

# Dipping a Paddle into Mississippi's Waters

DISCOVERIES ARE JUST AROUND THE BEND  
ON THE STATE'S LAKES AND RIVERS

By Jim Beaugez

For all paddlers, Mississippi—which translates to “big river” in indigenous Ojibwe or to “father of waters” in other Native American languages—certainly lives up to its name.

From the Delta's flatlands to the rolling hills of Central Mississippi, the marsh-lined Gulf Coast and its namesake river, Mississippi abounds with a wide variety of public waters accessible for canoeing and kayaking.

“Mississippi is like an undiscovered gem for adventure paddlers,” said Kelly McGinnis, himself an avid paddler from the central part of the state and a nationally registered and wilderness EMT.

If anyone, he would know. McGinnis spends most of his summers as a master guide on the popular whitewater the Ocoee River in Tennessee, but when he is home he can be found paddling the

nooks, channels and creeks that feed Pelahatchie Bay on the Ross Barnett Reservoir.

When McGinnis started looking closely at Mississippi's waterways for places to paddle during the winters, he quickly realized the abundance of hot spots in Mississippi. These discoveries by him and others led to the formation of an impromptu group that eventually grew to more than 400 people who call themselves the Central Mississippi Paddling Mafia, a Facebook-organized and open group of boating aficionados in the Jackson area.

“Our group is really just beginning to explore the upper Pearl River, from Leake County down,” said McGinnis. “Pelahatchie Creek is a beautiful paddle—I've probably gone six or seven miles up the creek and it's gorgeous. Even the bay itself is a great place to paddle.”

Chickasawhay River in Clarke County.







Ross Barnett Reservoir in Madison County.

In these and other waters, canoeists and kayakers throughout the state often get a close-up and different look at native wildlife, which often includes creatures such as raccoons, beaver, and otter but can also mean waterfowl, alligators, deer, and turkeys. While a whitewater experience is not what these waters are known for, the abundance of rural and wilderness areas in the state, as well as the relatively small numbers of paddlers, makes trips up the many creeks, rivers and sloughs a solitary experience.

“We’ve got a nesting pair of eagles on the very eastern side of Pelahatchie Bay,” said McGinnis. “Another unique thing about Pelahatchie Bay is that there are a couple of islands out there and years ago people put goats on them to help keep the vegetation down, and these goats still live on the islands.”

“The Pearl River is a beautiful paddle right through the middle of Jackson—from the reservoir spillway down to

Mayes Lake is probably the most paddled part.”

Although he occasionally leads excursions at dusk and into the evening, McGinnis doesn’t fear the creatures that go “bump” in the night.

“When the weather really warms up, we do a lot of night paddling, and we often see gators with their red eyes. We’ve had a couple of them bump the boat when they start to surface, which is a little unsettling, but we never feel threatened by them. We make sure to leave them alone and we know that in the spring, when they’ve got the new hatch, we give them a lot wider berth.”

MDWFP and other groups are also taking an interest in the sport by investing in infrastructure to support the growing movement. While paddlers on the Barnett Reservoir such as McGinnis often launch at the Pelahatchie Bay Trading Post on Hwy. 471, a timely recreational trails grant from MDWFP

funded a new floating pier for launching kayaks at the nearby Turtle Point Nature Area.

In the Delta, Sky Lake (Sky Lake Wildlife Management Area) attracts many nature lovers for its astonishing bald cypress trees, which provide shelter for species as diverse as wood ducks and sometimes even Louisiana black bears. This ancient abandoned channel of the Mississippi River and its surrounding wetlands and forests are replenished with nutrients through natural flooding. Annual flooding provides fertile environs for its 1,000-year-old cypress trees, the largest of which measures nearly 47 feet in circumference and stands 70 feet tall.

Paddlers have a unique (and best possible) way to experience Sky Lake’s natural majesty—a dedicated paddling trail that leads canoers and kayakers through a maze of its flora. The 2.6-mile trail is segmented into four separate loops, and

the best experiences are had in late summer and autumn, when water levels are at their highest.

Not surprisingly, the Mississippi River—the longest river in North America—offers the most options for multi-day trips in the state. Despite its swift currents and river traffic, the sheer size of the river, its mythical status, and its abundance of islands and sandbars, make it a popular choice for weekenders and campers. In recent years, recreational paddling races have become popular on the Mississippi, including the Bluz Cruz in Vicksburg and the Phat Water, a 42-mile race from Port Gibson to Natchez.

Lauderdale County and the Meridian area also attract paddlers to streams like the Chunky River—which flows from Newton County through Lauderdale and into Clarke County, where it joins with Okati-bbee Creek to form the Chickasawhay River—as well as the dammed Okati-bbee Reservoir upstream

near Collinsville, and Bonita Lakes in Meridian.

Curt Skipper, an instructor at East Central Community College and advisor for its outdoor-minded Environmental Club, helps organize canoeing and camping trips for area students, many of whom are first-time paddlers.

“Paddling the Chunky River, there’s beautiful limestone cuts in the bank from the river and several places where you’ll see gorgeous, 30-foot cliffs,” said Skipper. “There’s a great diversity of plant life and wildlife along the river. A lot of times you’ll see ducks and other birds, and there are big cypress trees that make it very scenic. It’s one of the hidden gems we have in this part of the state.”

