

## Tales of Water Trails: Big Fork River

Welcome to 'Tales of Water Trails' presented by the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources.

Our guests, Lynne and Bob Diebel, are experienced canoeists and kayakers who have paddled more than 2,400 miles of Minnesota water trails. They describe these routes for other travelers in their two books, *Paddling Northern Minnesota* and *Paddling Southern Minnesota*.

For this series of programs, the Diebels are sharing their insights about Minnesota's state water trails. The Minnesota DNR manages over 4,000 miles of water trails for canoeing and kayaking including the north shore of Lake Superior and dozens of rivers statewide.

Here are Lynne Diebel and Bob Diebel, talking about paddling on the Big Fork River.

Lynne:

From Dora Lake, the Big Fork heads north to the Rainy River and the Canadian border. It flows freely for 170 miles through wild and scenic state forestland, including the Big Fork State Forest, Pine Island State Forest, George Washington, Koochiching and Chippewa National Forest.

We paddled 121 miles of that river, and we went through only two small towns and passed almost no cabins along the way. There are a couple of dramatic falls, the Little American Falls and Big Falls that are formed at granite outcrops. Spectacular sites.

Bob:

We had first heard about the Big Fork from a ranger that we encountered on a river further south in the state. He was very excited about the river, and said he'd taken troops of Boy Scouts up to paddle and considered it an ideal river for that – exciting whitewater that you could portage around, waterfalls, and the route mainly through wilderness, good fishing. He considered it a great alternative to going to the Boundary Waters.

Lynne:

We really found that it was a great river for canoe campers. And you do want to be comfortable in some rapids, class I to II. Makes the trip a lot more fun if you don't have to get scared about the rapids, but a day paddler could enjoy this as well. The bridge landings on Highway 6 are excellent landings, and make for a good day trip on the river.

Bob:

The river flows up through the watershed that goes to Hudson Bay. It goes up to the Rainy River, and then up through Lake Winnipeg, and to Hudson Bay. So it's among a few rivers in the northern part of the state that's part of that watershed.

Lynne:

The route that you can take heads from Harrison's Landing, which is west of the little town of Big Fork, and goes for 19 miles into Big Fork, where you start to head north. After about 22 miles you hit the class II rapids, which is called Muldoon Rapids. Now, the portage there is difficult so you want to be prepared to run that one. Running with canoe gear and camping gear is a challenge, so you want to have your skills up.

When you get to Little American Falls that's a six-foot drop. That's another ten miles from Muldoon, you don't want to try to run that one. But there's a nice, short portage trail that's well maintained.

Bob:

And that portage trail also has a campsite right near it. Make sure that you like to sleep in a noisy environment if you decide to go there!

Lynne:

The waterfall right next to you can either lull you to sleep or it can keep you awake all night.

Bob:

There's a lot of wildlife along this river. We saw moose and bear, deer, beaver, river otter, eagles, woodpeckers, just a wide variety of animals.

Lynne:

The fishing - and this is attested to by a guide along there - is really great for walleye, northerns, muskies, small mouth, and people catch some sturgeon as well.

Bob:

So, it's one of our favorite rivers. Very good paddling, some challenging whitewater in a few areas, but for the most part this is a fast flowing river that will develop some of your skills. You need to be a little bit better than a beginning paddler, but it's not a super challenging river.

Lynne:

Some of the safety concerns are:

1. Don't paddle in the spring. The high water in the spring carries a lot of debris downstream. There may even be chunks of ice still in the water.

2. Another thing to consider is that it's a remote river – quite remote – and the camping is primitive, so be prepared for a Boundary Waters-like experience.
3. The third thing is the falls. Big Falls, in the town of Big Falls, is where the river drops sixty feet in a quarter of a mile. That is spectacular. You'll want to look at it even if you don't paddle that far down the river. It's worth a visit, a drive up Highway 6 to Big Falls.

Bob:

And according to the local residents, during ice-out in the spring it's quite spectacular to watch the ice from the river come down and make its way down through the falls.

Lynne:

They say everybody takes off of work that day and runs down to the river to watch the ice come crashing through.

Bob:

So, in summary, a great river, go up and try it. There's a number of other rivers up in that area that you could paddle also in the same trip if you have the time.

Good paddling!

Lynne:

Thanks for joining us.