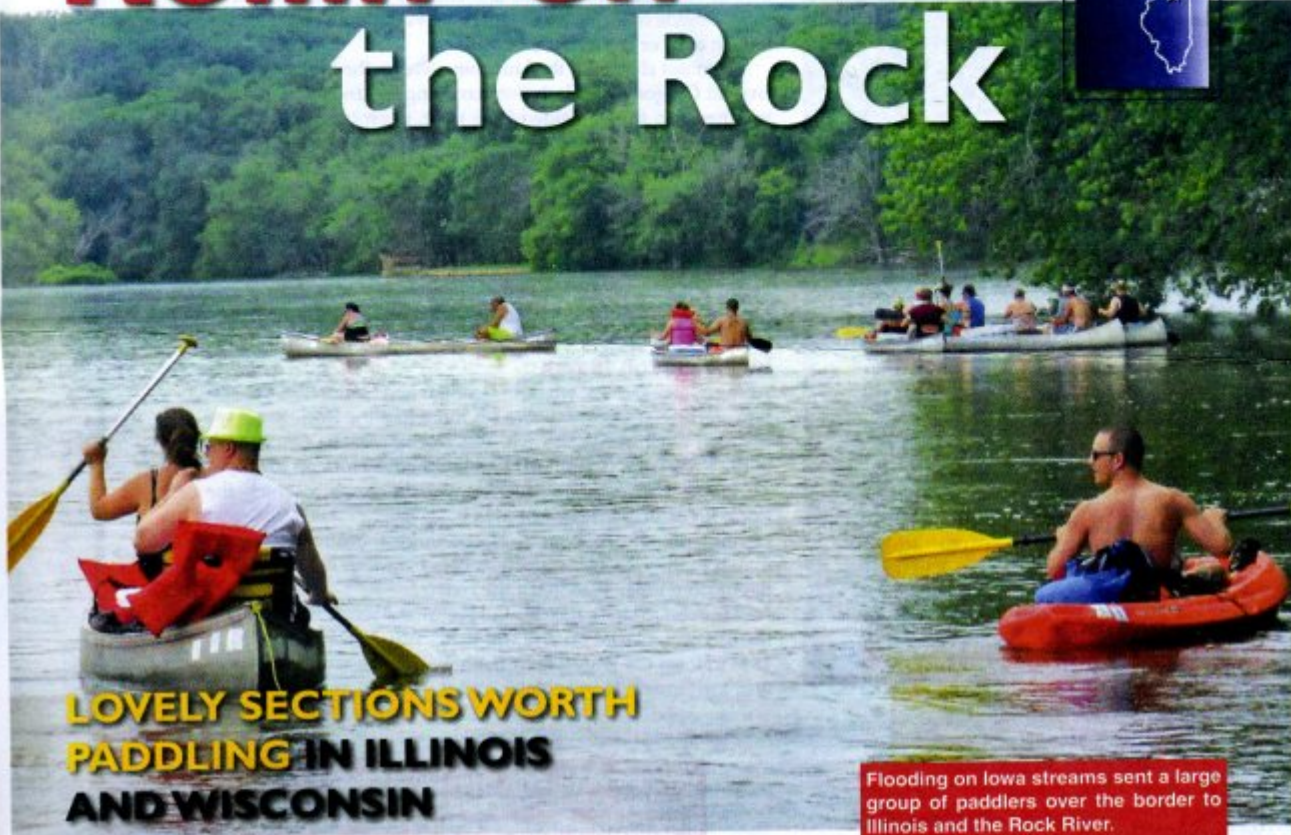


Rollin' on

by Bob McCray

the Rock



**LOVELY SECTIONS WORTH
PADDLING IN ILLINOIS
AND WISCONSIN**

Flooding on Iowa streams sent a large group of paddlers over the border to Illinois and the Rock River.

PHOTOS BY BOB MCCRAY

Some rivers unfold like adventure novels, with non-stop action and a gripping climax. But for us, the Rock River could best be described with a musical metaphor, like that of British author Aiden Chambers, who describes rivers as “sometimes andante, sometimes surging ... sometimes amoroso.”

