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 Sunny
 Time: 7:30 am
 Temp: 70
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 Humidity: 89
 Winds: Calm

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Lifestyles



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Rolling on the River

By **Matt Williamson** | Enterprise-Journal

Posted: 06/30/07 - 11:31:18 pm CDT

GAUTIER — Kathy Wilkinson opens the throttle on her 13-foot Boston Whaler, and the bow of the boat lifts up and skims across the murky water of the Pascagoula River. This is Wilkinson's second job — captain of a guide boat for Eco Tours of South Mississippi — the one she describes as more fun and less lucrative than her primary occupation as a paralegal.

She and her husband Jeff, a plumber and Gautier city councilman at-large, started the business about a year ago.



The sun sets over Big Lake near the west channel of the Pascagoula River. (Matt Williamson | Enterprise-Journal)

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They take visitors on a tour of the lower Pascagoula River and along some of the waterways feeding it, including Buzzard Lake and Whiskey and Creole bayous.

Along the way, they point out the different species of birds, plants, trees and other wildlife that inhabit the lower Pascagoula River and the surrounding saltwater marshes and coastal barrier islands and swamps.

The Pascagoula, known as “The Singing River,” is the longest unimpeded major river in the lower 48 states. It flows 81 miles from the confluence of its two major tributaries, the Leaf and Chickasawhay rivers, to the Gulf of Mexico. The Wilkinsons offer tours that last two or four hours or all day as well as three-day, two-night expeditions, in which guests stay at their remote cabin on Creole Bayou.

The tours typically start at Gautier City Park, and the boat departs from Mary Walker Bayou, a brackish estuary of the Pascagoula that’s surrounded by marsh and dotted with white buoys marking crab traps.



Kathy Wilkinson of Eco Tours of South Mississippi guides her 13-foot Boston Whaler along Whiskey Bayou; osprey roost in a dead tree. (Matt Williamson | Enterprise-Journal)

“Without all this marsh here, we wouldn’t have nearly the seafood we have in this area,” Wilkinson said. “It’s really like a nursery for crab and fish.”

Stands of sawgrass, cordgrass, various species of wild rice, tubers called duck potatoes and some invasive grasses make up the vast marshes that surround the area around the river’s mouth at the Gulf of Mexico.

As soon as the boat leaves the dock, Wilkinson sees blue herons nesting in a stand of trees.

She turns up Long Bayou, where she spots a pair of osprey nesting in a dead tree.

Wilkinson soon makes her way onto the west channel of the Pascagoula River, the one she calls “the true Singing River.”

The Pascagoula got its nickname from a legend that suggests the tribe wiped itself out by wading in the river to drown, singing a death chant until their lasts breaths.

A Pascagoula chief and a Biloxi princess had fallen in love, and this had enraged the Biloxi, who declared war on the peaceful Pascagoula tribe, which chose mass suicide over defeat. “It’s believed you can hear them singing,” Wilkinson said.

Market Watch



Index	Last Trade	Change
NASDAQ	2603.23	-5.14 ↓
SP 500	1503.35	-2.36 ↓
Russ 2000	833.70	-5.33 ↓
AMEX	2356.38	9.97 ↑
NYSE	9873.02	7.25 ↑
30 YR BOND	51.26	-0.95 ↓

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During the trip, least terns dive into the water catching fish, and mullets leap from the river.

Wilkinson turns off the Pascagoula into Whiskey Bayou, and the scenery changes completely, from marshes to bottomland hardwood swamp.

“This is nothing more than a forested wetland,” she says. “Most of the trees you find growing in the water are cypress and water tupelo.”

As the boat makes its way down the bayou, fiddler crabs scurry about on the muddy banks and a pair of green herons perch on the branches of a tree.

There are herons all about — greens one, blue ones, tri-colors and black crowns.

There are also smaller birds, like the bright yellow prothonotary warbler. Wilkinson hears its distinctive chirp and knows there’s one in the area before it comes to sight as the boat rounds a bend and it crawls into its home, a hollow, dead tree.

“There are some birds you instinctively know. ... But sometimes it’s hard enough to get a good look at them,” she said.

The boat winds down Creole Bayou before heading back to Big Lake, so named, Wilkinson said, because “it’s a big lake,” and cutting across to the Pascagoula.

The setting sun casts a beam of orange-yellow light on the water as she throttles up the four-stroke motor, racing to get back to the pier at the park before night sets in.

Along the way several alligators hide out along the edge of the marsh.

But Wilkinson’s tours aren’t a sightseeing trip out to get glimpses of alligators. If she sees them, she sees them. On this day about a half dozen are seen, and that’s above average, she said.

Wilkinson’s tours, as the name suggests, are about learning about the ecosystem the Pascagoula and surrounding waterways create.

And the people she shows it to take in an eyeful of beauty and quite possibly learn some things they didn’t

already know about the river system.

“I love this river. When you’re riding, it seems like you’re the only person. ... You see something different every time you come here,” Wilkinson said.

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Eco Tours of South Mississippi offers two-hour tours for \$25 per person (\$75 minimum), four-hour tours for \$40 per person (\$120 minimum), eight-hour tours for \$300 for up to six people, three-day, two-night expeditions starting at \$275 per person. Soft drinks, water and life vests are furnished on the tours, and meals, snacks, kayaks and “well-appointed (but rustic) accommodations” are furnished on the overnight trips. Call (228) 297-TOUR (8687), e-mail ecotours@datasync.com or visit www.ecotoursofsouthmississippi.com.

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