

Dave Hillman Bio- Three Forks, Montana to the Gulf of Mexico 2022

**** I live in Cedar Rapids Iowa and have been a Iowa resident most of my life. I am a retired Materials & Process engineer (BS/MS from Iowa State University) having worked at Rockwell Collins for 40 years. I have been paddling for 45 years in multiple kayak/canoe disciplines: flat water racing, whitewater, dragon boats, outriggers, slalom racing, ocean surfing, etc. I am also a coach for the ISU Canoe & Kayak club and an ACA Level 4 River Kayak certified instructor. I have paddled at places all around the planet (Australia, Costa Rica, Spain, Amsterdam, etc.) but I had never done an expedition type paddle longer than 3 days so I wanted to do something "epic" - the MO river Headwaters (3 Forks) to the Gulf of Mexico was a perfect choice with its remoteness, history and people.*

#1: What was the most difficult part about your paddle trip and how did you overcome (if you did) the situation?

**** Overall, the trip was much easier than what other folks have experienced. The last 5 weeks of the trip was rainless and the number of wind bound days I had on the upper lakes was only 5. The most difficult stretch was on the Mississippi river from St. Louis to Memphis. The river is a mile wide, the river current was only 5 mph, I had already paddled 2600 miles, there was minimal interaction with the wildlife/towns, and there was barge traffic to keep an eye on - it was just a mileage grind in contrast to the MO river or Atchafalaya sections.*

#2 What do you feel was the most important thing that you planned for on your trip that you actually benefited from?

**** Two things: (1) I relied on my Garmin InReach GPS Explorer Plus unit for the majority of the trip but had never really "used" it before starting the trip. I took a Master Class on its use which really was beneficial; (2) I was able to paddle in the MORP Rendezvous and pick the brains of other paddlers. It was pure luck that the schedules meshed but such a critical experience as I was still waffling on whether to take the Mississippi main channel thru Venice marina or go down the Atchafalaya river route. The Atchafalaya river route was so much better than the Mississippi main channel and it was my fellow paddlers who provided me the knowledge to go that route. I don't know if you can define paddling in the MORP Rendezvous "planned" but it changed the character of the trip.*

#3 Was there anything that you planned for then you felt was unnecessary or overdone? Explain.

**** I over planned on my food and water supplies. I initially carried 40 liters of water and that is way too much in terms of weight. I eventually settled on carrying 20 liters which would last me 8-9 days depending on the daily temperatures. You can filter water on the MO river but that takes work and I am lazy. Access to water just takes a bit of real time weekly planning. In terms of food, I initially started using Knorr noodles and fish foil packets but that combination requires more stove gas and some amount of water to clean "dishes". I swapped to Mountain House food packets at my first resupply - more expensive but lower fuel use and only a spoon to wash. Made a huge difference in terms of cooking time, fuel and water consumption. Well worth the cost to go that route.*

#4 What was the 5-most important pieces of gear you carried on the trip? Explain.

*** #1: Garmin InReach Explorer Plus GPS unit. Yea, I know the river runs downstream but being able to set water resupply waypoints was pretty critical. Using the GPS also let me setup daily mileage and Plan B points. Plus it had an SOS feature for emergencies and could send/receive SMS texts. My subscription option also allowed me to post my daily tracks so folks could follow along which turned out to be quite fun for everyone. And after the trip, I had all of my trip data (miles, speeds, times) which I used to figure trip statistics.

#2: Tent (REI 2 man half dome). Having a tent that could handle 50 mph winds, easy/quick to assembly, weather proof, light weight and compact was really important. I went through two ugly thunderstorms in the Dakotas that basically flattened my tent (with me in it). I came out of the storms dry and no broken poles. I think having aluminum poles is better for storms than fiberglass. Also, using a two man tent allowed me to have all my "stuff" in the tent comfortably instead of being cramped inside. We went through a very rough storm at Springfield during the MORP Rendezvous and my tent/gear was dry when other folks were less fortunate.

#3: Dry bags. You are going to be wet multiple times during the trip. Whether it's due to weather or flipping over the kayak (I only flipped over once in 3700 miles!). Being wet all the time is miserable so having dry gear is pretty critical to having fun and being comfortable. I had very good dry bags so my spare clothing, tent, food, etc. was always dry.

#4: Paddle (Werner Player two piece). I didn't take a spare paddle with me to save room which pretty much freaked out everyone I met on the river. Werner paddles are indestructible and I was careful not to mis-use it (i.e. shoving sand, using it as a pole, etc.). The Player is a whitewater paddle with very large blades so bracing in rough water conditions was easy. It's a bit heavier construction than typical expedition kayak paddle but I don't believe that was a negative for the trip.

