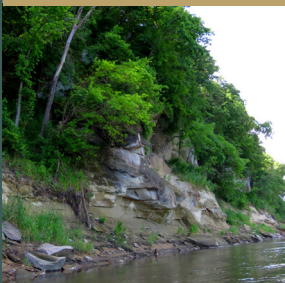


# DES MOINES RIVER WATER TRAIL



BOONE COUNTY

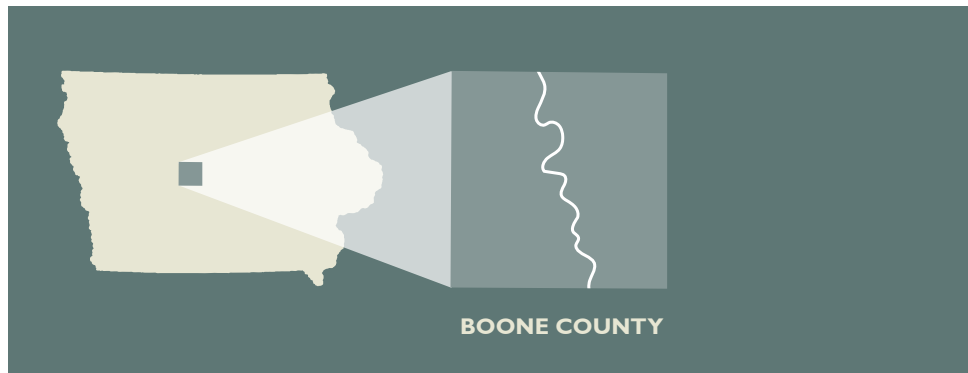
Photo Jim Pease

## THE DES MOINES RIVER IN BOONE COUNTY

While paddling through Boone County, one can experience and imagine past and present movements of people, wildlife, and goods and materials. The rich history includes Native Americans paddling dugout canoes and fording shallow areas on horseback en route to and from summer hunting grounds. Bridges still cross the river, beckoning to a past era when railroads dominated transportation. Fish and wildlife are part of the moving waters, and birds follow centuries-old river corridor migration routes.

The Des Moines is a meandered stream. That means that private property begins at the high water mark, typically where vegetation begins. The river bed, sandbars and banks up to the high water mark are held in public trust for the people of Iowa. Sandbar camping is allowed on meandered streams.

The US Army Corps of Engineers regulates water levels upstream in Lake Red Rock, so water levels may be unexpectedly low, or high and fast, depending on upstream management.



BOONE COUNTY



Photo Joseph Stanski MorningStar Photography

Below the Fraser accesses, railroad tracks run parallel to the river and cross it by old trestle bridge where the river forms a large bend. In the early 1900s, an interurban electric train transported people between Des Moines and Fort Dodge and later transported gypsum from the mines in Fort Dodge. Today, the tracks are operated by Boone and Scenic Valley Railway for pleasure trips.



Photo Jim Pease

A hydroelectric dam at Fraser once supplied electricity to the railroad. Now it has no serviceable function and is a hazard to paddlers and other river users. A constructed portage trail provides a safe path around the dam, from the North Fraser Access to the South Fraser Access.

# DES MOINES RIVER WATER TRAIL



Photo Glen Harman

Nonfunctional, low-head dams present dangers to people and are a barrier to the movement of fish, mussels, and other aquatic species. The dam at Boone Waterworks was transformed into a series of rock arch rapids. Depending on paddling experience and water levels, paddlers may choose to run the rapids or portage around them by using the accesses and trail above and below the highway bridge.



Photo Jim Pease

The Des Moines is a major flyway for birds. Belted kingfishers, bank swallows, and rough-winged swallows dart across the river, with their tunnel nests found in exposed riverbanks. Look for cliff swallows and phoebes, with their nests plastered on the undersides of bridges. Killdeers and sandpipers skip along beaches and sandbars. Turkey vultures soar effortlessly on rising thermal air currents.



Photo Jim Pease

Two big bridges stretch hundreds of yards high above the valley. The Kate Shelley High Bridge was the main railroad span over the Des Moines River for more than a century. It was replaced with the modern, double-track Union Pacific line, which runs more than 65 trains per day.



The last access of the water trail in Boone County at Highway 210 provides a view of the famous High Trestle Bridge – a former RR bridge that today is a key feature of the 25-mile High Trestle Trail and a tourist destination.

Photo Jim Pease

# DES MOINES RIVER WATER TRAIL



## KEY

- Beginner Level
- Intermediate Level
- Advanced Level
- City/Town
- Public Land
- Paved Roadways
- Gravel Roadways
- Portage Trail
- Carry Down Access
- Unimproved Access\*
- Boat Ramp
- Rapids
- Dam
- Point of Interest

\*Note: Accesses marked 'Unimproved':  
 - Will not have wayfinding signage  
 - May have inadequate parking  
 - May be in poor condition



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### Norton's Ford Access to Fraser Access (north)

Most of this 4.5-miles section is heavily wooded, with row crops encroaching on a couple of upstream bends and a few cabins seen from the river. The tight woodland corridor brings wildlife close to paddlers. Sand and silt compose most of the bottom of the Des Moines River, with visibility only 4-6 inches.