The Rock River was named a National Water Trail in 2013, and designated “of national significance for its great diversity and landscape, recreation, cultural and historic experience, and for its ease of accessibility.”

We’ve paddled a number of sections of the river that lie in Wisconsin, so we wanted to explore the stream where it flows in Illinois.

The Rock, from its headwaters in Fond du Lac County down to the Mississippi at the Quad Cities in Illinois, is over 320 miles long. Like branches of a tree, its tributaries include the Bark, Sugar and Pecatonica rivers and Turtle Creek, all of

which we’ve also paddled over the years. And, like the tributaries, each section of the Rock has its own tempo, temperament and rhythm.

We picked the section from Oregon, Illinois, to Castle Rock State Park for our trip, as we had friends in Rockford, and also it was recommended by Tom Lindblade, past president of the Illinois Paddling Council and former instructor/trainer for the American Canoe Association.

“It’s one of the really great paddles in the area here,” said Lindblade, presently a council member for the Rock River Trail Initiative. “It’s probably as pretty as any stretch of river that I know. Also Grand Detour to Dixon is pretty impressive, with spectacular rock formations as good as anything on the river.”

Running high

I ended up scouting the river the first time I went there, because the USGS water level gauge at Byron had the river at 9.8 feet,



The 48-foot statue of the Eternal Indian by Laredo Taft and members of his Eagle's Nest Art Colony, stands on the east side of the Rock River in Lowden State Park overlooking the town of Oregon.

when the river normally runs six or seven feet. Ten feet warrants an "alert." The river was flat, but the current was anything but "tranquilo." So I did some exploring, working in a stair climbing workout while I was at it.

First, I climbed the stairs to the top of Castle Rock in the state park, a large sedimentary rock and a landmark for river travelers. It was awe inspiring and well worth the 144 steps to the top. Equally impressive was the imposing 48-foot high statue of the Eternal Indian by Laredo Taft (and members of the Eagles Nest Art Colony) in Lowden State Park on the east side of the river, overlooking Oregon, where I huffed and puffed 200 stairs down to the river and then back up.

Then I explored the Castle Rock State Park boat landing, a short way north of the Castle Rock, a scenic, grassy spot with a picnic area, toilets and parking. A small part was underwater, but that didn't discourage the paddlers I met there. A couple of competitive racers with beautifully polished cedar-strip kayaks were not deterred by the high water and paddled upstream into the hefty current.

A group of 21 paddlers, all of whom grew up around Burlington, Iowa, were undertaking their 15th annual canoe trip.

They usually canoed Iowa rivers, but at the time, those were all flooded. They located the Rock River on the Internet.

When I paddled the river several weeks later, the USGS water level gauge at Byron registered above normal but lower than before. So I got a shuttle and launched at TJ's Canoe Rental on the west side of the river. (If you bring your own boat, there is a launch and/or shuttle fee.)

I did not check out the launching site on the east side of the river at Oregon Park East. But according to Lindblade, launching there, on the east side of the river, is problematic because of the proximity of Oregon Park East to the dam and the piers under the Highway 64 bridge.

In the excellent book *Paddling Illinois*, author Mike Svob advises boaters to carry boats from the Oregon Park East parking lot as far as possible downstream. "At medium to high water levels, however, a big eddy can pull canoeists upstream into the very dangerous backroller of the dam," Svob warns. Both he and Lindblade recommend launching on the west side of the river.

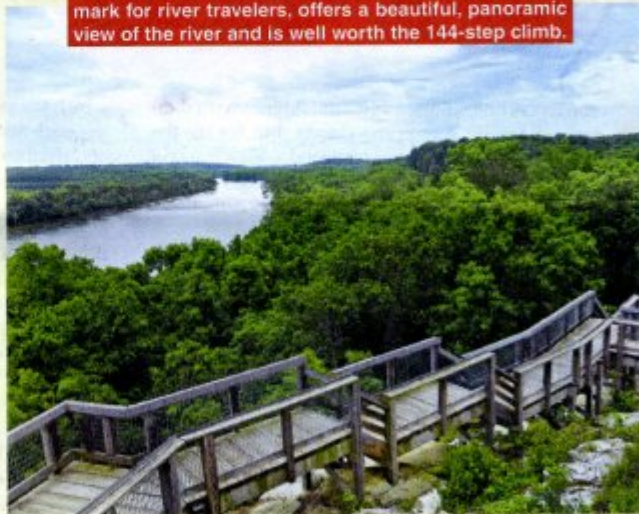
Like Horicon Marsh

Although the current was still strong when I launched, the section starting at Oregon was a bit more like the Rock River we paddled north of Watertown, Wisconsin, and the east branch of the Rock from Greenhead Landing above Horicon Marsh.

