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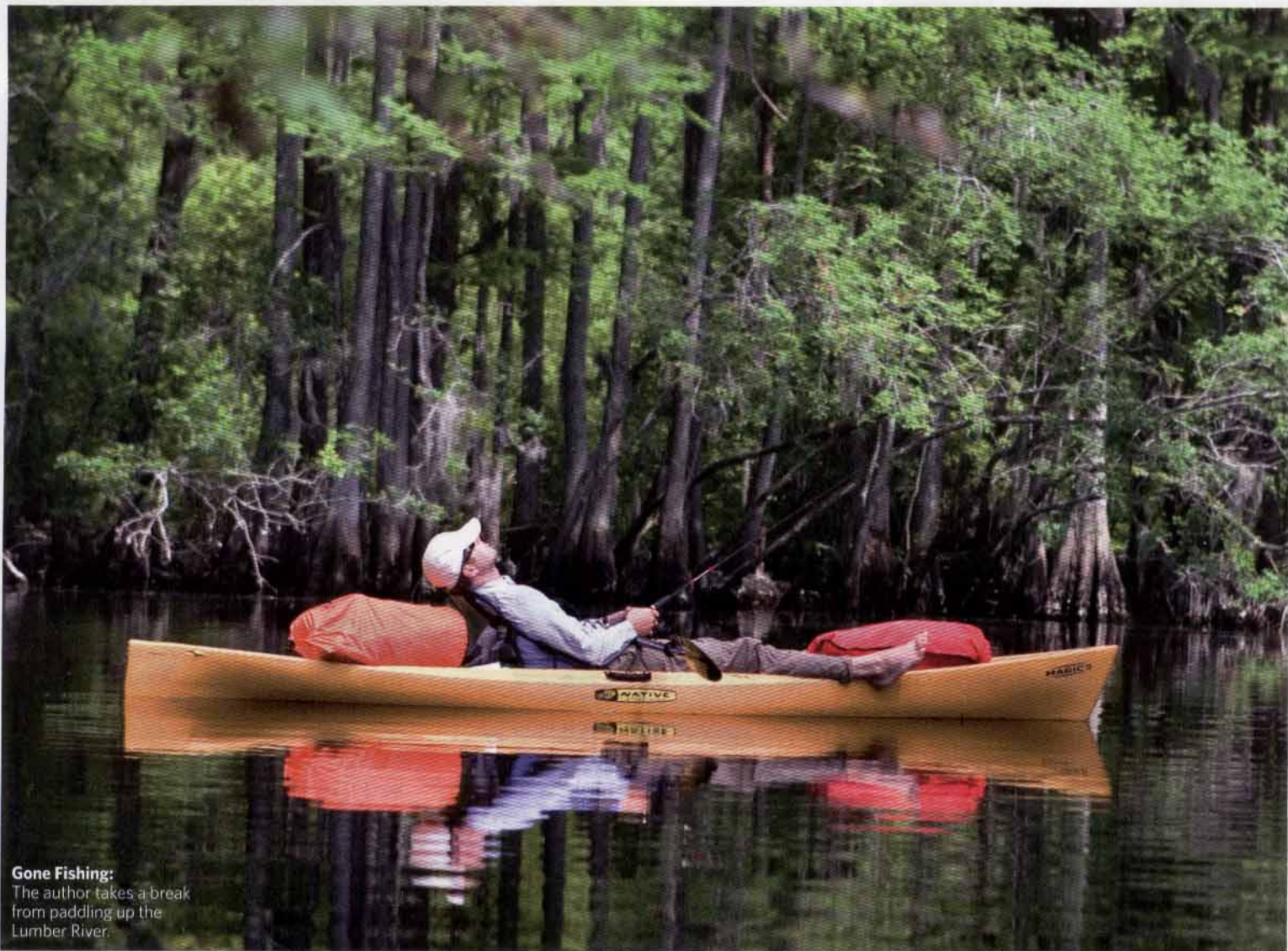
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Gone Fishing:

The author takes a break from paddling up the Lumber River.

Lazy on the Lumber

Exploring the Amazon of the South by paddle
by Mark Anders



“**U**PRIVER?” said Virgil with a hint of *you-ain’t-from-round-here* coloring his voice. “You all don’t want to be doing that.”

Actually, we did want to be doing that. My good friend Flint Hill and I had exactly three and a half days to get as far away as we could from our everyday lives. From our vantage there on the muddy banks of the tannin-stained Lumber River, having just watched three bass boats put in and roar downriver, we figured the quickest route away from it all was indeed upstream.

Twisting its way through the coastal plains and swamp forests of south-central North Carolina, the Lumber is the only black-

water river in the state protected from development by the National Wild and Scenic Rivers Act. I once heard a fellow paddler refer to it as the South's answer to the Amazon—a legitimately wild destination surprisingly close to home. Our goal was to paddle the river to places where fishermen in powerboats can't go, accessing untapped swamps holding largemouth bass, catfish, and bluegill.

