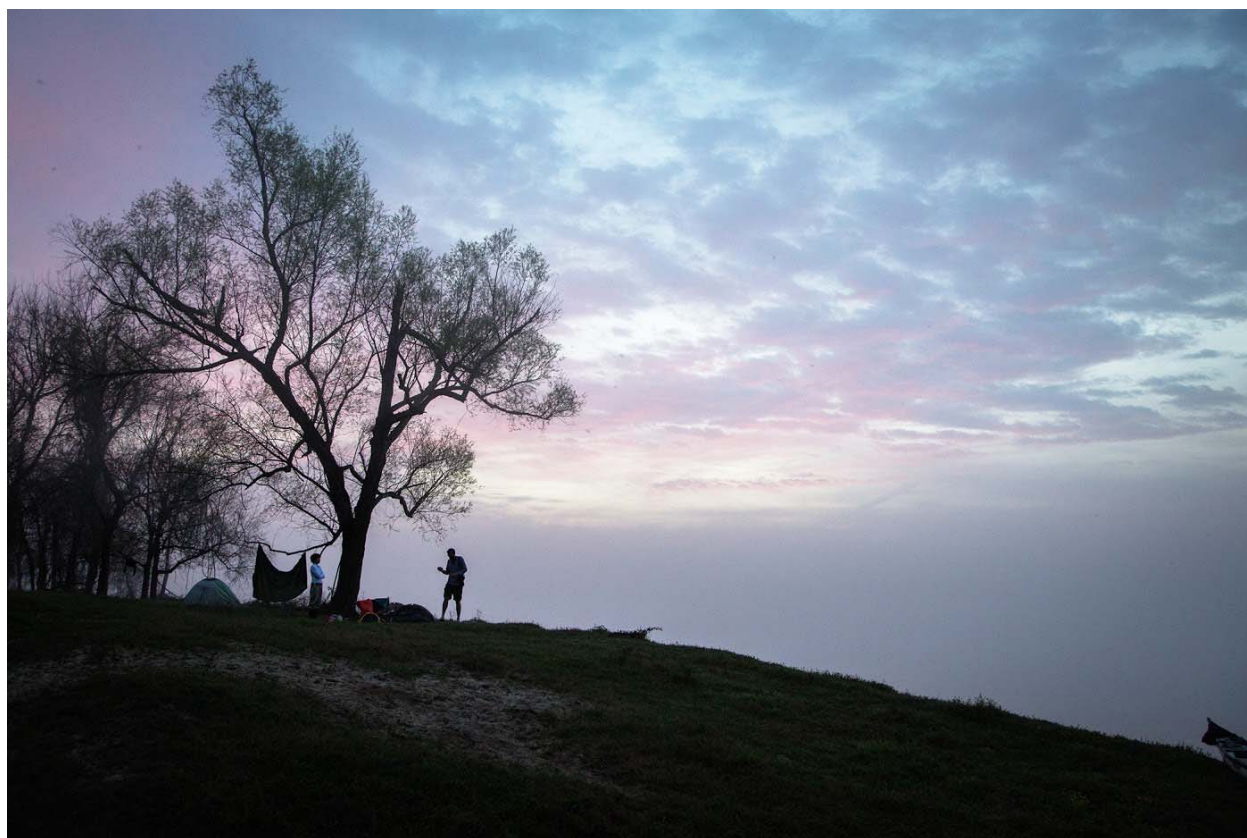


# CANOE & KAYAK

## WHY PADDLE THE MISSISSIPPI RIVER: PART 5 THE RIVERGATOR CREW GOES DEEP ... INTO THE ATCHAFALAYA

August 05, 2015 | By [Dave Shively](#)



By Chris Staudinger  
Photos by [David Hanson](#)

One of the easiest things about paddling the Mississippi River is that you can't really get lost. You can start way, way upriver, in say, Billings, Montana, or Little Valley, New York, and all you have to do is follow the flow, and you'll eventually get to the Gulf.

But south of Natchez, Miss., amber lights flash and an air-horn blares in the vast empty country along west bank of the river. The US Army Corps of Engineers is letting you know about the lock sucking hundreds of thousands of cubic feet of water away from the Mississippi every second, and that an unknowing paddler could get sucked away too.

Of course, lots of long-haul Mississippi River paddlers like to willingly follow that water through the Old River lock and into the Atchafalaya beyond. It's the first place on the Mississippi that the river changes from a collector of water to a distributor. The gateway leads to an 800,000-acre floodplain of wilderness. It's why John Ruskey and his team from the [Lower Mississippi River Foundation](#) have been mapping the Atchafalaya (uh-CHAFF-uh-lie-ya) as a part of their [Rivergator paddling guide](#). The free online resource shows good camp spots at several water levels, as well as put-ins, takeouts, and re-supply points on the Lower Mississippi River Water Trail. In the Rivergator guide, Ruskey writes that the Atchafalaya is the wildest and safest route to the Gulf. He calls it a paradise.



