

# NORTH RACCOON RIVER WATER TRAILS

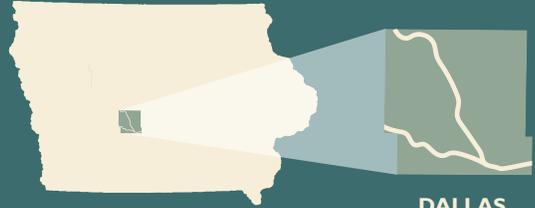


DALLAS COUNTY

## BORN IN WILDNESS, A RIVER SLOWLY TRANSITIONS TO CITY LIFE

The North Raccoon River in Dallas County is a great example of the transitions throughout Iowa from wildness to rural agricultural landscapes and increased human presence. The Water Trail begins in a narrower corridor largely engulfed by forests and bluffs. While proceeding downstream, the river meanders through mostly private lands, where individuals affect the river through their land use choices.

The North Raccoon River is a navigable “non-meandered” stream in Iowa. That means that the State of Iowa owns the water flowing through it, but not the land adjacent to it or under it. Except at access sites and public areas marked on the map, the land adjacent to and underneath the river is private. Please respect it and do not trespass.



DALLAS  
COUNTY



Branches of low-arching or downed riverbank trees may form obstacles to paddlers. Often, these “sweepers” occur on eroding curves of the riverbank, where faster moving currents may direct canoes or kayaks. Paddlers should steer clear of these obstacles by navigating to the slower, shallower water away from sweepers, and walking boats if necessary.



Snapping turtles are the largest of the turtles found in the North Raccoon River. They are equipped with a stout, powerful beak that can snap down on a wide variety of prey. Look for large turtles with distinct saw-tooth tails, often in slow-moving, muddied water.

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Scouring rush is found growing in a few locations where water slowly seeps along river's edge. This unique plant is in the genus *Equisetum* – a group of plants that date back to a time before dinosaurs roamed. The abrasive stem was used by early Americans to clean (scour) cookware.



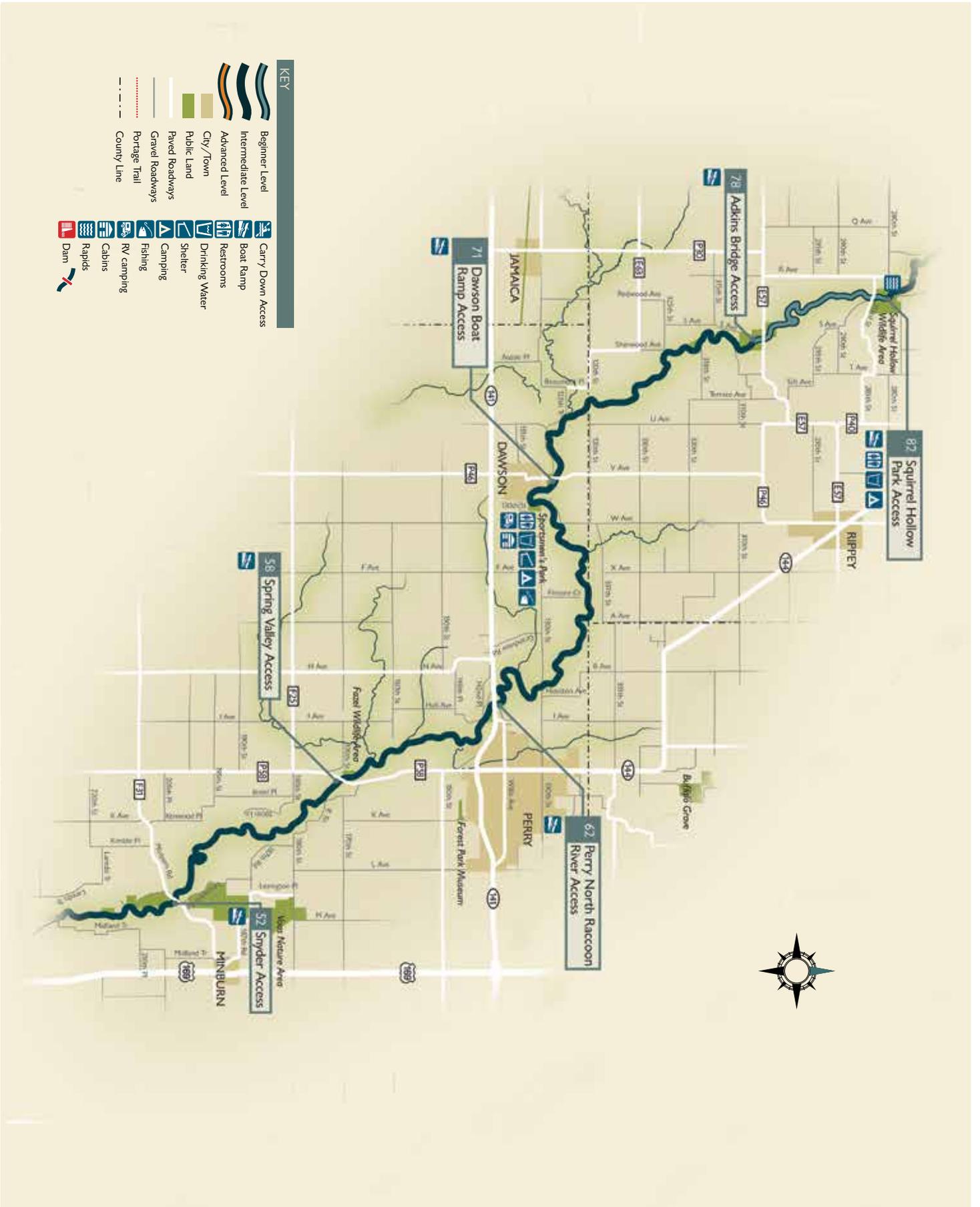
At least six species of mussels are found in the North Raccoon flowing through Dallas county. As you pick up remnant shells and live mussels, see if you can identify some of these beautiful and interesting creatures.

