Paddling the Trail

Fool River Boat Ramp to Ben Lilly Boat Ramp

The Fool River Boat Ramp is a concrete ramp with a gentle slope. The ramp may not reach the water during dry periods, and it may get completely inundated in high water, but it is always usable. There is no launcher at Fool River.

Fool River is an old channel of the Tensas River; now isolated and surrounded by forest. It is fed by Rayburning Bayou. Fool River actually is a long lake and has no perceptible flow until it narrows and enters its original river through a narrow and scenic neck. Fool River supports an alligator colony, and probably will see evidence of that. Floating logs and gator tracks can be seen from a distance. The water, of course, eventually submerges can smoothly亲子.

Paddle through the piers of an old bridge. There are a few small hunting camps and a private small-scale ferry crossing. As you approach the Tensas River the water shallows and the channel narrows. Families of cypress knees watch you as you paddle by. As you move deeper into the river, you will see landlocked wild grapes, also known as muscadine or possum grapes.

As with all narrow wild rivers, maneuvering through snags and rapids is necessary at places where big trees have fallen across the channel. Take your time and pick a place where you can paddle through the branches or undertake the tree. Be very careful on swift water conditions. Follow many years ago when river was a trail. Fool River is a common occurrence on any river, but the water levels on this section of the Tensas are buffered by many healthy wetlands.

Throughout this section you will view many aquatic life trapped in the floodplain. The gator, of course, eventually submerges or smoothly moves upwards, on either bank. You are now in the middle of one of the healthiest and most active biotas in North America, and you are experiencing it as the native people who inhabited this region, the first explorers and the earliest settlers did. Apart from a few isolated hunting camps, there is nothing but continuous forest. Learning the process and matching your row style around is a great skill that allows you to maneuver around as smoothly as possible.

Several miles down (2.3 miles) you come to the first and only bridge along the Fool River. The Fool River may get a little more difficult to traverse because of the exhilarating current. Any strainers along this section might be more difficult to traverse because of the obstructions current. As you paddle along, scrutinize the banks for tracks. You may not see much wildlife beyond the birdlife, but the animals definitely will be watching for you. Ford every rain or when the river is high. Flash flooding is a remote possibility. You are now in the area at Explore Louisiana North.

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A few miles down (1.5 miles) you will encounter Mill Bayou entering left bank. Mill Bayou is the major tributary of this section. With the introduction of Mill Bayou, the current picks up a little, but the river deepens and narrows with the canopy closing in from high muddy banks on either side. In some places, the tree tops meet, and you feel like you are paddling through a tunnel of vegetation. Any strainers along the sections might be more difficult to traverse because of the obstructions current. As you paddle along, scrutinize the banks for tracks. You may not see much wildlife beyond the birdlife, but the animals definitely will be watching for you.

Your take-out, the Ben Lilly Boat Launch, is found bank right along the downstream side of the bridge. Fool River Boat Ramp is a steep concrete ramp usable at all river levels up to flood stage. There is plenty of parking among the trees and palmettos. Approaching flood stage, the parking area goes under water.

Acknowledgements:
- Northeast Louisiana: Outdoor Series is a project of the agritourism program at the LSU AgCenter. www.lsuagcenter.com/agritourism
- Trail narrative and pictures by John Ruskey, Quapaw Canoe Co.
- More information is available for this trail and tourism in the area at Explore Louisiana North.
Tensas River Paddling Trail

There is no quieter way to get close to nature than from a paddle-powered craft such as a canoe or kayak, and nowhere is this more true than in the depths of the Tensas River National Wildlife Refuge. The possibilities for paddlers on the Tensas River and adjacent bayou, backwaters and tributaries are almost endless. The very best choice, we feel, is the route from Fool River Boat Launch to Ben Lilly Boat Launch.

Getting There:
The trail begins at the boat ramp inside the Big Lake Wildlife Management Area. The wildlife management area is located in Franklin, Madison and Tensas parishes. For a detailed map go to: www.wlf.louisiana.gov. Fool River runs through the area for about 2 miles before crossing into the Tensas River National Wildlife Refuge, running for a little over a mile before it hits the Tensas River.

The Ben Lilly Boat Ramp is located inside the Tensas River National Wildlife Refuge. To get there from U.S. 61 at Somerset, go west on La. Highway 575 then turn onto La. Hwy 888. Make a right onto highway 888 and continue on to Ben Lilly. The Ben Lilly Boat Ramp is 15.2 miles. This is a great day trip for any paddler. Carry everything you will need with you for a long journey through a remote area. Difficulty level for the full-day paddle is moderate. The length of this trip will make a challenging day trip for any paddler. Carry everything you will need with you for a long journey through a remote area.

Skill Level

Put in at the Fool River Boat Launch and paddle 3.2 miles to its confluence with the Tensas River. Paddle around two giant bends of the river. Paddle past the confluence of Mill Bayou near mile 12. Below mile 15 take out at Ben Lilly Boat Launch.

Access Points:

Fool River Boat Ramp 283.17158 W91.67602
Fool River - Tensas River Confluence 283.07424 W91.60147
Mill Bayou Confluence 283.06639 W91.32142
Ben Lilly Boat Ramp 283.16827 W91.56577

What You Will See on Trail

This is a great all-day paddle through lush and bottomland hardwood forests, fall of wildlife and fall leaves. The thick understory is draped with vines, ferns and flowering bushes. Think stands of palmetto and reminders of its subtropical nature. The Tensas River is not only a birder’s paradise but thrill with all flora and fauna. The area has a healthy population of the Louisiana black bear. Here you will find one of the few remaining completely forested sections of river found anywhere in the lower Mississippi River drainage. There is clean water and little trash.

Equipment

Choose a canoe, kayak or paddleboard. Motored craft will not be able to traverse numerous blockages from fallen trees.

Paddling Tips

Carry plenty of drinking water in the summer and fall months to prevent dehydration. During the winter months, also carry extra warm clothing as well as a kit including fire-starting materials in case of emergency. Hypothermia is a risk in the winter.

Always pack your overnight gear, just in case you have an unexpected delay (such as a severe thunderstorm or medical emergency). This paddle is through a remote, rural area with few services.

Be wary of falling limbs and trees and poisonous plants and venomous snakes.

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