

IOWA RIVER WATER TRAIL



JOHNSON COUNTY

The Iowa River is a meandered stream. That means that private property begins at the high water mark, typically where vegetation begins. The river bed, sandbars, and banks up to the high water mark are held in public trust for the people of Iowa. Sandbar camping is allowed on meandered streams. Paddlers need to be aware that stream reaches outside the designated Water Trail are not signed from the river (gray areas on map).

IOWA RIVER - RIVERS ARE CHANGE

The very nature of rivers is one of change, making paddling a new adventure every time, even on the same river. This Water Trail guides paddlers through one of Iowa's major interior rivers. It begins in urban Iowa City, where bridges, light industry, and cabins dominate the shoreline. It quickly takes paddlers into long stretches of bottomland woodlands that line the river's edge. Its many bends provide great opportunities to see surprising wildlife along the river. Relax and gander at your surroundings while you wander lazily on the water. Take a break on one of the many sandbars and gravel beaches.



Toolesboro Mounds
From University of Iowa Office of the State Archaeologist



Clovis point spear

People started to settle along the Iowa River nearly 13,000 years ago, during the PaleoIndian period. Many cultures followed over the next millenia as people were drawn to the river for its abundant natural resources and for transportation to the interior of the state. Archaeological evidence reveals that ancient Iowans buried their dead, built earthworks, camped, made tools, and lived in villages along the Iowa River.

As Euro-Americans settled in the area and displaced Native Americans, they, too, settled along the wooded river valley. The river provided transportation up and downstream to markets, lumber to build with, power for mills, and ample fish and game. These settlers from the east cleared the wooded areas along the river for agriculture, a practice they had been familiar with in the East.



Current view of 1913 reconstruction of Gilbert's second trading post (1837-1839, south of Iowa City on the river) by Old Settler's Association



Softshell turtle

Photo by Don Becker, IowaHerps.com

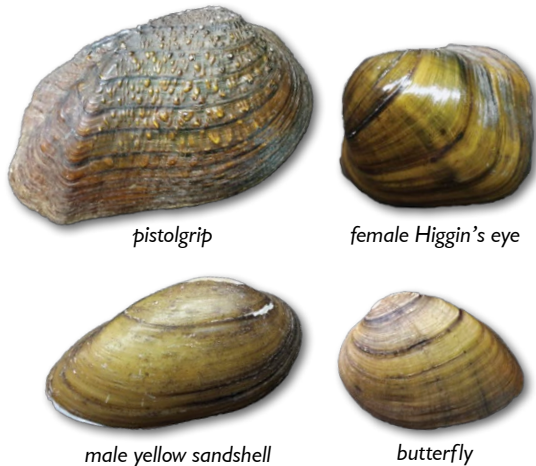
Quiet and observant paddlers may see a pancake-like turtle basking on the sandbars or mudflats of the Iowa River. These softshelled turtles like to hide in the water but watch closely: they stick their snorkel-like noses above the water's surface to see what else you are up to! The lower Iowa River is known for its impressive abundance of reptiles and amphibians.



"Portrait of Keokuk" by George Catlin

From University of Iowa Office of the State Archaeologist

In recent years, archaeologists have discovered several historic Indian village sites along the banks of the Iowa south of Iowa City. The village sites were occupied by members of the Meskwaki and Sauk tribes as recently as the 1830s. Some 400 square miles along the Iowa River in this county were held in reservation through Chief Keokuk's Treaty of 1832. The Iowa River and its watershed were believed to be the adopted home of these Native Americans. As Euro-American settlement expanded, the Sauk and Meskwaki were forced farther west to areas along the Des Moines River.



pistolgrip

female Higgin's eye

male yellow sandshell

butterfly

Endangered and threatened mussels in the Iowa River

Photos by Jen Kurth

Twenty three species of mussels (a.k.a. "clams") are found in this section of the Iowa River! They include 3 species that are listed as Iowa Endangered or Threatened, as well as the Higgin's Eye mussel, a federally endangered species that has also been reintroduced into this river. This is a very high diversity for a modern Iowa river and is due to both its direct connection to the Mississippi River and to the diversity of fish species. Early in their lives (the glochidia stage), mussels attach to the gills of fish to be transported from where they are born.

