

NORTH RACCOON RIVER WATER TRAILS



GREENE COUNTY

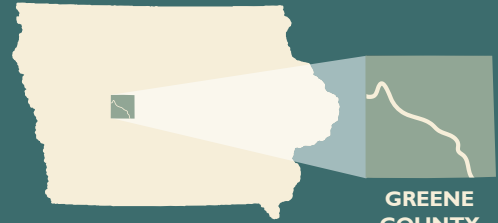
A TRIP THROUGH WILD BLUFF COUNTRY

A trip on the Raccoon River in Greene County takes travelers through a landscape of tall bluffs, hilltops with sprawling old oaks, and wild places with abundant wildlife. It is a place to experience nature, with few obvious signs of development. The river cuts through prehistoric glacial deposits in a modern agricultural landscape. The story of the river is one of natural features and human alterations, much of which is revealed on the water trail.



Sand, silt, and clay deposits.

The North Raccoon 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.



GREENE COUNTY



Dramatic bluffs are unique features on the Water Trail. The bluffs are composed of deep deposits of sand, silt, clay, and scattered larger rocks left by the last glaciers. The river corridor in Greene County was the final “dumping ground” for materials that had been carried in the glacial ice, and which remain today, exposed now as tall bluffs along the river.



Many of the picturesque bluffs along the river appear stable but some are eroding. Whole trees that were at the top of the cliffs have slid into the water. Scientists studying climate change predict more severe rains which will cause more erosion.

