

## INTRODUCTION – PADDLING THE BLACK RIVER

Paddling Southern Wisconsin says that the Black River, from the confluence with the Popple River to Lake Arbutus, is “for experienced whitewater boaters.” While this is the case in certain locations along the way, there are plenty of opportunities for more casual paddlers to enjoy the Black from County Highway X and Highway 10. This long stretch of the Black River is almost entirely wooded and contains several scenic bluffs. Depending on the flow, this stretch has many challenging rapids, but it also contains enchanting backwaters and deep, calm sections. Along the way, about 25 of the islands you will encounter are public, managed by the Bureau of Land Management, which is part of the U.S. Department of the Interior. In the summer of 2009, the Bureau of Land Management in cooperation with the Clark County Land Conservation Department paddled the Black River inventorying the public islands. The last time the islands were inventoried was in the mid-1970s. However, little about the islands has changed over time and most of the islands remain free from human intervention with native flora and fauna communities thriving.

## BLM ISLANDS/ OTHER RECREATIONAL AREAS ALONG BLACK RIVER

### *Origin of BLM Islands*

When the U.S. government first surveyed Wisconsin in the mid-1800s, the surveyors passed by most of the small islands in our rivers and lakes. Since these islands were not surveyed, they were never sold to homesteaders and have remained federal public lands. As you paddle the Black River in Clark County, you may pass by as many as 25 of these public islands. These are your public lands, and several of them are great places to stop for a visit when you're on the river.

### *Water Level Information*

The Black River is subject to large fluctuations in water level and flow rate. High spring flows and heavy summer rains produce rapids around the river's large boulders, while typical summertime dry periods render some parts of the river non-navigable to even the lightest kayakers. When river flows are below 200 cfs, many stretches of the Black River have low water levels that make paddling some stretches difficult. Furthermore, when river flows exceed 500 cfs, many stretches of the river reveal exciting class I and class II rapids difficult except for the most experienced paddlers. Thankfully the riverbanks are not typically steep and they offer numerous safe portages around any low or high flow water conditions. You can get current information on the water level and flow rate from the United State Geological Survey's website, which includes water data taken from the gauge at Neillsville, at <http://waterdata.usgs.gov/wi/nwis/rt>.

## RIVER ACCESS LOCATIONS

**1. Black River Recreation Area** – Location is on the south side of Highway X, west side of the river. Parking is available a short distance from the river. The access is via a low, shallow bank.

**2. Highway N** – easiest access point is on the east (river left) side of the river, north side of the highway. Parking is on the side of the highway, which is the only bridge on this stretch.

**3. Longwood Park** – located on north side of Colby Factory Road, west (river right) side of river. Parking is available a short walk from the river. Access is at a steep, low bank. You will know you are approaching the park when you see the Colby Factory Road bridge.

**4. Riplinger Road** – located on the upstream side of the bridge and the west (right) side of the river. This is the only bridge on this stretch. Parking is available on the road a short distance away from the bridge.

**5. Greenwood Park** – located off Highway 73 north of Greenwood. Parking is available in the park, which also has campsites, restrooms, drinking water, and picnic areas. The park is on the east (left) side of the river, directly across from a large, wooded island. The closest point on the river to the parking lot is at the downstream end of the park.

**6. Willard Road** – located at the dead end of Willard Road, which is off Highway 73. You will have to carry your canoe a short distance to the car unless you are able to back down the narrow, curved path leading to the river. When you are paddling, the take-out will be on the left after you pass under a set of power lines.

**7. Highway H** – accessible via a driveway on the south side of Highway H on the west side of the river. You will have to carry your canoe a short distance down a rather steep path from the parking lot to the river.

**8. Neillsville North Side** – located at the end of an unpaved road off Grand Avenue. Turn to the east off Grand Avenue on the north side of the river. The road is public, in spite of the sign at the intersection. Parking is available at the end of the road. You will have to walk a very short distance through some light brush to the river. You can recognize the spot from the river by the island on the right side; go to the right of the island to get to the parking area.

