

# MILWAUKEE URBAN WATER TRAIL



## A Canoe and Kayak Guide



**The Milwaukee Urban Water Trail is a canoe & kayak route through urban portions of the Milwaukee, Menomonee, and Kinnickinnic Rivers – with more than 25 miles of paddling. The trail enhances public recreational opportunities, promotes safe and legal river access, and encourages stewardship.**

**MILWAUKEE'S RIVERS – PAST AND PRESENT**  
Milwaukee's rivers have always been important cultural, economic, and natural pathways. Native Americans used these water routes for trade and transportation, and sustained themselves with the fish, wildlife, wild rice, and other plants harvested from the rivers and associated wetlands. Traders, trappers, missionaries, and French explorers used the rivers for exploration and trade. As European settlers moved into Milwaukee, the local rivers quickly became the main commercial and shipping arteries of the young community, and were heavily used for transporting wheat, lumber, coal, and other products. Over time, roads, rail-

**NATURAL ATTRactions**  
Our local rivers flow through lands that are both privately and publicly owned, with most of the latter protected by the Milwaukee County Parks system and other municipal parks. These parks provide a scenic backdrop along much of the water trail, as well as provide excellent opportunities for bird watching and wildlife viewing. It is common to see kingfishers, herons, egrets, mallards, osprey, and migratory birds, as well as the occasional deer, coyote, mink, raccoon, and frog, among others. Due to improving water quality and river restoration projects such as the removal of the North Avenue Dam, over 30 species of fish can now be found throughout much of the water trail area. The DNR is reintroducing sturgeon, walleye, and other native fish that once thrived in our rivers, and fishing opportunities now abound, especially below Kletzsch Park Falls and Estabrook Falls and along the Burnham Canal on the Menomonee River. The water trail flows adjacent to the Milwaukee County Parks' Oak Leaf Trail and the newly created Beer Line Trail, which provide quality hiking and biking opportunities that could be combined with a paddle trip.



ways, and air transport gradually replaced rivers as the major transportation routes for most goods. Milwaukee and other cities gradually turned their backs on the rivers, which had become severely polluted. Buildings that had once opened out to the river now looked to the streets.

Over recent decades, people are once again embracing their rivers. This change in perception is the result of improved water quality, a surge in building and redevelopment along riverfronts, increased interest in recreation, and improved public access. The rivers are now used largely for recreation — from the more natural reaches meandering through parkland enjoyed for their beauty and wildlife, to the more urban portions welcoming boaters to dock along the RiverWalk to enjoy a local beer, dinner, or entertainment. While Native Americans, traders, and trappers are rarely seen on our rivers today, modern day explorers can be found in canoes and kayaks seeking tranquility, relaxation, and a natural connection to the past in the midst of an increasingly busy world.

**WATER TRAILS – MAKING CONNECTIONS**  
Water trails are liquid “pathways” that are being developed in communities across the country. They enable non-motorized boaters to find legal access points, resting sites, and nearby cultural, historical, and natural attractions. Water trails connect people with places, both natural and human-made, connect past to present, and bring the boater into contact with the rivers and surrounding lands. These connections help provide “a sense of place” within our watersheds, promote stewardship, and bring us together as a community.

**MILWAUKEE URBAN WATER TRAIL**  
People increasingly recognize that they don't need to travel long distances to go canoeing or kayaking, but can enjoy the rivers right in their own backyards. The Milwaukee Urban Water Trail is a cooperative effort to help Milwaukee's citizens and visitors gain safe and legitimate access to the Milwaukee, Menomonee and Kinnickinnic Rivers with their canoes, kayaks, and other small non-motorized boats. The Milwaukee Urban Water Trail also connects the urban portions of these three rivers to Lake Michigan.

The Milwaukee Urban Water Trail builds on a series of efforts to bring life back to the rivers of Milwaukee by improving access, water quality, and wildlife habitat. The underlying goal of the Water Trail is to encourage people to enjoy their rivers in a responsible way that protects our natural and cultural resources. Water trail explorers are encouraged to respect these resources and the private landowners and communities that care for them.

