

Stand-Up Paddling and Other River Quests

By Molly McGuire

This summer's high water didn't seem to discourage the parade of Lake-Itasca-to-Gulf-of-Mexico paddlers. They had adventures and close calls, broke records, made friends and raised money for charities. Most recorded their passages in blogs, Twitter, Facebook or YouTube, and many were featured in newspapers and local television newscasts along the way, making it easy for them to keep an eye on each other.

Three men on stand-up paddleboards set out to break the world record for distance, 1,808 miles. Paddling the Mississippi's 2,320 miles (give or take) would do the trick. The three started at Lake Itasca, in Minnesota, at different times, and all made it to the Gulf. The first, Alex Linnell from Mendota Heights, Minn., finished with 2,350 miles under his feet on August 9, and held the record for about a month. Then Dave Cornthwaite from England arrived after paddling 2,404 miles, using a different method to count the miles.

The third paddleboarder, 37-year-old Matthew Crofton from Orlando, Fla., had a bit of excitement at Lock and Dam 11, at Muscatine, Iowa.



Above: Dave Cornthwaite (davecornthwaite.com)

Top right: Matthew Crofton at the Gulf (mattcroftonwrites.com)

Right: Alex Poe and Cliff Walls strike a pose with Louie the Lumberking (middle) at a baseball game in Clinton, Iowa. (courtesy of Alex Poe)



According to the *Muscatine Journal* (8-19-11), when Matt got too close to the dam, a lock worker threw him a rope, only to have it slip from his hand. The current pulled him through the gate, and he came out on the other side, unhurt. Matt completed his trip on September 27.

Sit-Down Trips

Twenty-one-year-old Ben Jonas put his canoe in the Chippewa River at Eau Claire, Wis., where he is a student. Without much preparation, he paddled until the river flowed into the Mississippi and 39 days later ended up in Empire, La. He got hit by flying carp, saw swimming deer up-close and met strangers both kind and inspirational.

Four men from California, three of them brothers, paddled bright yellow Wenonah canoes and stopped at the factory in Winona, Minn., to have their seats fixed. One brother got a grant from YouTube to produce a video series about their trip. (Watch for Peter Bragieli's "InTransit" trav-

el videos on his YouTube channel, "pdrop.")

A New Zealander, Greg Dunning, kayaked the length of the river and wrote in his blog about some of the problems:

Wing Dams. These were all submerged and all created a greater or lesser degree of turbulence. This is where I think it was important not to have had an IPOD on but to be listening to the sounds of the river. The noise the turbulence made could be heard some distance away. I had no control of the boat once it hit the turbulence and whirlpools and boils would throw it one way and then another for a couple of hundred yards. There would also be waves, especially if the wash from a passing tow should hit at the same time

Raccoons. The zip on my day bag failed and I twice came to the boat in the morning to find muddy footprints and my beef jerky and cheese crackers gone ...

Locks & Dams. An even quicker method of getting through (the locks) is to shoot the dam. Some times the flood gates were up and I could paddle through. We heard that this was



The Okee Dokee Brothers composed music as they went down the river. (courtesy of Joe Mailander and Justin Lansing)



Left: Greg Dunning celebrates back home in New Zealand. (courtesy of Greg Dunning)

Center: Al Sazama, Conor Pesci and Sean Hickey paddle to Venice, La. (courtesy of Jenna Molle)

Right: Avoiding mosquitoes calls for drastic measures on the Upper Mississippi. (courtesy of Galen Bowles)

illegal but on the two occasions we enquired we were told that they would neither permit it or prohibit it. ...

... The kindness of strangers is the thing that will stay with me for the rest of my life. I hope to be in a position to repay some of it in the future.

Fellow Travelers

It is no surprise that some of these voyagers bumped into each other. Near Hannibal, Mo., Greg Dunning met up with Anthony Reinert and Jason Gunning in their 17-foot canoe, the *Kandu Queen*, then encountered the Okee Dokee Brothers, a bluegrass duo from the Twin Cities who were paddling to St. Louis and writing a children's album on the way.

Earlier, while canoeing upriver in high water, the Okee Dokee Brothers — actually friends Joe Mailander and Justin Lansing — visited fellow river rat, Kenny Salwey of Alma, Wis.:

Visiting his river home was a mystic experience, like walking into a story book and getting to hold the items inside of Hagrid's hut. But Kenny is not a fairy tale. He lives with nature. He is real, and he makes nature real too. Many of us live lives greatly removed from nature.

Before meeting Dunning, Anthony Reinert shared pizza in LeClaire, Iowa, with Cliff Walls and Alex Poe, who were going down the river raising funds for the Friends of the Fishermen, a fund for fishermen affected by the Deepwater Horizon oil spill.

Two of the stand-up paddleboarders, Matt Crofton and Dave Corn-

thwaite, met twice on the river in Minnesota, once close to Aitkin, and then in Hastings. From Crofton's blog:

June 29, 2011

Longest day on the river so far ... 31 miles!

Yesterday when I was launching I looked up ahead and there, 100 yards ahead of me, was the 3rd runner up on the river, Dave Cornthwaite. I have to say I could not be happier losing my 2nd place position to a better man. I knew eventually I'd be in last place because my disease does not let me go far before my feet and legs swell up. Dave and I camped out together, had a couple beers and told some great stories. Dave is an amazing guy doing amazing things and I look forward to seeing him at the end of the line ... and I look forward to being his friend.

July 15, 2011

Woke up to some bad rain and wind in Hastings. Been in this town for three days now. Got kicked out of the park by the sheriff because of "River Days" festival. Can't have a bum in the park! So I packed up my gear in the rain, climbed into the river, and 100 yards down ran into none other than Dave Cornthwaite! My friend from England that is paddling the Mississippi as well.

A trio of kayakers, Al Sazama, Conor Pesci and Sean Hickey, all graduates of Winona State University, are still on their way down the river:

As we have paddled down the river

we have met some very nice and hospitable people. Many of them fishing, cruising or just enjoying their day off. One thing that I have noticed about the river is that it really brings out the alcohol. There has been many occasions where we have been paddling and stopped to talk to some boaters and they immediately ask us if we want a beer. In most (when I say most, I mean every time) we graciously accept. ... The river really provides you with what you need and for the most part it brings people together. This trip would never be the same without the people we meet.

On October 17, they were in St. Louis, and in the last two weeks have met two other distance paddlers.

Causes

Many paddlers were raising money for charities. Jeff Pearson aimed to collect a dollar a mile for Victims of the (2011) Mississippi River Flood, Gene Iserman for Christian hunger and relief charities, Alex Linnell supported the American Red Cross Disaster Relief, Dave Cornthwaite paddled for Cappafeel and the AV Foundation, and Matt Crofton raised money for the Florida Hospital Foundation.

As we go to press, three paddling groups are still on the river. Check the Big River website for links to blogs, social media and news accounts of all the river travelers. 🌊📱

Molly McGuire is managing editor of Big River.