Route Description of the Big Fork River

NOTE: (R) and (L) represent right and left banks of the river when facing downstream.

RIVER MILE

8.0 (R) Confluence with Rainy River. On right is Grand Mound Interpretive Center.

8.5 (L) Trailer access at Randy Flat Landing, a Boise Cascade site on the upstream side of the State Highway 11 bridge.

14.0 (L) Pooley’s Landing, trailer access.

15.0 (R) County Road 1 bridge, Town of Loman.

18.0 (R) County Road 1 bridge, Town of Lulo.

24.0 (R) County Road 1 bridge, Town of Clinton.

26.0 (R) County Road 1 bridge, Town of Rood.

27.0 (R) County Road 1 bridge, Town of Wilson.

29.0 (R) U.S. Forest Service trailer access and rest area on west shore of Dora Lake.

30.0 (R) State Highway 38 bridge. Town of Big Fork. River gauge on bridge.

37.5 (R) Robb’s Rapids, Class I.

39.0 (R) Johnson Landing. Rest area near shore; campsite and drinking water available.

40.0 (R) County Road 229 bridge.

42.0 (R) class I rapids.

42.9 (R) Bear Lynn Landing, a gravel clearing with a campground and carry-in access.

47.5 (R) Sturgeon River Landing. Carry-in access and campground, just above the confluence with the Sturgeon River.

52.5 (R) Big Falls West trailer access, campground and rest area with drinking water.

52.8 (R) railroad crossing with river level gauge.

53.0 (R) Big Falls East Landing trailer access. The beginning of a half-mile portage around Big Falls, which is a series of four falls dropping 40 feet in a quarter mile, rated Class IV. Cross the river via Hwy 71 Bridge. Put in at trailer access west of Hwy 71 below the falls on river right.

63.5 (R) Grasswood Landing carry-in access.

67.5 (R) Johnson Landing. Rest area near shore; campsite and drinking water up a gentle rise, several hundred feet from the river. The drinking water comes from an artesian well through a small pipe.

72.6 (R) Power line crossing.

76.0 (R) Carry-in access at State Highway 6 bridge.

81.5 (R) Easy Half Campsite, a gravel clearing amid deciduous trees with picnic tables.

83.1 (R) Caldwell Brook joins.

93.8 (L) Carry-in access at State Highway 6 bridge.

95.7 (L) Class I rapids.

94.0 (R) Old Harbor Bay Farm Campsite and rest area.

95.5 (R) Pooley’s Rapids, a Class I boulder-bed rapids.

104.8 Little American Falls. The river plunges over a six-foot ledge into a deep pool flanked by 60-foot cliffs. This Class IV-V pitch bears scouting and probably a portage at any level. Portage left. A campground with fire ring lies to the left of the falls. A county campground, picnic site and parking area are on the right bank, up a steep trail.

107.6 County Road 5 bridge. The site of Cringley, an abandoned logging town.

113.5 County Road 40 bridge.

116.4 (R) Muldoon Rapids, Class II. End of half-mile portage.

116.4 (L) Muldoon Campsite, off portage trail.

116.7 (R) Begin of half-mile portage.

116.9 (R) Bigo Muldoon Rapids, Class II, a boulder half-mile stretch with more than ten races in high water.

116.9 (L) Class I rapids.

119.1 County Road 229 bridge.

121.1 County Road 40 bridge.

122.6 (R) Trout River Campsite. This large site has a fire ring and privy.

123.7 (L) Class I boulder-bed rapids begin at bend about 1/4 mile above State Highway 1.

127.2 County Road 42 bridge.

127.9 County Road 237 bridge.

130.3- (L) Rice Rapids, a long, bouldery Class I stretch that washes out in high water.

130.3- (R) Rico Rapids Campsite.

137.6 Fourmile Bridge, Confluence with the Rice River.

137.8 (L) Rice Highway 38 bridge. Town of Big Fork. River gauge on bridge.

138.0 (R) Boitner access and watercraft campsite. Drinking water available.

147.3 (R) Sturgeon River Campsite.

147.5 (L) Hwy 71 carry-in access.

149.3 (L) Little Moninee campsite.

150.5 (L) Bowerman Rapids, Class I.

153.5 County Road 14 bridge.

157.1 (L) Bowerman Rapids, Class I.

158.3 (L) Barrie Lake Trail, trailer access, campground, upstream of County Road 4 bridge, picnic area, and fire rings.

