

Root River Kayak Trip
Parsley Bridge to Hokah – 75.5 Miles
Saturday, May 6, 2006
Paul Scanlon

Once again this year, I paddled my kayak to raise money for the local chapter of the American Red Cross, this time on the Root River in SE Minnesota. The Red Cross was in the news in the past year for providing disaster relief in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. As the biggest fund-raiser for the effort, they were exploited by some of the criminal element and were criticized by the press, unfairly I believe. They continue a long tradition for being the biggest and best helping hand in our community for disaster relief as well as disaster preparation and prevention. I support them wholeheartedly, and I'm glad so many of my friends do also.

Last year I kayaked 81 miles from Rochester to the Mississippi, unsure if it was possible to complete in one day. I did it, and felt surprisingly good, though it was a very long and tiring day. I raised over \$5000 for the Red Cross in the process. In preparation for this year's trip I paddled several branches of the Root River on numerous occasions and also various portions of the Zumbro. The Root is a beautiful river, spring fed and clear when there isn't heavy spring runoff or recent rains. Despite high water from recent rains, the water clarity was 2-4' for most of the upper reaches of the river. The lower portion is less beautiful in many ways (see below) including murkier water.

I started at the Parsley Bridge Access, about 4 miles south of Chatfield off US 52. When I set out at 4:30 a.m., it was cold and very dark. I had expected the light of the first quarter moon, but I had miscalculated its setting time by over an hour and found that it set before I started. I launched into the dark (except for starlight). Unfortunately, there was enough fog on the river to obstruct the effectiveness of my headlamp. I could see the banks only some of the time. At one point I found myself sideways in the stream through a small rapids. Fortunately I did not swamp. I turned off my headlight occasionally, with no benefit until after about 20-25 minutes on the water. At that point there was barely enough pre-dawn light in the eastern sky to make my way. The light gradually increased until sunrise at 5:55am. I reached my first checkpoint, the County Highway 11 Bridge (8.2 miles) at 5:45, over 6.5 miles per hour, one of my fastest split times of the day, despite the uncertain moments in the dark, likely due to fresh arms and fast current.

The weather was cold initially, though there was no wind early in the morning. With an overnight low of 34 degrees, I had frost on my front cargo hatch. Despite neoprene gloves, my hands were cold for the first several hours, but the rest of me was warm enough, and by about 8 a.m. my hands were comfortable. Skies were clear all day and the high was 66 degrees. Winds picked up during the day with steady SW winds at 12 mph and gusts to 24 mph, an occasional challenge when the winding river headed SW.

The scenery along the Root River is really beautiful. Like the Zumbro, it seems very wild from the viewpoint of the river surface. There are occasional houses (rare) and some farm fields adjacent to the river, but much of the land adjacent to the river is state land and totally undeveloped, seeming as though no one has ever left a mark on it. There are beautiful bluffs and hillsides along most of the length of the river with limestone or

occasional sandstone bluffs. The entire Zumbro above Kellogg and the Root until you reach Rushford are both very scenic. Below those points, both rivers have been “improved” by the Army Corps of Engineers for “flood control”: meandering streams made wider, straighter and shallower. The resulting river is muddier and nearly devoid of fish and wildlife.

My kayak performed well. I have had some problems with the rudder, but I got it working the best it ever has, and I waxed the bottom, so it was a bit faster than usual. My body held up well enough. I had a few worrisome back twinges early in the day. Fortunately they went away. I was able to sit pretty comfortably with only 40 minutes out of the cockpit for a single rest stop – a nap on a sandbar at midday. My arms were quite tired before my nap, but fine thereafter.

About 5:15 a.m. I started hearing and seeing wildlife. It started with turkeys gobbling – loudly! - a bit startling out of the dark silence. In the early hours I could make out numerous unidentified raptors. As it became lighter, I could see better: numerous eagles, and a mother barred owl and 2 chicks. I saw 5 tom turkeys, 2 beavers (very close-up), and 2 deer. Later in the day I saw many other birds, including lots of kingfishers. Strangely, I did not see any blue heron all day. I have never seen so many eagles - many dozens.

There were a number of fun rapids along the river, always a source of exhilaration when you can see them coming. The man-made scenery highlight is the abandoned Root River Power & Light 1915 power plant 23 miles below the starting point – very ghostly.

There were two bird-watching highlights of the day. The first involved two immature eagles just below Eagle Bluff. As they were flying together, one attacked the other and they clenched talons in mid-air. They pirouetted inverted with wings spread for 4 or 5 full revolutions spiraling downward out of the sky until just above the tree-tops, where they disengaged and flew off, feigning threats at each other.

The second highlight was seeing a kingfisher fish. It swooped straight up above the water and flapped madly to hover over the water at a height of about 20'. It spotted a fish, tucked its wings and dove head-first into the water, then emerged with a small fish in its bill and flew off.

The carp spawning was strung out and less dramatic this year than last. Last year in late April they seemed to fill every rapids in the Zumbro in one weekend. This year I've seen smaller numbers in the rapids scattered over weeks. Two weeks before this trip seemed to be the peak. I saw only a few turtles sunning themselves despite sunny 66 degree weather in the afternoon.

The cuisine was superb. My favorite energy foods were available in abundance. I ate 5 PB&J's, 3 banana's, 2 apples, 1 Baby Ruth, and drank 4 quarts of Gatorade.

All in all, it was a great experience, and I'm glad it could be combined with such a good cause.

Trivia

Time checks

4:30	0 Miles	Leave Parsley Bridge Access	
5:45	8.2 Mi	Co. 11 Bridge	6.6 mph
8:20	14.8 Mi	Root River Power & Light Station	6.1 mph
8:45	3.2 Mi	Confluence with South Fork	7.7 mph
9:30	6.3 Mi	49 mile mark below Whalan	8.4 mph
10:30	5.5 Mi	43.5 mile mark	5.5 mph
11:30	5.0 Mi	38.5 mile mark – 40 min nap/stop	5.0 mph
12:18	0.7 Mi	Hwy 16 bridge E of Rushford	5.2 mph
12:50	3.3 Mi	Hwy 43 bridge at Rushford	6.2 mph
2:20	9.1 Mi	State Bike Trail bridge at mile 25.5	6.1 mph
3:20	6.0 Mi	Houston	6.0 mph
4:40	7.2 Mi	Co. 24 bridge at Mound Prairie	5.4 mph
5:45	6.3 Mi	Take-out at Hokah	5.8 mph

13:15 Total time

12:35 Time paddling

Total miles 75.5

Average speed: 6.0 mph

Total pledges: \$5222.50

Number of strokes per minute: 60

Est. total strokes for trip: 45,600

Est. distance per stroke: 8' 9"

Pledge per stroke: 11.5¢