

Missouri National Recreational River 59-Mile Reach Guide

Canoeing the 59-Mile Reach Gavins Point Dam to Ponca State Park

The 59-mile reach stretches from about one mile below Gavins Point Dam to Nebraska's Ponca State Park. 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.



NPS photo by Linda Gordon Rokosz
View downriver from the St. Helena boat ramp

Gavins Point Dam regulates water flow on this reach of the river. (For river conditions click [here](#).) The river channel follows a winding course. There are many snags and sandbars. Some of these are just under the water's surface and require caution. Prevailing south and southwest winds can make this trip difficult.

Caution: The Missouri is the deepest Nebraska river--25 feet or more in places--and contains many hazards. It is important that you wear a life jacket at all times.

The stretch between Gavins Point Dam and Yankton is the most developed. Downstream from Yankton the river has the taste of wildness to it that is nonexistent on the channelized river below Ponca State Park. The river is a series of meanders, chutes, and backwaters dominated by sandbars with an occasional heavily-timbered island. The river channel varies in width from a quarter to three quarters of a mile with an average width of a half mile. The depth of the channel or thalweg varies from ten to twenty feet. Side channels may be just inches deep while scours can create forty- to fifty-foot deep holes.

The floodplain varies in width from two miles at Gavins Point Dam to as much as twelve miles below the confluence with the James River. Grass- and farmland rise above the South Dakota side; the river often runs hard against high, wooded bluffs on the Nebraska side. The unique geology--orange and white chalk and gray shale--is often exposed where the river has carved away at the bluffs.

The river is dotted with sandbars, islands and backwater marshes that are havens for waterfowl, shore birds and other wildlife. Birders may want to stop and explore these areas, but they must remember that 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. In a few stretches the state borders are still indefinite.

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 **Nebraska Tailwaters Boat Launch** (RM 810.8), close to the campground (U.S. Army Corps of Engineers) on the Nebraska (south) side. There is another boat ramp at the **Training Dike** (RM 810.1) across the river. Even though this boat ramp is on the other side, it is still in Nebraska.

About four miles down river you will pass Yankton (on the left) and then float under the new Discovery Bridge (US 81) and then the historic Meridian Bridge (presently closed to all access). Yankton is the "Mother City" of Dakota, having been settled in 1858. The bridge was designed for vehicular and railroad crossings--the upper level for cars and the lower level for trains. However, railroad track was never laid and the trains never ran. Built entirely with private funds, the Yankton community officially dedicated the bridge on October 11, 1924. The bridge was the last segment of a highway stretching from the Canadian border to Mexico. This highway is today also known as the Pan American Highway and extends some 17,000 miles down to the southern tip of South America.

5.4 miles from Nebraska Tailwaters Boat Ramp is Yankton's **Riverside Park Boat Launch** (RM 805.4). Modern restrooms are across the parking lot from the two-lane concrete ramp. This is a popular river access with recreational boaters. Downstream from here you will want to be especially alert for snags, sunken sandbars, and other hidden obstructions. To drive to this boat ramp from the Meridian Bridge take 2nd St. east to Pearl St. Turn right (south) and continue ahead to the river. Camping is not allowed here; however, primitive camping is allowed a couple hundred yards downstream (east of Marne Creek). There is no vehicle access to this primitive camping location. Vehicles can be parked at the trail head that is adjacent to the Yankton Chamber of Commerce office on SD 50 (east side of town).

It is 6.9 river miles from the Riverside Park Boat Ramp to the **Cedar County Park and St. Helena Boat Launch** (RM 798.5), on the Nebraska side. A vault toilet and picnic shelter stand nearby, and primitive camping is allowed. Exercise caution when landing at this site due to the strong current along the bank. To drive to this boat ramp from Yankton go 1.0 mile south on US 81. Turn left (east) onto Road 898 and continue ahead for 7.0 miles. Turn left (north) onto Road 563 and proceed ahead 0.9 miles to the river. This route is all gravel after turning onto Road 898.

Or you can take Nebraska Highway 12 to Spur 14H (8.1 miles east of the intersection with US 81). Turn north onto the spur and continue 5.7 miles to St. Helena. Turn left at the store (9th St.) and go one block. Turn right onto Nette Rd. and go 0.3 miles. Turn left onto Jones and go

0.4 miles. Take the right fork in the road (573 Ave.) and continue ahead for 1.5 miles. Then take the left fork (Road 898) and proceed for 0.2 miles. Finally, turn right onto Road 563 and drive 0.9 miles to the river. St. Helena was an important steamboat port during the mid-19th century. However, during one of the "Big Muddy's" periodic floods, the river changed its course, cutting a new channel that left the town a couple miles from the river.

