

A paddler's guide to the Twin Cities



**We paddled 11 river,
lake and creek routes
in the metro area.
Here's how to get on
the water, whether
you're a beginner or
a seasoned paddler.**



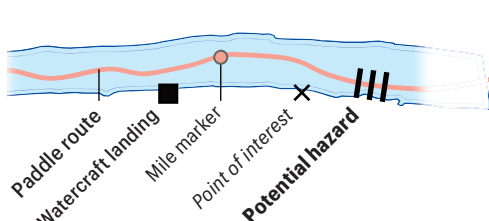
You don't have to go to the Boundary Waters to have fun paddling a canoe.

In Minnesota, we pride ourselves on being connected to water. But getting out there in the Twin Cities metro area is easier said than done. Where do I put in my boat? How fast is too fast for moving water? Are there rentals? The information you need is all over the place, if you can find it at all. We thought it could be easier, so some Strib staff members set out to create an urban paddling guide. We researched, paddled and mapped our favorite routes within the metro area. Whether by canoe, kayak or paddleboard, we hope this guide helps you see the Cities in new ways: take a lazy river ride toward Minneapolis; explore a little-seen part of St. Paul; or practice portaging at Lebanon Hills in the southern suburbs. See you on the water.

WHILE YOU'RE OUT THERE, DON'T FORGET TO

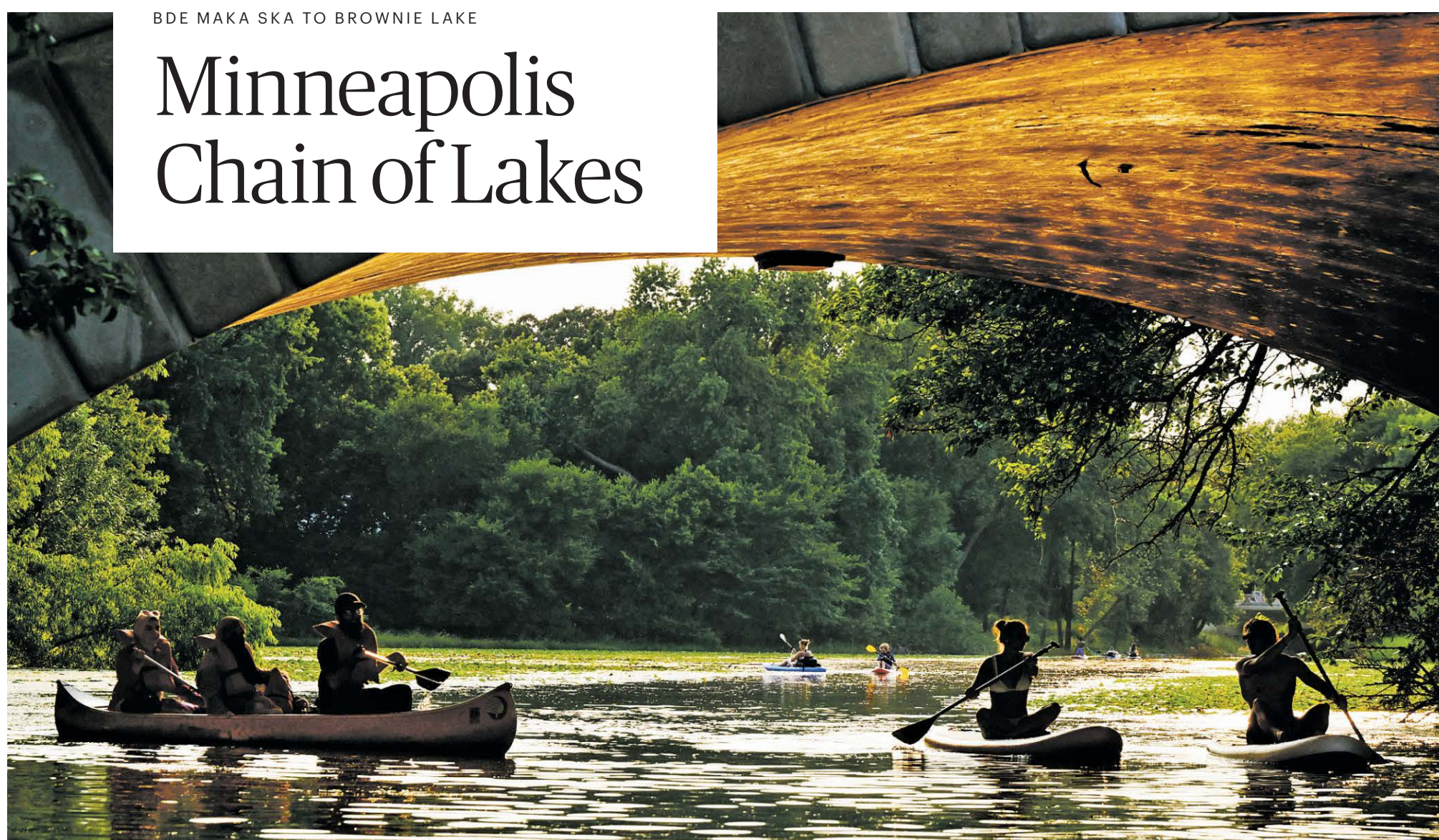
- Bring a life jacket for each person on your watercraft. State law requires it.
- Watch water levels on rivers and creeks.
- Swim with care.
- Think twice before paddling in winds over 10 mph.
- Be mindful of private property.
- Take the guide with you on your phone by visiting startribune.com/paddling.

HOW TO READ THE MAPS



BDE MAKA SKA TO BROWNIE LAKE

Minneapolis Chain of Lakes



GOOD FOR

Canoes, kayaks, paddleboards, beginners, rentals

DISTANCE AND TIME

5 miles, 1.5 to 3 hours round trip

BOAT LAUNCH

Point Beach
2100 Cedar Lake Pkwy., Minneapolis

From Bde Maka Ska to little Brownie Lake, traveling through lagoons, tunnels and bridges from one lake to the next features skyline views, wildlife and beaches galore. Take it one lake at a time or make an afternoon of it, going from shore to shore.

This is a perfect beginner paddle in the heart of the city, with flexible route options. Start on Bde Maka Ska and work your way north, or vice versa. With several beaches across Cedar Lake and Bde Maka Ska, there are lots of good places to stop for a break, a snack or a swim when conditions allow.

The smaller northern lakes are more secluded and protected from wind. You will navigate bridges and may have to paddle around downed trees in the Kenilworth Channel and Lake of the

Isles Lagoon. Be mindful of swimmers on Cedar Lake and other paddlers. On sunny days and weekends, the lakes can be busy.

These lakes afford a ton of flexibility. Parking lots are available at several beaches and usually on nearby streets. Kayak, canoe or paddleboard rentals are located on the northeast side of Bde Maka Ska, available by the hour or the day. Several city bus routes run through this area, particularly around Lake Street and Hennepin Avenue.

KNOW BEFORE YOU GO

- **Recommended conditions:** Avoid paddling when wind speeds exceed 8-10 miles per hour.
- **Consider your craft:** Watercraft with fins or rudders can get caught on plant material, especially in channels between lakes.
- **Watch for traffic:** Gas-powered motorboats aren't allowed here, but boats with electric trolling motors are. Sailboats and swimmers are common.
- **Stay healthy:** This route is prime for swimming both on open water and many beaches – but be mindful of water quality before jumping in, as lakes are prone to closures because of E. coli. Check beach/water conditions at the Minneapolis Parks & Recreation website. The Minneapolis Park Board does not recommend swimming within 48 hours of heavy rain, which can raise bacteria levels.



