

# SKUNK RIVER WATER TRAIL



STORY COUNTY

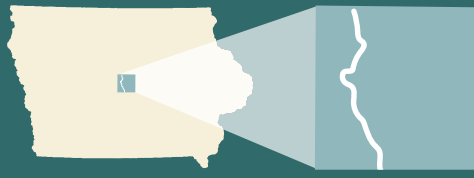
## THE SKUNK RIVER IN STORY COUNTY

The Skunk River was once a green wooded ribbon in a prairie sea. Today, it is a green wooded ribbon in a sea of agriculture. Forested river corridors are the only continuous habitat left in the modern Iowa landscape. As such, the Skunk provides critical habitat for both river and land species.



Granite, basalt, gneiss, chert, and other stones make up glacial cobble beaches.

The Skunk was formed as a major drainage for melting glaciers. Rounded cobble, large granite boulders, and gravel were left behind as the glaciers receded, and are found in and along the river. Ada Hayden Park in Ames was formerly a quarry business that mined the gravel.



STORY COUNTY

The Skunk is a “non-meandered” stream in Iowa law. That means that the State of Iowa owns the water flowing through it, but not the land adjacent to it or under it. That’s all private land. Please respect it and don’t trespass. Even though you can’t get out or camp along this beautiful stream, there’s plenty to see along the way!



Dams and bridges are part of the history of the Skunk River. Paddlers will notice a bridge built by the CCC in the 1930s at Story City. Remains of bridge abutments and a mill dam remain at Soper’s Mill. A low-head dam where a mill once stood still can be seen near the Sleepy Hollow Access.



Soper’s Mill rock riffle dam

Rock riffles have been constructed at Story City, Soper’s Mill, and River Valley Park. These areas of faster water provide excellent habitat for fish and aquatic insects and fun challenges for experienced paddlers.





A chert nodule lies along the Skunk shore.

In places along the shore, low outcrops of limestone can be seen. Hard chert stones often were used by Native Americans for making tools. Today, paddlers just north of Sleepy Hollow may hear a loud boom occurring around 5:30 pm weekdays. It comes from modern mining of limestone near the Skunk River.

The Skunk contains lots of fallen trees, often piled up in river meanders or hung up on sand and gravel bars. The brush provides important habitat for aquatic wildlife, but also may be hazards for paddlers.



Dead trees in the water provide habitat and hazard.

A spring paddle brings views of colorful spring wildflowers along the wooded shoreline. Summer on the river features an abundance of birds, deer, beaver, and raccoons. Fall paddlers experience stunning colors of silver maples, sycamores, cottonwoods, and oaks along the shoreline.



Bluebells



Anemones, violets, and other spring ephemerals



Wild phlox in bloom



Flowering Serviceberry

Trees along the Skunk contain holes and hollows for cavity-nesting wood ducks. Day-old ducklings tumble from their tree hole nests to join their parents waiting on the ground or water. The youngsters often use tangles of trees in the water as hiding places.





# SKUNK RIVER WATER TRAIL



## KEY

- Beginner Level
- Intermediate Level
- Advanced Level
- City/Town
- Public Land
- Paved Roadways
- Gravel Roadways
- Portage Trail
- Carry Down Access
- Restrooms
- Drinking Water
- Rapids
- Dam
- Point of Interest

Photo Jim Pease

**Story City Access to Lekwa Access (3.8 miles):**

Story City rock riffle dam

Between Story City and the Lekwa Access the river meanders along a mostly wooded corridor of bottomland trees, silver maple mixed with some cottonwood, box elder, and sycamores. Some houses are visible along the shoreline and a bike/pedestrian bridge crosses the river within Story City limits. Deer are common and beaver-chiseled trees are found along the shoreline. The rock rapids at Story City Park were developed below the dam to improve habitat for fish and invertebrates.

River accesses at Story City Park are on either side of the Swinging Bridge, originally built by the Civilian Conservation Corps in the 1930s. Either put-in requires carrying boats a short distance from the parking lot to the access. **NOTE:** Dangerous currents below the dam can trap and hold both boats and bodies. Do not put in above the dam. Experienced paddlers may, however, wish to put in further below the dam and above some of the rock rapids. Others may wish to avoid the rapids and put in on the small sand beach available on either the west or east (easiest) sides of the river. The Lekwa Access is on the right (west) just after the Co. E-18 bridge.

