

# St. Croix Riverway

National Scenic Riverway  
Wisconsin/Minnesota

National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior



Free flowing and unpolluted, the Namekagon and St. Croix Rivers flow through some of the most scenic and least developed country in the Upper Midwest. Today 405 kilometers (252 miles) of these rivers are preserved as part of the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System. The St. Croix National Scenic Riverway, which includes the Namekagon, was established in 1968 as one of the original eight rivers under the National Wild and Scenic Rivers Act. The Lower St. Croix National Scenic Riverway was added to the system in 1972. Together they form a Riverway that offers outdoor enthusiasts a chance to enjoy a wilderness-like experience and a variety of outdoor recreation opportunities within

easy reach of a major metropolitan area. On the upper St. Croix and Namekagon Rivers rapids challenge the canoeist, although none of the Riverway's waters are classified as whitewater. At the lower end, where the river widens out as Lake St. Croix, power and sail boating are popular. Campers, picnickers, swimmers, and birdwatchers enjoy its variety of scenes throughout. Anglers are attracted by the variety of fish lurking in the rivers, from trout and bass to muskellunge and sturgeon. The Riverway is managed through the cooperative efforts of the National Park Service, The Minnesota and Wisconsin Departments of Natural Resources, and The Northern States Power Company.

## Upper St. Croix and Namekagon

The upper St. Croix and Namekagon part of the Riverway offers varied canoe environments on 322 kilometers (200 miles) of rivers. The Namekagon River begins at Namekagon Lake dam. It lies entirely in Wisconsin, flowing 158 kilometers (98 miles) south and west to join the St. Croix River near Danbury. The Namekagon begins as a narrow trout stream closed in by forest and meanders through a wide valley for much of its length. The river occasionally widens into marshy or swamplike areas popular for waterfowl watching. The lower Namekagon passes through an area of high sandy banks with many sharp bends. This stretch offers canoeists a wilderness-like experience because there is no development visible from the river. At four areas, dams form lake-like stretches called flowages. You can end canoe trips above these flowages, to avoid the slack water, or start below the dams, to avoid having to portage.

The St. Croix Riverway starts at a dam near Gordon, Wisconsin. It flows southerly for 164 kilometers (102 miles) to the dam at St. Croix Falls, Wisconsin. It lies in Wisconsin for its first 40 kilometers (25 miles) and then becomes the border river between Minnesota and Wisconsin until it flows into the Mississippi River. The St. Croix begins as a small spring. It is narrow and shallow until joined by its major tributary, the Namekagon, 32 kilometers (20 miles) downstream. It then becomes wider, deeper, and slower. For most of its length it flows through a wide valley with low banks, formed by the glacial activity that shaped both rivers' watersheds. The St. Croix passes two Minnesota State Parks that provide developed camping areas. (The Namekagon and upper St. Croix offer primitive sites.) The upper Riverway's last 16 kilometers (10 miles) are the Indianhead Flowage created by the 18-meter- (60-foot) high St. Croix Falls hydroelectric dam. Most canoeists

take out upstream of the flowage to avoid the slack water. Small powerboat activities such as water skiing and deeper-water fishing take place on this flowage.

Many low and medium hazard rapids and a few high hazard rapids exist on the St. Croix and Namekagon Rivers, but they are not considered whitewater rivers. Recreation here includes fishing, hunting, inner tubing, picnicking, and canoeing, with small powerboating on the flowages. Most camping is at canoe-access primitive sites. Recreational vehicle camping areas can be found within the state parks or private campgrounds located near the Riverway.

## Lower St. Croix

The Lower St. Croix National Scenic Riverway covers a narrow river and shoreline corridor for 84 kilometers (52 miles) from St. Croix Falls dam to Prescott, Wisconsin, where the river joins the Mississippi. The lower St. Croix is wider, deeper, and slower than the upper, its flow controlled by the hydroelectric dam at its upstream end. Downstream of the dam are the high cliffs of the Dalles, which formed as meltwaters from retreating glaciers cut a deep, vertical-walled gorge through bedrock. For about 3.2 kilometers (2 miles) here the St. Croix, in places 21-30 meters (70-100 feet) deep, flows its fastest. The Dalles mostly lie within two Interstate State Parks. Both offer short hiking trails to geologic features, and developed campgrounds, swimming beaches, picnic areas, and boat launch ramps. On the Minnesota side you can rent a canoe or take a boat tour to see the scenic Dalles from the best vantage point, right on the water.

