

## Gators & Freighters

### Mark River: Days 12, 13, 14: To the End of the World and Back

#### *Lower Mississippi River Dispatch No 322*

Posted Monday, Nov 23, 2015  
Clarksdale, Mississippi



~~~~~

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

*1 million words describing the Middle & Lower Mississippi River.  
Written for paddlers and any others seeking the "wilderness within"*

~~~~~

*Quick Re-Cap: Chemical Corridor turned out to be full of surprises. 25% of America's petrochemicals are produced within this 250 mile stretch of river by 200 petrochemical plants. Sounds awful, doesn't it? It wasn't. We found sparkling pockets of wetlands, woods and sandbars in between. Mark River and all of our guest writers have been sharing this wonder of discovery. I have tried to share the same through photography. The industrial places are an incredible education about how American industry works. Almost all of the pilots we met were polite and courteous, and seemed to be watching out for us in our odyssey. This strange juxtaposition makes the wild places even more beautiful. It is our intention to describe them all in the upcoming 2015 edition of the Rivergator: Paddler's Guide to the Lower Mississippi. The 9-member crew reached the Gulf of Mexico at the beginning of November. The 2011-2015 Rivergator Explorations are Complete. Writing and photos will appear online on the Rivergator.org by the end of the year.*

*In This Issue: Mark River returns to complete his much awaited blog entries for the Grand Finale of the expedition: Days 12, 13, 14: to the Gulf and back.*



# **Mark River: To the End of the World and Back**

## **Last 3 Days of Gators & Freighters**

### **By Mark “River” Peoples**

*Photos by John Ruskey*



#### **Day 12: Bohemia to Venice - 35 miles**

We leave our exquisite beach willing and anxious after a two day storm camp. It's time to resupply, so we cross the channel looking for a boat ramp, which leads to Port Sulfur. We find the small ramp, secure the boats, and walk over the levee. One team goes to the grocery store and another to a small cafe directly over the levee called La Caffè Casa. The

plan was to charge electronics for the last time before the Gulf of Mexico, and to dry our souls before the days paddle. This little "gas station" is also a great place to have burgers and po-boys. It's local the hangout for truckers, boat captains, fishermen, rig workers, and locals, all wearing the same signature white boots. The people are very kind and quick to start a conversation. They also have a great jukebox.

We ordered some po-boys to go and thanked the locals for their hospitality. The team headed back to the boats to start our paddle to Venice. Our sandwiches are fresh, so we pull over shortly for lunch. A loud roaring sound blares through the trees and suddenly an airboat shows up out of nowhere. Three men curious of our intentions and our feelings for them were mutual. They each had a shotgun and various pistols, strapped to their bodies with a cooler full of beer.

"What y'all doing in those canoes."

I reply, "Headed to the Gulf of Mexico!"

"Y'all crazier than us! and then: Y'all want a beer?"

With all that fire power, the answer was yes. We chatted for awhile and we found out they were hunting pigs. With that loud motor, they were not going to see anything that day. They left, "before we figured out who they were" and motored across the channel. What a crew!



Continuing on towards Venice, gulls, brown and white pelicans, and terns fill the sky, along with ospreys and eagles. More commercial fishermen, all heading to the gulf, a sport-fishing paradise. The paddle was demanding and tedious, dealing with the marine traffic, which we had become accustomed to. We passed an old fort called Ft. Jackson, continuing on trying to beat the sunset. Local kids were waded out in the shallows fishing for mullet, as they leaped out of the waters surrounding us. We passed the town of Venice and found a small inlet protected by a rock dike to camp for the evening. Campsites are becoming a challenge. All dry land is overrun with fire ants, briar patches, and wild pigs. The driftwood selection is limited as we scavenge wet wood from the revetment. We all are exhausted from the paddle, but our moral is high, as we will be sleeping on the Gulf of Mexico tomorrow night.



