

IOWA RIVER WATER TRAIL



LOUISA COUNTY

The Iowa River is a “meandered stream”. This legal term, not to be confused with the character of the river, means that private property begins at the high water mark, typically where vegetation begins. Below the high water mark: river bed, sandbars, and banks up to where vegetation begins is held in public trust for all to enjoy. Sandbar camping is allowed.



LOUISA COUNTY

Flooding is common along this river. At average flows or “normal conditions”, sandbars are visible. Flood stage for Columbus Junction is 23 feet; however, at 17.5 feet the access road at River Forks goes underwater. It’s important to know the current water levels and conditions before venturing out. When in doubt, call Louisa County Conservation: 319-523-8381. At average flows or normal conditions, expect to travel 2 to 3 mph by canoe, and 1 mph by tube.

THE IOWA RIVER -

The Iowa River in Louisa County flows unimpeded through thousands of acres of public backwater sloughs, wetlands and bottomland forests. Spectacular scenery, diverse habitat and sacred sites flank both sides of the river, but paddlers will appreciate the abundance of sandbar camping opportunities on a wide river that nearly doubles in size after the confluence with the Cedar River. Wildlife areas include: Horseshoe Bend Division of Port Louisa, Indian Slough, Millrace Flats, Wapello Bottoms and Odessa Wildlife Complex, to name a few.



Goldenseal

Photo Jessica Bolser

Goldenseal is not common, but look for this spring flower in wooded areas growing in patches in the open shade. Meskwaki and Potawatomi tribes, as well as pioneers, used this plant medicinally, and in some states its continued use as an herbal supplement has led to its threatened and endangered status due to overharvesting.

