

Otter Tail River

MINNESOTA  
STATE PARKS  
AND TRAILS  
ESTABLISHED 1891



Left to Right: Sunset on Rush Lake. Pelicans in flight. Canoeing and fishing on the Otter Tail. A great day on the river. (Amy Ellison, Roger Lee, River Keepers, Jim Krausz)

**“The Otter Tail River GETS ITS NAME FROM EARLY FRENCH EXPLORERS WHO CALLED IT ‘Lac de la Queue de la Outer’ OR ‘Lake of the Otter’s Tail.’”**

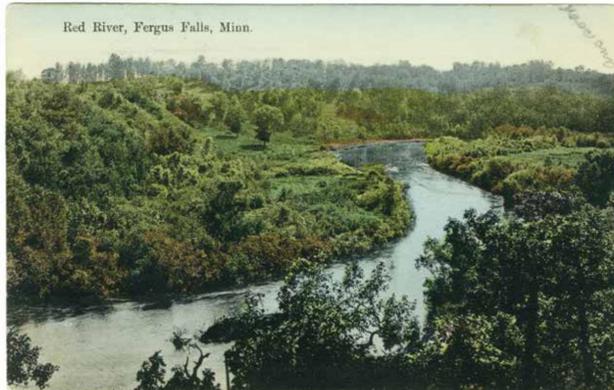
**LANDSCAPES OF THE OTTER TAIL**

The Otter Tail River Water Trail is 157 river miles of Minnesota’s eighth-longest river. The Otter Tail River, located in west central Minnesota, is unique because it flows through three of four biomes in the state. Biomes, also known as ecosystems, are areas on the earth with similar climate, plants, and animals. The Otter Tail moves southerly and then westerly, first through the Coniferous Forest, then the Deciduous Forest and finally the Prairie Grassland biome. Paddlers enjoying this river will be able to see distinct differences between the biomes, particularly in the tree types and water color. Large stately pine, spruce, fir, and tamarack typify the coniferous biome followed by sugar maple, basswood, oak, elm, and ironwood of the deciduous forest. The prairie grassland is now extensively farmed with little of the original prairie remaining, but the rivers edge will still have trees such as oaks, box elders, and willows.

As the soil types change, the crystal-clear water of the coniferous forest biome eventually changes to dark clay-silted opaque water of the prairie grassland biome. The fine clay soil particles are so small that they remain in suspension even during periods of slow flow. This dark water color is often assumed to be caused by pollution or drainage practices. However, while that may occasionally be a factor, this dark-colored water was typical long before European settlement. The drop in the river as it moves “down hill” also changes as the river moves towards Breckenridge. The first 100 miles of the river have minor rapids and a steeper drop, but when it reaches the prairie grasslands, the river flattens out and its flow reflects that change.

The water trail passes through several lakes for a total of about 30 miles. They include Rice, Little and Big Pine, East and West Lost, Rush, Deer, and Mud. The largest lake in the chain, Otter Tail, is also Minnesota’s 10th-largest lake. The name “Otter Tail” was used for many years by Native Americans before Europeans entered the area. Around 1750, two early explorers, reportedly a Frenchman and an Englishman, met a band of Native Americans on the shore of “Lac de la Queue de la Outer,” which translates roughly to the Lake of the Otter’s Tail. There is a large sand bar on the northeast shore of the lake that is shaped like an otter’s tail. The river enters the lake and flows several hundred yards between the sand bar and the shore before entering the main body of water.

The water in the Otter Tail River is unique because it starts by flowing south but when it joins the Bois de Sioux River in Breckenridge it starts flowing north! It’s at this point the water is named the



Red River of the North and flows into Canada and eventually Hudson Bay. Originally the Otter Tail River was considered part of the Red River of the North and shared the Red River name. Around 1900, the portion of the river from Clearwater County to Breckenridge was renamed the Otter Tail. Despite its caption, the postcard above is actually a picture of what is now called the Otter Tail River.