Stream Reach: Sturgis Ferry Park to Hills Access (9.5 Miles)

As you leave Iowa City you will notice a bike trail on the east side and light industry with armed banks on the western banks. Outside the city and far enough away from the Burlington Street dam, the water trail becomes more dominated by river bottom forest with greater water visibility. Banks are often steep, commonly rising 10+ feet above the water level. Cabins and houses are found along the way, usually in good repair, and overall it is a pleasant paddle. Although the bank is often rip-rapped with cement chunks and slabs, the river is allowed to meander naturally along most of this route, which leads to many horseshoe bends and allows the paddler to explore. On the inside bends of the river, beaches of sand and rock are common, while the outside bends have steep banks.

Bottomland forest that is dominated by silver maple trees, some cottonwoods and sycamores in the overstory, with occasional elm, boxelder, and mulberry. Riverbank grape is often seen draping over tree branches and draping nearly down to the water level. Reed's canary grass is often found on the tops of sunny banks and a variety of weedy forbs grow on the riverbanks. Saplings of willow, silver maple, and cottonwood inhabit mud banks and backwaters. In some areas, the presence of honey locust stands betray a grazing history.

Commonly seen or heard along this reach are song sparrows; cliff, bank, and rough-winged swallows; cardinals; robins; green herons; great crested flycatchers; killdeer; kingfisher; catbirds; woodchucks; fox and gray squirrels; wood ducks; Canada geese; softshell and painted turtles. Mussels can be found on beaches just north of the Hills Access. Because Hwy. 218 is within a mile to the west of this entire reach, the sounds of the highway are a constant reminder of the paddler's closeness to motorized civilization.

The Hills Access is a concrete boat ramp area with ample parking. It also has campsites and restrooms available.

Recommended Experience Classification: **Intermediate**



Bald eagles in a nest
Photo credit: Jim Pease

For decades now, bald eagles have visited Iowa in winter months, fishing ice-free water below dams and other areas, including below the dams in Iowa City. After a dramatic decline in population, bald eagles began nesting in Iowa again in the late 1970s for the first time in at least 80 years. Today, Iowa has over 400 known eagle nests on our rivers. Be on the lookout for eagles and nests as you paddle the Iowa River. They're back and it's a privilege to see them!

Stream Reach: Hills Access to River Junction Boat Ramp (9.6 Miles)

From a cement boat ramp at Hills Access the river's journey south is a lazy one, meandering back and forth multiple times. As the crow flies, the journey would cover barely over 4 miles. But the river changes its mind many times, providing paddlers with a gentle introduction to what it means to meander, to wander.

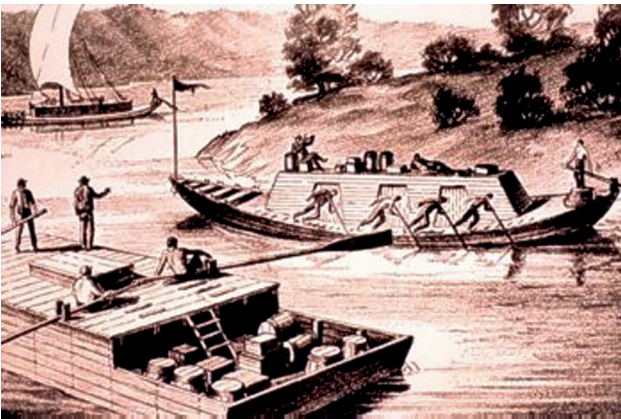
Nearly every bend has opportunities to surprise wildlife along the river. The inside of the bend is almost always a stretch of beach of sand, gravel, or both. There, killdeer, herons, shorebirds, and geese are found, along with the occasional coyote, deer, raccoon, or other unsuspecting critter. Rivers allowed to meander like this one have many such beaches and many such opportunities. (And they make great potential camping spots, as well!)

Some farms and cabins are present along the way but much of the adjacent shoreline is covered in trees, dominated by the bottomland hardwoods of maple, cottonwood, and willows. There are more and larger cottonwoods in this stretch providing high perches and nest sites for eagles and some vultures. Where old silver maples dominate, it becomes almost a "bottomland savanna" in appearance, with few shrubs or secondary growth trees below the maples. The deep shade of the silver maples—together with the limitation of having wet roots in these lowland soils—seems to prevent many other species from growing there, and thus the savanna-like appearance.