Photo Jessica Bolser

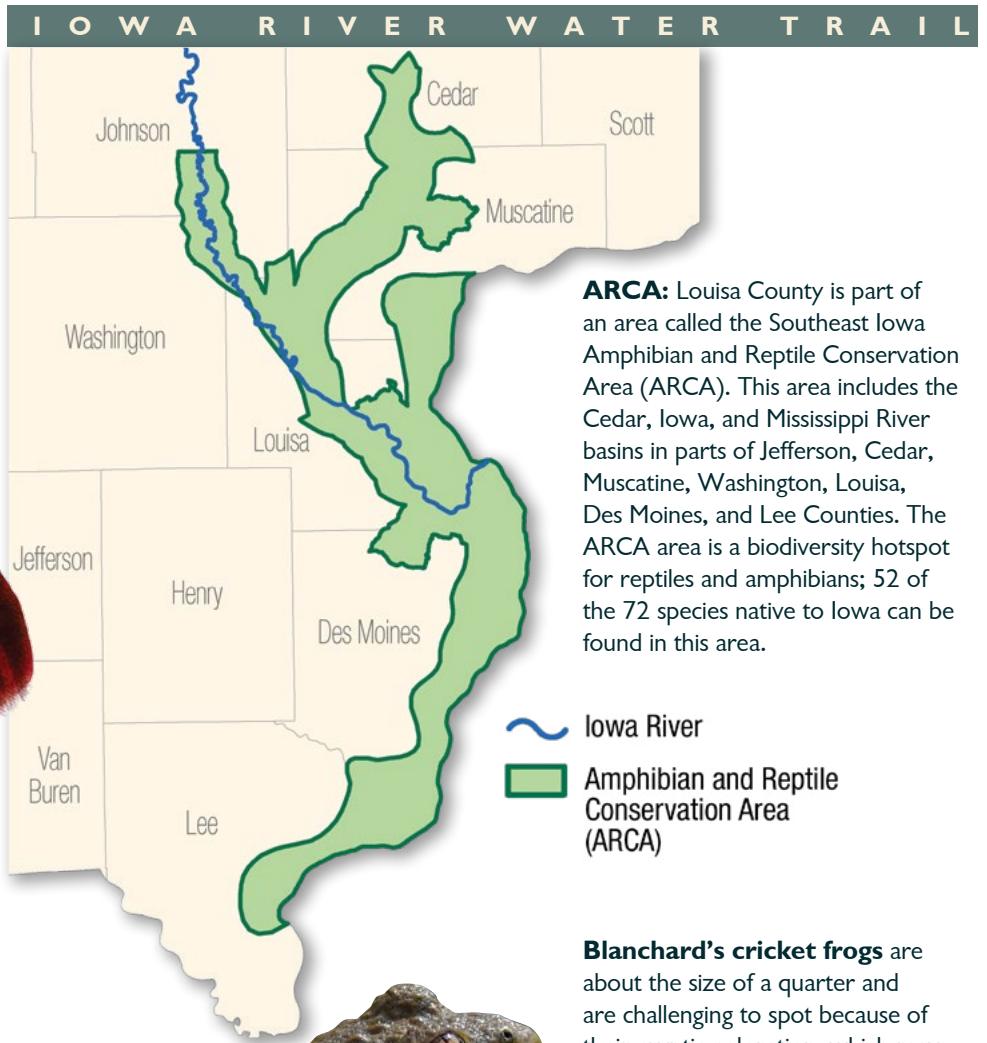


Horseshoe Bend Division of Port Louisa Wildlife Refuge: This parcel shown above lies within the Iowa River floodplain, 4 miles upstream from its confluence with the Mississippi River. Its 2,600 acre wetland complex provides flood storage, fish passage, fish spawning and abundant protection for migratory birds.




Sauk Chief Makataimeshekiakiah, or Black Hawk painted by Charles King Bird in 1837

Native Americans: For nearly 13,000 years, people have been drawn to the Iowa River. They fished, hunted, farmed, and used the river for transportation to the interior of the state. In the early 19th Century, many Meskwaki and Sauk sought refuge from U.S. encroachment, moving their villages west to the banks of the Iowa; these included Wapello and Keokuk's villages in Louisa County. Keokuk's village lay twelve miles upstream of the mouth of the Iowa River. It is here, in the spring of 1832, where Keokuk reportedly dissuaded a majority of the Sauk tribe from answering Black Hawk's call to take up arms and resist what Black Hawk viewed as illegal U.S. occupation of Sauk-owned lands. Black Hawk's eventual defeat resulted in treaties that removed the Meskwaki and Sauk from the region. The village site was known as the "council on the Iowa" and later became a pioneer town named Florence.



ARCA: Louisa County is part of an area called the Southeast Iowa Amphibian and Reptile Conservation Area (ARCA). This area includes the Cedar, Iowa, and Mississippi River basins in parts of Jefferson, Cedar, Muscatine, Washington, Louisa, Des Moines, and Lee Counties. The ARCA area is a biodiversity hotspot for reptiles and amphibians; 52 of the 72 species native to Iowa can be found in this area.

 Iowa River
 Amphibian and Reptile Conservation Area (ARCA)

Blanchard's cricket frogs are about the size of a quarter and are challenging to spot because of their cryptic coloration, which may change depending on environmental conditions.

Blanchard's Cricket Frog

Photo Brian Button

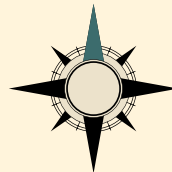


Photo Louisa County Conservation



Toolesboro Mounds: Located on the bluffs between the Iowa and Mississippi Rivers is the Toolesboro Mounds National Historic Landmark and Museum. The Hopewellian mounds at Toolesboro are among the best-preserved and accessible remnants of an ancient culture flourishing from about 200 BCE to 300 CE. The site includes several large mounds and a museum. The museum is open seasonally, but the grounds are open to visitors year round.

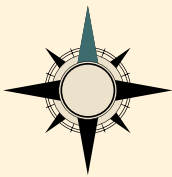
See Iowa River Water Trail in Johnson County brochure
















KEY

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

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



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Wildlife and Plants: There's plenty of wildlife to watch in and around the Iowa River. Bird life is diverse, especially along the lower half of the trail. Late spring through early fall, great blue herons are often seen hunting in the shallows, bald eagles sit on nests high in the trees during spring, small colorful warblers, like this prothonotary warbler, flit through the bottomland forests in summer, and pelicans may be seen swooping in for fish in both spring and fall.

Prothonotary Warbler

Photo John Wenck



As you paddle into Louisa County, you'll notice the river 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.

A new access, Todd Town, located in Columbus Junction at the SE intersection of Highway 70 and the river will be completed in mid-2020. It will offer an opportunity to take out on the west side of the river about a mile above River Forks.



Photo Jessica Bolser

Yellow jewelweed can occasionally be spotted blooming in shady areas near water. Bumblebees and hummingbirds pollinate this plant, and quail, pheasants, and white-footed mice, as well as other wildlife, eat the seeds.

Stream Reach: River Junction Access to River Forks at Columbus Junction (24 miles)

Recommended Experience Classification: **ADVANCED**

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 if they need to, 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. Because there is no public parking, it is not advised to leave cars there.