### **Day 13: Venice to the Gulf of Mexico - 23 miles**

Last night at sunset we arrived on a small slither of land protected by an unusual formation of dikes. Large cane groves, with briar patches and fire ant mounds throughout. The land was uprooted from pig activity, with very few options to camp. The beach was small, but functional. We didn't seem to mind knowing we would see the gulf the next day.

I find myself a modest briar patch with a little bit of sand in the middle. I set my tent in the dark, as the cane comes alive. Moon Flowers started to bloom in the night. Wild pigs scampering. Red wing blackbirds inhabit the cane keeping the night full of sounds. The smell of the ocean filled the air, as the Mississippi River shows characteristics of the gulf. Warm winds and waves crashing from the sea-going vessels, send me into a deep sleep. Darkness extends forever as if we are at the end of the world.

In the middle of the night I stare at the fly of my tent admiring the community of mosquitoes using my home as a wind break. Opportunistic spiders and crabs set themselves up for the ambush. Animals rustle in and out of the cane, making the night full of questions. I take a bathroom break. Somehow I got turned around in my tent, exited through the wrong door, and into a fire ant mound. This is one of the tragedies of pitching your tent at night. Instantly ants swarm up my legs, as I somehow run through a huge briar patch, into the water. My feet seemed to move so fast, I never touch the ground.

The morning finally arrived, as I continued to kill fire ants in my tent. The sunrise is beautiful. Everyone is excited, anticipating the arrival to the Gulf of Mexico. I take a short walk, and underneath a small tree, something is stirring. Looking more closely, I realize, it's a baby pig. Only a couple days old and about the size of a small potato, its smooth skin looked radiant in the sun. Its eyes were barely open and its belly fat from suckling. It looked comfortable and healthy. I must have scared the mother off.

I had a sudden realization: this piglet looks like me.

I instantly get emotional. This little piglet, little River, made the thoughts of my Mother occupy my mind for the remainder of the day. She was with me as I headed for the gulf. I could only imagine the feelings the piglet was enduring. Was the mother close? It looked well fed. Will she come back for it? I could only hope. If it was anything like me, it made it.

We share stories about our unique camp around breakfast, as anticipation of the gulf flow through our hearts. We paddle towards Pilot Town, an establishment for pilots waiting to board any freighters entering the Mississippi River. It was a quiet place, with authentic history and the feeling of old. The marsh surrounding the town was full of wildlife: deer, rabbits, coyotes bobcats, and pigs had taken over the area. The cane was full of fish, frogs, herons, and snakes. Crabs and crayfish built cities in the marsh. It reminded me of an old Key West village.

This is our last stop before the gulf. Commercial fishermen in their fast boats zoom past us . Cane lines the channel on both sides. Activity in the cane can be heard frequently as we hug the marsh. The cane is very important for fish and shrimp reproduction.

We paddle hard into the evening. The marsh finally opens up. Oil rigs litter the skyline. Flocks of sea-birds fill the sky. The sounds in the air are loud and vibrant. My emotions take over, as I turn my back trying to hide. Another accomplishment for a young man born in East St. Louis. A place where most of the kids don't make it to the age 18. A place where kids can pick sports or a life of crime. I'm happy my parents kept my mind occupied by sports and the Mississippi River. Thank You!



**Day 14 - Upstream: Gulf of Mexico back to Venice - 24 miles**

The night was majestic as our tents hugged the water line along a small wet beach in the gulf. When we pulled up to the beach the night before,



a coyote scampered off. You wonder how they got here? All the marsh and wet ground. Where do they build their dens? The tide was suppose to rise one foot, but the beauty and sounds of the gulf mesmerized my mind to the point where I didn't care. The sounds of the apps you can purchased don't compare to nature's version. I stared into the horizon at oil rigs in the distant, while waves crashed the shore just a few feet away from my tent. The stars are within an arms reach. I didn't sleep much, enjoying the sights and sounds of the gulf.

The sunrise comes quickly as flocks of birds in the thousands hover and occupy the shoreline by camp. Brown and white pelicans, gulls and terns, eagles and osprey, and many more, cover the skyline. I realize why that coyote was in the cane. That's where it ambushes the birds.