WHERE THE GLACIERS ENDED

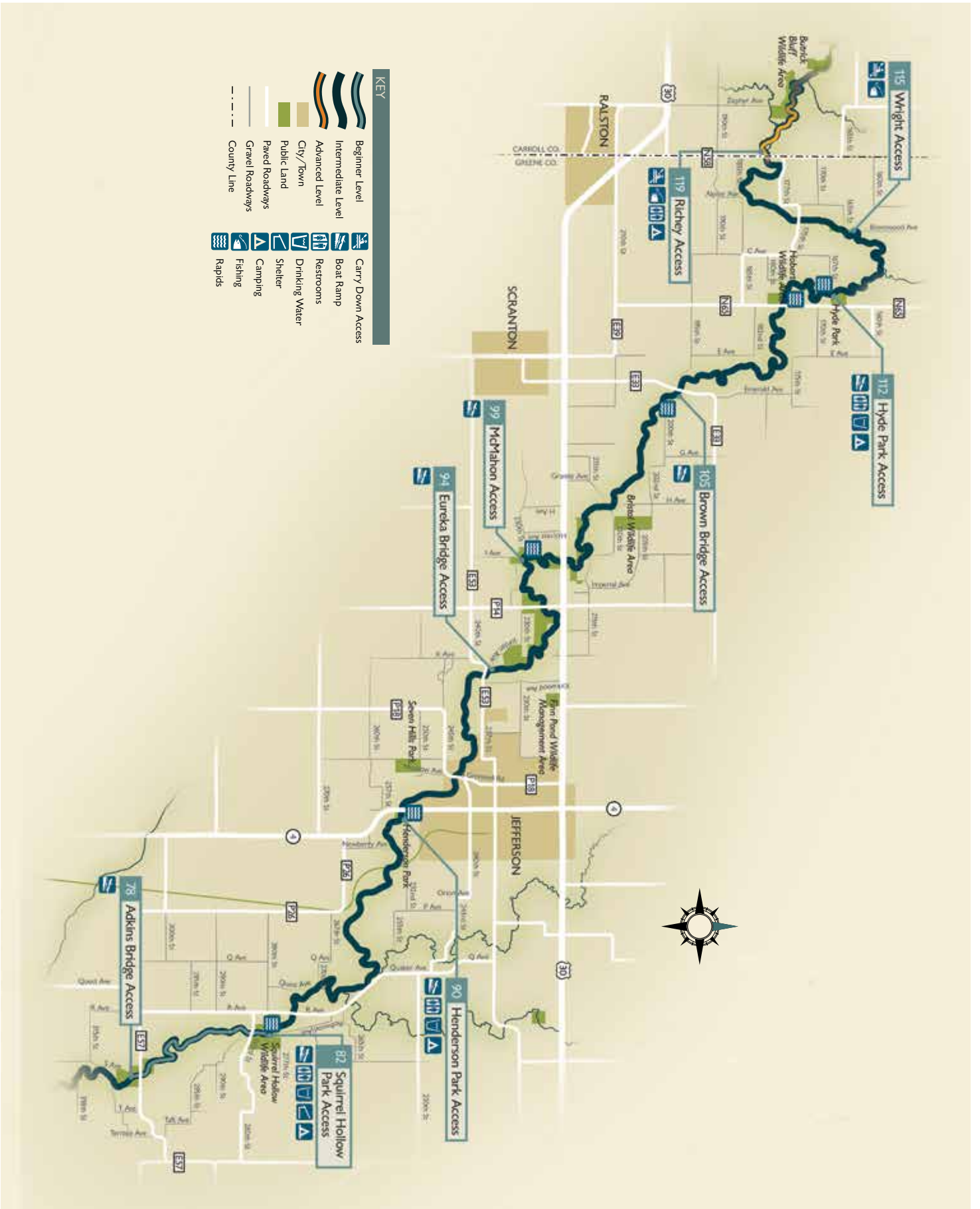


Green County contains end moraines, which form the hills of rocks and soil deposited by advances of the last continental glaciers. The river cuts through these hills leaving dramatic cliffs that likely have been exposed for hundreds of thousands of years. The current trend of more frequent, heavy rainfall is resulting in more rapid cliff erosion.

One of the largest bank swallow colonies in Iowa exists downstream of the McMahon Access. It contains hundreds of nests burrowed into the riverbank. Besides catching insects out of the air, they sweep low over the water and grab a drink-on-the-wing.



NORTH RACCOON RIVER WATER TRAIL



Richey Access to Wright Access to Hyde Park Access and rock dam - 7.3 miles

This stretch of the Raccoon River provides a pleasant paddle through mostly wooded streamside terrain. Honey locust is frequently found growing in the woodland, and indicates heavy grazing by cattle. Cattle prefer eating other species of grasses, forbs, and woody plants, leaving honey locust as the dominant tree.

Tall bluffs with stark cliff faces are a signature feature of the North Raccoon in Greene County. They are composed of deep glacial till made up of sand, silt, clay, and occasional rocks left behind as glaciers retreated from the landscape 12 thousand years ago. Sandstone, shale and mudstone make up the shoreline at the base of the bluffs. Atop the bluffs are sprawling oak and cedar trees. More than a dozen dramatic glacial escarpments are seen along the forty-plus miles of the North Raccoon.

The river cuts through some of the glacial bluffs, exposing steep soils, some of which are actively eroding. In some areas, whole trees that once occupied the tops of the cliffs have slid down into the water as the banks sloughed off. Dead and downed trees are in the river bends and can be hazards for paddlers.

Wildlife is abundant in and along the river. Great blue herons and green herons wade and stalk the shallows in search of fish and other prey. Bank and rough-winged swallows make good use of the exposed glacial escarpments for their nest holes. Kingfishers swoop along the shoreline. The 175th St. Bridge is especially popular for cliff swallows, which attach their pottery nests to the cement structures. A wide variety of birds feed on insects attracted to the water and shoreline shrubs. Killdeers run on the beaches. Turtles bask in the warmth of the sand and mud. Turkey vultures soar and tilt on air currents over the valley

The Richey Access is in a campground on the west side of "A" Ave. The campground provides electricity, a pit toilet, and a couple picnic tables. No water is available on site. The mowed access path drops abruptly into the water, but paddlers can look farther down the trail to a gentler approach. The Wright Access, about 4.25 miles downstream, is a walk-down access from a small pull-off on Brentwood Ave. A narrow trail ends at a long beach where access is easy. No facilities or water are available. The Hyde Park Access is a cement ramp. It is located downhill from the park campground. Electricity, pit toilets, and water are available at the top of the hill. Paddlers should take out at Hyde Park to avoid a rock dam.