City of Milwaukee, as seen from the Menomonee River. (Friends of Milwaukee's Rivers)

### PLANNING FOR A SAFE TRIP

Although the Milwaukee Urban Water Trail is not as remote as many popular water trail routes, the power and unpredictability of the Milwaukee, Menomonee, and Kinnickinnic rivers should never be underestimated! It is important to plan ahead before launching. Be aware of water levels, potential hazards, and required and recommended portages.

### WATER LEVELS AND HAZARDS

Water levels and flow can vary greatly with rainfall, affecting safety both on the land and water. Higher water generally increases level of difficulty due to low bridges, snags, concealed boulders, low hanging trees, and other hazards. Paddling in high water should be avoided. There are two required portages; the falls in Kletzsch Park and Estabrook Park (downstream of the dam). Additionally, Estabrook Dam requires portaging during most of the summer when the dam is closed and during high water. The North Avenue rapids upstream of the former dam/new pedestrian bridge is a recommended portage for inexperienced paddlers and during high or low water.

For water trail updates, information on water conditions, and advisories, visit the FMR website at: [www.mkeriverkeeper.org](http://www.mkeriverkeeper.org). To report hazards or obstructions on the rivers, call FMR at (414) 287-0207.



### GENERAL SAFETY TIPS

- Always wear a U.S. Coast Guard approved Personal Flotation Device (PFD)—a PFD is legally required for each person onboard and can save your life!
- Don't be left up the creek without a paddle—always bring an extra paddle along.
- Consider seeking formal boating instruction, attend a boating safety class, and practice paddling and rescue skills.
- Dress appropriately for the weather and anticipate weather changes, especially when paddling in cold water. Bring extra dry clothes, stored in a waterproof bag.
- Wear brightly colored clothing to improve your visibility to other boaters.
- Review your exit points and portages before launching and be aware of hazards.
- When paddling along the inner harbor and Milwaukee Estuary, exercise extreme caution and stay in marked channels to ensure your safety and minimize conflicts with motorized boats.
- Bring water and safety equipment, including a first aid kit, sunscreen, rain gear, extra lashing line, and dry bags or storage containers.
- Avoid contact with contaminated sediments, especially in Estabrook and Lincoln Parks upstream of the Estabrook Park dam. PCB levels are high in these areas and pose a potential threat to human health.
- Do not paddle under the influence! Breweries are “take-out” and not “put-in” access points! In a recent report by the American Canoe Association, alcohol was found to be a causal factor in 25% of canoeing deaths and 9% of kayaking fatalities from 1996-2002.

In case of emergency, please contact the U.S. Coast Guard at (800) 321-4400 or (414) 803-5807 or hail them or other nearby boaters on channel 16 if you have a marine VHF radio.

For more information on safety, please visit the FMR water trail website at: [www.mkeriverkeeper.org](http://www.mkeriverkeeper.org). For real-time flow levels check the USGS website at: <http://www.usgs.gov>

### LEAVE NO TRACE

The Milwaukee Urban Water Trail promotes the following elements of the national Leave No Trace Code of Outdoor Ethics that promotes the responsible use and enjoyment of the outdoors:

- Plan ahead and prepare;
- Travel on durable surfaces to minimize disturbance of natural areas;
- Dispose of waste properly;
- Leave what you find (unless its garbage!);
- Respect wildlife; and
- Be considerate of others and protect the quality of their experience!

For more information, contact the Leave No Trace program at (800) 332-4100 or visit their website at: [www.lnt.org](http://www.lnt.org)

Please remember to always respect private property and publicly owned property along the water trail. Please only park in designated parking areas and parking lots. If there is no parking explicitly denoted on the map, please use street parking and comply with posted parking restrictions.



FRIENDS OF MILWAUKEE'S RIVERS is a non-profit organization working to protect water quality and wildlife habitat and to advocate for sound land use in the Milwaukee, Menomonee, and Kinnickinnic River Watersheds. Friends of Milwaukee's Rivers is a member of the Waterkeeper Alliance, a national coalition dedicated to protecting and restoring our nation's waterways, and is the licensed Riverkeeper® for Milwaukee.