Photos Jennifer Kurth

Just below Interstate 80, the North Raccoon River is joined by the South Raccoon River, doubling the volume of water. Paddlers will notice a change in water due to the larger sediment load carried by the South Raccoon. The dramatic changes in water volume increases riverbank erosion, making the banks taller and steeper.



# NORTH RACCOON RIVER WATER TRAIL



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## KEY

- Beginner Level
- Intermediate Level
- Advanced Level
- City/Town
- Public Land
- Paved Roadways
- Gravel Roadways
- Portage Trail
- County Line
- Carry Down Access
- Boat Ramp
- Restrooms
- Drinking Water
- Shelter
- Camping
- Fishing
- RV camping
- Cabins
- Rapids
- Dam

**Stream Reach: Adkins Bridge to Dawson to Perry Access - 15.7 miles**

Great blue heron

This first section of the Water Trail includes a few dramatic bluffs and pillars, 30 to 40 feet high, carved out of glacial till that remained after the great ice sheets retreated from northern Iowa 12,000 years ago. Further downstream, glacial till gives way to smaller bluffs carved out of shale and sandstone that formed more than 300 million years ago. Paddlers may see some blue clay-like deposits, with vertical rusty stripes of oxidized iron on their surface.

The river is bordered by woodland that varies from a single tree to a forested corridor several hundred yards wide. Though roads are nearby, only one crosses the river, just above the Dawson Boat Ramp. There are few cabins or houses or other signs of construction. The wooded corridor and lack of human development provide a wild feel to this section of river.

Bald eagles can be seen all along this section, and paddlers should look for eagle nests in some of the larger trees. Great horned owls and red-tailed hawks are also common raptors in this section. Great blue herons and kingfishers prey upon fish and frogs found in the shallows.

A variety of birds scoop up insects from the air or glean them from logs and sandbars. Some common insect-eaters include rough-wing and tree swallows, Baltimore orioles, wrens, great crested flycatchers, cedar waxwings, eastern kingbirds, killdeer, and solitary sandpipers. Blue jays, cardinals, wood ducks, downy woodpeckers, and brown creepers are likely to be seen or heard in the woodlands along the route. Cliff swallows glue their nests to the undersides of the only two cement bridges in this stretch of river.

The accesses at Adkins Bridge, Dawson, and Perry provide cement boat ramps and ample parking. There are no restrooms.

Downed trees may be hazards for paddlers and should be avoided, especially when the water is swift. Beginning paddlers should consider shortening their trips by putting in or taking out at Dawson Access. Otherwise, this section of river is appropriate for paddlers of all skill levels.

**Stream Reach: Perry Ramp Access to Spring Valley to Snyder to Hwy 44 Accesses – 14.7 miles**

Live Plain Pocketbook mussel

This river stretch is heavily wooded and has an isolated feel to it. The few roads that cross the river are at the accesses, and in only a couple of short sections do roads even come near the river. Only a handful of cabins and farm buildings are visible to paddlers. Crop fields and pasture are rarely seen – mostly in the first third of this paddle, south of Perry. Fishing is good. There are many large, sandy beaches, often backed by willows and other bottomland trees. These beaches provide ample opportunities for paddlers to picnic, sunbathe, and look for tracks, mussel shells, and other artifacts.

Many of the same wildlife species noted in the previous section continue to take advantage of the wildness in and alongside the river. Turtles bask on the shoreline. Turkey vultures soar overhead or congregate around an animal carcass. While empty shells are not abundant, mussels find this water to their liking. At least six mussel species are found in the North Raccoon flowing through Dallas county, including plains pocketbook (*Lampsilis cardinium*), fragile papershell (*Leptodea*

*fragilis*), black sandshell (*Ligumia recta*), mapleleaf (*Quadrula quadrata*), mucket (*Actinonaias ligamentina*), and pistolgrip (*Tritogonia verrucosa*).

In the rare instances where row crops or roads are near the edge there is noticeable surface runoff and bank erosion. Where riprap is deemed necessary, most landowners in this section have used natural rock, rather than waste cement – providing better stabilization and leaving a more natural appearance to the river.

