The North Fork of the Crow River

Rising in southeastern Pope County, the North Fork of the Crow River flows southeast for about 175 miles until it joins the Mississippi River at Dayton. Although the North, Middle and South forks of the Crow are all part of a state-designated canoe and boating route, the North Fork is generally considered to be the main stem, the best maintained, and the best for canoeing.

The North Fork is small, shallow and fairly clean from the Lake Koronis Spillway to Kingston. Prairie and hardwood vegetation border the river. Falling an average of less than 3 feet per mile, the river tumbles over many small rapids (the spillway, however, should be avoided).

A two-mile stretch of the river below Lake Koronis has been channelized. Many snags in this reach make canoeing difficult, particularly in high water when the river flows quickly.

Although rapids are not difficult, hidden snags can tip canoes and overhanging branches may strike canoeists. Sharp bends may also make this part of the river difficult for beginners. Because of many drainage ditches in the area, the Crow rises quite quickly but falls slowly. The upper reaches of the North Fork may be impassable in low water.

The river deepens and widens downstream from Kingston, meandering in a floodplain that is sometimes more than a mile wide. The Crow River grows straighter and even broader and deeper as the North and South forks join near Rockford. Ideal for family canoeing, the lower river is rated extensively for day trips.

Named by the Ojibway Indians for the bird they called the “marauder of newly planted corn,” the Crow River passes several archaeological sites, although none have been thoroughly studied. Two sites near Lake Koronis have a total of 43 mounds.

The Crow River was once flanked by the “big woods,” a thick forest of maple, basswood, elm and other hardwoods supporting abundant wildlife. Considered a sacred hunting ground by the Indians, the forest later attracted white trappers. The Ojibway and Dakota, and later the Dakota and the settlers, fought many battles near the Crow River.

The whites first settled the Crow River in 1851, building their homes near the site of Dayton. Several lumber mills operated along the river as the forest was cleared for agriculture.

Steamboats were the only means of hauling passengers and freight during the early 1850s. Paddle-wheel boats brought provisions from St. Anthony Falls to Dayton where the goods were transferred to rowboats and carried up the Crow. Rowboats regularly ran supplies from Dayton to Rockford for about two years. In May 1851, when the river was high, the steamboat, “Governor Ramsey” paddled to Rockford, farther upstream than any other steamboats has traveled.

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Rapids with waves up to three feet high. Some maneuvering is required.

CLASS III. Difficult rapids with high, irregular waves capable of swamping an open canoe. Narrow chutes may require extensive maneuvering. Usually considered the limit for an experienced paddler in an open canoe.

CLASS IV. Long, turbulent rapids with high, irregular waves, constricted passages and blind drops. Decked canoes and kayaks only; open canoes should be portaged.

CLASS V. Long, violent rapids with complex routes and steep drops or waterfalls. Hazard to life in the event of a mishap. Runnable only by experts in decked boats.

CLASS VI. Cannot be attempted without great risk to life.

Boating Information

- Wear a U.S. Coast Guard-approved personal flotation device that state law requires to be on board the craft.
- Bring an extra paddle.
- Not all portions of this water trail are suitable for motor 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.

General Information

- Bring drinking water. It is only available at a limited number of rest areas. Drinking river water is not recommended.
- Respect private property. Stop only at designated sites; much of the shoreline is private property.
- Be sanitary! Use designated toilet facilities or bury human waste away from the river.

Sustainable Ecosystems

Outdoor recreation is dependent on a healthy and attractive natural environment. Sustainable outdoor recreation enables people to enjoy the outdoors without negative impacts on the environment.

Communities working together can improve water resources by promoting environmentally sensitive land-use practices along rivers and throughout watersheds.

Natural shoreline buffers improve water quality by filtering out pollutants and sediments. Healthy and diverse native shoreline plant communities are attractive and provide important habitat for birds and wildlife.

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Rest Areas and Camping Sites

- Public rest areas are available along the route to rest, picnic and explore.
- Camp only in designated campsites, which are available on a first-come, first-served basis.