As it leaves the Dalles, the river becomes wider and shallower and passes between high banks for the next 32 kilometers (20 miles). Although development is visible from the water for 24 kilometers (15 miles) on this stretch, it is popular with canoeists. The shallower water, lack of rapids, and absence of large powerboat waves make it suitable for beginning canoeists.

About 35 kilometers (22 miles) below the dam the Apple River flows into the St. Croix, creating a large sandbar. Near here the river becomes deeper and slower-moving. Large powerboating becomes the major use. Forty-three kilometers (27 miles) downstream the valley widens still more and, for the last 40 kilometers (25 miles) of Riverway, the river is known as Lake St. Croix. Here you enter the state-administered area. From near Stillwater, Minnesota, the Riverway's largest city, south to Afton, Minnesota, shoreline

development is more visible and the area is classified recreational. Near Hudson, Wisconsin, south of Stillwater, the river reaches its maximum width, 2,255 meters (7,400 feet) and sailboating predominates. Further south the river passes two developing state parks, one on either side.

Recreation on the Lower St. Croix includes canoeing, fishing, powerboating, water skiing, and sailboating. Four boat rides are offered at Interstate State Park near Taylor Falls, Minnesota, and at Stillwater. The three developed state parks offer developed campgrounds, hiking trails, picnic areas, and swimming beaches. Find limited primitive campsites at shoreline points and on islands. Special water-use regulations apply on the lower Riverway.

## Past Ways of Life



Dakota and Chippewa Indians lived in this river and valley country for centuries before Europeans came. The country was rich in game, fish, wild rice, and other plant foods. It was also rich in beaver, and the Chippewa allied themselves with the first French

trappers and traders. With French-supplied guns, the Chippewa eventually drove the Dakota Sioux onto the plains of southern Minnesota.



Chippewa are shown left and above with traditional canoe and wigwam. All historic pictures shown here come from the Minnesota Historical Society.



After beaver supplies declined and European markets went soft, the next big industry on the St. Croix was logging. Rivers here were once choked with logs. Spillways that canoeists now portage around once regulated the water for log drives. Dams were constructed to build a head of water to float the logs over falls and through narrows to down-river mills. A logjam in the narrow Dalles area in 1883 lasted 57 days. Loggers broke it up with dynamite. Log drivers are shown above on the Bronson and Folsom Co

log landing at Stillwater in 1904. Seemingly endless forests created a boom economy for a time, but the last log drive went down the St. Croix in 1914.



The St. Croix Mills, owned by Isaac Staples, is shown here about 1880. The Staples residence sits on the hill.



Steamers plied the river for many commercial purposes. Here the steamer Cleon puts in at Taylor Falls beside a barge full of rock for building piers for the "Cedar Bend" railroad bridge. The Cleon was built in 1879 by Captain Oscar Knapp.

## The Life of the River



Quiet pools, rapids, swamps, lakes... the Riverway has many moods. The wild creatures you may discover change as the Riverway's habitats change. The mix of mostly recent-growth forests along the banks—pines, brush, and hardwoods—attracts deer.

Marshes are favorite waterfowl haunts. There you may see wood ducks, mallards, or the great blue heron. Songbirds and small mammals abound throughout the Riverway.



With some luck you may see an osprey winging overhead. It is probably patrolling the river for fish, which it captures in its strong talons. The osprey is so large you might mistake it for the bald eagle—unless you see the birds together. The eagle is much larger.



For many people the Riverway is synonymous with canoe camping and fishing. Indeed it is a quiet, natural haven providing a relaxing change of pace. But the Riverway offers a variety of water and outdoor recreation opportunities along its length. For

canoeists, a variety of trips is possible, from leisurely afternoon excursions to week-long expeditions.



Bass, muskellunge, wall-eye pike, and sturgeon can all be caught in the St. Croix. The Namekagon is noted for its brown trout. Fishing is popular along the Riverway in part because of the many different species lurking in the waters. There is competition of course,

from other anglers and from various fishing birds and from the otter. While quietly fishing, you may also see other small aquatic mammals the mink, beaver and muskrat. More elusive are the red and gray foxes, black bear and coyote. You may be startled if you

flush an upland game bird, such as the ruffed grouse, sharp-tailed grouse, or the woodcock.



