

MIGHTY BUT MILD

A SAFARI ON THE MISSOURI

Story by Nina Furstenau, Photography by Justin Leemann



IT'S NEVER A GOOD SIGN WHEN THE EARTH ITSELF GIVES WARNING. So when the mud made quiet sucking sounds around my feet as I walked to the canoe, I was apprehensive. It felt as if the moving mass of the Missouri River was coiling around the boats, ready to launch us, heedless, into a force beyond control. I like to launch on my own volition, thank you very much. Plus, it was disconcerting the way my eyeballs had to slide side to side quickly to watch the speed of the water.

That just goes to show what I know. I've always thought that the Missouri River is not something to mess with, but Danita Allen Wood, editor of *Missouri Life*, invited me to test our mettle on the current of a nearly forty-mile river float. Granted, we started out with a rather different idea of a float: It was going to be one canoe, something quiet with more than a nod to nature—and our husbands planned to motor ahead to be our safety net. We went instead with Wapiti Adventures and enjoyed the fellowship of a delightful group.





From top: Nationally acclaimed artist Billyo O'Donnell, from St. Charles, painted en plein air along the way on sandbars and banks of the Missouri River. His depictions of the river and those on the float trip made lasting memories.

This trip, however, was much more of everything. Before leaving, I took an informal poll, and no one I met wanted to float the Missouri. Some shuddered or looked perplexed. I became a mite worried. Turns out, we quickly became so comfortable with the river that we completely abandoned a couple of river rules set by Wapiti leader Bill Martin: We often got separated on the river from other team canoes, and we shucked our life jackets as soon as it got hot. Early, it became easy to see that because of Wapiti leadership, the low water levels free of debris, the fact that barges were easy to spot and avoid, many available sandbars for pit stops, plus beautiful fall weather, the Missouri River was our very own best kept secret: beautiful, easy, and underutilized.

If I had been the cook, there would have been much more worry. Wapiti Tour fare was on a whole different plane than my classic outdoor menu of hot dogs and chips. I'm talking quail, citrus-marinated lamb kabob, fresh-fig-and-honeycomb kind of fare that was sometimes served on sandbars in the middle of the river and always delicious. Incredible, savory dishes were produced sunrise and sunset à la sandbar by Chef Gabe Meyer and Sous Chef Tom Sasseen.

My canoe and kayak experience has been on smaller waterways in Missouri: the Current River, the White and Jack's Fork. With water being touted as the most important future resource across the globe, the Missouri, one of the world's major arteries, is on a totally different scale than our small, twisty Missouri streams. It has undergone much change in past years, its channel penned so that the tempestuous, swift and unpredictable river that the Lewis and Clark Corps of Discovery crew encountered and wrote about from 1804-1806 has narrowed to a third of its original width. Two hundred years ago, the Missouri had more violent tangles of debris and double the water area. The bridled river today averages 48,000 cubic feet of water per second (cfs) in September at Boonville during our trip September 10 through 14, or about 21.5 million gallons of water every minute, says John Skelton, environmental compliance coordinator of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Missouri River Office in Napoleon. In flood stage in 2007, the Missouri River averaged 200,000 to 220,000 cfs at Boonville. Immediately, I think, *48,000, psshaw.*

As the date for our float trip got closer, I began watching the weather and checking water stage levels; we wanted sandbars available for stops and for reas-

urance. As the levels declined over the days prior to the float, I began looking for visual evidence of the ten feet or below our group wanted for safe floating. In fact, it was 8.91 feet at the start of our trip and 8.33 feet by the finish on September 14.

Our personal gear list included sunscreen, water bottle, rain jacket, dry as well as wet shoes, a light fleece, socks, hat and extra pants or shorts. We all brought camp chairs, sleeping bags and tents, though some were available from Wapiti as needed. Kansas City Paddler provided the canoes. Owner Lynn Lyon had intended to float, too, but a family health emergency prevented him from joining us.

Day One: Slipping Sideways

Our adventure begins with trees on the horizon that drip trailing branches into each other. Blue herons fly across the wide vista. We put in at Franklin Access at river mile 195 and float fifteen miles through some of the most beautiful prairie regions of the state. The rippling, rushed sounds of water going around a bend accompany our canoes and soothe tension away. This, as close to Lewis and Clark's view of our state as possible, reminds me that being *in* this state is much different than passing by it in a car with tinted windows. The texture of wind, the silk of water, and warmth of sun cannot be substituted. Plus, there's something to be said for scale when you're down on the water and not rushing over it on massive bridges. We begin "river time" that was surely felt by legions of waterway travelers before us. The absence of cell phones and computers let us hear the birds and the near-silence of wind. Demand-free total relaxation is quite a statement, but we felt such stirrings on the Mighty Missouri. If two somewhat driven journalists can shrug and think, *so what?*, when our canoe drifted sideways for awhile, I'd have to say it is a unique retreat from the world—somehow different from vacationing in an interesting city, touring a monument, or even cycling the Katy Trail. The river, in its steady dash homeward to the ocean, is the driver. Such is its gift to us. Recognition comes on the water that only a few things are important, and that nature is one of them.