#4: Stove (Jet Boil). If you can't have a hot meal at the end of the day, the trip gets really long. The Jet Boil created boiling water in 2 minutes and allowed me to cook quickly - I beat out several rain storms by boiling water fast and avoided having to eat a cold supper. Once I switched to using the Mountain House meals, my fuel consumption for the whole trip was one large fuel canister thus saving weight/space in the kayak.

#5: Water Bladders (MSR Dromedary 10 liter). Having a wear resistant, easy to fill, easy to store and contamination proof water bag is pretty important. I had a Sawyer water filter system as a backup but never used it as keeping the MSRs filled was more a matter of planning than lack of water availability.

#5 Prior to your trip, what was your weakest asset or least skilled or qualified trait for the trip and how do you overcome this?

*** LOL, for me that is the easy question - camping! I hate camping as most of my trips had been done using cabins. I had lots of camping experience growing up on family trips but having a hot shower and a bed at the end of a day of paddling had been the routine for many

years. It took me about a week to get into a routine of setting up and tearing down the tent. By the end of the trip I was pretty efficient with the tent. But I can tell you, camping on sandbars is a blast and makes the entire journey really cool. And there are numerous established camp grounds, both primitive and modern, that make camping very easy. Camping in the Missouri Breaks section was a highlight of the trip.

#6 What was the least important item(s) that you brought and discovered there was never a need for?

*** Two items: (1) an umbrella. Several paddlers suggested having one for shade on the sandbars and I just never used it; (2) a marine radio. On the Mississippi river the tows will talk to you but you either have to know their boat name or what mile marker you are near. If you use the Ship Finder app on a cell phone you can identify the tow's name but I didn't use my cell phone while paddling to save battery life so the marine radio didn't provide any benefit. I sent both items back at a resupply point to reduce boat weight and free up storage space.

#7: What was the biggest surprise of the journey? Something you did not anticipate.

*** The physical part of the journey. I thought I was in good shape and found out I could have been in better shape. You have solo portages to accomplish and some of them can be long/steep. You are also paddling 8-10 hours a day sometimes for a week straight which is taxing on the body. I didn't use sun block as it just gathers dirt. I wore sun sleeves and a wide brimmed hat so only the back of my hands took a beating. I tried putting sun block on them but it just washed off. I found that using O'Keefe's hand lotion worked very well on keeping the back of my hands healthy. I could have worn gloves but I can't feel the paddle shaft the way I want when paddling. And Chapstick is a requirement!

#8 What kind of boat did you paddle and what were its good qualities and also the things you did not like about it?

*** I paddled a 17 foot Current Design Gulfstream kayak and it was an awesome boat. Handled the conditions well and weighing only 40 lbs made the portages simpler. The downside was that the Gulfstream didn't have a rudder. The Gulfstream has a skep which helped with tracking but on the lakes the cross winds would cause me to "crab" sideways which a rudder would have fixed. And it would have been nice to have an 18 foot boat so I could have eliminated some of the gear off the boat deck storage into internal storage which would have reduced some of the wind effects during paddling.

#9: How did you plan your meals/food? Did this system work good for you and what would you change regarding this?

*** I thought I had a good meal plan but after the first month the plan needed changes. One issue was the Knorr noodles in terms of cooking and cleaning (see question #3) plus they didn't provide the same calorie count as the Mountain House meals. I did supplement them with tuna/salmon foil packages and I continued that practice with the Mountain House meals. I kept breakfast simple with breakfast bars or simple fruit pie pastries and lunch was just power

bars or granola bars. Supper was the big meal and where I cranked up the Jet Boil stove. In addition to the Mountain House meals, I added animal crackers, Granny Smith apples, Pop Tarts (which become Pop Tart crumble!) and beef jerky. I was consuming about 1500 calories per day but I still lost 35 lbs during the trip. The trip is physical and I didn't plan as well as I should of in terms of calorie consumption. There are plenty of locations for food resupply along the route so revising/alternating your food plan is simple. And realize that your food needs to be robust to packing in your boat as most stuff does get squished at some point.

#10 What was your system for obtaining drinking water and what were the benefits as well as the disadvantages you had dealing with water.

*** If you plan on filtering water then water access is simple until you get south of Sioux City where the water quality is very poor and filtering becomes exponentially more work. I used MSR water bladders which worked great. I carried too much water during the first month. I think that 20 liters is plenty unless you drink a lot of water each day. I consumed 2 liters over an 8 hour period and another ½ liter for supper. That meant I could go 8-9 days before needed to resupply. There are many water sources on the MO river so you just need to be aware of where your resources are located. The Mississippi river is a bit more isolated since most of the towns are not along the river but there are still plenty water resource locations. I provided Norm a full trip resource list, including water stops, for my entire Headwaters to Gulf journey for future paddlers to have as a resource.

#11: What was your strategy for getting across the large reservoirs, including dealing with bad weather?

