The Mississippi River makes a question mark shape on the land as it travels from Lake Itasca to St. Cloud. You are invited to follow the Headwaters Trail down the first 420 miles of the Mississippi River. At Lake Itasca, the Headwaters trickle over a stone ledge, where you can walk across the mighty river. Tributaries add momentum for the 2,348 mile trek to the Gulf of Mexico; groundwater contributes two-thirds of the Mississippi’s flow. From the Headwaters, the river flows through nine lakes. Glacial hills, called moraines, and glacial depressions, new lakes and wetlands, create scenic views. Wetlands, marshes, and oxbows act as natural filtration systems, preserving water quality. Rapids and riffles det the entire river. Fishing is great! River elevation drops 500 feet from Itasca to St. Cloud. Hydropower and water control dams require portages. A bridged river path joins the Mesabi and Cuyuna Iron Ranges—100 miles apart by road and 200 miles by river. The Cuyuna Range is the most rugged area of the Headwaters. View Baraboo Range development and agriculture increase with a more defined channel; natural characteristics are preserved. The Mississippi Headwaters Board is an eight-county joint powers board organized to protect the natural, cultural, scenic, scientific and recreational values identified on the Mississippi Headwaters Castle Book. The Headwaters is an extraordinary place for wildlife and rare plants. Citizens protect the Mississippi River at its Headwaters to help provide safe drinking water to millions of people downstream in St. Cloud and the Twin Cities, and in Iowa, Wisconsin, Illinois, Missouri, Kentucky, Arkansas, Mississippi and Louisiana. Choose a wilderness experience or visit parks with a variety of facilities. Either way you will see a unique place and meet the people who live here. The Mississippi River is a fun place to visit.

**PLANNING A SAFE RIVER TRIP**

A successful river trip is safe. To enjoy a safe trip, you should be prepared. You should be acquainted with your route. Choose a distance that is comfortable for you. Water levels can speed up or slow you; get information about water levels from the regional DNR office, or check the river level gauges listed in the route description section of this map. Protect the water and shorelines and leave nothing behind you except footprints. Remember that much of the shorelands are privately owned. River levels are updated weekly and available on the DNR website at: midn.dnr.gov.

**Trip Planning**

- **Travel with a companion or group.** Plan your trip with a map before you depart and advise someone of your plans including planned departure and arrival time.
- **Most people paddle two to three river miles per hour.** Plan for fast water. Do not underestimate the power of wind and waves on large lakes. Lake Beltrami, Cass Lake and Lake Winnebagois can be dangerous; stay within swimming distance of shore. If you are uncomfortable with large, open water, plan to use a vehicle to portage around the lakes.
- **Bring a first aid kit that includes waterproof matches.**
- **The currents of river obstructions, such as overhanging and dead trees in the river.**
- **You must pack out all trash.**
- **Leave only footprints; take only photographs.**

**Rest Areas and Campsites**

- **Public rest areas are available along the route to rest, picnic and explore.**
- **Campsite in designated campsite areas, which are available on a first-come, first-served basis.**
- **Bring drinking water. It is only available in a limited number of rest areas.**
- **Drinking river water is not recommended, but if you do it must be treated.**
- **Respect private property.** Stop only at designated sites, much of the shoreline is private property.
- **The Use of designated toilet facilities or bury human waste away from the river.**

**Boating Information**

- **Wear a U. S. Coast Guard approved personal flotation device.**
- **Bring an extra paddle.**
- **Not all portions of this water trail are suitable for motorized use.**
- **Register your watercraft.** All watercraft more than 9 feet in length, including nonmotorized canoes and kayaks, must be registered in Minnesota or your state of residence.

**ABOUT THIS RIVER SECTION**

Lake Itasca to Cass Lake

In 1832, Henry Schoolcraft became the official “discoverer” of the Mississippi Headwaters guided by Ozazindid, a relative of Schoolcraft’s Ojibwe wife living on Star Island in Cass Lake. Reverend William Boutwell helped Schoolcraft christen the river’s source, suggesting the words “veritas,” Latin for true, and “cass,” Lakota for head. Schoolcraft combined the two and dropped the first and last syllables, to create the name “Itasca.”

Schoolcraft wasn’t the first white man to visit the headwaters. In 1680, Father Hennepin’s companion, the Italian Tomi, led him to the Indians to the northeast at the source of the great river. About 1805, the trader, William Morrison visited Lake Itasca, then known as Elk Lake. Indian guides told him it was the source of the Mississippi.

The Mississippi headwaters are indeed remarkable. The river lies on the western edge of the Itasca moraine, a large landform created by glaciers 10,000 years ago. A moraine is a glacier’s endpoint, created when rocks and sand were deposited by the glacier. The river traveler will see the power of the glaciers, where hills composed of glacial material meet plains flattened by the outwash from melting ice.

White and red pine, oaks, maples, birch and aspen grow on the moraines well-drained, sandy soils. Wet, organic soils of the plains support confederate swamp forests, covered in black spruce, white birch or tamarack. This diversity of plant life supports 242 kinds of birds, 23 species of reptiles and amphibians, and 57 species of mammals. These include warblers that migrate to Central America every year, common loon, tufted and loon, American beaver and muskrat, and pine marten, which only recently has returned to this area. Also seen are the bald eagle and other birds of prey, bears including the black bear and the white-tailed deer.

**SUSTAINABLE ECOSYSTEMS**

The city of Cass Lake is the headquarters for the Chippewa National Forest, Minnesota Chamber of Commerce and the Leech Lake Indian Reservation Tribal Council. Records of culture use include prehistoric burial, an ancient trail leading from Leech Lake to Red Lake, a historic cemetary, and evidence of fur trading, early missionaries and logging history. The river’s beauty connects us across the centuries to all the other people who have lived and visited here.

**HEADWATERS RESOURCES**

**U.S. FISHERY SERVICE - CHIEF MINNESOTA FEDERAL RELATIONSHIP OFFICER**

**MINNESOTA DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES REGION HEADQUARTERS**

**CASS LAKE AREA CHAMBER OF COMMERCE**

**BEMIDJI AREA OF COMMERCE**

**STATE WATER TRAIL GUIDE TO THE MISSISSIPPI RIVER**

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**A STATE WATER TRAIL GUIDE TO THE MISSISSIPPI RIVER**

This information is available in alternative format upon request.

Online water trail information and maps can be found at midn.dnr.gov/watertrails