



Drowned Sunflowers

I *didn't go kayaking* expecting to find them. I went kayaking expecting to find something I wasn't expecting. That is one of the swamp's many charms. You never know what you will see.

It was their unusual orange color that first caught my eye, an opalescent orange. Only someone who hasn't spent much time in a swamp would picture it in muted tones. The Atchafalaya Basin, on more days than not, is almost entirely various greens set against browns and blues, and punctuating this palette, especially the closer you zoom in on the vegetation, are moments of more gemstone-like color.

Yellowtops, yellow lotuses, indigo sauvage, spider lilies, trumpet vines, honest-to-God grapes, copper irises, blue irises, mulberries, blackberries and swamp holly, not to mention the deciduous trees and certain common vines that go golden or amber in autumn—bald cypress, green ash, sweet gum, bitter pecan, poison ivy, black willow, honey locust, sweet pecan. Even muscadine vines, which have managed by the end of September to climb every tree in the forest, vines whose grapes alone would have been a fantastical enough touch, grow storybook-worthy green leaves that turn orange and cinnamon and rust.

I'd put in at West Dixie early that afternoon. This is a landing just over the protection levee that forms the western edge of the Basin. If you think of kayaking as the hiking of St. Martin Parish, then you can think of the swamp's various landings as its trailheads. I pick one as a point of departure, as I would for any hike. West Dixie, only a few miles north of Pat's Fisherman's Wharf Restaurant in Henderson, is one of my favorite "trailheads" because I can get into the swampiness right away. In less than a quarter of a mile I can be floating through a flooded forest, and with a little more effort I can "hike" the maze of bayous that radiates outward from this point.

The Atchafalaya River is the main source of water for the swamp, and when the river stage is high, the water comes right up to the edge of the big bowl of the Basin, where it laps at the base of the levee. In April or May, I see water as soon as I drive over the crest of the levee at West Dixie, but that November afternoon the Basin was as dry as I've seen it, and when I drove over the crest of the levee, I saw an entire road down there, not water. I'd paddled past puzzlingly submerged NO PARKING signs in the springtime, but seeing the road still surprised me. This is another one of the swamp's many charms. It never looks the same way twice. I drove past

the NO PARKING signs and pulled my kayak from the bed of my truck. It was two o'clock in the afternoon, three hours before sunset.

Out in the elements, I don't go looking for things, I go looking for light. Anything that is beautifully illuminated in the swamp is beautiful. That may or may not be true of the world in general, but I've found it to be true of the Atchafalaya. So I put my faith in the angle of the day, and I let that lead the way. I notice where it pools, where vegetation obscures it, and I start paddling in a general direction, playing the rest of the route by ear. Some days I go far, other days not far at all. A sequence of colorful lichens or a willow tree in flower might occupy me for an hour.

That November afternoon, not far from the landing, where the access canal branches off into small bays on both sides, it was an opalescent orange that got my attention, something gold and orange and gleaming, in constant twirling motion, swirling like giant goldfish swimming just below the surface of the water. When I paddled closer the what-I-thought-were-giant-goldfish turned out to be hundreds of yellow sunflowers undulating underwater, rooted to the unseen earth, but obeying the local logic of the water, and the deeper the sunflowers were, the more orange they appeared.

These were not the tall, seed-studded sunflowers you might be familiar with, but a variety of *Helianthus* native to the Atchafalaya, two or three feet tall when vertical, now fishtailing horizontally. They'd only recently drowned, because I could see that their yellow petals were crisp and still entirely untattered underwater.

I pointed my kayak into a pocket of current and pulled up alongside the sunflower island—the swampwater had drowned all but the tallest of them—but when I tried to photograph them, the current kept pulling me away. It was stronger than I'd first suspected. No sooner would I put

down my paddle to pick up my camera than I would immediately be pulled downstream.

A crooked branch of swamp maple grown over with flowerless trumpet vines had narrowed the stream's outlet even more, and I realized I was paddling against the momentum of the newly arrived water seeking its lowest level. I tried planting my paddle in the mud. No such luck. I tried wedging my kayak in the island. Same story.

So I decided to just go with the flow. I traded my camera for my phone and paddled upstream of the sunflowers, then, aligning myself with the water's pull, I let the flow transport me, slowly at first, then quickly gathering steam, and as I floated downstream I videoed the drowned sunflowers sweeping past me, the diagonal autumn sunlight through a clearing in the trees adding an unexpected pinkness to the spectacle.

I paddled to a spot in a neighboring bay where the current was much quieter but the sunflowers were just as plentiful, and as I kayaked through the yellow-and-green islands, slipping through the drooping spiderwebs that stretched between the blooms, easily twenty-five small spiders, and one large spider, were happy to climb aboard. Maybe they knew I was their only ticket out of there.

You see, when the water level came up fast like that, the creatures who lived on the sunflowers found themselves suddenly marooned. Caterpillars with nowhere to crawl to. Grasshoppers with nowhere to hop to. Parked on the wildflower island until a hungry bird comes calling or else baked into oblivion by the sun. It isn't as apocalyptic as it sounds.

In fact, a drowning like this is healthy. For example, yellowtops are wildflowers that bloom throughout the Basin beginning in late December. The tall yellow-and-green plants—imagine butter-colored asters atop giant sticks of celery—are routinely, you could even say religiously, drowned. Each spring, like clockwork, as part of the Atchafalaya's natural cycle, the

river stage rises dramatically and swallows up the lot of them from stem to stern, and the timing is such that the decomposing vegetation forms the bulk of a wild crawfish's diet. Here, drowning is a kind of renewal. The swamp *comes alive* with water.

If only there were more of it. While the Louisiana coastline loses land relentlessly—a football field every hour—the Atchafalaya Basin loses water. The swamp has been bleeding water since it was contained by the two long protection levees that were built in the 1930s, one down each side of the Basin. From 1850 to 2005 open water in the Basin decreased from 190 square miles to 73 square miles as silt filled up its lakes and obliterated its network of native bayous.

The loss of water caused not only the loss of habitat for the swamp's flora and fauna—crawfish need free-flowing water to flourish—but also the loss of public access. Most of the land in the Basin is privately owned and off limits to the general public. The exception to this rule is that when a waterway is navigable by boat, it serves as a public right of way. When the Basin was much wetter, it functioned as a kind of public commons. The swamp belonged, in large part, to all of us, offering its bounty and its beauty without favor to anyone who cared to access it. As those waterways dried up, the Basin has become less public. What was once a maze of bays, lake and bayous has been reduced to a collection of man-made canals that cut through the wetland landscape in surgically unnatural angles. The bald cypress swamps, once spongy with water, have morphed into forests of willow.

Kayaking through the Basin, and with old maps of the Atchafalaya to guide me, I've learned to see traces of the native bayous and coulées that still meander through, curving in graceful arcs or spiraling like the shell of a snail. When the river stage is low, they're so shriveled up and flattened that they disappear into the surrounding woods. What does

wetland look like when it isn't wet anymore? It looks like the land around it. So when I come across a fresh influx of water in the swamp, and drowned sunflowers bobbing along in the current, I don't see sadness or destruction. I see the pulse of a living thing. Water comes and water goes, and if a caterpillar should happen to be swallowed up by the rising river, it only has wildness to blame.