



THE *Bluewater Trails* SERIES

GREEN RIVER UNPLUGGED

Lower water alters paddle near Mammoth Cave
Story by Lee McClellan • Photos by Obie Williams

IN 1906, THE U.S. Army Corps of Engineers plugged the Green River at Brownsville with the construction of Lock and Dam 6. The deep pool it created allowed the steamer *Evansville* to board passengers in Indiana for a trip up the Green River to Mammoth Cave.

Debarking tourists streamed up the landing near the River Styx for a hike through the woods to the historic entrance of Mammoth Cave. The trip cost \$8 to \$10 for a four-day excursion. The price included entertainment, meals and cave tours.

The first 20 years or so, river traffic proved robust, culminating in 22,000 passengers a year by 1925. However, the expansion of highways and railroad lines bled away passengers. In 1931, the *Evansville* burned and sank at Bowling Green. By 1932, only 1,000 tourists made the river trip to Mammoth Cave. Lacking commercial use of that section of river, the U.S. Army

Corps of Engineers decommissioned Lock and Dam 6 in 1951.

By November 2016, the 110-year-old dam could take no more. The Green River, by this time, had carved a path underneath the aging structure, creating a dangerous whirlpool from the breach. Federal officials authorized the lock and dam's removal.



The pool dropped more than 7 feet, exposing gravel bars and gushing springs that had remained hidden since the horse and buggy provided transportation for the majority of Kentuckians. Now, canoeists and kayakers may enjoy two floats of roughly 17 miles along a river in the process of being reborn.

This "new" section of Green River still reflects more than a century of inundation of the natural river. Collapsing banks have tumbled trees into the river, creating thickets for paddlers to pick their way through. So many trees have fallen in the Nolin River Lake tailwater that it remains impenetrable to boaters coming up from the Green River.

"I think you will see a lot of sediment move down river and also get scoured from the rocky shoals and stream drops as time

Fishing should improve as new vegetation grows along the river.

goes by," said David Baker, Central Fisheries District biologist for the Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources. "This will make for more complex habitat. The increasing habitat complexity will improve the fish populations in this part of the Green. It is limited right now."

Baker, who formerly served as a stream biologist for this section of Green River, believes plant growth along the riverbank and newly exposed bars will help sportfish populations rebound.

"When we get the water willow beds re-established and other vegetation, I expect smallmouth and rock bass populations to blow up in the newly flowing sections of the Green," Baker said. "I expect it to get tremendously better for smallmouth bass."

Biologists are especially interested in how muskie populations will react to the newly renovated river. In the 1950s through 1960s, this area was home to several consecutive state record muskellunge.

"With all of the newly exposed woody cover in this stretch of Green River, the muskellunge will have plenty of habitat, especially in the stretch from Houchins Ferry to Brownsville," said Eric Cummins, Southwestern Fisheries District biologist.

The gentle gurgle of newly uncovered springs emanating from the nearby cave system may startle paddlers and attract muskies. Sometimes these springs seem to come from a root wad, from underneath a tree or through a maze of driftwood deposited on the shoreline.

They are critical habitat for muskies in hot weather.

"In summer, river muskellunge seek cool water," said Mike Hardin, assistant director of fisheries for Kentucky Fish and Wildlife. "They concentrate near springs on the Green River. You increase your chances by focusing on those areas."

Two floats best showcase the newly liberated Green: One is a lengthy 12-mile journey, while the second 5-mile trip is perfect for families and beginners. Several outfitters in the area offer shuttles and boat rentals.

GREEN RIVER FERRY TO HOUCHINS FERRY

The first float begins at Green River Ferry and ends 12 miles downstream at Houchins Ferry. Use Joppa Ridge Road as a shortcut if you shuttle your own boats.

Joppa Ridge Road is on the right as you



An exposed rock bar just upstream of the Nolin River confluence is a good picnic spot.

drive away from the ferry. This is a one-way gravel road connecting to KY 70 (Brownsville Road). Turn right onto KY 70 at the T-intersection. Continue into Brownsville, then turn right onto KY 259 at the T-intersection. Turn right onto Houchins Ferry Road to the river.

On the return trip, take KY 70 to Mammoth Cave Entrance Road. Turn left, then take another left on Maple Springs Ranger Station Road (Green River Ferry Road).

Paddlers launching at the Green River Ferry landing must be considerate. The ferry is not a historic relic, but a business with considerable use in the warmer months. Paddlers should launch downstream of the ferry and not dally.

To check the safety of the river levels on this section of the Green, search online for Mammoth Cave National Park's River-Check page before floating.

"This will be the best fishing section of the Green," Cummins said. "This stretch will be favorable for smallmouth bass with the new flow from the removal of Lock and Dam 6. There are few smallmouth bass on structures in the stretch now, but more will relocate there in the next few years. This will be the perfect camp trip, not one you will want to do in a day if you plan to fish."