The Norton's Ford access is at a remote road's end, and the carry-down may be muddy. There is little space for parking. The takeout at North Frasier Access is well-signed off Juniper road, warning paddlers to portage around the dam at the cement ramp or on the portage trail on the west side of the river. No restrooms or camping facilities are available. However, since this stretch of river is designated "meandered", camping on beaches along the way is legal.

This stretch of river is appropriate for paddlers of all skill levels. It is always best to be aware of water levels and respect the strength of the river's current.

### Fraser Access (south) to E-26

It becomes clear in this section that this is a big river. Deeper holes are common, and the river is sometimes more than 100 yards in width. The corridor remains heavily wooded. Railroad tracks are briefly visible along the river to paddlers, and cross the river at the Des Moines Y Camp. The track is operated by the Boone and Scenic Valley Railroad, and is a prime tourist attraction for the town of Boone. In the early 1900s, the tracks were powered by electricity supplied by the dam at Fraser.

All accesses and roads to them are well-marked and visible in this section. Interpretive signage can be found at the South Fraser Access.

This stretch of river is appropriate for paddlers of all skill levels. However, there are special considerations for paddlers. The low-head dam at Fraser is still present and dangerous to paddlers. Though it may appear runnable at some water levels, it is not recommended. The North Fraser and South Fraser accesses, and a constructed portage trail, provide safe means for paddlers and boaters to avoid this hazard. The dam at Boone Waterworks has been modified to allow experienced paddlers to paddle through a series of rock arch rapids. Less experienced paddlers are provided with accesses both above and below the E-26 highway bridge to allow safe portage around the rapids.

### E-26 to Hwy 30 Access Ramp

Land along the river is mostly forested to the top of the valley, and there are good opportunities to see eagles, hawks, and a variety of other birds and mammals. Layers of sandstone, limestone, shale, and coal become increasingly prominent along this section.

Approximately halfway through this section, two bridges span hundreds of yards high above the valley. The Kate Shelley High Bridge was the main railroad span over the Des Moines for more than a century. It was replaced with the modern, double track cement span to its north in 2009. With more than 65 trains each day, quiet paddling may be frequently interrupted.

For many years, the old dam at Boone Waterworks provided no functional use, and was dangerous. Five people drowned beneath the dam from 1971 to 2014, at which time the dam was removed and replaced by rock arch rapids. Paddlers need to choose whether or not they have the skills and desire to maneuver through the rapids. Those wishing to avoid the rapids should use the Boone Waterworks Downstream Access on the east side of the E-26 Bridge.



Paddlers Be Aware: dams are not always obvious from above. Watch for signs, like at North Fraser, exit when directed, and portage around.



Adult bald eagle  
Photo Jim Pease



Photo Jim Pease

The river has cut deeply into its banks where it meanders through Ledges State Park. Paddlers travel along exposed rocks and dramatic sandstone bluffs. During Iowa's geologic past, giant tree ferns, horsetails, scale trees, and other ancient plants were buried and turned into the narrow layers of coal seen today. Fossils are found in the shale and coal layers, evidence of a long extinct plant community.

*Lepidodendron fossil,*  
an imprint of a  
scale tree



Ledges is one of Iowa's premier State Parks. It features a great network of hiking trails, and places to fish and camp.

This stretch of river is appropriate for paddlers of all skill levels. However, paddlers should be careful around bridge piers and other hazards in the water. Accesses at each end of this section are well developed and well-marked. The Highway 30 Access is just upstream of the Highway 30 Bridge, a four-lane highway that replaced the historic two-lane Lincoln Highway.

### Hwy 30 Access Ramp to E-57 Access

This section features some of the most beautiful and dramatic scenery on the river. The valley continues to grow wider, and young bottomland hardwoods repopulate the inside bends of the floodplains that were once cleared and grew row-crops. Most of the surrounding uplands, some rising over 100 feet above the river, are covered with diverse upland woodlands. Sandstone bluffs are particularly dramatic at Ledges State Park, about five miles downriver from the Highway 30 Access. The river has cut deeply, exposing rocks deposited during the Pennsylvanian Period, some of which contain fossils.

Floods of the past 30 years deposited silt and mud across the floodplain, sometimes at a depth of more than 10 feet. The river has cut down through that alluvium, leaving vertical cut-banks. Some wildlife take advantage of the exposures. Willows and cottonwoods grow on the new soil. Bank swallows, rough-winged swallows, and kingfishers dig tunnel nests into the banks. Beavers construct bank dens in the easily excavated soil. This is one of nature's ways of "making lemonade out of lemons".

This stretch of river is appropriate for paddlers of all skill levels. However, users should realize that this a bit longer than other sections of the Water Trail. Accesses at either end are well marked and usually well maintained. However, they are prone to becoming covered with silt and sand. Signs are in place to educate people about the river. About halfway between the two accesses, a sand and rock quarry is visible from the river on the west side. Paddlers also may see remains of an old stone chimney and other past human habitation.

