

# Swampland Paddling the Mid-Mississippi Delta

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*Matthews Break at sunset. Photo credit: Robin Whitfield*

From music to politics, and almost everything between, the Mississippi Delta is considered an American cultural icon with a rich but tumultuous history. Not to be confused with The Mississippi River Delta, which lies at the end of the Mississippi River in Louisiana entering the Gulf of Mexico, the Mississippi Delta is a large, flat, fertile region in west-central Mississippi neighboring the Mississippi River.

Artistically, the Delta was a catalyst for rock 'n' roll and the Delta Blues, home to Conway Twitty, Sam Cooke, and B. B. King, as well as the burial site for the legendary Robert Johnson. Johnson is considered by many as one of the most masterful and influential singers, songwriters, and musicians of the Blues-style sound, and legend believes he 'sold his soul to the devil' for musical greatness at the crossroads in the Delta.

The American writer, William Faulkner from Oxford, Mississippi, awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature and Pulitzer Prize for Fiction, once stated "To understand the world, you must first understand a place like Mississippi," inferring to, perhaps, the regions misunderstood, but profound role in America's history. Additionally, the National Park Service refers to the region, "Much of what is profoundly American – what people love about America – has come from the Delta, which is often called 'the cradle of American culture.'"

The Mississippi Delta is the eastern floodplain of the Mississippi River, but is the actual delta of the Yazoo River. Some seventy miles wide at the greatest points and stretching nearly two-hundred miles south of Memphis, Tennessee, to Vicksburg, Mississippi, the Delta is 4.4 million acres of alluvial floodplain. Much of this floodplain has been developed for farming by ridding the natural vegetation and expanding the landscape into large-scale cultivated cropland.

Indigenous people, or American Indians, settled, inhabited, and thrived the Mississippi Delta region around 700 A.D. prior to Europeans' arrival in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century. They farmed, hunted, and traded using the Mississippi River as transportation. Archeologists have discovered relics suggesting these regional people used dugout canoes to transport goods and explore the Delta.

Spain's Hernando De Soto is considered the first European explorer to penetrate and explore the Delta region during his quest for gold and silver. De Soto is regarded as the first European to cross the Mississippi River in 1541 using wooden flatboats, perhaps near the north Delta region (south of Memphis). Sadly, De Soto's expedition introduced, not only contagious diseases among the Mississippi Indians, plummeting the population into near non-existence, but also a contentious and unhinged relationship that decimated the regional tribe. Ironically, De Soto died of a fever in 1542 and was buried on the banks of the Mississippi River, perhaps near present day Ferriday, Louisiana, some eighty miles south of the Mississippi Delta.

Despite the region's historical and cultural significance, today the Mississippi Delta hosts pockets of unique outdoor experiences. From swamps, small rivers, and hardwood wetlands, the region provides microcosmic glimpses of the natural Delta landscape prior to mega-cropland expansion. Hundreds of unique trees litter the region divided into two distinctive types: conifers and broadleaves. Pines, bald cypress, and red cedar, regarded as softwoods, make up most of the conifers. Ashes, maples, oaks, and gums, with broader leaves and flowering fruit, are hardwoods and widely prevalent across the Delta. Perhaps most notably associated with the Delta, and Mississippi alike, the southern magnolia can grow 90 feet high with highly-fragrant white flowers, and blistering-green leaves. It is the official state tree, the bloom is the state flower, and the state is nicknamed the 'Magnolia State.'

The trees and forest undergrowth of the Delta provide homes and habitat for native wildlife, but also serve migrating visitors. Yearlong residents include skunks, opossums, raccoons, and muskrats, and the state mammal, the white-tailed deer to name a few. In addition, the southern flying squirrel, eastern gray squirrel, and eastern fox squirrel transit through woodlands, while according to the Mississippi Department of Wildlife, Fisheries and Parks, as many as one-hundred black bear navigate the Delta forests. In the wetlands, the American alligator and beaver reside along with numerous freshwater fish species.