INTERSTATE 35W TO FORT SNELLING STATE PARK

Minnesota River

GOOD FOR

Canoes, kayaks, beginners

DISTANCE AND TIME

9 miles, 2 to 3 hours, depending on water flow

PUT IN

11115 Lyndale Av. S.,
Bloomington

TAKE OUT

Fort Snelling State Park
boat ramp, Mendota Heights

One hundred feet below the surrounding urban sprawl, the Minnesota River Valley is a haven for wildlife. Beaver and eagle sightings are nearly guaranteed. Bridges, barges and the occasional plane overhead are the few incursions into this natural refuge.

Traversing the heart of the Minnesota Valley National Wildlife Refuge, paddlers can expect to encounter herons, cranes, eagles, waterfowl, beavers, muskrats and even river otters. Summer paddling at dusk offers the chance to witness a mayfly emergence, when thousands of the aloof insects cloud the evening air with an awe-inspiring show. The fish enjoy it too, leaping several feet in the air to get a late meal. The Minnesota River is beginner-

friendly, but paddlers should be mindful of conditions when planning a route. The river floods each spring and can swell from rainfall well into July. Rain fills the river with runoff from the surrounding urban areas, and floodwater can carry debris from dislodged trees into the river channel. Fort Snelling State Park typically closes when flooded, as do some of the other launch points. It is best paddled later in the year: August, September and October.

KNOW BEFORE YOU GO

- **Recommended conditions:** A river height of 9 to 12 feet. Condition reports can be found at the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources website.
- **Watch for traffic:** The river sees barge traffic that creates a heavy wake. Paddlers should be cautious and give barges a wide berth. Watercraft ranging from yachts to small motorboats share this route.
- **Stay safe:** Check flood conditions. High water introduces risks such as fast currents and submerged obstacles. Flood conditions may cause closures at boat launches.
- **Stay healthy:** The Minnesota River drains nearly 17,000 square miles of primarily agricultural land and is also ringed with industrial facilities in the southwestern metro area. This makes for dirty water. Conditions are especially bad after heavy rain. Those with a paddleboard may think twice.
- You can extend this route into St. Paul on a longer day by leaving your car at a takeout point farther downstream. See our guide for the Lower Mississippi.



LAKE PHALEN TO GERVAIS LAKE

East metro Chain of Lakes

GOOD FOR

Canoes, kayaks, beginners, rentals

DISTANCE AND TIME

3.5 miles, 3 to 5 hours round trip

PUT IN

2420 Edgerton St.,
Little Canada

TAKE OUT

1863 Keller Pkwy.,
Maplewood

This route takes you from lovely Lake Phalen, an urban oasis, up through smaller lakes and channels where it's easy to forget you're in a city, spitting you out in Gervais Lake. Practice portaging on the shortest portage ever – just a canoe length or two. Go out and back or arrange a ride for a point-to-point paddle.

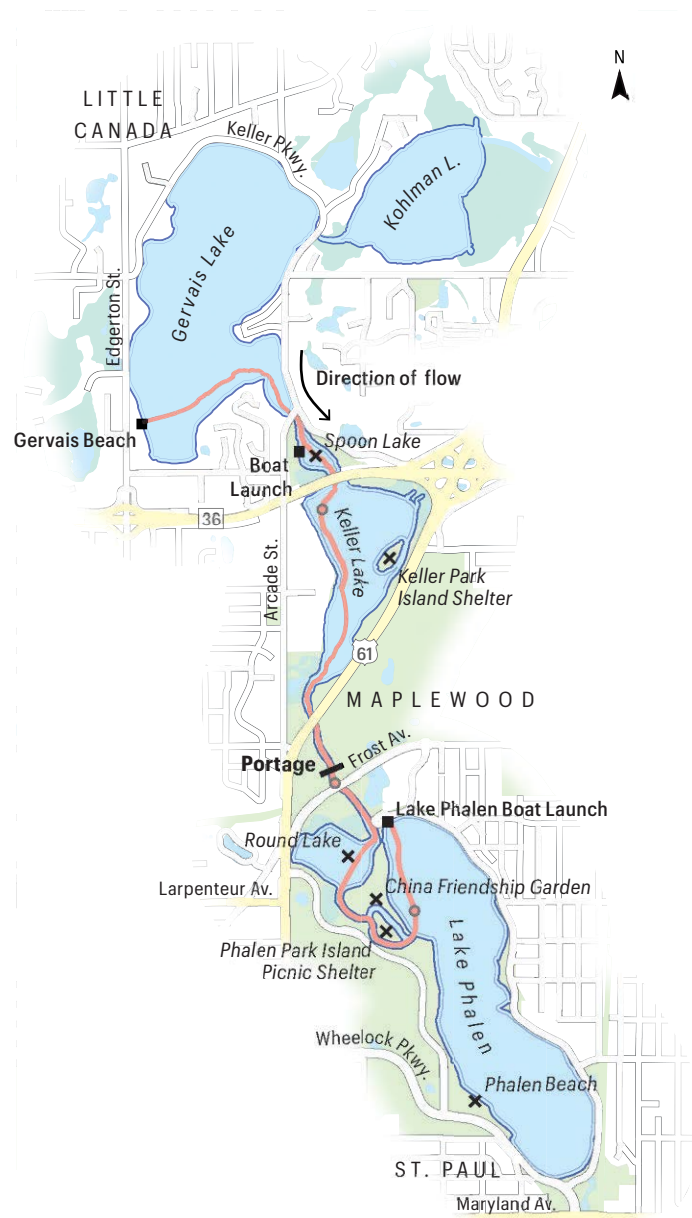
An easy beginner route, this is a great less-trodden alternative to the Minneapolis Chain of Lakes, whether you have your own boat or rent one at the self-serve kiosks on Phalen or Keller. This route brings you from Lake Phalen, north to Round, Keller and Spoon lakes. You can keep going north into Gervais Lake or even to Kohman Lake, but you may run into more motorboat traffic. Not only are these lakes popular for