Much of the Lumber is narrow and choked with downed trees, confining motorized boats to areas downstream near the town of Fair Bluff, where locals keep the river cleared.

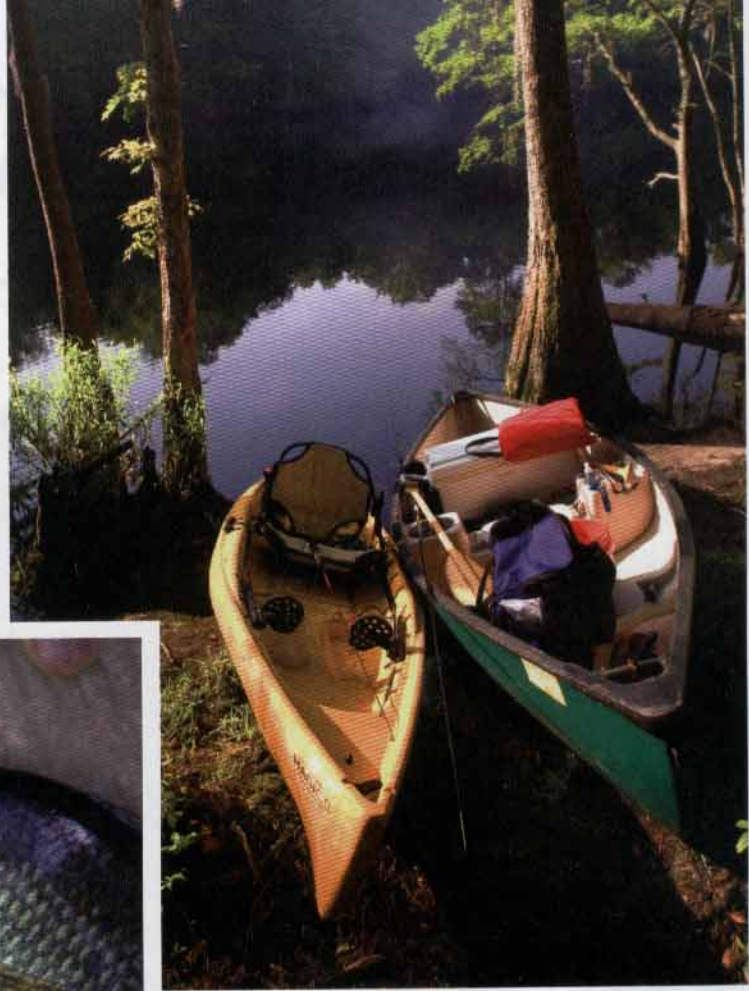
After bidding farewell to Virgil, who let us park my pickup truck on his riverfront property for three nights, we packed the last of our camping gear into dry bags and began slipping upstream. A warm honey-suckle breeze blew across our faces as we paddled alongside gums and junipers and under old-growth cypress trees, thick with Spanish moss and bending over the river. Soon the road noise from Interstate 74 was replaced by the sounds of woodpeckers, barking tree frogs, and rowdy loons. It's a busy forest. And a loud kind of quiet.

Though the river is never more than a few miles from the nearest road, we paddled all day long and never saw another soul. Before we reached our campsite the first afternoon, the only vestige of human activity we saw was a set of decrepit pilings near Big Swamp, remnants of old railroad trestles from when the river was used for logging in the late 1700s and 1800s. Hence the name Lumber River.

Actually, that's its new name. For centuries prior, Native Americans who lived along its banks called it the Lumbee River, from a word in their language that is thought to mean "black water." They used it daily for fishing, hunting, and trading. As proof of their history on the river, a chip-and-burn canoe estimated to be more than a thousand years old was found in the Lumber and is now on display at a Native American museum on the campus of the University of North Carolina at Pembroke. The river was central to their culture, and they eventually took Lumbee as the official name of their tribe.

Right: The view from the camp just after sunrise on the river.

Below: Bluegill were just one of a number of fish caught during the paddle.



Despite Virgil's warning, paddling up-river wasn't nearly as tough as it sounds. The river is lazy in some places. So lazy, in fact, it can be hard to tell which direction the Lumber is headed. Of course, in other spots, especially around bends in the river, the flow speeds up. Flint found "paddling uphill," as he called it, difficult because he was in a large canoe and carrying the lion's share of our supplies.

The farther upstream we paddled, the more the river narrowed. Submerged trees often blocked our passage. At one spot I had to get out of my kayak and balance on a log, like walking the nose of a moss-covered surfboard, while I pulled my kayak up and over a downed tree.

