

Lower Mississippi River Dispatch No. 289

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Mark River: The Spawn



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The month of March brings the snow melt and the warm rains to the Mississippi River Watershed. The melt from the Rockies in Wyoming feed the Bighorn and Tongue Rivers, while entering the Yellowstone River in Montana. The Grand and Cheyenne Rivers in South Dakota, the James River in North Dakota, the Platte River in Colorado, the Niobrara River in Nebraska, and the Osage River, all flow into the Missouri River, swelling its banks. The Minnesota, Wisconsin, Illinois, Des Moines, Meramac, St. Francis, White, and Arkansas Rivers flow into the Mississippi River. The Allegheny, Wabash, Cumberland, and Tennessee Rivers empty into the Ohio. Eventually, all the water swells the floodplains and oxbow lakes on the Lower

Mississippi River connecting many small waterways, creating the atmosphere for the spawn.

The combination of sunlight, gulf stream winds, and warm rains start to raise the water temperature in the shallows to the low sixties, triggering the freshwater fish of the Lower Mississippi River to begin their spawning rituals.

In Moon Lake, an eight year old paddlefish has the yearn to travel. Just entering the age of sexual maturity, she leaves the abundance of zooplankton in the lake, to swim hundreds of miles to her birthplace in the Missouri River system. She makes her journey through the Yazoo Pass, to the Yazoo River, then to the Mississippi River, heading north, occasionally taking a break behind wing dikes, revetments, and other man-made structures. Over the Chain of Rocks, to the Missouri River, eventually making it to her birthplace along the Osage River. These migrations are important; spoonbill catfish don't spawn yearly, skipping years of reproduction depending upon conditions.

The white bass start to congregate in unisex schools, adjacent to the rocky shoals, at the bottom of the boat ramp on Desoto Lake. The females start spinning on the surface of the water, while the males bump their bellies waiting for eggs to be released, so they can simultaneously release their sperm and fertilize the eggs before they reach the rocky bottom.

A large spotted gar swims gracefully in a flooded swamp along the Atchafalaya River. She's followed by a school of smaller males waiting patiently for the moment to occur. The clear pool is full of yellow rockets, with driftwood lining the swamp. Perfect conditions for the female to release her adhesive eggs which will attach to the dead vegetation.

On the main channel of the Mississippi River, a male channel catfish finds a hole in a log near the cut-bank to build a nest. He coats the hole with a white mucus and lures a female. She lays her eggs, and is immediately evicted from the nest. The male protects the eggs from predators while fanning the eggs with his tale until they hatch in ten days.

In Louisiana, fisherman from all over gather for the annual smallmouth buffalo run along the Ouachita River. They spawn in big numbers along shallow rivers. Splashing on top of the surface, pointing their bodies perpendicular to the bottom, eventually releasing large quantities of eggs. Fisherman are highly successful netting or snagging this highly sought after fish. Contrary to belief, the buffalo is the leading fish of the commercial fishing market.

A lone fisherman weaves in and out of the sloughs along the Greenville Bends searching for crappie. I can tell by his fishing poles, what he's after. The rising of the Mississippi River has connected the waterways surrounding Islands 81 and 82, creating a challenging scene for him.



I ask, "You catch anything?"

He replies, with a smile, "I can't find them."

That put a smile on my face, knowing the crappie might be able to finish spawning, before the fisherman finds them. Crappie, like smallmouth and largemouth bass, make nest on the bottom of shallow waterways, made of gravel and silt. They protect their nest by attacking anything close, which makes them vulnerable to fisherman casting lures.

The spawn is the most important time of year for wildlife in general. The flooded forest are havens for the reproductive cycles of reptiles and amphibians. They need the shallow, warm pools. It also benefits the migratory birds that feed in the trees and on shorelines loaded with worms, nymphs, and other invertebrates. The abundance of water also beneficial to mammals having their young, not having to go far for water. The spawn is the symbol of new life and beginnings. A time of plenty for all species, and the reassurance of the incredible, undeniable cycles of life.

- Mark River



Mark River Peoples is a guide and teacher with Quapaw Canoe Company and is also the 1 Mississippi Southern Region Intern representing the Lower Mississippi River Foundation. Please go to <http://lmississippi.org> for the Mark River Blog with photos, maps, videos, and other depictions of the Big River!

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