



# The Ohio River

'Current Gentle and Waters Clean'

by  
**Patrick R. Baker**  
Photos by Zach Neikirk

The author retrieves a mallard drake from Crooked Creek.

Summers inevitably bleed into fall. With the northwest wind on my face, I am comforted by the reliability of yet another migration for men and fowl alike. Every fall, not unlike the ancient instincts that direct my prey, I assemble my gear, replenish supplies, and embark on yet another journey, one that includes thousands of miles, countless 4:00 A.M. wake-up calls, and more value meals than I care to remember. I depart late one Friday afternoon from Southwest Virginia and head through the Cumberland Gap into *Cane-tuck-ee*, aptly named by some of America's truest outdoorsmen, the Iroquois, using their word for prairie. My final destination: the mighty Ohio River.

As a lad in Kentucky's tobacco region, I came of age with the horse capital of the world at my back and the Ohio River in my sight. My existence was split between pomp and circumstance and the legends of Kenton and Boone.

She stretches almost 1,000 miles from Pittsburgh to Twain's Cairo, Illinois (and for y'all Northerners, it's pronounced *Kay-row*). The Ohio and her indelible role in America's history represent more than merely the gateway to the West. For me, she is as iconic a presence from my youth as the Zebco 202 I first used to fish her. Cursed by the Buckeye state's name, she is still owned by all the Southern states that border her, one of my favorite ironies in

life. Thomas Jefferson once remarked, "The Ohio is the most beautiful river on Earth. Its current gentle, waters clean, and bosom smooth and unbroken rocks and rapids, a single instance only excepted." Once on her banks, I am whisked back to a simpler time in my life.

Our journey begins in Maysville, Kentucky, founded and first named Limestone by frontiersman Simon Kenton, who constructed a fort there. Kenton was born in the Bull Run Mountains of Prince William County, Virginia, and fled from a murder rap into the Kentucky wilderness at the tender age of 16. As I embark on my own westward journey, Kenton's unbridled spirit is burning inside me.



**The mouth of Crooked Creek as she empties into the mighty Ohio**

**The author calls in late-season mallards with a feeding chuckle.**



We arrived in Maysville late on a January evening with the fowl on their migration south. As we unload our gear, we could hear the honks of Canadas overhead, milling about on that clear, crisp night. An Alberta Clipper had pushed through mid-week, locking up every pothole and farm pond around. My uncle and I had no sooner hit the hay than the alarm sounded. We stumbled around, collecting our gear, and did everything humanly possible to layer more clothing on

our fatigued bodies. The temperature that Saturday was a less than balmy two degrees, with the Weather Channel promising a high of 10. Despite the freeze, we beamed with cautious optimism over cheap java, believing, as we always do, that we could be at the edge of the proverbial right place at the right time. I knew that once the ducks' wings were locked and their bodies spiraling into the deeks, the numbness in my hands and face would disappear.

As the boat motor slowly idled, we faced a quandary. Like Boone and Kenton, we had to choose: east or west? While history tells us that Boone and Kenton went west, in true pioneer style, we decided to buck that trend and head east. We headed upstream into the bitter river breeze. Our jaws squared, teeth firmly clamped together as steam exited our nostrils like warriors of antiquity, we headed to one of our favorite timber holes. After a strategic call to our source at Kentucky Fish



Dave (L) and Zach Neikirk proudly display the day's rich bounty.



and Game, we knew fresh birds had arrived—a duck hunter's prayer answered. With the wind set to blow at 20-25 mph that day, we had no wish to test her. Our experience on the Ohio had taught us what she could do in those conditions. We pushed against her current in complete darkness with the chop lapping against the bow.

Soon we found ourselves on Crooked Creek. We tied off to the exposed roots of hardwoods that had bordered the river for decades. We tossed out the decoys and positioned the Mojo, a mechanical decoy with whirling wings, to work her magic on the birds. Once the last deck was tossed overboard, the blind was fastened shut and our numb bodies were concealed. We sighed; a calm confidence came over us as we waited on the first birds of the morning. Anticipation and the arctic front made shooting hours seem an eternity away.

Finally, my uncle announced with just a hint of drama, "Boys, it's time." My ears and eyebrows perked, and I immediately peeked at the horizon with the prayer that greenheads would soon arrive. My cousin whispered, "There they are, two o'clock – a six-pack of mallards." The birds started to circle. They continued to work counterclockwise. Finally, they swung wide and dropped in altitude with their wings cupped and landing gear down. We clicked our safeties off, our bottoms firmly planted on the last two inches of our seats. My uncle proclaimed, "Take 'em, boys!" We stood with military precision and fired skyward. The birds folded and plunged into the Ohio.

As I pulled my wool face mask back, the frigid air suddenly became irrelevant as we harvested our prey from the river. As the morning went on, each group landed just as confidently and naïvely as the last. We had reached the waterfowler's

pinnacle — we were in the right place at the right time.

As morning turned into afternoon, we picked up our harvest and decoys and headed out onto the Ohio, hoping to find some afternoon working birds on her main channel. We cruised the river in search of one more hot spot, but to no avail on that 10-degree day.

With our bags near their limit and the cold finally exacting its bitter revenge, we called it a day. We were eager to exchange our cold waders for hot meals. It would be another year before I felt the spray of the Ohio on my face. As we pulled the boat from her muddy waters, melancholy touched us all, but there was comfort in knowing that when we join again in next fall's migration, she will be the same timeless beauty she was for Boone, Kenton, and every nameless soul who has sought her rich bounty and her gentle current since time immemorial, welcoming us once more to join in her eternal journey westward.

---

The author is an avid bird hunter and fly fisherman and can be reached at [swvaguandreel@hotmail.com](mailto:swvaguandreel@hotmail.com).

**Duck Hill Kennels**  
*British Labradors - Guardians of Excellence*  
 Robert R. Milner, LICOL USAF (Retired)  
 President

711 Bailey Morrison Drive  
 Evansville, TN 38148  
 Phone: (901) 226-0691  
[www.duckhillkennels.com](http://www.duckhillkennels.com)

**POWHATAN**

[www.powhatanva.com/powhatangunandtackle](http://www.powhatanva.com/powhatangunandtackle)  
 804.598.8056  
**GUN + TACKLE**