

RESTORING MARK TWAIN'S MISSISSIPPI



Photo: ALC

ALC PROTECTS 880 ACRES OF FOREST ON BUCK ISLAND

Buck Island is just three minutes by motor boat from Helena, Arkansas, but its wildness and air of adventure would transport any visitor back to the time of Huck Finn, Tom Sawyer, and Becky Thatcher. Located in the Lower Mississippi River south of Memphis, the island sits in a world-class ecosystem that some compare with the Florida Everglades. But as public access to the Lower Mississippi River Delta is extremely limited, Buck Island is somewhat of a natural treasure hidden in plain sight.

ALC and its partners hope to change all that. In October ALC worked with the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Natural Resource Conservation Service to protect 880 acres of timber on the 1,500-acre island through a conservation agreement under the Flood Plain Easement Program. ALC purchased the island in 2005 at the recommendation of the Lower Mississippi River Conservation Committee to create the jump-off point for a 106-mile river trail to Choctaw Island Wildlife Management Area in Arkansas City.

The island offers exciting outdoor recreation, with five miles of wooded hiking trails, huge sand bars for camping, and opportunities to view the island's wildlife, including deer, turkey, beaver, squirrel, opossum, rabbit, raccoon, bats, frogs, and turtles. Three miles of river frontage and another three miles of side channel water offer outstanding fishing and an inviting way to explore the area by boat, kayak, or canoe.

The easement is the first step in eventually transferring the island to public ownership, which will create a new recreation destination in the lower Mississippi while also providing numerous local benefits. Arkansas State Representative Clark Hall noted that conserving Buck Island will mean "visitor industry growth, jobs, and new tax revenues from people who want to experience America's greatest river." Local business owners are also excited: "We couldn't be more thrilled," said Quapaw Canoe Company founder, John Ruskey. "Buck Island will be a destination for paddlers as well as an outdoor classroom for students."



Buck Island provides habitat for endangered interior least terns.

Buck Island also provides critical wildlife habitat. It is a stopover site on the Mississippi River Flyway, migration corridor for 40 percent of North America's waterfowl, and it includes Arkansas's largest Mississippi River nesting colony of interior least terns, an endangered species.

ALC continues to work to convey the island to public ownership, an outcome with broad support, including from state and federal elected officials, more than sixty chambers of commerce, individuals, and community coalitions.

"Protecting and restoring Mark Twain's Mississippi is clearly an idea whose time has come," said Jenny Frazier, ALC Mississippi River program director. "There is much more we can still do for wildlife and recreation here, but conserving forest resources on Buck Island is a critical first step."

Least Tern Photo: Paul Tessier