For more information on Friends of Milwaukee's Rivers or the Milwaukee Urban Water Trail, or if you would like to make a donation please contact:

**Friends of Milwaukee's Rivers**  
1845 N. Farwell Ave., Suite 100  
Milwaukee, WI 53202  
(414) 287-0207  
[www.mkeriverkeeper.org](http://www.mkeriverkeeper.org)

For additional maps, please send a self-addressed stamped envelope or download a copy from our website (click on water trail).

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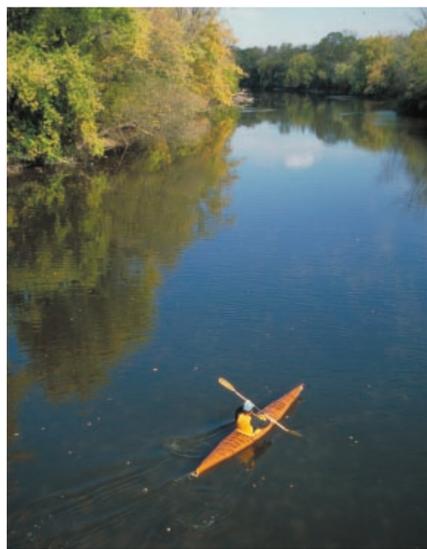
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### CULTURAL AND HISTORICAL ATTRactions

Although Milwaukee and its natural harbor began as a Great Lakes port in 1835, many settlers, fur traders, and immigrants were drawn to Milwaukee by the access that Milwaukee's three rivers provided into the interior “wilderness” by canoe. Although the wilderness is largely gone, paddlers can still find connections to our human past along every stretch and around every corner of the Milwaukee Urban Water Trail. Boating by Jones Island, now the location of a sewage treatment plant and the Port of Milwaukee, we are reminded of a marsh island settled by largely Kaszube and German immigrants who made their living by fishing Lake Michigan. Floating through the Third Ward and Downtown Milwaukee, we are reminded of a past where shipping and commercial vessels lined our shores, teaming with wheat, lumber, coal and other supplies. Paddling upstream of the former North Avenue Dam, we can envision a lake that was once a popular recreational area lined with swimming schools, passenger ferries, boat liveries, rowing clubs, and even a theme park! As we pass the old Schlitz



Paddling on the Milwaukee River.

Brewery Dam, we remember a time when ice was harvested for a booming beer industry, and ice wars were in the news. Meandering through Kletzsch Park and downtown Thiensville reminds us of time when our rivers were used to convert wheat to flour and trees to lumber.

Today, paddlers pass by cultural and tourist attractions that include a vibrant downtown Milwaukee, the Milwaukee RiverWalk, the Pabst Theater, the Performing Arts Center, the Milwaukee County Historical Society, and the Urban Ecology Center on the Milwaukee River; the Potawatomi Bingo Casino and Miller Park Stadium on the Menomonee River; and scenic boat marinas and industries along both the Kinnickinnic and Menomonee Rivers.

For more information on the water trail, please visit the FMR website at: [www.mkeriverkeeper.org](http://www.mkeriverkeeper.org)

Left to Right: Friends of Milwaukee's Rivers leads a group paddle. Monarch butterfly. Whitewater on the Milwaukee River. (Eddie Daniel)



# MILWAUKEE URBAN WATER TRAIL



### MAP KEY

- 5 Described site on trail
- 0.0 Distance traveled
- CAUTION: DAM / FALLS
- Portage
- Canoe and kayak access
- Boat launch
- Parking
- Restrooms
- Picnic area
- Food and restaurants
- Rapid water
- Park land
- Bike trail

Scale for Main Map: 0.5 Mile

## ROUTE DESCRIPTION

Please be respectful of both private and public property by landing only at designated sites described in this route description.