This stretch is appropriate for paddlers with at least an intermediate skill level due to some rock riffles and downed trees.

**Lekwa Access to Anderson Access (3.3 miles):**

Several small riffles and many downed trees and logs in the water—especially in the river bends—make this stretch both beautiful and a challenge. The river is lined with bottomland hardwoods, including some large sycamores. Typical of trees along the Skunk, many have hollows that provide dens for nesting and raising young for many species of birds and mammals. Quiet paddlers may see this wildlife along the way.

While much of the land on the east side of the river is public, nearly all land on the west is private. Respect private land.

The Lekwa Access was refurbished in 2016. The Anderson Access is on the left side of the river, just above the steel 150th St. bridge. Neither access has restrooms or water.

Due to the presence of fallen trees and sharp bends, this section is most appropriate for paddlers with at least an intermediate skill level.

**Anderson Access to Sopers Mill Access (4 miles):**

As the river passes through this section, it begins to cut more deeply into the landscape. Bottomland hardwoods give way to upland hardwoods on hills above the floodplain — mostly white and bur oaks with some basswoods and shagbark hickories. Cropland is close to the river in a couple of areas and I-35 is visible in one location as the river bends sharply eastward. Logs and downed trees are particularly abundant in this meandering section. Paddlers should take care to avoid getting trapped by “sweepers” – trees leaning over or fallen into the river.

Some limestone layers become visible occasionally in this section. Granite and basalt rocks of glacial till are found along the shore, revealing the glacial meltwater



Eastern bluebird



origins of this river. Some riffles, rock bars, and large boulders (known as glacial erratics) are common mid-river. A few, tall banks rising 10 to 20 feet or more above the water narrow the river corridor. Clay banks provide opportunities for kingfishers and bank and rough-winged swallows to dig dens. Numerous hollow trees provide homes for wood ducks.

Rainbow bridge at Soper's Mill, 1914

Just above the 170th St. bridge, old bridge abutments are visible on either side of the river. The Sopers Mill Access is on the right side of the river, just above a rocky rapids, installed for better fish habitat. Inexperienced paddlers should exit above the rapids and portage around to quiet water below. Both the Anderson and Sopers Mill Accesses provide ample parking but no water or restrooms are provided.

The numerous trees and riffles make this stretch appropriate for paddlers with at least an intermediate skill level.

**Sopers Mill Access to Peterson Park Access:**

The rapids at the Sopers Mill Access will prove challenging even for experienced paddlers, so most should put in below them. Though only a short 1.5 miles, the river drops quickly in this stretch and flows fast over multiple rocky riffles to arrive at the Peterson Park Access, on the right, just above the 180th St. bridge and Peterson Park.

This section contains somewhat less dense woods.

Pastureland is sometimes visible through the narrow wooded corridor. Glacial erratic boulders are present in many areas both along the shoreline and mid-stream. Smaller rounded glacial till is frequently seen along the edge. Large sycamore trees, their roots accustomed to being wet, trace the shoreline.

**Peterson Park Access to Sleepy Hollow Access (3.5 miles):**

This is a popular route, made dangerous by a lowhead dam just a few hundred yards above Sleepy Hollow. It is well-marked and a portage trail is on the right-hand side of the river. This dam has claimed lives, trapping victims in the back currents below the dam. DO NOT attempt to run this dam, no matter how skilled a paddler you believe you are! Use the portage, please!