Stream Reach: River Forks Access to Hwy. 61 Access (10 miles)

Recommended Experience Classification: **INTERMEDIATE**

The Cedar River joins the Iowa River just north of this access, so the river volume is increased significantly, often 4 to 5 times the volume of the Iowa alone, all dependent on the rains farther up on the respective watersheds. The result is a very wide river as it passes under the Hwy. 92 Bridge and proceeds southeast to the takeout at the Hwy. 61 Access. The current river meanders little in this stretch, making for a very flat and broad floodplain, stretching some 2 miles across. The immediate shorelines are often in bottomland forest,



Photo Merryn Laughlin

Swinging Bridge: The Columbus Junction Swinging Bridge is a suspension bridge just like the Golden Gate in San Francisco. Rural swinging bridges were inexpensive to build, easily made from local materials, and a fun challenge for builders. The Swinging Bridge is a footbridge designed for pedestrian traffic as a shortcut between Third and Fourth Streets to reach downtown Columbus Junction.

The Swinging Bridge has been rebuilt many times over the years. The original bridge was constructed in 1886. A sturdier version reopened in 1904 and spanned 160 feet but collapsed in 1920. Following the collapse, an engineering professor from Iowa State University developed the plans for the current 262-foot cable bridge with wooden planks that is still in use today.

but land beyond has been farmed—and part still is. In the most recent decade, much of that land has been put in the federal WRP (Wetland Reserve Program) and is under permanent easement of the federal government. Some groups of cabins exist in a few areas along this stretch of river, and sometimes you can see anglers casting a line in hopes of luring a fish.

The river's width and strength means that many of its meanderings are within the riverbed, leaving islands large and small to explore. Backwaters of these islands are often filled with fish and wildlife and the careful paddler will spy herons, bald eagles, mink, pileated woodpeckers, blue jays, deer and more in these backwaters. The main portion of the stream is also host to species that might normally be found in the Mississippi, including double-crested cormorants and ring-billed gulls. The patient angler will often catch carp for the smoker or a meal of the catfish this Mississippi River tributary is known for. Large trees are often found in the channel, adding challenge for the paddler and creating new habitat for aquatic life and basking logs for turtles. Big rains upstream on the watershed create a constantly changing Iowa River downstream, especially in this stretch, with new logs to watch for and changing beaches and sandbars. The alluvium that makes up this bottomland is deposited and removed over and over again, as the water levels change.

The woodland along this stretch is typical of the bottomland forest found throughout the river: the forest is dominated by silver maples, often with little growing beneath the dense canopy, with some cottonwoods, sycamores, and willows in some locations, and ash, mulberry, and boxelder in more open locations. Land more recently returned to trees has dense stands of willows and cottonwoods, with ash, boxelder, and mulberry where the land is high enough above the water. Riverbank grape vines drape over many trees along the banks. Often large poison ivy vines do, as well. Willow branches and other portions of willow trees will often root and establish themselves wherever they can. If beaver do not trim them off for food, they help stabilize banks and slow the speed of the river's current.

While most of the land along this stretch is in private ownership, the last approximately 2 miles belongs to public agencies. These make up significant blocks of wildlife habitat for heron rookeries, insect and fish nurseries in the shallow waters, and places where wild critters can live mostly undisturbed by humans. Just think of that wildness—and watch for it—as you paddle along.



Convict Road: Likely the first Iowa highway built with convict labor, this narrow 1.5 mile stretch of concrete road still exists, and is located southeast of Fredonia and immediately north of State Highway 92. Built in 1914 by prisoners from the Anamosa Reformatory, the highway was one of only five paved roads in the state after it was built, attracting visitors from miles away who were eager to drive on this new surface. The county bore the high \$30,000 per mile cost, but succeeded in convincing the state to use convict labor, which up until then was approved only for state projects. The highway was needed because the river had deposited huge "sand banks" making the existing road impassable. The route was deemed critical to the western expansion of Iowa because four registered highways converged at this location to cross the Iowa River on the only bridge for miles.

Louisa County Conservation



Six Littleton Brothers Memorial:

The Littleton Brothers Monument honors the memory of the six sons of James and Martha Littleton. The Littleton Brothers were from the small town of Toolesboro in Louisa County, Iowa. The brothers enlisted in the Iowa Infantry in 1861. Between 1862 and 1864 Thomas, William, George, John, Kendall, and Noah all died from wounds, disease, accident, and as a prisoner of war while in service to our Country. This is believed to be the largest loss of life in one immediate family from any war in United States history.