All accesses in this section contain cement boat ramps, situated at a down-stream angle that provides a nice eddy for paddlers to put-in or take out. All have ample parking.

Notable hazards in this section include frequent mid-river sandbars, an abundance of dead trees in the river, and the occasional boulder hiding just below the water's surface. Beginners could handle any sub-section of this stretch. However, paddling the full stretch of river, and navigating the river hazards, is more appropriate for those with at least an intermediate skill level.

### Stream Reach: Hwy 44 to Adel to Puckerbrush Accesses – 17.3 miles

Due to flooding in recent years, this section of river has control structures that change water volume and direction. As a result, descriptions of the river may vary. Overall, it is an attractive paddle, with diverse woodlands along much of the shoreline and low rock outcroppings of sandstone, mudstone, and shale. Hills rise and fall along the corridor. Only occasionally do agricultural fields or human dwellings creep close to the river. No livestock appear to have direct access to the river in this section, unlike in several upriver sections.

Wildlife responds favorably to the habitat and species diversity. Species previously listed continue to use this stretch of river. Large, vertically oval, pileated woodpecker holes in some old trees attest to the age and relative wildness of the forest. Quiet paddlers may see great horned owls. Noisy crows and blue jays may reveal locations of owls, hawks and eagles, as they mob and scold the larger birds of prey. The raucous rattle of belted kingfishers is commonly heard. Wood ducks are common.

White-tailed deer frequently visit the river's edge. Their trails down to the shoreline, as well as the slides of beavers or otters, are visible to slow travelers and careful observers. Turtles are common. The sucking sounds of carp, caught in too-shallow water near the shoreline, may leave some paddlers wondering what they are hearing. Green darners and other dragonflies zoom over the water in search of insect prey, and water striders and whirligig beetles move on the water surface of shoreline eddies.

Paddlers need to carefully choose their routes. At the time of this writing, the northern end of the west channel at Kinnick-Feller Park was completely blocked by a logjam. The river has a lot of braided channels, and some can be dry depending on which the North Raccoon “decides” to flow. Should a paddler wish to exit at Adel, they must paddle upstream to the beach at Adel Island Park (less than a half-mile), to take-out below the dam and rock riffles.



Widow skimmer dragonfly

Some insects quickly dart to and fro. Dragonflies and damselflies zoom over the water in search of insect prey. Water striders and whirligig beetles move on the surface of calmer water. These small speedsters do not bite or sting. They are natural parts of the river community.



Whirligig beetles



Bluet damselfly

## NORTH RACCOON RIVER WATER TRAIL

Just below the confluence of the two river forks, three bridges are visible. The upstream one at the confluence is River St./288th Trail. It is abandoned and blocked off at each end. The Raccoon Valley Bike Trail crosses the river about another 100 yards below, and yet another 100 yards downriver the busy Hwy 6 Bridge crosses the river.



Raccoon River Valley Trail bridge

Below Hwy 6, the landscape changes near the town of Adel. The wooded corridor along the river is narrower and has more agricultural land, houses, and other development visible from the river.

Accesses at Highway 44, Adel, and Puckerbrush provide cement boat ramps and ample parking. There are no restrooms.

This section's length, and the presence of logjams and changing river conditions, makes it appropriate for paddlers with at least an intermediate skill level. There is a shorter trip option from Hwy 44 to Kinnick-Feller Park. There are many dead trees in the water. Caution is

advised in choosing one's course to avoid getting trapped by sweepers or logjams. Occasional mid-river sandbars can also surprise paddlers, especially as the current slows above Adel.

### **Stream Reach: Puckerbrush to Booneville – 8 miles**

This section differs from upriver sections, as the landscape transitions to increased row crops and more human development near towns. Woodlands along the shoreline are mostly narrow. Roads are parallel to, or crossing, the river. Agricultural fields are often perched on the very edge of the river. Large county tile lines empty into the river in several locations.

Just below I-80, the North Raccoon joins the South Raccoon. The river doubles in volume and nearly in width, and visibility lessens as silt from the South Raccoon mixes in. Banks are often steep and high.

Beauty and some wildness still exist. Some rock outcrops are visible along a couple of short sections, and the woodlands that do exist are diverse. Wildlife is still present, including many of the animals mentioned in previous sections. Broad sand beaches are found at several bends in the river and receive a lot of public use. Unfortunately, litter often is left behind. The mixture of human impacts, development, and nature is typical of many central Iowa rivers.

Accesses at Puckerbrush and Booneville have cement ramps and adequate parking. The Booneville Access may be heavily silted-in, making its use for motorized boats doubtful, but fine for paddlers.

This section is appropriate for paddlers of all skill levels. However, beginners may find it a bit long. There are log hazards and only one small riffle. Dry sandbars along the way make ideal places to stop, rest, and look for tracks in the sand and mud flats.

**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.

**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)

Photography:

*All photographs are attributed to Jim Pease unless otherwise noted.*

