Journey through the land of
DEADGIANTS

STORY BY JUDY STANFORD • PHOTOS COURTESY OF GREG GUIRARD

Outside magazine tours the Basin
‘the hard way’

Jenkins crossed the Atchafalaya Basin the way it was done before the outboard motor. Catadonta native Greg Guirard and Outside magazine writer Mark Jenkins paddled a canoe across the Basin at its widest point, from Bayou Benoit on the west levee to Bayou Sorrel on the east levee, a distance of about 19 miles as the crow flies, but closer to 23, as the canoe maneuvers around obstacles in the swamp.

Jenkins’ column, “The Hard Way,” takes him around the globe in search of undiscovered areas and, as the name of his column implies, challenging ways to enjoy them. Jenkins has recently returned from a trip to Australia, where he tackled some of the more difficult descents into canyons.

The July issue of Outdoor magazine features Jenkins’ account of his trip through the Basin, which, in the title of the piece, he calls a wilderness that “lives on in mythic dreams and salvaged hope.”

Jenkins discovered the less-well-known Atchafalaya Basin by chance. “A friend of his had given him a copy of my book, "Seasons of Light in the Atchafalaya Basin."

Jenkins recommends crossing the Basin as it was done in years gone by: “We wanted to re-create what people used to do. Today, you wouldn’t cross the Atchafalaya Basin in a pirogue if you didn’t have to.”

The two met at Guirard’s Catahoula home in April. Although Guirard said he would have preferred using a pirogue, the straight-sided, narrow-bottomed boat once used by Cajun fishermen, the pair crossed the Basin in his aluminum canoe. “We couldn’t find a really good, old cypress pirogue,” Guirard said. “Nobody has them anymore, except when they build them for shows.”

The trip, which Guirard had estimated would take two days, took only one. While the crossing was not as physically challenging as some of Jenkins’ other exploits, he said the trip was far from disappointing.

“Almost all the people I meet on those trips,” Jenkins said, “Greg was certainly one of those. He’s a very inspired, very kind, very caring type of person – not just toward humans, but toward the landscape he grew up in.”

Jenkins’ column is not always about extreme sports. “There are columns where there is a lot of physical struggle, but also columns where there is emotional struggle.”

He said he found the latter in the Atchafalaya Basin. “Those cypress trees – it’s tremendous and tremendously tragic,” he said, referring to the stumps of centuries-old cypress trees that are all that remain after more than 100 years of unrestricted logging operations. Most of the cypress trees that once live in the Basin are relatively young.

Jenkins sees the landscape as an object lesson. “I think it’s a foreshadowing of what could happen to what’s left in America. You can drive on the highway and see all those stumps and see what happened 50 years ago and go to the redwoods and see what could happen. And it will.”

Sunrise, Sibon Canal off the Red-Eye Swamp.

Jenkins speaks of his time in the Basin in almost mystical terms. "The cypress trees are like ghosts," he said. "You can almost still feel them above you."

But the trip was not all about tragedy and lost landscape.

"On the positive side," Jenkins said, "it's still a tiny wilderness. Wildlife is still there, the birds life is still amazing. The alligators are still there!"

Jenkins and Guirard both attest to the advantage of crossing the Basin in a silent mode of transportation.

"We were in a boat the whole time," Jenkins said. "You aren't going to know a piece of landscape unless you get out of your car, get out of your motorboat and get into something that you can move at a pace where you can really see it."

Guirard, who lives and works in the Basin on a daily basis, even saw his surroundings in a new way. "We saw a golden eagle – I had never seen one. We saw a swallow-tailed kite and a whole list of birds, like this and roseate spoonbills."

Jenkins says everyone could benefit from taking a similar approach to their surroundings.

"We're all moving at the speed of light," he said, "and we're missing what's around us. The only way to capture the environment is to move at a pace where you can look about."