

MAQUOKETA RIVER WATER TRAIL




JONES COUNTY

The MAQUOKETA RIVER - THROUGH ANCIENT LANDSCAPES

The beauty of an ancient landscape comes to life while paddling the scenic Maquoketa River. The water winds through a corridor of bluffs and outcrops that has changed little during thousands of years. The cracked and creviced limestone provides opportunities to view species rarely found elsewhere in east central Iowa. Eddies and rocky shorelines are haunts for smallmouth bass and other fish. Birds swoop, dip and soar along the route.

Cover photo Michele Olson



The Maquoketa 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.

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Photo Michele Olson

The bluff-filled landscape likely is not much different today than it was when glaciers retreated 10-12,000 years ago. Cliffs originated as thick coral reefs in a sea that existed more than 400 million years ago, and contain fossils.

When moving water encounters obstructions, eddies form downstream as the diverted current fills in behind. Crossing this current (eddy line) can spin a boat around. An eddy also provides an area protected from fast moving water, sometimes used by fish and other aquatic animals.

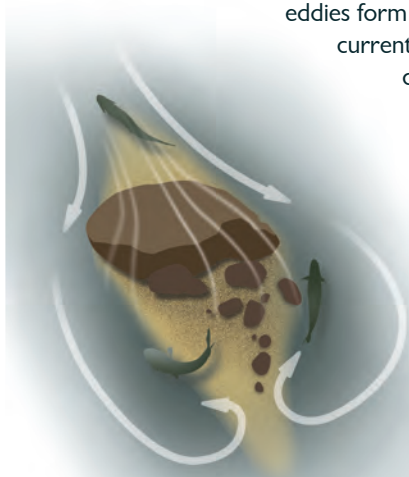


Photo John Wenck

The rock-strewn and gravelly river bottom of some sections of the Maquoketa River results in riffles. You should “read” the riffle downstream by looking for a v-shaped path of deeper water to pass through. Sometimes, a too-shallow riffle will mean getting feet wet while walking the boat, rather than getting stuck on the rocks.



◀ *Spotted Sandpiper*

Photo Stephen J. Dinsmore

Killdeers are common shorebirds seen running and probing for food on sandbars, gravel beds, and mudflats of the Maquoketa River. Killdeers have two black “necklaces” on their white chests and a far-carrying “kill-deer” call. They nest on gravel beds, laying four eggs right on the ground among the rocks. They often try to lead people away from their nests or hidden young by using a “broken wing” trick. Other birds to watch for in the same areas include spotted sandpipers, gold finches, and herons.



Limestone easily forms cracks that widen by freeze-thaw cycles and flowing water to form crevices and caves. Mosses, lichens, and liverworts (left photo) colonize these fractured micro-habitats. Ferns and a few flowering plants (right photo) take root in the meager soil among the rocks.

You may see vines that cling to rock outcrops along the shoreline. Some vines, such as the five-leafed Virginia Creeper use disk-like adhesive pads called “hold fasts”. Other vines, such as wild cucumber, use twining tendrils and larger poison ivy vines use hairy roots to hold on tight.

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NOTE: Stream reaches shaded in gray are not part of the state designated water trail. Paddlers need to be aware that stream reaches outside the designated Water Trail are not signed from the river.

KEY

- Beginner Level
- Intermediate Level
- Advanced Level
- City/Town
- Public Land
- Paved Roadways
- Gravel Roadways
- Portage Trail
- Carry Down Access
- Boat Ramp
- Rapids
- Dam
- Restrooms



Dunlap Park (Hopkinton) to Monticello (Mon-Maq Dam)

Approximate mileage: 11.5 miles

This section, like much of the Maquoketa River, is a pleasant paddle through a mostly wooded, northeast Iowa landscape. The water is generally clear, with mid-river sandbars.

As is the case in most of Iowa, the river corridor is almost entirely in private ownership. In some areas, cropland exists right to the water's edge, and the shoreline is rip-rapped with concrete waste. In one location, eroded cement has formed a mid-river hazard for paddlers. Fortunately, this is not the norm, and the more wild shorelines support a variety of plant and wildlife species.



Paddlers Be Aware: dams are not always obvious from above. Watch for signs, like at the Mon-Maq Dam, exit when directed, and portage around.



