

A person wearing a red and white plaid shirt and a straw hat is seen from behind, paddling a canoe on a river. The river is surrounded by lush green trees and foliage. The title "Down to the River" is overlaid in large white letters.

Down to the River

BY ROBERT REID | PHOTOGRAPHY BY SHANE BEVEL

A WRITER and PHOTOGRAPHER FOLLOW the LITTLE RIVER THROUGH MYSTERIOUS and SCENIC SOUTHEASTERN OKLAHOMA.

ALL THE BIRDERS have left the convention. The last signs of life here, amid empty chicken dinner plates on tables in the conference room at Idabel's Museum of the Red River, are ornithologist Mia Revels and me. Our conversation has taken an unexpected turn.

"If they made a movie about Swainson's warbler, who would play it?" I ask.

"Christopher Walken," she replies.

Mia, a biology professor at Northeastern State University in Tahlequah, is the queen of the Swainson's. Over the past couple of decades, Mia's monitored what she calls these "cryptic, difficult birds" and tracked down more than seventy nests, doubling the previous record. To meet one is no walk in the park. The tiny, brown, barrel-chested warblers, named for a nineteenth-century British naturalist, enjoy living in steamy, mosquito-infested areas of thick thorns, vines, mud, and roots.

"Yeah, they live in horrible places," Mia deadpans. "But I always had a higher tolerance for horrible."

All this is happening because I decided to follow the Little River.

Writer Robert Reid paddles a canoe in the headwaters of the Little River near Honobia.



AS BODIES OF water go, Oklahoma's Little River—specifically the southernmost of two state rivers sharing the name—is not fabled. It springs to life a bit south of the Talimena Scenic Drive in southeastern Oklahoma. It makes an arcing c-shape west, then south, then east, before hitting the Arkansas border east of Idabel and eventually joining the Red. That's a 217-mile journey—130 in Oklahoma—sometimes at more than 300 feet wide, so it's not really that little, either.

It's definitely bipolar, though. From near its source, it runs clear and swift through upland forest—good canoeing country—then muddies after passing through the Pine Creek Lake dam halfway to Arkansas. There, it sludges on into bottomland forest and swampy sloughs, home to the occasional gator and many more mosquitoes.

Locals do swim in it sometimes, even in Idabel. They just don't live on it much. Only one town, Honobia, has ever bothered to cuddle up alongside. No locals I meet know anything about its history. Nor, it seems, do books. My futile searches in libraries and old newspapers never gleaned its origins in nomenclature or geology. I did discover that, in 1719, Jean-Baptiste Benard de la Harpe, the first French explorer to tackle what now is Oklahoma, followed it briefly (his journal, found eighty years later, included reports of seeing “multiple unicorns”). Though maps have consistently dubbed it “Little” since the late 1800s, on the road I find no signs—on a dozen crossings—identifying it.

If you're wondering why I bother with this lonely river, I should mention the river marks the state's lowest elevation, 289 feet above sea level, east of Idabel. I'm following it to see how low Oklahoma goes.

MY FOUR-DAY DRIVE begins on the fifty-four-mile Talimena Scenic Drive. I pass a salad-like medley of bright and dark greens under a clear blue sky. Just south of the drive, at the town of Big Cedar, I spot a granite marker built for John F. Kennedy, who came in 1961 to cut the ribbon on U.S. Highway 259 and say a few words about land, wood, and water.

JFK was referring to the nearby 1958 monument *Land Wood Water*, generally called Three Sticks. Five miles south, I see them, three crimson stone-and-wood poles standing like triumphant churros on a star-shaped base at a dramatic bend in the road facing the hulky green Kiamichi Mountains.

The Little River National Wildlife Refuge is one of the only places in Oklahoma to see the elusive Swainson's warbler. The refuge also is home to Oklahoma's tallest tree, a baldcypress, as well as beavers, bobcats, and swamp rabbits.

This is where a Little River road trip begins for photographer Shane Bevel and me.

Rising behind us is the rock-filled dirt road, which leads twenty bumpy miles west on a mountain ridge to the spring where the river stirs to life. Tree limbs nearly meet over the dirt-and-stone road, which occasionally bottoms out into big muddy puddles. An hour later, and a mile from our destination, we find the road's closed.