Sandbars provide both opportunities and hazards. They seem to form sometimes in the middle of the river, the only warning being the wedge-shaped ripple you see ahead. Before you know it, your paddle and then your hull scrape bottom and you must disembark to free the boat. Use caution, however: those ripples signal the drop off at the end of the sand bar and deeper water.

The River Junction Boat Ramp access has a concrete boat ramp and a primitive camping area for paddler use.

Recommended Experience Classification: **Intermediate**



Flatboat and keelboats
Wikimedia Commons

Transportation on the Iowa

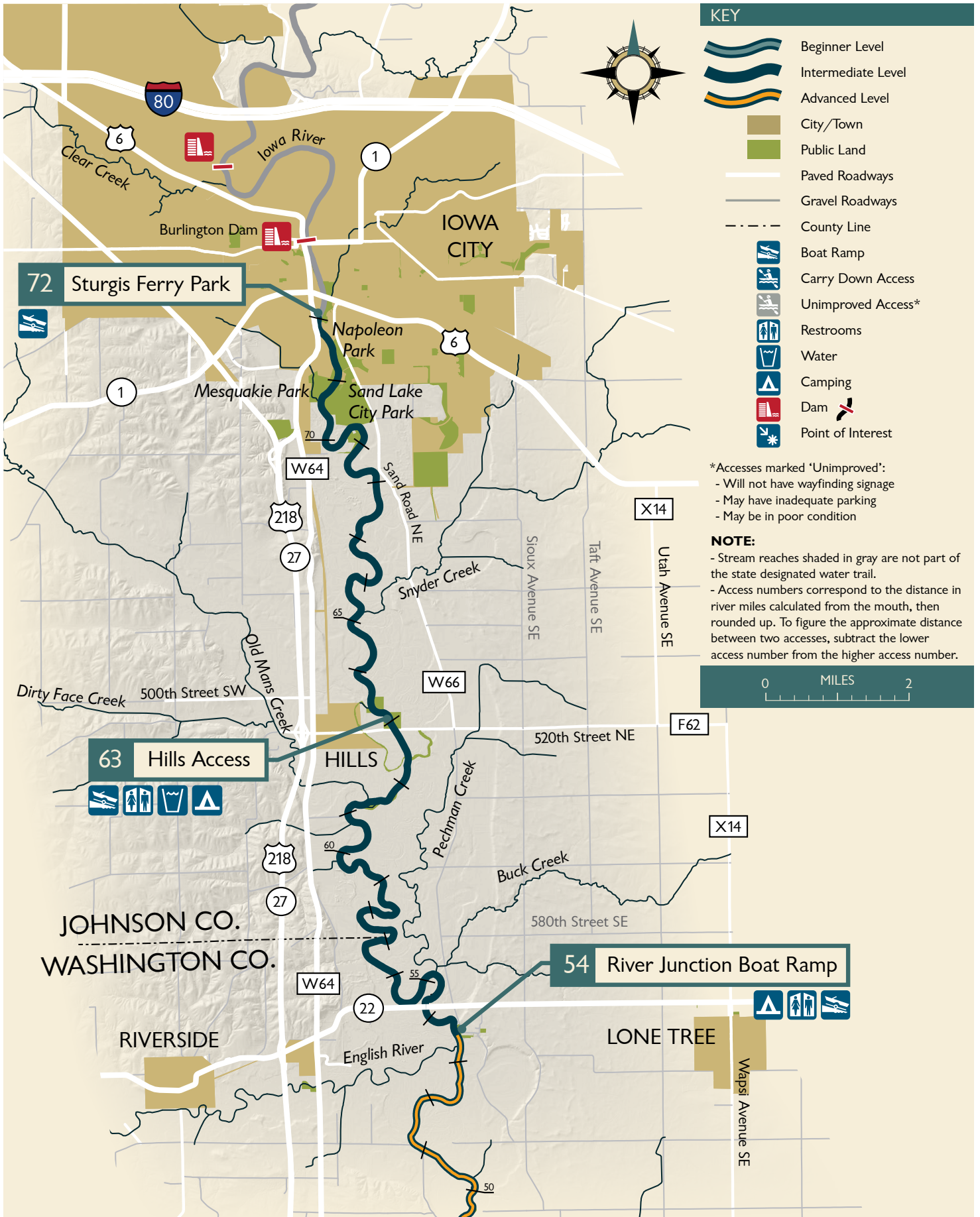
While flatboats and keelboats provided much of the mid-1800s transport on the river, carrying grain, meat, and other goods to markets downstream, steamboats sometimes pushed these shallow-draft crafts back upstream, and carried goods and passengers to the upstream settlements. Once the railroads were built, steamboats and keelboats largely disappeared from the river.



