

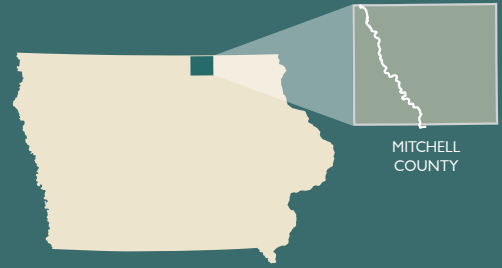
CEDAR RIVER WATER TRAIL



Photo: MCCB

MITCHELL COUNTY

The Cedar River Water Trail in Mitchell County is classified as a navigable “non-meandered” stream by the Iowa Department of Natural Resources. 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 creek is private. River users can paddle, float and wade in the water, but should not camp on sandbars. Please respect the owner and do not trespass.



MITCHELL COUNTY

A NORTHERN GEM

The Cedar River moves through Mitchell County like a winding snake: sometimes tranquilly, often with vigor. Through six main reaches, paddlers will experience diverse landscapes, wildlife, historical sites, and conditions. With access points located every hour and half to two hours along the river, these reaches differ in the challenges they pose to paddlers. With an eye to the suggested skill levels, paddlers and other river users can experience the variegated offerings the water trail presents.

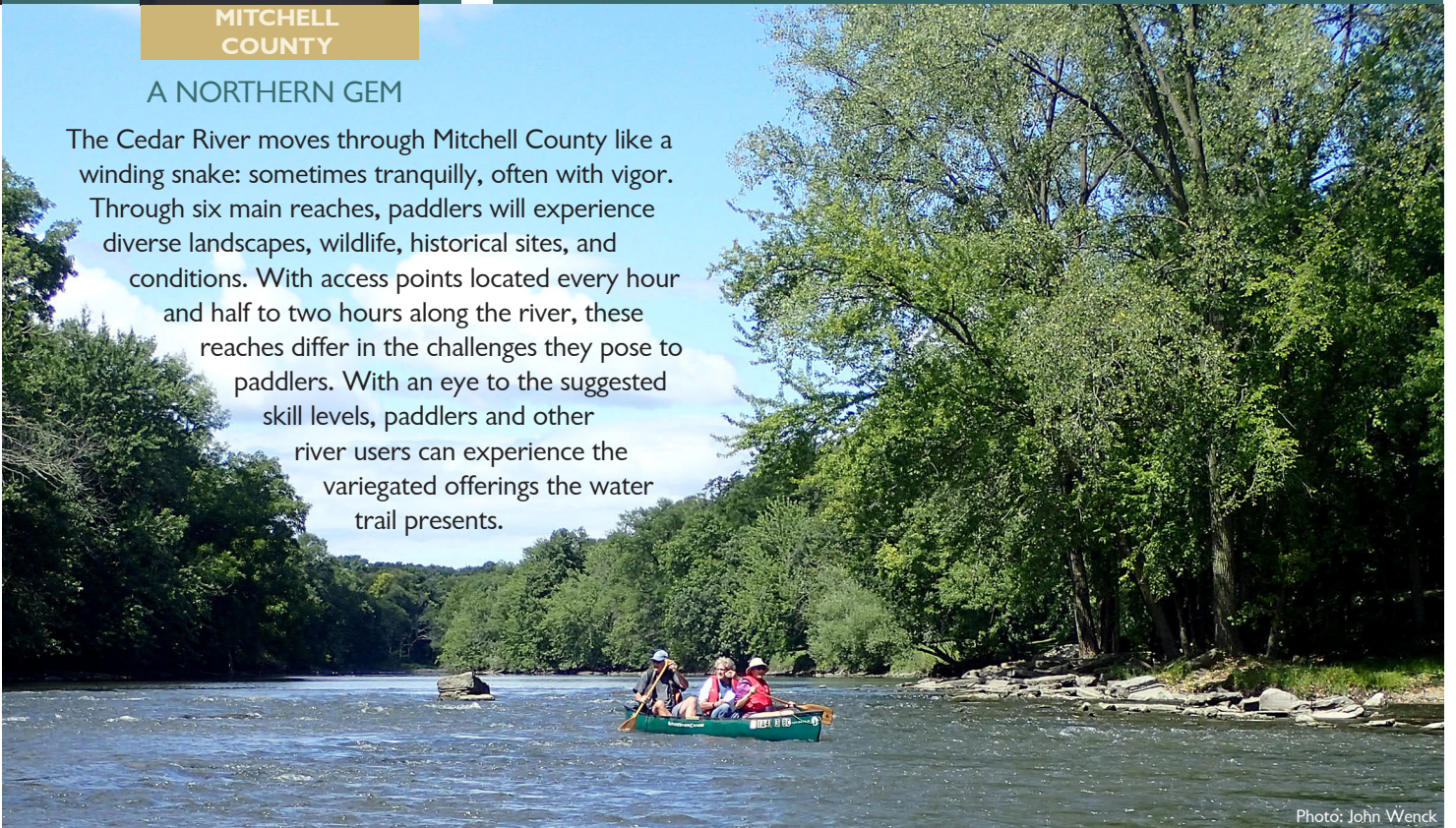


Photo: John Wenck



Photo: Iowa DNR

North American river otter



Photo: MCCB

The Mitchell Powerhouse and Dam at Interstate Park



Photo: Rori Paloski, WDNR

A wood turtle basks on a log along the Cedar River



Photo: MCCB

Paddling, angling, wildlife watching, and outdoor education are the primary recreational uses of the present-day upper Cedar River Water Trail.

The Cedar River Water Trail in Mitchell County

The Cedar River sources in Dodge County, Minnesota, from where it flows 329 miles until draining into the Iowa River in southeastern Iowa. Traveling through the Cedar River Valley, the water trail runs for 30 some miles in Mitchell County from the Minnesota border down to Iowa’s Floyd County line. Public parks, trails, wildlife areas, and river access points are plentiful along the water trail and offers residents and visitors alike the opportunity to enjoy one of the state’s most beautiful waterways.