"Of course, the river begins under those old roots," Shane says, optimistically referring to the nearby trees.

I pocket a couple of rocks for souvenirs, and Shane points out a fresh bear print.

"Probably a cub," he says.

But another hairy animal is of greater concern.

Forty-five minutes' drive southwest from Three Sticks, Honobia (pronounced "HOE-nubby") is a small town straddling my first glimpse of the river, already running confident and clear through lush forests along a green valley floor. I ask a local about the river. He confesses, "Never paid much attention to it. I usually go to mountains and stuff."

And then there's Bigfoot. Turns out the Little River area marks Oklahoma's first recorded Bigfoot sighting, back in 1849. Since then, a flurry of reports came in the early 1900s and just after the release of the 1972 Bigfoot film *The Legend of Boggy Creek*. Every October, Honobia stages a Bigfoot Festival featuring lectures and a guy dressed up in a hairy costume.

Shane and I risk crossing paths with Bigfoot anyway in Shane's canoe. There are no Class V rapids to navigate, and at first, we drift slowly enough that I lazily admire waterfront cabins I'd like to live in and the view of lush green mountains that remind me of upstate New York.

Then, on one sharp turn, the current kicks in strong. Shane and I paddle furiously to avoid a rock. The stern pokes up out of the water, then dips sharply as we descend into the next cascade. We paddle left, but the stream won't have it, pushing us hard into the right bank. The canoe turns backward and spins around sideways. I'm out in a flash, knee-deep in the cool water. But Shane's gone in butt-first.

"No one will make fun of me for not having scratches on the bottom of my canoe anymore," he says.

Clockwise from top left: Despite its name, the prairie warbler is found primarily in eastern Oklahoma and prefers to nest in wooded areas. Elizabeth Hatcher surveys the shores of the Little River for birds. Mia Revels balances her iPad on her head while calling for the Swainson's warbler. Attendees at the Red Slough Birding Convention monitor a cuckoo along the river.



FOLLOWING THE LITTLE River requires some creativity. Dirt roads trace it most closely, plying the Honobia Creek Wildlife Management Area, where fly-fishers can pond-hop on hikes around the Little River. Paved roads crisscross the river west and east of Pine Creek Lake. I take the latter, leaving the mountains behind and eventually reaching the river's most historic site, the Wheelock Academy in Millerton, a half hour south of the lake.

Built in 1884 as a mission school for Choctaw girls, the institution ran for more than a century before closing in 1955. Pushmataha Hall, a grand dorm building, anchors the site but is off limits, with missing windows and an uncertain future. Near the cemetery, four hundred yards west, is the Wheelock Rock Church, Oklahoma's oldest church, a well-preserved limestone building that wouldn't look out of place in a small Spanish town.

At the small museum near the former dorm, I learn about the Choctaws' Trail of Tears and find a photo of four students in bonnets posing on a boat in what could be the nearby Little River around 1910.

The following morning in Idabel starts at dawn. I'm joining the tenth annual Red Slough Birding Convention. At \$125 for four days of guided tours with birding, wildlife, and forestry experts—plus a T-shirt and dinner thrown in—I'd call it one of the greatest deals in the state.

Mia, wearing a Peter Frampton sweatshirt, is leading a tour of the Little River National Wildlife Refuge to celebrate bird majesty and, notably, find the Swainson's warbler.

So far, no luck.

The dozen of us—most wearing sun hats and vented shirts and clutching binoculars—wait on the road as Mia wanders into the brush, holding an iPad to send out a recording of its call (three steady quarter notes, followed by three quicker ones up the scale). No answer.

"This is getting suspenseful," she says.

This is all new to me, but birders are a welcoming bunch. Nadine Warner sort of adopted me right off. She grew up with birder parents and eventually became the bird keeper at the Oklahoma City Zoo. She passes me a bird manual, plays songs of birds we hear, and points out species I've not heard of before.

"I love to teach," she says.

On one stop, she points out a prothonotary warbler across the bank of the Little River. It looks like a flying lemon darting from branch to bush. I borrow binoculars,

An oxbow lake fed by the Little River near Honobia is a serene spot along what's already a pretty laid-back river. Flathead catfish, bass, green sunfish, and chain pickerel bring plenty of fishermen to the area. But visitors beware: Alligators are not an uncommon sight on these waters.