This section of river is appropriate for paddlers of all skill levels. However, beginners are cautioned to avoid getting caught up in the abundance of dead trees present, especially in the river bends. Trees just below the water surface can surprise novice paddlers and upset their craft.

Hyde Park Access to Brown Bridge to McMahon Access – 13.5 miles

This stretch flows through a mostly wooded corridor that reveals a changing landscape. Bottomland savanna pastures, grazed and ungrazed woodlands, hay fields, and even some row-crop land can be seen in this section. The treed corridor varies in width from greater than 100 yards in some areas to a single tree in others. In some areas cattle area kept from the river by fences and allowed to graze the woodlands. Where cattle have direct access to the river, the banks are broken-down and eroded.



Cedar waxwing



Great crested flycatcher



Eastern kingbird



Paddlers will see fences that restrict cattle from the river in most areas, but in some areas the cattle still have direct access to the river.

Dramatic bluffs and cliff faces continue to be a feature in this river section. While they have existed for many centuries, recent flood events have led to increased erosion and bank sloughing.

Wildlife species that can adapt quickly to a changing landscape are most common in this stretch. Wood ducks are common along the river, hatching broods in the many den trees available in the oaks, cottonwoods, and silver maples. Barn swallows join the list of birds from the previous section, and cliff swallow nests continue to be a feature under highway bridges – especially at Highway 30. Redheaded and red-bellied woodpeckers use the variety of dead trees available in open and more heavily wooded sections. A variety of bird songs can be heard from the diverse shrubs, vines, pastures, and trees along the route, and paddlers likely will spot bald eagles soaring or perching above the river.

Dead trees tend to pile up in river bends and, in some cases, mid-river. Several meanders have been cut off by large piles of dead trees, and have formed isolated ponds, called oxbows. An old railroad pier that remains mid-river just below the 215th St. Bridge has accumulated downed trees, forming an island that now supports willows and other growing vegetation.

The three accesses in this section contain cement boat ramps. The Hyde Park ramp is above a rock dam, and paddlers should navigate the right side of the dam. For those who do not want to run the dam, a narrow trail on the left allows for a put-in below the dam. The same is true below the access at the Brown Bridge rock dam. The McMahon Access is below another rock dam with no obvious portage trail, but, with caution, paddlers can make it through safely.

Due to this section's length, numerous downed trees, and rock dams, it is recommended paddlers have at least an intermediate skill level. Beginning paddlers are recommended to use the first 6.7-mile section from below Hyde Park rock dam to the Brown Bridge Access above the rock dam. They should be wary of the large number of dead trees in the water, especially at river bends.



Honey locust trees are common in grazed woodlands along the river. The trees have large thorns along the trunk and branches, and are not likely to be eaten by cattle. The long, flat bean pods from the trees are sticky sweet inside and are a favorite food of several wild animals.

McMahon Access to Eureka Bridge Access to Henderson Park Access – 8.6 miles

This section of the water trail can easily be broken up into two shorter paddles, with the Eureka Bridge Access being the half-way point.

Two eroding cliff faces form 15-50 foot tall banks along the river. One bank contains one of the largest bank swallow colonies in Iowa, with several hundred holes in one exposure. Several hundred holes in one exposure attest to the versatility of the bank swallow. The birds choose certain layers of deposition in which to excavate their nests. Similarly, cliff swallows and their nests are abundant at all of the cement span bridges. At the Highway 4 Bridge south of Jefferson, nests are stacked up like condominiums. The birds select certain types of mud, carrying back approximately 1,200 beakful for each nest.

Many of the wildlife species mentioned in the previous sections continue to use this section of the river. Woodlands are typical of river corridors in Iowa, with bottomlands dominated by silver maples, cottonwoods, and willows, and uplands with various oaks, hickories, basswoods, and walnuts.

NORTH RACCOON RIVER WATER TRAIL



The railroad bridge crossing the river west of Jefferson is a very busy east-west line, with exceptional stonework in its support pillars and beautifully crafted stone arches at the ends. Just downriver from there, the 237th St. Bridge is a second arched highway bridge that was structurally improved in such a way as to maintain the character of the original. The bridge tends to be a place where debris becomes trapped. At the time of this writing, four of the five arches were plugged with trees, sand, or both.