*Photo by David Hanson*

Early in the Spring, Ruskey and company paddled the entirety of the swollen Atchafalaya, beginning in the Mississippi River at Natchez and ending 150 miles later in the muddy Atchafalaya Bay. At Morgan City, a rusty oil town in the heart of Cajun country, I joined the Rivergator crew for the last few days of their survey.

They recounted their last couple of days paddling deep in the swamplands beyond the main channel, navigating through spots where the current split, reversed, stopped, or did other weird things. They explored places like Whiskey Chute and Grand Lake, which, according guide, Mark 'River' Peoples, was a near mystical experience.





*Photo by David Hanson*

**Watch the entirety of David Hanson's film 'Atchafalaya River: The Mississippi's Best Route to the Gulf' from the Rivergator's Atchafalaya source-to-sea.**

"Eagles so big, they make the tree look small, the cypress trees with the thick Spanish moss, the maze of bayous and sloughs, the uncertainty of not knowing where you are and what's around you, makes it mysterious and majestic."

The Atchafalaya, like the Amazon, is more than a single river. "The Basin" flows from the gut of Louisiana to the Gulf of Mexico in a maze of waterways, canals, bayous, lakes, and swamps. It has carved the lush, largely water-logged homeland of the Cajuns, Creoles, Chitimacha Native Americans (the People of Many Waters), and lots of boar-hunting, craw-fishing, nutria-tail-collecting country people who love the bounties of their waters. It's "a lived-in kind of wilderness," Ruskey writes, "very similar to the Lower Mississippi in days gone by, which was also thinly populated along

its banks by all types of pioneers and people living off the river and the land, but who had become part of the wildness by their harmonious lifestyle.”

Before the trip, I had never camped in the Atchafalaya. I had the ideas that I think most of us have of the area: wet, muddy, and covered in mosquitos. I wondered whether there would be any dry land to sleep on, and whether we would be sharing it with snakes and alligators. Ruskey had suggested bringing hammocks. And everyone discussed the previous night, when they paddled till near dark and finally found a tiny chunk of dry ground, which they shared with an army of mating frogs and other rustling, howling, not-sleeping swamp creatures.



*Photo by David Hanson*

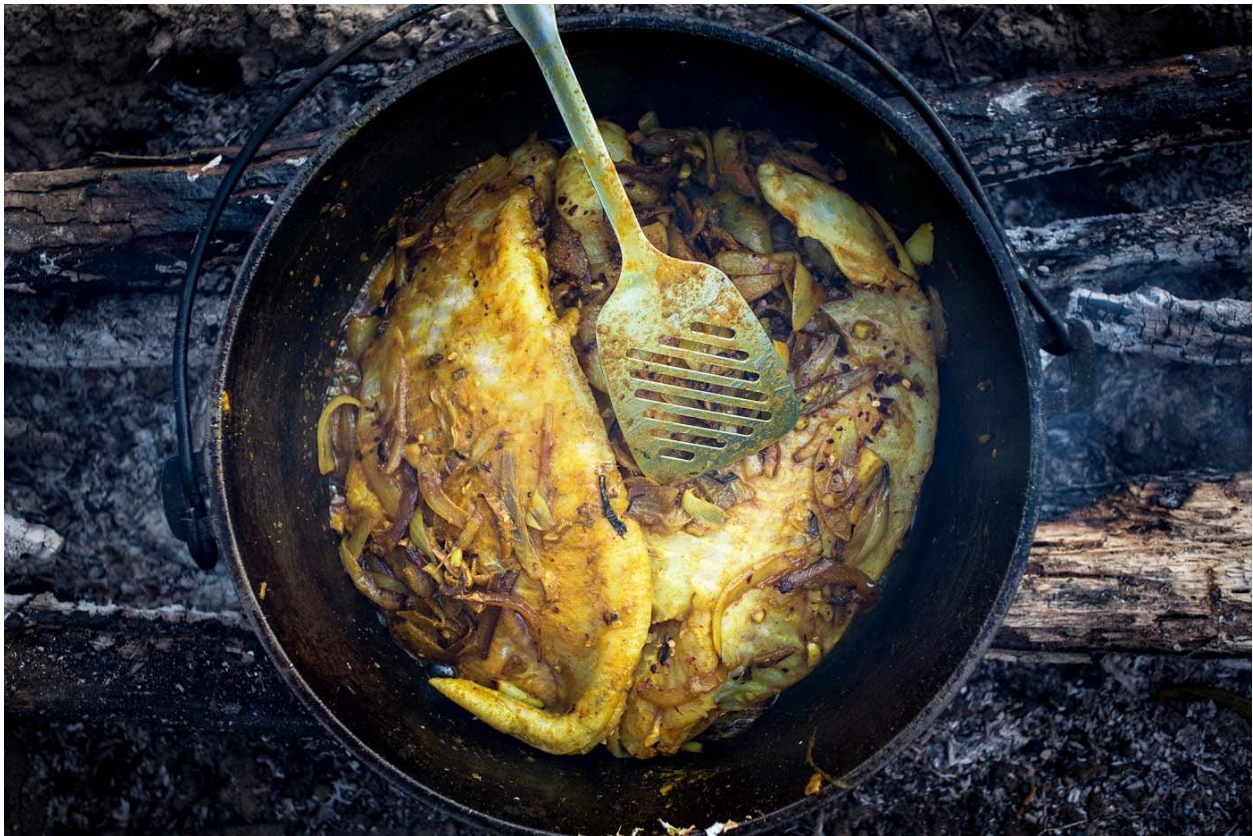
But we were high and dry that first night, on a thin, sandy island in the main channel. The next day, the river split, we followed Shell Island Pass as it branches to the Gulf. We watched as the banks fell gradually lower and lower into the water, until the only land was a jiggling mass of hyacinth and lotus, and the horizon widened to open water.

