The Yellow River is not only the longest cold-water trout stream in Iowa. It is also purported by Iowa DNR fisheries to have the highest gradient of any canoeable stream in the state. The challenging rapids, limestone cliffs, lowering bluffs, mature hardwood forests, and boulders the size of boxcars combine with high clarity water to make this a superior recreational experience. These characteristics alone may explain the popularity of the river but other attributes may also draw visitors. The river is known for its spectacular scenery, which includes high profile public lands. A segment of the river passes through one of four state forests in Iowa, Yellow River State Forest. It continues on to the only National Monument in Iowa, Effigy Mounds National Monument (www.nps.gov/effi) and empties into one of America’s greatest treasures, the US Fish and Wildlife Upper Mississippi Fish and Wildlife Refuge.

The Yellow River Water Trail is not only one of the most scenic water trails in Iowa, it is also one of the most remote. It provides a chance for river enthusiasts to enjoy abundant wildlife, clear water, wooded bluffs and a bit of history. The Yellow River begins its journey in the farm fields of eastern Winneshiek County. It gains flow and flows through several counties before reaching the Mississippi River north of McGregor, Iowa. The Yellow River is over 50 miles long, but canoeing and kayaking is only recommended on the lower 35 miles. This guide breaks the river into four trips of varying length and difficulty. It also provides information about geology, plants and animals, fisheries, the history of the river, as well as other useful information. It was developed by Northeast Iowa Resource Conservation & Development (www.northeastiowarc.org) in cooperation with many partners through a grant from the Iowa DNR Water Trail Program.

About the trail and Watershed Geology

The Yellow River valley is noted for its rugged terrain, rocky outcrops, steep slopes and springs. These features also make this one of the most challenging Water Trail sections of the best examples a Driftless Area or Pecos Plateau River in Iowa. The Yellow River valley is a direct result of the erosional processes of the river. The river is fed by cold water springs and streams; springs bubble up from the bed or a short distance away. Other sections of the Yellow River lose water into underground aquifers, creating a dynamic system of geology and geohydrology.

The landform region referred to as the Driftless Area or Pecos Plateau is a region in the upper Mississippi River drainage basin in the states of Wisconsin, Illinois, southwestern Wisconsin, southeastern Minnesota and northeastern Iowa. In contrast, most of Iowa, which is covered by deep deposits of glacial drift, clay, alluvial fans and bedrock dominate this area. This area is unique because it was bypassed by the last continental glacier. The term ‘driftless’ relates to the lack of glacial drift, the material left behind by retreating continental glaciers. Karst topography is also predominant throughout the Driftless Area. Karst topography is often found in areas where limestone bedrock dissolves and over time forms caves, sinkholes and subterranean streams. Certain portions of the Yellow River watershed sinkholes, caves, and sinkholes resulting from the landscape resulting in no surface water. Karst topography can play a major role in water quality as surface water can easily mix with groundwater.

History of the Area

Near the mouth of the Yellow River, more than 210 prehistoric mounds have been discovered and are now part of Effigy Mounds National Monument. Woodland period Native Americans used the mounds from about 500 BC until Europeans moved into the area. The 2,526 acres of Effigy Mounds National Monument on the banks of the Yellow River are a mecca for prehistoric hiking trails. More information can be found at the visitor center just off of highway 96. The Yellow River is one of the most popular canoe trips in Iowa. The area is also a stop for French voyageurs on the fur trade. French explorers in the 1700’s gave the Yellow River its name. Later the power of the Yellow River was harnessed as many mills grazed along its course. In 1835, three settlements were established as 50 mills existed along the river. Around 1829 the first sawmill in Iowa was constructed on the Yellow River about 3/4 miles from the mouth; Lieutenant Jefferson Davis oversaw the mill that produced wood for construction of fort Crawford in Prairie du Chien, Wisconsin. By the early 1900’s many of the mills were gone and the Yellow River was known as the “River of Lost Mills.” Today only a few signs of this history still exist, the small town of Volney is one of only a few remaining towns.

