

NORTH RACCOON RIVER WATER TRAILS



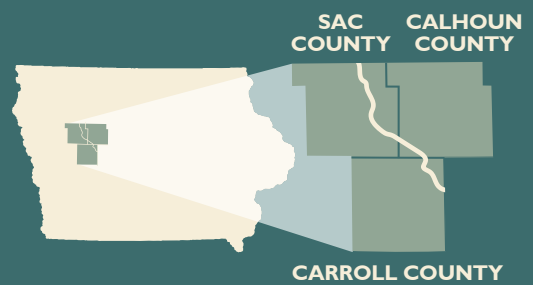
SAC, CALHOUN, &
CARROLL COUNTIES

A RIBBON OF HABITAT IN A SEA OF AGRICULTURE

The North Raccoon through Sac, Calhoun and Carroll counties stands apart from the broader landscape of intense agriculture, while at the same time taking on the character provided by land practices of private landowners. The corridor varies from broad pasture and savannah grasslands to narrower forested buffers with nearby cropland. In some places, eroding riverbanks rise 50 feet above the river – a testament to the volume of water being shed from the agricultural landscape. Wildlife is abundant, and varies greatly with changes in vegetation. The paddle is a bit challenging – with longer river stretches and occasional rock dams, riffles, and logjams to navigate.

But the journey is worthwhile.

The North Raccoon River is a navigable “non-meandered” stream in Iowa. That means that the State of Iowa owns the water flowing through it, but not the land adjacent to it or under it. Except at access sites and public areas marked on the map, the land adjacent to and underneath the river is private. Please respect it and do not trespass.



Pasture and prairie on private lands along the North Raccoon provide perennial vegetation that reduces erosion. Fences keep cattle out of the river. In some cases, private land protection is secured long-term through conservation easements. The North Raccoon thrives on private lands managed for public good.

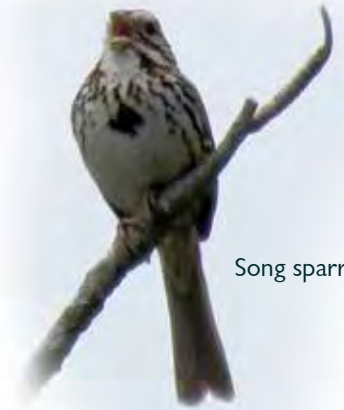


Rivers are always changing course – using their power to seek new paths of least resistance. Sometimes, the river cuts across a tight river bend creating a separated pool of water, called an oxbow. During spring floods, oxbows sometimes reconnect to the river and serve as nurseries for fish and other wildlife.

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The modern Iowa landscape has been altered to quickly shed water into the river. The result is increased current and quickly rising water that delivers a strong, cutting punch to areas of riverbank. Paddlers will see cut-banks that range in height up to 50 feet, exposing layers of fertile soils.

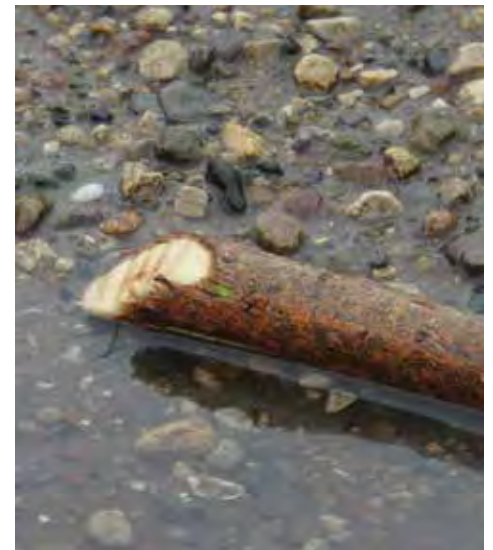


Song sparrow



Large oaks, with wide sprawling branches, are landmarks along the river. These trees grew up in open pastures or savannas without having to compete for sunlight with closely growing trees.

Most river corridors in Iowa contain forest and row crops. The upper stretch of the North Raccoon River corridor is somewhat unique in its areas of broad grasslands. Paddlers can hear pheasants crowing, and songs of dickcissels, song sparrows, bluebirds, and other grassland and savannah birds.