**HUMANS AND THE OTTER TAIL**

Humans have been in the Otter Tail River region for many years. Skeletal remains found near the Pelican River, a tributary of the Otter Tail, are estimated to be over 7,500 years old. It’s unknown when the first European explorer saw the Otter Tail, but some suggest it may have been Viking explorers before 1400 A.D. The quest for furs brought the first trappers to the region of the Otter Tail in the 1600s. But it was still some time after the great California Gold Rush of 1849 that European settlement of the area began in earnest. Driven by the need for lumber to feed a growing nation and facilitated by railroads and steamboats, the final wave of settlement began.

**RIVER POWER AND DAMS**

Dams have played an important role in the history of the Otter Tail. There are currently about 30 water control structures on the Otter Tail. A few of them are still used for power generation, but dams were originally constructed on the Otter Tail to facilitate the movement of logs and to provide power to grist mills. The last remaining mill on the river is Phelps Mill (river mile 85.5), listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1975. It no longer produces flour, but is a popular tourist destination.

While most logs were processed in the Frazee area before the lumber was shipped, some logs were successfully floated more than 500 river miles all the way to Canada via the Otter Tail and Red River. The modern town of Selkirk, Manitoba was built in 1870-71 using pine lumber from the northern reaches of the Otter Tail.

The dams helped provide deeper water for an extra push to move the logs to their destination. On the bottom of the Otter Tail, there are 125- year-old logs that didn’t successfully make the trip from logging sites to the mill. To see one, look for the cut ends of the logs to identify them from naturally occurring fallen trees.

**RESORTS AND RECREATION**

The lakes in the Otter Tail chain are some of the most beautiful in Minnesota. During the last 100 years, a thriving resort and campground industry has developed which brings visitors from all over the world to enjoy fishing, swimming, golf, horseback riding, canoeing, and wildlife watching.

Some of the resorts in the Otter Tail region are hosting third-generation family members who make a trip to their favorite resort an annual event. The resort industry is changing with some smaller family-run resorts being replaced with large resort complexes or cabins and homes. In addition to



resorts, lake cabins and homes are popular along the river.

**FLORA AND FAUNA**

The Otter Tail River region is a popular location for birdwatchers. Even the less serious birdwatcher will enjoy the wide variety of birds on the Otter Tail. The numerous lakes in the Otter Tail chain host many families of loons, the state bird. Minnesota has more loons than any other state except Alaska. Known for their unique calls and coloring, they dive for fish on most Minnesota lakes. They have distinct red eyes, thought to be helpful when searching for food on their deep dives, which can be as much as 250 feet below the surface. The adult loon weighs about 10 pounds and has legs that are set far back on its body so it has an awkward gait on land. Their bones are solid instead of hollow like most birds. These heavy bones combined with relatively small lighter wings allow for the deep dives. After the young hatch, they will often ride on their parent’s back even when their parent dives. Both the male and female have identical coloring and share in parental duties. Loons can be sensitive to disturbances, so avoid approaching them when paddling or boating.

You can hear the warning call of the loon when another favorite Minnesota bird, the bald eagle, is in the vicinity. The eagle is the only predator of adult loons and when an eagle is spotted, the loon warns others of its presence. The observant paddler will see bald eagle nests on tall trees or occasionally on power line poles. The nests are large, often weighing many hundred pounds and can be as much as 20 feet deep. The bald eagle’s distinctive dark brown and white coloring and large size make it easily visible in trees along the river. It commonly eats fish and ducks, which are plentiful in the Otter Tail region. Occasionally, an eagle can be seen diving on to the river and returning to the sky with a fish.