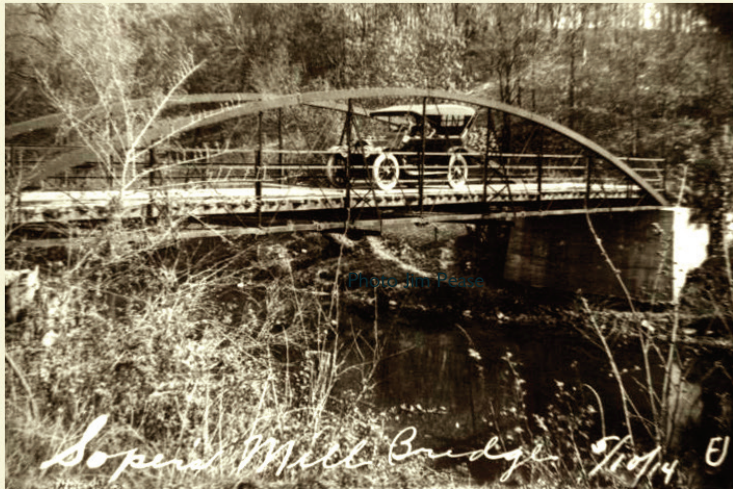
Limestone outcrops are visible in some sections of this stretch – remnants of ancient reefs. About halfway down this segment, daily blasting (late afternoon) may be heard from a large underground limestone quarry, not visible from the river.

Many Canada geese make nests during the summer along the banks and on the mid-river rock bars. Beaver sign is visible on the trees along this section.

Below the lowhead dam, the river takes a sharp left turn as it runs up against U.S. Highway 69.

Sleepy Hollow Access is on the right, just after passing under the Riverside Road bridge. Both the Sleepy Hollow and Peterson Park Accesses provide ample parking.

Due to the danger associated with the dam above Sleepy Hollow Access, this stretch is appropriate for paddlers with an intermediate skill level.



Remaining bridge abutments

**Sleepy Hollow Access to River Valley Park Access (2.9 miles):**

Sometimes, nature fells a tree and it falls partially in the water. Beavers say “Thanks!” They proceed to quickly cut away the leaves and small branches for food and even chew the bark on the remaining trunk to get to the nutritious cambium. Paddlers see this story in the signs of beaver along this stretch of river. Wood ducks, mallards, herons, and swallows also are common along this stretch. While some cropland exists, this stretch is still wild, especially for a river on the edge of a busy city.

The last mile of this section passes through Ames’ River Valley Park and paddlers may see hikers using the popular trails. After passing under a park footbridge, the access is on the right, about 300 yards south of the footbridge. All paddlers must exit here to avoid another dangerous low-head dam. A short, 100 yard portage brings paddlers back in the river below the dam. (NOTE: the dam is scheduled to be replaced with a runnable series of rock rapids in 2017-18. However, many paddlers may still want to portage around the rapids.) Both the Sleepy Hollow and River Valley Park Accesses provide restrooms and ample parking.

This section is well-suited for paddlers of all skill levels.

**River Valley Park Access to Southeast 16th St. Access (3 miles):**

This stretch passes through the east side of the city of Ames, including both parkland and industrial area. The portion between 13th St. bridge and the railroad bridge is naturally meandered and mostly wooded on both sides of the river, with bottomland hardwoods of silver maple, cottonwood, and box elder trees. Dead trees are common in the river bends and should be avoided. Paddlers should expect occasional blockage by trees, and may find shallow riffles depending on the water level.

A bike trail joins along the right side of the river at the railroad bridge and continues to the Lincoln Way bridge. This section is channeled and contains industrial area on both sides. Few trees provide a buffer in this short section. Below Lincoln Way, the river meanders through agricultural cropland for the next mile. The shoreline varies from bottomland forest, to crops planted right up to (and falling into) the river’s edge. Those eroding banks reveal both the rich dark soils that originated beneath Iowa’s tallgrass prairies and the need for wide river buffers to protect against erosion of those rich soils.

Many wildlife may be seen along this stretch, including solitary sandpipers, wood ducks, deer, and raccoons. Canada geese, once gone from Iowa, are now common nesters on the sand and rock bars of the river. They once nested in the uplands surrounding the abundant wetlands of the county. Most of those wetlands were drained, however, and now the geese have adapted to river habitats. Many nests are destroyed each year by the rapidly-rising waters of the Skunk, but the geese are persistent and successful enough that their numbers continue to increase.

The access at Southeast 16th St. is on the right, just above the SE 16th St. bridge. A narrow grass trail leads from the parking lot to the unimproved access along the river’s edge. Both the River Valley Park and Southeast 16th St. Accesses provide restrooms and ample parking.