From left: Cooper's Landing is a gathering place for people traveling on the Missouri River and on the Katy Trail. Nina Furstenau and Danita Allen Wood set out together to tame the river, or at least make friends with it, in a canoe.



Counterclockwise from top: Greg Wood, Gabe Meyer, and Bill Martin have an impromptu jam session near the fire. We waited on shore for the occasional tug boat and barge to pass. Gourmet meals served by Chef Gabe rivaled anything found in a five-star restaurant.

We pass Dianna Bend and Rocheport Bend and cruise along Overton Bottoms. At marker 182 Boone Cave is alongside our canoes. At day's end, we camp near Katfish Katy's at Huntsdale, where showers, a masseuse, and a sumptuous meal await, and Billyo O'Donnell, adept at art and conversation, is setting up his easel and facing the sunset.

Day Two: A Sunken Boat

I wake to a cat-footed river. It seeps into the background sounds of the campfire's pop and crackle, a few low voices and a tin cup being set on a stone. There is another hazy sky with distant trees sporting fuzzy edges. I sit on a canvas chair that had been tipped forward so no dew settled on its seat and look through waist-high, lime green grasses at the moving water of the Missouri. A small yellow butterfly flits between the stems, and the sun warms the back of my neck. No motors so far.

After breakfast, we shove off toward Cooper's Landing. California Island, not far from McBaine, is the first stop. Billyo paints the hull of a huge sunken wooden boat — about twenty-four feet exposed from the

sand — at the edge of the island, and Greg Wood walks off in search of arrowheads. Wapiti team members Doug Thompson and Kevin Miquelon lash an odd piece of driftwood that happens to look like a horse, a giraffe, or some exotic safari animal, to their canoe, and Danita and I watch a large Coast Guard vessel moving upstream. The wake seems too much to battle from eye level, and we paddle off after it clears. We pass the Missouri River Relief Stream Team campsite on the far side of the island and notice Kevin choosing the channel on the other side of the island, which most of us avoided because we could see a riffle across it. He sped through it with ease.

That night, we camp on a sandy shoreline, upstream from Cooper's Landing near the mouth of the Bonne Femme Creek. The sun takes its time dropping past the trees, and its long rays illuminate our new driftwood mascot, having survived its river trip from California Island, standing sentinel at the shore and sporting a bandana. The sinking sun creates a shiver of gold around its stick head. Twenty feet from the water, Chef Gabe tips white wine into a bubbling sauce, and as the sun



Counterclockwise from top: Nina and Terry Furstenuau enjoy a dusk. Morning camp was quiet near the mouth of the Bonne Femme. Back, from left, Billyo O'Donnell, Ron Engemann, Greg Wood, Bill Martin, Tom Sasseen, Danita Allen Wood, Terry and Nina Furstenuau, Gabe Meyer, (front, from left) Doug Thompson, Kevin Miquelon, and Justin Leesmann with the safari mascot.

sets, Greg and later Gabe and Tom begin to play guitar, drum, and sing. Billyo, finding the scene compelling, paints swiftly in the dying light.

Day Three: No Fear

After waking again to a sumptuous meal, signaled by a universal sigh from the group, we paddle off on the five- to six-mile-per-hour current. Today, it especially feels like the river cradles us, and we relax into its force. I turn to see Gabe and Tom turning lazy circles in their boats as they drift the current. We pass several pallid sturgeon spawning areas and even paddle our way into one: The driftwood here on the shore is a bleached full-sized tree, and the mud is deep. Along the way, Doug, who mans the motor-powered boat on the team and carries supplies and drinks under a shaded umbrella, occasionally checks to see if we're hydrated. We call over the "butler" once or twice. For lunch, he finds an unlikely twenty-by-thirty-foot sandbar in the middle of the river, revealed by the declining water level. Inches from waves on all sides, under an umbrella, we feast on salmon, blue cheese, hummus, olive tapenade, slices of tenderloin, and

homemade pickles. Perfection.

The last few miles go too fast through Marion Bottoms Conservation Area, and our take-out at Marion Access at river mile 158 is suddenly upon us. All along, Danita and I have traded positions in the canoe: sometimes steering from the back and sometimes sitting in the front. When with our husbands, this changing of the guard would have been unlikely. New to the tricks of back-canoe steering, we had moments of challenge but found a sweet discovery in the fact that, despite some nerves and occasional squeals when crossing currents to land, we were equal to the challenge. The fear factor for us was about seven to start, zero on finish. But our recommendation for anyone seeking a mild adventure: A solid ten.

*Wapiti Adventures will repeat the Safari on the Missouri August 27-29, 2010. Visit www.wapiti.com for details. Visit www.billyoart.com to learn more about Billyo O'Donnell's art and his book, *Painting Missouri*. Visit MissouriLife.com to see more photos, Billyo's images from the float, and Gabe Meyer's menus for fine campsite dining.*