The access at Dunlap Park south of Hopkinton is a walk-down gravel path to an easy put-in below a small dam. Watch for signs indicating the takeout on the left side above the Mon-Maq Dam. If the signs are missed, it is difficult to see where the dam drops off.

This river section is appropriate for paddlers of intermediate experience. Beginners may find it too long. The river is shallow and the thalweg very fickle. Mid-river sandbars are frequent and paddlers may easily misread the river and get stuck on them. Lower water levels likely will require some walking and dragging of boats.

Monticello (Mon-Maq Dam) to Pictured Rocks Park

Approximate mileage: 7.7 miles

This stretch flows through areas of dense upland and lowland woodlands. Steep banks in the first half of this section sometimes rise 10 feet above the water and the effects of bank erosion are apparent. In areas without trees lining shoreline, some landowners have placed broken concrete and rock on the eroding bank.

As the river approaches Pictured Rocks Park, paddlers are treated to a valley of limestone bluffs and a wondrous woodland landscape teeming with wildlife. Bluffs rise up 30 to 100 feet or more above the water. Some rise up right out of the water while others are somewhat hidden behind shoreline trees. Faults and caves in the limestone are artifacts of erosion over many thousands of years. These nooks and crannies provide microclimates for mosses, ferns, liverworts, and other plants, many of which are more typical of more northern boreal forests. It is only the cliff-induced microclimates that allow them to exist this far south. They form fairyland-like scenes for paddlers along the way. Among the wildlife are numerous bald eagles, which may nest in the huge cottonwoods or sycamores found in this section. Paddlers should also look into the eddies created in the water behind the frequent large blocks of limestone cliff that line the river's edge. The eddies often hide fish, ducks, whirligigs, and other river critters that prefer life out of the current.

The sandbar access below the Mon-Maq dam makes for easy launching, and the takeout at Pictured Rocks Park features a large, wide boat ramp constructed of native stone. It is one of the most beautiful and well-constructed ramps in the state. Bathrooms, water, and ample parking are available at both accesses.

Although an eight-mile trip may be a bit long for beginners, this stretch of river is appropriate for paddlers of all skill levels.



Photo Michele Olson

Five miles downstream of Monticello, paddlers will float along the 1,138-acre Pictured Rocks Wildlife Management Area.

Hiking trails traverse the undeveloped hardwood forest in Pictured Rocks. Get out of the boat and stretch your legs! Several small caves attract spelunkers.

As mentioned in the previous section, the Pictured Rocks Access fully accommodates people taking out or putting into the river. The access at Highway 136 is adequate, but conditions may vary with water levels. The eddy created by the Highway 136 Bridge support works well for paddlers, and there is ample parking.

Beginners likely will find this to be too long a trip. Otherwise, this section poses no problems for paddlers of all skill levels.

Pictured Rocks Park to Highway 136 Bridge Access

Approximate mileage: 11.7 miles

This section continues to take paddlers through some of the prettiest and most dramatic stretches of the Maquoketa River. The 6-plus miles between Pictured Rocks Park Access and Eby's Mill Road Bridge flows along public land on one or both sides of the river, and continues to feature scenic limestone bluffs. The heavily wooded shoreline, often intersected by deeply cut valleys and streams flowing into the river, supports a variety of wildlife. As paddlers proceed downstream, extensive woodlands give way to more sparse trees and buffer plantings, and agricultural fields, homes, and cabins are more visible.

Highway 136 Bridge Access to Supples Bridge and Canton Bridge Accesses

Approximate mileage: 9.4 miles

This section of the Maquoketa passes through a changing landscape. From Hwy 136 to Supples Bridge Access, bluffs disappear and flatter bottomland hardwoods are restricted to a more narrow river corridor. Agricultural fields push close to the water's edge. Although not as dramatic as in the Pictured Rocks area, limestone bluffs and the wide forested corridor return after Supples Bridge. The widening of hardwood forests along the river is accompanied by a noticeable presence of a variety of birds and other wildlife.

The access at Hwy 136 provides an adequate river access. The Supples Bridge Access, however, is not a desirable one. It may be knee-deep with mud, and is not signed or readily visible from the river. The Canton Bridge Access is a good access. It is well marked from the road and river, and provides ample parking.

The Supples Bridge Access, in its current state, does not provide a good shorter trip option for this section. The distance between Highway 136 and Canton Bridge is long for beginner paddlers. Therefore, it is suggested that paddlers have at least an intermediate experience level.

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

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