**MILWAUKEE RIVER** (inset map) Mileage figures (0.0) refer to miles downstream from Mequon Villa Grove Park.

- 1 (0.0) **Mequon Villa Grove Park**. Motorized boat ramp (use caution). Parking. Picnic. Restrooms.
- 2 (1.3) **Thiensville Village Park**. DAM AHEAD: REQUIRED PORTAGE! Take out at motorized boat ramp or adjacent sea wall (use caution). John Henry Thien purchased land and founded Thiensville in 1842. He had a mill race dug and a dam constructed with Native American labor, and then constructed a saw mill and grist mill, which are still present a short paddle downstream. Parking. Picnic. Restrooms.
- 3 (1.8) **Molyneux Launch**. Limited parking. Picnic. Restaurants nearby.
- 4 (6.0) **Schlitz Audubon**. Natural bank on river left just downstream of Brown Deer Road Bridge. Please stay out of fenced natural area owned by Schlitz Audubon Nature Center without permission. Limited parking. Picnic.
- 5 (10.4) **Kletzsch Park Sluiceway**. This sluiceway is believed to have been dug at the river bend for a saw mill in the late 1800s, possibly owned by John Henry Thien. Parking. Picnic.

**MILWAUKEE RIVER** (main map) Mileage figures (0.0) refer to miles downstream from the Kletzsch Park Sluiceway.

- 5 (0.0) **Kletzsch Park Sluiceway**. Parking. Picnic.
- 6 (0.43) **Kletzsch Park Falls**. FALLS AHEAD: REQUIRED PORTAGE. Exit on river right just before fenced viewing area. Kletzsch Park Falls, adjacent to the site of a former Native American village, was built by the Civilian Conservation Corps in 1933 (general park development started in 1940). Parking. Restrooms in pavilion, a quarter mile north. Picnic.
- 7 (1.4) **Apple Blossom Lane**. Motorized boat ramp (use caution). Limited street parking. Residential area—please be courteous!
- 8 (1.7) **River Forest Drive**. Natural bank. Street parking. Residential area—please be courteous!
- 9 (2.8) **Lincoln Park Fishing Pier**. Fishing pier not accessible in winter when Estabrook Dam is open due to low water levels (use Milwaukee River main channel). The fishing pier is located on Sandy Island, which was connected to the mainland via bridge in 1941 by the Milwaukee County Workers Progress Administration (WPA). The island to the east, Mac Island, was intentionally left isolated to serve as a wildlife refuge. Restrooms. Street parking with additional parking lot and restrooms at Blatz Pavilion to south.
- 10 (3.8) **Estabrook Dam**. DAM AHEAD: REQUIRED PORTAGE! This dam is usually closed from early spring to late fall, and open during the winter. However, it is sometimes opened manually during high flows—posing a potential safety hazard. Recommended take-out is on river left before debris catchers (sharks' teeth), especially when dam is open! Put-in is at natural beach downstream of dam. Parking.
- 11 (4.1) **Estabrook Falls**. FALLS AHEAD: REQUIRED PORTAGE! This dam is usually closed from early spring to late fall, and open during the winter. However, it is sometimes opened manually during high flows—posing a potential safety hazard. Recommended take-out is on river left before debris catchers (sharks' teeth), especially when dam is open! Put-in is at natural beach downstream of dam. Parking.
- 12 (5.6) **Hubbard Park**. This beautiful Shorewood Park was once the home of a series of amusement parks, known as Lueddemann's-On-The-River (1872), Zweitusch's Mineral Springs Park, Coney Island Park (1900), and Wonderland Amusement Park (1905 to 1909). Parking. Picnic. Hubbard Park Lodge open seasonally.
- 13 (6.2) **Schlitz Brewery Ice Dam**. HAZARD: PASS BY ON RIVER RIGHT! This rundown dam just above Locust St. was built by the Schlitz Brewery in the early 1900s to hold back water in winter months for ice harvesting. During this time, ice wars were reported both near Locust Street and North Avenue bridges. The "Beer Line" rail route used to run on the west bank of the river from Locust St. to North Avenue—serving Schlitz, Pabst, and Blatz Breweries in the neighborhood. It is now a hiking and biking trail managed by the River Revitalization Foundation. A small rapid is present just under the Locust St. Bridge; during low flows, anticipate a one to two foot drop.
- 14 (6.6) **Riverside Park/Urban Ecology Center**. In the early 1900s, the Milwaukee River upstream of North Avenue Dam was once lined with swimming schools (remnants can still be seen in Gordon Park), passenger ferries, boat livery and rowing schools, and esteemed parks such as Riverside Park (designed by Frederick Law Olmsted, of Central Park fame). Now Riverside Park is home to the Urban Ecology Center, which offers organized river trips and educational activities for the local community. Water access only. Restrooms.
- 15 (7.3) **North Avenue Dam**. RAPIDS AHEAD: OPTIONAL PORTAGE. During high flows, inexperienced paddlers may want to portage around this site. Paddlers can take-out either side of the river just upstream of the North Avenue Bridge, and use trails on either side of the river. Put-in anywhere after the rapids or former dam. In 1835, a timber dam was built at this site as part of a failed plan to link the Milwaukee River via manmade canals to the Wisconsin and Mississippi Rivers. This dam was ultimately washed out in 1866 and a new dam built in 1891 to control flooding. The North Avenue Dam was removed in fall of 1997 to restore natural flow and artificial rapids were created. A pedestrian bridge now spans this site. Downstream of the pedestrian bridge, paddlers can see the flushing tunnel on river left, which was constructed in 1888 to pump water from Lake Michigan into the Milwaukee River to flush out sewage, animal excrement, and debris. Area accessible from Riverboat Road. Street parking.
- 16 (7.7) **Milwaukee Rowing Club**. Launching and landing; no mooring. Gate is child resistant, but not locked. Please close gate at all times, be courteous to rowers, and do not block building doors. Street parking.
- 17 (7.8) **Lakefront Brewery**. Street parking. Paddlers can use parking lot, but preferably not on Friday and Saturday nights. Restrooms. Restaurant. Brewery tours available.
- 18 (8.0) **Trostel Square Condos** (river right). Use two signed "public" piers for launching and landing; do not use private piers. Street parking only. Please be courteous of homeowners adjacent to piers.
- 19 (8.0) **Ogden Realty** (river left). Good stop for visiting historic Brady Street. Street parking only. Restaurants and shops nearby.
- 20 (8.3) **Laack and Joys** (river left). Pier can be accessed from water to obtain paddling supplies! Paddlers can launch from land if used during business hours. Building and surrounding fence is locked and access to street prohibited after business hours. Street parking only. Canoe and kayak rentals.