The wooded edges of the Otter Tail are ideal nesting locations for one of Minnesota’s most colorful duck species, the wood duck. It’s one of the

few ducks that nests in tree cavities. Community groups and individuals have placed hundreds of nest boxes along the Otter Tail that wood ducks use. These boxes are about 30 inches high and usually have an oval shaped entrance facing the water. A few fortunate paddlers, in late spring or early summer, will be able to see the female wood duck on the ground calling to her ducklings to jump out of the nesting box and join her on a walk to the river or a neighboring slough where they spend the rest of the summer.

When the parents of ducklings are disturbed, they will often feign a broken wing in an attempt to lure away a predator. This realistic action does not mean that they need help. They are drawing attention away from their young, which will often be seen hiding along the shore. The appropriate action is to keep paddling and not to further disturb the family.

The Otter Tail chain is also home to many fish and occasionally paddlers will troll a line trying to catch a fish for lunch or a picture. A popular fish for angling is the smallmouth bass, which may be the hardest fighting fish pound- for-pound in Minnesota. The largest smallmouth bass recorded caught in Minnesota was in Otter Tail County. A popular fishing spot for smallmouth is below the Orwell Dam (river mile 39). A bobber and worm will provide hours of fun for young and old. Special regulations are in effect for smallmouth on the Otter Tail, so refer to posted signs and fishing regulations before casting.

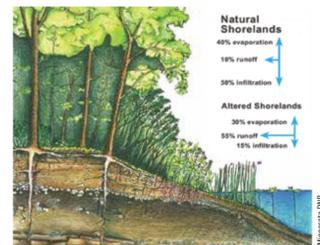
A success story in Minnesota is the reintroduction of sturgeon in many rivers including the Otter Tail. This fish was all but removed from the state due to construction of dams and the quest for caviar. They are a large fish and older residents of the area tell stories of how as children they built rock “corrals” in the river, trapping sturgeon and riding them like a horse. Some of the dams on the Otter Tail are being retrofitted with rock rapids allowing sturgeon and other fish to pass to spawning areas. This, along with stocking, will bring back a sustainable population of sturgeon. Until then, if caught, they must immediately be returned to the river after recording information on any identification tags.

The banks of the river are home to many wildflowers including the Minnesota State flower, the Lady Slipper. Wildflowers should be viewed and not picked. Another plant found in the Coniferous and Deciduous biomes is Minnesota’s official grain, wild rice. Wild rice is a water-loving plant that produces a nutty-flavored seed favored by humans and waterfowl. It’s an annual plant found in water less than three feet deep and grows to stand several feet above the river. Once a food staple for

Native Americans, its harvest is now regulated and managed to ensure it will be here for generations to come. Paddlers will often use wild rice bent over in the current to point the way towards the shortest route when encountering multiple river channels.

**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.



**A WORD ABOUT THE TRAIL**

The Otter Tail River is a quiet, peaceful slow-moving river but it’s also a river with rock rapids, dangerous dams, and fast-moving water through culverts with little or no headroom. Careful reading of the route description before an outing is a necessary step in planning a safe and fun trip. Flow rates change throughout the year with faster flow rates usually occurring earlier in the year. During higher flow rates, adventurous paddlers can enjoy dodging rocks, but that same stretch during low flow rates may require walking along side the canoe or kayak. With proper preparation, the Otter Tail is an ideal river for both family canoeing and those that want a little more adventure.

**PLANNING A SAFE RIVER TRIP**

Most of the Otter Tail is a slow-moving, easily navigable river. However, certain reaches depending on certain flow conditions can be challenging, even for experienced paddlers. Before getting on the river, make sure you know the basics of paddling, how to maneuver, and how to right a tipped vessel. Some reaches of the Otter Tail have excellent access while other reaches will be more difficult. This water trail is continuing to be developed, so use current information while planning your trip. Good trip planning will result in an enjoyable trip.

