

Tales of Water Trails: Otter Tail 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 Otter Tail River.

Bob:

In the far western part of the state, the Otter Tail is a treasure of a river. It's quite lengthy. We paddled from right below the historic Phelps Mill, down to just short of Fergus Falls. The river flows into the Red River, which flows north. So it's kind of an interesting thing in that the Otter Tail flows from north to south, and then when it gets down to the Red River it reverses course to head up to Hudson Bay.

But back to the part that we paddled. From Phelps Mill you go down through a series of small lakes and get to the Red River Lake, oddly named being on the Otter Tail River, but at the exit of the Red River is the Friburg Dam. Red River Lake is the Friburg Dam and the Taplin Gorge. This is a very steep, spectacular rapids before the dam was put in – you need to portage around that. And then from there you go paddle on down in some calm water to the Diversion Dam, and portage around that of course. And then put back in until you get to a rock dam right by the power plant, and then shortly after that is our last takeout point. This is a very clear stream, some very interesting and varied paddling.

Lynne:

It's also got one of the best smallmouth bass fisheries in the state. It's a really primo place if you're a smallmouth bass fisherman.

Now, one of the things that'll surprise you along the way, of course you'll be prepared for this, but it's a broken down dam. You can paddle through the dam, you can drag around it – it'll depend on the water levels. Between the Diversion Dam and the Broken Down Dam, the rapids are pretty challenging and if the water's up, they'll be class II. So you want to be aware of that. In the early 1900s, Broken Down Dam was built to be a power dam. Within a year of its construction there was a giant flood and the

whole thing broke apart, and the powerhouse went floating downstream. It was a big mess. Nobody was killed, but the Broken Down Dam still stands there as a reminder of "don't build your dams where there's springs underneath."

Bob:

The Friburg Dam has an interesting detail. When you portage around the Friburg Dam, the powerhouse along the river at its base is a neoclassical structure. We found that very interesting in our travels around Minnesota – although we're not real fans of dams in general, because they usually do harm to rivers – the period in which these dams were built, the powerhouses constructed, offers a lot of interesting architecture. Some neoclassical, some even art deco sorts of architecture.

Lynne:

This particular powerhouse is a replica of the tomb of the emperor Theodoric of Rome. So, go figure, out there in the woods near Fergus Falls. It's really an interesting contrast.

Bob:

We were very fond of the Otter Tail and highly recommend paddling it. Good paddling.