

## **Ellen Kolbo-McDonah**

Ellen is a retired educator, practicing artist and author from Galesville, Wisconsin. Seldom venturing on an expedition without her paints and sketchbook, her style reflects the Adventurism Art Movement, described in greater detail at [ellenmcdonah.com](http://ellenmcdonah.com). In 2014 (May-Sept) Ellen completed a source-to-sea paddle on the Mississippi River from Lake Itasca, Minnesota to the Gulf of Mexico. This journey is described in her book; *One Woman's River A Solo Source-to-Sea Paddle on the Mighty Mississippi*, and showcases her art created and inspired by the expedition. In 2015 (June-August) she completed a section of the Jefferson/Missouri River from Twin Bridges, MT to Pierre, S.D., and in 2017 completed the section from Pierre, S.D. to the confluence with the Mississippi River near St. Louis, MO. Her art studio is close to the Black River and Mississippi River near Trempealeau, Wisconsin and is covered with art produced from creative trips by canoe and kayak into the wilderness.

Scroll below to read what Ellen had to say:

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

*I felt the most difficult part about paddling the Missouri River was dealing with exposure to weather and the elements 24/7. Severe storms can be a threat because there is little protection in many areas and depending upon water level, ascending steep, slippery banks to find protection can be challenging. Although my tent provided adequate protection and I was lucky enough to find occasional windbreaks when a storm moved in, at one point I considered harboring in a cave as the best solution. Wind is a large factor when setting up camp, landings, making miles, even cooking. When it was necessary to cross a large reservoir, at times the wind escalated so that I was surfing towering waves in the middle as I headed toward the opposite side. The sound of the wind can go on for days and can become an endurance test at every level, physical and emotional. Heat can be another challenge. I truly learned to appreciate a tree's sprawling arms for the shade provided on this trip. I found that acceptance and planning was the best way to deal with these difficult challenges. Stay abreast of the weather, and if tornados or wind warnings are in effect, find shelter early on the leeward side of a hill and wait it out. Be patient. Consider waiting out high winds and bad weather for more favorable conditions. Know that in an emergency or dire situation, your own skills and confidence are the best source of safety. Understand that the only person you can depend upon in an emergency situation is yourself, and make thoughtful decisions accordingly.*

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

*The most important thing that I planned for and benefitted from on my trip was carrying my Jetboil (also used on my Mississippi source-to-sea trip), and my Bushbox (German folding stove.) I prefer to use the Jetboil for boiling water only in drinks and rehydrating simple meals.*

*The Bushbox folds flat and takes up very little space, but I am able to use multiple fuels (wood, alcohol, etc.) and grill on it. Between these two, I can cook almost anything. I remember on stormy evening when I had fresh popcorn in my tent as I studied maps. That was quite a treat.*

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

*Knowing the importance of water for my survival, (and understanding the high level of sediment in the MO water) I carried multiple methods of purification in a dry bag. (Katadyn filter, small Sawyer, iodine tablets, alum, etc.) Multiple methods were largely unnecessary, although water I carried on Peck looked contaminated, so I filtered for a few days until I reached the dam.*

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

*The five most important pieces of gear that I carried other than the obvious boat and paddle, were: 1.) tent, 2.) SPOT, 3.) Thermarest mattress, 4.) Jetboil 5.) Marine radio. These are the items I used the most that were necessary for my reasonable comfort and safety. On a side note, it's important that my tent be free-standing, light-weight, have adequate room for minimal gear, and two entrances/exits. Plan on the possibility of setting up camp on beds of sharp rocks and thorny sites (Peck, etc.). I did not use my cell phone other for communication with the "outside world," and personally do not feel that it was a necessity with the SPOT device.*

**#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?**

*Before the trip, I was not familiar with the climate and demeanor of the Missouri River, having never paddled it before. I had traveled the Mississippi River, but there were big differences between the two rivers. I studied the climate of different regions (temperature, rainfall, etc.) in order to understand what type of gear to bring, and I read every blog that I could get my hands on, trying to learn from the experience of others. The Missouri River Paddlers fb page is a wealth of information for anybody planning this trip.*

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

*The least important item that I brought but never needed (in my opinion) was deodorant.*

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

*I believe that the biggest surprise of the journey was the diversity of surroundings that I saw, beginning at 93 miles on the Jefferson River above Three Forks, MT and ending at St. Louis, MO. The journey began with snow-covered peaks in the distance, towering mountains on both sides of the river, progressed to wide prairies and farmland, and ended with river cities. It was*

*fascinating to see the surroundings change and experience various birds, fish, and animals in their habitats.*

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

*Since I completed the river in two summers, I was able to use two boats. For the first section (Twin Bridges, MT to around Pierre, SD), I used a Current Designs Whistler kayak (roto-molded plastic, with rudder, length 14'6", 57 lbs). This was a very good boat for this section because it was literally indestructible, could carry enough gear, water and food, and was very responsive. For the second section, (Pierre, SD to St. Louis, MO) I used a Current Designs SOLSTICE-GT North American Touring kayak (composite, with rudder, length 17'7", 54 lbs.) This boat had a nice glide for open water, and was very responsive for its size with the rudder, and was surprisingly tough.*

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

*Regarding meal/food planning, I dehydrated my own food ahead of time, packing breakfasts into airtight, sealable bags, (Opsak odor proof barrier bags), and suppers into another large bag which I kept in the bow. Food for 3 days or so was kept sealed in an easily accessible dry bag and replenished as it was used. Whenever I was able to supply, I'd buy fresh citrus and vegetables for a treat. I carried a 2 month dehydrated food supply starting out. This system*

*worked very well for me and was affordable. I'd probably increase the variety of choices in my food plan, now that I know my favorite meals.*

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

*My system for obtaining drinking water was to carry potable water, and use purification/filter as a backup. The benefits of this were peace of mind knowing that I would not be sick from a bad water source. Carrying water limits freedom on the river in some respects. It tied me down to periodically stopping to refill water supply at wells/cities, etc. Since I usually carried 6 gallons because reliable sources are far between for most of the river, it was heavy and probably slowed me down, and a pain to keep "tapping off" to maintain an adequate supply. Since I like to maintain the wilderness feeling and maintain independence on the river, I prefer remaining remote in many ways.*

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

*Here are a few things that a person planning this journey might consider that I have learned to be helpful: 1.) Find a place for every item in your boat and put things back in the same place. Consider balance and stability when packing your boat. 2.) Use a spray skirt or covered canoe. 3.) Purify water when you can, carry water when you must. 4.) Take treats for windbound occasions. (Mine were a Ukelele, journal, harmonica, sketch book, and a big novel.) 5.)*

*Understand your skills/limits as a paddler and make decisions based upon that knowledge. Sound decisions based upon logic are safer and more effective than a reactive decision based upon fear. 6.) Above all, take your time. Let the river teach you the value of each moment, and be open to finding this wisdom about yourself and our world.*