Just after the ferry launch, the Green

bends gently to the right then left and soon envelopes paddlers in some of the most spectacular scenery on any river in Kentucky. This section features 2 million years of work by the river to carve a gorge into Joppa Ridge.

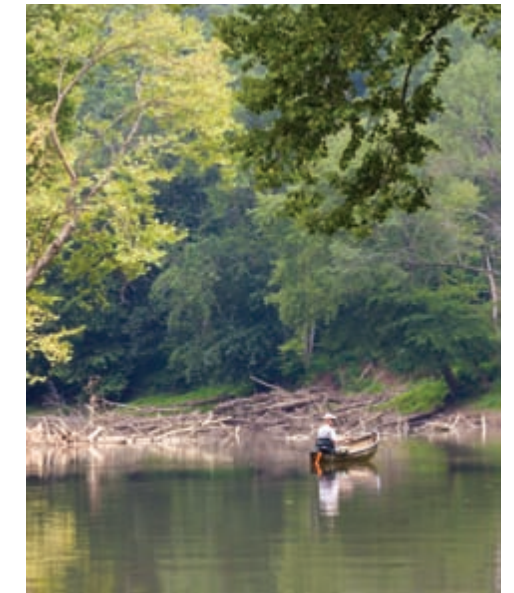
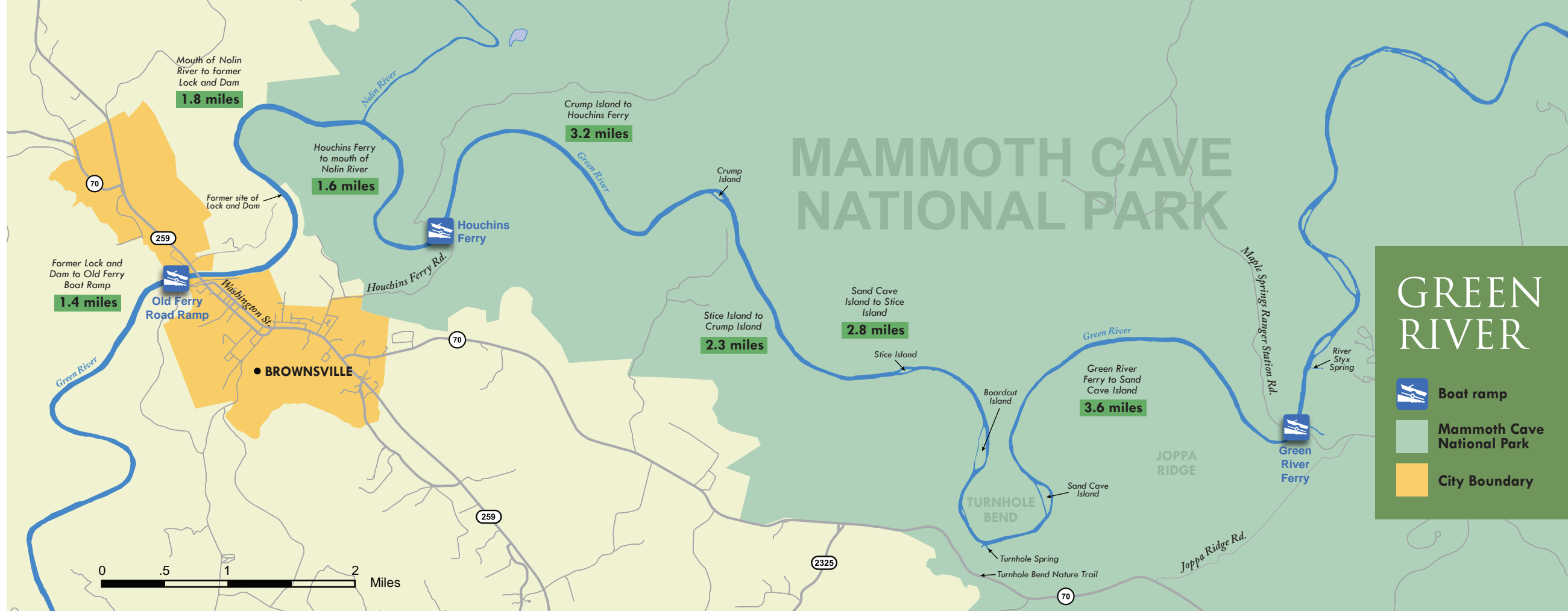
The rocky reaches along the outside bend are good places to throw Hula or Spider double-tailed plastic grubs. Use green pumpkin-colored grubs rigged on a 3/16-ounce jighead for smallmouth bass.

As the Green continues flowing around Joppa Ridge, paddlers enter the horseshoe-shaped Turnhole Bend and meet Sand Cave Island. This and Boardcut Island on the opposite end of Turnhole Bend are popular camping spots for paddlers in summer.