The upper part of the Riverway is canoe water, but the lower part is pleasure boat water. You may see powerboats large and small, sailboats, and even houseboats. Some of the powerboats will be towing water skiers. Houseboats reflect the easy-living pace

of the river. This pace is wonderfully slow where the river widens out as Lake St. Croix.

## Facilities, Safety Tips, and Regulations

**Boaters and Canoeists:** All craft must be equipped with a Coast Guard-approved lifesaving device for each person aboard. These should always be worn by nonswimmers and by everyone during high-water conditions or when running rapids. Do not overload your craft. If you capsize in fast water, stay upstream from your canoe and don't get caught between a swamped canoe and a rock or log! Boaters should watch their wake when near canoes; remember your prop when near swimmers.

**Swimmers:** Don't swim alone, at night, or in unfamiliar places. Don't dive from bridges, high banks, or into water of unknown depth. Small children should be watched closely near the water. There are no lifeguards or supervised beaches along the Riverway.

**Inner Tube Floaters:** Wear a lifesaving device, travel only with others, and always navigate rapids feet first.

**Hikers:** There are several high-cliff areas on the Riverway. You should use extreme caution and watch your footing when near the edges of these cliffs. Parents should watch their children closely while in the areas of high cliffs.

**Fishing:** A fishing license is required for fishing on the Riverway. On the Namekagon and the first 40 kilometers (25 miles) of the St. Croix, a Wisconsin license is required. Where the St. Croix River is the boundary between the states of Minnesota and Wisconsin, a license from either state is valid. State fishing regulations are in effect on the Riverway. State conservation offi-

cers and park rangers have authority to enforce the regulations.

**Fires and Firewood:** Firewood is scarce near campsites and the cutting of trees or brush is prohibited. Fires should be built only in fire rings provided at campsites, or kept as small as possible. Fires should never be left unattended and should be completely extinguished before you leave the area.

**Camping and Campsites:** There are numerous primitive campsites on the Riverway. You should camp at these rather than create new ones. Remember to carry out whatever you carry in and do not bury trash. Camping in the federally administered area is limited to three days at any one site and a maximum of 14 days per season.

**Accommodations and Supplies:** Accommodations and supplies are available in nearby communities. Commercial canoe outfitters are located along the Riverway.

**Facilities:** The Riverway visitor center and headquarters are located in St. Croix Falls, Wisconsin. Riverway information stations are open in season, on the upper St. Croix near Grantsburg, Wisconsin, and on the Namekagon River in Trego, Wisconsin. There are several picnic areas on the Riverway. The two largest are in Earl Park on the Namekagon near Trego, and at Camp Croix near Osceola, Wisconsin, in the Lower St. Croix.

**Fees:** There are no fees for use of federally-owned land or facilities. The state parks charge entrance and camp fees. Daily and annual per-

mits are available for the state parks.

**Private Property:** Although the National Scenic Rivers have been authorized by Congress and much of the land is in federal or state ownership, there is and always will be properly remaining in private ownership. Please respect the rights of these landowners and do not disturb them or their property in any way.

**Cultural and Natural Features:** It is illegal to disturb any natural features, such as rock formations, or cultural and archeological features, such as Indian burial mounds or remnants of historic structures. The gathering of any fruits, nuts, or plants for commercial purposes is prohibited.

**Special Water Use Regulations:** Boaters are

cautioned that there are special "Slow Speed" and "Slow—No Wake" zones on the lower 84 kilometers (52 miles) of the St. Croix River. There are also zones where water-skiing is prohibited after noon on weekends and holidays from Memorial Day weekend to Labor Day weekend. More details on these regulations are available at marinas, state parks, or from water patrol people. These regulations are posted on bulletin boards at access points along the lower Riverway.

**Administration:** Three hundred sixty-five kilometers (227 miles) of the St. Croix and Lower St. Croix National Scenic Riverways are administered by the National Park Service. For information, write: Superintendent, P. O. Box 708, St. Croix Falls, Wisconsin 54024.



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