With access points located every hour and half to two hours along the river, six main reaches, or segments, comprise the Cedar River Water Trail. The first few reaches run quickly and narrowly through a valley with rocky outcrops bordering the shores. The third reach moves through a developed area and widens out, almost lake-like, where powerboats roar past and houses dot the shoreline. The fourth, fifth, and sixth reaches of the river return to the Cedar River’s most instinctual wilderness—wildlife fill the area with bird song, wary curiosity, and quick riffles under the water, all providing paddlers company.

Geology and Physiography

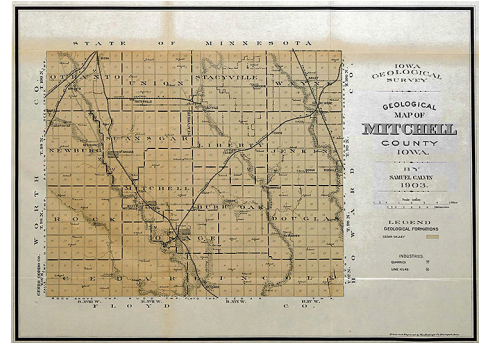
The Mitchell County portion of the Cedar River lies squarely within the Iowan Surface of northeastern Iowa. While not directly glaciated during the last continental glacial advance (the Wisconsin), it was certainly impacted by the cold, tundra-like climatic conditions of that advance and by the meltwaters as the glacier receded. The landscape was not flattened by the last glacier like those counties to the west on the Des Moines Lobe, nor was it ignored by past glaciers like those counties to the east in the Driftless Area of the Paleozoic Plateau. Rather, it is characterized by rolling hills with long slopes and a more subtly eroded landscape. The Cedar River (one of three major river watersheds in Mitchell County) meanders southeasterly through a landscape of ancient limestone, with low bluffs that are much decayed, contributing to the naturally “rip-rapped” shorelines of broken limestone. Some particularly resistant bluffs guide the river’s flow across the land. Run-off waters from glacial episodes contribute some granitic and metamorphic rocks that show up as “glacial erratic” boulders in and along the river. They are far removed from their northern homelands on the Canadian Shield, carried south by glacial episodes and ground down to roundness by ice and water over the millennia.



Limestone bluffs provide microhabitats for plants and animals.

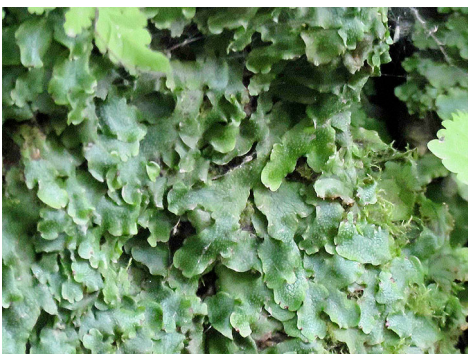
Groundwater discharge from bedrock aquifers contributes significant flow to the river.

This reach of the Cedar can be described as “bedrock-controlled,” a geological term meaning that the depth and width of the channel and its valley are constrained by the presence of hard, erosion-resistant layers of bedrock. Bedrock layers vary in their resistance, however, and this difference is readily seen on maps. Some valley reaches are quite narrow and, in these stretches, paddlers will find bedrock cliffs rising on either bank, often shrouded by trees and with colorful “fairy lands” of ferns and mosses festooning the cliff faces. Eventually, the gorge-like valley opens into a broader landscape, with the bedrock-defined valley margins far removed and invisible from the river channel. In these reaches, less resistant layers of bedrock have permitted the valley to widen and the channel to meander.



Other changes in valley width have to do with massive floods and erosion that occurred during the Ice Ages, especially in the last glacial period.

In the last half mile of the water trail, the valley widens dramatically where it intersects an ancient buried bedrock valley that is unrelated to the modern drainage system of the region. This ancient valley, partially filled with easily eroded glacial sediments, is a southeast-trending tributary to a larger, N-S oriented buried valley in eastern Mitchell County.



Liverwort, a non-vascular plant, grows in moist conditions among the river bluffs.

Time and the River



Originally known as Eureka or Watertown, Mitchell became a thriving flour and saw mill town in the 1850s. The Cedar River valley has a long prehistory and history of human use for settlement, transportation, industry, and recreation.

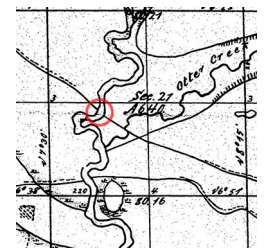
Native American presence in the valley stretches back some 13,000 years to when the last glaciers were retreating and paleo-hunters scanned the landscape for game. A succession of vibrant indigenous cultural periods spanned the subsequent years until the Protohistoric Period when French, Dutch, and British settlers colonized much of the Great Plains and began displacing tribes that lived east of what became the Iowa Territory westward. Ancestors of the Oneota culture already present—the Ioway, Oto, Missouri, Ho-Chunk, Omaha, Ponca, Kansa, Osage, and Eastern Dakota tribes—also felt the pressure, culminating in the removal of indigenous people from the state. In time, some returned.



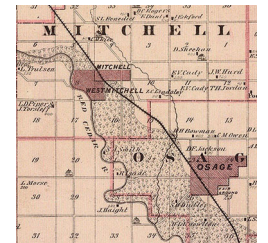
The historical use of the Cedar River for recreation remains one of its major uses and reaches back into the 19th Century.

The valley was settled by Euro-Americans in the 1850s, attracted to the rich soil, natural resources, and potential for waterpower that the area had to offer. The waterway was formerly called the Red Cedar River, or Big Cedar River, by Native Americans and in journals and on maps, until the late 19th century, due to the large red cedar trees that lined the riverbanks.

