

## **Jim Fleming 2024 Missouri river paddling QA & Bio**

My name is Jim Fleming and I reside in Rapid City, South Dakota amongst the lakes and trees of the Black Hills near Mt. Rushmore. My 2024 run on the Mo started at Brower's Spring near the SW Montana/Idaho border on May 11 and ended at Pierre, SD on July 7, 2024.

The Missouri River is a three-hour drive to my east along I-90 near Chamberlain, SD. I retired from the full time South Dakota Army National Guard in 2023 as a Chief Warrant Officer Four. I am college educated and have always paddled, all be it, most of my paddling time was in canoes growing up until I developed a desire to take up kayaking about 20 years ago. Initial boats were small 10-12' kayaks for day paddling on local lakes, but it soon became an easy jump to convert my canoe camping experiences in the Adirondacks of NY as a young adult into kayak touring in a 2011 18' S18 Excel Stellar kayak. I also bicycled self-supported across the U.S. after college and used those camping experiences to motivate me.

The idea of paddling the Mo and maybe the Mississippi developed one afternoon around 2015 while swimming and tubing on the Missouri River in SD with some family. It occurred to me that I was approaching retirement in the next decade and could possibly recreate some river camping experiences I enjoyed as a young adult with a solo trip on the Mo.

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

You can prepare physically with all the equipment necessary to travel alone on the river, but what you cannot predict is the impacts of being away from family and worrying about how your family was doing while isolated from them. For me, there was an anxiety generated from a sense of guilt taking off for a river run that could take weeks and months. It was all the more compounded by every sacrifice I asked my family to make so I could pursue my military career when I was younger and then in retirement, I continued to ask them to carry on without me while I pursued a desired run on the river. It also turned out that during the summer of my run, our first grandchild was going to be born in Oregon and that proved to be a huge draw on me to end

my ride on the Mo sooner than originally planned. Lesson learned, have those physical things you need for an extended paddle ready, but really lock down the pressures of being away from family and the worry they face every day you are out in the elements on your own and miles from nowhere. A trip of this nature can be more frightening for family then it is for the solo Paddler.

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

Because I was kayaking, storage space and max weight load of the boat was finite. It was a great idea to develop a load plan using many small dry bags for my boat and practice with different load distribution ideas. I made a handful of overnight practice runs on local lakes and rivers to see how the boat handled. All of my equipment was weighed and I knew to the ounce what I was hauling, to include drinking and cooking water and how to pack it on the boat.

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

I always carried too much water, but it gave me a sense of peace not having to worry about obtaining water. I typically carried 7-8 gallons of water on the Missouri and at over 8lbs per gallon, it added up. If you combine the water I carried and the additional backup filter system I had on board, it was overkill.

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

1. Garmin InReach Mini (GPS Device): Small in size and attached to my PFD, it held a charge for days when turned off at the end of the day. I could always text message family if cell reception was not available and they in turn could track me on-line on a map overlay provided by Garmin on their website as a subscription holder. In addition, having an SOS button was reassuring if needed.

2. Cell phone with the PredictWind app. The app is free and provided super accurate wind speed and wind direction forecast days ahead. If I had one bar on my cell, I could pull it up and determine when and what side of the river I desired to paddle on based on wind data. The phone was also my main camera and was tethered and contained in a waterproof case.

3. Aqua Bound Tango ergonomical kayak paddle. Its composite design makes this paddle super light and made hours of paddling easy on the body, hands, arms, shoulders and back.

4. Mountain Safety Research Dromedary bags in 4-, 8- and 10-liter sizes. They are bomb proof and when filled with water, packed well in the bottom of the boat and near the cockpit of the kayak. I used one under my thighs to provide a better seating position.

5. ...and to round out with a few more items: I loved my BigBlue 28-watt solar charger, Level Six mud boots, an old Army surplus GORTEX sleeping bivy bag and last but not least, a Jetboil hot water cooking system and Marmot Tungsten 2-person tent.

***#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 if you did?***

1. I never learned how to roll a kayak but I practiced wet exits and self-recovery in both calm and high wave water conditions for years to become confident in self-recovery if sent into the brink.

