

Tales of Water Trails: Cottonwood 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 Cottonwood River.

Lynne:

The Cottonwood's a fast-moving prairie river flanked by tree-covered banks. It feeds the Minnesota River at the city of New Ulm. The good paddling is about the last twenty miles of the river. It's a wooded corridor. There's farmland all around, but the wooded corridor provides a little bit of relief from the farm fields.

Bob:

One of the things to think about on this river – although it is calm, there are some standing waves particularly at Highway 10. It's a very wooded corridor so of course there's opportunity for deadfalls. The river is wide enough that those deadfalls are really going to block your path down the river, but of course you can get into trouble on a curve if you suddenly encounter a deadfall. So have the paddling skills to be able to handle that should you encounter it.

Lynne:

When the water is above six feet on the USGS gauge, and there's a link to that on the DNR website, then you're going to run into standing waves that are about three feet high at the beginning of the route. As you get further down it's going to be a little flatter but there will still be ripples. So it's a river for experienced paddlers.

The wildlife along the way will surprise you. It seems as though with all the farmland around there, that all the wildlife chooses the river corridor as a place to live. There are wild turkeys, scarlet tanagers, eagles, blue herons, little green herons, kingfishers, and bank swallows have formed another one of those great swallow condos on a sandstone cliff where there are dozens and dozens of holes all over

the cliff where the swallows live. We called that one a swallow metropolis, it's about halfway down from County Road 10 to New Ulm.

There are wild roses and phlox growing on the banks and big cottonwoods and oaks line the river. Flandrau State Park has land along the river just before you get into New Ulm.

Bob:

The Cottonwood does run through farm country. There's not as much descent on this one as there are on some of the other rivers that flow into the Minnesota River. So it's a bit flatter.

One of the issues that is a reality on the river, is there's some water quality issues. It goes through corn country. There are some farm chemicals that at certain times of the year you can smell in the water, and some turbulence due to runoff. There are some tiled fields that have drainpipes right in the river, so that's a little disturbing.

It's worth mentioning these things because this is an example of a river that is basically a beautiful river that hopefully will improve as some farming practices improve in the future. Joseph Nicollet was an explorer of the area back in the late 1820s; he kept an extensive journal and mentioned the incredible clarity of the water in this river. And of course today it's not that way except at some times of the year when the turbulence is down because there's not so much runoff. But it's nice to think the river may someday be back to that kind of condition.

Lynne:

The Redwood-Cottonwood Rivers Control Area is a group that's trying to improve water quality. They have an annual canoe trip, which is something you might want to look into.

Good paddling.