21 (8.3) **Schlitz Park** (river right). Schlitz Park is a mixed-use complex of businesses, restaurants and even a Milwaukee Public School in what was once the Schlitz Brewery. Street parking only.

22 (8.8) **Pere Marquette Park**. This park is named after French Missionary and Explorer, Pere Marquette, who was one of the first known Europeans to visit Milwaukee. Today, this park is the home of Riversplash, River Rhythms concerts, the Milwaukee River Rowing Challenge, and other river events. Paddlers should use the south pier (north pier for tourist cruise boats). Street Parking. Restrooms. Milwaukee County Historical Society. Performing Arts Center (across the river). Many restaurants nearby.

23 (8.9) **Plankinton Alley-Wells**. Good alternative to *Pere Marquette Pier* during festivals. In the early 1800s, Solomon Juneau settled "Juneauntown" east of the river, while Byron Kilbourn came in 1834, founding "Kilbourn town" on the west side of the river. The settlements became rivals, and even laid out their streets so that they would never meet—causing many bridges to be built at any angle. A "bridge war" was narrowly averted in 1845 when the west-siders decided to demolish parts of the Juneau Avenue and Wells Street bridges. The City of Milwaukee was established a year later. Alley good for drop-off and loading. Street Parking. Restaurants nearby.

24 (9.1) **Rockbottom Brewery/Plankinton Alley** (river right). U-shaped piers adjacent to brewery and at end of Plankinton Alley to the south for public use (piers in between are private). Brewery pier is accessible by water only. Alley good for drop off and loading. Street parking. Restaurants nearby.

25 (9.1) **Mason Street** (river left). Stub-in street good for canoe drop off and loading. Street parking. Restaurants nearby. City Hall. Pabst Theater.

26 (9.4) **St. Paul Avenue/RiverWalk Park**. The Historic Third Ward, which was once a thriving commercial and shipping district, is now home to a mix of condos, restaurants, shops, businesses, and the Milwaukee Public Market. Street parking. Restaurants nearby.

27 (9.5) **Buffalo Street/Milwaukee Ale House**. U-shaped pier is public; Milwaukee Ale House piers for patrons. The last commercial steamboat traveled upstream of Buffalo Street in 1959. Buffalo street good for drop off and loading. Street Parking. Restaurant.

