

# MAQUOKETA RIVER WATER TRAIL

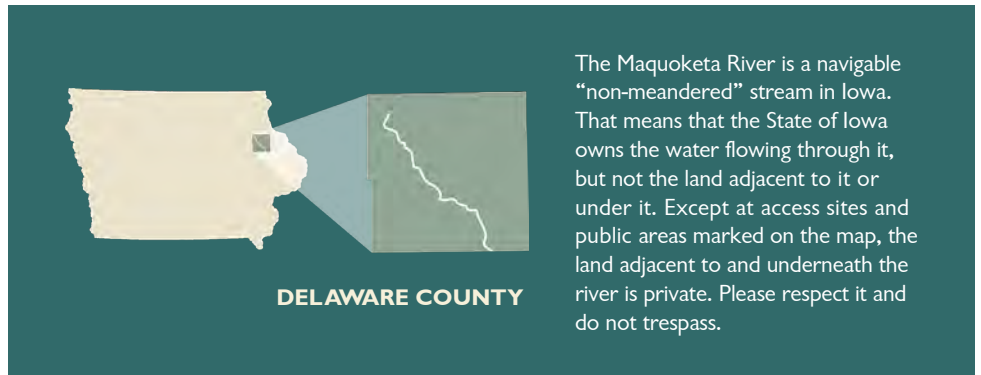


DELAWARE COUNTY

Cover photo Cindy Pease

## THE MAQUOKETA RIVER IN DELAWARE COUNTY

The Maquoketa River Water Trail provides multi-faceted experiences. The river showcases limestone cliffs, mature oak forests, shallow impoundments, lowland forests, and diverse wildlife. Some stretches provide a quiet, prehistoric feel among ancient rocks and forests. The presence of people is more obvious in other places – where cropland and towns encroach on the riverbanks, and where citizens come together to clean the river and promote its use. People can slowly float, fish, enjoy a trip through a whitewater park, and explore Iowa's oldest state park.



DELAWARE COUNTY

The Maquoketa River is a navigable "non-meandered" stream in Iowa. That means that the State of Iowa owns the water flowing through it, but not the land adjacent to it or under it. Except at access sites and public areas marked on the map, the land adjacent to and underneath the river is private. Please respect it and do not trespass.



During millions of years, rain and snow-melt dissolved portions of ancient, exposed limestone, creating cracks and fissures and eventually caves and sinkholes. This porous landscape is called karst and it describes much of the topography of Northeast Iowa. At Backbone State Park, more resistant limestone cliffs, called dolomite, guide the river around the karst feature known as "Devil's Backbone."



Plan to spend some time exploring Backbone State Park before or after enjoying the river. Designated in 1920, Backbone is Iowa's first State Park. Many of the signature stone and timber bridges and buildings were built during the 1930s by the Civilian Conservation Corp (CCC), which even had a full work camp at the park.



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Photo R. J. Gardner

Citizens promote recreational use of the river, and were instrumental in development of the Manchester Whitewater Park. Some landowners maintain a forested corridor for the river. In a couple instances, paddlers are even being allowed to access the river through private land.



Photo Darrin Siefken

Iowa's largest constructed whitewater paddling course is located in downtown Manchester. It features six 18-inch drops over a span of 800 feet. Paddlers can use a paved trail to walk back to the beginning and repeat the course, or continue downstream on the water trail.

Woodpeckers can be heard banging their beaks on hollow-sounding trees to attract mates. Downy woodpeckers are the smallest, and produce slow, short, persistent drumming - often ten or more bursts per minute. Pileated woodpeckers are the largest, and produce a short series of loud, powerful raps - repeated a couple times per minute. Red-headed, hairy, and red-bellied woodpeckers are medium in size, and drum at levels somewhere between downy and pileated woodpeckers.

Pileated Woodpecker






Red-bellied Woodpecker

Photo Craig Meyers

# MAQUOKETA RIVER WATER TRAIL

## KEY

-  Beginner Level
-  Intermediate Level
-  Advanced Level
-  City/Town
-  Public Land
-  Paved Roadways
-  Gravel Roadways
-  Portage Trail
-  Carry Down Access
-  Boat Ramp
-  Restrooms
-  Drinking Water
-  Camping
-  Fishing
-  Rapids
-  Dam

**NOTE:** Stream reaches shaded in gray are not part of the state designated water trail.

Paddlers need to be aware that stream reaches outside the designated Water Trail are not signed from the river.