2. For the longest time, I felt in advance of my trip that I needed to know all the latest in whiz bang electronic navigational aids or super high-end GPS units but on the tributaries to the Missouri like the Red Rock, Beaverhead, Jefferson, and upper Missouri through Montana and the Dakota's, I did just fine without. I used detailed state topographical maps produced by Delorme Atlas and Gazetteer. I used terrain association to fix my position or if needed, I could use Maps in my phone when able or break out a very old handheld GPS. On one occasion due to some heavy fog, I even used a compass to shoot an azimuth necessary to get across a very large bay under limited visibility.

3. Lastly – I consider myself fairly reserved/almost shy when on my own and it was hard to accept support from the occasional River Angel. My advice, remain thankful as we all would if receiving their help and go with it. Having them around to help you portage a dam is a massive blessing. At the very least, keep track of all who helped you and gift them with stories of your adventure and send them a kind token or handwritten note when you have

safely completed your travels. These Angels are a group of blessed, wonderful individuals.

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

1. My first aid kit, and maintenance kit were never used, but in some way, that was a good thing. I never had cause to use them, but I recommend you take the very basic essentials.
2. My kit for cooking meals had a few to many amenities because I thought it would be fun to enjoy such things like a collapsible plate and cup at the end of the day as an example, but just eating a dehydrated meal directly from a bag with a spoon was sufficient. Resting and taking it easy after a day's paddle became my priority as was not having to do any dishes.
3. I brought a very small collapsible camping chair, but only used it a few times over my two months. Leaning against a big rock or old stump was my go-to if I needed to kick back for a while.

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

I did not expect the number of mad hatter beavers that worked and played all night long near my campsites along the river or a very mad bull from a rancher's herd that attached my kayak tied up on the shore one evening at sunset. On a more serious note, sometimes paddling for 8-10 hours can become mundane, but rest assured, the wildlife and views around each turn bring on great distractions as do water surface conditions that get sort of angry from time to time. Nothing like paddling under tempest conditions miles from anyone to keep you on your toes.

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

After much consideration, I eventually paddled an 18' (21.5" beam) yellow Stellar S18 Excel touring kayak once I hit the Missouri River at Three Forks. I opted for this type of ride over a canoe because I traveled solo and I felt it would be more efficient and less subject to wind influences that a higher profile canoe would experience. As a compromise, it forced me to scale down my camping kit to stay within weight and space allowances of the boat. I tried hard to keep as much gear off my decks to avoid anything that could act as a sail. The boat has a drop-down rudder controlled by foot pedals with a composite hull. It was important to keep mud off the pedals because they became slippery and difficult to manipulate because your shoes/boots would slide off of them, especially on windy days when you needed the control.

It was also important to drag the boat on shore at your selected campsites and avoid larger, jagged rocks out of fear of damaging the hull. I used drift wood along the shore to act as a boat ramp lifting the boat above the mud and rocks or if needed, I had a couple of pool noodles cut in thirds to also act as rolling barriers between the boat and rocks or concrete boat ramps if needed.

Note: On the upper tributaries of the Missouri (Red Rock, Beaverhead and Jefferson) I paddled a smaller 12' Dagger Blackwater (rotomolded) kayak with a retractable skeg. This smaller kayak allowed me to negotiate sections of river that were narrow with a lot of turns and undercut banks. It also worked well when portaging some low head dams or paddle over them. On this boat because of its smaller size, I packed only the absolute essentials to eat and camp. The one mistake I did have with this boat was that I used a half skirt on the cockpit and in sections of turbulent water, breaking waves would wash over the boat and enter the cockpit. I would go with a full skirt the next time.

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

### ***change regarding this?***

Planning and preparing food for my trip became an enjoyable hobby in itself. Every breakfast and evening meal was a dehydrated meal I prepared. Ingredients and ethnicity of the meals (Asian, Italian, Mexican, German, Americana) was my choice and all dehydration took place in my kitchen ahead of my trip. My breakfast menu included four different meals to choose from and my evening meals contained nine different selections. My goal was to prepare meals with high calorie content, yet afforded me the opportunity to pack up to four weeks of food because of package sizing. Each meal was vacuum sealed and I typically rehydrated in 10-20 minutes with boiling water and consumed directly from the bag in which they were prepared. This eliminated dirty dishes and all trash was carried out with me.

