Northeast Louisiana: Outdoor Series

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www.explorelouisiananorth.org/

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  www.lsuagcenter.com/agritourism

- Trail narrative by John Ruskey, Quapaw Canoe Co.
  www.quapawcanoe.com

www.louisianapaddle.com
www.louisianadeltaadventures.com

Imagine paddling down long highways of tall, serene cypress trees, with Spanish moss swaying in the breeze. Imagine canoeing or kayaking through a maze of flooded cypress forests and around groups of solemn cypress knees. Where is this watery magic kingdom for paddlers? Along the Mississippi River in northeastern Louisiana!

The lake country of north Louisiana provides a delightful alternative to its rivers and bayous. While paddling the streams is dependent on water levels, the lakes are always good for canoeing, kayaking and stand-up paddleboarding. When the river water is too low or too high, paddlers can always get on the lakes. While the rivers present snags, strainers, deep muddy banks, occasional trash and infrequent blockages, the lakes are always wide open and full of sparkling clean water. Water clarity and quality varies from lake to lake, but in general, the lakes of north Louisiana are deep, clear and clean.

If this sounds too perfect to be true, here’s the drawback: The lakes are surrounded by houses and during the summer months are filled with boaters. Paddlers have to share the water with water skiers, jet boats, party boats, bass boats and johnboats. Regardless of traffic, the lakes are full of wildlife, and paddlers can always find places that no one else can get to. Naturalists of all sorts will enjoy the birds, the fish and the unique solitude of paddling through flooded cypress forests. These Louisiana lake trails have been chosen for the best scenery, quietest places and the most wildlife.

Explore Lake Country
North Louisiana Lake and River Trails

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April and fall generally are the best times of year for outdoor activity in the south, but these lakes are open year-round and can be enjoyed on almost any day of any season.

It is advised to stay off the lakes during stormy weather and high winds. Check the weather forecast before embarking on any adventure. Severe thunderstorms sweep through this region with dangerous ferocity. Beginners should only paddle on calm days. Moderate and advanced paddlers can try it if the wind is 15 mph or above – but be ready for strenuous paddling and waves. All paddlers should stay off the lakes if the wind is gusting to 25 mph or above. Cold weather paddlers should dress in wetsuits or drysuits and also be able to self-rescue in case of capsize. Hypothermia is always a danger between November and April. In the event of strong winds, choose a route with protection from the wind, like a line of trees along one shore or the other.

The paddling trails are daytrips only, and arrangements for lodging will need to be made at any number of nearby campgrounds (like Lake Bruin State Park), lakeside hotels (like Lake Bruin Lodge or Spoon Lake Resort) and cabins (like Netterville cabins). Visit the website for complete details.

In the trail below, you can launch a canoe from a ramp at the state park and make a kayak or canoe journey of about 10 miles, depending on prevailing wind. Follow cypress shoreline, dodging in and out of the trees for close-up views of bankside wildlife. After a mile or two, turn around and cross lake for return and continue same route for another 10 miles. Bring a snack. The lake is a 1 mile paddle to reach most interesting spots. A canoe is not necessary to enjoy this trail.

Lake Joseph Paddling Trail

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Lake Joseph Paddling Trail
Explore Lake Country: North Louisiana Lake and River Trails

3 Lake St. John Paddling Trail
(3-5 Miles Round Trip)

Google Map of Trail: http://goo.gl/maps/280Pe

Lake St. John is an old Mississippi River oxbow and is lined with houses and fields on all but its northeastern extremity. So, the best paddling and most plentiful wildlife is found as far north as you can venture. In 2013, the only reliable public access was located at the Spokane Fishing Resort, which is close to north end. There are plans for another public access, which will use an old primitive ramp located on the northeast end of the lake.