## MAQUOKETA RIVER WATER TRAIL



**Stream Reach: 1.2 miles west of North Gate of Backbone State Park on 400th St.,** access on private property into the river to boat ramp at Backbone Lake ~6 miles OPTIONAL stretch that requires access permission from private landowner and is not part of the officially designated DNR Water Trail. This stretch is usually shallow, but in spring and after rainfalls it is well worth exploring.

Paddlers will float through spectacular woodlands, including some of the finest examples of mature oak forest in Iowa, and along limestone and dolomite cliffs. Backbone is the oldest State Park, and one of the gems of Iowa's State Park System. Those who take the time to explore the park on foot will notice numerous buildings and bridges that were built by the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) workers during the 1930s. A museum details Backbone's history of housing a CCC camp.



The North and South Forks of the Maquoketa River converge in the Park and, as paddlers float through the "flats" to Backbone Lake, they travel through two horseshoe turns of the river and around the landmark Backbone Rock Formation. A popular land trail allows park users to walk along the rock precipice. The Backbone Formation is among many features showcasing a unique geology, including caves, cliffs, spires, hills, and washouts rich in fossil imprints. This river section ends at Backbone Lake - a popular river impoundment with a beach, and boat rental and food concessions. Unfortunately, the beach has been periodically closed due to high bacteria levels. Still, much of the Maquoketa River provides quality river habitat for fish and other wildlife.



Backbone State Park is a designated Important Bird Area and Wildlife Watching Area. Among its signature bird species are nesting bald eagles and pileated woodpeckers. The park also is an important migration stop for many species of warblers and other migrating songbirds, waterfowl, and deep forest birds. Paddlers with permission from the landowner can put-in off 400th street, although this is not maintained as a public access. It also is possible to put in at the North Flats area in the middle of the park, where parking is available. The decision to enter this stretch of river is contingent on ample water level. Paddlers should check the river level before choosing this route. The takeout at the lake has ample parking and restroom facilities. There are several options for camping at Backbone State Park.

This river stretch is appropriate for paddlers of all skill levels, so long as water levels are adequate.

### **Stream Reach: Below Backbone Lake Dam to Dundee Access - 2.1 miles**

Although outside the Backbone State Park boundaries, this stretch captures the flavor of the paddle within the Park, flowing along deep mature woodlands and limestone cliffs. There are a series of riffles in several places along this stretch, making for fun and interesting challenges.

Bird life is a key feature while paddling through this narrow corridor of river habitat. Song sparrows, rough-winged swallows, great blue herons, belted kingfishers, orioles, catbirds, red-eyed vireos and crows are commonly seen and heard, and quiet paddlers may occasionally encounter pileated woodpeckers, wood



Chert and flint

ducks, Cooper’s hawks and barred owls. Other wildlife also are common – deer, squirrels, turtles, and northern water snakes are likely to be seen. A few rock and sand beaches are found in this stretch and they are strewn with chert and flint nodules, and some appear to have been flaked by native cultures. Some large mussel shells are also found on these beaches.

The put-in for this section is below the Backbone Lake Dam and below the northern-most bridge on the park road to the South Lake Campground. The takeout at Dundee Access is found on the northwest edge of the village of Dundee, and is unimproved.

Although this is a short river stretch, riffles and downed trees in the narrow river corridor make this section most appropriate for paddlers with at least an intermediate skill level.

### **Stream Reach: Dundee Access to Manchester Whitewater Park - 11.8 miles**

As paddlers float downstream of Dundee, the wooded corridor begins to narrow with agricultural lands encroaching closer to the river. Some smaller outcrops of limestone still appear in the upper end of this stretch, though not as high or dramatic as in the sections above Dundee.

The river contains a lot of twists and turns, and many fallen trees and logs to carefully navigate. There also are a good number of riffles to run during low water levels, and paddlers likely will need to walk their boats over shallow sand bars. Numerous beaches on the inside bends of turns provide habitat for shorebirds such as killdeer and spotted sandpipers. Dead trees provide woodpecker heaven as well as basking areas for turtles and water snakes. Farther downstream, the more open character of the river favors birds such as tree swallows, red-winged blackbirds, song sparrows, Canada geese and yellowthroats. All are species that prefer younger forest with dense young trees or shrubs.

After about five miles, the wooded river corridor gives way to a broader floodplain and increased agricultural land. More homes and cabins are seen as the river approaches the town of Manchester.