Promising places to cross the river attracted and served early settlers of Mitchell County. One of the first, Lorenzo D. Merry, a native of Troy, New York, first settled in Section 22 of Otranto Township in the autumn of 1852. In April, 1853, he moved to Section 21 where he established a fording place across the upper Cedar that became known as “Merry’s Ford” that many residents, traders, and travelers relied on. Although not labeled as such there is a trail marked crossing the river in Section 21 on the General Land Office (GLO) 1853–1854 map, near present-day Otranto Station and Bartlett Grove area. His son became the first recorded death in 1855 and is said to be buried near the ford. Merry was described as a typical frontiersman and a sort of “mover.” Eventually he moved on to Red River of the North where he operated a line of boats and a ferry line.



Beginning in the 1850s, the river has had a rich human history of lumber and grist mills along its shoreline. By the late 1860s no fewer than nine flour mills, six sawmills, and at least one woolen mill were in operation on the riverbanks up and down the mighty stream. In 1925, the concrete dam and hydroelectric powerhouse were dedicated. The dam created the conditions for today’s popular powerboating and recreation. In the 1960s the project was donated to the Mitchell County Conservation Board (MCCB) after ceasing to generate electricity. Over the years, floods and freshets (ice-outs) were frequent, destructive, seasonal events for all of these operations and repairs were expensive. But, in the 1990s the MCCB committed to electrification as an answer to funding repairs to the Cedar River parks system. An agreement was signed to have the dam and powerhouse once again generate power, sell it to electrical companies, and generate revenue.



Campers at Spring Park near Osage in the early 1900s. The private club was established in 1895 and was a popular attraction for family gatherings until the 1930s when it became a city park.

Bathing in the Red Cedar

by John Zeller



Photo: Mitchell County Historical Society

Bathers on the Cedar River in Mitchell County

Reading the newspapers of the era one finds accounts of “killer dams” all over Iowa. The large Charles City dam claimed its share of victims trapped in its powerful undertow. One eleven-year-old visitor from Osage was ensnared in the turbulence, with the horror captured by a local newspaperman:

“This is the bathing season and the boys are enjoying it to the fullest. While moderate indulgence is invigorating and healthy, it would be well for the lads to use caution in exposing themselves to dangers of drowning.”

~ Mitchell County Press, Aug. 14, 1884

“Somehow he slipped and he plunged feet first into the stream. The drowning boy had come up twice before help could get there... One rescuer was caught by the current where it swirls back up under the dam and was rolled three or four times before he could get to the surface. For hours men with rakes and pikes trying to locate the body... A charge of dynamite was set off and the boy’s hat came to the surface... Evidently the body was whirling around in the undertow.” - The Osage News, July 13, 1916

Nineteenth-century kids lacked today’s swim lessons, flotation gear and lifeguards. Sadly, leaving boys and young men to their own better (or worse) judgment led to deaths and near-drownings. But by the 1890s things improved. The era of skinny-dipping boys gave way to civilized family vacations in August at the shore of Spring Park or Clear Lake with safe beaches, swim suits and even frolicking girls!

The July 20, 1910 Mitchell County Press noted one father’s cautious approach to the ever-present danger of mill ponds and dams. William Griswold took his ten-year-old son Delos and his friends on the boy’s annual birthday holiday of bathing and fishing on the Cedar River. Anchoring their row boat in safe, shallow water they spent their afternoon happily diving off the shore-side of the boat under Dad’s watchful eye and then “enjoyed a hearty dinner, washed down with a bountiful supply of lemonade.”

In 1921 the “pool” at the old mill dam at Osage was popular with the “boys,” having a sandy and stone-free bottom, a perfect place for a ladder to a high springboard. The reporter from the Press counted forty cars parked near the river bridge.

But by the middle Twenties untreated sewage from Minnesota was driving swimmers out of the Big Cedar. In 1947, St. Ansgar abandoned a plan to improve the swimming hole at its old gravel pit near the river when “startling” tests revealed that “The water was so polluted with filth that it was beyond cleaning up.”

A water carnival with seven “naiads” from ISU presented a one-hour water ballet before Osage’s new concrete pool opened to a throng of giddy youngsters on June 17, 1951. Seventeen years later, St. Ansgar inaugurated their own municipal pool at its July “Hey Day Festival,” picking Miss Linda Horgen from a field of nine local beauties as “Queen of the Pool”. The towns of Mona, Otranto, Carpenter and Grafton weren’t forgotten either, as a free pool bus made scheduled stops in these settlements.

With the arrival of area municipal pools, most earlier swimming risks had been mitigated, save one: the lure of the wild river still attracts young people, adding to the sad legacy of low-head “killer dams.” Their final elimination will remove the last barrier to safe recreational enjoyment of Iowa’s scenic water ways.

Promising Signs from the River

The year 2018 brought some excitement for fish biologists in Iowa. A rare species of redbhorse sucker fish was positively confirmed in Iowa interior waters, in the upper Cedar and Shell Rock rivers. Another rare species, the River Redhorse, thought to have been extirpated in the state, was also confirmed still be present in the same waterways.

Redhorse suckers belong to the genus *moxostoma*. Of the six redbhorse species in Iowa that occur in the upper Cedar River (above Cedar Falls/Waterloo), the River Redhorse and the Greater Redhorse are particularly dependent on the right conditions. Both



The Greater Redhorse

species inhabit large rivers with good water quality and substrate; are intolerant of pollution and siltation; are large, sometimes weighing over 10 lbs; are often confused with each other and with Shorthead Redhorse (*M. macrolepidotum*); and were believed to be declining with little known about their distribution.