Although this region serves native wildlife species, the many non-resident birdlife have placed the Delta on the map for hundreds of thousands of birding and outdoor enthusiasts to track, observe, and identify unique species rarely found in one location. The migration route, referred to as the Mississippi Flyway, funnels millions of birdlife through the Delta. Wildlife researchers estimate between 320-350 total species, with over 40% of all waterfowl, use this flyway to migrate across the United States to access warmer climates. The Downy woodpecker, red-breasted nuthatch, Pileated woodpecker, American goldfinch, Baltimore oriole, and northern cardinal are frequent visitors. Perhaps one of the most vibrant and unique visitors, yet significantly impacted due to swampland depletion, is the Prothonotary Warbler. These small, bright golden warblers, with an extremely distinct call, nest in wooded swamps and received their name 'Prothonotary' referring to official scribes in the Catholic Church who wore bright yellow hoods.

With all of this intrigue awaiting, the Mississippi Delta provides a rare opportunity for adventurers and naturalists to explore fascinating outdoor environments. Since the areas are swamplands, paddling a canoe or kayak serve as the perfect vehicle. Kayaks and canoes are quiet, easy to transport, and require little skill to maneuver. In addition, kayaks and canoes are environmentally friendly and hardly affect the waters' carbon footprint, unlike like gasoline, or motored boats.

There are several public access points to nature or swamp waters in the Delta providing prospective paddlers a portal to wellness exploration connecting paddlers with nature, and possible positive wildlife identification and observation encounters.

The areas listed here are approved paddling destinations located on state or federal lands. It should be noted, that much of the Mississippi Delta is comprised of private land and have strict laws forbidding trespassing, even paddling. Be sure you contact your local agency governing land and property prior to paddling any bodies of water.

## **MATTHEW'S BREAK**



**Matthew's Break** is a National Wildlife Refuge operated by the United States Fish and Wildlife Service. Established in 1980, the nearly 2,500 acres is comprised of shallow bottom brush and Cyprus swamp and a 1,800-acre oxbow lake providing habitat for 30,000 waterfowl in the winter months. Several species of



marsh and wading birds inhabit the refuge including egrets, herons, with the rare visitation of wood storks and roseate spoonbills. Wildlife managers estimate that over 225 species of migratory birds visit Matthew's Break, with over 70 species using the region for breeding.

**Look For:** Wood ducks, snowy egrets, great egret, Prothonotary warblers, and yellow-crowned night herons.

**Directions:** Refuge is 9 miles south of Greenwood and 5 miles west of Sidon, Mississippi, between Highway 49E and Highway 7. Paved and graveled county roads provide access. From Highway 49S use School Street east to County Road 511 east (aka Phillipston Road). At the junction, take County Road 249/250 south to Matthew's Break Road (County Road 249) south. The boat access ramp will be on your right 1.5 miles from County Road 250/249 split.

**Access:** A boat ramp is available on the east side of the refuge.

## SKY LAKE



**Sky Lake**, considered a Mississippi Natural Wonder, is a 3,500-acre lake owned by the Mississippi Department of Wildlife, Fisheries, and Parks, however, a partnership between the Sky Lake Wildlife Management Area (WMA) and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers assist in supporting this important historical region. In fact, Dr. Stahle, the director of the Tree Ring Laboratory at the University of Arkansas, and a leading American dendrochronologist stated in a 2011 article published by Wildlife Mississippi, "Based on our field inspections and core samplings, I can state with certainty that Sky Lake contains some of the largest and oldest baldcypress trees that remain on earth, and they have international scientific significance." A functioning backwater ecosystem, Sky Lake offers outdoor recreationalists an amazing opportunity utilizing a 2.6 mile paddling trail exploring the heart, of what experts believe are ancient 1000-yr-old-plus baldcypress trees. The trail, divided into four segments, uses colored signs to designate each section. Along this trail, one can paddle beside the former record-holding baldcypress tree, the now second largest tree in Mississippi and the largest in Sky Lake, measures a circumference of 46 feet 9 inches, nearly 15 feet in diameter, and just over 70 feet high. Like other lakes and swamps in the Mississippi Delta region, Sky Lake is an important habitat for yearlong wildlife

including turkey, frogs, turtles, and American alligators, as well as migratory shorebirds and neotropical songbirds through the Mississippi Flyway.