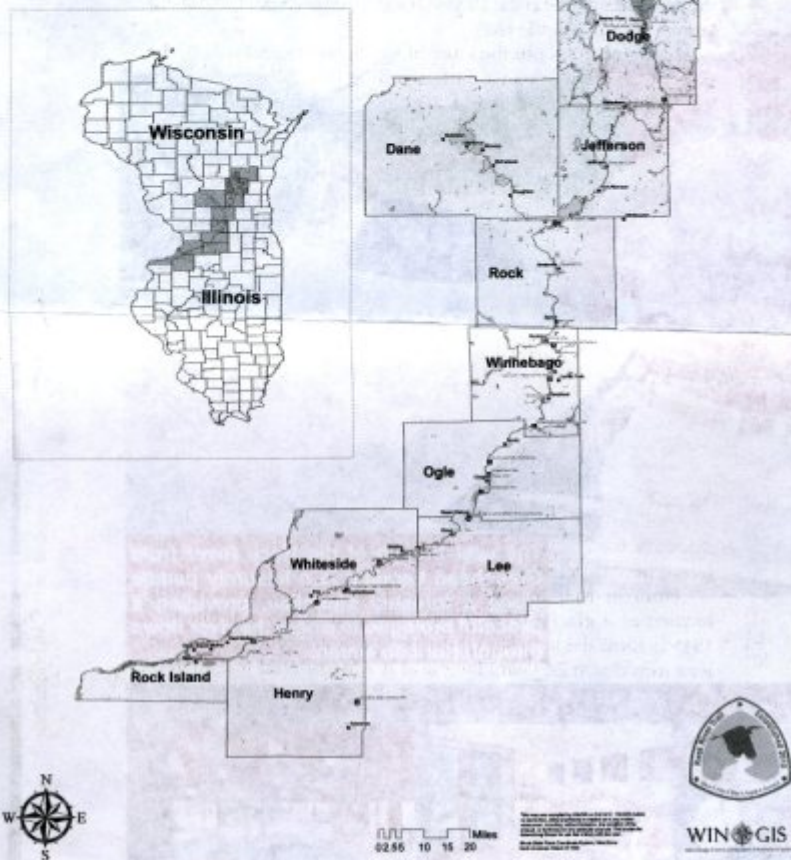
We've also paddled Horicon Marsh, through which the Rock River flows, several times years back. The 32,000-acre "Everglades of the North" is the largest freshwater cattail marsh in the U.S. and a birdwatchers paradise. It is vastly different from other sections of the river.

Horicon Marsh has had three makeovers since it was formed as a glacial lake 12,000 years ago. It was dammed in 1846 to form the largest man-made lake in the world. The dam was torn down 24 years later and it was restored to a marsh.

The observation deck at the top of Castle Rock, a sedimentary rock outcropping which serves as a landmark for river travelers, offers a beautiful, panoramic view of the river and is well worth the 144-step climb.



Rock River Trail



After the turn of the century, farmers dredged a 14-mile ditch and lateral ditches through the marsh to drain it for crops. However, flooding and peat fires caused the state legislature to restore it in 1927 to its present ecosystem as a vast wetland.

We paddled the ditches, a grid of liquid streets – a kind of cattail Venice – with right-angle turns, as well as the bays and backwaters.

Oregon to Castle Rock

While we favor narrow, more intimate rivers like the Wolf or the Bois Brule, we also enjoy open water paddling, like the section of the Rock River below Oregon.