Rollin' on the River

IT'S MORE THAN JUST PADDLING *with the* CURRENT.

A TRIP DOWN *the* LITTLE RIVER OFFERS MANY OPPORTUNITIES *for* ADVENTURE.

WHAT TO DO

Talimena Scenic Drive

State Highway 1 from Talihina to the Arkansas State Line. talimenascenicdrive.com.

Honobia Bigfoot Festival

October 5-6 in Honobia. Admission, \$5-\$10. (918) 755-4549 or honobiabigfoot.com

Land Wood Water (Three Sticks Monument)

U.S. Highway 259 south of Big Cedar. GPS: 34.612707, -94.657810

John F. Kennedy Memorial

State Highway 63 and U.S. Highway 259 in Big Cedar. GPS: 34.645991, -94.648997

Museum of the Red River

812 East Lincoln Road in Idabel, (580) 286-3616 or museumoftheredriver.org

Little River Park

864 Little River Park Road in Ringold, (580) 876-3720

Honobia Creek Wildlife Management Area

From Rattan, travel north fourteen miles on Cloudy Road. (918) 527-5308

Wheelock Academy Historic Site

1377 Wheelock Road in Garvin, (580) 746-2139 or facebook.com/wheelockacademy

Little River National Wildlife Refuge

635 South Park in Broken Bow, (580) 584-6211 or fws.gov/refuge/little_river

WHERE TO STAY

Riverwalk Cabins

\$110-\$150 per night. 453391 East 1718 Lane in Honobia, (918) 755-4535 or oklahomariverwalkcabins.com

Hootie Creek House Bed & Breakfast

\$119-\$129 per night. 202 First Street in Talihina, (918) 567-5388 or hootiecreekhouse.com

Eagle Creek Escape

Couples only. \$185-\$200 per night. 68438 Eagle Creek Drive in Smithville, (580) 244-7453 or eaglecreekescape.com

Beavers Bend State Park

4350 South State Highway 259A in Broken Bow, (580) 494-6300 or TravelOK.com/state-parks



but soon my gaze lingers on the river itself. Trees crowd the water, which runs slow, brown, and flat here. I stand by a series of two-foot-tall cyprus knees, vertical roots poking upward like fingers from the muddy banks on a lazy bend. It feels tropical, like Central American rivers I've visited. I snap a photo and text it to Chip, a childhood friend from Tulsa. "I had no idea Oklahoma looked like that," he responds.

At our final stop, Mia suddenly cocks her head and holds her finger to her mouth. Then she whispers, "If you want to see a Swainson's warbler, follow me."

We follow her into the shadowy brush, stepping on dried pine needles and pushing back branches as we pass. We stop, we listen, we look. Quick bursts of the Swainson's song are unmistakable now. Soon, ten feet ahead, and just above our heads, a quick flutter of feathers zips past us.

Then the little guy is gone.

At the convention's closing dinner, I sit with Mia, talking about weird little birds, the smell of mud, and Christopher Walken. She remembers catching and releasing the same Swainson's warbler here five straight years.

"To think, this little sixteen-gram bird flew all the way to his wintering grounds in the Caribbean and back to the same spot every year," she says in wonder before growing teary-eyed when recalling that she didn't see him a sixth year.

The talk turns to underdogs, travel, and eventually what's become my de facto beat for *Oklahoma Today*: the noble goose chase.

During the past couple of decades, I've covered six continents in my travel writing life, but my Oklahoma adventures, following cow trails by car or snooping at sinkholes on Panhandle farms, are my highlights. Along the way, I've learned random quests lead to unexpected fruits, like a broader understanding of what Oklahoma is, and with this, the Little River absolutely did not disappoint.

Listening, Mia says, "You sound like a Swainson's warbler kind of guy."

I like that. For some, the Little River is merely a pretty stream that runs into Arkansas. For the rest of us, it's something much bigger. It whispers stories as it guides you to your spirit animal. ■

The Little River originates in the mountains of southeastern Oklahoma and meets up with the Glover and Mountain Fork rivers before exiting the state.