Beavers have bank dens in many locations. Evidence of busy beavers is apparent in cut willows piled in places on the inside of river bends, gnawed stumps and wood chips, and beaver slide trails down bank slopes.

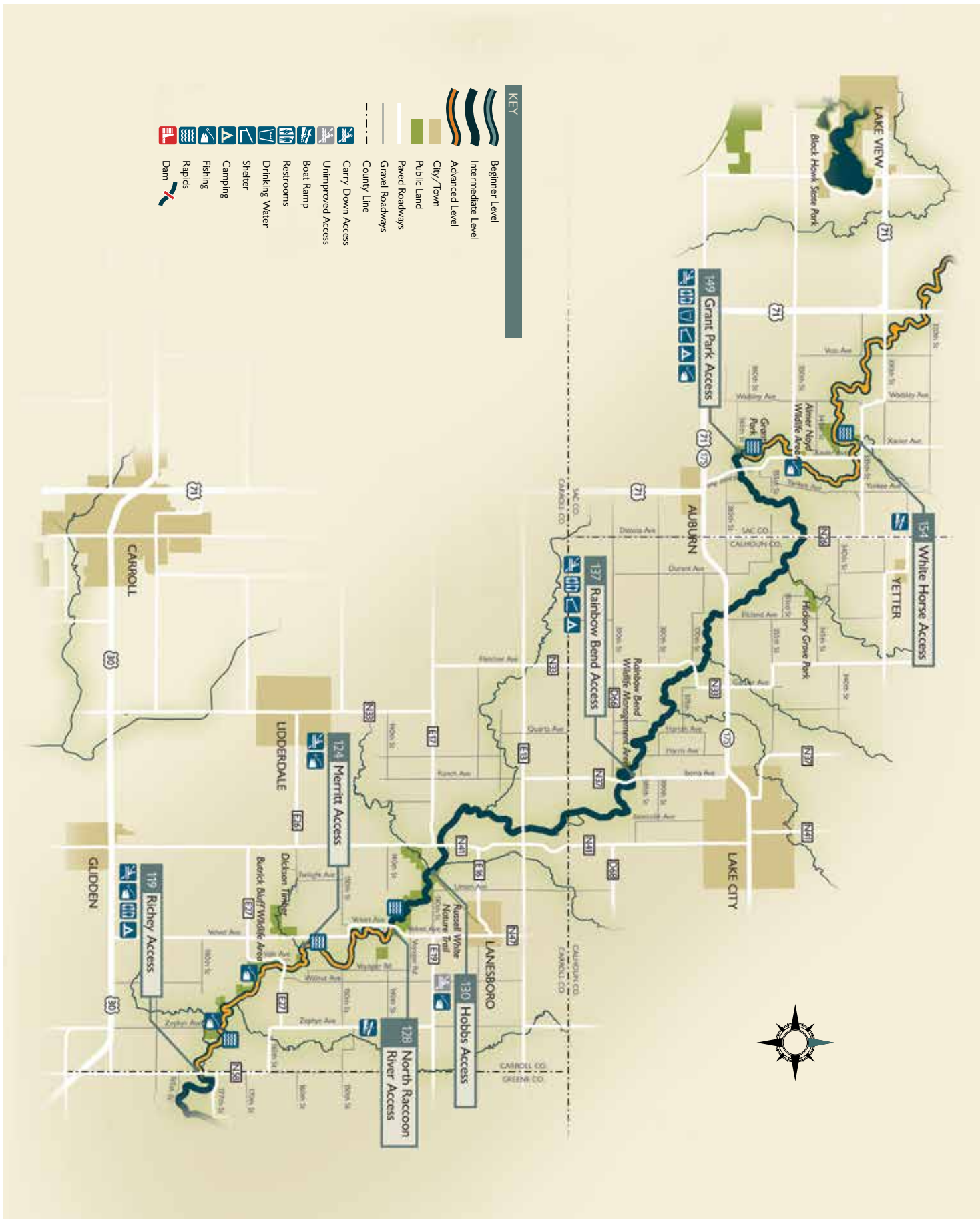
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KEY

- Beginner Level
- Intermediate Level
- Advanced Level
- City/Town
- Public Land
- Paved Roadways
- Gravel Roadways
- County Line
- Boat Ramp
- Restrooms
- Drinking Water
- Shelter
- Camping
- Fishing
- Rapids
- Dam
- Carry/Down Access
- Unimproved Access



