Guirard, Jenkins cross Atchafalaya in one day
National columnist to focus on unique trip

by Steven K. Landry

Catahoula — What started as a three-day journey by canoe across the Atchafalaya Basin took only one day for photographer/author Greg Guirard and Outside magazine columnist Mark Jenkins.

“We expected to camp out a couple of nights,” the pair noted a few days after their unique — and Guirard says exclusive — paddle-sojourn. That was not to be, as the Atchafalaya Basin took only one day for the Guirard and Jenkins, whose monthly column titled “The Hard Way” will focus on the Atchafalaya and the bucolic serenity of the swamp.

The pair set off from the Texaco Landing near Bayou Benoit early last Tuesday morning and finished at the East Atchafalaya Levee at Bayou Sorrel Landing less than half a day later.

“Basically, we just kept moving,” Jenkins said. “Halfway across we decided, ’Why not just do the whole thing in one day?’

“Greg had told me of all these crawfishermen in the Bayou, but that he doubted anyone had paddled across the Atchafalaya in — who knows? — 50 to 100 years,” Jenkins said.

“They (modern-day fishermen and naturalists) still have their pirogues, but they don’t go any distance,” he added.

It was a 23-mile, twisting, turning excursion that took them from Grand Bayou to Jackass Bay to Gay’s Slough to the Phillips Canal to the Atchafalaya River itself, among a handful of other areas in the largest bottomland swamp in the country.

And speaking of “country,” the Atchafalaya is totally on its own nature-wise across these United States and perhaps the world, according to veteran adventurer Jenkins, whose monthly column titled “The Hard Way” will focus on Guirard and the bucolic serenity of the swamp.

Guirard planned to paddle the first day with Jenkins, then turn over the wooden reins to his buddy Roy Patin of Coteau Holmes.

But even a trudge through hyacinth — with Jenkins’ 6-foot, muscular frame weighing down the front of the canoe and Guirard whipping the water like a madman — couldn’t keep them from a destination they eventually reached far ahead of schedule.

Guirard admitted, however, that it wasn’t his easiest time in the swamp, even if they stopped every once in a while to take snapshots.

“I was sore in the neck, in my arms and shoulders,” he said. “We had to paddle upstream at times, and against the wind. It was hard. And not everyone can do it, not these days.”

Jenkins agreed. His column, which covers adventure, travel, natural history and the environment, has taken him to the mountains of Europe as well as one-of-a-kind locations in America. His next stop is Alaska.

But the Basin is unlike anywhere else, he said, though he did compare it to the “Wad” country of the Netherlands. The Basin is truly a “natural” location, where fishermen and crawfishermen make both their living and their day-to-day contributions to their family sustenance, Jenkins said.

“Actually, a good friend of mine judging by the Basin — is fished for his column for The Teche News. (See ATCHAFALAYA, Pg. B-2)
And the trip? "It was incredible," the 40-year-old Jenkins smiled. He gave up canoeing for the time being, a lover of the swamp, much credit.

The first thing you have to realize is that he is a totally unassuming guy, at least when he gets on the water he's an animal," he said. "He seems laid-back, but put a paddle in his hands and you've got a human outboard motor behind you."

In fact, Guirard is quick to say that an outboard can be a real help, of anyone crossing the Basin. "I think I would have heard about it," he said.

They completed the east-west feat in about 10 hours.

The sights and sounds are totally unique, Jenkins said. And this time there was no human contact, as the crawfishermen are staying away from a swamp that is normally fertile with mudfish but this year is hot.

"You know," Jenkins starts slowly, "we saw a lot of birds. The bird life is amazing." "Of course," he laughed. "Greg knows every bird that's ever thought of living there."

And Jenkins said that in the adventure = mountain climbing, Atchafalaya Basin canoeing is always best to go with somebody who knows the geography, and actually, somebody who is not professional but just does it "cause he like it. Then you get the best of the best."

They went through a couple of "adventure sections," according to Jenkins. "We had to pull the boat through hyacinth..."

"He was just lying down on the front," Guirard continues. "And it was a foot deep there and really thick," Jenkins finishes.

But overall, it's not just the trip itself that Jenkins will highlight in his next column, to be published in the endangered era.