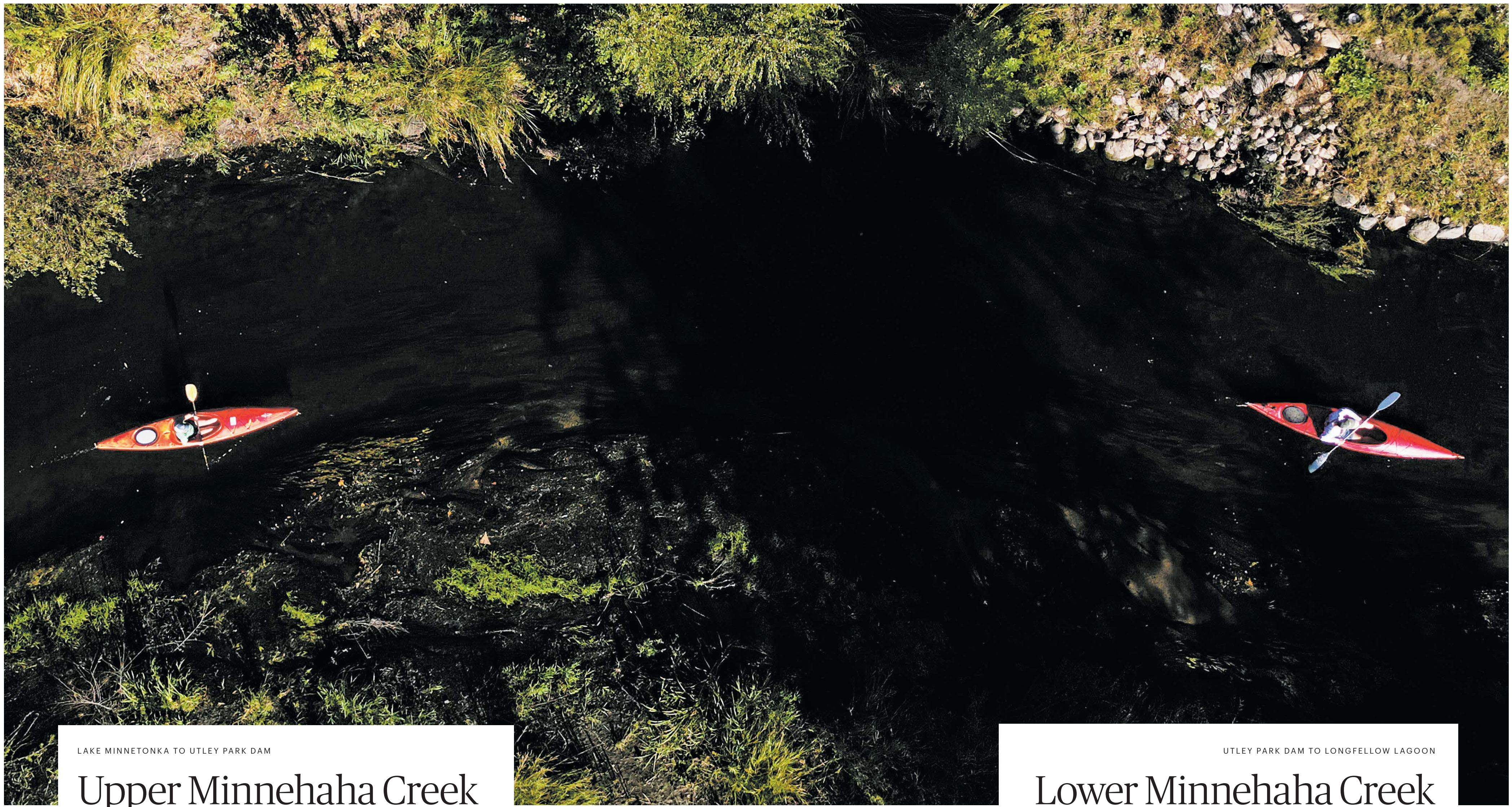
fishing in the east metro, but you've also got a good chance of spotting waterfowl like ducks and herons. The channel between Round and Keller lakes feels like a secret passageway and requires a very short and well-marked portage of just a few steps over a small dam. Parts of the channels and lakes have lots of water lilies and other plants late in the season, which pose little barrier to canoes and kayaks but can get stuck on paddleboard fins.

KNOW BEFORE YOU GO

- **Recommended conditions:** Avoid paddling when wind speeds exceed 8 to 10 mph.
- **Consider your craft:** Watercraft with fins/rudders can get caught on plant material, especially in channels between lakes.
- **Watch for traffic:** Motorboats are allowed on Keller, Spoon and Gervais lakes.
- **Stay healthy:** None of the lakes along this route are considered impaired water-wise, but Phalen is your best bet for taking a dip. Check water conditions at the Ramsey County website. Avoid swimming 48 hours after a heavy rain.

Photo by AARON LAVINSKY • The Minnesota Star Tribune





LAKE MINNETONKA TO UTLEY PARK DAM

Upper Minnehaha Creek

UTLEY PARK DAM TO LONGFELLOW LAGOON

Lower Minnehaha Creek

GOOD FOR
Canoes, kayaks,
intermediate paddlers

DISTANCE AND TIME
Upper: 11.5 miles
Lower: 10 miles, 3 to 4 hours
each, depending on water flow

PUT IN
Upper: 16501 Grays Bay Blvd.,
Wayzata
Lower: 4521 W. 50th St.,
Edina

TAKE OUT
Upper: 4500 W. 50th St.,
Edina
Lower: 3933 E. Minnehaha
Pkwy., Minneapolis

Minnehaha Creek is the gem of Twin Cities paddling. As it winds through the west metro area, the creek varies from a meandering channel to a sprawling wetland. The paddling experience depends heavily on water levels. In a typical year, spring rains bring favorable paddling conditions in April, May and June. Expect a plethora of migratory birds and flowers on the creek's edge.

The creek's headwaters are at Grays Bay Dam on Lake Minnetonka. Its path through the western suburbs feels like an escape from urban sprawl. Signs of civilization are few, except for the occasional highway crossing. The stream is relatively wide throughout this section as it meanders through marshes, though it contains some narrower and faster sections at road crossings. Houses begin to hug the creek's banks as it continues east, and it eventually passes through the Knollwood shopping area in St. Louis Park. This section feels more commercial and offers a chance for a Burger King stop.

The Edina section of the creek offers backyard views of some of the metro's most coveted real estate. The route ends at the Brownedale Avenue dam in Edina. Paddlers wishing to traverse the entire length of the creek would have to portage across four-lane W. 50th Street — a long and potentially dangerous endeavor. See our guide for Lower Minnehaha Creek. The creek is a more advanced paddle than others in the Twin Cities. When water is low, it means navigating whitewater sections, evading rocks and likely walking your boat in sections.

The best way to continue the experience of Minnehaha Creek is by letting its flow carry you through Edina's lavish backyards and some of the metro's most beautiful parkland.

South of the Brownedale Avenue dam, the creek's meandering turns can be an exciting ride at higher water levels. The Minneapolis section is the city's best-kept secret: a place for urbanites to trade skyscrapers and traffic for towering cottonwoods and mischievous waterfowl. The creek takes paddlers beneath charming pedestrian bridges, through Hiawatha Golf Course and eventually deposits them at Longfellow Lagoon just above the falls. Don't

worry, a barricade keeps paddlers who miss the takeout point from accidentally going over the falls. The creek is a more advanced paddle than others in the Twin Cities. When water is low, it means navigating whitewater sections, evading rocks and likely walking your boat through sections. Paddling at higher water can be an exhilarating ride but requires responsive and powerful paddling to dodge downed trees and low branches.

KNOW BEFORE YOU GO

- **Recommended conditions:** A creek flow of 100 to 150 cubic feet per second. Condition reports can be found at the Minnehaha Creek Watershed District website.
- The creek itself is public land, but land adjacent to the creek may not be. Be respectful of private property and only exit the creek at designated takeout points.
- **Be on the lookout:** The potential for downed trees and low branches keeps all sections of the creek unpredictable. Navigate with caution. Updates about the creek's condition are posted on the Friends of Minnehaha Creek Facebook page.
- **Packing list:** Polarized sunglasses are a must for low-water paddling, as they will help you spot rocks and other underwater obstacles.

- **Stay safe:** Don't paddle the creek right after heavy rain. The creek gets filled with runoff from surrounding streets, and fast-moving water increases the chance of encountering branches and other obstacles.
- **Material matters:** Carbon fiber and wooden canoes may risk damage at low water due to rocks at some of the narrower sections.
- **Transit friendly:** The lower route is available to paddlers with access to only one vehicle. Bring a padlock and cable to secure your watercraft near the takeout point at Longfellow Lagoon. Catch a Metro Transit 46C bus at E. 46th Street and 34th Avenue S. It's about a 45-minute ride back to Utley Park.