House wrens, song sparrows, great crested flycatchers, chickadees, blue jays, bald eagles, kingfishers and wood ducks are all seen and heard in this section. A number of barred and great horned owls are seen near the shoreline, and killdeer and spotted sandpipers nest and entertain on beaches.

The floodplain is more broad and flat along much of this section, and pasture and row crops are closer to the river. Litter tends to gather along this stretch of river – apparently mostly from riverbank users. The river benefits when paddlers come prepared to pick up some trash while enjoying the river.

Approximately 8 miles downstream from Dundee Access, and just north of the city of Manchester, you’ll enter an area of river where the DNR converted the Quaker Mill dam to a series of rapids and restored a 1-mile section of river upstream.



While paddling along areas with young groves of trees or shrubs listen for the unique song of the common yellowthroat. This small, black-masked warbler sings “witchity, witchity, wichity, WHICH!” Yellowthroats can be seen and heard throughout spring and summer along the Maquoketa.

*Dam removal and a more wild river*

Floods in 2008 and 2010 resulted in damage to the levee berm holding back the Quaker Mill Pond. After the 2010 flood, area residents realized that simply repairing the existing levee was not a good, long-term solution. The power of

the Maquoketa during flood events was too strong to be held back at the site of the levee bridge crossing, and rebuilding a stronger levee and bridge would be very expensive.

Removing the dam along with filling the levee breach was a more economical solution with several side benefits. Dam removal allows fish to travel upstream and eliminates a dangerous impediment to public use of the river. Natural resources professionals from Iowa DNR Fisheries Department and others determined that restoring the river's natural flow would also scour out sediment and potentially reconnect cold water springs to the river.

The dam was removed. Then, a starter channel was cut to mimic curves and bends of natural meanders on another river stretch. River banks were given time to re-vegetate, and river flow was re-established.



Removal of most of the old Quaker Mill Dam resulted in rapids with a 5-foot fall and restored fish passage upstream. The full project showcases multiple benefits of dam site restoration, repair, removal, and reconnecting.

In place of the dam, a series of rapids allows paddlers and fish to traverse the river as it runs wild again. The bottom of the former impoundment now contains trees and other plants, and serves as a floodplain that will handle some of the energy and water volume of future floods.

The stretch of river corridor from below the rapids to the access above the Manchester Whitewater Park is mostly treed with silver maple bottomland forest, and the river bottom is shallow and sandy. A housing development in Manchester lines the right side of the river, atop a bank that is rip-rapped with cement chunks and older limestone. Agricultural fields come close to the river and paddlers will see water entering the river from tile lines.

Paddlers have the option to take out at a small unimproved ramp in Tirrill Park, or paddle a short and shallow 1.2 miles to the access/portage above the Whitewater Park. Advanced skilled paddlers may choose to navigate the series of rapids at the whitewater park. Typical of towns and cities, much of the shoreline above the whitewater park is armored with cement slabs and some limestone, and a variety of old vehicles and various other metal discards. Storm sewers empty into the river along this stretch. Downtown parking lots and businesses—including a canoe/kayak livery – abut the shoreline.

This stretch of river is appropriate for paddlers with intermediate to advanced skill levels, primarily because of the upstream section which includes a number of areas with rapids and woody debris.



Winged seeds of silver maple and box elder helicopter down, and the downy seeds of cottonwoods and willows float in the breeze. Some seeds land in the water, and float to sand bars and mudflats. They are adapted to germinate and grow quickly.



**Manchester Whitewater Park**



The City of Manchester greatly improved the section of river within the city limits when they developed a whitewater park in 2015. The park provides a very nice paved take-out and portage trail around the rapids, and vehicle parking is close and convenient. The banks on each side of the river within the park were greatly improved. It is Iowa's largest constructed whitewater paddling course featuring six 18-inch drops over a span of 800 feet. Paddlers can use a paved trail to walk back to the beginning and repeat the course, or continue downstream on the water trail. For more information about the Whitewater Park, visit [www.manchester-ia.org/whitewater-park/](http://www.manchester-ia.org/whitewater-park/).

The whitewater park would require no less than advanced skills.



**Stream Reach: Below Manchester Whitewater Park to Pin Oak Access - 3.2 miles**

This section begins at the access downstream of the whitewater park, located on the south edge of Manchester. It requires a lengthy portage from the parking lot to the bottom of the whitewater park. Schram Park Access, just a mile downstream of the park, is a more accessible alternative.