The upper Cedar River has been described as about as fish-diverse as an interior river in Iowa gets. Iowa DNR fisheries research biologist Greg Gelwicks and his crew, as well as other researchers, had been collecting this species for several years in the upper Cedar River basin, but they were calling it River Redhorse, primarily because Greater Redhorse were not known to occur in Iowa. It was some photos of the Greater Redhorse collected by Gelwicks and crew in 2016 that was sent to redbhorse expert Bob Jenkins in Virginia that eventually led to confirmation that Greater Redhorse were, in fact, present in the upper Cedar and Shell Rock rivers. In April 2018, ichthyologist John Lyons of the University of Wisconsin/Madison confirmed the identification based on specimens that Konrad Schmidt (Minnesota DNR, retired) and John Olson (Iowa DNR), along with Gelwicks & crew, collected from the Shell Rock River at Greene in September 2017. This was good news to all Iowans, especially river users. The presence of the environmentally sensitive redbhorse species is an indication of healthy conditions in the upper Cedar River.



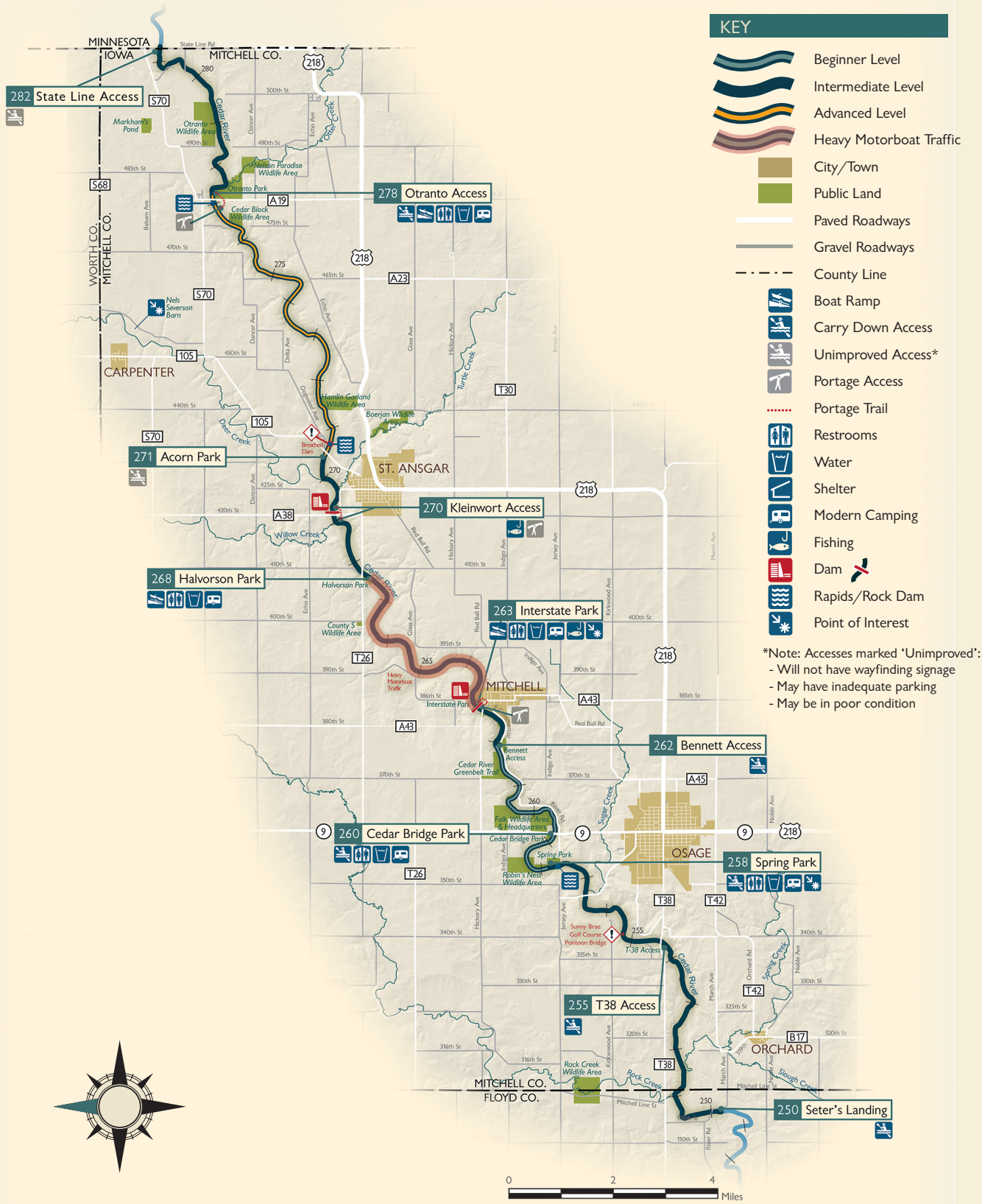
River Redhorse



Greater Redhorse

Photo: Iowa DNR

CEDAR RIVER WATER TRAIL



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State Line Access

Stream Reach: State Line Access (Access #282) to Otranto Park (Access #278) (4 miles)

This first reach of the Cedar in Iowa is typical of much of the river in Mitchell County. It meanders gently in a southeasterly direction through a mostly wooded shoreline buffer, varying in width from a few yards with cropland abutting to wide areas of extensive woodland habitats. A few rock riffles provide slight challenges for paddlers and several creeks and drainage ditches empty into the river in this stretch, including Otter Creek, which adds considerable water to the river's flow. The water is relatively clear with visibility to 18 inches and the bottom is rocky or sandy. It's an easy and enjoyable stretch for beginning paddlers, filled with wildlife viewing opportunities. With few structures (save for one railroad bridge) or farm fields visible from the river, it has a wild feel to it.

The unimproved access at State Line Road offers limited parking, but only for high profile vehicles. Parking on the road is not recommended due to the narrow shoulder and steep drop to the ditch below. The path down is narrow, grassed and partially graveled.

The access at Otranto Park was just improved as part of the dam to rapids conversion project here, and is easy to access at most water levels. This small park provides areas for camping, water, flush toilets and showers, and electric plug-ins, and is easily accessible off 480th St.

