



Planting Sandbar Willows and Cottonwoods on the Big Piney

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Photos by Ed Wrasmann

I am standing on the bank of the Big Piney River at Six Crossings gazing out at the swiftly flowing water over the gravel bar where we usually launch our kayaks. The river has taken most of the space for parking and it is hard to imagine how we will complete our task of planting 800 willow cuttings and 200 cottonwoods today.

Then our friends arrive and scoff at us, "You should be here when the river is REALLY rip-roaring! This is nothing!" It is their river. They know every shoal and eddy between here, their property at the mouth of the Bald Ridge Creek, and the take-out point at Ross Bridge. I should know it too as I've been floating this stretch for nearly 28 years off and on. But last spring I wrapped my kayak around a sycamore snag and I've been extra cautious ever since.

The river is five feet above normal according to the monitoring station downstream. We would have measured the flow ourselves two weeks ago when our Stream Team, "The Big Piney Tie-Rafters" (in honor of the uses this river was put to in the early part of the last century), completed our winter chemical testing, but we deemed it unsafe at that time (not to mention cold!) to wade chest deep across the river.

Our purpose today is to restore vegetation to the mud banks and logged stretches above that will help stabilize them to resist the flows that constantly alter the riparian corridor of the river, carrying silt and eroding banks. Deforestation of this river corridor began during the 1800s; first supplying lumber for the rapid growth of St. Louis and other cities, and later, ties to the railroads that were moving across the country. Tie-rafters cut the timber, hewed it into ties by hand, and floated big rafts of nailed-together ties to Arlington and Jerome, where they were picked up by tie-buyers for the railroads. The rafters gave colorful names to the dangerous turns and twists the river made that not infrequently broke up their rafts and caused them to start the whole process again. "Pike's Defeat" and "Devil's Elbow" live on along a river that now sees mostly canoes and johnboats, their owners floating and fishing the river, quietly during the winter and raucously during the summer.

My fears are completely unfounded. The river is flowing rapidly but also covers a lot of the snags and gravel bars that might have slowed us at other times. I relax and enjoy the panorama nature has prepared for us. I have never seen so many Virginia bluebells in one place. They have naturalized in the woods along the river and are in profuse blue bloom today. Huge sycamores lean over the banks looking like it wouldn't take much for them to fall into the river and join those already downed. Mud-backed turtles sun themselves on logs and plop into the water when we approach in our boats. Eastern red cedars climb the majestic bluffs. The deciduous trees are not yet fully leafed out so our views are

unobstructed. A wild turkey appears and flies across in front of us. Kingfishers keep up a lively chatter and a solitary blue heron stays ahead of us 50 yards downstream.

We reach our first destination and climb out of our boats along a clay bank. The willow and cottonwood cuttings, about 15 inches long, have been supplied by the George O. White State Nursery near Licking. We use an 18-inch piece of rebar and a 3-pound sledge to pound a hole that will accept a cutting. They must be pushed in until only 2-3 inches remain and will form roots at every leaf node. It is hard, slow work, as the rocks and gravel resist our efforts and the clay is so slick we find it hard to keep from sliding back into the river. Enough planted, we get back in our boats and paddle to the next spot. This time the mix of clay and sand is soft enough we can easily push the willow cuttings in by hand. The cottonwood cuttings are much thicker and go higher up in open areas. We plant them eight feet (two giant steps) apart and take pictures of the bluebells. Before we know it all 1000 trees have been planted.

An hour and a half later we arrive at Ross Access – mud-covered, with numb feet, pumped up with our success, and looking forward to the next Stream Team activity so we can see the results!