All three access have cement boat ramps, large parking and turn-around areas, and are well-maintained.

This stretch is appropriate for paddlers of all skill levels. However, care must be taken around downed trees and log piles, and in getting out at the rock dam above Henderson Park Access. The river continues to have a large number of dead trees and logs in the water, especially at sharp bends in the river.



Henderson Park Access to Squirrel Hollow Park Access to Adkins Bridge Access – 12 miles

This section is perhaps the most wild, with fewer signs of human activity. The only bridge over the river between Henderson Park and Squirrel Hollow is the Raccoon Valley Trail Bridge. The four-mile section between Squirrel Hollow and Adkins Bridge is similarly isolated and wild, and has both the bluff exposures and an oxbow being created by a new cut-off. One of the few breaks in the wild river appearance is a ¼-mile berm of waste concrete at a bend in the river south of 255th St. and west of Quaker Ave.

The railroad bridge west of Jefferson has exceptional stonework in its support pillars, and the ends contain beautifully crafted stone arches. Divers are hired to inspect the stone work below the water surface to assure safety. Just downriver from there, the 237th St./E53 Bridge is also an old, arched concrete bridge, appearing graceful on the landscape.

Prominent on this paddle are four separate sections of vertical cliffs, ranging from 25 to 60 feet high. These dramatic bluffs provide the paddler with a peek at the history and the future of this river. Several have clearly existed for many years, extending back from the river into previous river channels that were occupied decades or even hundreds of years before. Most now are actively eroding - their vertical faces being transformed by more frequent, powerful river flows. The result is slopes with trees and shrubs that were once on top, but sloughed off, sliding down to the river below. Atop the bluffs are old white and bur oaks and basswoods that have been growing in challenging conditions for 150 or more years.

The width of the wooded corridor varies from a few yards, where open fields are visible beyond, to dense woodland a hundred or more yards wide. Where grazing of woodlands, bottomland pasture, or upland pasture is allowed, honey locust is common. Black locust is also present in a few locations - another indicator of disturbance by grazing. Understories of elderberries and other native shrubs and vines are common. A few locations have water seeps where scouring rush (*Equisetum sp.*) is common.

The wildness of this section includes a diversity of wildlife. Many species noted in previous sections are even more obvious in this section. Tracks of shorebirds, deer, raccoons, squirrels, and turtles on the beaches and mudflats reveal their presence. Some eroded riverbanks reveal beaver dens. Bald eagle and turkey vulture sightings are more common. A myriad of bird life is obvious through their songs and sightings as paddlers float down river.

NORTH RACCOON RIVER WATER TRAIL



Upstream of the Adkins Bridge Access is a unique elevated gas pipeline.

Mid-river sand and rock bars are common throughout the stretch, and paddlers can get out of their boats and find mussel shells. Two oxbow ponds are evident in this stretch of river, formed when sharp river bends were cut-off by the water as it changed course. One oxbow is just above the Squirrel Hollow rock dam. The other is located just above E57 Bridge, and has recently formed. Narrow and still dotted with dead trees, the cutoff has views into the old meander on both ends, with floodplain cornfields clearly visible beyond.

Dead trees in the water continue to be common in this section. Many have piled up in river bends and others have accumulated on the upper end of bridge abutments. There is one abandoned railroad pier that sits mid-river, collecting trees and piling up sand below. An elevated gas pipeline provides an obvious landmark immediately above the Adkins Bridge Access. In this wilder section of river, this elevated pipeline reminds us that modern daily life intersects with wildness in Iowa.

All three of the accesses in this stretch have cement boat ramps and are well maintained. None have signs visible from the river, nor are any of the bridges signed in any way. The rock dam at Squirrel Hollow is above the actual access. There is a signed portage trail on the left side, above the rock dam at Squirrel Hollow. However, the dam is easily runnable at normal water levels.

Either of the two sections in this stretch is appropriate for paddlers of all skill levels. However, the shorter four-mile stretch between Squirrel Hollow and Adkins Bridge Access may be less intimidating for beginners.

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

Photography:

All photographs are attributed to Jim Pease unless otherwise noted.