Bottomland hardwoods are common along the shoreline, including silver maple, willows, some cottonwoods, green ash, and box elder. A few bur oaks, ash, elms and walnuts are common on benches above the river, and in a couple of places sugar maples and basswoods are found on slopes above the river.

Killdeers and sandpipers are common along the shoreline and kingfishers rattle as paddlers approach. Bald eagles can be seen fishing the riffles while turkey vultures tilt on the thermals above the river, waiting for the scraps. Blue jays and catbirds call from the shoreline and red-bellied woodpeckers take advantage of the dead trees common along the corridor.

Note should also be made of a nearby historic site of interest: the Nels Severson Barn. It is located just 1.4 miles west of Dancer Ave. on 456th St., just northeast of the town of Carpenter. Solidly and skillfully constructed of local limestone and timber from surrounding woodlands, it was built in 1867 by Euro-American settler Nels Severson. Referred to as Fort Severson for many years, it was never actually a military post but was regarded as a safe haven by early frontier settlers. In subsequent years it served as a stop on the stagecoach route that operated in the area before the coming of the railroad. The old stone barn is now on the National Register of Historic Sites and is maintained by the Mitchell County Historical Society and families in the area. It is one of the few such structures still standing and well worth a visit.



Nels Severson Barn

This initial stretch of the water trail truly offers a gentle paddle in the wild. While the short distance and easy flow of the river at this segment is excellent for beginners, the difficulty in accessing it at State Line Road requires us to classify it as intermediate. More experienced paddlers will be interested to know that the Mitchell County Conservation Board converted the Otranto dam to rapids in 2022, making the river safer for recreational use while allowing fish unimpeded access to habitat upstream.

Recommended experience classification: **Intermediate**

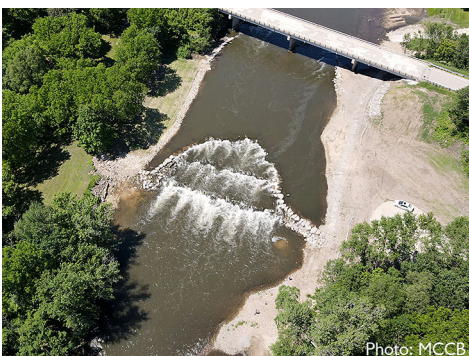


Photo: MCCB

The Otranto dam was converted to rapids in 2022, making the river safer for recreational use while allowing fish unimpeded access to habitat upstream.

Stream Reach: Otranto Park (Access #278) to Kleinwort (Access #270) (8 miles; includes ~6.5 miles to Acorn Park (Access #271) and ~1.5 miles from there to Kleinwort)

As you set out, you can choose to run the rapids, which requires advanced skills, or enter the river below the rapids by following the portage trail along the west bank of the river to the put-in below.

This reach of the Cedar is a beautiful, wildlife-rich paddle. The 3 to 4 hour trip has a feeling of wildness that is not common in many Iowa rivers. The route is mostly lined with trees, only occasionally with crops or pasture visible from the river. Low limestone bluffs often accompany the woodlands on one or both sides of the river and the shoreline is often naturally "rip-rapped" with decayed limestone pieces. At least 8 riffles are encountered,

many the result of entering tributary streams bringing rocks into the river. Several of those noted are actually a series of two or three riffles close together and separated by short sections (50 meters or so) of quieter water. Some glacial erratic boulders dot the shoreline and mid-river. Eagles, kingfishers, deer, squirrels, songbirds, and even otters can be seen along this reach. A few homes and cabins can be seen from the river—especially near St. Ansgar—but their windows, decks, docks and paddlecraft show that most owners highly value the river. This reach has only one bridge (Highway 105) that crosses it, so the wild feel of this paddle is seldom interrupted.



A North American river otter frolics in the river above St. Ansgar.

Just upstream from the Highway 105 bridge, the remains of an old hydroelectric dam are visible from several hundred meters upriver. The river has breached the dam on the west end (river right), with large slabs of concrete marking the breach. As the river bends around the dam and back to the east, a challenging riffle is encountered. The deepest and swiftest portion is closest to the old dam and care must be taken to avoid a tree that overhangs the water, creating a sweeper. The riffle is reported to be great habitat for walleyes.

A wide variety of vegetation lines the shoreline. Closest to the water, bottomland hardwoods dominate, their roots tolerant of long-term inundation. Silver maples, cottonwoods, willows, box elders, and some ashes are common in the floodplain. In areas a meter or two above normal water flow, upland hardwoods like walnuts, hackberries, elms, and some bur oaks are found, sometimes with ironwoods in the subcanopy. At slightly higher elevations, basswoods, silver maples, white and bur oaks are more common, mixed with other hardwood species. The dominance of maple-basswood woodlands is increasing as shade-intolerant oaks grow old and die. In yards of the few homes along the river, bur oaks and hackberries are often quite large.

Beneath the trees, white snakeroot blooms in abundance in the late summer and fall, tolerant of the deep shade. On the edges and in openings, giant ragweed, Bidens (stick-tights), dock and other annuals take advantage of frequent disturbance. Stinging nettles, wood nettles, and jewelweeds grace the shoreline in many locations. In a few spots, cup plants, Indiangrass, and a few other prairie perennials make an appearance. Some elderberries and dogwoods dominate the shrub layer and European cranberry, an introduced Viburnum, can be found around the St. Ansgar dam shoreline. No evidence of invasive bush honeysuckle or European buckthorn was seen. Vines of riverbank grape and Virginia creeper commonly drape over banks, shoreline trees, and limestone bluffs, draping to just above the flowing river. On the limestone bluffs, lichens, mosses, ferns, and liverworts find microclimate niches in the rocks.

Wildlife species are abundant in this stretch and can delight the observant paddler. Bald eagles can be found fishing the riffles, often perched on branches hanging above them. With both adult pairs and sub-adults present, nests are likely nearby. Turkey vultures tilt on thermals above the river, waiting for something to die and offer lunch. Nighthawks ply the skies above the river, as well, eating insects while they migrate to Central America at this time of year. Crows, once common, are only occasionally seen, their numbers impacted by West Nile virus. Red-tailed and sharp-shinned hawks hunt nearby, perhaps using the crows as scouts.