We eat a hardy breakfast and share our thoughts about the expedition with each other. I'm overwhelmed by emotions, but happy and proud of the completion of the Rivergator. All the hard work and sacrifice has resulted in success. We all have learned a lot about this great river and how it's connected to many aspects of life. Freshwater is what these expeditions are all about, and the more I see, the more I know, about its importance to mankind.

A paddle upstream to Venice will complete the expedition. It has been one of the toughest to date, but I'm able to smile knowing how much each of the trips have effected my life. I haven't had my Mother physically in my life for 36 years, but she is always with me throughout my journeys along the Mississippi River.

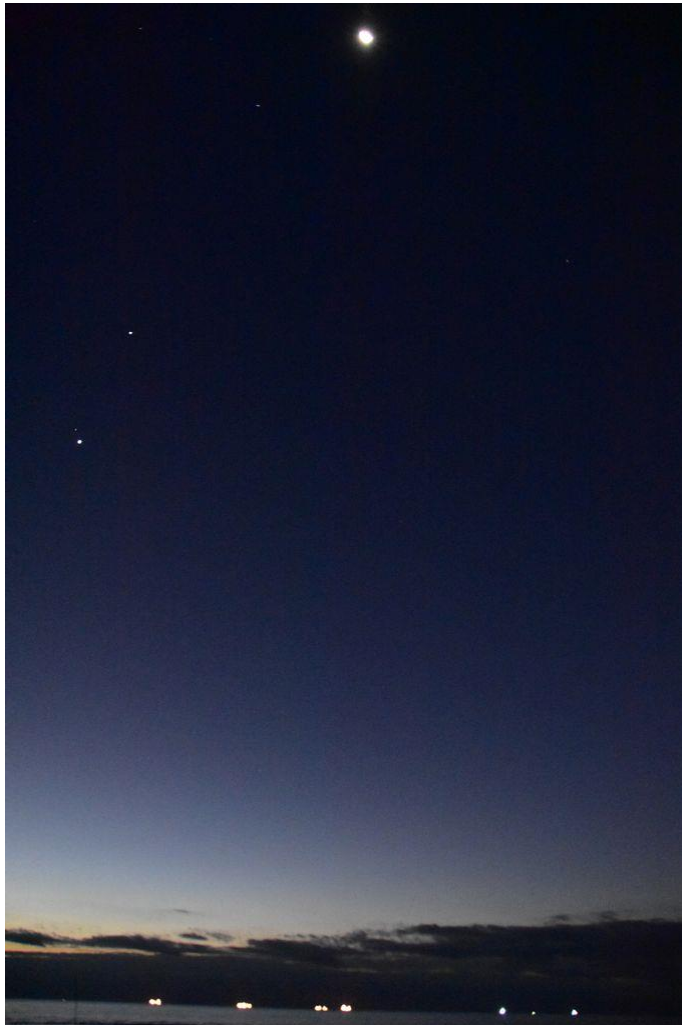


*Next week we will post our last guest perspective, from New Orleans-based writer Christopher “Wolf E.” Staudinger. Happy Thanksgiving everybody. We all have so much to be thankful for. This is a good week to remember it.*

**Express your Thanks by Helping Spring Initiative:**

PS: You can express your thanks to some of the people helping reverse the trends of impoverished neighborhoods and families in the Mississippi Delta. The Spring Initiative Program of Clarksdale has a chance to win \$10,000 from Kind Snacks -- but only with your help!

From Spring leader Anja Thiessen: “please vote for us because we have a chance to win \$10,000 at the end of November if we have the most votes. We're already in 5th place (from being in 93rd/last place yesterday) - but we need about 3,000 to make it: <https://causes.kindsnacks.com/cause/readers-chang-the-world/>”



*For more photos of the Lower Miss and more reading, go to [www.rivergator.org](http://www.rivergator.org)*

*The Lower Mississippi River Dispatch*

is a service of the Lower Mississippi River Foundation