The monument, dedicated in 2016, is located along County Road 99 at the entrance to the Toolesboro Mounds and Museum, National Historic Landmark.

Stream Reach: Hwy. 61 Access to Fred Schwob Access

Recommended Experience Classification: **BEGINNER**

Public land dominates the majority of this stretch and, where private holdings are located, they are well-treed or otherwise wild land. Hundreds of cliff swallows nest beneath the Hwy. 61 Bridge, gathering just the right mud for their nests from pools along the way. How do they know what is “just the right mud?” Great blue herons are also common in this stretch, perhaps having a rookery (a communal nesting area) in trees nearby. Rookeries are sometimes in the tops of cottonwoods and other hardwoods and sometimes in low trees, a few feet over the water. Like the mud of the cliff swallows, how they select them is a mystery.

This is a great beginner stretch of river that offers a lot to see in just four miles. With public lands bordering both sides of the river, nature dominates the view. There are great opportunities to see wildlife, birds, and appreciate the abundant trees of bottomland forests in the area.

Banks along the river are mostly treed with silver maples, cottonwoods, willows, and a few sycamores, all sitting atop mostly vertical banks, and sandbars are found along inside bends and, sometimes, in the middle of the river (known as island bars or mid-channel islands).

The small city of Wapello has fortified its banks in the final turn in the river before the Schwob Access, armoring the high banks with constructed concrete and dumps of street concrete. The city sits high up on the banks, perhaps 25 feet above the river level, smart for living along a river that is as variable as the Iowa.

Stream Reach: Fred Schwob Access to Cappy Russell Access (10 miles)

Recommended Experience Classification: **INTERMEDIATE**

The first quarter of the paddle has cabins (some not in good shape) and rip-rap composed of old cars and trucks, in addition to cement and brick rip-rap along the west river bank.

The rest of the river redeems itself after this first couple of miles, with much more wild land both in and along the river. A series of islands in the river give the now slowing river a braided appearance. The many logs strewn around the islands provide some challenging paddling in low water, and create habitat for aquatic wildlife. Herons, eagles, great crested flycatchers, warblers, buntings, bank and rough-winged swallows, orioles, and many other wildlife species entertain paddlers enroute to the Cappy Russell Access. Turtles are in profusion along this stretch of river, basking on logs and sloped banks. Heads of painted, red-eared, map, and softshell turtles poke up above the water and harmless northern water snakes drop into the water from low over-hanging branches.

The silver maple dominated forests, once 6-8 feet above the water, become 2 feet or less in this stretch, allowing the paddler to peer into the dark, savanna-like forests of silver maple. Occasionally, a large—greater than 4 feet in diameter—old swamp white oak will grace the bank as we near the end of this paddle.

Yet, we humans have left our marks. Where local roads parallel the river, cabins in various states of repair are found. A few overhang the river precariously, owners perhaps hoping that some near future flood will save them the trouble of removing them. Rivers as dumps are a large part of our past, unfortunately. They took things—sewerage, waste materials, old buildings—“away”. Our vision and understanding ought not to be so limited today.



Effigy Pipe: The pipe is from Toolesboro Mounds, thought to be made from Elkhorn Creek pipestone in Illinois.

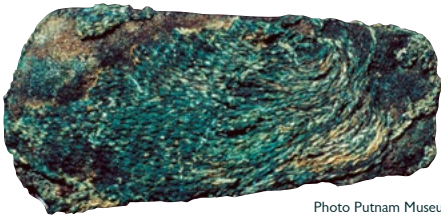
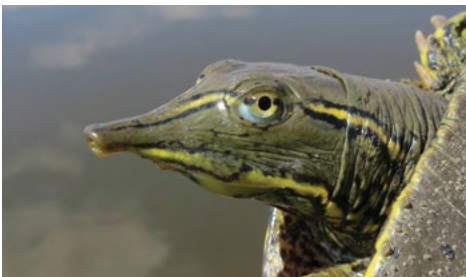


Photo Putnam Museum

Copper axe with woven wrapping: The axe is from Toolesboro Mounds. Textiles normally decompose quickly in Iowa soils. However, charring or contact with copper salts sometimes preserves fabric, baskets, cattail reed matting, or cordage remnants such as this, for thousands of years. Both are located in the Putnam Museum in Davenport.