As wide as it was, we could taste almost no salt in the bay. This makes sense for the mouth of the fourth largest river in North America at high water. It also made sense that the bay was full of mud, which sucked at our paddles if we weren't careful to skim only the top of the brown water. It's the



“subaqueous delta” of the Atchafalaya, the Louisiana of the future, biding its time, growing toward the surface at about an inch each year.

We were heading three miles west toward the Wax Lake Outlet, where we would turn back upstream. The man-made outlet was dug in 1941 as a secondary channel for the Atchafalaya’s waters, and a delta quickly formed over there, too. But it’s not just any delta. It’s pristine, young, and structurally undisturbed. It’s been free to form into “a quintessential (and beautiful) fan shaped delta,” as Ruskey describes. And it’s turned the heads of scientists from across the world who are lining up for the chance to watch a healthy delta grow from its infancy.



*Photo by David Hanson*

We admired the new mud, dined amongst the emerging irises and lilies, and departed upstream through a small, rush-lined bayou. Aside from the occasional oil dock or distant drone of a boat, humanity seemed far away. There are peregrine falcons, aninghas, ospreys, and roseated spoonbills, which shake their pink butts as they sift the water through their big beaks. There’s an estimated 755 pounds of fish per acre; a yearly output of 23 million pounds of crawfish; more alligators than human beings; and the occasional Florida panther.

The thriving, expanding Atchafalaya is a far cry from the wetlands of the Mississippi Delta to the east, which have been shriveling and sinking at depressing rates for the last eighty years. And the

Mississippi's industrial shores below Baton Rouge, which have earned the area nicknames like "the chemical corridor" and "cancer alley," are a slice of river that Ruskey frankly dislikes.

In the Rivergator, Ruskey frames it like this: "1) Mississippi River — 300 miles of industry or 2) The Atchafalaya River — 150 miles of wilderness." He goes on: "Some paddlers have gotten sick within (the former) stretch when they ended up downwind of the wrong smokestack."

For Ruskey, the Atchafalaya is the obvious, even godly choice. He writes: "It's always a blessing to go with the will of the creator!" He says this because "The Mississippi is overdue for a new route, and it seems to favor the Atchafalaya." Most scientists think that the Atchafalaya would already have claimed the majority of the Mississippi's waters if it weren't for the Old River Control Structure.



*Lower Mississippi River Foundation founder John Ruskey soaks in the Atchafalaya wilds. Photo by David Hanson*

But some paddlers want to nothing but the namesake Mississippi, through and through. They want to climb up the riverbanks and into the French Quarter. And there's certainly adventure there, too. Look for that in the next installment of this series, coming up in the fall.

Until then, consider the Atchafalaya.

— Check out the *PART 4 in Staundinger's 'Why Paddle the Mississippi River'* series, where the RiverGator crew dodges barges as the Lower Miss. River Paddling Trail extends to Baton Rouge, as well as *PART III, Part II* and *PART I*, starting at the northernmost leg of the Lower Mississippi River Paddling Trail, from Caruthersville, Mo., to Mud Island in Memphis.

— Read more on *Ruskey* and his efforts to *map the Lower Mississippi*.

— Watch David Hanson's film *'Atchafalaya River: The Mississippi's Best Route to the Gulf'* from the Rivergator's Atchafalaya source-to-sea.