Cottonwoods on the bank

Photo credit: Jim Pease

IOWA RIVER WATER TRAIL



KEY

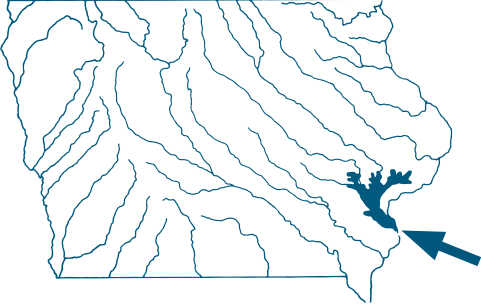
- Beginner Level
- Intermediate Level
- Advanced Level
- City/Town
- Public Land
- Paved Roadways
- Gravel Roadways
- County Line
- Boat Ramp
- Carry Down Access
- Unimproved Access*
- Restrooms
- Water
- Camping
- Dam
- Point of Interest

*Accesses marked 'Unimproved':
 - Will not have wayfinding signage
 - May have inadequate parking
 - May be in poor condition

NOTE:

- Stream reaches shaded in gray are not part of the state designated water trail.
- Access numbers correspond to the distance in river miles calculated from the mouth, then rounded up. To figure the approximate distance between two accesses, subtract the lower access number from the higher access number.





A “lake” that wasn’t

For early geologists, an area from just downstream of Iowa City all the way to the Cedar and Iowa River junction in Louisa County resembled the billiard-table-flat appearance of a classic glacial lake bed. They called it “Lake Calvin” and it became enshrined in local lore. Subsequent geological fieldwork, however, discovered no trace of lake-bottom sediments. By the 1980s it had become clear that no such lake ever existed.



River birch trees

Photo Credit: Jim Pease

Stream Reach: River Junction Boat Ramp to Tri-County Bridge (6.5 Miles)

Few roads now cross this stretch, and because of its relative remoteness, it is a fairly wild stretch of river. The quiet and observant paddler can count on seeing bald eagles, vultures, owls, herons, geese, kingfishers, swallows, warblers, shorebirds, kingbirds, turtles, evidence of beavers, woodpeckers and numerous other wildlife species along this route. In the spring and early summer, the calls of frogs and toads are frequent from shallows and verdant pools in the woods along the route, and wildflowers dot the shoreline benches above the river. Much, though not all, of the riparian zone is treed or in WRP (Wetland Reserve Program) easements and the river meanders over a broad floodplain. Armoring of banks with both cement waste (re-rod sometimes intact) and tires (car, truck, and tractor) strung together has been attempted. This explains, in part, how so many tires end up in our rivers.

The Tri-County Bridge crosses the river at the Johnson-Louisa County line. Paddlers may exit upstream of the bridge on river left, but no public access or parking is currently available at that site. The next public access is located another 17.5 river miles southeast, at Louisa County’s River Forks Access.

Recommended Experience Classification: **Advanced**



Volunteers removing trash from the Iowa River Water Trail

Photo credit: iarvcp.org

Clean it up!

Each fall, several dozen volunteers gather to collect and recycle trash, scrap metal, and tires from a section of the Iowa river. With little more than canoes, gloves, a few hand tools, and a lot of energy and grit, these volunteers have removed hundreds of tires and over 50 tons of metal and other trash from the Iowa River and recycled it properly! Help them—and the river—by taking all of your trash back with you, and by volunteering with them in the fall. Go to www.iarvcp.org for more details.

Cottonwoods, silver maples, willows, and river birches are the four common native tree species along Iowa rivers. The river birch is only found in eastern Iowa, especially along the Iowa and Cedar Rivers. Their multi-stemmed trunks are common along floodplain areas, with peeling bark typical of all birches, and water-tolerant roots. Its salmon-colored bark changes to an orange-brown as it ages. Its cone-like seed pods burst in early summer and are carried downstream on wind and water to sprout on bare mineral soil in mudflats and sandbars.