This river stretch is appropriate for paddlers of all skill levels.



Signs of beaver activity

**Southeast 16th St. Access to 265th St. Access (3.7 miles):**

Shading silver maples

After passing under the Southeast 16th St. and U.S. Highway 30 bridges, the river flows along the southern edge of the City of Ames. The first third of this stretch is wooded with both bottomland and upland hardwoods. Below the Ames city limits, agricultural cropland dominates the landscape. River meanders are either hard-armored with old waste cement on the banks or are often actively eroding on the outside bends. Willows and other bottomland species occupy and hold the ground on the inside of the river bends. While some fields have grassed or treed buffers, others have none.

Cliff swallow nests number in the hundreds beneath the U.S. Hwy 30 bridges. Turkey vultures are commonly seen gliding over the river valley and roosting in trees.

An abandoned, old steel bridge still crosses the river at Ken Maril Road, marking the south limits of the City of Ames. Just above the 265th St. Access, the river passes along Jordan Family Acres Park, a project of Story County Conservation Board and the Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation. Across from the park, on the west side of the river, two bends are dominated by 12-plus feet high steel walls – remnants of armoring done by a now abandoned railroad line in the 20th century.

The access at 265th St. is on the left side, just above the bridge and has a gravel carry-down path from the parking lot. Both the Southeast 16th St. and 265th St. Accesses provide ample parking but neither has a restroom.

This river stretch is appropriate for beginning paddlers, although downed trees may sometimes block easy passage through river meanders.

**265th St. Access to Askew Bridge Access to C.J. Shreck Access (8.1 miles)**

The more wild character of the earlier section of this Water Trail changes from here on down. The wooded corridor narrows considerably, and croplands are planted much closer to the river's edge. A portion of the river's course has been drastically altered, having been channelized in the first half of the 20th Century. It feels unnaturally straight, constrained, and confined, and lacks the abundant wildlife seen and heard in earlier sections. Banks are steeper and trees fewer as the human world intrudes.

The 3.6 miles from 265th Street to Askew Bridge is a relatively easy paddle for inexperienced paddlers. The channeled banks are often steep and sometimes hard-armored with waste cement and other building materials. Trees also occupy the banks and beyond, providing a variable-width wooded corridor. Drainage ditches frequently enter on either side. The river flows under the Interstate 35 bridges and then passes by Skunk River Flats public hunting area on the east. Further on, it passes beneath the 280th St. bridge and down to the Askew Access on the right side of the river, just above County Road R-70 bridge.

Although wildlife is less abundant than in the previous stretches, paddlers still are likely to see and hear some river animals. Canada geese, wood ducks, mallard ducks, and some bald eagles can all be found. Evidence of deer and raccoons can be seen in tracks and trails on the shoreline. Red-headed woodpeckers, song sparrows, and gold finches, all typical of more open woodland and savanna, can also be seen and heard along the route.



Heart of Iowa Nature Trail bridge

Story County Conservation and cities along the river, maintain bike and walking trails in many areas in the Skunk River Greenbelt. Paddlers are encouraged to use these public areas. Maps are available.



## SKUNK RIVER WATER TRAIL

The 4.5 river miles between Askew and Shreck are similarly straight, intercepted by drainage ditches, and with wooded corridor varying in width. North of Cambridge, the river passes beneath an active railroad bridge and, about a mile later, goes beneath the 4th St. bridge on the east side of Cambridge. The Skunk River Water Trail and the Heart of Iowa Nature Trail intersect in the town of Cambridge. Paddlers will travel beneath the high bridge of the trail. Just a few hundred yards downstream it flows beneath the old steel 320th St. bridge, its wooden planks visible from below. The Shreck Access is on the right bend of the river, just above the State Hwy. 210 bridge.

Wood duck drake and painted turtle



The 265th St., Askew Bridge, and C.J. Shrek Accesses provide ample parking but no restrooms are available.

This section is appropriate for paddlers of all skill levels.

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)

[www.storycountyconservation.org](http://www.storycountyconservation.org)