NORTH RACCOON RIVER WATER TRAIL



Vogel Access to Sac City Park Access – 17.8 miles



Grassed shoreline

The first third of this river stretch features pasture and other grasslands along the shoreline, including some native prairie grasses and wildflowers. Where grazing exists, animals are fenced out of the river. Scattered flood-tolerant trees, such as willow, cottonwood, silver maple, and box elder, are found among the grasslands. Hillsides often are covered with oak savannas of white and bur oaks with large, spreading, lower branches. Boulders and cobble are found in and along the river, and numerous riffles add to the wild flavor of this stretch. Only a few homes or other buildings exist along the route until the northern outskirts of Sac City.

The lower two-thirds of this section is more densely wooded. The McDonald Greenbelt is an area of public land stretching a mile upstream of the Highway 20 bridges. The Greenbelt is enhanced and widened due to landowners who have enrolled property in conservation easements. These private lands are being protected for their benefits to wildlife, the river, and scenic beauty.



Bottomland hardwoods line corridor below Hagge Park.

This is a great wildlife-watcher's paddle. White-tailed deer, fox squirrels, woodchucks, and raccoons are common. Beavers have bank dens in many locations, and paddlers are likely to see beaver-cut willows piled in some locations. Canada geese occupy sand and rock bars. Wood ducks are abundant along this stretch, making use of human-provided nest boxes and the hollows of abundant, old trees. Spotted sandpipers, killdeer, and migrating solitary sandpipers traipse along the shoreline and sandbars. Mussel shells, including a few recently harvested by raccoons and other critters, are found on some rock bars.

Birds are abundant. Pheasants use the prairie and pastures, and wild turkeys can be spotted and heard in the savannas and woodlands. Kestrels nest in holes in old willows along the grassed floodplain. Barred and great-horned owls also inhabit the trees, and red-tailed hawks are commonly seen and heard. Bald eagles and turkey vultures are likely to be seen soaring or perched. The vultures find roosting easy in the large horizontal branches of the savanna oaks. Cliff swallows build their pottery nests below most of the bridges, and rough-winged and bank swallows dig tunnels into vertical dirt banks. Tree swallows nest in tree cavities, and barn swallows make use of bridges and some of the few houses and outbuildings along the way. Red-headed woodpeckers and belted kingfishers are frequently seen along the shoreline or flying across the river. Various sparrows, sedge wrens, yellow-throats, goldfinches, red-winged blackbirds, cowbirds, and dickcissels call from the grassed shorelines, while Baltimore orioles, rose-breasted grosbeaks, catbirds, robins, indigo buntings, cardinals, and blue jays occupy the more wooded sections.



Spotted sandpiper

Photo Steve Dinsmore

The Vogel Access is a bit steep, and paddlers may choose to enter the river from a sandbar about 10-15 yards upstream. You can portage the rock dam in Sac City on the right, but it may be rocky and unstable. The Sac City Park Access is located two miles downstream where camping, restrooms, and drinking water are available.

The large number of riffles, long distance, and the lack of shorter alternatives make this stretch appropriate for paddlers with at least an intermediate skill level.

Sac City Park to Hagge Park Dam to White Horse Access – 17.5 miles

Rock dam rapids at Sac City.

The four miles of river from Sac City Park to Hagge Park flow through a wide corridor of bottomland forest, with uplands often covered with open-grown oaks and other trees. Below Hagge Park, the corridor narrows. Much of the river maintains its wildness, but erosion is apparent where livestock have been allowed direct access to the river and where row crops are falling in from eroded riverbanks. Junked cars and other machinery have also been used as riprap along the shoreline.

Wildlife continues to be abundant, and many of the species noted in the previous section can be found, especially where woods and grasslands occupy the shoreline.

Three rock dams provide challenges for paddlers. The first, a mile or so south of Sac City Park, is particularly problematic. The portage above the rock dam may be badly eroded, and debris tends to gather and create a logjam that may block access to the portage. If there is no logjam, the rock dam can be run at decent water levels. The rock dam at Hagge Park is not passable by canoe or kayak.

