

Paddling the Trail

Old Berlin Bridge to Highway 425 Bridge – 7.8 miles:

Access is located underneath Old Berlin Bridge on the south side of bridge. Arrange shuttle, if possible, and park your vehicle at state park.

The trail starts off in a narrow channel. If the water is low, you might need to avoid an old section of the original Old Berlin Bridge that has fallen into the water. Float past several pumps and then leave all sign of mankind behind as you descend into a bankside wilderness lined by stretches of stately cypress trees alternating with stretches of overhanging privet (oaks, sweet gums and river birches above). On a hot summer day there is no shortage of places to sneak into the shade and enjoy some respite from the blazing southern sun.

The channel is followed by parallel back channels on both sides through which the water flows during periods of high water. Keep your eyes open for tracks of animals and birds and mollusks. Various frogs will jump out of your way as butterflies flutter about and horseflies buzz the perimeter.

As you approach Chemin-a-Haut at mile 2, you will see some bigger cypress trees. About 100 yards above the confluence is one giant tree with a hollow belly so big 10 people could stand inside. If you have some extra time, you will want to take a right into the Chemin-a-Haut and visit one of the most beautiful cypress swamps in the south.

During low water levels, there are shallow stretches followed by long pools of deeper water where you can paddle with ease and enjoy the columns of cypress trees and fantastic convolutions of their roots and cypress knees.

There is a possible primitive takeout at mile 37.6 at the old mouth of Chemin-a-Haut, but access is difficult and it's a muddy place.

As you paddle through the beautiful state park, continue around the 180-degree bend; under the tall riverbanks on your right the Caddo ridges break off into the erosive action of the bayou. The woods are deep here, and there are no nearby roads. The riverbank becomes noticeably taller in this section, and this is another good place to locate a sandbar to picnic or make a landing to get out and stretch your legs. This entire section is relatively quiet and free of trash due to the lack of bankside automobile traffic, but as you approach Highway 425 vehicular noises become louder and louder. At mile 34.4 the bayou rounds one last bend and your take-out bridge will be seen downstream. Until there is a ramp built, your easiest access point is bank left on the downstream side of the bridge.

From Highway 425, vehicle access is off the southbound lane and the south side of the Highway 425 Bridge. If you have four-wheel drive, you can possibly drive over the grassy bank for ease of packing, but if you don't (or if it's been raining) you'd be best advised to stay on the highway easement and portage your vessels and gear to your vehicle. This is part of the adventure for any paddler!

Chemin-a-Haut Bayou Lower – approximately 1.4 miles roundtrip:

At the end of the Bartholomew Trail, add this short length to see one of the most magical places you'll ever paddle. Lower Chemin-a-Haut is a small lagoon of tannin dark water but densely packed with giant cypress rising out of the water in fantastic other-worldly shapes. It's one of the highlights of the trail, and you can only get there via the 7.8-mile paddle down Bayou Bartholomew from the Old Berlin Bridge to 425 Bridge. You could make a roundtrip by parking at the New Berlin Bridge, paddling to the Chemin-au-Haut and then paddling back upstream to the same bridge. This could be challenging depending on water level.

To access the lower Chemin-a-Haut Bayou from Bayou Bartholomew, you will need to cross a shallow inlet lined with big cypress trees and knees. Depending on the Beekman Gage, you may have to drag your vessel across some of the shoals here.

The waters deepen immediately past this short shallows, and the creek opens up into a delightful lagoon of dark, still waters, which offer sparkling reflections of the overhanging bankside trees and shrubbery. The cypresses are so big they look like gnarly cliffs rising out a fjord. It's hard to get a perspective of just how big they are until you paddle close by, or if you see

someone else paddle by their base. Trees this large are at least 1,000 years old. They saw the native people of the last millennium flourish and disappear. They saw Hernando De Soto, La Salle, the rise of the French Empire and the sale of the Louisiana Purchase. They lived through the birth of the American West, the Civil War and the Industrial Age.

The giant cypress in the Chemin-a-Haut are so big and have so much character that some of them have gained names accordingly. First you will paddle past "The Jester," a twin-trunked giant; the two trunks cross each other like pointed crowns of a Jester's hat. Shortly thereafter, you will have to find passage through the "Blowdown," a giant cypress that fell over in a previous storm. The Blowdown is so big it would require an industrial crane or something like one of Colonel Henry Miller Shreve's snagboats to remove it. So it will probably remain a landmark until it disintegrates.



