

Tales of Water Trails: Cloquet 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 Cloquet River.

Lynne:

The Cloquet River is up north of Duluth. In its upper reaches it races through wild and beautiful northern forests, drops through a number of challenging rapids, and then flows into the reservoir called Island Lake. Below the dam at Island Lake the river's quiet for a little while, but then it starts another drop. It's an exciting river from beginning to end, and you can paddle about 64 miles of it. It takes you through the Cloquet Valley State Forest. There are very few cabins and in the upper stretch you'll find one boulder rapid after another. The great thing about those rapids is that if you're not comfortable paddling them there are really well maintained portage trails.

Bob:

This is a very exciting river. We had a really good trip with a group of paddlers, five canoes in all. This is a river that you really need to think about some safety issues. It would be best to paddle with other people should you get into trouble. Safety equipment like flotation in your canoe, helmets would be appropriate, and of course, the normal cautions of being very careful about determining whether or not it's paddleable by the water levels need to be thought of.

This river flows down into the St. Louis River, which in turn flows into Lake Superior at Duluth. So from the very top of this all the way down to Lake Superior this is a wild watershed. The St. Louis, which we'll talk about later, has of course a spectacular fall right above Duluth and this is all part of that big fall down to the big water.

Lynne:

Canoe camping along the upper Cloquet is a great experience. You want to plan carefully, but you'll find good campsites and there are opportunities for fishing along the way. The smallmouth and the northerns are biting up in that area.

Day paddlers can choose this too. It gets a little complicated doing a shuttle though when you're a day paddler, because you've got a lot of state forest to drive through.

Couple of good routes: Indian Lake to Island Lake is a three-day trip if you take your time. You can do 10 miles the first day, 11 miles the next day and 12-13 miles the last day. That last day is going to take you through four big rapids, including the final one before the river flows into Island Lake. Now if the water is up in Island Lake, it's a reservoir, then the ledge is going to be non-existent and you'll just float right into the lake. If it's not up, if it's down at its lowest level, this can be as much as a 15-foot drop and you're not going to paddle that. In between that you've got Cedar Rapids, McCabe's Rapids and White Sides. Those three are class II or class II - III. Scout the rapids! Always go on the portage trail and scout the rapids. Now below the dam, there's a nice quiet stretch for about 9 miles down to County Road 15, and from County Road 15 to Highway 53 you've got 10 miles of pretty easy class I. Below Highway 53 it starts out class I and by the time you get to the St. Louis you've got a solid mile of difficult class II rapids without any let up. So choose your river segment based on your level of ability.

Bob:

The rapids on the upper part are actually more difficult, but they are shorter and they have kind of calmer water between them. The lower section is interesting in that once you've started on this last mile before the St. Louis River you're really kind of committed, and you don't have the opportunity to stop and scout it out.

So it's a wild ride, it's exciting, and well worth doing if your skills are adequate to do that. The upper part, as we said, really you need to scout the rapids. We went with this group that I had mentioned earlier and we did have one incident that was kind of exciting and very instructional. One of our party got sideways and pinned against a rock. They were out there sitting on the rock with a fully loaded canoe and they had to be rescued with throw ropes and everything. It was very interesting to see how it was to have a canoe pinned against the rock. The forces are just unbelievable – it took the strength of all the other canoeists with two ropes to finally pry that canoe off the rock. And if these people had been out there by themselves it would have been a very difficult situation for them. As it was, everybody was very cold and we made camp early; the coldest people got into sleeping bags and stayed there the rest of the day to warm up. So it's a river that needs lots of thought, but it's very rewarding to paddle.

Lynne:

Great rewards. The wildlife is everywhere. You'll see birds, animals, lots of red-shouldered hawks, and kingfishers and wood ducks, eagles everywhere.

When you are on the lower part, this needs to be mentioned, you don't have the opportunity to portage – there aren't any portage trails. So you want to be sure you're up to running those rapids without portaging.

Highly recommend the Cloquet!

Bob:

Yeah, great river, a lot of fun. Good paddling.