### E-57 Access to Sportsman Ramp (a.k.a "Old Hubby Bridge")

This is a short section in which the river slows and the floodplain widens. Two large looping turns feature long sandbars. Changing climate, increased flooding, and effects from Saylorville Dam have resulted in lower areas along the river being dominated by willows, grasses, and other species that tolerate being inundated by water. Associated wildlife along the shoreline include beaver, red-winged blackbirds, field sparrows, white-tailed deer, butterflies, and an occasional softshell turtle. Uplands remain covered by hardwood forest.

This stretch of river is appropriate for paddlers of all skill levels. The two accesses at the ends of this section are well marked and easily found. Though silt may sometimes cover them, both ramps are maintained and accessible. The E-57 Access has signs to educate people about the river. The Sportsman Ramp is locally known as the "Old Hubby Bridge" Access, in reference to a wooden pylon bridge that spanned the valley in the early- to mid-1900s. In very low water, paddlers may see remnants of the old wooden bridge supports.

Dragonflies dart over the water, catching mosquitoes, gnats, and other insects on the wing. While some dragonfly species migrate long distances, many are adults for only one season. They lay eggs in the water and their aquatic nymphs prey on other insects, tiny fish, and tadpoles.

Photo Erv Klass



*Dragonfly nymph*  
Joe Morris

### BE SAFE OUT THERE!

Keep your trip enjoyable by following these safety TIPS:

- Pack only essentials and keep them in waterproof bags.
- Check the river water levels and currents before each trip.
- Know the weather forecast, including areas upstream, and stay aware of the weather on your trip.
- Make sure someone knows your planned entry and exit points and estimated times.
- Always wear a properly-fit life jacket.
- Expect overhanging trees, logjams, and other obstacles, such as bridge abutments or big rocks. If paddling around them is not possible, get out and portage around them. Grabbing onto tree branches may capsize your paddlecraft.
- Always portage around lowhead dams. Surface appearance can be deceiving. Undercurrents can be strong enough for drowning.
- If you capsize, remain on the upstream side of your boat to prevent being pinned.
- Dress appropriately for weather conditions (including air and water temperatures), and avoid weather and water conditions beyond your skill level.

### Sportsman Ramp to Hwy 210 Access Ramp

This section of river is under strong influence of the Saylorville Dam. Due to the frequency of the river spilling out over the floodplain, trees are almost non-existent along the river. Even cottonwoods and silver maples cannot tolerate the long periods of inundation that are so common. Flood-tolerant grasses and other plants cover the floodplain. Wildlife adapt to this landscape in many ways. Beavers often move up the stream tributaries, where they build a series of dams that create more stable home life. Paddlers can look for these and other wildlife signs by paddling up these adjacent creeks when the water levels are sufficient. Fishing boats become more common in this area as paddlers approach public recreation areas associated with Saylorville Lake Reservoir.

Below the Sportsman Access, the river makes a long, sweeping turn and then flows along land that is part of the Iowa 4H Camp. In the distance, large old oaks and basswoods dominate the forested ridge overlooking the Des Moines River Valley. Bluffs along the east side of the river expose coal veins that were mined and transported to Des Moines and other surrounding towns to heat homes and businesses until the 1940s.

This stretch of river is appropriate for paddlers of all skill levels. The Sportsman Ramp, locally known as the “Old Hubby Bridge” Access, may become covered with silt, but is well maintained. The access off Hwy 210 is a cement ramp. Signs exist to educate people about the river, and there are great views of both the Highway 210 Bridge and High Trestle Trail Bridge. The High Trestle Trail is a popular recreational trail, and a reminder of how forms of transportation have changed along the river.

### KNOW YOUR SKILL LEVEL!

- **BEGINNER:** Segments are generally less than six miles. Hazards are few and easy to avoid in normally slow-moving currents. Users can easily access these segments from parking areas, and will not need to portage, except to walk a boat around some shallow riffles or to make the going easier around an obstacle.
- **INTERMEDIATE:** Segments are generally less than nine miles. Users should have ability to recognize and avoid hazards in moderate river flow. The need to portage is rare, but users should be able and willing to carry boats and gear a short distance. Access to the river may involve a short portage, and the launch or take-out may be a bit difficult.
- **ADVANCED:** Segments may exceed nine miles. Hazards are likely and often occur in fast-moving water. The need to portage may be frequent or may involve carrying boats and gear a long distance. Access to the river may involve a portage, and the launch or take-out may be from steeper banks or faster moving water.

### BEHAVE AS A GUEST!

- Respect private property. Only use public lands and access points.
- Be considerate of others in your group and on the banks.
- Give anglers a wide berth.
- Never change clothes in public view.
- Never litter. Always pack out trash.
- Do not disturb wildlife.

For more information, visit:

[www.iowadnr.gov/paddlingsafety](http://www.iowadnr.gov/paddlingsafety)

[www.mycountyparks.com/county/boone.aspx](http://www.mycountyparks.com/county/boone.aspx)

