

PAID TO PADDLE:

Surveying River Obstructions from a Kayak

Text and photos by Scott B. Williams

My recent two-week-long, 240-mile kayak trip in Mississippi from the headwaters of the Chickasawhay River to the Pascagoula and on to the Gulf turned out to be more profitable than staying at home. I earned \$1,500 for taking a survey of river obstructions for a state agency that monitors the river and maintains boat ramps and parks in the entire Pascagoula basin.

The purpose of the survey was to verify data taken in a previous report performed two years earlier in which all naturally occurring snags and obstructions were located by recording their coordinates with a GPS receiver, photographing the obstruction with a digital camera, and writing a short description of the nature of the obstruction and whether or not it was a significant impediment to navigating the river. Most of these obstructions were trees that fell into the river when the banks eroded away around their roots.

To find the obstructions, I took the agency's 200-plus-page report, consisting of aerial photographs, topographical maps, written descriptions of each snag, and corresponding full-page color prints of the digital photos the previous surveyor had taken. Each page of the report was protected in plastic sleeves and carried in a dry bag. I kept only the pages I would need for a given day on deck and stowed the rest inside the boat. I also had my GPS receiver, digital camera and notebook within easy reach.

Each morning before leaving camp, I entered waypoints into the GPS for all the previously charted snags within a

day's paddle. On the river, I would set the "Go-To" function on the unit to the next waypoint downstream and paddle until the remaining distance got down to hundreds of feet. Then I would drift with the current and study the page with the photo of the obstruction I was approaching.

I was required to shoot a new photo from the same perspective as the original, not always an easy task in swift sections of the river when the current was sweeping me right into the very subjects of my photos. This task sometimes required quick work: Spot the snag, get out the camera, zoom to frame the shot like the one on the page I had out. Shoot the photo, check the review screen to see if it came out right, seal the camera back in its dry bag, then read the GPS and quickly write down the coordinates while being swept past the obstruction.

In addition to the snags in the report, I had to chart, photograph and describe any new significant obstructions I observed. Some days I recorded as many as 40 obstructions, for a total of more than 300 in the 159-mile length of the Chickasawhay River. Despite this, I still made the trip in a week with time to spare, and I helped the agency I was working for prove that removing all of the snags from a river like this is not feasible. New ones appear with every flood, and many old ones are swept away. Natural obstructions not only provide habitat for fish and other aquatic creatures, they keep the river free of speeding motorboats—something any paddler can be thankful for.



A congested stretch of the Upper Chickasawhay is clogged by deadfall trees, swept by floodwaters into a bend of the river.



Fallen live trees are common where the river undermines soft clay banks.



Many areas of the Chickasawhay are obstructed by cypress stumps and standing dead trees.