

Racing in the aluminum class, The Rastasafarians (Will Wolfe, left, and Callan Price) make their way past Stairtown, 17 miles southeast of San Marcos, during the 2018 race.



Team Boogie Again (Veronica Sosa, in front, and John Bugge) approaches the Staples dam, about 10 miles southeast of San Marcos.



As one of world's toughest canoe races, Texas Water Safari starts in San Marcos and annually attracts hundreds of paddlers in a grueling, daring dash to the Gulf Coast

Spring Lake in San Marcos, above, is filled with boats before the 2018 race begins. At right, the Miller Creek Racing Team jumps into the water after successfully passing its boat down the spillway of the Zedler Mill dam in Luling.

HARD CORE CANOEING

By Ed Crowell
Photos by Jay Godwin

The small Caldwell County river town of Martindale gears up every spring for what's billed as "The World's Toughest Canoe Race." Boats can be seen on sawhorses in yards and garages, strapped onto trucks and trailers, and going down the San Marcos River on practice runs.

The race is why Jay and Kristin Daniel moved their family from Katy to Martindale in 2017. They wanted to be closer to the action they love. Both are veterans



Kristin and Jay Daniel, seen in 2018, moved to their home in Martindale the year before to be closer to the Texas Water Safari, a 260-mile paddling race from San Marcos to the Gulf of Mexico. Jay has raced 24 times, including with the overall winning team in 2017.

of the Texas Water Safari, a grueling 260-mile paddle odyssey from San Marcos to the Gulf of Mexico. About the first 60 miles of the race run through the Bluebonnet Electric Cooperative service area.

The Daniels, members of Bluebonnet, launch their boats for practice runs on the San Marcos River just behind their

house. As they prepared for the safari last year, the front entrance of their house all but screamed, "Racers at work!"

Two skinny, six-seat boats stretched across sawhorses near the carport. One was Jay's winning boat from 2017. The other was the boat he would use in the 2018 race with a different set of team-

mates. Hydration supplies, water pumps, tools, lights and other gear laid in wait nearby.

Kristin, who competed in the 2010 safari with Jay in a tandem boat, would serve as one of two team captains. The captains for each boat scurry by road to checkpoints along the race route on the San Marcos and Guadalupe rivers to toss racers supplies of water, ice and food.

Inside the Daniels' house, the dining room table held a 3-foot-tall silver Texas Water Safari trophy cup engraved with the names of the overall winning team members for each year the race has been run. Jay was taking his turn with the trophy that rotated among members of the 2017 team. The trophy's base has been expanded over the years to hold all the winning

Continued on next page





A crowd of race fans gathered in Martindale to see boats navigate rapids, going over or under a low-water bridge — depending on river levels — and passing near several roads.



The members of team 'Can't Paddle No More,' Jeff Feguson and Tom Hallberg, make their way through Martindale. Below, Veronica Sosa takes a soak below the Staples dam.

Continued from previous page

names since the safari began in 1963. The motivation for racers is purely for the thrill of the chase, because the safari has no cash prizes.

This year's race, the 56th Texas Water Safari, is scheduled for June 8. The paddling-only marathon begins in San Marcos at the Meadows Center on Spring Lake, near the headwaters of the San Marcos River. Martindale, 7 miles downstream, is a popular viewing area with the racers turning through rapids, going over or under a low-water bridge — depending on river levels — and passing near several roads.

Jay was still uncertain at the beginning of April whether he would be racing in his 25th safari this year. He has finished 18 of them, a typical ratio for an exhausting race that claims many “DNFs” (did not finish). Of the 134 teams that started in the 2018 race, 51 were unable to make the Gulf Coast finish line at the fishing village of Seadrift on San Antonio Bay by the official cutoff time of 100 hours — four days and four hours.

Physical exhaustion from day-and-night paddling takes the biggest toll, compounded by laborious and slippery portages around dams and logjams. Spiders and mosquitoes are major annoyances, as is avoiding alligators near the coast.

Jay became a DNF in 2011. While he and a partner were carrying their two-person boat around the Gonzales dam, Jay fell on the concrete slab beside the dam. “I woke up with a concussion, or so they told me,” Jay said. “It makes me hurt just thinking about the sternum rub they did

2019 Texas Water Safari

WHO: 134 boats in 2018; likely similar in 2019

WHEN: Begins at 9 a.m. Saturday, June 8; entrants must check in with their boats by 8 a.m.

WHERE: Starts at Spring Lake, 201 San Marcos Springs Drive, San Marcos

ENDS: First finishers in the 260-mile race will arrive Sunday night at Seadrift on San Antonio Bay; racers have 100 hours to be considered finishers

REGISTRATION: Online only at texaswatersafari.org. Early registration fee \$200/person by May 5 or \$250 by May 24. Entrants must be 18 years old for solo racing or 13 if in boat with adult. Boats can only be people-powered.

