

## LaGrange to Bateman Road: The Ghost River Section

The Wolf River in west Tennessee - called "Blackbird River" by the French in the late 17 century - offers opportunities often overlooked by the modern paddler. For centuries, the upper Wolf River has been largely unspoiled by human hands, never having been channelized or subject to industrial pollution. The section of the river between LaGrange, TN, and Bateman Rd., just east of Moscow, stands out as unique and deserving of special attention. It is beautifully representative of a wild swamp river, and paddlers can observe five distinct ecosystems, or plant communities, as the river meanders through: (1) bottomland hardwoods, (2) open shrubby wetlands, (3) cypress-tupelo swamp, (4) open water swamp, and (5) grassy wetland. Depending on the time of year, paddlers may also see flowering catalpa trees, smoky rubyspot damselflies, wood ducks, scarlet tanagers, prothonotary warblers, red-headed woodpeckers, herons, egrets, and other species.



The only passage through this section of the Wolf is via canoe or kayak. Motorized craft, rafts or tubes could not negotiate the many narrow twists and turns. Most paddlers can navigate the approximately nine miles between LaGrange and Bateman in four to six hours. Portage is rarely necessary due to volunteer efforts to keep the well-blazed and signed water trails open. There are six signs numbered 1-6 visible along the route which are strategically placed to denote important landmarks. These signs are often used as rendezvous points on guided trips.



Paddlers enter the river at the LaGrange access, which is off Yager Road to the right, just before you cross the bridge. (Take Hwy 57 east to LaGrange, turn right at the flashing yellow light, and continue down the hill to the bridge). Upon launching a vessel, and shortly after departing the boat access, paddlers will see some indications of human encroachment. Ironically, it is within one of these areas, a diked lake at **Sign #1**, that we often see the bald eagles that have begun to frequent the Wolf basin.

Further down the river, except for the small (3x6") blue and white metal canoe trail markers, there is little evidence of civilization. This part of the river is characterized by bottomland hardwood trees, especially oaks like swamp chestnut and cherrybark typical of this community. To help keep this habitat intact, large sections of the river's adjacent forest and wetlands have been purchased by the Wolf River Conservancy (WRC). By doing so, WRC prevented the scheduled logging of the massive trees visible from the river. A portion of one such major purchase (the Beasley Plantation) is marked by **Sign #2**, a 6"x6" sign on the left bank.



**Sign #3** denotes an area called the “lunch stop” where paddlers often stop to eat and rest. Turn right at the sign and paddle up a small tributary stream for about 20 yards. This will be one of the only places on this section with a relatively clean, solid surface area for beaching canoes, picnicking, and resting. The sandy-bottomed stream offers an excellent opportunity to cool off and relax. On departure, please remember to leave the site cleaner than you found it.



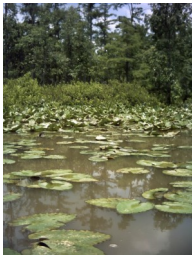
As you depart **Sign #3** at the lunch stop, you will be paddling in the second plant community, the open shrubby wetlands with plants such as Virginia Sweetspire (*Itea*). Continue downriver in a well-defined channel for roughly a mile before reaching the Ghost River entrance. Along the way, there are several indications that water is being diverted off to the left, into what appears to be a deep swamp. That is just what the Ghost section is - a deep swamp. Don't make the common mistake which earlier explorers often made and paddle into any of these apparent entrances. If you were to take the wrong route, passage would be virtually impossible. The only entrance to the Ghost will be partially hidden on the left bank and marked by a “**Ghost River Entrance**” sign, approximately 14” X 16” in size, along with several of the regular blue and white trail markers. There is also a **Sign #4** on river right. If you miss the Ghost River Trail entrance, the channel of the main river will disappear a couple hundred yards downstream. Go back up river and look for the “Ghost Entrance” sign which you can easily see, now on the right side of the river as you paddle upstream.



When you reach the Ghost Entrance signs, stop, and take a good look around. You are about to enter the “**Ghost River section,**” a cypress-tupelo swamp and the third plant community found in the LaGrange to Bateman section of the river. After turning left off the main channel into the Ghost, follow the numerous trail markers through the swamp's narrow twisting corridor fringed by Virginia Sweetspire (*Itea*) shrubs and elegant cypress and tupelo trees. For the next mile or so, there will be no evidence of the flowing Wolf River. The only movement in the water of this vast swamp will be wakes created by boaters and the wildlife which calls this area home. The river channel seems to disappear, hence the name “Ghost River”.



On exiting the Ghost section at **Sign #5**, you will enter a section referred to as “**Spirit Lake.**” This lake-like area, or open water swamp, also home to numerous cypress and tupelo trees, is the fourth community in the LaGrange to Bateman run. There are no visible river currents in the lake. Navigation is well-defined and signed for easy passage, preventing paddlers from becoming disoriented. Just follow the trail down the old river bed, which meanders its way through this expanse of water and trees. If you have a compass, your heading will be roughly 270 degrees, or west.



Note the beautiful wetland meadows filled with common floating aquatic plants (swamp doc) stretching seemingly for miles toward the distant southern tree line. **Sign #6**, which marks the end of Spirit Lake, will be the last of the numbered rendezvous markers. It will take most paddlers approximately 45 minutes to paddle through Spirit Lake. You will know you are leaving the lake when the river current becomes visible again.

As you leave the lake, note the log cabin on the right which belongs to the Fayette County Rod and Gun Club. Downstream a few yards on the left is a large sandbar where Mt. Tena Creek enters the Wolf. This is another good stopping point and swimming hole, and a scenic location for a picnic. The Wolf River Conservancy recently acquired the land which includes this favorite spot. Please help WRC protect it by leaving no trash or other items behind.



This final mile of the Ghost River journey contains the fastest flowing waters on the Wolf. As the river begins to flow rapidly west, it soon empties into an open grassy wetland, the fifth and final plant community encountered on this section of the Wolf. Look for sawgrass and alder shrubs, as well as wading birds like herons and egrets.

The take-out point at Bateman Bridge is only a few hundred yards down river. The access ramp is on river right, before passing under the bridge.



By: F. Dale Sanders, River Guide and Volunteer

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