You might notice huge stumps closer to water level – the remainders of other giants that were pushed over during tornadoes and high winds. As you traverse your way through the maze of trees, stumps and knees, you will see the biggest cypress of all filling the middle of the bayou. "The Castle," which is unmistakable because of the hollow within the tree. The area is so cavernous you can actually nose your canoe into the tree and become engulfed in its belly. Viewing from a distance, the sides of the "Castle" flow outward in a classic bell shape, like a woman's wide dress, and have to be at least 20 feet in diameter.

Continuing on, you will paddle by the "Leaning Sisters," a small grove of tightly situated medium-sized cypress trees in the water; four of them are leaning over at a severe angle. Next, there is "Old Stumpy," the largest stump and a reminder of other giant cypress trees from centuries past. Onward, the deep pool of water begins to shallow and narrow as the Chemin-a-Haut bends to the east. At "Knee Forest" you will have to pick your way around a broad swath of very tall cypress knees packed around the base of several big trees.

Beyond "Knee Forest," the Chemin-a-Haut bends eastward into "The Tunnel," where it narrows into a thin, shallow channel shadowed with overhanging privet and a few younger cypress. (Younger being a relative term here, these cypresses are hundreds of years old compared to the thousands of years of their downstream neighbors.) At normal water levels (1-3 on the Beekman Gage), you will find it too difficult to continue. Turn your vessel around and return downstream to the Bartholomew. As you paddle back, you will be able to enjoy once again all of the marvelous trees and magical pools of water in this wondrous place called the Chemin-au-Haut.

Acknowledgements:

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Bayou Bartholomew Paddling Trail



Bayou Bartholomew and its tributary Chemin-a-Haut Bayou are the crown jewels of the rivers of northeast Louisiana.

Northeast Louisiana: Outdoor Series

Bayou Bartholomew Trail

Already a designated Scenic and Natural Waterway, the richly endowed Bayou Bartholomew springs from the Arkansas River floodplain hundreds of miles upstream in the middle of Arkansas near Little Rock and flows southward and parallel to the Mississippi River in a bewildering pathway of angular river bends.

It is thought to be the longest bayou in North America (365 miles). In addition, it is the longest undammed waterway on the lower Mississippi River. This fact alone will be of great interest to any paddler, because paddlers know undammed rivers are the wildest and most scenic.

Like most flowing waters of any size in the area, "Da By" (as it's referred to locally) once provided transportation for the steamboats of the region that plied its waters to reach remote plantations and outposts. Unlike most other waters of the South however, the "By" somehow escaped the zealous river engineering of the past century. As a result, it is a thriving paradise of bankside cypress forests and wildlife. It is the richest fish habitat of any bayou.

Bayou Bartholomew is a classic mixed cypress/hardwood bayou that reaches its most beautiful articulation at the confluence of Chemin-a-Haut, a forest of giant Louisiana bald cypress.

Getting There:

Directions to Old Berlin Road access site for trail: From the Morehouse Courthouse square in Bastrop, La., take US 425 north toward Crossett /Hamburg for 4.6 miles to Louisiana Highway 140, Old Bonita Road. Take a right on the Old Bonita Road. Go 6.6 miles to intersection with Louisiana Highway 591, Berlin Road. Take left on Berlin Road and go 2.2 miles to Bayou Bartholomew Bridge.

To reach the takeout on Bayou Bartholomew at 425: US 425 crosses Bayou Bartholomew 7.4 miles north of courthouse square.

Trail Length

Trail length depends on route length, river speed and your own paddling ambitions. In general, any paddler can sustain 3 mph with strong paddling, 2 mph with casual paddling and maybe 1 mph with gentle paddling. Add river speed to that, and you can calculate approximately how long your journey will take.

As with all southern rivers, water levels can vary on Bayou Bartholomew and will have significant effects on water speed, safety and usability. Pay attention to descriptions throughout and decide when it is best to paddle based on your ability and the water level.

