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Tensas River NWR Visitor's Center
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(with the exception of all federal holidays)

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More information is available
for this trail and tourism in the
area at Explore Louisiana North.



Acknowledgements:

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- Trail narrative by John Ruskey, Quapaw Canoe Co.



Louisiana Water Trails Tensas River National Wildlife Refuge



Northeast Louisiana: Outdoor Series

The Tensas River creates a natural wonderland of big trees and spectacular wildlife through the middle of northeast Louisiana. The Tensas is legendary for its natural history of red wolves, Florida panthers, ivory-billed woodpeckers and Louisiana black bears. Unfortunately, out of that list, only the black bear remains.

The best way to experience the natural wonders of the Tensas River is by canoe, kayak or pirogue. Paddlers will be humbled by giant cypress trees and thrilled with birding, flourishing flora, frequent turtle and gator sightings and many signs of the Louisiana black bear. During winter, bald eagles may be sighted.

The Tensas River flows out of Lake Providence and meanders south before it descends into the expansive woods of the Tensas River National Wildlife Refuge.

Appropriate Vessels:

Canoes, pirogues, kayaks or stand-up paddleboards are ideal for the river trails and lakes. Choose a vessel you can pick up and maneuver with ease. Motorized boats are allowed on the Tensas River but are not practical during low water levels. On the refuge lakes, no motors over 10 hp are allowed.

Bad Weather:

Avoid open water paddling on a lake in thunderstorms or high winds. Be especially cautious with cold water conditions.

Precautions:

Carry plenty of water and sun protection. Bring maps and this guide packed in a waterproof container. Watch for spiders and snakes, as well as gators sunning themselves or swimming. Learn about the different poisonous plants, which sometimes drape over branches or climb up tree trunks.

Louisiana Water Trails – Tensas River National Wildlife Refuge

On a map you will notice graceful loops, which begin in small radial turns and then grow in size as the river coils into giant loops that are actually ancient channels originally carved by the violent floods of the Mississippi. You will be amazed by the directional changes as you make your way down. In one section, the river channel loops around 20 miles to make 2 miles of southerly gain!

Two trails are on lakes that inhabit old channels of the Tensas that have been isolated by the changing nature of the river and are now charming still water pools ringed by deep forests drenched with the aroma of cypress/hardwood forests.

The visitor's center at Tensas River National Wildlife Refuge should be your first stop before embarking on any water travel inside the refuge. Consult someone at the main desk for permits and information about current water conditions and landings.

When is the best time to paddle?

Spring and fall are the best seasons for outdoor activity in northeast Louisiana, but you can enjoy it anytime. You will want to avoid river travel here during hunting season. Consult an official Louisiana hunting calendar and the refuge brochure for permitting when you make your plans.

River Gauge: "Tensas River at Tendal"

http://water.weather.gov/ahps2/hydrograph.php?wfo=jan&gage=tdgl1

- Below 6: Too Shallow.
- 8-14: Ideal.
- 15-19: Fast Water. Some Caution Required.
- Above 20: Dangerous. Advanced paddlers only.

Visitor's Center GPS: N32.318201, W91.382174



INDEX:
RBD - Right Bank Descending
LBD - Left Bank Descending

Below the un-named bayou, trees have fallen from the right bank. Debris has accumulated around these fallen trees, among a thick grove of shrubs and carry your canoe to the other side of the blockage, then resume your journey. NOTE: This might change after the next high water.

Fallen Trees/Blocked Channel (Mile 4)

N32.325042, W91.372217

Mouth of Un-named Bayou (RBD Mile 3.9)

At mile 3.9 the shrubby opens up momentarily in a grove of young cypress trees and the mouth of an un-named bayou that spills into the river. This would be a good place for a landing, although the bankside is crowded with a thick congregation of cypress knees in low water.

Spanish Moss Cypress Trees (RBD Mile 2)

N32.332618, W91.349452



Overhanging Cypress Tree (LBD Mile 1.9)

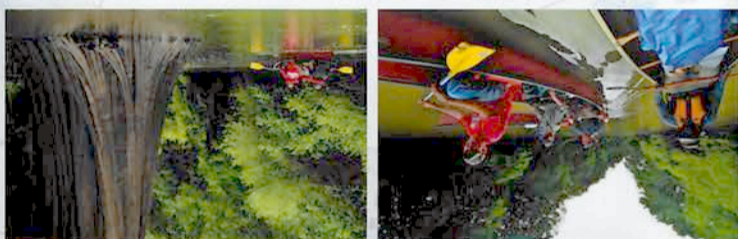
Paddle downstream toward the gently meandering river channel, which opens up into a succession of long pools. Towering trees crowd the banks with smaller trees and shrubs underneath. During low water, these thick vines create enticing tunnels of vegetation through which you can paddle and enjoy shade on hot days.

Crossroads Bridge Boat Ramp (RBD near Judd Bayou)

N32.348803, W91.315552

Crossroads Bridge to Visitor's Center (4.5 Miles)

Google Map of Trail: <http://goo.gl/maps/mXqf>



Cypress Knee Grand Canyon (LBD Mile 2.2)

N32.35556, W91.326048

Maternity Ward Cypress (RBD Mile 1.7)

N32.356882, W91.335942

Put-In: Tendal Landing (RBD near Judd Bayou)

N32.371043, W91.344107

Overhanging Big Cypress (RBD Mile 1.5)

N32.356938, W91.337513

Crossroads Bridge Boat Ramp (RBD Mile 3)

N32.348803, W91.315552

Next, the river swoops southward and then eastward through deep forests and overhanging privets, oaks, pecans and wild grapevines and other vines. You will paddle past some mature cypress and see the banks rising steeper and higher on either side with large populations of cypress knees. Keep an eye out for black bears and gators! You probably won't see bears, but the careful observer will notice scratch marks where the bears are climbing their favorite trees. Watch for tri-colored herons, green herons, little blue herons and egrets. Songbirds, such as the prothonotary warbler and indigo bunting also enjoy the river.