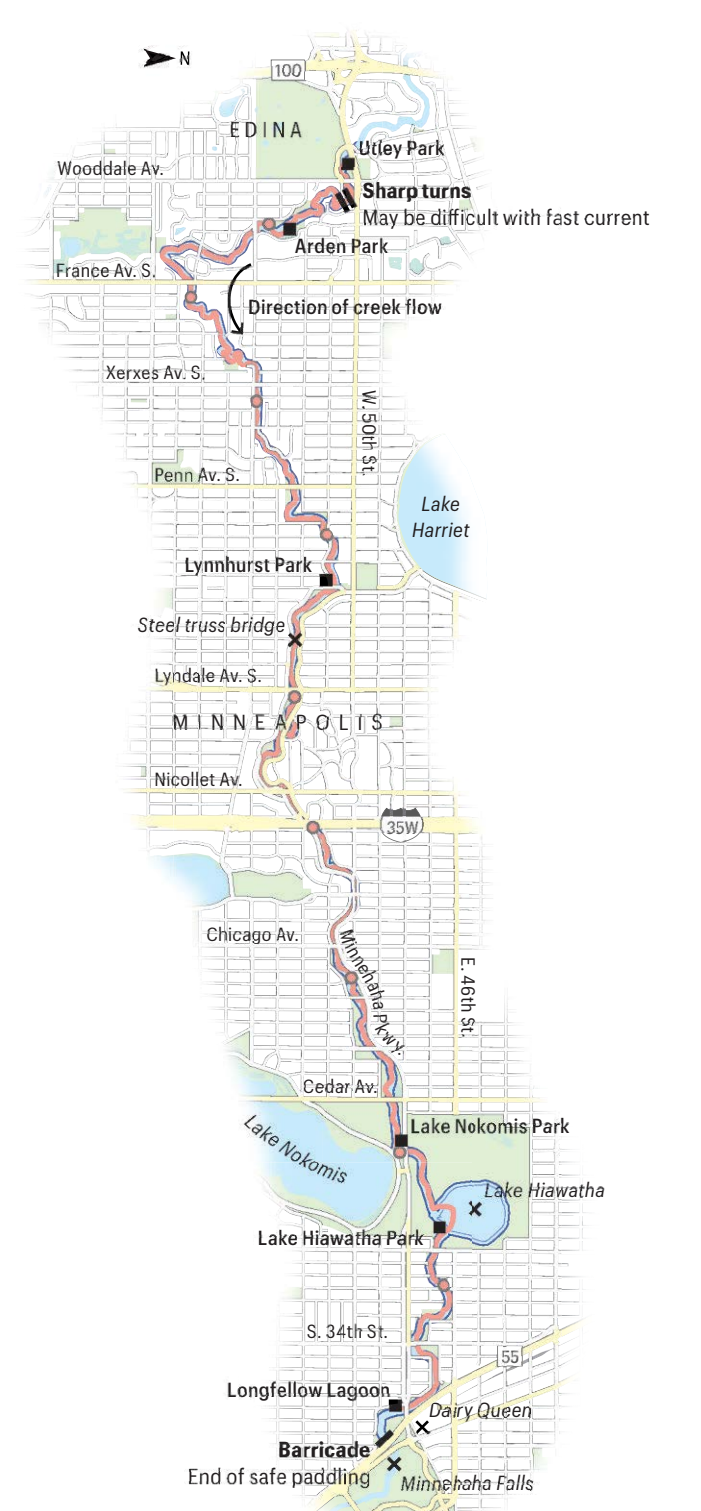
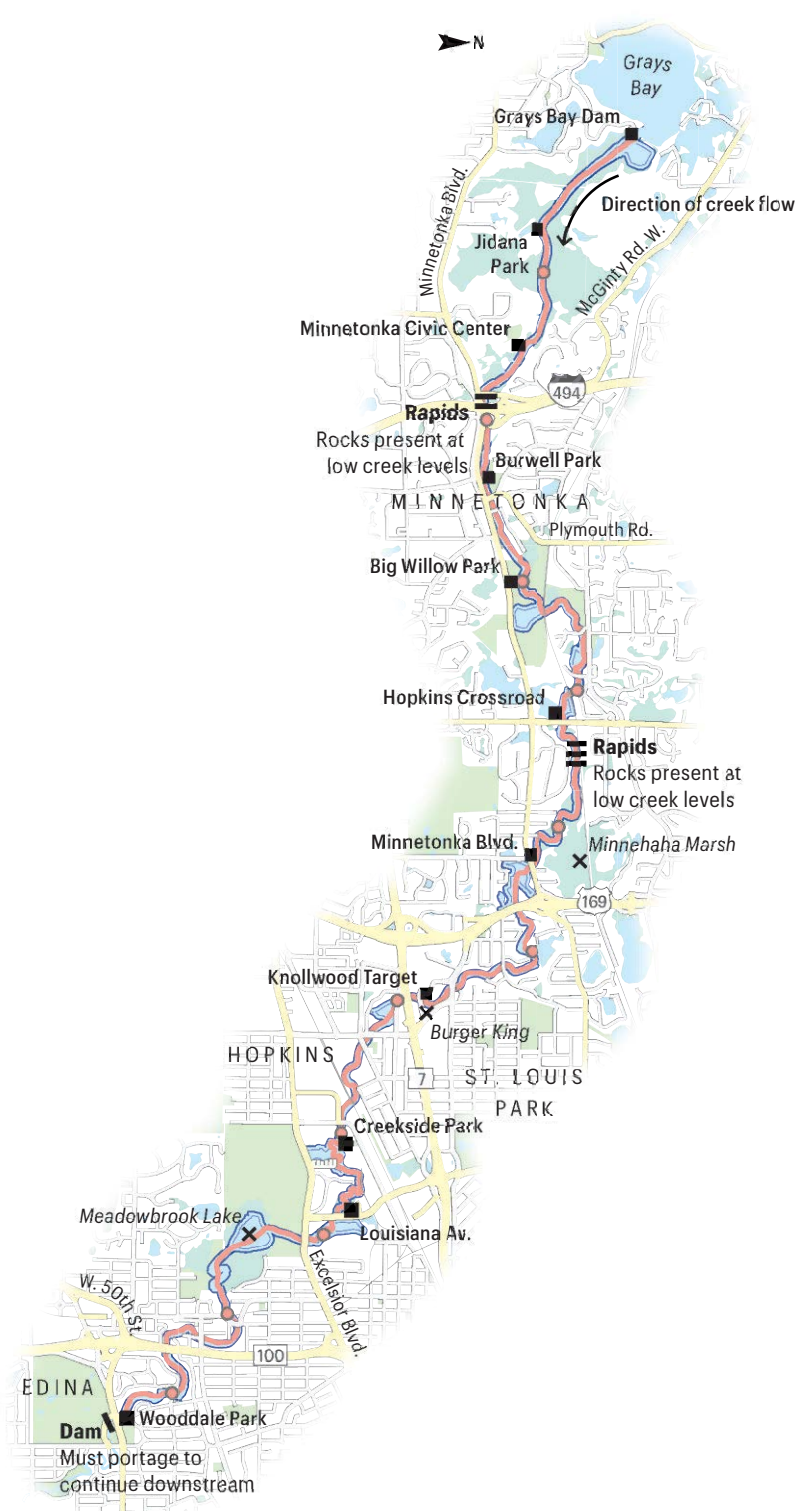
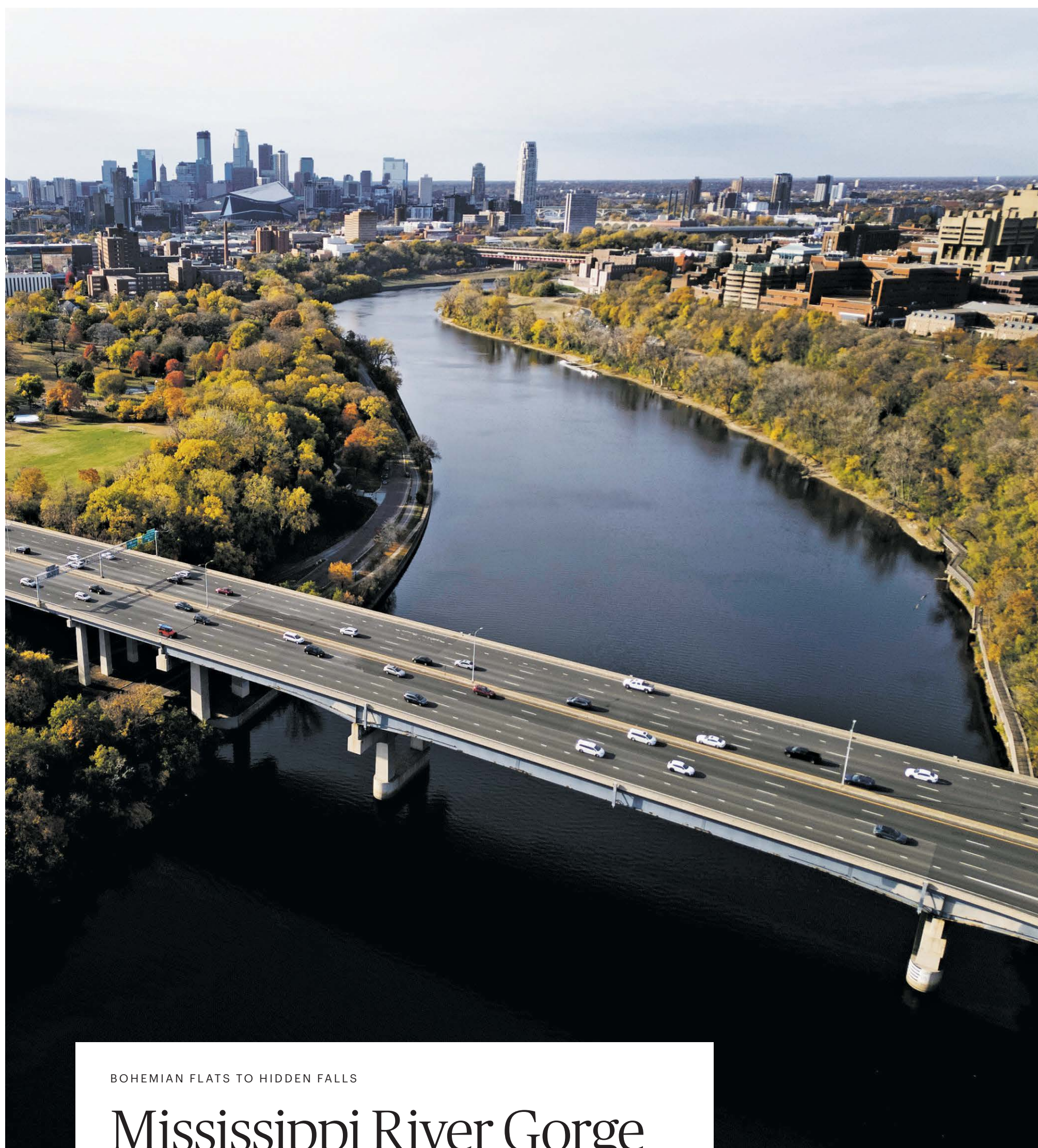