KEY

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- Boat Ramp
- Carry Down Access
- Unimproved Access*
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0 1 2
MILES



Great blue heron

Photo: John Wenck





Riverbank grapes in bloom

Photo credit: Jim Pease

Stream Reach: Tri-County Bridge to River Forks Access (17.5 Miles)

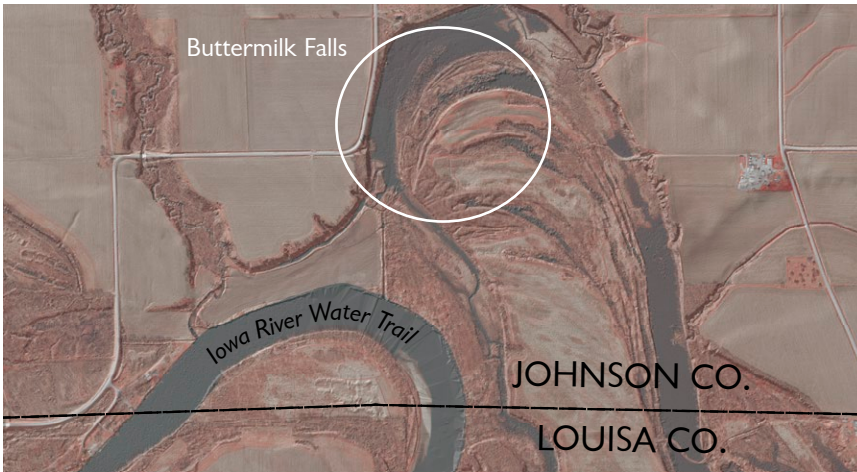
Banks are generally steep, exposing the tree roots along the edges. A few farms and some groups of cabins are found along this stretch, which is nearly all privately owned, but the setting is mostly wild.

The inside curves of the river frequently hold beaches of sand or gravel, perfect for exploring for tracks and providing camping or lunch stops. In a few places, narrow veins of soft coal with accompanying mud-stone or soft shale layers are visible at the water level, generally in the deeper, outside cuts of a river curve. Look for dark gray to black veins in the bank exposures.

Cottonwoods, willows, and sycamores add diversity to the canopy and ash, elm, mulberry, box elder, and some walnuts are found in some locations. Rarely, river birch makes an appearance along the bank.

While tree roots are exposed along the steep banks (the bright orange roots of mulberry being the most obvious), where more gentle slopes are exposed, a variety of weedy forbs—including *Rumex* spp., daisy fleabane, plantain, and a variety of other weedy pioneers—are found on the bank slope, along with thousands of seeds of cottonwoods and silver maples and the sprouting stems of willow. Riverbank grape vines and poison ivy vines drape themselves over the branches of bank-side trees, taking advantage of the support to find the sunlight—and providing abundant fruit to other wild species. Some upland forests near the river are forested with oaks, basswoods, hickories, sugar maples, and some understory ironwoods and catalpa.

Recommended Experience Classification: **Advanced**



Map of Buttermilk Falls over 2016–2018 infrared and lidar background images

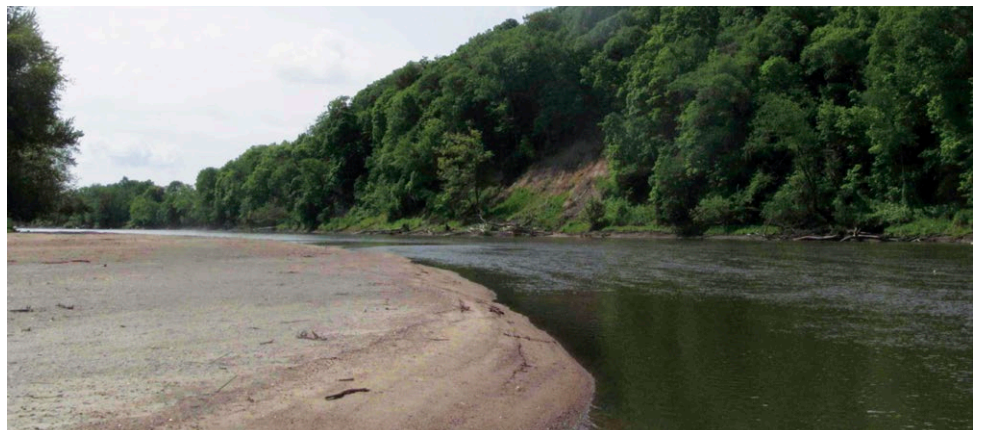
University of Iowa Office of the State Archaeologist