You must obtain a free backcountry camping permit from the Mammoth Cave National Park Visitor's Center to camp along the river within the park. Always check the park's website before your trip for current alerts about river conditions and camping.

Paddlers will also see the mouth of Sand Cave and a teal-colored pond in the distance on river left. This "pond" is Turnhole Spring. Steamboats once used the wide area of the spring to turn around in the river's narrow channel.

Turnhole Spring is the terminus of a large underground drainage system. Rick Toomey of Mammoth Cave National Park said the conduit for Turnhole Spring lies 30 feet underneath the surface. It drains an area stretching to Cave City, Park City and



Collapsing banks put numerous trees in the water.

trees in the water that it's difficult to know where to start. It's hard to beat woody cover nearest rocky banks as good bets for sunfish and largemouth bass.

The best section of the float starts at the mouth of Nolin River. The confluence lies about 2 miles downstream of Houchins Ferry at the end of a long, gentle bend.

Exposed rock and small bluffs greet paddlers on river right all the way through a bend to the left. Large bluegill inhabit branches washed into cuts along the rocky shoreline. They will savage 1-inch, red curly-tailed grubs rigged on 1/32-ounce lead-head jigs.

Soon, the roar of the river flowing over the remnants of Lock and Dam 6 overtakes the ears of paddlers. The bark of this small rapid far exceeds its bite; run it straight down the middle. The flowing water below this structure is an excellent spot to catch smallmouth bass.

After this riffle, the current slows to a crawl for the last mile of this float. This backwater is the effect of Lock and Dam 5, roughly 13 1/2 miles downstream.

The take-out for this float lies on river left shortly downstream of the KY 70/259 Bridge in Brownsville.

Kentuckians interested in seeing a re-born river in one of the most beautiful and mysterious regions in the world should make plans to paddle Green River through Mammoth Cave National Park. It is a rare treat to see history in the making. ■

beyond.

The Green flows around to Boardcut Island, bends left and passes Stice Island. Lower water levels now reveal rocky shoals that hold smallmouth bass, especially around Stice Island.

After Stice Island, the Green straightens for a distance before bending left and into Crump Island. The deep sections in this stretch hold flooded timber and deadfalls, perfect places to work an inline spinner for muskellunge.

"At normal summer flows, the river has a few shoals after Crump Island; then it grows more riverine," Cummins said. This deeper, more sluggish water is what you will find on the next float on Green River in Mammoth Cave National Park. The take-out at Houchins Ferry lies on river left.

For an interesting side trip on the shuttle back, consider visiting the Turnhole Bend Nature Trail to experience more of the karst geology of Mammoth Cave. A short

New shoals, such as this one adjacent to Boardcut Island, may be exposed during lower water levels.

hike leads to huge sinks caused by underground water flowing to Turnhole Spring. A small parking area off KY 70 provides access to this exceptionally scenic and educational trail.

Another short hike to nearby Cedar Sink off Cedar Sink Road features a huge



karst window formed by the same processes.

HOUCHINS FERRY TO BROWNSVILLE

This nearly 5-mile float reveals a river in the process of healing and the impact of a manmade dam on a river system. It mainly consists of flat water with a riffle at the old

site of the dam.

The put-in is at Houchins Ferry and the take-out is at the Brownsville City Park ramp via Washington Street/Old Ferry Road in Brownsville.

The first thing you'll notice is the steep, muddy ascent to launch your boat. It smacks the senses seeing the river's normal level after decades of higher water.

Consult the U.S. Geological Survey website for information on the river flow data and releases from the dam at Green River Lake before taking the trip. Ideal releases from the dam are 200 to 350 cfs (cubic feet/second), with river flows at Munfordville measuring 450 to 800 cfs.

This flow rate is a bit fast for fishing slow lures such as a jig, but good for anglers fishing crankbaits or top water lures for black bass, in-line spinners for muskellunge or small crankbaits for panfish.

Dam releases below 150 cfs produce little current downstream of Houchins Ferry, making this float a straight flatwater paddle.

This section includes long stretches of slumped bank and mighty trees felled. Large Eastern sycamores and river birch now look

like they had the rug pulled out from under them, their massive root complexes facing the paddler.

"It only took about a month after Lock and Dam 6 failed for that to happen," Cummins explained. "Once that water pressure from the old pool came off those banks, they just slid into the river."

While somewhat distressing to see, these sloughed areas eventually will grow green with new vegetation, providing bounteous muskellunge habitat, nursery areas for sunfish and ambush cover for bass.

Paddling this stretch also reveals how much siltation occurs in impounded rivers. Long stretches of bank are slick and flat with sandy, loamy soil. Great amounts of silt lay behind large boulders and fill in undercut banks.

Just after launching at Houchins Ferry, paddlers will notice long stretches of rocky banks on the outside bends. These areas hold largemouth and spotted bass ready to strike 3-inch, boot-tailed soft plastic grubs. Green pumpkin and black are the best colors to use here.

The river currently has so many fallen