**Planning Tips**

- Travel with a companion or a group.
- Don’t overestimate your capabilities.
- Always wear a proper-fitting Coast Guard approved personal flotation device.
- Check weather forecasts and be aware of changing conditions.
- Flow rates will determine if you will confront rapids or need to walk alongside your canoe in some reaches.
- Most people paddle two or three river miles per hour. Plan your trip accordingly.
- Use a map, know your route, and tell someone of your plans.
- Bring a first-aid kit and a charged cell phone.
- Not all dams or hazards are marked. Stay alert.
- Be prepared to get wet. Keep cameras and cell phones in dry bags.
- Be prepared for limited access to drinking water, sanitary, and trash disposal facilities.

- Access, Rest Areas, and Camping Sites
- Formal access sites are limited. In some areas, road right-of-ways adjacent to bridge crossings may be used for access, but long-term vehicle parking at those sites is rarely allowed. Always watch for traffic when using these sites.
  - Some resorts will offer a shuttle service. Call ahead.
  - Formal camping sites adjacent to the river are limited. They may be too far apart for multi-day trips. Do not use private property without permission. Consult websites and other maps for locations of parks with camping facilities.

**Boating Information**

- Know and use methods to prevent the spread of exotic aquatic species.
- Minnesota law requires most watercraft, including canoes and kayaks, to be registered in Minnesota or state of residence.
- Low water conditions or the presence of rocks and fallen trees across the river may make the use of boats difficult in some reaches. Do not lock down motors.
- Minimize wakes in developed areas and when passing anchored boats, canoes, and kayaks.

**OTTER TAIL AREA RESOURCES**

Minnesota Department of Natural Resources - Minnesota State Parks and Trails 218-739-7576 or mndnr.gov/watertails

Fergus Falls Visitors and Convention Bureau 800-726-8959 or visitfergusfalls.com

City of Frazee 218-334-4991 or frazeecity.com

Perham Chamber of Commerce 800-634-6112 or perham.com

Wahpeton-Breckenridge Convention & Visitors Bureau 800-892-6673 or wahpetonbreckenridgechamber.com

**LEAVES OF THREE ...**

...leave them be. Poison ivy, frequently found on the banks of the Otter Tail, is a small non-climbing shrub, usually knee-high with a single stem and a few, if any stubby branches. The leaves can be relatively large but always with three leaflets. This plant is common throughout most of Minnesota and produces a skin irritant. A trip on a Minnesota river can produce unpleasant memories if there is an encounter with poison ivy. The old adage “Leaves of three, leave them be,” still holds true today.



Minnesota DNR

**IS IT TRESPASSING?**  
On private land, the simple and best answer is, Ask First! Signs are posted by the landowners, and they will state, “No Trespassing,” or similar words in two-inch letters and the signature or name and telephone number of the landowner, lessee, or manager. There can be civil and criminal penalties for violation of the trespass laws.

**RESPECT PRIVATE PROPERTY.**

**LOOKING FOR MORE WATER TRAILS?**  
Online information for other water trails in Minnesota can be found at: [mndnr.gov/watertails](http://mndnr.gov/watertails)

You can make a difference by joining the **DNR Adopt-a-River Program**. Be a cleanup volunteer for a portion of your favorite recreation area. Call the **DNR Information Center** for a brochure. Or visit their website at: [mndnr.gov/adoptariver](http://mndnr.gov/adoptariver)

**DNR Information Center**  
The DNR Information Center provides free publications of facilities and services, and answers questions pertaining to DNR recreational opportunities in Minnesota.

500 Lafayette Road  
St. Paul, MN 55155-4040  
651-296-6157 (Metro Area)  
1-888-646-6367 (Toll Free)

[mndnr.gov](http://mndnr.gov)

The Minnesota Department of Natural Resources is an Equal Opportunity Employer.

This information is available in alternative format upon request.

Left to Right: Spring wildflowers. Wood Duck drake. Power plant. First trip on the Otter Tail. Fergus Falls River Walk. (River Keepers, Roger Lee, Minnesota Historical Society, River Keepers, River Keepers)

