

CAMPING ON THE RIVERBANK: A CAUTIONARY TALE

The term “camp” has a different meaning in Louisiana than in the rest of the country. Instead of a tent and sleeping bag, camping in the Atchafalaya Basin commonly includes a roof, a bed, indoor plumbing, and the all-night hum of a generator to power lights and even air conditioning. If you’re lucky enough to have access to such a camp, a night in the semi-wilderness of the Basin can feel just like home. But not everyone has that option, and even if they do, many city-dwellers crave an experience that gets them closer to nature, that challenges them to survive without modern conveniences. These are the adventurous types of people who seek a primitive camping experience.

To meet this need, the Atchafalaya Basin Program (ABP) introduced its primitive camping program in 2014. Various sites throughout the Atchafalaya Basin were nominated by members of the public as good spots on state property where anyone can pitch a tent, build a campfire, and enjoy a night under the stars. Each site is marked by a brown metal post that is locatable only by GPS. The posts blend in remarkably well with the surrounding tree trunks, so to help people find them, ABP staff have begun emblazoning each one with a yellow stripe.

On a recent visit to Primitive Campsite 1 (PC1), even our own staff could not locate the brown post marked “PC1.” As we approached the steep, almost vertical bank of the Whiskey Bay Pilot Channel at the approximate coordinates of the campsite, we had to carefully navigate our boat around a mine field of tree branches sticking out of the water. Then we secured our boat to a half-buried log, climbed up the bank, and zoomed all the way in with our handheld GPS to the coordinates of PC1. We walked past the mark on the digital map without seeing the post. We circled back, walked in every direction around the place on the Earth that the GPS pinpointed, and still we found no post.

Gazing toward the water, we realized that what had been riverbank when the campsite marker posts were installed was now water. Approximately 40 feet of wooded riverbank had eroded since our last visit, and like the soil and trees that formerly stood tall against the river’s edge, our humble marker post was now at the bottom of the river.

At this time, there are no plans to replace the metal post at Primitive Campsite 1. The site still appears on our maps, but we have moved the coordinates inland. Anyone with an adventurous spirit is welcome to navigate to this place and enjoy the sound of the powerful river flowing swiftly southward, but there will be no marker to assure you that you are in the right place. If you do select this campsite as your destination, we suggest pitching your tent at a safe distance from the riverbank. The Atchafalaya Basin is wild and constantly changing, and this is a reminder that an abundance of caution and a certain amount of flexibility are necessary for anyone who camps there, whether at a lodge, on a houseboat, or in a tent.

For more information on primitive camping in the Atchafalaya Basin, visit our website at basin.la.gov.