Photo by AARON LAVINSKY • The Minnesota Star Tribune



BOHEMIAN FLATS TO HIDDEN FALLS

Mississippi River Gorge

GOOD FOR
Canoes, kayaks, paddleboards, rentals, beginners

DISTANCE AND TIME
6.5 miles, 2 to 3 hours, depending on water flow

PUT IN
2150 W. River Pkwy., Minneapolis

TAKE OUT
1313 Hidden Falls Drive, St. Paul

The Mississippi River between Minneapolis and St. Paul is a worthy paddle any time of year, but it demands to be enjoyed in the fall. The river carves a gorge between the Twin Cities, forming towering bluffs that pop with color. Cottonwoods and oaks glimmer golden, accompanied by fiery maples. Few places in the metro offer such expansive views of fall foliage.

The land on both sides of the river – along with the river itself – is part of the Mississippi National River & Recreation Area. Wildlife abounds. Eagles soar overhead. Otters swim about. The protected forests beside the river are wildlife highways, allowing everything from deer to turkeys to the occasional bear to move across the metro.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Lock and Dam 1 stabilizes the river's flow. This allowed barges to move up the river, though no barge has gone north of the dam since the St. Anthony Falls lock closed for good in 2015.

Paddling the gorge offers views of six bridges, including the Franklin Avenue and Lake Street-Marshall Avenue bridges with their impressive arches, and the Ford Parkway bridge with its Gothic ribbed structure.

Paddling from Bohemian Flats Park

to Hidden Falls Regional Park requires going through the lock at Lock & Dam 1. Passage is available Friday through Monday; the lock is closed to recreational traffic Tuesday through Thursday.

The lock is open from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. Saturdays and Sundays and noon to 6 p.m. Mondays and Fridays. The last passage going downriver is at 5:30 p.m. for both periods. It is recommended you arrive at least 30 minutes ahead of time to ensure passage.

When approaching the lock from upstream, you are supposed to find the recreation pull cord along the lock's western guide wall and pull it. However, pulling the cord did not seem to notify personnel of our presence when we paddled this route. Bring a cellphone and call the lock staff at 651-290-5919 if the cord does not work.

KNOW BEFORE YOU GO

- Recommended conditions:** The dam on this section of the river keeps the water flow consistent and reliable. The river swells into a pseudo-lake, so check wind conditions beforehand.
- Be mindful of rowers and follow their traffic pattern. Paddle downstream on the west side of the river and upstream on the east, as if you are driving on a two-way road.
- Caution:** Certain areas around the Ford Dam are restricted due to strong currents that threaten to pull boats into and potentially over the dam. Avoid being within 600 feet upstream of the dam and 150 feet downstream of the dam.
- Call ahead:** Make sure you call Lock & Dam 1 ahead of time on Mondays and Fridays. Traffic may change to commercial-only after 3:30 p.m. with a 24-hour notice.



- Travel logistics:** The Lake Street takeout has limited parking and no direct vehicle access to the water. Paddlers taking out there should stick to the public beach between the rowing club docks and will have to carry their watercraft up a steep 80-foot climb.
- Where to rent:** Renting a kayak is an option if putting in at Bohemian Flats and taking out at Lake Street. More info is at paddleshare.org.

Photo by AARON LAVINSKY • The Minnesota Star Tribune

COON RAPIDS DAM TO BOOM ISLAND PARK

Upper Mississippi River

GOOD FOR
Canoes, kayaks, paddleboards, rentals, beginners

DISTANCE AND TIME
11.5 miles, 2.5 to 4 hours, depending on water flow

PUT IN
9750 Egret Blvd. NW., Coon Rapids

TAKE OUT
724 Sibley St. NE., Minneapolis

The Upper Mississippi is the metro area's definitive urban paddle. The mighty river delivers you to a bustling heron rookery and sends you under the Lowry Bridge as you near the picturesque Minneapolis skyline. It's a different way to appreciate familiar landmarks.

All sections of this river are easy to paddle, with minimal obstacles or hazards to navigate. At higher water, the river makes for a good "lazy river"-style paddle, where the current does most of the work. Slower flow and a headwind make for a more exerting outing. Expect to share the river with some motorboats, including water taxis and – closer to northeast Minneapolis if you time it right – Twin Cities River Rats water skiing shows.