FOR SPECTATORS: Spectators can watch from shore prior to start. Access is limited at start but plentiful along the San Marcos River to Interstate 35. Other locations for viewing include Martindale, Staples, Fentress and Luling on the San Marcos River. Also Gonzales, Cuero and Victoria on the Guadalupe River.

INFORMATION: texaswatersafari.org

on me with their knuckles to make sure I didn't lose consciousness again.”

Despite the arduous nature of the competition, there has been only one fatality in the race's history. In 2012, a solo racer who was not a veteran paddler failed to take in adequate electrolytes and collapsed south of Gonzales. He was airlifted to a hospital but died the next day.

Other paddling races around the world also feature long distances and challenging, unpredictable water conditions. It is difficult to compare exact degrees of toughness in Texas with races on the Missouri and Yukon rivers and in Australia, Africa, Canada and South America.

Jay's advice to any would-be competitors of the Texas Water Safari: Train a lot and learn the river.

As a veteran, his work is a bit more complex. His role in six-person boats for the 2017 and 2018 races was crucial: “I'm the driver,” he said. “When we need to turn the boat, I'm in control.” From the rear seat,

using his paddle and the boat's rudder, he guides the craft through rapids, rocks and logjams on the twisting route.

In last year's race, his team came in fourth overall after 46 hours, 24 minutes, about 10 hours behind the winning boat. He had predicted the 44-foot-long boat he outfitted from a carbon and Kevlar fiber hull would place third or fourth. All the big boats are customized by the racing teams and have no size limits. They are just wide enough for the paddlers to sit atop hard, narrow seats without backs.

Jay, 55, knows the competition well after so many years paddling with various teams and in different sizes of boats. And he knows what to expect from the two Texas rivers, where race-week flows can vary widely from flood-to-drought levels.



The 2018 safari “was the first time in a few years that we had relatively low water flow, so that made a difference,” he said after the race. “It caught some people by surprise. But for us the race was straightforward. There wasn't a lot of drama.”

The course record of 29 hours, 46 minutes, was set in 1997 by a six-person boat in near flood-stage conditions. Jay said organizers today would not hold the race in such high water because of liability concerns.

The last six miles of the race can be the most challenging. That's where the Guadalupe River ends at San Antonio Bay and paddlers must cross the open water at the top of the bay to reach Seadrift. Wind and wave conditions can vary widely. Sometimes, if the bay waters are too rough, the racers get out of their boats to “push-swim” to the finish line at the Seadrift seawall.

“We did have a pretty long swim in the bay at the end, but it wasn't the worst swim there or the best one,” Jay said of the 2018 finish. “We dropped from third to fourth place. It was a little bit choppy, a little cross-ways to the waves and we were a lot tired by then.”

No serious mishaps occurred for his boat full of experienced racers, but Jay said a fish did catch them by surprise at night: “One of our guys had a light hanging from his neck and a gar jumped at him and he got scratched a little.”

There's no sleep time in the highly competitive and speedy six-person boats. “I fight through sleep, but about four in the morning is tough. At sunrise, I wake up mentally,” he said.

Jay grew up in San Antonio, paddled boats as a Boy Scout and has worked around the state as a programs specialist for the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department. His boating expertise was honed when he worked for a canoe livery service in Martindale before his first safari in 1985. “I got hooked being around all these cool toys on the river,” he said.

With the 2018 team, there was a “lot of fun in the boat, cutting up with jokes and silliness,” he said. “It can get pretty sour out there when it's hot and miserable and you're paddling all the time. So if you can keep your spirits up, that is a long way toward success.”

The Miller Creek Racing Team name

The Miller Creek Racing Team checklist

In the 2018 race, team captains Kristin Daniel and Tom Vanderveer made 16 handoffs of drink and food supplies to the six men in the canoe to keep them hydrated and fed for an estimated racing time of 40 to 50 hours:

- Gallons of water: 46
- Pounds of ice: 700
- Jugs filled with water and electrolyte mix: 92
- Spiz bottles (food replacement liquid): 90
- Ice packs to cool necks and shoulders: 56
- Topo Chico and other bottled waters: 42
- Other sodas and drinks: 20
- Individual food packets: watermelon, mixed fruit, avocado, bacon, sandwiches (peanut butter and jelly, and ham and cheese) and candy bars (Snickers and Payday)

painted on their black boat was a bit of humor as well. Numerous small tributaries feed the rivers. When someone kept asking their names, the teammates said they were all called Miller Creek.