Iowa River island

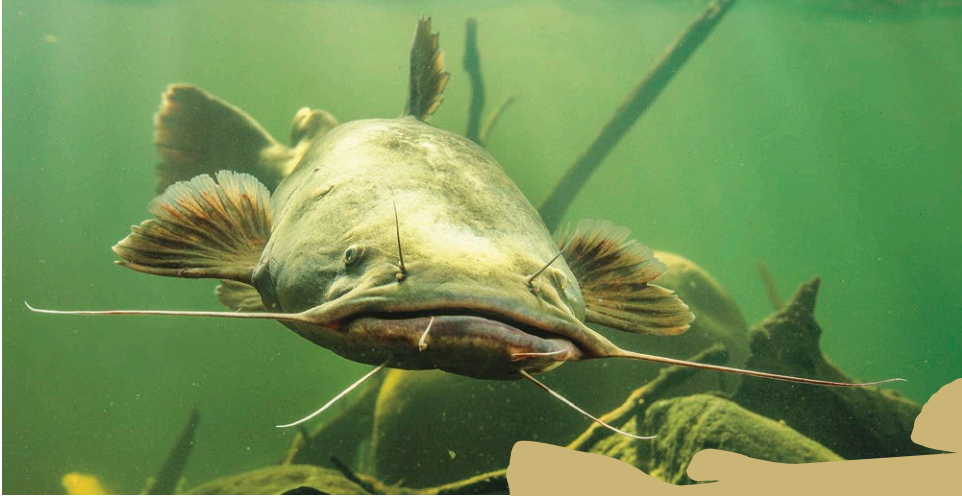
Photo credit: Jim Pease

River rapids, where water flowed fast over rocks and rock ledges, were major hazards of river transportation. One of these, called Buttermilk Falls, was on a horseshoe bend of the river, about $\frac{3}{4}$ of a mile north of its current channel and the Johnson/Louisa county border, on what is now an oxbow slough of the river. The river was filled with boulders left behind from an earlier advance and retreat of a glacier some 0.5 to 2.5 million years earlier.



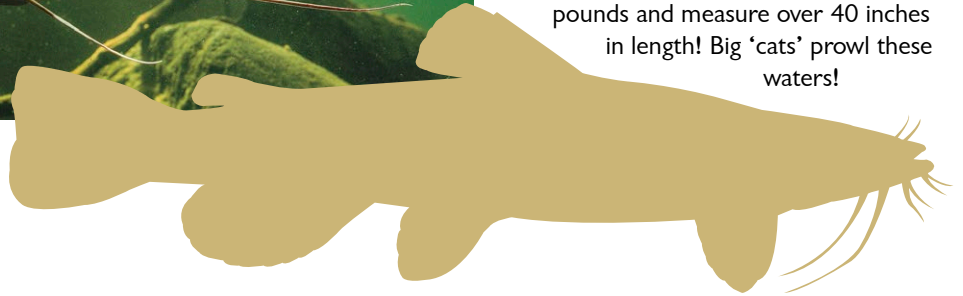
Beach at river bend

Photo credit: Jim Pease



Flathead catfish
From Alchetron.com

The Iowa River below the Burlington Street Dam in Iowa City flows unimpeded some 75 miles to the Mississippi River. The lack of dams below that point means that fish have ready access to this entire reach of the river. Seasonally, some species, including flathead and channel catfish, may move up and down the river to and from the Mississippi for spawning and overwintering. A recent study of flatheads by DNR fish biologists showed that some move an average of 26.5 miles seasonally, and may weigh more than 35 pounds and measure over 40 inches in length! Big 'cats' prowl these waters!



BE SAFE OUT THERE!

Follow these safety TIPS to keep your trip enjoyable:

- 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 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:

DNR Safety Information:

www.iowadnr.gov/paddlingsafety

DNR Interactive Paddling Map:

www.iowadnr.gov/paddlingmap

Johnson County Conservation

319-645-2315

