



What the Delta Looked Like Before European Settlers Came

The Delta of northwest Mississippi was part of the largest contiguous forested wetland in North America, containing 24 million acres and extending across portions of seven states from the confluence of the Mississippi and Ohio Rivers to the Gulf of Mexico. We do not have a record of what the Delta looked like before European settlement, but eighteenth and nineteenth century botanists and historians preserved many facts about the appearance of the forests they saw. Early explorers commented on the interminable forests dominated by giant hardwoods and bald cypress, with an abundance of wildlife, including species such as the ivory-billed woodpecker, Carolina parakeet, Bachman's warbler, passenger pigeon, red wolf and Florida panther which are extinct or rare today. John Wesley Monette, a physician who lived in the Natchez area from 1821-1851, wrote about the flora and fauna of the Yazoo Basin. He described canebrakes along stream levees as 'dense undergrowth with giant cane 25-30 feet tall, topsoil 12-24 inches deep, and robins roosting in large numbers in canebrakes. He listed over 150 species of birds in the Mississippi area, and described communal roosts of passenger pigeons, which traveled 70-80 miles a day on feeding forays and then moved to another area when food supplies were exhausted. Black bears were common. In 1773, William Bartram recorded several sightings of black bears swimming across rivers and mentioned 'seemingly an endless wilderness of canes' on a botanical expedition south of the Delta.

There are some features of the Delta forests that have likely not changed since European settlers arrived. Roland Harper made a botanical expedition across Mississippi in 1911, and mentioned that there are probably few places in temperate regions where one can see more species of trees in an essentially homogeneous region. The only evergreen tree he saw in the region was American holly. Woody plants greatly outnumbered the herbaceous vegetation, and woody vines were abundant. Bald



The Red Gum Research Natural Area in the Delta National Forest in 1957.

cypress was the most common tree, although it was not found on the banks of the navigable streams of the Delta, but occurred along smaller bayous and lakes and in the inter-

stream swamps. He did not see any terrestrial ferns, red cedar, magnolia, pine or beech trees. He explains that the presence or absence of plants is related to the seasonal dis-

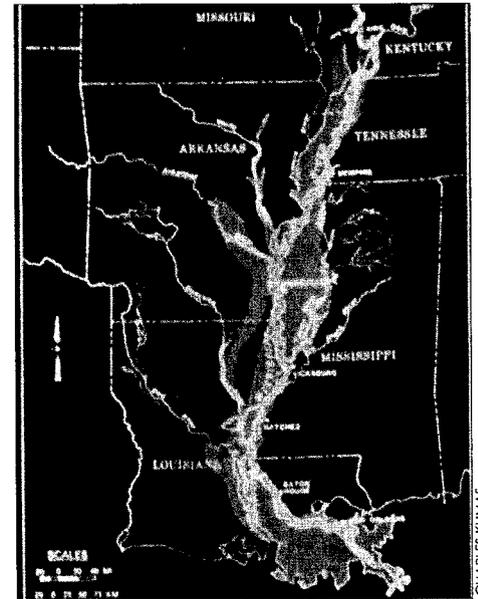
DELTA'S NATURAL HISTORY

tribution of rainfall. In most of the coastal plain, summer is the rainy season, but in the Delta, winters are wetter than summers. This makes streams and ground water high in spring and low in fall, while in the pine barrens of the coastal plain the evaporating power of the sun in summer is counterbalanced by the increased rainfall and the water level is much more uniform throughout the year. Another important factor in determining the plants found here is the prevalence of clay soils, in contrast to the sandy soils nearer the coast. The ponds and swamps are caused by the topography in spite of the climactic conditions.

The big question is: to what extent did Native Americans modify the Delta? The unpredictable nature of the Mississippi River and the inhospitableness of the area kept land conversions by European settlers to a minimum until the early 1900's, when a levee system was put in place. Did it also keep the Native Americans from converting the land for agriculture? In 1936 the U.S. Forest Service purchased 13,200 acres of mostly virgin timber in what is now the

Delta National Forest. Between 1938 and 1946 the timber was harvested, except for three small tracts, one of which is the Red Gum Research Natural Areas. The Red Gum area is dominated by huge sweetgum trees that are around 300 years old. Since sweetgum seeds need light to germinate, this stand (which was previously larger than it is today) must have come in following some disturbance. The sweetgum seedlings could have established after a hurricane or ice storm caused extensive damage, or they could have grown in fields abandoned by Native Americans.

Sam Brooks, forest archeologist for National Forests in Mississippi, states that although the Native Americans raised crops in the Delta, the land was so fertile and game so plentiful that they obtained a lot of their food by hunting and gathering. The forests in the Delta were modified less by Native Americans than those in other parts of the country, but they cleared prairie areas throughout the Delta, similar to food plots for wildlife today. They did not do much clearing within the Delta National Forest



Pre-settlement flood pattern of the Mississippi River.

because it was a heavy clay area with extensive flooding. □

Margaret Devall, Ecologist Center for Bottomland Hardwoods Research, USDA Forest Service.

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