Private Boat Ramp – Spokane Fishing Resort
31.699767, 91.45936
There is a concrete boat ramp and site of parking at the Spokane Fishing Resort, 4289 Highway 56, 5 miles northeast of Ferriday, La. 318-757-4308. $8 ramp use fee. They offer cabins for rent. There is a seasonal restaurant and convenience store.

Lake St. John Paddling Trail
You will travel approximately 10 miles round trip to reach the best part of the lake. It is a long paddle, but the effort is well worth it. The north and end of Lake St. John teems with wildlife among extensive stands of large cypress trees. Paddlers can easily slide through tree trunks, where vibrant vaulted canopies loom. The largest trees of any southeast Louisiana inlets will be seen. There are thickly vegetated shorelines, which are full of shrubs, flowering bushes and tall grasses, as well as pockets of water hyacinth. Evidence of beavers, raccoons, crawfish and muskrats can be found. During migration season, you will see plenty of waterfowl and songbirds.

4 Lake Concordia Paddling Trail
(3-5 Miles Round Trip)

Google Map of Trail: http://goo.gl/maps/m64j6

Lake Concordia might be small, but it is deep and sparkles with the clear, water of any oxbow lake in north Louisiana. It also boasts the best birding. Its waters are more than 130 feet deep in places. It is great for swimming, but be wary of gators. It is thickly populated with houses and piers along its southern end – and busy with motorboats during the summer months. Paddlers can find peace and more wildlife at the northern end of the lake among the stands of baldcypress trees and clumps of vegetation. Excellent chances for sneaking up on owls, sparrow hawks, Sharon egrets, green herons, ibis and other spectacular birds. Good paddling for canoes, kayaks or stand-up paddleboards.

Boat Launch at Wildlife and Fisheries
31.673625, 91.499922
Good concrete boat launch at Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries facility, located on Alex Road, just off Wildlife and Fisheries Road. Parking can be found among the shade trees near top of ramp.

Lake Concordia Paddler’s Trail
This trail is approximately 4-5 miles round trip into the wilder areas of Lake Concordia. Leaping, rapids, cross lake and follow the forested shoreline, as closely as possible, for views of turtles, fish and waders. Paddle in and out of several small coves, and dive through stands of trees, as the water level allows. The lake shallows toward its northwestern end, but adventurous paddlers can continue between clumps of grass, flowing boughs and water hyacinth. Through the isolated cypress trees you will reach the far end of the lake. Follow a different route on the return trip for the best wildlife viewing.

5 Mississippi River St. Joseph to Waterproof

Google Map of Trail: http://goo.gl/maps/2b4ZV

Embark on a 15-mile paddle down the big waters of the lower Mississippi River, the largest river in North America. Enjoy stunning views of the Mississippi bluffs and long-distance views of islands, floodplain forests and giant flocks of birds. Along the way, paddle past the sunken lumber of Bayou Pierre and the enchanting entrance to Rodney Lake Chat. At Brinkman, 40,000 Union troops successfully crossed the Mississippi in Grant’s final attempt to break behind Vicksburg in 1863. Good paddling or camping sites can be found on Bonderant Towhead or Spithail Towhead. The main channel is your fastest route, but many alternate routes are possible during higher water levels.

Put in at St. Joseph and take out at Waterproof. Paddle in the main channel for the quickest route (15.5 miles), or follow alternate routes for visiting islands, back channels and other points of interest. Appropriately fit canoes, kayaks or stand-up paddleboards, but only for experienced (and strong) paddlers. You will need to be capable of handling big volume waters, big waves, long crossings over open water, chaotic currents and possible side winds, head wind and tail winds. We support you to bring a VHF marine radio and U.S. Army Corps of Engineers maps of the lower Mississippi, for navigation. It’s advised to stay off the river when wind is gusting above 20 mph.

Mississippi River Maps and Mileage
For best navigation, use the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers 2017 Maps of the Lower Mississippi River, which can be downloaded at: https://waterdata.unl.edu/nwis/portal/waterbody/mississippi-and-ohio-river-trail-maps. Mileage refers to the number of miles above the Gulf of Mexico. This section of river begins at mile 396 and ends at 381.

