

By Charles Paxton

BAYOU HOPPING

The woodland waterways of northeast Louisiana offer a world of adventure seemingly little changed since the days of De Soto, Mark Twain and Audubon. Here gators glide, pelicans preen, frogs hop, turtles bask on stumps and part-sunken logs while impossibly bright birds flit through sun-dappled clearings over mud stamped by the webbed feet of otter families. Land and water embrace, swapping places in an ever-changing seasonal dance of sights and scents. But where do you begin to engage with all this wildlife?

D'ARBONNE RIVER SYSTEM

The D'Arbonne River System is fed from Corney Lake, a beautiful part of the Kisatchie National Forest. In winter watch out for American bald and golden eagles as well as majestic beaver lodges. Waters descend southward via Corney Creek with exquisite stretches and gloriously wild sloughs, accessible north of Rockets Crossing. At Simmon Hole Road and Hog Pen Road — each worthy of a day trip — watch for otters, nutrias and a wide range of waterfowl. Then meander down to Lake D'Arbonne, which is great for water sports and home of a record bass over 15-pounds. Lester's On The Lake rents kayaks off Highway 2, you can also rent them from D'Arbonne State Park. Within a 20-minute paddle to the south and east of Lester's, you'll find some lovely wooded islands, with a beaver lodge, basking turtles, fishing herons and a wealth of water lilies. The lake has cormorants in impressive flocks, also bald eagles in the cooler months, and dense breeding aggregations of turtles in spring. See Swifts' nests under the road bridge. Watch for pelicans, diving terns and other water birds around the spillway on foot, avoid boating by the spillway. South, the waters feed very pretty country in the D'Arbonne NWR.



DIFFICULTY: Easy (low water) Hard (high water April through May)

LENGTH OF FLOAT: Originates in Arkansas. In Louisiana 53 navigable miles, plus 15,000-hectare lake, many sloughs and tributaries. Daylight hours within the NWR

HABITAT: Bottomland hardwood, riparian, upland hardwood, mixed deciduous with loblolly pine, cypress swamp, marsh, wild flowers.

AMBIANCE: Parts of Corney Creek feel like Borneo.

TRIVIA: Lake D'Arbonne is man-made and hosts motorboat racing and fishing tournaments.

BLACK BAYOU

Begin in February with Monroe's Black Bayou for the best chance to see American alligators. Keep voices down and you may see them basking out of water during the cooler months. They can also be seen cruising smoothly between the trees and water weeds. Several young alligators hang out near the boat slipway. From here paddle the Rails' road, enjoy sightings of seasonal migrant waterfowl, stately herons in residence, egrets and even American bald eagles in the winter months. Class "A" wildlife sightings abound here on and off water. Watching adolescent eagles test their wings is unforgettable. Their nest is enormous and both parents take turns foraging for food and the right sticks for repairs. The boardwalks and prairie walk offer intimate encounters with wildlife in its respective ecosystem allowing you to scope for amphibians, turtles, snakes, birds and butterflies — a monopod helps in low-light. Ranger Nova Clarke or a friendly volunteer will help orient you. Join regular events such as guided trips out to the eagle's nest, and nocturnal frog walks. In time, you can learn to identify frog calls by ear.



DIFFICULTY: Easy, no flow, easy access (In breeding season it is forbidden to approach the eagle's nest beyond the warning signs.)

LENGTH OF FLOAT: 1,600-acre lake accessible in daylight hours only.

HABITAT: Bottomland hardwood, cypress swamp, marsh, saw palmetto, tallgrass prairie with wildflowers.

AMBIANCE: Magnificent cypress swamp habitat, the clear water looks black.



BAYOU BARTHOLOMEW

For giant ancient Cypress trees paddle Bayou Bartholomew, America's longest, at 360 miles, with 117 fish species and over 40 freshwater mussels recorded. Access near Bastrop provides beautiful Bottomland hardwood forest, at low water some very large, mature cypress trees can be admired at fullest extent in the first 200 meters above the confluence of the adjoining Chemin-a-haut Bayou. This was the Native American's "highway" in times past. Launch from Old Berlin Road Bridge and either arrange a pickup at the state park five miles away or do a return trip of two miles each way to the ancient trees. We saw an alligator, Black-bellied whistling ducks, wood ducks, bats hawking for mosquitoes between us in the double kayak and fireflies. Nearby, is Chemin-A-Haut State Park with cabins and camping facilities, swimming pool and Big Slough Lake.



DIFFICULTY: Easy (low water) Hard (some portage in very low water) and high water has very strong flow from the State park to the confluence of Chemin-a-haut bayou.

LENGTH OF FLOAT: The four mile round trip to the ancient trees from Old Berlin Bridge with plenty of time to enjoy the Chemin-a-haut bayou ambiance is recommended.

HABITAT: Bottomland hardwood, riparian, upland hardwood, mixed deciduous with short-needle pine, cypress swamp.

AMBIANCE: Untrammeled.

TRIVIA: Fireflies are a clean water indicator species.



BAYOU DELOUTRE

For quiet, atmospheric adventure, try Bayou Deloutre, accessed via the right fork in the road behind Antioch Grocery off Highway 2, that's a good source of food and picnic supplies. This, slim, elegant bayou feels just the right scale, with a kingfisher often flying before you, you can check each bank for wildlife simultaneously. We saw egrets, a raccoon, map turtles and sliders. Southern and checkered water snakes allowed close approach, avoid the poisonous moccasins that have vertical pupils and swim higher in the water, also keep an eye out for gators, owls and herons. Head upstream for a darker, more densely forested river trip with some need for portage and some rocky banks, head south for a lighter run, with lovely open views and mellow avenues of mature trees. Listen out for the barred owl's call.



DIFFICULTY: Easy (low water) Hard (in very low water and high water).

LENGTH OF FLOAT: Originates in Arkansas. In Louisiana 40 miles, not all continuously navigable, plus sloughs and tributaries.

HABITAT: Bottomland hardwood, riparian, upland mixed hardwood, cypress swamp.

AMBIANCE: Peaceful.

TRIVIA: Some river shrimp may migrate here from coastal waters.



DIFFICULTY: Africa and Rainey lakes are placid, avoid Tensas River in spate.

LENGTH OF FLOAT: Daylight hours only.

HABITAT: Bottomland hardwood, mosaic of fields and forest, saw palmetto, cypress swamp.

AMBIANCE: Safari-like.

TRIVIA: President Theodore "Teddy" Roosevelt spared a bear cub near here in 1902 and sparked a global love of "Teddy" Bears. The unique crop-sharing field system devotes 30 percent of crops to wildlife.



TENSAS RIVER NWR

For Louisiana black bears, wild turkeys and more besides, visit Tensas River NWR, fed by the same Bayou Macon that runs past the awesome Poverty Point Indian Mounds World Heritage Site nearby. The ecological wealth of this river system fed thousands of super-adapted hunter gatherers whose egalitarian, hierarchical society developed vast mounds and artisan skills in their startlingly sophisticated shamanic civilization center. Wildlife watching from the bridge can yield sightings of large alligator, alligator gar fish and spiny soft-shelled turtles. You might see bears, white-tailed deer, turkeys, cougars, bobcats and a host of resident and migrant birds on the safari drive and woodland trails near Rainey Lake, including a blind overlooking a magnificent Heronry for Great White Egrets, which also draws roseate spoonbills and white-faced ibises. Wear boots and beware of bear dung and snakes.