Skill Level

Easy to Moderate to Advanced: Skill level depends on water level, which can fluctuate as much as 30 feet between drought conditions and flood events. Any route on Bayou Bartholomew could be classified as "easy," but beware fast-rising waters following heavy rainfall. Inspect river conditions carefully before putting in. If the water is muddy and moving fast, you'd better be prepared for turbulence, snags, strainers and sections of river that require quick decisions and a lot of fast water maneuvering. Heavy rain from thunderstorms out of view (a hundred miles away in central Arkansas) could lead to flash flood conditions here in northern Louisiana.

All previous warnings aside, this usually is flatwater paddling on a gently flowing stream. Pick the length according to your strength as a paddler. At all levels, paddling on the "By" might require some maneuvering through snags and fallen trees blocking channels. Rare portages might be necessary to get around blockages. Expect muddy banks and possibly slippery landings.

River Levels

For this section of the Bayou Bartholomew, you can get an approximate idea of the water level using the United States Geographical Survey River Gage at "NW of Jones" or the "Beekman Gage" on RiverGages.com. The Beekman gage will best indicate current river levels. But consult NW of Jones for possible fast rises coming in from Arkansas.

River levels (Using Beekman): Low water (too shallow) – don't go below 2 on the Beekman gage (when some dragging through shallows and mud flats might be necessary). It's ideal at 4-7 on the Beekman gage. Above 12 on the Beekman gage the current will most likely be swift and extra caution is advised. During the hot dry months of the summer and fall, regional farmers pump water out of Bayou Bartholomew for irrigation, which sometimes might affect local water levels.

River levels (Using NW of Jones): Low water (too shallow) – don't go below -.5 on the NW of Jones gage (when some dragging through shallows and mud flats might be necessary). It's ideal at 2-5 on the NW of Jones gage. Above 10 on the NW of Jones gage the current will most likely be swift and extra caution is advised. During the hot dry months of the summer and fall, regional farmers pump water out of Bayou Bartholomew for irrigation, which sometimes might affect local water levels.

"Beekman Gage": www.RiverGages.com

"NW of Jones": http://waterdata.usgs.gov/la/nwis/uv/?site_no=07364203&agency_cd=USGS

Historical Water Levels:

Looking at river gage data from the past 10 years, the Bartholomew (and hence the lower Chemin-au-Haut) normally flows somewhere between 1 and 3 on the "Beekman Gage" with infrequent spikes due to rainfall, snowmelt and other runoff. This is a good level to explore these beautiful waterways that flow with the cleanest and dearest water out of any rivers or bayous in the area.

Access Points to Trail

Waypoints using the decimal system on all GPS readings

Old Berlin Bridge to 425 Bridge:

Old Berlin Bridge: N32.921097, W91.806736

Mouth of Chemin-a-Haut (RBD): N32.90625, W91.830767

Chemin-a-Haut State Park (RBD): N32.901101, W91.843901 or N32.904848, W91.848525

Highway 425 Bridge: N32.873445, W91.868065

RBD = Right Bank Descending

Chemin-a-Haut Bayou Lower:

Mouth of Chemin-a-Haut: N32.90625, W91.830767

Landing at old farm logging road: N32.907623, W91.830845

"The Jester" (giant cypress tree): N32.91212, W91.829182

"Blowdown" (trunk of giant cypress tree): N32.91336, W91.829592

"The Castle" (giant cypress tree): N32.914215, W91.830117

"Leaning Sisters" (four medium cypress trees): N32.91435, W91.830483

"Old Stumpy" (stump of giant cypress tree): N32.915623, W91.830932

"Knee Forest" (cypress knees): N32.915722, W91.830685

"The Tunnel" (overhanging privet): N32.915318, W91.828392

Equipment

Choose a canoe, kayak or paddleboard. Motorized craft will not be able to traverse numerous blockages from fallen trees.



Paddling Tips

Carry plenty of drinking water during the summer and fall months to prevent dehydration. During the winter months, also carry extra warm clothing, as well as a kit including fire-starting materials, in case of emergency. Hypothermia is a risk in the winter.

Always pack your overnight gear, just in case you have an unexpected delay (such as a severe thunderstorm or medical emergency). This paddle is through a remote, rural area with few services.

Be wary of falling limbs and trees and poisonous plants and venomous snakes.