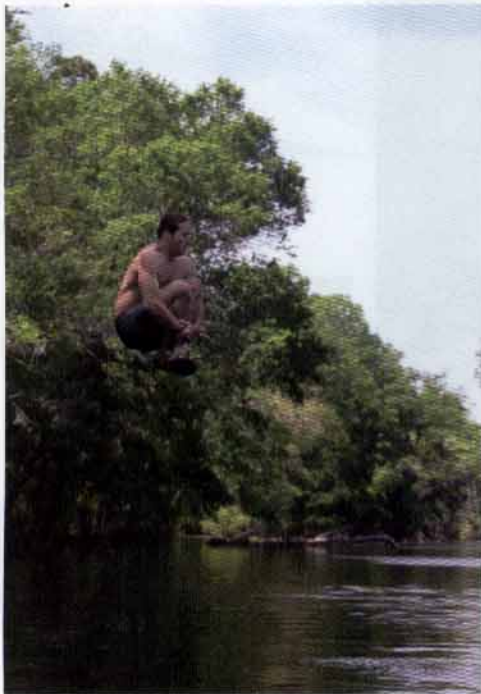
The amount of poison ivy, oak, and sumac lining the banks grew to comical proportions as we headed upriver. We're talking poison ivy trees. In places, we had

to weave and limbo under huge branches of the stuff.

We weren't trying to get anywhere fast. But at times it was tricky to figure out where we needed to go. In many spots the river splits off in several directions. We'd look for which fork had the greater flow but sometimes picked wrong and were forced to backtrack. The Lumber is a massive maze. In fact, the Lumbee people took advantage of the confusing and impenetrable nature of the river to hide from enemies.

It's easy to picture how the river must've looked hundreds of years ago. The Lumber is still mostly untouched, and there are animals everywhere. We saw otters and banded water snakes and the flashing white tails of fleeing deer. There were bright blue dragonflies mating in midair and a pair of black king snakes slithering along the bank.

In the trees above we saw wood ducks, kingfishers, snowy egrets, and even a wild turkey. Mid-afternoon one day, a black vulture stalking something from above led us to a bird strung up in a trotline. The sleek black cormorant was doing everything it could to pull the line off his bill. He'd swim



Lumber River, NC



Where: The Lumber River begins in south-central North Carolina near the Scotland-Hoke county line and runs for 115 miles before crossing into South Carolina, where it joins the Little Pee Dee River. There are access points all along the river, mostly where it passes under roads. For specific put-in spots, pick up a copy of *Paddling Eastern North Carolina* by Paul Ferguson (Pocosin Press).

Boats: Bring your own canoe or kayak or arrange rentals locally.

Contact Lumber River State Park for a current list of outfitters (ncparks.gov; 910-628-4564).

Camping: Much of the riverbank is low and swampy, so good campsites are tough to find. There are twenty-two State Park-operated riverside campsites in two locations along the river, Princess Ann and Chalk Banks (each \$9 per night), plus a handful of paddle-in-only sites at Piney Island and Buck Landing.



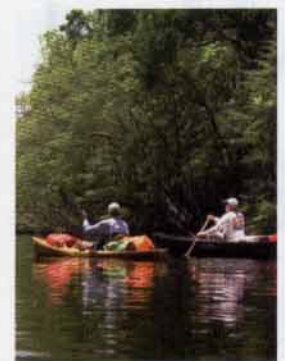
as deep as he could only to be snapped back. Flint and I debated briefly about how rescuing the bird might throw off the ecosystem somehow ("Buzzard needs to eat too," Flint said), but in the end we decided to cut the cormorant free. The bird's intense blue eyes stared me down as the knife severed the thick braided trotline.

The highlight of our trip was the afternoon we reached Piney Island, a remote paddle-in campsite managed by the Lumber River State Park. With a grassy clearing carved into the riverbank and a small wooden dock, it was the perfect base camp.

Though we'd fished most of the way upriver and in any little swampy side pockets that looked promising, we hadn't had much luck, just a few small panfish. My buddy Flint is one of the fishiest guys I know, and I could tell he was getting really frustrated. And I was getting hungry. Half the reason I brought him along was to ensure we'd be eating some fresh catfish by the riverside.

Sunset found me swimming in the river and practicing my cannonballs off the top railing of the dock while Flint set up some trotlines. Checking them the next morning uncovered two decent-size channel cats. Then we paddled deeper into a swamp just off the main flow and started

Clockwise from far left: An evening round of cannonballs. Catfish dinner. Making headway upriver. Still water.



roping in bluegill and black crappie. Life for Flint was good once again.

And so was the eating. We whipped out my little camp stove and fried a brunch of catfish and corn bread right there on the riverbank. It's tough to say if it was the hunger or the scenery, but that was the best catfish I've ever eaten.

Packing the last of our gear before heading back downstream, we heard something upriver. Soon, an olive drab canoe piloted by a man in his late fifties and dressed in full camouflage glided ashore beside our boats. Howard was a Vietnam veteran, career marine, and local Lumbee who'd been paddling the river his entire life. He asked us about our journey and seemed interested that we'd chosen to paddle upriver.

As we drifted away from camp, I cast a line into the tan water and settled into my seat. It felt good to be moving again.

"Hey!" Howard called out to me.

"Yes, sir?" I said, spinning my kayak around in the current.

"I was proud of you all when you told me you paddled upriver. That's a good piece of stroking."

A good piece of stroking indeed. 🐾