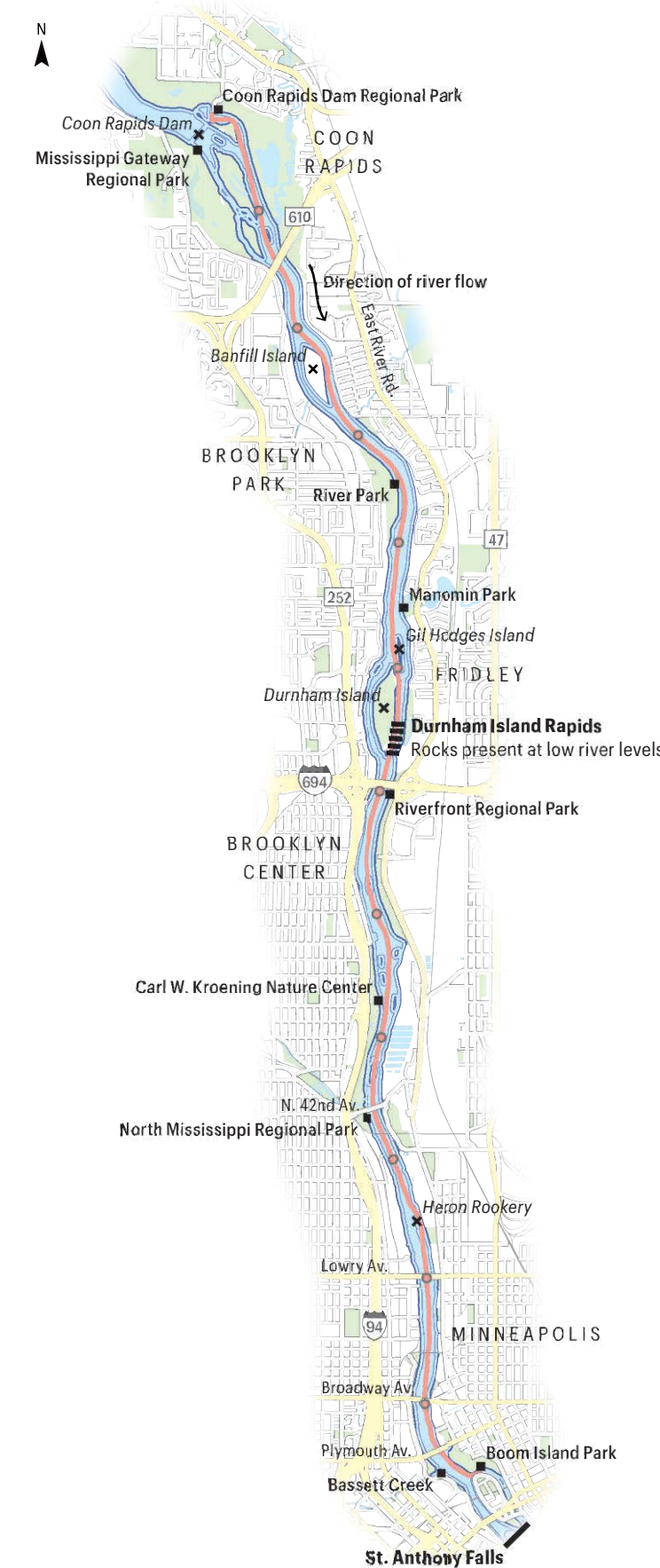
The Upper Mississippi is an industrial stretch of river, featuring an Xcel Energy power plant and a Minneapolis water facility. Interstate 94 runs near the river in north Minneapolis. The smells and sounds from these features can be unpleasant. But many sections

move through serene cottonwood and maple forests, and in the city you can see industrial riverfront such as the Upper Harbor Terminal being repurposed into parkland.

Typically we would recommend taking out at the Boom Island boat launch, but it is closed this summer due to Plymouth Avenue construction work. We recommend an alternate takeout nearby on the southeast side of the park, found by paddling along the shore and into the channel to the left. Follow the channel under the bridge to Nicollet Island and find the spot to take out just after the bridge on the left, as is marked on the map. For a shorter route, take out at Kroening Nature Center in North Mississippi Regional Park.

KNOW BEFORE YOU GO

- Recommended conditions:** A river flow of 8,670 to 28,300 cubic feet per second. Condition reports can be found at the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources website.
- The river itself is public land, but land adjacent to the river may not be. Be respectful of private property and only exit at designated takeout points.
- Don't disturb the herons. They're protected by the Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1918.
- Watch for traffic:** Expect to meet motorized traffic ranging from yachts to small motorboats.
- Stay safe:** Check flood conditions. High water introduces risks such as fast currents and submerged obstacles. Flood conditions may cause closures at boat launches.
- Where to rent:** This section of the river can be paddled even if you don't have your own watercraft. The Mississippi River Paddle Share has kayak rentals available at multiple put-in spots along the river. Renters retrieve the kayaks from lockers stationed at either end of their route. Kayaks must be rented in advance. More information at paddleshare.org.



HIDDEN FALLS TO HARRIET ISLAND

Lower Mississippi River

GOOD FOR
Canoes, kayaks, beginners

DISTANCE AND TIME
7.5 miles, 2 to 3 hours, depending on water flow

PUT IN
1313 Hidden Falls Drive, St. Paul

TAKE OUT
49 Harriet Island Road, St. Paul

This route has a bit of everything: You begin on a peaceful stretch of the Mississippi, passing anglers on the river's banks, eagles' nests, fishing herons and the Minnehaha dog park. In the second half, an old grain elevator, swing bridge and St. Paul's skyline offer glimpses of the working river, past and present.

Highlights of this route include views of Fort Snelling on bluffs high above the Mississippi; an optional scenic detour around Pike Island; the confluence of the Minnesota and Mississippi Rivers, known as Bdot, which is a site with cultural significance to many Dakota people; a swinging railroad bridge, which turns to allow large boats to pass by; and St. Paul's High Bridge, with spectacular views of the downtown skyline.

For a 7-mile paddle, put in at Hidden Falls and take out at Harriet Island. The Hidden Falls boat ramp allows

easy access to the water. Harriet Island has no ramp, so be prepared to carry your boat from the water to the parking lot.

For a 5-miler or for those not looking to carry a boat very far, put in at Hidden Falls and take out at Lilydale Regional Park. Lilydale is prone to flood closure in spring, so pay attention to the Ramsey County Parks website for information.

Go short and sweet (about 2 miles) by putting in at Lilydale and paddling to Harriet Island.

KNOW BEFORE YOU GO

- Recommended conditions:** A river flow of 6,000 to 30,000 cubic feet per second. Condition reports can be found at the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources website.
- Watch for traffic:** The river sees barge traffic that creates a heavy wake. Paddlers should be cautious and give a wide berth to barges. Watercraft ranging from yachts to small motorboats share this route.
- Stay safe:** Check flood conditions. High water introduces risks such as fast currents and submerged obstacles. Flood conditions may cause closures at boat launches.
- Stay healthy:** The water in this part of the Mississippi appears dirty, particularly after it meets the Minnesota River. Conditions are especially bad after heavy rain. Those with a paddleboard may think twice.