Pileated woodpeckers advertise their presence with alarm calls and rectangular excavations in search of ants in large old trees along the river. Both they and smaller red-bellied and downy woodpeckers can be spotted flying across the river in their undulating flight patterns. Blue jays warn everyone of approaching danger, be it paddlers or owls. Barred owls, our most diurnal of owls, can be heard along the river in the late afternoons. Kingfishers perch on dead branches above the river, waiting for small fish to swim by below. A few monarchs lilt over the water, late migrants heading southward and dragonflies dart over the water, gathering insects and strength for the southward flight. While old mussel shells are occasionally seen on rocky shores, very few live ones can be seen. The abundance of other species of wildlife, though, will arouse the interest of river explorers.

Most paddlers choose to exit this stretch at Acorn Access after the Highway 105 Bridge on river right. It is slated for improvements, but is still easier to exit than above the St. Ansgar Dam at Kleinwort. The accesses above and below the St. Ansgar Dam are primarily used



Pileated woodpeckers have made their mark on this old ash tree.

CEDAR RIVER WATER TRAIL

by anglers and those who want to portage the dam rather than end or begin their river journey there.

This stretch is recommended for advanced paddlers only. The number of riffles, the skills needed for safely navigating around the abandoned dam, the condition of the accesses, and the mostly wild feel of this stretch lend it to being a challenging experience.

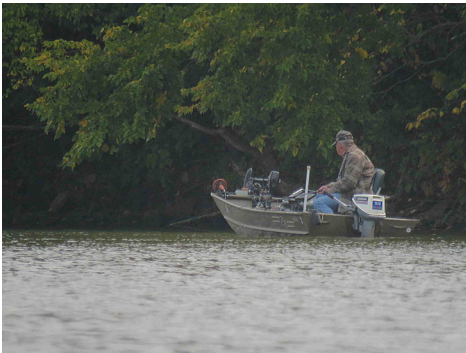
Recommended experience classification: **Advanced**



Large homes with concrete “sea walls” along the shoreline, boat docks and lifts, and acres of mowed lawn become the norm on this stretch of river.

Stream Reach: Kleinwort (Access #270) to Interstate Park (Access #263) (1.6 miles to Halvorson Park and then ~4.5 miles to Interstate Park)

This reach of the Cedar is a very different paddling experience from the section upriver from St. Ansgar. Because of the hydroelectric dam at Mitchell, the character of the river is fundamentally changed. The river changes from a flowing river that is a couple of hundred feet wide to more of a lake that is heavily impacted by human development along its shoreline. The first section between Kleinwort to Halvorson Park is still narrow and contains a rock riffle just below the access at St. Ansgar; however, the wooded buffer is narrow and crops and pasture are close to the river. Where woodland exists, a natural limestone shoreline is present. Where crops are adjacent to the water, concrete waste riprap is more common. Below Halvorson, the river gradually widens and slows considerably all the way to Interstate Park. Large homes with concrete “sea walls” along the shoreline, boat docks and lifts, and acres of mowed lawn become the norm on much of the remaining river. The river is as wide as a football field in many locations along this stretch, making it ideal for motorized boats. A wider, heavily wooded shoreline returns just above and at Interstate Park as the topography becomes steeper and maple/basswood woodlands dominate. While still a pleasant paddle, the heavy presence of powerboaters primarily on weekends and holidays makes this stretch challenging especially for beginner paddlers.



Power boaters and anglers find this stretch of the river much to their liking.

The access at Halvorson Park, approximately 1.7 miles downstream from Kleinwort, is found on the western shoreline, just after passing under the Foothill Ave. bridge. The Halvorson access has a concrete boat ramp, but paddlers will find it easier to enter or exit the river at the beach in the campground, just upstream a hundred meters or so. The park has campsites, showers, flush toilets, and electricity. The boat ramp will accommodate large powerboats easily and has docks available for tie-up. While this access area can be used by paddlers, it's predominately used by powerboaters and is often busy on weekends and holidays.

The access at Interstate Park is on the east side of the river, above the dam. Access can be made either at the concrete boat ramp or at the beach above the docks in the campground. Camping includes both electrical and non-electrical sites, playground equipment, showers, flush toilets, and other amenities. Excellent interpretive signage about the dam and its history is adjacent to the dam and a selfie station is in place below the historic generator building.

The shoreline woodland contains the same bottomland and upland species as the previous reach: silver maples, cottonwoods, willows, ashes and box elders nearest the water, and elms, walnuts, hackberries, oaks, ashes, basswoods, and hickories farther above. Reeds canary grass is common in many areas along the shore, along with some Phragmites grass and invasive pampas grass. Asters, Jerusalem artichoke, and white snakeroot still bloom in some shoreline areas in the late summer. Potamogeton pondweed and coontail, both typical pond and lake species, can be found in the quiet waters near some shorelines.

As might be expected with a more human-dominated landscape, wildlife species are fewer in this river reach. Canada geese graze on pastures and lawns near the river and stand in lake shallows. Turkey vultures still float the thermals overhead and killdeer run along some shorelines. A green heron hunts the shallows and wood ducks hide behind a fallen tree in the smaller river section above Halvorson Park. A few crows and blue jays still call from the woods. Some cliff swallow nests cling to the bolts of the steel span bridge. Fox squirrels sneak a drink at the water's edge, surprised by the quiet paddler slowly floating by. While other species are likely found here, the eagles and otters of wilder sections are absent.



Photo: Andy Taets

Paddlers must exit the river and portage around the dam at Interstate Park at Mitchell.