I planned to stop and eat lunch on the shore each day, but I never felt hungry or motivated enough to stop. Instead, I would snack all day while paddling with GORP, jerky sticks, power bars and tuna packets contained in my deck bag. It was odd how lacking my appetite was after paddling so much each day. My biggest indulgence at the end of the day was the consumption of a homemade strawberry or chocolate coffee protein drinks and a chocolate or vanilla pudding concoction that was also homemade and sprinkled with cookie bits. These treats were carried in powder form and mixed in a bag or water bottle to a consistency I desired prior to eating.

**#10** What was your system for obtaining drinking water and what were the benefits as well as the disadvantages you had dealing with water. How much water did you carry when you left Ft. Benton, since this section is the greatest distance between fresh water sources?

Using Mountain Safety Research Dromedary bags in 4-, 8- and 10-liter sizes, I had the ability to carry up to 7-8 gallons of water. Under cool conditions and used for drinking and cooking, I could go days without a concern for refill, but did take advantage of opportunities to refill if I

happened upon them at a riverside campground or boat ramp. Note: I also carried a small life-straw and gravity fed water filtration bag but never had to use them. All bathing was done in the

river using biodegradable soap and a few times in campgrounds. Note: I stayed at a BLM campground just below the Holter Dam and was expecting water to resupply, but they elected to not turn on their camp water until June 1st. I had a similar problem when I expected to get water at the James Kemp Park campground by HWY 191 above Fort Peck Lake. They do not run potable water in their systems.

In reference to the question about water after leaving the Fort Benton area, I camped at the Coal Banks Landing/Visitor Center and campground after Loma and before entering the Breaks. I carried 7 gallons of water from this point and easily made my next water resupply point at the Fort Peck dam, even with a few zero days due to heavy winds on Fort Peck Lake.

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

With a good feel for wind forecast using the Predictwind app, I felt comfortable cutting corners on the lakes if I had calm water. Being miles from shore was not a concern for me unless the winds kicked up some serious wave action. On those days, I was almost always lucky to be on the leeward side of the river and gained cover by shoreline bluffs and vegetation. A word of warning. On good weather days, the walleye fishermen are out in their large power boats and I never trusted that they could see me sitting so low on the water. Regardless of boating rules, I always gave way to them to the best of my ability. In addition, I learned to embrace the Zero

Day. When the water got black and ugly because of storms or heavy winds, I never risked a section beyond my comfort and survivability. Taking a swim in the Mo during the month of May and even June can put you in some cold water and that comes with a serious safety risk.

**#12: Did you do trip updates for a website or social media? Was this worth your time and are there any tips on how to do this from the river?**

I posted to a personal Facebook page and the Missouri River Paddlers Facebook page when I had phone connectivity. I felt it was worth it because I relied for years on post by previous paddlers in real time to gain some insight into what it took to make an extended run on the Mo. Their stories of their time on the water and on shore definitely benefited me. I in turn was hoping to benefit anyone who was following my trip. I also liked it that a member of the MO River Paddlers posted my travels daily on a map overlay to the page. This allowed potential River Angels to track me and offer up a hand of help if they wanted. Some of my posts were also designed to give examples of camping equipment that I thought useful and further update paddlers behind me by days and weeks on what they may face as they headed downstream behind me.

**#13: Did you use solar power to recharge any equipment? If so, what system did you use and any tips on using it out on the river?**

I utilized a BigBlue 28-watt solar charger. It was advertised as waterproof but I never tested it under wet conditions nor did I deploy it on the deck of my boat while on the water. I never had a need. Instead, when I got done at the end of the day and needed to charge anything with its dual USB ports, I set it up on shore facing the sun which during the summer is up until nearly 9:00PM. I always had plenty of time to charge a phone, my Garmin Mini or a number of small hiking battery packs made by BLAVOR or Dark Energy.

I kept my electronic footprint pretty small to reduce the volume of my kit. I had a couple of devices like a headlamp and very small AM/FM radio that operated on AAA/AA batteries.