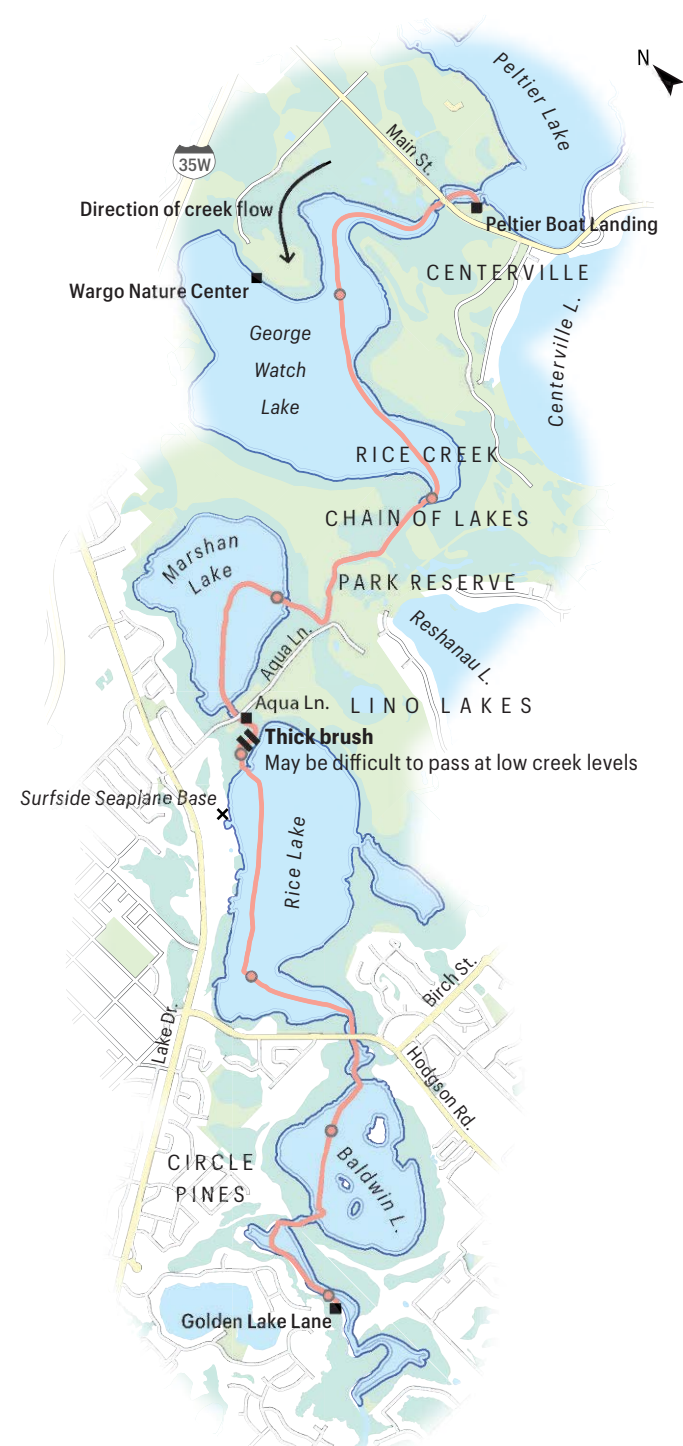


PELTIER LAKE TO BALDWIN LAKE

Upper Rice Creek

BALDWIN LAKE TO LONG LAKE

Lower Rice Creek



GOOD FOR
Canoes, kayaks, paddleboards, intermediate paddlers

DISTANCE AND TIME
Upper: 7 miles
Lower: 8.5 miles, each taking 2 to 3 hours, depending on water flow

Far less logistically difficult than a Boundary Waters trip, the Rice Creek Chain of Lakes offers a day trip experience mere miles from downtown Minneapolis. Five lakes – PelTier, George Watch, Marshan, Rice and Baldwin – are strung together by reed-and-cattail-lined channels. No portaging required.

The Rice Creek Water Trail spans 15 miles from Lino Lakes to New Brighton. The first section is a series of interconnected lakes. With little visible development along their shores, the lakes come alive with herons, mergansers, coots, pelicans and loons. There is little to no current on this section of the route, so check wind conditions and be prepared to paddle. The lake section of the paddle is

beginner-friendly, but higher winds can create challenges. Additionally, low water or thick weeds can make some of the passages between the lakes difficult.

We recommend taking out just after Baldwin Lake. Thereafter, the creek becomes narrow and meandering. Paddlers looking for an all-day adventure can continue downstream toward Long Lake.

KNOW BEFORE YOU GO

- **Recommended conditions:** A creek level of 6.3 to 7.9 feet. Check current creek conditions at the United States Geological Survey website. Avoid paddling when wind speeds exceed 8 to 10 miles per hour.
- **Travel logistics:** You can extend this route on a longer day by leaving a car at a takeout point further downstream. See our guide for the Lower Rice Creek.
- The creek itself is public land, but land adjacent to it may not be. Be respectful of private property and only exit at designated takeout points.
- **Caution:** Do not attempt to follow Rice Creek beyond Long Lake. The official water trail ends at Long Lake, and lower sections are not maintained for brush or obstacles. There is a dam at East River Road that prevents paddlers from entering the Mississippi.

PUT IN
Upper: 7448 Main St., Lino Lakes
Lower: Rice Creek North Regional Trail, E. Golden Lake Lane, Circle Pines

TAKE OUT
Upper: Rice Creek North Regional Trail, E. Golden Lake Lane, Circle Pines
Lower: 1500 Old Hwy. 8, New Brighton

The lower section of the creek is an easier paddle than the upper section. The narrower channel speeds the water up some, but its pace is still leisurely. Be prepared to paddle as the creek meanders through the unkempt backwoods of the former Twin Cities Army Ammunition Plant.

The creek section has a generally slow current and no rapids, but the quick, successive hairpins require a maneuverable craft – and the ability to steer it. The creek eventually lets out into Long Lake, which offers backyard lake life views. The lake can get choppy when it's windy, so be sure to check weather conditions. Paddling conditions are generally

favorable May through September. If spring or summer rains cause high water, some bridges may be too low to pass under. We paddled the creek at a water level of 8.24 feet and found the water was too high to float under County Road 1 in our canoe. There is a quarter-mile-long portage around the bridge that requires a fair amount of bushwhacking to put back into the creek.

