," Ruskey said.

"Primarily this is for advanced paddlers in expedition-style canoes or sea kayaks. Those are made for long-distance travel and are capable in all the challenges the Mississippi presents – waves, winds, long crossings, quick crossings in between towboats."

Their argument, that much of the Lower Mississippi is wild and scenic, was evident in the 307-mile stretch from St. Louis to Caruthersville, Ruskey said.

"For about half the way, all you see is big trees, big bluffs, big islands thriving with wildlife and the big river that ties them all together," he said.

"The bluffs below [St. Louis](#) were just spectacular, particularly around Herculaneum and Crystal City," he added. "In the back chutes, behind the islands, we saw deer, coyotes, bald eagles, numerous songbirds. At Osborne Chute, below Crystal City, we saw three eagles feasting on a gar. Sunrise on the limestone cliffs at Trail of Tears State Park was beautiful."

Paddlers will share the river with towboats and barges, but Ruskey said that was not a problem.

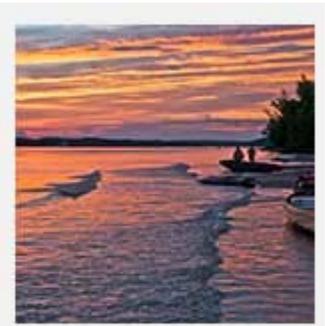
"The towboats are slow-moving and very predictable," he said. "Normally, on any stretch of the river, you'll see them about an hour before they actually pass. That gives any perceptive paddler time to predict where they'll go, and how to maneuver around them."

Getting more paddlers out on the Lower Mississippi will have a beneficial impact by making more people conscious of the landscape of the river's flood plain, Ruskey said.

"Not only do paddlers clean up places they camp, but they also become impassioned users of the river," he said. "That leads to more public land along the river and better decisions about its use."

As far as the occasional thunderstorm, that is just part of life on the Mississippi, Ruskey said.

"You might be slightly uncomfortable, like getting mud between your toes or sunburn," he said. "But these are things that make you remember the experience and what wilderness is all about."



Mississippi River  
Sunset

***About the Missouri Division of Tourism***

*The Missouri Division of Tourism (MDT) is the official tourism office for the state of Missouri dedicated to marketing Missouri as a premier travel destination. Established in 1967, the Missouri Division of Tourism has worked hard to develop the tourism industry in Missouri to what it is today, an \$11 billion industry supporting more than 285,000 jobs. For more information on Missouri tourism, go to <http://www.VisitMO.com>.*