

## Missouri National Recreational River 39-Mile Reach Guide



NPS photo by Linda Gordon Rokosz  
Looking downriver from Randall Creek  
Recreation Area.

### Canoeing the 39-Mile Reach Fort Randall Dam to Running Water

The 39-mile reach begins immediately downstream from Fort Randall Dam at Pickstown, South Dakota, and continues to Running Water, South Dakota. Those who choose to paddle the Missouri River need to be well prepared for the adventure. Only experienced paddlers should plan to be on the river. The quickly changing weather, long distances between launch sites, and the current can create major problems for novice paddlers.

Flows on this reach are influenced by controlled releases from Fort Randall Dam. (For river conditions, click [here](#).) The water discharge rate can change hourly. The normal rate of flow is between 3 to 5 mph, while in periods of high water it can attain 7 mph or more. Also, be aware that the wind is an issue on most days, with prevailing winds out of the south and southwest.

**Caution:** The Missouri is the deepest of the Nebraska rivers, 25 feet or more in some places. It is important that you wear a life jacket at all times.

The river is tamer now than before the closure of the dams. However, debris, logs, and silt still wash into the river, especially at the confluence with the Niobrara River. The Missouri follows a braided and winding course, with the channel alternating between the shorelines. Sandbars and islands exist in profusion; a few of these islands are privately owned. Some islands are covered with willows and cottonwoods, others are marshland covered with reeds and cattails. For the most part, the river gives the appearance of being natural, much as it was when the Lewis and Clark Expedition passed through in 1804 and 1806.

The valley ranges from one to two miles wide and in some areas is flanked by nearly vertical limestone cliffs and loess bluffs, more than 250 feet above the river. Heavy stands of willow and cottonwood trees are found near the water, while hardwoods grow on the steeper, upland slopes. Numerous fish species, including walleye, sauger, paddlefish, sturgeon, northern pike, smallmouth and largemouth bass are found in the river, while deer, fox, coyotes, mink, eagles, and turkeys are a few of the animals and birds that occupy its bottomlands.

Most of the land on the Nebraska side is privately owned and permission is required for access. On the South Dakota side, private property extends down to the mean high water level.

Two bird species are of particular importance on the Missouri, the least tern and the piping plover. These shorebirds are on the federal Threatened and Endangered Species List and use

the sandbars for nesting and raising young. These birds are protected under the Endangered Species Act, and it is unlawful to harass or disturb them. During the nesting season biologists post signs and use twine to delineate the nesting colonies. Please do not go into these areas when the birds are present.

Sites are listed below by River Mile (RM). River Miles are calculated as the distance on the Missouri above its confluence with the Mississippi River. Thus RM 0.0 is the confluence of the two rivers. Ponca State Park, NE, at RM 753.5, is 753.5 miles above the confluence.

You can begin your trip at the **Randall Creek Recreation Area** (River Mile 879.5) just below Fort Randall Dam on the west side of the river. The river access has a double boat ramp, with nearby camping, picnic and restroom facilities (South Dakota's Randall Creek Recreation Area and a valid state park entry permit is required). Just downstream from the camping area is the Karl E. Mundt National Wildlife Refuge. It provides a year-round safe haven for bald eagles. There is no access from the river. As you paddle past the Refuge, watch on the right for Old Baldy. This hill with no vegetation is the place where the Lewis and Clark Expedition caught a "barking squirrel" (prairie dog) in 1804 to send back to President Jefferson at Monticello.

The next river access is at **Sunshine Bottom** (RM 866.8). The ramp on the Nebraska shore is unusable for boat trailers; however, it can be used for canoes and kayaks. To drive to this boat ramp follow Nebraska Highway 12 four miles west of Monowi or 2 1/2 miles east of Lynch to a "Sunshine Bottom" sign. The sign will direct you north along a gravel road which may not be passable during wet weather. Primitive camping only is allowed a couple hundred feet downstream of this access; watch for the sign. Across from Sunshine Bottom is the Yankton Sioux Powwow grounds at Greenwood, South Dakota. Established in 1859, this community was the original Yankton Sioux agency. Marty, about four miles to the north, is now tribal headquarters.

The next river access, also on the Nebraska side, is **Verdel Landing** (RM 851.5). To drive to this boat ramp, follow Nebraska Highway 12 and turn north at the "Lazy River Acres" sign, approximately eight miles west of the town of Niobrara. The gravel road leads you directly to the river access. A pit toilet stands nearby. Primitive camping only is allowed here. The boat ramp can be busy, but is an excellent canoe access site. Across from Verdel Landing is Choteau Creek, the historic eastern boundary of the Yankton Sioux Reservation.

Six miles downstream from Verdel Landing on the right is Niobrara State Park. This popular park (daily permit required) has excellent camping and day-use facilities, and is located on Highway 12 two miles west of the town of Niobrara. It has no river access. However, there is one campsite for canoeists and kayakers close to a natural slide and about one mile upstream of the old railroad bridge, now a part of a hiking trail. Just downstream of the bridge is the confluence of the Niobrara and Missouri rivers. Marshland begins to appear downstream of this confluence. Stay on the south side of the river and watch for two larger waterways on the right. The second waterway will bring you directly to the **Niobrara Village Boat Launch** (RM 844).

From Verdel Landing to the **Niobrara Village Boat Launch** is 8 river miles. To drive to this location take Spruce Drive north from Highway 12 in the center of the village. Follow the road to the end. Turn left to the village boat landing. The site has a pit toilet and primitive camping only is allowed. A gravel road leads to the right and to the **Old Ferry Landing** (RM 841.0) just upstream of the Chief Standing Bear Memorial Bridge. This road may not be passable during wet weather. There are no facilities here, but primitive camping only is allowed. The bridge is named for the clan chief of the small Ponca tribe who in 1879 successfully sued the federal government demanding the basic civil right to be recognized legally as a human being.

The old ferry boat landing on the South Dakota side, just downstream from the bridge, has a very unsatisfactory access and is not recommended. About 0.2 miles downstream from this former landing is the **Running Water Boat Launch** (RM 840.5). It has a pit toilet and primitive camping only is allowed. To drive to this boat ramp, take the paved road to the community of Running Water from South Dakota Highway 37 about 1/2 mile north of the Standing Bear Bridge. Turn left at the stop sign at the bottom of this hill. Go about 0.2 mile and turn right toward the river, following the unpaved road to the boat ramp.

**Your trip ends** here at the eastern boundary of the 39-mile reach of the Missouri National Recreational River. You can continue your canoe journey on Lewis & Clark Lake for about 29 miles until you reach Gavins Point Dam. You will have to portage around the dam yourself. Click for the [Paddling Guide](#) for the 59-mile reach.

Click [here](#) for a list of outfitters.

Parts of nine Nebraska rivers--the Calamus, Cedar, Dismal, Elkhorn, lower Platte, Niobrara, North Loup, Republican, and Missouri--have been designated as state canoe trails. Maps and descriptions of the rivers, access points, campsites and services are available at Nebraska Game and Commission Offices, or by calling (402) 471-0641, or [online](#).