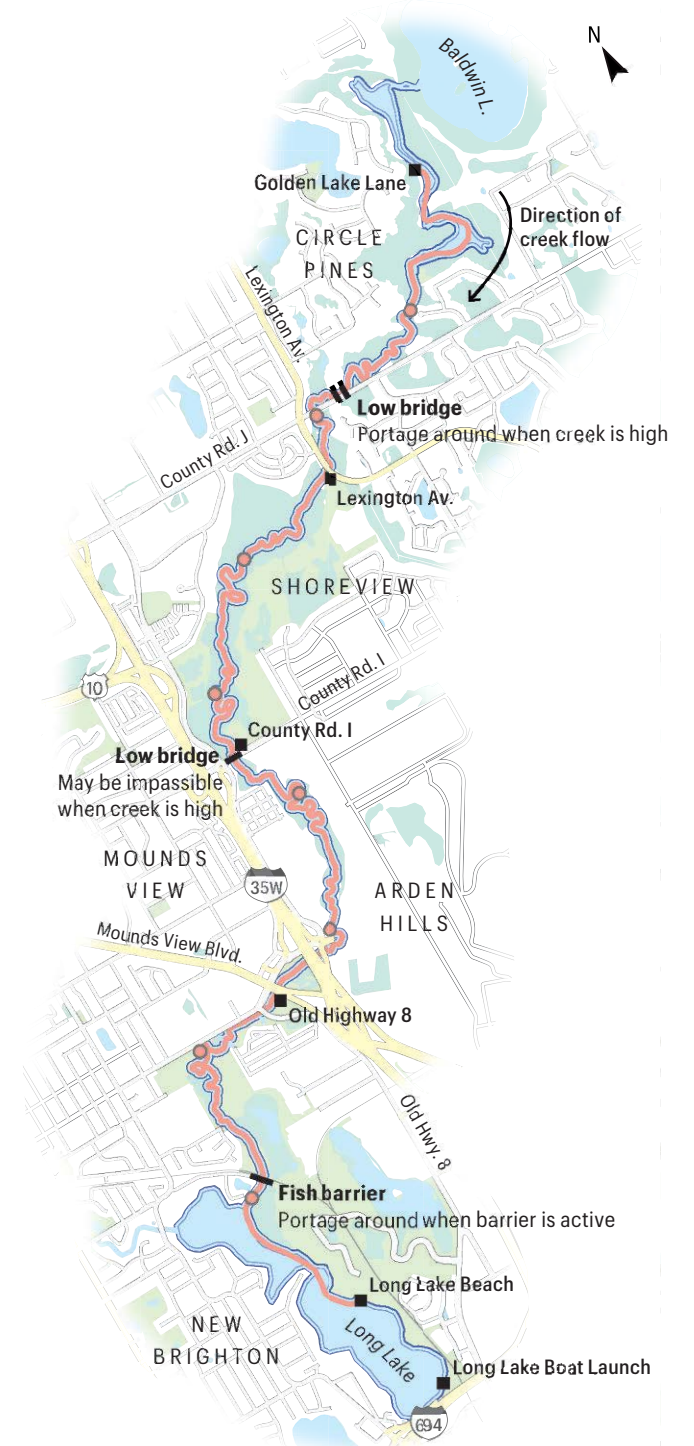
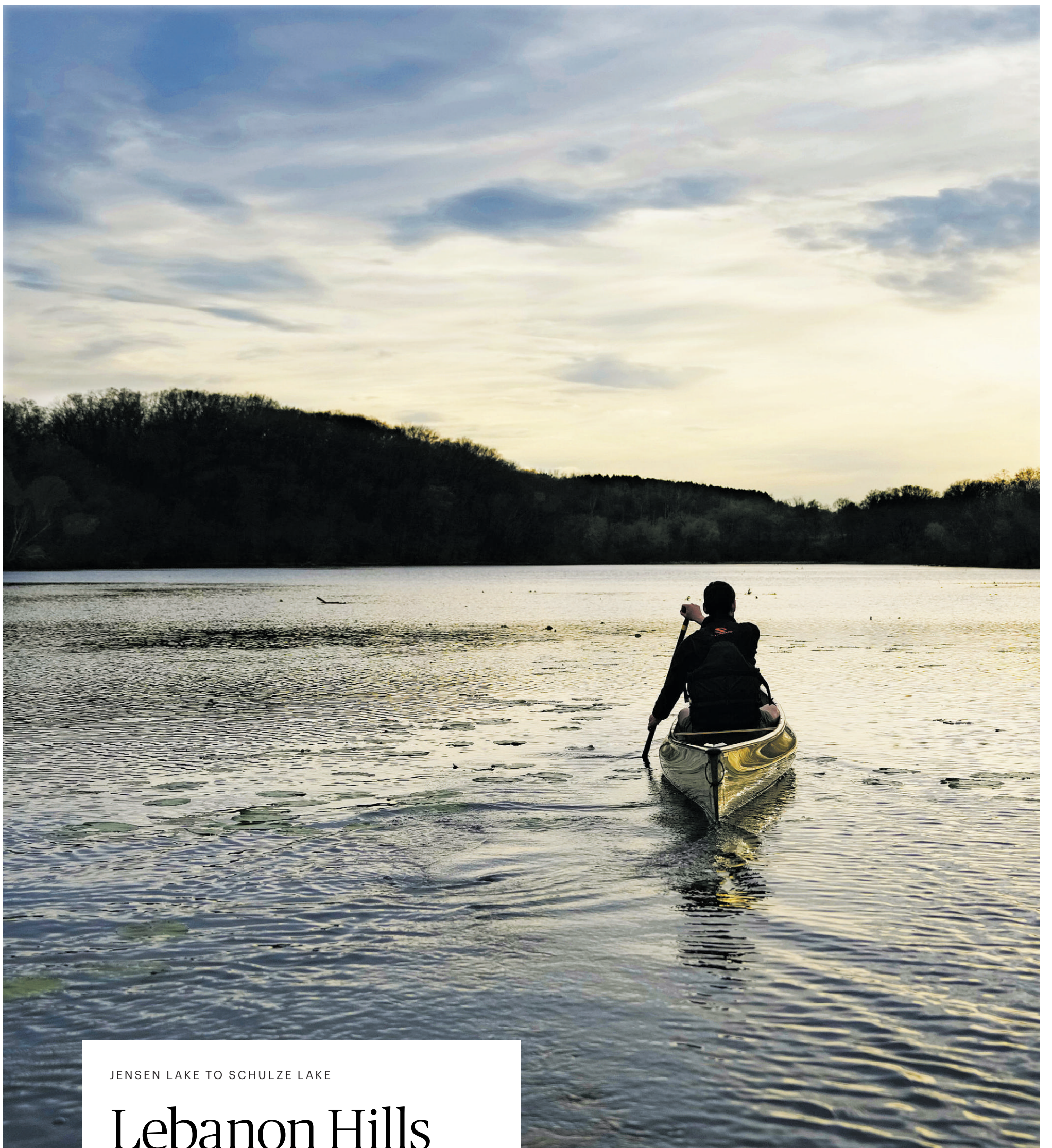


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JENSEN LAKE TO SCHULZE LAKE

Lebanon Hills

GOOD FOR
Canoes, intermediate, rentals

DISTANCE AND TIME
2.5 miles, 1.5 to 3 hours

PUT IN
1398 Carriage Hills Drive, Eagan

TAKE OUT
842 Cliff Road, Eagan

Better known as a destination for hikers, skiers and mountain bikers, Lebanon Hills Regional Park also features 12 significant lakes. This route takes you through six of them, with short portages in between.

While any level of canoeist will enjoy paddling these small, protected lakes, the portages make this route more challenging. Although most portages are approximately 1,000 feet or less – not long by Boundary Waters standards – they do require carrying your craft up and down steep hills with sharp turns. The path from the parking lot to the put-in at Jensen Lake is steep. The last portage, from Portage Lake to Schulze

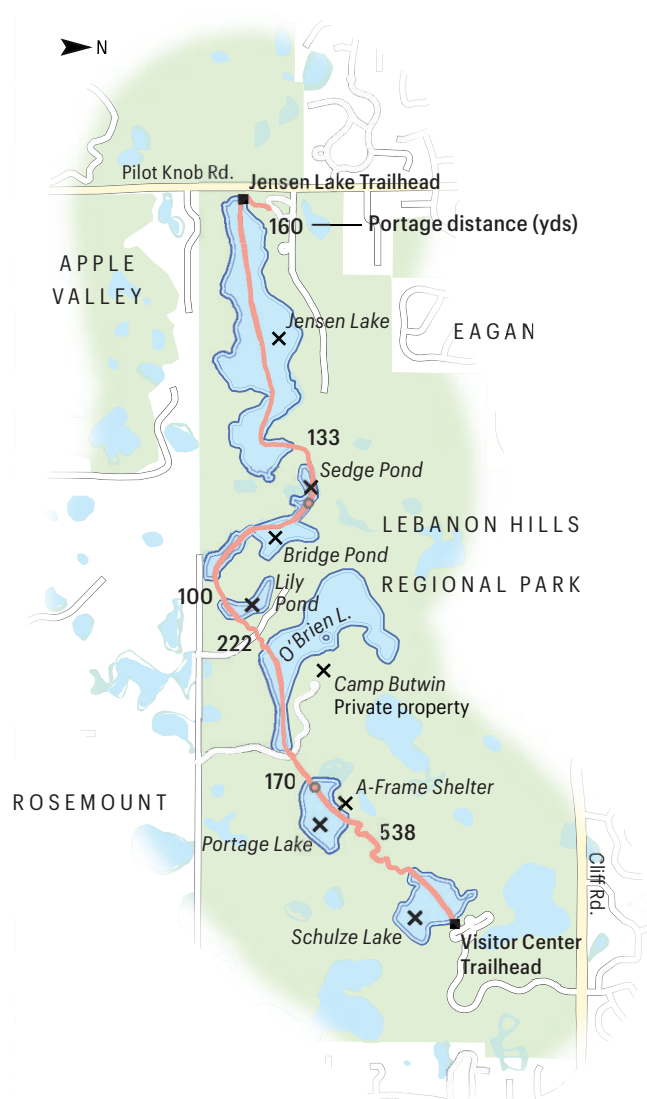
Lake, is about a quarter-mile long and involves several turns.

The numerous interconnected lakes and trails at Lebanon Hills make for an easy “choose your own adventure” style of route planning. Don’t feel like moving a vehicle to the end of your route? Just plan an out-and-back trip, venturing as deep into the park as you want. Don’t feel like portaging? Do laps around Jensen Lake.

KNOW BEFORE YOU GO

- **Recommended conditions:** Avoid paddling when wind speeds exceed 8 to 10 miles per hour.
- **Runner’s special:** Runners can drop their watercraft at Jensen Lake, drive to park at Schulze Lake and enjoy a just-over-2-mile trail run back to their boat to start their paddle.
- **Watch for muck:** The lake system should be paddle-able in all three seasons, though low water can make for mucky put-ins and takeouts at the portages.
- **Where to rent:** Canoe, kayak and paddleboard rentals are available at the park facility on Schulze Lake. Canoes are recommended if intending to portage.

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