The Rock River from Oregon to Castle Rock State Park is “Big Sky” country. If you like to watch cloud formations, the broad expanse of sky here provides quite a stage. As my friend said, “You expect to see God come out and say hello.” She found precedent in the paintings of clouds by the Italian masters and the words of Martin Luther, “God writes the Gospel not in the Bible alone, but also on trees, and in the flowers and clouds and stars.”

The wide river also allows leisurely drifting. You can tinker with the batteries in your camera, fight with a stubborn wrapper of a granola bar or check cell phone service and never need to look up for downfall or rapids. On Sundays, groups of paddlers link canoes in flotillas and go with the flow.

According to Lindblade, however, “Wind conditions can be problematic. It’s wide enough so that it’s a pretty good fetch for kickin’ up some pretty good waves, which can be a problem for beginners.”

I counted six islands on this section of the river. I was told the eastern shore was the most scenic, but I paddled the western side for shelter from a south wind beginning to blow. The forested shoreline was only broken by houses and cabins above the Castle Rock State Park landing near where Route 2 borders the river.

I paddled with herons, egrets and one pelican. Earlier in the season 500 pelicans lived near the river, but they were down to a dozen when I was there. An eagle’s nest is said to be located at Lowden Rock, a large formation of sand-

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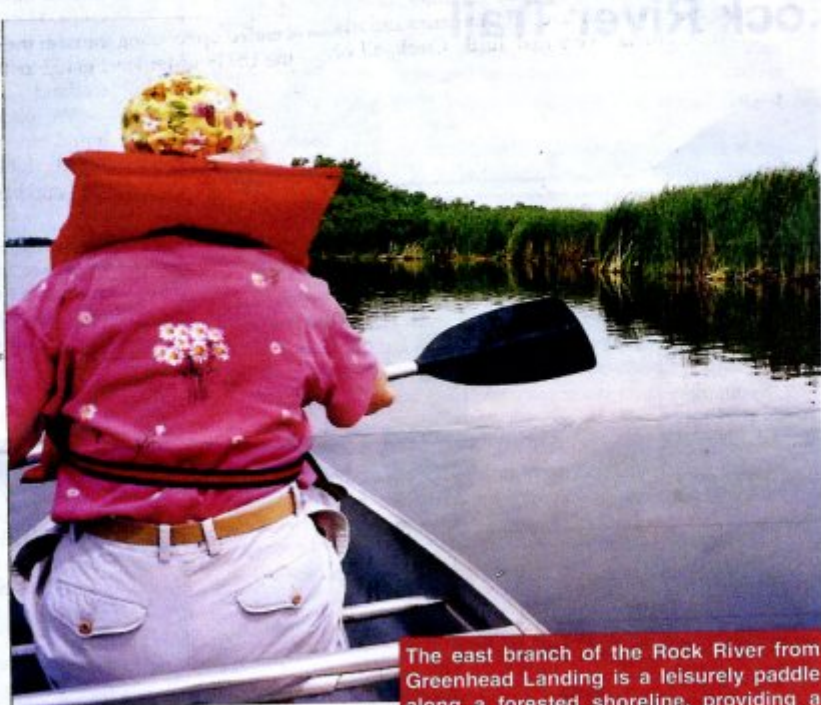
stone rising up out of the river, but from my vantage point, I couldn't spot it.

In general, the Rock has a small gradient, about one foot per mile, and is deepest on parts farther south of Castle Rock where it cuts through high sandstone bluffs.

For a comprehensive description of each section of the river from the headwaters down to the Mississippi, including maps and info about access points, dams, camping and the various amenities, check out Rockriver.com. This is the website for the Rock River Trail Initiative, a coalition of citizens, government and nongovernmental organizations formed to preserve and protect the river and increase access for recreation, including hiking and biking.

Using a musical metaphor, the trip on the Rock from Oregon to Castle Rock State Park could be described as "placido" and "giacoso" – peaceful and pleasurable, in the sun.

Bob McCray is a community college journalism teacher and writer who lives with his wife in Evanston, Illinois.



The east branch of the Rock River from Greenhead Landing is a leisurely paddle along a forested shoreline, providing a peaceful prologue to where the river flows through Horicon Marsh.


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