Several hundred yards south you will pass the mouth of Judd Bayou. Judd Bayou is a narrow drainage extending deep into the Tensas, following an ancient Mississippi River bend. Scrutinize the bankside privets and cypress for an iron bridge crossing the bayou.

Not far below "Big Twily" is another hallway of big cypress rising from the riverbank (right bank descending) like the columns of a temple. The first of these is almost dead but stands monumental, and mother bears use a cavity formed among young trees, palmetsos and cypress knees and set off. Long reflections of trees and wedges of sky beckon you downstream, and there are several patches of rich mussel-shell beds, evidence of a healthy river.

Tendal to Crossroads Bridge is the single most beautiful section of the Tensas River with the biggest trees and the most abundant wildlife.

Tendal to Crossroads Bridge (3 Miles)

Google Map of Trail: <http://goo.gl/maps/bucn>



Louisiana Water Trails – Tensas River National Wildlife Refuge

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Africa Lake

(2.3 Mile Circumnavigation)

Google Map of Trail: <http://goo.gl/maps/BBoc>

Africa Lake Boat Launch

N32.349893, W91.388526

Africa Lake follows old channels of the Tensas River in the deepest woods of the Tensas River National Wildlife Refuge. The lake curves through canyons of tall trees growing along its steep, muddy banks.

A complete loop might require an hour of continuous paddling, although you certainly will want to spend more time enjoying the striking scenery, especially the gators and birds. Visit during October-December when the cypress needles turn brick red and stand out in striking contrast to green waters of the lake and blue skies.



Classic Cypress with Full Crown

N32.346825, W91.390153

Keep following Africa Lake west. You will pass a classic cypress tree with full crown, its branches draped with Spanish moss and reaching out in all directions. At normal lake levels, you can get close and perhaps make a landing at the base of this giant.

Africa Lake Picnic Area

N32.34482, W91.39049

You will soon notice a metal staircase on the east bank 500 yards from the boat launch. It's a great place for a picnic, but no bathrooms are available. Up the staircase there is an area perfect for resting and enjoying a picnic lunch or snack.

Rooty Cypress

N32.344595, W91.39372

Continuing west, you will come around the S-shaped bend of the lake. There's a giant bald cypress, towers upward and commands the eastern bank.

Cypress Twins

N32.344683, W91.393948

Just past "Rooty Cypress" more giant cypresses rise, the "Cypress Twins," whose combined root base is wider than the length of a 16-foot canoe! Don't be tempted to turn around just because you can see the end of the lake. If you do, you will miss the thickest and biggest stand of cypress.

End of the Lake, Cypress Cathedral

N32.340728, W91.398227

"Cypress Cathedral" towers upward from a shallow inlet that becomes an impassable bayou at lake's end. Paddle in a short way for an unforgettable experience. You will feel like a visitor in a land of the giants.

Pecan Cave

N32.350898, W91.390698

Continue to the far northern end and look for the two caves of foliage. The west bank cave is created by a pecan tree, and on the east by a big cypress. Paddle into these caves for shade and the amazing views through the leaves.

Overhanging Red Oak

N32.350703, W91.390222

This is one last tree to note. It's a giant red oak overhanging the lake from west bank. You can paddle under the large overhanging branches and look for wildlife.



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Indian Lake

(2.95 Miles)

Google Map of Trail: <http://goo.gl/maps/mboeD>

Indian Lake Boat Launch

N32.289672, W91.45144

Put in at base of ramp and paddle south into the clear waters of Indian Lake. Follow outside edge for glimpses of animals and plants in the forest and possible alligator sightings. Egrets, herons and other wading birds commonly are seen flying over or fishing from the shoreline.

Halfway along its length, Indian Lake makes an elbow bend slightly south-southwest. Keep paddling to the far end of the lake where a small tributary enters behind a peninsula. Paddle a short way up this tributary or turn around and head back to the parking area. For a change of scenery, paddle down the opposite side.



Large Cypress Tree

N32.276925, W91.454555

A large cypress tree stands in the water at the elbow bend on the west bank. You can paddle up to its base and photograph the interesting array of fluted buttresses and sharp knees.

South End of Lake

W32.270078, N91.457552

Further Exploration Around Indian Lake: Lick Bayou

N32.289743, W91.451323

Paddle under the bridge near the Indian Lake landing and follow the bayou upstream through a canyon of wild hibiscus, that gives way to a cypress and bottomland hardwood forest. Otters and beavers make their homes along the bank, and turtles and snakes often are seen.

Indian Bayou to Tensas River

N32.288947, W91.450067

Follow lake edge northeast into a striking inlet that narrows into a snaky bayou that leads down to the Tensas River. You will encounter snags, fallen tree obstructions and other obstacles along the way. Close encounters with spiders, snakes, gators and poison ivy also are possible. 1.5 miles total. For the adventuresome only. Not passable during low lake levels.

