

BOONE RIVER WATER TRAIL



HAMILTON COUNTY

THE BOONE RIVER -

The Boone is a wild, intimate river flowing through a narrow, wooded corridor. Wildlife abounds in the woods and waters. History also comes to life. The rapid and steep fall of the river made it ideal for placement of sawmills and gristmills during the 19th century. While only their names remain, historical sites along the route help today's paddlers learn about this rich history.

Cover photo Cindy Pease



A gift from Canada, brought by ice and water.

The Boone 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.



HAMILTON COUNTY



The most recent period of glaciation in Iowa brought with it huge boulders and smaller rocks from the north. Rocks and boulders are the basis for riffles and obstacles in the water that may challenge paddlers, especially when water levels are low.



Cliffs and outcrops of limestone, shale, coal, and sandstone are along various sections of the Boone. They were laid down in shallow seas that covered this area some 300 to 350 million years ago. They add diversity to the scenery and to the microhabitats available for wild life.

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Bottomland hardwoods line the Boone.



The steep river valley is covered with rich woodlands, dominated by oaks and hickories. Oaks and hickories cannot grow in their own shade. In many Iowa woodlands, shade-tolerant maples and basswoods are gradually replacing the oak woodlands.



Once a plentiful Iowa species, river otters were nearly absent in Iowa due to unregulated 19th century hunting and trapping. In 1986, river otters were released at Boone Forks Access and in several other strategic locations in Iowa. Today, it is again possible to catch a glimpse of otters in the Boone River.



Nearly every bridge on the river has from a dozen to hundreds of cliff swallow nests beneath them. Each nest consists of about 1,200 beaks-full of clay, which are gathered from nearby banks. During the nesting season, the birds may fly around you, catching insects in the air to feed their young.



Watch for abundant wildlife as you paddle. Hawks and eagles soar overhead; shorebirds scamper along sandbars and shorelines; beavers gnaw on trees along the river; and mussels, fish and other aquatic life abound beneath the water's surface. The photo is a young-of-the-year bald eagle.

KEY

-  Beginner Level
-  Intermediate Level
-  Advanced Level
-  City/Town
-  Public Land
-  Paved Roadways
-  Gravel Roadways
-  Carry Down Access
-  Restrooms
-  Water
-  Shelter
-  Camping
-  Rapids/Rock Dam





Chase Mill was located at the mouth of Brewer Creek and was one of seven mills that once stood along the length of this water trail. The historic names remain in the local lore.



Paddlers will see some rental cabins as they approach Briggs Woods Park, which features camping, golfing, boating, fishing, and a bicycle trail. After passing under a bike trail bridge and a railroad bridge, a stream and waterfall is visible on the left.

Stream Reach: Riverside to Briggs Woods

This stretch of river features a wooded corridor with rock bluffs and riffles. The bottomland forest is dominated by silver maple, willow, cottonwood, and box elder. Natural features along the river are maintained even as it meanders through Webster City. The riverbed is mostly sand and gravel; some boulders emerge above the water surface. Mussel shells are found on rocky and sandy beaches, especially in the lower half of the stretch.

During normal water conditions, this stretch provides a good experience for paddlers of all skill levels. However, some riffles and boulders may present challenges to paddlers when water levels are low. Accesses, at Riverside Park and Briggs Woods, have ample parking and concrete boat ramps.

Stream Reach: Briggs Woods Access to Albright Bridge Access and Bever's Bridge Access

The river in this stretch falls the fastest of any portion of the Boone River. Rock rapids, boulders, and limestone bluffs and outcrops add beauty and excitement. The longest set of rapids is located below Albright's Access, and is approximately 200 yards in length. The landscape is more open than in the previous river stretch, with some houses and agricultural fields visible from the river. Still, most of the river corridor is wooded. Watch for pileated woodpeckers among the old trees above Bever's Bridge.

The more rapid fall and challenge of some rapids, glacial boulders, and ledges makes this stretch more appropriate for paddlers with at least an intermediate skill level. Parking, restrooms, and a concrete boat ramp are available at Briggs Woods. Albright Bridge and Bever's Bridge Accesses require some carrying of gear down short-distance walk-down trails. There is no parking lot at Bever's Bridge Access, off Inkpaduta Road.