**9. Listeman Arboretum** – located on the north side of Highway 10 on the west (right) side of the river. The parking lot is up a hill from the river, accessible by a walking path.

## DESCRIPTIONS OF STRETCHES

### *Highway X to Highway N*

- Length and approximate duration: 3.2 miles, 1 hr and 45 min.
- Gradient: 3.7 feet per mile.
- Description: This portion of the river has a rocky bottom. This relatively flat stretch is divided into two navigable channels that are separated by several islands. The significantly deeper right channel is easier to paddle at low water conditions due to better navigability; it is likely easier to paddle at high water as well, since the left channel has several downed trees that could be dangerous strainers. However, the left channel provides an enchanting excursion, full of mysterious backwaters that likely teem with frogs and other wildlife in the spring. This stretch is forested, like most of the Black River in Clark County, and features hemlock bluffs in some areas. The broad floodplain in this stretch and the next creates buggy conditions during wet times of year, so come prepared.
- BLM islands and other public recreation areas: Apart from the parks that provide the river access, the land along this stretch is private. There are three small, public islands along this route. Like the backwaters along this stretch, these islands harbor birds and other wildlife and are worth a visit if you are curious about what critters are back there.

### *Highway N to Colby Factory Road*

- Length and approximate duration: 2.4 miles, 1 hr and 30 min.
- Gradient: 4.2 feet per mile.
- Description: This stretch is similar to the previous, being flat and easy. Unlike the previous stretch, though, the river south of Highway N is wide, straight, and deep – a good place to spot kingfishers and eagles. The whole stretch isn't like this, though. Near the end, the river branches again, allowing more curious paddlers to take the less-traveled channel – another slow, shallow backwater – that meets up with the main channel across the river from the take-out. At a discharge of around 300 cfs this part of the river has a slow current making it easy to paddle.
- BLM islands and other public recreation areas: The Town of Longwood owns a 2-acre parcel with about 430 feet of river frontage on the east side of the river between about .16 and .25 mile south of Highway N. Contact the Town for information on whether this parcel is intended for public recreational use. There are two public islands beside each other across from the take-out at Longwood Park. These islands are low enough to be flooded each spring. The last approximately 1,000 feet of frontage leading up to the park is Wisconsin DNR land.

### *Colby Factory Road to Riplinger Road*

- Length and approximate duration: 7.2 miles, 4 hrs and 15 min.
- Gradient: 4.2 feet per mile.
- Description: This long stretch varies from beginning to end. The first mile or so flows through relatively flat terrain, and the river splits into two channels just over one-half river-mile in. Unlike upstream, the primary channel is the one to the left. Because the channel to the left is a more direct route for the river to travel, the channel to the right will most likely be abandoned as time passes and become an oxbow. After the two channels reunite, the river flows to the southeast for about one mile. This stretch flows along a high bluff with hemlock forests. When the river turns to the south, the bottom becomes very rocky for the remainder of the stretch. This stretch is very difficult to paddle when the flow at the Neillsville gauge falls below around 200 cubic feet per second and is dangerous for novice paddlers at high flows. The Popple River meets the Black about a mile from the end of the stretch.
- BLM islands and other public recreation areas: The riverbanks along this stretch are entirely privately-owned, but the stretch has several public islands that may be used for picnicking, fishing, or watching wildlife. Two of these are at the beginning of the stretch. The first is about a half-mile in and may be a good spot to catch frogs, since it has a small pond on it. The second will be to your right after the primary channel meets the secondary channel. Several more small islands – some as small as two tenths of an acre – are scattered along the rocky portion of the stretch. One of these is where the river bends to the south after the confluence with the Popple, and a cluster of small, rocky islands presents a bit of an obstacle course just before the end of the stretch, within view of the bridge.