Paddlers can easily navigate this reach if they keep an eye out for powerboaters, and are willing to paddle. Due to the lake effect of the dam at Mitchell (Interstate Park), there is little current below Halvorson Park to carry floaters. Paddlers should also be aware that large powerboats, especially evident on summer weekends, also use this section of river.

Recommended experience classification: **Intermediate**

Interstate Park is very popular for fishing, mostly below the dam on the west side of the river. There isn't a developed launch for canoes and kayaks because the largest access in the county is about 1 mile downstream. While Interstate Park is primarily a take-out, the adventurous paddlers wishing to portage the dam, may do so without issue by taking out at the boat ramp, walking up the embankment and following one of the natural paths down to the river's edge to put in below the dam.



Sugar maples and basswoods are the dominant canopy species in the uplands.

Stream Reach: Bennett/Two Poles (Access #262) to Spring Park (Access #258) (4 miles; ~1 mile to Bennett Access then 2.8 miles to Highway 9 Access at Cedar Bridge Park plus .2 mile to Cedar Bridge Park access south of cabin)

This reach of the Cedar returns to being a wilder river. A publicly-owned greenbelt lines most of the west side of the river in this reach and private land and a public road line most of the east side. A trail also goes along most of the west shoreline in this stretch, crossing both public and private land easements. The river returns to its more narrow corridor of a couple hundred feet and most of the rocky bottom and shoreline consists of low limestone bluffs and natural broken limestone shoreline. Mussel shells, so rare upriver of the Interstate dam at Mitchell, are now common on the shoreline, preyed on by raccoons. Woodlands buffer both shorelines and shade the paddler's and the fish's passage.

Bennett Access is about 1 mile downriver from Interstate Park on the east side, located off River Road. This access has a gentle slope, has parking, and is an easy access. Bennett, Spring Park and T-38 access sites were identified as high priority areas needing improvement in the Cedar River Water Trail Plan to be published later in 2022. Wide, low-sloped concrete launches are planned, offering easier access for families with children, the elderly and those with limited mobility. In addition, you can expect concrete parking areas that offer traffic flow, staging areas, and have greater capacity to accommodate more vehicles, as well as trailered vehicles.

There are two accesses at Cedar Bridge Park, one at the northeast side, just below the west end of the Highway 9 bridge, and the other at the park's south end, on a trail behind the rental cabin of the park. Both are easily accessed from the shoreline and are carry-down accesses. There is only adequate parking for more than 5-vehicles at the access on the north end. While there is no formal parking area for the access on the south end, one or two vehicles can park alongside the road or in the grass.

Woodlands line both sides of the vast majority of this reach, with bottomland hardwoods near the river and upland hardwoods as the land rises above the floodplain. Sugar maples and basswoods are the dominant canopy species in the uplands. Where oaks (bur and white) are found, saplings of sugar maples and basswoods are beneath, foretelling the future of the forest in the area. Vines of riverbank grape and Virginia creeper drape the shoreline, hanging low over the water and curtaining the limestone bluffs.

Wild critters return to being common along the river. Kingfishers rattle their way up and downriver, voicing their annoyance at a paddler's presence in their kingdom. Great blue herons wade the shallow shoreline, stalking slightly larger fish. Woodpecker hotels are found in dead cottonwoods on the shoreline, homes for downy and red-bellied woodpeckers and flickers. Chickadees take the lead searching for insects in the gradually emerging fall and winter mixed flocks of songbirds. Wood ducks spring from behind the protective branches of trees fallen into the water, leading the paddler downriver. A sub-adult bald eagle, perhaps returning to its natal territory, searches for fish from a snag above a riffle.

Most impressive, however, are the mussels, indicators of a river's health and history. The Cedar is connected, via the Iowa River, to the Mississippi River, and should have most of the numerous species found there. However, human impacts on the river and exploitation



Mussels are in abundance on the upper Cedar River below the dam at Interstate Park.



A common map turtle basks on a glacial erratic in the Cedar River.

of mussel populations have lowered both the number of species and their abundance on all our rivers. Mussel shells, rare on rock or sand beaches above the Mitchell dam, are found in abundance on the rocky shores of the Cedar immediately below the dam (elktoe, especially) and in some locations farther downriver in the county. Mussels are dependent upon fish for transportation upstream in their juvenile, glochidia, stage. The dam prevents fish passage and, therefore, mussel passage. It is nice to see them again and know that the river can support them. Species found in this and other lower reaches include: elktoe (*Alasmidonta marginata*); fluted shell (*Lasmigona costata*); fatmucket (*Lampsilis siliquoidea*); mucket (*Actinonaias ligamentina*); and creeper (*Strophitus undulatus*).

This short reach is appropriate for experienced beginners or intermediate paddlers.

Recommended experience classification: **Beginner**

Stream Reach: Spring Park (Access #258) to T-38 Access (Access #255) (4.6 mile)

This reach of the Cedar River is one of the most beautiful in Mitchell County. The wooded shore on both sides of the river from Cedar Bridge Park to T38 lines nearly all of this stretch. The river makes a wide meander to the west below Cedar Bridge Park and then back to the east along resistant limestone and past Spring Park. At least 10 rock riffles, often in sets of two or three, challenge the paddler, and old limestone bluffs, some rising 30-40 feet above the water, add beauty and mystery to the shoreline. A floating bridge at the Sunny Brae Golf Course is a serious hazard, only allowing access through a 10 foot wide section in the center of the bridge. A low-hanging cable draped across the upstream side sometimes sags lower than the bridge deck causing some paddlers to panic. If you're not comfortable "threading the needle," both banks offer easy access for portaging. An old railroad pier of local stone stands mid-river, a reminder of past commerce and the resourcefulness of its builders. Wildlife species are many in this reach, also enjoying the wildness and rocks. The T-38 access (also know as Lancer Ave.) is almost anti-climactic, as the paddler wants more.



Keep right and paddle under the section providing the most clearance at the Sunny Brae Golf Course pontoon bridge. Portaging around the bridge is also an option.