Stream Reach: Bever's Bridge Access to Tunnel Mill Access

This river section is one of the more remote of the entire water trail, with no bridges crossing the river in the more than five-mile stretch and no roads along it. Paddlers will appreciate the feeling of wildness and the presence of wildlife along the river. The first and last thirds of this stretch are lined with dense woodlands, mostly on both sides of the river. The middle section is bordered by cropland and pasture, which occupy the broader floodplain. In the more wooded areas, paddlers are likely to see bald eagles and at least one eagle nest. Eagles use the rock riffles to catch fish unaware. Great blue herons and double-crested cormorants similarly make use of the availability of fish. Glacial rocks, ranging from pebbles to boulders the size of a Volkswagon are especially common in the first half of this stretch.

Due to the remoteness and abundance of rock riffles, at least intermediate paddling skills are recommended. Bever's Bridge Access is a walk-down put-in on private land that can be used though there is no parking lot. The Tunnel Mill access features a cement ramp with a parking lot. No camping or restroom facilities are available at either access.

Stream Reach: Tunnel Mill Access to Bell's Mill Access

The vast majority of this stretch is surrounded by public land, protecting its wild nature. The floodplain widens a bit, with more distant bluffs growing in height, reaching 80 feet or higher above the river. Tributary streams entering from the uplands bring rocky glacial till into the river at their mouths, and create riffles in the river. Mature and extensive upland woodlands line the shoreline for much of this stretch, dominated by walnuts, oaks, basswoods, sugar maples, and a variety of other species.



Paddlers will see areas along the river where whole sections of steep hillsides have slipped into the river. Enterprising early settlers mined soft coal from narrow veins exposed along the river, which contributed to bank erosion. Increasingly heavy rains and the lack of buffers on the valley's top continue to contribute today.



Paddlers can learn much of the area's mill history from the display at Bell's Mill Park. The park contains an old log cabin and a display of grist wheels and a turbine, which powered the mill.

The narrow, steep Boone River Corridor was carved rather quickly by glacial meltwater some 10- to 12,000 years ago. The result is a riverbed that drops from three to up to nine feet per mile in some river sections. Swift water powered historic mills and makes for exciting paddling today.

This is a great stretch to explore the history of mills that once were prevalent along the Boone River. The accesses at Tunnel Mill and Bell's Mill are well marked and relatively easy to find. Both have interesting interpretive signs, and Bell's Mill contains some exhibits that interpret the old mill site.

Due to the abundance of rock riffles, at least intermediate paddling skills are recommended. The accesses feature cement ramps and ample parking, and Bells Mill has a campground, water, and restroom.

Cliff swallows use overhanging cliffs to protect their pottery nests from dissolving rains. They use bridges for protection too. Bank and rough-winged swallows both tunnel into river-scoured banks, often excavating in the root zones of the grasses growing above. Bank swallows, like cliff swallows, are colonial nesters, often with dozens of holes in the same vicinity. Rough-winged swallows, however, are more solitary, usually with only one or two holes near one another. The iridescent blue backs of tree swallows are also seen along the Boone, nesting in tree cavities of dead snags along the river.

Stream Reach: Bell's Mill Access to Boone Forks Access

The Boone River completes its journey in this section, emptying into the Des Moines River just below the take-out at Boone Forks. The river falls more slowly, creating fewer riffles and a broader floodplain. There are more meanders, resulting in more beaches with willows and wildlife. Beaver exploit the available and nutritious willows. Killdeer and solitary sandpipers find nest sites on the sand and rocks, preferring to lay their eggs in shallow scrapes on open ground. Public land surrounds most of the last two miles, below the Stagecoach Road (a.k.a. R-21) bridge.

This stretch provides a great short-trip experience for paddlers of all skill levels. The put-in at Bell's Mill Access is a concrete boat ramp. There is ample parking, restrooms, and a campground. Paddlers need to watch closely for the take-out at Boone Forks Access, which is a walk-down access that may be somewhat hidden by vegetation or dead wood deposited by the river. There are no take-out opportunities after Boone Forks – be prepared to exit the river.



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

The Hamilton County Conservation Board has canoes for rent.

www.mycountyparks.com/county/hamilton.aspx