Although it is generally a shallow river—Skipper recommends checking the water levels before taking a trip, as it can vary from season to season—there are deeper spots where paddlers will find rope swings and swimming holes. Situated on one of the bluffs is Dunn’s Falls, site of a gristmill where Stetson hats were once made.

South of Hattiesburg near the Brooklyn community flows Black Creek. Like the Chickasawhay, Black Creek is a tributary of the Pascagoula River, Mississippi’s only designated National Wild and Scenic River. Black Creek itself courses through a 21-mile stretch of Black Creek Wilderness in the DeSoto National For-

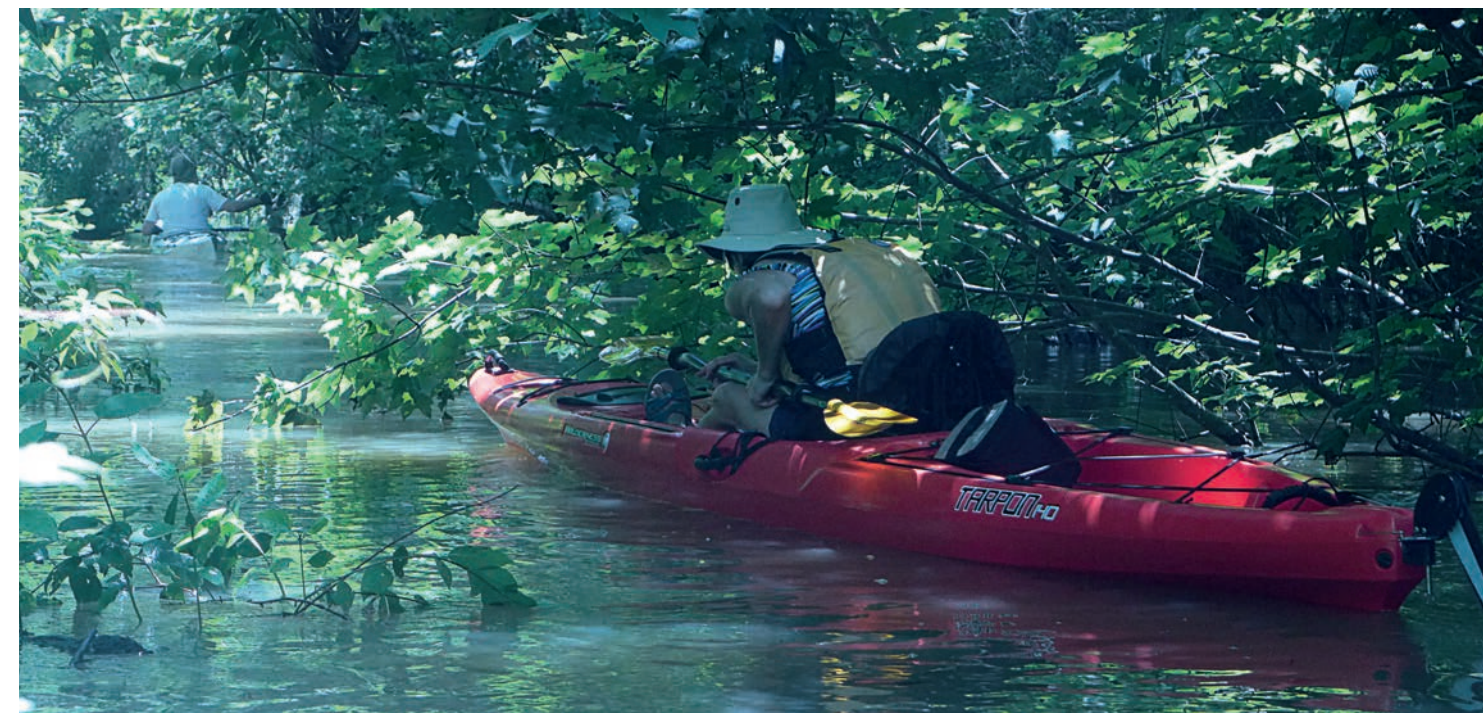
est, which protects upland longleaf pine forests and lowland hardwoods. Like many smaller creeks in South Mississippi, Black Creek is known for its tannin-stained caramel color, plentiful sand bars and wildlife diversity.

Located just north of Hattiesburg near Seminary and also part of the Pascagoula River watershed, Okatoma Creek provides paddlers with something very unique in Mississippi—a series of Class I whitewater rapids and chutes—along with rope swings and rocky pullouts ideal for picnicking.

The coastal counties are home to vast stretches of winding bayous and rivers that feed into the Mississippi Sound. Fort Bayou near Ocean Springs, the lower Pascagoula River and Gulf Islands National Seashore offer miles of secluded paddles through a labyrinth of coastal wetlands and marsh grasses, as well as offshore excursions to the uninhabited Horn Island, best known as a favorite subject of artist Walter Anderson.

From the Tennessee line to the Gulf of Mexico, Mississippi is full of discoveries for canoers and kayakers. Visit [www.mdwfp.com](http://www.mdwfp.com) to learn about many of the public paddling opportunities in the state. ■

*Jim Beaugez is a freelance writer who lives in Clinton.*



The lower Pearl River in Hancock County.