There is an exit to portage around the dam, but it is located immediately at the start of the rapids, making for a tricky takeout. The put-in below the dam is over unstable boulders. The rock dam at White Horse Access is runnable by experienced paddlers at decent water levels.

Although care is required when navigating the rock dams, the three accesses are, themselves, in good shape. White Horse Access provides a cement boat ramp, while the other two are carry-down accesses. Camping, restrooms, and water are available at Sac City Park. Primitive camping is allowed at Hagge Park, though no water or toilets are available.

The long distance, rock dams, and logjams make this section suitable only for paddlers with at least an intermediate skill level.



Fresh tree and log jam blocks the river.

White Horse Access to Grant Park to Rainbow Bend Access – 16.6 miles

This river stretch provides a contrast in landscapes. The 4.5 miles between White Horse Access and Grant Park has a wide, wooded river corridor, filled with dense bottomland forests close to the river and hardwoods dominated by oaks on the uplands. For most of the remaining ten miles, the corridor is narrow, with only scattered trees, pastures, hay, and row crops. Some oxbow wetlands are evidence that the river once roamed more widely over its floodplain. Steeply eroded banks are more common, especially in areas where no trees abut the river. Big cut banks—some 35 feet or more in height—reveal small oak savannas on the hills above. A few more extensive woodlands exist where fields were “squared off”, due to poor access for large equipment to inside bends of a meander. The wider woodland corridor returns as paddlers near the Rainbow Bend Wildlife Area. Where woodlands exist, many of the forest species noted in the first river sections are again common. A few softshell turtles can be seen basking on the shoreline banks, and old mussel shells are high on the beaches. At the time of this writing,



Adult bald eagle guards the nest.

two active bald eagle nests were located along this stretch.

White Horse Access provides a cement boat ramp, with an eddy that works fine for paddlers. The takeout to portage around the rock dam at Grant Park requires some scouting, since no signs are visible from the river. Portaging is recommended at normal water levels for all except skilled whitewater paddlers. Rainbow Bend is a walk-down access. Camping and all amenities are available at Grant Park, and primitive camping and toilets are available at Rainbow Bend.

This section's length and the portage at the Grant Park rock dam make this section suitable for paddlers with at least an intermediate skill level.

Rainbow Bend Access to Richey Access (including Hobbs, N. Raccoon, and Merritt Accesses) – 18.1 miles

This section flows through a checkerboard of public and private lands. The floodplain widens dramatically. In some areas, woodlands are extensive. In other areas, trees are sparse to nonexistent, with pasture or row crops adjacent to the river.

The river's meandering has resulted in many stranded oxbow ponds and wetlands, old channels, and islands. Township and county road departments have sand and gravel pits in some of these old meanders, taking advantage of the deposits from a glacial past. An old railroad bridge now is part of the Russell White Nature Trail.

Where woodlands are larger, deer, raccoons, opossums, and the myriad of other species from earlier sections of the river find ample habitat. Where woodlands are narrower or non-existent, wildlife is scarcer. Similarly, threats to river habitat vary with the adjacent land practices. Most of the land along the river is maintained as wooded or pastured ground cover that protects against erosion and bank destabilization. However, paddlers will see places where cattle are not fenced from the river, and eroded banks where row crops are falling into the river.

Several accesses are found in this 18-mile stretch, but when the water is high and swift, they may be difficult to use. The ramp at Rainbow Bend Access no longer exists, so paddlers should plan to carry their boats a short distance to the sand/silt beach. The Hobbs and Merritt Accesses are both heavily riprapped with cement waste, making them difficult for paddlers to enter or exit. The North Raccoon River Access is excellent, with a well-protected eddy leading to the cement boat ramp. The Richey Access is difficult to see from the river, and the mowed path from the parking area ends in a vertical drop of several feet down to the water. None of the accesses in this section have signs visible from the river. Camping and toilets are available at Rainbow Bend and Richey Accesses.

The length of this stretch, presence of riffles and challenging rock dams, and difficulties at some of the accesses, make this stretch appropriate for paddlers with at least an intermediate skill level. At higher water levels, this stretch has a swift current that makes avoidance of numerous downed trees more difficult. Most paddlers will find it more pleasurable to paddle this section when the gauge at Lanesboro is at 11 feet or below, and the river flow at Jefferson is around 1,000 cfs.

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