*** The large reservoirs were a new experience for me as a paddler. I had done extensive open ocean paddling in San Diego but I always had a shoreline in view so getting out of the water was pretty fast and I never experienced bad weather. The large reservoirs are beasts - you can be 2-3 miles from a shore line at times which means any sudden bad weather can be life threatening. I learned really quickly that understanding the daily wind forecast is critical for your daily paddle plan. You need to understand if there was going to be a wind shift and use it to your advantage to cross the big open portions of a reservoir if that was in your plan. I learned that you just don't try to fight a head wind as paddling for 8 hours and only going 18 miles is silly (yep, I did that once). Taking a zero day due to high winds is a good thing and I was quite fortunate to not have a ton of wind bound days. And knowing the wind forecast also allows you to plan on sitting out high wind days where you have resources (i.e. marinas, campground, showers, electricity, etc.) to use. Lake Oahe was the worst for me - 260 miles of river/lake running North/South and very little chance for a tail wind. Most of the time it was either a headwind or crosswind. And when I did get a tailwind it was 25 mph to 35 mph which made for ugly big wave paddling conditions - yea, that turned into a zero day. But the wind gods can be kind - I paddled across Lake Sharp in two days with a 5 mph tailwind! On the big reservoirs you just have to be schedule flexible and take what the weather conditions give you. The second issue with the big reservoirs is the MO river deltas where the river hits the lakes. Canyon Ferry lake and Lake Sak have very extensive deltas so if you are paddling low water conditions you can't take short cuts, need to stay in the channel and read the water very well which may mean paddling a few extra miles. NEVER get out of the boat as the MO mud is horrendous and has resulted in stuck paddlers many times. The Niobrara river delta where it meets the MO river in Nebraska is also very extensive so you need to read water well.

#12: If you were going to give advice for someone planning the same journey, what do you feel would be the best advice and things to consider that you now know about this journey?

*** Four big “must do’s” I would recommend: (1) WEAR YOUR LIFEJACKET! (PFD) All the time, no matter what the weather. If your PFD is not comfortable then buy one that is since you will be wearing it for several months. There will be times when you could be 2-3 miles from a shoreline, potentially cold water (hypothermia) and your PFD is the only thing that may save your life. I went through a 108F and a 104F day plus 7 other days with heat index’s over 100F. You can do it, it just takes will power or maybe a zero day; (2) Have a GPS that can send an SOS message in case things go south on you. Many paddlers have used their GPS SOS function and were able to finish their interrupted river trips the next year. Norm has lots of documented “oh crap” experiences from other paddlers who had the SOS function become critical; (3) Take a year and do your trip planning. Use the MORP website, read through Dave Miller’s MO River book, make sure to attend the MORP Zoom meetings for potential paddlers, look at the resources lists that Norm has from other paddlers and talk with other paddlers on the MORP page. Every paddler I have met is very willing to assist you. Just remember that you need to create “your” trip from all of this data; (4) DO NOT RUSH! If you have a definite schedule then break the trip into multiple years. As a flat water racer I always had an urge to cover miles but after the first couple weeks, I learned to just take time to enjoy the water, the sandbars, meet people and explore the locations. I took 32 zero days in my 123 day journey as I had so much fun in the towns and on the river. There is so much history on the river that paddling past any of it would have been a crime. I was able to camp where Louis and Clark camped on their journeys. Towns like Fort Benton, Fort Peck, Hermann, New Haven, Vicksburg, Natchez and so many others are just awesome to explore. And there are either campgrounds or river angels available to make sure your boat/gear are safe so you can run around without worrying about gear theft.

#13: Something about your personality that helped you succeed, whether it being a personal belief, lifestyle, family upbringing, mental state or learned quality?

*** Being a paddler made the river/paddling portion of the trip easy but I learned very quickly to have daily patience. Something will go wrong and you are the only one who can keep the trip together until you get to resources to fix whatever went wrong. Understanding that you have the ability to make it through every issue is huge.

#14: Worst moment of the journey?

*** The St. Louis to Memphis section of the Mississippi river was the roughest. On one of the days where the heat index was over 100F I pushed too hard. I finished paddling for the day, got my tent setup and then sat down as I was getting light headed. I got up from my camp chair to get a drink of water and promptly passed out. Woke up on a crushed camp chair sprawled out on the sand! I put my PFD on and sat in the river to get cool down. Learned really quickly that pushing too hard is not good and I wrecked my camp chair! The next time the heat index exceeded 100F I cut the day short and didn’t paddle the whole day.

#15: An interesting unknown fact that may surprise someone and/or has nothing to do with the trip? (This may include an accomplishment, hobby, former job or experience?)

*** I had a very wonderful engineering career. I achieved the rank of Technical Fellow (i.e. you are considered an expert in your field) and was inducted into the Electronics Industry Hall of Fame. But I may have never accomplished any of those things as when I interviewed for the Rockwell Collins job and then accepted the position, it turned out the company had interviewed 2 other engineers who declined the position! Had either of those engineers accepted the position, who knows where I would be today.