171.3 (L) U.S. Forest Service trailer access and rest area on west shore of Dora Lake with tables and privy.
The Big Fork River

Most of the Big Fork is considered the relatively easy class-IV (see Rating White Water). Only two stretches are more difficult; Little American Falls (class-IV+) and Big Falls (class-IVV). All rapids can be portaged, though some portages are difficult because of brush. For the fishing enthusiast, the river provides an excellent and diverse fishery. Fish habitat and geographic character changes along the river offer a variety of fishing opportunities. Sturgeon, Muskie, Walleye, Small-Mouth Bass and Northern Pike populations are present in the river.

Planning A Safe River Trip

A successful river trip is safe. To enjoy a safe journey you should be prepared by doing the following:

- Get acquainted with your route. Plan your trip with a map before you depart and advise someone of your plans including planned departure and arrival times.
- Travel with a companion or group.
- Choose a distance that is comfortable for you, most people paddle two to three river miles per hour.
- Wear a U.S. Coast Guard approved flotation device that state law requires on the back for each person.
- Be cautious of river obstructions, such as overhanging and dead trees in the river.
- Bring a first aid kit that includes waterproof matches.
- Bring an extra paddle in your canoe.
- You must pack out all trash.
- Leave only footprints, take only photographs!
- Water levels can vary so slow you down. You can get information about water levels from the regional DNR Parks and Trails offices, or check the DNR website, or the DNR Information Center. Remember that much of the shorelands are privately owned. Respect and protect the water and shorelands.

The Big Fork River is in places pastoral and in other parts wild. Much of this area is like a result of being what once was the bottom of Glacial Lake Agassiz. However, two waterfalls, Big Falls and Little American Falls provide a dramatic contrast to the mostly flat area which has topographical relief of less than 50 feet. Because this area was previously a lake bed, a lot of the area is covered in peat which is made up mostly of organic materials and is over 1.5 feet deep in some areas.

On the broad plan, extensive eisenging was done in the early part of the 20th century to turn this land into an agricultural nirvana but the efforts were unsuccessful. Today these peatlands are dominated by bog forest species of black spruce, fir, cedar and tamarack. Upland sites are commonly vegetated by aspen-birch and jack pine.

Foresty and tourism are the major land uses. A scattering of small farms are mixed within the forest. The area of major development are the towns of Bigfork and Big Falls.

The water level in the Big Fork river generally peaks in late April and falls during the summer, when the rapids may be impassable. Heavy summer or autumn rains can raise the river to runnable levels. River levels are reported by the DNR during the boating season April through October. This information is available on the DNR web page or by calling the DNR information center. Some rapids will be too rocky to run, when the gauge reading is much less than 4 feet. From Dora Lake to the Rainy River, the Big Fork drops 243 feet, 1.5 feet per mile.

Chief Busticogan, a popular Chippewa chief, along with the Big Fork River with his band in bog swamps in the late 1800s. Many stones and old log jam are known to this chief. In the 1800s he and his wife visited a logging camp where 60-80 had been struck with smallpox. They buried the dead and moved the survivors back to health.

Chief Busticogan was known as a remarkable, intelligent and dignified person who traveled the early Big Fork river country by birch canoe in summer and snowshoes in winter.

Boating Information

- Register your watercraft. All watercraft must be registered in Minnesota or your state of residence.
- Wear a U.S. Coast Guard approved personal flotation device that state law requires on the back for each person.
- Be cautious of river obstructions, such as overhanging and dead trees in the river.
- Bring a first aid kit that includes waterproof matches.
- Bring an extra paddle in your canoe.
- You must pack out all trash.
- Leave only footprints, take only photographs!
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Rating White Water

Rivers and rapids are rated according to the International Scale of River Difficulty. Ratings are estimates based on observations at low or moderate water levels and are meant to reflect average conditions.

CLASS I Easy rapids with small waves and few obstructions.

CLASS II Rapid with waves up to five feet high. Some maneuvering is required.

CLASS III Difficult rapids with high, irregular waves capable of swamping an open canoe. Narrow channels may require experienced maneuvering. Usually considered the limit for an experienced paddler in an open canoe.

CLASS IV Long, turbulent rapids with high, irregular waves, common passages and hidden drops. Decked canoes and kayaks only. Open canoes should be portaged.

CLASS V Long, violent rapids with complex routes and big drops or waterfalls. Hazard to life in the event of a mishap. Experienced only by experts in decided boats.

CLASS VI Cannot be negotiated without great risk to life.