Photo Jessica Bolser



Spiny Softshell Turtle: This pancake shaped turtle is the fastest swimmer of the 13 turtle species in Iowa. It's active by day, but buries itself underwater in sand or mud at night. Females are larger than males with shells measuring as much as a whopping 17 inches. It hangs out always at water's edge, basking on rocks, sand, mud or logs, and quickly dashes into the water at the slightest disturbance.

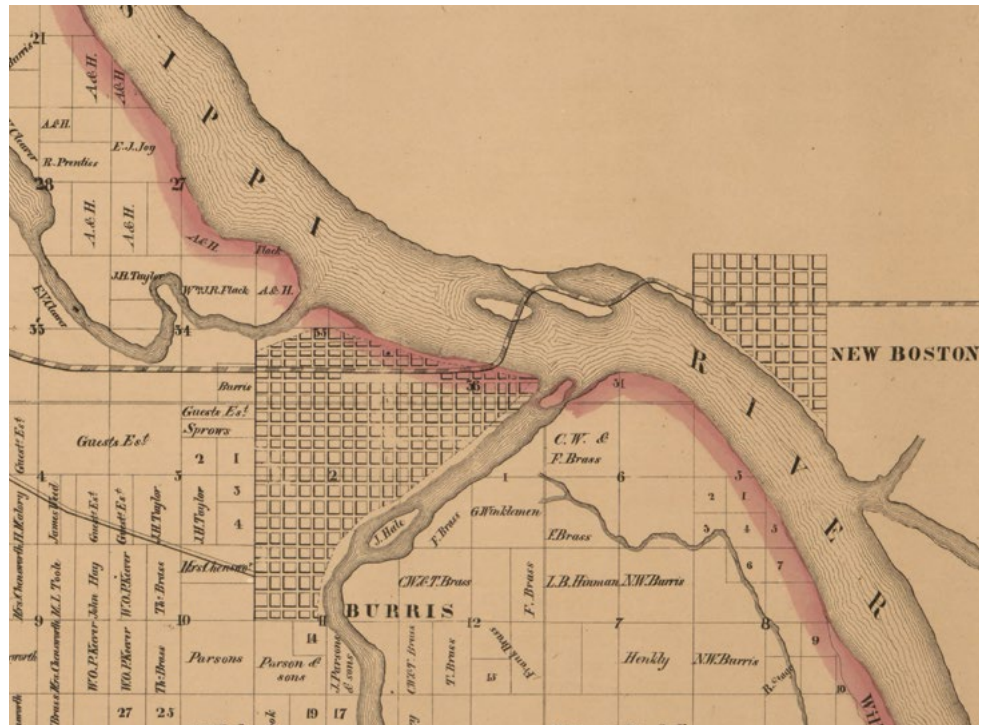
Stream Reach: Cappy Russell Access to Ferry Landing (5 miles)

Recommended Experience Classification: **INTERMEDIATE**

This short stretch from the Cappy Russell Access to the Ferry Landing on the Mississippi, where the Iowa joins it, is characterized by a braided river that ducks and weaves between islands, backwaters and lowland forests. If one does not watch carefully just where the current is flowing, it is easy to become disoriented among the multiple channels and islands. A levy has been constructed along the right (eastern) side of the river through this reach and is visible at varying distances from the river.

The lowland forest along this stretch is similar to the previous reach: it is heavily dominated by silver maple and is heavily used by a variety of wetland species of turtles, snakes, herons, eagles, cormorants, and songbirds. Paddlers can be constantly entertained by the numbers of species that inhabit this wetland forest. The floodplain forest dominated by silver maple, with occasional large cottonwoods and sycamores and willows along some banks.

From 1858 Louisa County map by A.B. Miller, courtesy of the Library of Congress



The Short History of Burris City: Bordered by water to the north, south, and east was the town of Burris City. Platted in 1855, Nathan Burris built a city, dreaming that it would thrive off of the future Air Line Railway, in addition to the existing Iowa and Mississippi River traffic in the area. Lots were sold and, by 1857, the city had a brick hotel, a planing mill and brickyard. Ultimately, the geographical location in a floodplain and failure of the Air Line Railway led to the rapid decline from prosperous city to ghost town by 1858. The last building was removed from the site in 1868.

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:

Iowa DNR

www.iowadnr.gov/paddlingsafety

www.iowadnr.gov/paddlingmap

(shows recent hazards)

Louisa County Conservation

www.louisacountyconservation.org

Phone: (319) 523-8381

