



# Riding the crest of the flood on the Mighty Mississippi

## Paddling on the Father of Rivers

By Gregg Patterson

ESPNOudors.com

Updated: July 10, 2008, 1:19 PM ET

The pucker factor is pretty high. It's late March and heavy rains from Missouri south have the Mississippi River above flood stage.

Our group of about 15 is on the Arkansas side of the river getting ready to put in at the mouth of the St. Francis River where it enters the Mississippi. To make things a little more edgy, the wind is blowing steadily upstream and gusting to 15-20 mph.

I notice my knuckles are white as I grip my paddle, readying to push off. It doesn't matter that I'm sitting in a 27-foot homemade cypress canoe that weighs several hundred pounds. Or that six other people and a few hundred pounds of gear are also in the canoe. My mind screams for me to go back to dry land.

Paddling a canoe on the Mississippi River during flood stage?

"Are you nuts?" my brother-in-law said. I'd asked him a few days earlier if he'd come along.

Maybe, but I decided to go, anyway. Call it extreme paddling to put a younger generational twist on it. I had always wanted to paddle on the Father of Rivers. I had read about Joliet, Marquette, LaSalle, and, of course, read Mark Twain's books. More importantly, I wasn't just going half-cocked on my own. I was in good hands.

John Ruskey runs Quapaw Outfitters out of Clarksdale, Miss., and a new store that recently opened in Helena, Ark. He's guided canoe trips on the lower Mississippi River south from Memphis for 10 years.



Gregg Patterson  
The Mighty Quawpaws prepare to float on the flooded Mississippi River.

We're all wearing life jackets and wet suits and John is giving us detailed "what if" emergency scenarios before we leave. There are two other adult guides and a canoe full of African American teenagers — the Mighty Quapaws they call themselves.

We push out into the river. Ruskey has us hug the bank as we make our way into the Mississippi River. He is no fool. High water and wind is a dangerous combination. He has already told us that if things get too hairy, we're going straight to shore. No arguments. No one looks like they'd argue about that.

The trip will be short, an overnight and about 10 river miles total. Ruskey has a 300-mile trip scheduled later the following week from Memphis to Vicksburg. Once we get our "sea legs," the group relaxes some. We see owls, hawks and dozens of other bird species. The high water is forcing wildlife off the river islands, but we do not see any white-tailed deer swimming in the river like others have told us.



Gregg Patterson  
John Ruskey of the Quapaw Outfitters pilots a canoe down the Mighty Mississippi.

The wind picks up, and Ruskey has us pull ashore for a break and some exploring.

"Better safe than sorry," he says. "The wind should lay down enough for us to go on a little later. If not, we'll camp here. We're on river time."

After about an hour, we're back in the canoes and headed towards Buck Island where we'll spend the night. The scenery is beautiful and we take in the wide expanse of the swollen river. Barges make their way up and downstream. We give them wide berth.

On Buck Island that evening, Tim Richardson of the American Land Conservancy tells us of his organization's plans to create the Lower Mississippi Fishing and Boating Trail. His organization owns Buck Island. It wants to sell it to the state of Arkansas or the U.S. Forest Service that owns nearby St. Francis National Forest and put it in public ownership. ALC would then use the resulting money from the sale to find another island to put into public ownership and extend the "trail." It's done this successfully in the middle section of the river, protecting 25,000 acres of islands and river chutes from just south of St. Louis to Cairo, Ill. The fishing and boating trail would go all the way to the Gulf of Mexico.

It's a great idea, a sort of water version of the Appalachian Trail, the famous hiking trail from Maine to Georgia. Unfortunately, neither the state nor the federal government has come up with the almost \$1 million necessary to buy the 2,000-acre island.

Richardson is undaunted. The glass is always half full for him. He's experienced in this sort of thing. He helped broker many of the deals that protected 650,000 acres around Prince William Sound after the Exxon Valdez oil spill.

The Mississippi River Delta on both sides of the river is one of the poorest places in the U.S. An ALC-funded economic impact study of the river trail indicates the trail could positively impact local counties along the river by \$18-21 million annually. That certainly won't save the Delta. However, it is one of a thousand good ideas needed to help this impoverished region.



Gregg Patterson

The 27-foot homemade cypress canoe easily carries seven passengers and their gear.

It's late evening. We're sitting around a comforting campfire. I ask the Mighty Quapaws what they think about the day's activities. Before us, the river slips by and a huge full moon rises seemingly from the river's depths. Barred owl calls drift through the night. There is no talk about the fishing and boating trail, who will buy the island, or economic impact studies. These young men have worked hard all day under Ruskey's patient directions; learning the nuances of the river and how to tie knots, cooking, and tending to the canoes and gear.

One says it's his first time ever on the river. Another offers in a shy manner that it's his first time camping overnight. I ask another why he would come out on a flood swollen, dangerous river and camp out in the pitch-black darkness of an island in the middle of nowhere. He looks at me as if I'm the crazy one.

"Man," he says. "I just wanted to get out of town."

Now, that's an answer worth a million dollars.