The most unusual phenomenon for Jay in 2018 was the strength of a solo racer, Andrew McEwan, an experienced white-water kayaker from Washington, D.C., who came in fifth overall just 45 minutes behind Jay's six-person boat.

“He shot out at the beginning of the race like a cannon. We were dumbfounded in our boat. He had over an hour lead over us in Gonzales. We caught up with him after that, but he was amazing for a guy who had never been down the course before. He had never raced that far before, he told me later.”

Kristin Daniel has been involved in Jay's teams as support crew since they started dating in 1996. In 2010, when they paddled the race together, they finished 32nd overall.

She's glad she raced that one time with her husband but said, “I'm really not a paddler. What comes second nature

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Coming in September: Texas Junior Water Safari

For paddlers at least 13 years old (with an adult racer in the boat) or 18-year-olds as solo paddlers, there is a 16-mile sprint version of the water safari race scheduled for Sept. 21, 2019. The younger competitors begin in San Marcos City Park and end at the FM 1977 bridge in Staples. Entrants can only register at 8 a.m. on the day of the race, at the starting location.



CAPITAL CREDITS

Cha-ching! Excess revenue returned to members

Most Bluebonnet members will see a credit on their bill this month. It's called "capital credits," one of the benefits of being a member of an electric cooperative.

The co-op shares with its members money it collects above what is required to run the business. The amount that members receive depends on how much electricity they used in the previous years and how long they have been Bluebonnet members.

Questions? Contact a member service representative at memberservices@bluebonnet.coop or 800-842-7708.

Continued from previous page

to Jay, making split-second decisions, doesn't apply to me. Instead, I've enjoyed being a team captain and holding seminars to teach others how to do that."

Last year she served as a team captain along with Tom Vandever, the son of a racer in Jay's boat.

"They were waiting for us every time we got to a checkpoint with everything we needed," Jay said. "I can't hardly imagine what it would be like to get there and not have them there."

Checkpoints serve a dual purpose. Volunteer officials wait there to record times and keep track of racers who otherwise are mostly out of sight on the rivers. Team captains drive to the checkpoints with the essentials for racers' hydration and energy. If the boats carried everything for two to four days and nights of paddling, that extra weight would slow down the paddling pace and delay finish times.

Kristin and Tom filled their cars with supplies and mapped out the 11 official checkpoints and a few other spots where they could reach Jay's boat during last year's race. In some places they had to scramble down steep riverbanks or trudge through heavily wooded areas to wade into the current.

Standing waist deep in the San Marcos River below the Zedler Mill dam in Luling, Kristin and Tom waited for a long 10 minutes, clutching water jugs and plastic bags full of food and ice. The current was a tricky swirl as they maintained



The Miller Creek Racing Team passes its long boat down the Staples Dam, upper left. Above, Heather Harrison, left, and Cecili Bugge maneuver their boat under another boat as they launch into Spring Lake at the start of the race. Upper right, the Cowboys, with John DuPont in front, launch their boat into Spring Lake. Right, Carley Morris and Kathy Hurst, reflected in sunglasses, wait for another team to pass under a bridge near Stairtown.

their footing while looking for Jay's team to approach the top of the dam. Kristin was relieved when the crew members came into sight and hopped out on a concrete apron to lower their boat down a rocky spillway.

The paddlers got in again and aimed for the captains. The bags of supplies were heaved into the boat. In a minute or two, the crew was back to racing.

"Because we're handing off six water jugs,

food bags and electrolyte mix bottles for each racer, it takes two captains at each supply point to do it quickly. We have a basic schedule of when they expect to be at each checkpoint, but some of it is random depending on conditions," Kristin said.

Traffic jams from spectators in vehicles on roads along the San Marcos River, particularly near viewing points from Martindale to Luling, can cause problems for the



resupply team. "And there's an occasional accident. I like having a backup with another captain in a different vehicle," Kristin said.

Crowds of viewers turn out to watch the race through San Marcos and at accessible spots downstream to Luling, but below there, the distances and times between boats widen and it's harder to catch a view of many boats before nightfall.

Jay and Kristin's 17-year-old daughter hopes to join the family sport someday. Kassy, a student at San Marcos High School, watched last year's race among spectators at Cottonseed Rapids, the site

of a long-gone cotton mill in Martindale. She cheered as her father and crew plunged through water pouring over and around boulders.

She said it's a race her high school friends know little about. But for her it's a natural, especially since the family moved to Martindale.

Now, living on the river, she can easily put in a boat to test the flow and practice her paddling skills. When her race day arrives, Kassy will find out if she's got what her father said is his key to enduring the race — "a whole long streak of stubborn." □