The river above Sixteen Bridge Access is home to trout while smallmouth bass inhabit the lower portion of the river. More information about fish and fishing can be found in the fishing section of this report. The majority of the Yellow River valley plant communities are maple-basswood, oak-hickory and bottomland hardwoods. Prairie species may be found on dry bluff tops and rock outcroppings and steep slopes that face south and west.

Volney to Sixteen Access Bridge (4.1 miles)

The 4.1 mile trip from Volney to the Sixteen Bridge Access should take only a couple hours and is perfect for a casual, easy float. Just downstream from Volney, U.S. Highway 151 is a coldwater trout stream. There are no barriers to fish movement from the Mississippi River into the Yellow River and it is possible to catch a wide range of different fish species in this lower portion of the river. The upper Yellow River, upstream of Effigy Mounds State Recreation Area, is not a coldwater trout stream and does not support populations of warmwater game fish.

Sixteen Bridge to Yellow River Access (0 miles)

The gradient on this stretch of river increases to an average of 10.3 feet per mile and thus this section of river is the most challenging. The river meanders through the tree-lined valley with scenic limestone walls, some as high as 200 feet. During this section, watch for sharp turns as some can be difficult to navigate especially if low water is present. Approximately 3.3 miles downstream of the Sixteen Bridge there is a farmer’s ford; dangerous currents mean a portage on river left is required. DO NOT try to navigate through the ford! Follow the portage signs to resum your float. Downstream of the ford, the river makes a couple of sharp turns and passes over a few riffles that contain some Class I rapids with waves up to 2 feet. You will pass the Ion Bridge. Access to and from the river is possible at this bridge, but difficult. The Yellow River access is much easier and is recommended. About a mile and a half downstream of the Ion Bridge there is a short section of Class II rapids. The Yellow River Access is a mile past the rapids on river left in the Yellow River State Forest.

Safety Information

It is important to make safety a priority when enjoying recreation and boating on the Yellow River. Be sure to dress properly for the trip. Should you capsize or become stranded, there are limited resources along the river at all times when on the river. Life jackets save lives! A brimmed hat, sunglasses and comfortable dry-clothing are also recommended. Water shoes or sandals that strap securely to the foot will be needed for put-in and take-out as well as for any portages. While traveling the river, be on the lookout for debris, deadfall, and other dangerous situations. Rocks, heavy current and closed portages are all features of the river that can be challenging. Expect low visibility along peeling sections of the river. Expect to encounter and deal with debris on the river. Accidents are rare, but should happen, please contact emergency services immediately. Be familiar with the river and its hazards. Stay safe! The river is open to the public but please respect private property as much as land along the Yellow River is privately owned.

For more information contact
Allamakee County Conservation
1-800-824-1424 or www.viskitowa.org

THE YELLOW RIVER

The Yellow River above Volney is not for everyone; it is called a Wilderness Canoe Trail for this reason. The river in this section has no easy put-ins or take-outs and accessing the river from bridges can be difficult. Signage along this section is also minimal. This section of river can be shallow and may require portages over rocks and baffle during low water. There may also be low fence wires crossing the river that will need to be negotiated. For those venturing out on this section the rewards are great. This section provides the best brown trout fishing; some up to 20” have been caught. Beautiful covered bluffs line this section, and you might see the river all to yourself as it sees little use. This section of river has a gradient of 10.2 feet of drop per mile.

Upstream of Volney (14.8 miles)

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Sixteen Bridge to Yellow River Access (0 miles)

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Sixteen Bridge to Yellow River Access (4.1 miles)

The 4.1 mile trip from Volney to the Sixteen Bridge Access should take only a couple hours and is perfect for a casual, easy float. Just downstream from Volney, U.S. Highway 151 is a coldwater trout stream. There are no barriers to fish movement from the Mississippi River into the Yellow River and it is possible to catch a wide range of different fish species in this lower portion of the river. The upper Yellow River, upstream of Effigy Mounds State Recreation Area, is not a coldwater trout stream and does not support populations of warmwater game fish.

Volney to Sixteen Access Bridge (4.1 miles)

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