

# Two Days on the Ghost River

by Ray Graham

7/1/11

We did the LaGrange to Bateman section today for the purpose of checking the navigability of the river. The temps were in the mid 80's but quickly rose into the upper 90s. It was a hot, sunny day. The river was at 6 feet, and the water visibility was about two feet. The access at LaGrange was in an improved condition. A surface of small rip-rap rocks and sand was now in place. The parking area was no longer muddy or covered in soft sand.

We saw bird life at many points along the river. The avian species included prothonotary warblers, kinglets, great blue herons, red-winged blackbirds, turkey vultures, kingbirds and vireos. Several nonpoisonous water snakes (genus: *Nerodia*) were seen coiled calmly in the morning sun. I also saw a large water moccasin move quickly across the water and coil up on a log.

I was with a small group which included another kayaker (Pat Mazzeo) and two paddlers in a canoe (Charlie Bright and Susan Moffat). This would mean that we could do a little exploring. As a WRC intern I had three objectives today: 1) cut brush and note large trees that need to be cut with a chainsaw, 2) take video and pics, and 3) show other guides the location of the Leatherwood access. We reached a junction in the canoe trail. Paddlers had been using the left channel almost exclusively for the past year; however, I wanted to try the right channel, the canal channel, because it abutted the levee that could lead to a better chance of seeing an eagle. It was also a good chance to explore both channels. Charlie went left in his canoe and I went right with Pat following me in his kayak.

As we floated the levee canal, we could see the open space on the other side of the levee. Tall cypress trees stood out against the blue sky, but I did not see an eagle. We continued down the canal having to squeeze around a couple of fallen trees. I heard a splash behind us, and I turned to see Charlie. He said that the left channel is completely blocked. There was a tree across the trail, and a chainsaw would be needed to remove it.

After the levee canal rejoined the main channel, we didn't have to portage around trees for the remainder of the trip. We did have to pass under a few "low bridges," one of which consisted of a large tree covered in poison ivy. As we reached the #2 stop, I decided to explore the slough that led to the largest cypress tree on the river. I entered the narrow entrance, and I assumed that the slough would end soon. However, it opened up into a small bay known as "the Cathedral", so called because of the open space in the middle of a thick cypress forest. I continued from the Cathedral up one of the tributaries. The noonday sun beamed through the cypress in a variegated pattern. The lighting in the forest at this time of day looked unusual. The fronds of the bald cypress form a shade pattern that differs from the needles of a pine or the leaves of an oak. The forest floor (really more of a surface since most of the ground around the trees was

under water) was split between regions of deep shade and intense areas of pure sunlight. The forest was the most beautiful when one stared into the distance, an endless number of vertical lines created by the cypress tree trunks and their shadows. I saw a great egret take flight through the trees about forty yards away. I tracked it with a video camera as it flew through the trees during the return trip. When I re-entered the Cathedral, I saw a large water moccasin in the center of the bay. I took out my camera as the serpent bolted across the water and into a pile of wood debris. A few minutes later, it reappeared on a log in the center of a pool of sunlight. Because of the shafts of sunlight, it looked like the snake was under a spotlight in a zoo exhibit. After taking video of the water moccasin, I followed the slough back to the main channel of the Wolf. The distance of the side trip was about a hundred yards, but I had difficulty judging distance in the forest.

We continued to the lunch spot. It is fortunate to have a broad, sandy lunch spot in the middle of a swamp river. I have been told that this spot is a sand protrusion that formed during the same earthquake that created Reelfoot Lake. We navigated ten yards up a tributary and landed on the small sand beach. The fallen maple tree that blocked the entrance to the lunch spot had been sawed into pieces. A dry sand run trailed into the forest on the other side of the lunch spot creating a convenient bathroom area for the women. The guys traditionally go the other way, downstream.

After lunch, we continued downstream trimming overhanging limbs as we went. I pointed out the Leatherwood take-out. We stopped briefly as I described the poor condition of the trail and road. It is considered to be an emergency exit from the river. However, it is almost a mile walk through miserable terrain before one would reach the first house.

At the entrance to the Ghost River, we made a short video demonstrating the correct entrance to the Ghost River. I stopped to trim some of the *Itea* bushes that had grown over the canoe trail. We formed a single file line to enter the narrow channel through the vegetation. The water sped up, and we had to make several sharp turns before entering an area of calm water with almost no current. There wasn't any dry land in sight. The trees and bushes rose from the water while grasses and ferns sprouted from logs and stumps. I stopped to move a log from the canoe trail. After I wedged the log between three trees, I took some video. I noticed that in addition to the blue canoe trail signs, there were also red reflective diamond shaped signs facing the other way so that paddlers could find the trail going upstream. We were in the heart of the Ghost River. The overlapping cypress branches shaded us from the early afternoon sun. I noticed a squirrel leaping from tree to tree. It seemed odd to see a squirrel so far from dry land, but the closed mesh of cypress allowed for easy arboreal travel. I also saw evidence of insect life in the guise of dobson fly cocoons and dragonfly nymph shells.

As we continued, the current stopped completely. We would be under our own power for the next couple of miles. Spatterdock covered the trail in one place. I thought that the passing boats would push the plants aside, but the spatterdock closed in behind us like we were never there. Gradually, the

vegetation opened up, and we entered Spirit Lake. The cypress trees were spaced farther apart, and we faced the full force of the afternoon sun. We followed the North trail through the lake taking short cuts when available. We saw at least two beaver lodges and made a point to keep our distance.