**Look For:** Pileated woodpecker hammering on the hollow trunks of ancient cypress trees, prothonotary warbler, roseate spoonbill, and wood ducks, as well as the non-poisonous broad-banded water snake, one of many snake species that thrive in backwater swamps. It feeds on fish, frogs and other aquatic life.

**Directions:** The boardwalk is located at the Sky Lake Wildlife Management Area, which is north of Belzoni. At the intersection of US Highway 49W and Highways 12 and 7 (at Belzoni), turn east onto Highway 7 (1st Street). At the first traffic light, the intersection of Highway 7 (also named Martin Luther King Drive) and Hayden Street, turn left. When the road forks at Old Highway 49 and Highway 7, bear right on Highway 7 and continue for approximately 4.9 miles to the intersection of Four Mile Road. Turn left and travel approximately 0.9 miles to the intersection of Simmons Road. Turn left on Simmons Road and travel approximately 0.8 miles, staying on the blacktop, to the entrance of the facility, which will be on the right.

**Access:** There is ample public parking, a picnic pavilion, and public restrooms. In addition, the 1,700 foot Sky Lake Boardwalk is accessible with a kayak and boat ramp just to the right.

## Tallahatchie Wildlife Preserve





**Tallahatchie Wildlife Preserve** managed by the United States Fish and Wildlife Service is a 4,200-acre refuge in Tallahatchie and Grenada Counties established in 1990. In the refuge lies a small and narrow oxbow lake, Tippo Bayou and Long Branch with a thriving hardwood bottomland swamp. A diverse habitat, this region allows an easily accessible bayou/swamp area to observe numerous species including wintering waterfowl and wading birds. Bald cypress Water Tupelo dominate the forest and wetland area.

**Look For:** Wood ducks, hooded mergansers, herons and egrets, water snakes, and turtles. A unique songbird, the Dickcissel, identified by a yellowish chest, can be seen during the summer, but leave the area for Central and South America for the winter.

**Directions:** Tallahatchie National Wildlife Refuge is located on the north and south sides of Highway 8, nine miles west of Holcomb, MS. Please note that gated roads are open from mid-September through May 1.

**Access:** A unique feature to this refuge is the observation porch and boat ramp accessible from Highway 8. There is no boat launch fee and ample parking is available.

## Lee Tartt Nature Preserve & Chakchiuma Swamp



**Lee Tartt Nature Preserve & Chakchiuma Swamp**, although not technically in the Mississippi Delta, is a must visit paddle area owned by the City of Grenada. Located just a few miles east of the Delta in Grenada, Mississippi, the Lee Tartt Nature Preserve is a 300-acre area along the Yalobusha River. The area is named in honor of Lee Tartt, a State Narcotics Agent serving the Grenada, Mississippi area, killed in the line of duty. Considered an urban forest and green space, due to its location just .25 miles from the city center, the preserve is comprised of complex oxbows lakes, bottomland forest, and vernal pools, providing a biodiverse and rich habitat for birdlife, aquatic animals, and snakes. The area prides itself on

providing educational opportunities garnering relationships between users and nature by preserving the cultural and natural landscape through responsible recreation, creative interaction, and harmonious enjoyment of the natural beauty.

**Look For:**

**Directions:** 320 South Main Street, Grenada, Mississippi 38901. From the Grenada City Center, take Main Street north .25 miles. The preserve is located on the right.

**Access:** A short boardwalk with an observation patio is present and a small clearing is available to launch canoes and kayaks is present just to the right of the boardwalk entrance.

**Best time to Visit these Areas:** Migratory bird season (late fall to early spring) is the most ideal time to visit with moderate to low temperatures and optimal water level. Early spring can have extreme high water conditions that may inhibit paddling. Summer can be extremely hot and water levels can fluctuate and be low. Paddling is best in the morning and evening when wildlife is most active and conditions are cooler.

**Know before you Go:** Ensure you have appropriate paddling gear and equipment, including a personal floatation device (PFD), plenty of drinking water, insect repellent, and sunscreen. Some of the areas listed do not have consistent cellular phone connectivity, so inform a friend or relative of your whereabouts and your float plan. Poison ivy and thorny vegetation are present along the sides of bodies of water, so beware. Watch your step, venomous snakes and other wildlife can be found on hiking trails and roads. It is illegal to harass or injure any wildlife (including snakes) while on the refuge.