The National Park Service has recently acquired property on the Nebraska side at Bow Creek (RM 787.6). There is no vehicle access to **Bow Creek Recreation Area**. Primitive camping only is allowed with access from the river.

11.4 river miles downstream from St. Helena Boat Ramp is **Myron Grove Boat Launch** (RM 787.1). This access is on the South Dakota side. To drive to this boat ramp take South Dakota Highway 50 east from Yankton and west from Vermillion and turn south onto 454 Ave. (there is a sign that reads "Myron Grove Lake Access"). Proceed ahead for 5 miles and then continue straight ahead on the gravel road where the paved road swings to the left. Follow 454 Ave. 1.6 miles to the river. Canoes and kayaks can be launched at this site; however, the site is inaccessible for larger boats. Emergency primitive camping only is allowed.

The next river access, **Brooky Bottom Boat Launch** (also known as Sportsman), is 2.3 miles downstream (RM 784.8), on the Nebraska side. Across from Brooky Bottom is Goat Island, the largest island on the Missouri River between Gavins Point Dam and Ponca State Park and publicly owned. To drive to this two-lane concrete boat ramp, take Nebraska Highway 12 east 18.1 miles from its intersection with US 81. Turn left (north) onto Road 573 (there is a sign that reads "Brooky Bottom Recreation Area"). Follow this gravel road for 4.6 miles to a dead-end. Turn left (west) onto Road 892 and proceed for 0.3 miles. Turn right (north) onto Road 572 and continue ahead for 0.2 miles into the small park where the boat ramp, restrooms, and picnic shelter are located. Primitive camping only is allowed.

3.8 miles downstream from Brooky Bottom is the **Clay County Boat Launch** (RM 781.0). This river access is on the South Dakota side. A pit toilet stands nearby. A county campground is 1/4 mile north of this river access. To drive to this one-lane boat ramp take South Dakota Highway 50 east 21.6 miles from Yankton. Turn right (south) onto 460 Ave. (there is a sign that reads "Clay County Park") and proceed 1.7 miles to Timber Road. Cross Timber Road and drive ahead 1.4 miles to the river. From Vermillion take South Dakota 50 (Cherry Street) west to the junction of South Dakota Highway 19. Turn left (south) onto Highway 19 and almost immediately turn right onto Timber Road. Continue ahead (west) for 1.7 miles. Turn left onto 460 Ave. and continue ahead 1.4 miles to the river.

The next river access is on the Nebraska side, the **Mulberry Bend Boat Launch** (RM 775.0). A vault toilet stands nearby and primitive camping only is allowed. To drive to this one-lane concrete boat ramp, take South Dakota Highway 19 south from Vermillion (it becomes Nebraska Highway 15 as soon as you cross the bridge) or Nebraska Highway 15 north toward Vermillion until you come to Road 579. Turn onto this gravel road and continue ahead 1.9 miles until you come to the boat ramp on your left.

It is 11.5 miles to the next river access, **Bolton**(RM 763.5). Located on the South Dakota side,

it is accessible only for canoes and kayaks, not larger boats. There is no ramp. Primitive camping only is allowed. To drive to this river access leave I-29 at Exit 18 in Elk Point, SD. Turn left (west) onto Burbank Road and travel 0.5 miles. Turn left (south) onto Union County Road 26 and proceed 4.3 miles (the county road curves to the right and become 324 St.). Turn left (south) onto Road 471 and travel ahead 1.8 miles to the river.

The final boat ramp within the "rec river" boundary is at Nebraska's **Ponca State Park** (RM 753.5). This popular park has excellent camping and day-use facilities. To drive to this river access take Nebraska Spur 26E north from Ponca. Upon entering the park, follow the signs to the three-lane asphalt boat ramp. A park entry permit is required. Permits are available at the Park Office.

Your trip ends here at the eastern edge of the Missouri National Recreational River.

The next boat ramp is in Sioux City, Iowa.

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 Parks Commission offices, or by calling (402) 471-0641, or [online](#).