**#14: 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?**

1. If kayaking, consider having a long sleeve paddling jacket that secures around the waist and at the wrist. I wore a GORTEX rain coat that worked great but water would enter the sleeve at the wrist when paddling and the water found its way to my torso.
2. Find a good pair of mud boots that are slim in design to fit under the deck of your kayak. Mud on the shore is more common than I imagined plus early in the season, it helps keep the cold water off your feet.
3. Select a good 3-season tent which in my opinion is a two-person tent (allows room for some gear), with great reviews under heavy wind conditions and has plenty of extra points to tie off extra guidelines. The peace of mind having a tent that could handle heavy winds was nice. I would also invest in good stakes without spending a ton of money. Their extra weight is worth it as was having a small MSR tent stake hammer to drive them.
4. When building your camping/kayak kit, plan on laying it out several times, weigh it with a small digital scale and be very critical when looking at what you want versus what you need. Less in my opinion was always better.
5. If paddling the upper rivers leading into the Missouri in May and June, plan on some cold, below freezing nights. Having some snivel gear like light, long underwear that packs small

is nice to have if you only have room for a light sleeping bag and pad.

6. If hiking up to Browers Spring in May, plan on plenty of snow pack once you hit the trees near the trailhead in Centennial Valley. Even though I did not see any bears, the bear tracks were often spotted. Carry your bear spray and possibly a small cow bell attached to your pack to announce your movements. I would also be aware that during an early spring thaw, you will face multiple crossing of Hell Roaring Creek which places you in some shin deep cold water and around potential snow banks on each side of the creek you will need to scale. I used the pointed ends of my hiking poles to dig in and scale these banks and when the snow got deeper further up the draw toward the spring, I did resort to a good set of snow shoes. The eight miles up and eight miles back from the trailhead after locating the spring by its LOG/LAT location took the entire day from just before sunrise to just after sunset. I packed light based on a good weather forecast the day I hiked it, but still spent the night on the mountain when it got to dark to walk down the mountain safely. I used a light weight bivy

bag to rack out in under a pine tree and lit a small fire to put some smoke in the air to sway any local wildlife from disturbing me.

7. Take the manmade strainers and fences in place along the Red Rock River seriously. During this section, I used a bicycle and trailered my kayak behind it to navigable sections of this water like the Lima Reservoir and Clark Canyon Reservoir. (Note: I had a SAG wagon team that helped me with some logistics moving my equipment during this section.) After that, I paddled the Beaverhead and Jefferson in order to reach the Missouri. The Beaverhead contains several low head dams to watch out for as well as a few cattle fences which in my case included one that was electrified. The Beaverhead passed through a lot of cattle country with many herds right down in the water. The Jefferson on the other hand was wonderful with many moose spotting's.

8. Always tie off your boat when on shore. Water levels can change overnight lifting your boat and sending it down stream plus a passing thunderstorm can push your boat into the water and it is gone. I always anchored to a large rebar size stake I carried with me and any large tree trunks if I could when my boat was out of the water. One particular wind storm that lasted 30 minutes rolled my boat down the shore, but the stake and rope attached held it up on shore for me to retrieve after the calm weather returned.

9. Never pass up portage help at the larger lakes near the dams. Some of the distance are tough and come with narrow road shoulders. I had a cart for the small lakes up stream which did fine, but the back of a pickup truck is the way to go. (Note: Test your cart under load long before you set off to determine if it will hold up on gravel and blacktop.)

10. If you encounter any river boils, power through. If you encounter any light rapids and you are using a rudder on your kayak, it become worthless. Pick your line, keep your balance and use your paddles as impromptu outriggers as the current moves you downstream.

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

How do you get to Carnegie Hall? Practice, Practice, Practice. My military training involved practicing and refining skills and care for equipment. All of this helped me prepare for my run. I also found strength during periods of isolation. You will experience it for days at a time so embrace it and after a long day and you are facing Ground Hog Day syndrome, take in the views and bountiful nature around you. Notice the blue sky reflecting off the water, the sound of

the birds constantly around you and the howl of coyotes as they sing you to sleep. With some precautionary thinking, it can be very safe out there, just as long as scheduling and timing pressures don't cause you to overstep your abilities.