As the river rounds the big bend to the south, Spring Park, owned by the City of Osage, is on river left. The first claim to land in Mitchell County was made here in 1852 at the spring. In 1894 the area of present day Spring Park was organized as a private park that was very popular but open only to members. However, in 1935, the City of Osage acquired the deed to the venerable attraction and created a public park that provided good water, shade, space for kids to play, a bathing beach, and camping. Today, it provides modern camping, playground equipment, pit toilets, and a shelter, along with some interpretive signage about the natural spring. A hiking and mountain biking trail along the river leads eastward into the woods and eventually into Osage. The park has another access, with a sign visible from the river. Paddlers may use a grassy slope or a partially paved ramp to access the park or river. Parking is available.

The T-38 access is on the southeast side of the T-38 bridge. It has a gravel access road and adequate parking. The path to the river is gravel/rock and provides easy entry for paddlers.

The vegetation along the shoreline continues to consist of fast-growing bottomland hardwoods nearest the water (silver maples, willows, cottonwoods, box elders, ashes) and more durable hardwoods farther up-slope (elms, walnuts, ashes, some bur and white oaks, and especially sugar maples and basswoods.)

Wildlife species take advantage of the habitat, with kingfishers and great blue herons sampling the fishery, killdeers and sandpipers running the shoreline, and cedar waxwings and late-migrating phoebes catching insects overhead. Canada geese wade in rocky shallows and panic and honk at a paddler's approach, breaking the silence of the fall woods. Wood ducks leap from their hiding place behind trees that have fallen into the water. Blue jays call from the wooded edge of the golf course, unconcerned by any handicaps. Chewed and downed trees and riverbank slides attest to the presence of beavers, though their bank den locations were not obvious. White-tailed deer use trails to the river's edge and raccoons leave discarded shells of mussels along the shore. Painted turtles bask in late afternoon sun on a mid-river glacial erratic, too sleepy to move. They all add interest and beauty to this 1½ - 2 hour paddle.



Bald eagles are thriving along the Cedar River Water Trail in Mitchell County.



A great paddle comes to an end.

While the shorter length of this stretch is appropriate for beginning paddlers, some skill is necessary to safely navigate some challenging riffles in this reach, most of which consist of 2-3 sets of riffles. Hence, the recommendation is given for use by intermediate paddlers.

Recommended experience classification: **Intermediate**

Stream Reach: T-38 Access (Access #255) to Seter's Landing (Floyd Co.) (Access #250) (4.7 miles)

This reach of the Cedar River continues to have the wildness of the previous section. As the river travels south to the border with Floyd County, it continues to pass over rocky riffles and by some low limestone bluffs. The shoreline is mostly wooded, though homes, crop fields, and sand/gravel operations may lie just beyond the trees. Wildlife relish the wild corridor and eagles fish the riffles. Though no nests may be seen, both adults and sub-adults of various ages hunt the waters of this reach. As the river glides into Floyd County, oblivious of political boundaries, Seter's Landing access on the north side of the river brings this incredible paddle to an end.

While some upland hardwoods are found along this reach, bottomland hardwoods dominate much of this river stretch. Some silver maples and cottonwoods are quite large, and although many eagles were seen in this reach, no obvious nests were identified.

Great blue herons, Canada geese, kingfishers, and sandpipers were common in this stretch but the real attraction is the large number of bald eagles, both adult and sub-adult, that may be seen in this short 5+ mile section of the Cedar. At least three different adults and three sub-adults (1½ to 3½ years old) have been found in this short section. It portends good fish populations and riffles to find them in for anglers, both human and avian.

While many beginners with some experience could navigate this reach, the distance, strainers, and riffles (most with two in a set) indicate that it is more appropriate for those with intermediate paddler experience.

Recommended experience classification: **Intermediate**

James Pease, Ph.D.



A native of Burlington, Iowa, Dr. Jim Pease has over four decades of experience as a front-line interpreter, professor of interpretation, and writer and consultant on numerous interpretive and environmental education projects. He has impacted thousands, from youth to senior citizens, in formal and non-formal settings, and written dozens of publications for professionals and lay people alike, also contributing to television segments, podcasts, websites, and a regular statewide radio program.

Pease's experience includes teaching interpretation to undergraduate and graduate students for 24 years, research on impact of interpretive and education strategies, over two decades as an Extension Wildlife Specialist, director of the Iowa NatureMapping and Master Conservationist programs, and fifteen years in youth development and natural resources programs. He has taught and conducted projects internationally in Costa Rica, Brazil, Panama, Russia, and Taiwan. He has received numerous awards for his work, including the prestigious Master Interpreter from the National Association for Interpretation and Distinguished Science Teacher Award from the Iowa Academy of Science.

Dr. Pease is now retired from Iowa State University with emeritus status in the Department of Natural Resource Ecology and Management. He remains active speaking, writing, consulting, and leading international wildlife trips to Central and South America. Closer to home, Jim helped design and conduct the Master River Stewards Program for Iowa Rivers Revival and has paddled some 2,000 miles of Iowa rivers, conducting biological and interpretive surveys for the Iowa Department of Natural Resources' Iowa Water Trails program. He holds leadership positions with Story County Conservation Board and Friends of Ada Hayden Heritage Park. Finally, Jim Pease can still be heard on Iowa Public Radio in his wildlife program on "Talk of Iowa."

BE SAFE OUT THERE!

Follow these safety TIPS to keep your trip enjoyable:

- Pack all essentials 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-sized 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 going around an obstacle easier.
- **INTERMEDIATE:** Segments are generally less than nine miles. Users should be able 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.

Other Resources:**IA DNR Interactive Paddling Map:**

www.iowadnr.gov/paddlingmap

IA DNR Paddler Safety Info:

www.iowadnr.gov/paddlingsafety

Mitchell County Conservation

<https://mitchellcountyconservation.org/>

Nature RX Rentals

<https://naturerxrentals.com>

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