There was a large amount of bird activity on the lake today. I saw several kingbirds, swallows, flycatchers and prothonotary warblers. In addition to the birds, there were also a variety of dragonfly species continually dipping into the water throughout the trip. We passed the #6 stop, and the current began to resume. As we neared the channel outlet, the water quickened. We passed the dinner sandbar and entered a treed area that one of my friends had once referred to as the "Devil's Terrarium" because the twisted channel there can wedge an unaware paddler into cypress trees. The channel split, and we chose to take the right channel since it is generally more suitable for large group trips like the one that we would guide the next day. I stopped to take video of Pat running one of the larger rapids. After a few more turns of the river, we entered a grassy area where the river braided into several different channels forming small islands. Less than a mile later, we reached the Bateman Bridge take-out.

7/2/11

The First Saturday trip for July was once again going to be the LaGrange Section. This was the second time in two days, but I was looking forward to it. This would be my first time as "head" guide. The knowledge gained the day before had given me more confidence. I was glad that I knew we would have to detour at the levee canal. The weather was once again sunny with highs in the upper 90's. The river was still at 6 feet at LaGrange. The water visibility was about two feet.

There were a total of 16 boats, and everyone had paddled before. Charlie Bright took the point position, Mary Finley and Pat Mazzeo were the sweep and Chris Austin helped me do the boat count. Charlie and Chris also shuttled their cars to the take-out, which was much appreciated. The guides and members with their own boats met at the LaGrange access at 9:00am, while those renting boats met Mark Babb downstream at the Bateman Bridge at 8:30am. We were on the water before 10:00, and the trip lasted for approximately five hours.

No one joined the WRC today, but we did have more than one member on his or her first float. One of whom was Jonathan Brown who used a paddle board. I had seen him on the river before with a second hand board and a homemade paddle. However, this time he had rented a paddle board that looked not only river worthy but also brand new. Jonathan said that he had to persuade someone to let him paddle board on the FS trips. Since his equipment was good and he had a PFD, I had no problem with it. I thought that I might want to try it, but I forgot to ask. In addition to the paddle board, there were four canoes and eleven kayaks. I gave a lecture to the group before we started. I was afraid of boring them, so I kept it short.

We didn't see as much bird life this trip, but the snakes were out. The women in the group were especially adept at spotting them. The first one was five feet from the boat ramp. We saw a snake at almost every turn of the river.

They rested neatly coiled on a log or stump near the river bank. Most were nonpoisonous water snakes (Genus: *Nerodia*). We did see a couple of water moccasins. One appeared from under my boat and surfaced next to me. The moccasins typically hold their heads up. They also have wide bodies and heads and tend to float on top of the water whereas the *Nerodias* are thinner, have heads the same width as their bodies and generally don't float on top of the water for long periods of time.

We moved fairly fast as a group. Everyone was a competent paddler, so there were no gaps in our line. We easily stayed together, and I could move from the front of the line to the back in a short amount of time. We followed the levee canal. As we followed a turn in the canal, we could get a glimpse of a bald eagle sitting in a tree approximately two hundred yards on the other side of the levee. Chris told me the story about an emergency rescue. One of the paddlers on a previous group trip was having medical problems. The group leader was able to pull up on the levee and call for help, and the rescuers located him by following the signal from his cell phone. The distressed paddler was taken out by ambulance.

We reached the lunch spot, and I explained the "bathroom" rules. Then we ate and took a group photo. We continued downstream, and I pointed out the Leatherwood access to Mary and Chris. There was a small white sign with the name "Leatherwood" lightly carved in the paint. When we reached the entrance to the Ghost River, I told Dale's story about him getting lost here with his dog. I also warned the group that people who became lost here and tried to walk out suffered immensely. I told a couple more stories, and I also explained that the First Saturday trips allowed the WRC to educate its members so that they could safely navigate this section. The group continued into the Ghost River following Charlie in a single file line. Everyone stayed together, and we rested at the #5 stop. I talked a little bit about the Ghost River Section. I pointed out the standing, dead trees that are common on this section. I also talked about the dragonfly nymphs and the dobson flies. As we were leaving, I noticed a small watersnake surface behind one of the kayaks. The snakes were very active on the river today.

The current came to a stop and the tree cover became more open. We had entered Spirit Lake. Charlie and I had decided to follow the north trail and to avoid short cuts to ensure that the group did not become separated. This was easier said than done as the temps were in the upper 90's by this time. We hugged the shade but followed the trail dutifully and remained a polite distance from the two beaver lodges that we passed. We saw the great egret, a known resident, near the giant bed of spatterdock. There was a brown film on the water. Charlie suggested that it was an algae bloom caused by agricultural runoff. The line of hardwood trees in the distance told me that we would reach the western end of the lake soon. We rendezvoused at the number six sign. I talked about the lake, the nearby sandbar, and the two channels below the lake. As we continued, the current resumed. The river speed increased as we passed the sandbar and the Rod and Gun Club. We took the right channel. When we reached the big rapid, I took video of Jonathan on the paddle board. I also took video of Pat and

Mary running the rapid. The trees gave way to grasslands. This was the last mile, a beautiful float between grassy islands and a few scattered cypress trees. Suddenly, the parking lot came into view, and we were finished. Everyone seemed to have a good time despite the heat, and there were no turnovers. A big thanks to Mark Babb, Charlie Bright, Mary Finley, Chris Austin, Pat Mazzeo, and everyone who joined us today for the July float - an enjoyable experience.