As paddlers continue downstream from the Whitewater Park, the river reflects the transition from city/town to country. The Maquoketa is an excellent river for fishing, and in some places, bait containers and other litter are problems. The sounds of lawn mowers, and traffic from nearby Highway 20, subtract from those of nature. Still, trees are present along the river in town, and eventually the landscape gives way to woods and pasture.

At the second horseshoe bend south of Manchester, the City, is Schram Park, with a small boat ramp that can be used as an alternative put-in for those desiring a shorter paddle. A large ski lake, picnic shelter, and other amenities are located at this park, which is on the south side of the river and slightly upstream of Highway 20.

Manchester Whitewater Park

Pasture land is adjacent to the river beginning about ¼ mile south of the highway. It is rip-rapped along the shore and sparse trees are present in the pasture near the stream. It appears that cattle are fenced off from direct access to the river.

Approximately the last mile of river flows through or along public land that culminates at Pin Oak Access. Several riffles exist where the sand bottom is replaced by bedrock. The riffles are shallow and, especially in low water, can be challenging and fun for beginning paddlers.

The put-in below the whitewater park provides ample parking and a paved trail, but it requires you portage about 500 to 600 feet from the parking lot. Paddlers have several options for floating portions of the whitewater course or immediately heading downstream below the rapids. The takeout at Pin Oak Access has remote parking and a cement boat ramp. Chunks of concrete at the bottom can be a hazard for both boat trailers and paddlers.

Due to the presence of riffles, this stretch of river is recommended for paddlers with at least an intermediate skill level.

**Stream Reach: Pin Oak Access to Bailey’s Ford Park - 2 miles**

This is a short but particularly enjoyable section of the Maquoketa River. There are several riffles through this section, making it fun and exciting for paddlers with some experience. In lower water conditions, heavier boats might have to be walked through the shallow riffles. The majority of this stretch is heavily wooded on both sides of the river.

Red-tailed hawks, turkey vultures, and eagles may be seen on this stretch. Lots of woody debris in and along the river provides abundant perches for them.

The put-in at Pin Oak Access has remote parking and a paved boat ramp. Be aware of chunks of concrete that may be just below the water surface beyond the ramp. The take-out at Bailey’s Ford can be either at the campground or, more easily, at the boat ramp to the east of the campground. The County Park offers camping, picnicking, restrooms, trails, and a nature center.



Due to the presence of riffles, this stretch is appropriate for paddlers with at least an intermediate skill level.

Photography: *All photographs are attributed to Jim Pease unless otherwise noted.*

**BE SAFE OUT THERE!**

Keep your trip enjoyable by following these safety TIPS:

- Pack only essentials and keep them in waterproof bags.
- Check the river water levels and currents before each trip.
- Know the weather forecast, including areas upstream, and stay aware of the weather on your trip.
- Make sure someone knows your planned entry and exit points and estimated times.
- Always wear a properly-fit life jacket.
- Expect overhanging trees, logjams, and other obstacles, such as bridge abutments or big rocks. If paddling around them is not possible, get out and portage around them. Grabbing onto tree branches may capsize your paddlecraft.
- Always portage around lowhead dams. Surface appearance can be deceiving. Undercurrents can be strong enough for drowning.
- If you capsize, remain on the upstream side of your boat to prevent being pinned.
- Dress appropriately for weather conditions (including air and water temperatures), and avoid weather and water conditions beyond your skill level.

**KNOW YOUR SKILL LEVEL!**

- **BEGINNER:** Segments are generally less than six miles. Hazards are few and easy to avoid in normally slow-moving currents. Users can easily access these segments from parking areas, and will not need to portage, except to walk a boat around some shallow riffles or to make the going easier around an obstacle.
- **INTERMEDIATE:** Segments are generally less than nine miles. Users should have ability to recognize and avoid hazards in moderate river flow. The need to portage is rare, but users should be able and willing to carry boats and gear a short distance. Access to the river may involve a short portage, and the launch or take-out may be a bit difficult.
- **ADVANCED:** Segments may exceed nine miles. Hazards are likely and often occur in fast-moving water. The need to portage may be frequent or may involve carrying boats and gear a long distance. Access to the river may involve a portage, and the launch or take-out may be from steeper banks or faster moving water.

**BEHAVE AS A GUEST!**

- Respect private property. Only use public lands and access points.
- Be considerate of others in your group and on the banks.
- Give anglers a wide berth.
- Never change clothes in public view.
- Never litter. Always pack out trash.
- Do not disturb wildlife.

For more information, visit:

[www.iowadnr.gov/paddlingsafety](http://www.iowadnr.gov/paddlingsafety)

