

A DAY ON THE LAND — THE GREAT TRINITY FOREST

BY CHARLES ALLEN

“A Day on the Land” is a series describing special lands — places in Texas that have been protected for people to enjoy through the work of the Trust for Public Land. These narratives are written by guest writers — people who derive physical and spiritual nourishment from these places.

Benjamin Larkin



Charles Allen navigates a canoe along the Trinity River.

My friends and I wanted to assess the environmental features of an isolated area in the Great Trinity Forest prior to a landfill expansion nearby. I had canoed past this area for years but never had time to climb up the riverbank and see what lay beyond. Maps and aerial photos showed it was an 85-acre wooded island, bordered by old and new channels of the Trinity River and Five Mile Creek. Access to most parts of the Trinity wilderness is difficult at best; we carried one of my canoes for a mile over soggy ground, paddled across a creek, and struggled up a steep slippery bank just to reach the spot.

As we walked toward the old river meander channel, we observed the familiar flora of this area. White and green ash, American and cedar elm, black willow, pecan, burr oak, box elder, sycamore, cottonwood, mulberry, soapberry, sugarberry, and bumelia—these trees, developed by centuries of natural selection, surrounded us from all sides, many times slowing our passage. Some of the oaks, elms, and pecans were more than a yard thick.

Cardinals flew through the understory, while higher up in the canopy crows mobbed a red-tailed hawk. We saw a flying squirrel in the largest pecan and noticed a number of animal burrows between the small gullies that drain the island.

In the lower levels of the forest were Virginia wildrye, broadleaf woodoats,

violets, buttercups, alliums, dewberry, Virginia creeper, heartleaf nettle, bed straw, native briars and sedges, poison ivy, elderberry, and a solitary eastern wahoo. Approaching the old channel we found huge sycamores and willows in dense thickets of swamp privet and buttonbush; the largest willow was almost five feet in diameter.

Leaving the island was as hard as reaching it. It was another fascinating day of discovery in the Trinity River bottoms. ❁

Charles Allen is an avid naturalist and environmentalist who has canoed the Trinity River for more than 20 years. Currently he owns and operates a recreational canoeing business that offers access to wooded and open natural areas along the Trinity River. For more information or to schedule a trip, please visit his web site at canoedallas.com.

TPL purchased and conveyed the 208-acre “Southern Gateway” property, located on the Trinity River to the City of Dallas in 1997. It is located in the Great Trinity Forest—considered one of the largest remaining urban bottomland forests in the country.



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