28 (9.6) **Chicago Street**. A major fire in 1892 destroyed much of an early Irish neighborhood that used to exist in this area. Street parking with parking structure across the street. Restaurants nearby. Near Milwaukee Institute of Art and Design, Eisner Museum, Off Broadway Theater.

29 (9.7) **Waterfront Condos**. Thought to be original location of George Walker's settlement/trading post. Walker's Point never achieved "downtown" status as did Juneauntown and Kilbourn town, which eventually became downtown Milwaukee. Walker's Point was Milwaukee's first National Historic District and retains much of its 19th century architecture. Street Parking. Restaurants nearby.

30 (10.1) **Performance Yacht Services**. No access to street before and after business hours. Parking. Restrooms. Summerfest Grounds.

31 (10.2) **Bruce St. Boat Ramp**. This County Parks boat ramp is heavily used by motor boats, and can be difficult for paddlers during high winds. Paddlers should also exercise extreme caution in the turning basin and Port of Milwaukee areas due to shipping traffic. The ramp is directly across from the current harbor entrance to Lake Michigan, which was created in 1857 to create a straight channel to facilitate shipping (the original mouth of the river was abandoned about a half mile to the south). Jones Island is directly across from the ramp, now the location of the sewage treatment plant and Port of Milwaukee, but once the location of a Kaszube fishing village. Parking.

**MEMONONEE RIVER** There are no formal access points on the Menomonee River. One-way excursion distances are listed below for reference. Mileage refers to miles upstream of the Chicago Street access. Paddling on the South Menomonee Canal is not recommended due to coal barge traffic servicing the Valley Power Plant.

32 (0.0) **Chicago Street**. Street parking with parking structure across the street. Restaurants nearby.

32 (1.0) **Emmer Lane Bridge**. (13th Street). Hank Aaron State Trail traverses the entire Menomonee Valley from Miller Park to downtown Milwaukee, and runs along the south bank of the river at this location.

33 (2.3) **28th Street**. River becomes very shallow near Falk Corporation, which dates back to 1892 and to a time in the early 1900s, when Milwaukee was the "Machine Shop of the World". Farm machinery, electric motors, cranes, and rail cars were all produced in the Menomonee Valley, and these machines were used locally to convert wheat to flour, hogs to ham, and barley to beer.

34 (1.3) **Burnham Canal** (15th and Bruce). In the 1860s, Milwaukee was the world's largest shipper of wheat! From 1870 to 1890, the Menomonee River was straightened and several canals created to aid shipping and trade of wheat, lumber, iron ore, and other products. Today, the Burnham Canal is still home to several industries, and is a popular fishing area.

**KINNICKINNIC RIVER** Mileage figures (0.0) refer to miles upstream from the Bruce Street Boat Ramp.

35 (0.0) **Bruce Street Boat Ramp**. Good as both a put-in and take-out for round-trip excursion to explore the Kinnickinnic. Parking.

35 (1.1) **Skipper Buds Marina**. The Kinnickinnic (KK) once consisted of a vast marsh, a vibrant crawfish fishery, and multitudes of shippards. The KK, along with our other local rivers, have provided safe harbor for ships for hundreds of years. Accounts from the 1860s state that during storms masted in the harbor were so numerous they looked like a forest. Barnacle Buds restaurant. Restrooms.

36 (1.7) **Pier Milwaukee**. The KK still remains vital to the local boating industry, containing several marinas. The river becomes non-navigable for motor boats past Pier Milwaukee (Becher St.). Restrooms. Parking during normal business hours (9 a.m. to 5 p.m.).

37 (2.4) **Chase Avenue Bridge**. MMSD pump station on southeast bank marks location of a flushing tunnel built in 1907 to pump water from Lake Michigan to the Kinnickinnic River to flush out foul smelling sewage, animal waste, garbage, and other debris. The pump station is still functional. No access. Distance for reference only.

38 (2.6) **1-94/I-43 Overpass**. No access. Distance for reference only. River becomes very shallow here and becomes concrete lined at 6th Street.

*This map is not intended as a sole source for navigational information.*