### *Uplinger Road to Greenwood Park*

Length and approximate duration; 3.2 miles, 1 hr and 20 min.

Gradient: 9.4 feet per mile.

Description: This portion of the river has a very rocky bottom. When the Neillsville gauge registers a flow of about 200 cfs – typical late-spring/early-summer conditions – the stretch has a few calm, flat area sections, but most of the stretch has abundant, large rocks and rapids creating Class I-II conditions. At typical summer flows, you will likely have to carry your canoe through many shallow areas.

BLM islands and other public recreation areas: The island directly across from Greenwood Park is public and may be a good spot for fishing.

### *Greenwood Park to Willard Road*

Length and approximate duration: 3.1 miles, 1 hr and 17 min.

Gradient: 6.5 feet per mile.

Description: The river bottom for this stretch is rocky. At typical late-spring/early-summer flows, the stretch has a few Class I rapids and a Class II rapid. The Class II rapid can be avoided by going around the right side of the small island that is down-stream of Highway G. The two channels that pass to the right of the island are narrow and shallow, and you will likely have to carry your canoe for a short distance.

BLM islands and other public recreation areas: One public island is located less than one-half mile downstream from the Highway G bridge. In order to land on this island – or to avoid a Class II rapid – steer to the right side of the river after you see a park bench on the left bank and before you come to a right bend in the river. The island is high enough for camping, but there is poison ivy on the left (east) side. The land on the west side of the river is owned by Clark County, and it may be possible to put in or take out through this parcel if you want a shorter stretch.

### *Willard Road to Highway H*

Length and approximate duration: 7.5 miles, 4 hrs and 30 min.

Gradient: 6.7 feet per mile.

Description: At typical late-spring/early-summer flows, this stretch has several Class I rapids; at typical summer flows, you will likely have to carry your canoe through many shallow areas. It's a great stretch for spotting birds and turtles.

BLM islands and other public recreation areas: The stretch begins and ends with public islands. While the first, directly across from the Willard Road access, is dominated by silver maple trees and tall, non-native, invasive reed canary grass, the second, at the take-out, is a small, open island that is connected to the main-land by a dry walking trail. Other than these islands, the land along the river is almost entirely privately owned. Plan to paddle the whole stretch non-stop unless you have permission from a private landowner to stop on his/her land.

### *Highway H to Neillsville North Side*

Length and approximate duration: 7.0 miles, 4 hrs.

Gradient: 8.6 feet per mile.

Description: At typical late-spring/early-summer flows, this stretch of the river has many areas with Class I rapids; at typical summer flows, you will likely have to carry your canoe through many shallow areas. This stretch is mostly wooded with some areas with rock faces that have cedar glades around them.

BLM islands and other public recreation areas: the stretch begins and ends with small public islands. The island adjacent to the take-out is a good spot for a picnic or fishing.

### *Neillsville North Side to Listeman Arboretum*

Length and approximate duration: 2.0 miles, 44 min.

Gradient: 5 feet per mile.

Description: At typical late-spring/early-summer flows, this stretch is very rocky and difficult to navigate. At higher flows, this stretch likely has several Class I-II or higher rapids.

BLM islands and other public recreation areas: A small public island is adjacent to the put-in. Two small public islands are on the right and left sides of the river, just beyond a bend to the right.

### ISLAND ETHICS

Several of the public islands are wonderful places to stop to rest, have a picnic, or enjoy the views of the Black River during your paddling trip. There are a few guidelines that will help to protect the beauty of these islands for other visitors after you leave.

- Pack out all your garbage and human waste. The islands are not suitable for digging cat holes for human waste, since they are close to both the river and groundwater.
- Do not use any live wood for fires, and do not damage or destroy any live plants.
- Use only existing fire rings and tent pads.
- Keep your noise level low. Loud noises may disturb people and wildlife living near the river.



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# Canoeing on the Black River Clark County, Wisconsin

