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Going With The Flow

Many Texas rivers face uncertain future as more preservation measures a must

By SHANNON TOMPKINS

AT A GLANCE

Texans interested in learning more about their rivers and streams have an admittedly small pool of books into which to dive.

The following four works can add greatly to enjoying, understanding and appreciating the state's waterways:

· *Goodbye to a River*, by John Graves, 1960, Knopf.

One of the finest pieces of "creative non-fiction" ever penned by a Texan, *Goodbye to a River* is a chronicle of the author's three-week canoe trip down the then-undammed Brazos River in autumn of 1957, an unmatched essay on the watershed's history and a journal of personal insight.

First published more than 40 years ago and still in print, *Goodbye to a River* stands as the benchmark against which all other books on Texas rivers are measured.

And, yes, it has hunting and fishing in it.

· *Texas Rivers*, text by John Graves, photographs by Wyman Meinzer, 2002, Texas Parks and Wildlife Press/University of Texas Press.

Graves and Meinzer combined to present portraits of six Texas rivers -- Canadian, Clear Fork of the Brazos, Neches, Upper Sabinal, Llano and Pecos.

Graves essays give historical perspective from which to view the rivers as they are today, plus introduce readers to the Texans to whom these particular waterways are vital parts of their lives.

Meinzer, honored as Texas State Photographer by the Texas Legislature, brings his outdoorsman's eye to the book with stunning photographs.

The book, now in its third printing, was the best seller at the Texas Book Festival this past autumn.

· *A Flyfisher's Guide to Texas*, by Phil Shook, 2001, Wilderness Adventure Press.

This 400-plus-page book may be the most in-depth work ever produced for anglers looking to discover Texas' often-overlooked waterways.

Shook's journalism background served him as well as his fishing skills when compiling the book. Along with descriptions of the physical characteristics of most of Texas' major rivers and lots of smaller rivers and creeks, he includes good maps (150 or so) showing access points, talks about the water's fish and how to catch them, lists of places to rent boats, how to find guides, camps or get hotel rooms or bed-and-breakfast accommodations and where to find a good meal.

For an angler wanting to wander Texas and sample Texas' best remaining waterways, this book will prove invaluable.

· *Rivers and Rapids: Canoeing, Rafting and Fishing Guide; Texas, Arkansas and Oklahoma*, by Ben Nolen and Bob Narramore, 2000, self-published.

This is the classic users guide to Texas' living waterways. The book includes much useful, basic information on paddling, camping and fishing.

But its strength is in the excellent maps of waterways and the information on them. Information on the waterway's physical characteristics, water quality and flow, best times to visit, camping sites, fishing prospects, hazards, canoe rentals, shuttle services and contacts for more information are included.

The book, in various editions and forms, has been around for more than two decades. There's a good reason for that longevity. It's worthwhile.

-- SHANNON TOMPKINS

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June is Rivers Month in Texas, so officially designated in a proclamation by Gov. Rick Perry.

The timing carries a bit of cruel irony.

This past month the Rio Grande stopped flowing through the Big Bend region of the state. It remains that way, today, and almost certainly through the rest of Rivers Month.

For the first time since the benchmark drought of the 1950s, no water moves through the canyons bordering Big Bend National Park. The roar of living water that gives magical places such as Mariscal and Santa Elena and Boquillas canyons their voice and character -- their lives -- has ceased. This is the latest indignity visited upon the Rio Grande, a river physically, spiritually and culturally defining much of Texas.

The Rio Grande -- the Great River -- doesn't even reach the sea, these days. For more than a year, the Rio Grande has been so weak it has lacked the power to reach the Gulf of Mexico. Drought certainly plays a role in the Rio Grande's situation. But it always has been a dry, brutal country, and the river still flowed.

The Rio Grande's larger problems rest more with how humans have treated -- mistreated -- the waterway.

The Rio Grande has been impounded, diverted, siphoned, suffocated, strangled, trashed and otherwise abused to the point it is something other -- something much less -- than the Great River.

As the river has suffered, so have the wildlife, fisheries, vegetation and recreation it once supported. The region's environmental, economic and cultural health hangs in the balance.