River Speed and Trip Duration
The lower Mississippi River averages 3 mph at low water, 5 at medium water and 7 at high water. An average paddler can travel at 2-3 mph. Making adjustments for wind speed along the way and any alternate exploration, you can use these figures to roughly estimate your time of travel. You might lose time due to necessary waits for passing towboats. Never try to outrun a towboat, and never paddle across its line of travel.

Expert Paddlers Only!
We encourage only expert paddlers on Mississippi River. You must be very familiar with your canoe or kayak, its abilities and its limitations and be able to self-rescue, if necessary. Your canoe should have high freeboard, if you are using a voyajer or spruce. The penalty for a failure with your canoe or kayak, its abilities and its limitations is $250,000. You should be strong enough to paddle through big waves, and be strong enough to make long-distance ferry crossings from one side of the Mississippi River to the other (usually a mile or more). You should be comfortable paddling in the vicinity of 3/2 mile long towboats/barges. You should be able to negotiate big strong winds, powerful eddies, whirlpools and transitions of fast currents. You should also be strong enough to handle long sets of wave trains, sometimes a mile or longer, with waves coming from multiple directions.

St. Joseph Boat Ramp
Mile 396.4 • 31.936682, 91.197715
St. Joseph Boat Ramp (Gladdence Landing) is located at the bottom of Handicaps Bend at mile 396.4. There is a concrete ramp that boats out into sand around 15 on the Natchez Gage. Ramp and parking lot under water at flood stage 46. Land access is 3 miles north of St. Joseph via Highway 605. Turn on Highway 604 past Lake Bruin Store and follow pavement over levee. It is next to Buane Grain Elevator. Do not leave vehicles overnight.

Mississippi River Water Levels
Water levels for this section of the Mississippi River can be found by using the Natchez Gauge. Low water level is 0-20, with sandbars and back channels that are not possible. Medium water is 20-30, and most back channels are open at these levels. High water is 30-40, and all back channels are open and flowing strong. The river is bank full at 40, and at 45 almost all islands are under water, with the flood stage at 48. http://www.ohv.noaa.gov/misf?o=msl/mississippiandohioriverforecast. Paddlers are advised to stay off if river level is over 48.

Waterproof Landing
Mile 381 • 31.810997, 91.560245
(Also known as Goldman Lower Landing) is a primitive landing located just below Farmer’s Grain Elevator at mile 381. Do not leave vehicles overnight! Arrange shuttle.

Towboat Protocol
Towboats are paddler’s most dangerous hazard on the lower Mississippi River. Towboats can’t stop easily, and they often can’t see you. But the good news is they move slowly (10-14 mph) and their motions usually are predictable. Upstream towboats seek slow water and downstream ones seek fast water. The most dangerous place around any towboat is in front. It is usually safe anywhere behind their route of travel. Never try to outrun a tow, and never paddle across its line of travel. Carry VHF marine radio and transmit Channel 13 for nearby traffic. For more information, go to http://www.ohv.noaa.gov/misf?o=msl/mississippiandohioriverforecast.

What to Pack
In your vessel, be sure to pack bow and stern lines, rescue rope, bales and sponges, and at least one extra paddle. Bring VHF marine radio, if you have one. Carry cellphone in waterproof container. Wear clothing appropriate to weather, but also pack rain gear, change of clothes, fleece or;orwool tops and bottoms (in waterproof dry bag or dry box). Pack extra food and water. Pack at least a gallon of water per person per day during hot seasons. Bring sunscreen and bug spray. Carry a survival kit. Always be prepared for any and all circumstances. For a complete description of paddling the lower Mississippi River, please go to the Safety Page for the River at: http://www.ohv.noaa.gov/misf?o=msl/mississippiandohioriverforecast.