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# The Wild Miles

## *A One-Thousand-Mile Journey*

BY JOHN RUSKEY

### 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 that branch out eastward and westward from the Rockies to the Appalachians 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 20 miles (32 km) to make 1 mile (1.6 km). 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.

The origins of these waters are found upstream in America's heartland, St. Louis (Figure 1), where the Upper Mississippi River joins with the Missouri River to form the Middle Mississippi River. The Middle Mississippi separates the Pawnee Hills from the Ozarks and then meets the green waters of the Ohio River at the southern tip of Illinois to form the Lower Mississippi. 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 forested landscape of millions of acres. Even after it was

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John Ruskey. Photo © by Mathieu Despiau.

settled – its trees chopped down, its back channels cut off and main channel vigorously maintained – even still the river rules the landscape with unimaginable power, annually rising and falling 50 vertical feet (15.2 m) with water flow 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 other wild places? Yes – but 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 states.

There are 105 “Wild Miles” (167 km) on the Middle Mississippi River between St. Louis and Cairo, Illinois, and 515 Wild Miles (828 km) on the Lower Mississippi River between Cairo and Baton Rouge, Louisiana, which means that 71% of the scenery viewed from canoes or kayaks paddling down that stretch of river looks and feels “wild” ([www.wildmiles.org](http://www.wildmiles.org)). Wild Miles are the places along the

river where nature predominates and little is seen of humankind save passing tows (and other river traffic) and maybe a tiny hunting camp or a single angler buzzing by in a johnboat. These are places where the landscape is filled with giant islands bounded by endless mudbanks 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 wild beauty, each high water results in shifting sand dunes and remade sandbars (Figure 2). These are places where only deer and coyote tracks are seen along the sandbars and enormous flocks of shy birds such as the white pelican and double-crested cormorant are comfortable enough to make landing for the night, and once-endangered species such as the interior least tern and pallid sturgeon have regained a foothold in an altered but predominantly natural ecosystem. 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 and 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 River creates these Wild Miles. These places have been preserved mostly by neglect, by the power of the river, by its catastrophic rises and falls, and by 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



Figure 1 – Paddling the Mississippi River at St. Louis, Missouri. Photo by John Ruskey.

hardwood forests, and reopen 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.

The Lower Mississippi River Valley was historically a vast expanse of bottomland and adjacent upland hardwood forests with scattered openings primarily created by fires, beavers, or large flood events by the Mississippi River and its tributaries. These openings generally comprised herbaceous moist-soil areas that created excellent waterfowl and other wetland wildlife habitat, or giant switch cane that was almost impenetrable and an extremely important habitat component for a variety of wildlife species. Once covering 22 million acres (8.9 million ha) in the Mississippi River Alluvial Plain, bottomland hardwood forests have decreased in extent to only 4.9 million acres (1.9 million ha). Extensive clearing for agriculture (soybeans, corn, or cotton) and urbanization are two of the primary reasons giant bald cypress and oak trees of presettlement times no longer exist. However, giant

ald cypress and oak trees characteristic of yesteryear can still be seen on some of these sections of the Lower Mississippi River.

### Rivergator Project

The Rivergator is a four-year project to describe the Lower Mississippi River for modern-day human-powered explorers, namely canoeists, kayakers, stand-up paddleboarders, and rafters. A very detailed written guide called *Rivergator: Paddler's Guide to the Lower Mississippi* is being developed for publication. The title *Rivergator* is derived from a national



Figure 2 – Sandbars along the Lower Mississippi River. Photo by John Ruskey.

## An excerpt from *Rivergator*.

**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, Proffitt 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 sturgeons are recovering their numbers in the back channels, many of which have been reopened through the LMRCC 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 overrun many of the islands and alligators abound in all tributaries and slow-running channels. Invasive grass 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.

best-selling book called *The Navigator*, published in 1801 by Zadok Cramer, with 12 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 western United States. Thomas Jefferson and other leaders were fearful that the French or the English would get there first. With the Lewis and 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 along the Lower Mississippi River, and that the *Rivergator* will be adopted by successive generations of canoeists and kayakers and rewritten as the river changes. Zadok Cramer also invented the numbering system for Lower Mississippi River islands, a system that survives to this day.

*Rivergator* is written by paddlers, for paddlers (Figure 3). It will open the river for local experienced canoeists who have always wanted to paddle the Mississippi River but didn’t know how or when or where to start, including canoe and kayak clubs, outdoor leadership schools, friends and families, and church and youth groups. It could be used by the Girl Scouts for a weeklong summer expedition down the Middle Mississippi below St. Louis, or a group of Boy Scouts working on their canoe badge in the Memphis area. You could read *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 River. *Rivergator* will help you get there if you're a long-distance canoeist starting at Lake Itasca, or a kayaker coming 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 Monongahela Rivers to 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. Hullo big towboats pushing huge fleets of barges!

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 on 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 surprising beauty (Figure 4). It will help explain some of the mysterious motions of the biggest river in North America. It's written for canoeists and kayakers, but is readable enough to be enjoyed by any armchair adventurers. The river is the key to understanding the history, geography, and culture of the Mid-South. 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



**Figure 3 – Paddling with friends on a long canoe trip down the Lower Mississippi River. Photo by John Ruskey.**



**Figure 4 – Seeing wildlife along the river adds to the feeling of wild nature. Photo by John Ruskey.**



**Figure 5 – Rock bluffs dwarf the canoeists as they explore the riverbank. Photo by John Ruskey.**



Figure 6 – Paddling along through this grand river landscape allows time for reflection and relaxation. Photo by John Ruskey.

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 (Figure 5)? What is the experience from water level, over the gunwales of your canoe, or over the deck of your kayak? By the end of 2014, we have completed 926 miles (1,490 km) of the 1,155 miles (1,859 km) total of the *Rivergator*, covering the wildest of the wild river from St. Louis down through Ozark 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. In 2015 we will add

in the coastal reaches down the wild Atchafalaya, the river of trees, and the industrious “chemical corridor,” the only Lower Mississippi River section with no “wild miles.”

### The Floating Sensation

When traveling on the river, 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 (Figure 6). With a little

imagination you can dwell upon all of the places this water has traveled from to reach here and visualize the big bends upstream and downstream that come together at this location along the “wilderness within” the southern United States.

### Acknowledgments

For detailed reading and photos concerning paddling the wilderness of the Lower Mississippi River, visit [www.rivergator.org](http://www.rivergator.org). For more information about the Wild Miles, go to [www.wildmiles.org](http://www.wildmiles.org).

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