It's not much comfort, but perhaps the Rio Grande can serve as a cautionary tale for Texans.

Our rivers are priceless natural resources much more valuable and much more fragile than most of us have taken the time to realize. Without advocates, wise decisions and a commitment by the public, Texas' 191,000 miles of rivers and streams along with the bay systems they feed face a daunting future.

Not since the orgy of "water projects" in the wake of the 1950s drought have Texas rivers been so threatened.

Texas' population has nearly tripled since the 1950s drought, from about 7 million citizens in 1950 to about 21 million today. That could double over the next couple of decades.

All those people need water. Ranchers and farmers need water. Industry needs water. In Texas, there's never enough of it in the "right" places to serve all those masters.

Some groups want to move water from one river basin to another.

Others want to build more reservoirs.

Some even continue spouting the malignantly short-sighted idea, nearly universally held by water managers in the 1950s and '60s, that any drop of freshwater making it down a river and into a bay is wasted water.

Lawmakers have placed legal stumbling blocks in the path of those who would use Texas' current horribly antiquated water law to "buy" the "rights" to leave water in rivers instead of taking it out for private use.

Already, the state has conferred so many acre/feet of some river flows as "water rights" to individuals, businesses and water authorities that if the holders of those rights siphoned all their allowance from the river, the waterway would look like the Rio Grande in the Big Bend does today.

Over the past decade, Texas scientists have proved just how crucial freshwater inflows from rivers are to the health of bay systems. The Texas Parks and Wildlife Department has even documented how much freshwater needs to flow from rivers into each bay system to keep that bay system alive.

State agencies also have shown just how poorly waterways are protected and how seriously they are abused.

A couple of years ago, the Texas Natural Resources Conservation Commission (now Texas Council on Environmental Quality) found 10 percent of the more than 14,000 miles of waterways it surveyed didn't meet minimum requirements for supporting aquatic life.

That's 1,420 or so miles of rivers and streams so devoid of dissolved oxygen or otherwise fouled that they were as dead as if they were dry.

Just as sobering, almost 30 percent of the inland waterways TNRCC monitored were considered unsafe for "water contact recreation."

Not all river-related news is dire.

Texas still holds some of the most amazing, beautiful, richly alive rivers and streams in the nation. And because those waterways are considered public property, Texans have the right to enjoy them.

Texas rivers hold some of the most diverse and worthwhile recreation opportunities available to its citizens.

They range from the crowded, amusement park-like scene on the Guadalupe River downstream from Canyon Lake to the physically demanding but unmatched scenery and splendid isolation of of spring-fed desert rivers such as the Devil's and Pecos.

Most Texas rivers also offer fishing potential matching their scenic beauty. A float trip down a forest-canopied East Texas waterway -- the Sabine, Neches, Angelina, Village Creek -- can produce world-class fishing for spotted bass.

The rocky rushing waters of Central Texas' Llano, Pedernales, Nueces, Frio and Colorado are home to Guadalupe bass, Texas' official state fish, along with largemouth bass, catfish and worlds of sunfish.

Some of the best small mouth and Guadalupe/small mouth hybrid fishing in the world can be found on the Blanco; it may rival the Devil's as the state's best small mouth water.

Some rivers, particularly those in eastern Texas where the comma of large sandbars often mark the inside of river bends, make for great multi-day floats. A day paddling and perhaps fishing a river followed by a night spent on a sandbar makes for a fine experience and provides a more rounded insight into the world that rivers create.

It seems counterintuitive for someone who finds the solitude of rivers to be perhaps their greatest gift to encourage others to visit, paddle, fish, swim, wade, or simply sit on the bank of a Texas river or stream or bayou.

But if Texas rivers and the wildlife, fish and recreation they support are to survive the coming conflagration, they need all the advocates they can muster.

Only people who have enjoyed what rivers have to offer will be willing to fight to keep them from disappearing.

They *can* disappear.

Look at the Rio Grande -- if you can find it.

Shannon Tompkins covers outdoor recreation for the Chronicle. His column appears Thursday, Friday and Sunday.