



Application
Fox Cities
Wisconsin

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David Horst column: Berlin-Omro leg may be most beautiful of Fox River Heritage Paddle 2010

OMRO — They said it would be the most beautiful section, and the Fox River did not disappoint.

The White River Lock near Princeton to Berlin, and then Berlin to Omro. These were numbers six and seven of the 13 segments that make up Fox River Heritage Paddle 2010.

Here the banks were less farm field and wetland and more wooded wonderland.

June 26-27 would be the longest weekend of paddling in our journey from the near convergence of the Fox with the Wisconsin in Portage to its mouth in Green Bay, in time for the Tall Ships Festival.

We launched from the White River Lock on the wrong side of 10 a.m., due to the long drive to shuttle vehicles to Berlin. If not for the eagerness to get on the water, the drive along County J east from Princeton would have been a day's adventure in itself. The rolling hay fields were populated with crane families: ma and pa sandhill with one or two youngins, groups of bachelor cranes and a fawn so small it probably had not seen its second sunset.

Saturday's 13-mile paddle crossed the spots where the White River and the Puchyan (pronounced pucky-ann) River bring a charge of fresh, clear water into the greenish flow of the Fox.

We paddled past the spot where the last Winnebago chief to preside over the Green Lake area was buried. Son of Chief Big Shoulder, his name was Hanageh, but white settlers called him Chief Highknocker after the stovepipe hat he wore. He died trying to swim across the river he loved. His family later had his remains moved to near Berlin.

The history lessons continued when we reached Berlin's fabulous and expansive Riverside Park. Bobbie Erdmann — historian, author and former mayor — told us of the city's history of river trade and the land speculator who was given the swampy end of the deal by his partners, but turned lemons into cranberry juice. He noticed natives picking the red fruit in his swamp and turned the state's first cranberry farm into a moneymaker.

While all of the upper Fox offers a history lesson, Berlin to Omro was an advanced course in ornithology.

From the time we shoved off from Riverside, kingfishers criss-crossed our path. Further on, common terns took their — excuse the expression — turn zipping across the river. The underbrush held orioles, cedar waxwings, tree swallows and a small yellow warbler that took me past my identification skills.

We saw the geese and ducks and great blue herons typical of a river trip, but add to that sandhills, a cormorant, a flock of white pelicans, a bald eagle and a pair of osprey guarding their nest. We saw at least 10 egrets — or maybe five egrets twice, two egrets five times or whatever math table you care to construct.

The great-horned owl that flew across the river mid-afternoon, pursued by squawking blackbirds might have been the strangest bird sighting of the day, if not for what we saw as we approached a long, elevated pier.

Is it a decoy? No, it moved. It really was a wild turkey hanging out on a pier. I'm sure it wasn't the only wild turkey on a pier that afternoon, but this one didn't require ice cubes and a glass.

The pity of this wonderful segment was that too many people believed Sunday's dismal forecast. While thunderstorms were a dead certainty on the weather map, we experienced barely a drizzle. After averaging nearly 50 paddlers per segment, we had only 14 to experience the bird display. Thirty-six came along Saturday.

We needed all of the hands we had when it came time to portage the 28-foot voyageur canoe around the Eureka Dam. The formal portage is river-left, but a path around the fish ladder at river-right offers a much shorter — if steeper — path for a heavy boat.

As luck would have it, a fisherman's boat beached at the landing on that side complicated our task, as did his puppy, tied up to a tree at the put-in at the other end and determined to get under our boats or in front of our feet.

Lunch was a calm and casual affair on the grass above a serviceable boat landing in Eureka.

The natural beauty and frequent bird sightings continued through to Omro. We paddled through the delightful riverfront city and docked at Miller Park — the last of its four parks on the water. There, a group of volunteers from the Fox River Runners greeted us with cold drinks and warm smiles. They are but one example of the historical societies, business people and civic leaders who have welcomed us along the way.

Understand that Fox River Runners is a powerboat club. Those boat owners don't always welcome slower paddle craft on "their" river.

Club Commodore John Steen, a retired Milwaukee police officer, explained that his club just wants people to enjoy the river, whatever craft they choose.

Thanks, John. You've summed up exactly what Fox River Heritage Paddle 2010 is about and why we're advocating for a river trail and U.S. Park Service recognition of a Fox-Wisconsin Heritage Parkway.

Additional Facts

NEXT UP:

Sunday, July 18: Miller Park in Omro to Terrell's Island for a talk by DNR biologist Art Techlow III on the experiment to protect an area of Lake Butte des Morts to bring back native plant and animal species.

July 24: The ninth annual Park-to-Park Paddle from Shattuck Park in Neenah to Lutz Park in Appleton, with a bailout at Fritze Park in Menasha, which has drawn more than 300 paddlers in past years.

July 25: Lutz Park to Sunset Park in Kimberly, though the four Appleton locks.

July 30: A short Friday night paddle from Kaukauna to the Rapide Croche Lock, with camping available.

July 31: The downtown Wrightstown boat landing to Bomier Park in De Pere.

Aug. 14: De Pere to Green Bay for the Tall Ships Festival.