***#16: Worst moment of the journey?***

To enhance my abilities in my kayak over the years before my trip, I deliberately had family members in big walleye fishing boats try to swamp me with their wake on the Missouri near Mobridge, SD. They could never succeed, no matter which angle they sent their wake at me. ...but I will say, the biggest waves I ever paddled happened on my trip while on Lake Oahe. I was having a good time, but grew concerned I was all alone if I got in trouble. When the waves come up, all boat traffic on the lakes disappears before the washing machine starts. Beyond that, bears early on near Brower's Spring concerned me because I didn't have a lot of experience hiking near them. Cattle in the Beaverhead with the calves made me nervous. I was never certain if they viewed me as a threat and could charge me in the foot deep water. A couple of sections of the Beaverhead just below Clark Canyon presented some fast-moving water. And lastly, anytime lightning moved in, I left the water, but still presented as a potential target in my tent on the shore.

***#17: Did you use personal locator beacons such as SPOT or inReach? If so, how often and what was your strategy for using it and did you feel it was necessary to have?***

For me, Garmin was the winner. I used a Garmin InReach Mini with fantastic battery life. For a small monthly subscription fee that can be started and ended at any time allowed me to text when out of cell coverage. It further allowed my wife to track me on my account on a map overlay from home. I had it set up to send a satellite pinger every hour so she could see my location in real time. Having its SOS feature was reassuring if ever needed and it attached to my PFD with a carabiner. For a few more dollars, I would determine if having a larger Garmin GPS device with map viewing screen would be worth it. This might provide more information to visually fix your position if you are not in to paper maps contained in a waterproof map case on your deck bag.

***#18: Did you modify any gear to help in the safety or efficiency of your trip? (A rudder, Spray cover, sail, pontoon, tent etc?)***

Before my trip, I modified my kayak seat by replacing the stock Stellar back band and seat cushion to enhance long distance paddling comfort. I also used baseball bat grip tape on my paddle to make for a better gripping surface when needed, but still allowed the paddle handle to slide through my hand as needed with each stroke.

On my tent, I added as many extra tie down straps as I could so I could anchor the tent in multiple direction to mitigate heavy winds on the tent and fly.

***#19: How did you determine where to camp and did you have a specific place that you preferred such as secluded as not to be seen by other?***

Many paddlers use The Complete Paddler guidebook as a template or previous expeditions. What was your preferred method?

The Complete Paddler was only one of many resources I used to navigate the river. The files contained on the home site for the Missouri River Paddlers were equally valuable and at times,

more current.

As often as I could, I always sought out a place on the shore where I could stealth camp. If I stayed at a camp ground, moving to the tent sites from the water was an endeavor that I preferred to avoid. Staying in some small bays along the river allowed me to pull my boat on shore and unload my gear with less effort and set up my tent closer to the water. I looked for areas off of private property and off of reservation property between the water level and any evidence of a highwater mark. Never was I confronted by a rancher or home owner and I could enjoy the peace and quiet that came with being away from RVs and their generators.

Note: Do not pass up Tobacco Gardens Resort (camp ground) in ND, river right descending and a bit down river after exiting the delta near Williston. Check out their website. If you stop, you will not regret it. The owner, Peggy Hellandsaas, is a river angel extraordinaire and her restaurant churns out some damn fine cuisine.

***#20: What was your typical meal plan/food and snacks? (Did you resupply, and how?)***

Review question #9 above. I pre-made several months of dehydrated food and my wife acted as my SAG wagon if needed. We live in western, SD so getting to the river in MT, ND and SD is not a monster ask. She was a real champion and could meet me on the river if I called.

Note: If given a chance, pig out at any restaurant you happen to pass for a cold one and some greasy, good food. Life is too short to eat dehydrated food every day, even if it is pretty satisfying.

***#21 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?)***

Even though I came off the river earlier than originally planned because of anxiety over family, weather, some rudder maintenance problems and the impact of some heavy flooding on the Mo

below the Dakotas in 2024, I relish in the idea of finding the time to taste the river again and continue my journey south if I chose to do so. What surprised me the most when I elected to end my trip in 2024, I felt really good in that decision and was super thrilled at the journey accomplished. Heck – my brother even commented that if you look at the 1,500+ miles I traveled, that is further than a drive from New York City to Miami, Florida. That put things into perspective. Remember that when it takes you several weeks to paddle across Montana. That is one big, dang state. No wonder they call it Big Sky Country. Be proud of any day trip on the Mo or a S2S ride. This water is a gem worth experiencing no matter the distance accomplished.