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THE SACO: IT'S POPULAR FOR A REASON GREAT SANDBARS, PLENTIFUL CAMPING AREAS AND GOOD SWIMMING DRAW CROWDS TO THE UPPER SECTIONS OF THE RIVER. LOWER SECTIONS ARE LESS CROWDED.

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Article Text:

When you paddle your canoe down the Saco River, you're most definitely going with the flow: Thousands upon thousands of Vacationland visitors do it every summer.

Southwest Maine's longest canoeable river is a magnet that attracts visitors from all over New England. And the Saco deserves its immense popularity for a host of good reasons: The river offers casual day-trippers and overnight canoe-campers mile after mile of clear water, good current, an attractive rural setting and dozens of sunny beaches and sandbars along the way.

During peak summer weeks, as many as 3,000 people - most of them paddling canoes - use the river, according to **Fred Westerberg**, supervisor of the Saco River Recreation Council.

Part of the reason is accessibility. The most popular sections of the river are about an hour from Portland, and put-in and take-out points are abundant. Paddling options run from a couple of hours to several days.

THE SACO BEGINS as a tiny, wild stream in the central White Mountains of New Hampshire. By the time it reaches Center Conway, N.H., the river has dropped 1,500 feet in altitude, and numerous tributaries have joined it.

Now a gently meandering stream that varies from 25 to 75 feet wide, it crosses the state line and winds and loops its way across an ancient glacial lakebed in Fryeburg and Brownfield and eventually reaches tidewater at Biddeford-Saco.

Unlike many Maine rivers, flow rates and water levels on the upper Saco are entirely uncontrolled - governed only by natural rainfall and runoff in the vast Eastern Slope region of the White Mountains.

The current is normally moderately strong in July and August, and canoeists can count on getting a substantial boost from the river. For typical midsummer flows, figure 30 minutes per mile for casual paddling, and much longer for float parties.

Storms and downpours can dramatically and quickly raise water levels on the river. During the heavy rains on the weekend of June 13 several campers had to be rescued from campsites along the Saco. According to one rule of thumb, an inch of rainfall in the mountains can raise the Saco by a foot in a few hours - and more than six inches of rain fell in some areas that Saturday.

Below Hiram, Central Maine Power Co.'s generating stations control flows and water levels. Typically the highest water volumes are on the hottest summer days, when peak electricity demand requires the four dams to run full bore.

THE BEST CANOEING on the Saco is between Center Conway and Hiram, a 43-mile section characterized by clear water, frequent mountain views, attractive forested countryside and pleasant current.

Wildlife and waterfowl abound on the river's main stem and its numerous adjacent ponds and bogs. Nearly

every canoeist can expect to see a great blue heron or two plus a family of merganser ducks.

Moose browse at sunset, and deer often are spotted near farm fields. Colorful wood ducks breed in the bogs and ponds, while an occasional eagle swoops down for a fish dinner.

This stretch is justly famous for numerous broad, sunny sandbars and beaches that offer ideal spots for lunches, swimming and overnight camping. Here the river depth is 2 to 4 feet, with dozens of deeper holes and many shallower spots.

A small hydroelectric dam at Swan's Falls in Fryeburg is the only obstruction on this section, and it's an easy portage - or easily avoided.

About 70 percent of Saco paddlers bring their own canoes. A handful of touring kayaks are seen and, on hot summer days, some people float the river in tubes.

Canoeing is secondary to some, who simply spend hours sunbathing and swimming on the sandbars.

"A lot of people will come in and rent a canoe for a two-hour trip - and make a whole day of it," says Chris Gantick, owner of Woodland Acres Camp 'n' Canoe.

Six companies rent canoes and provide shuttle service on the upper river. They'll also suggest itineraries to fit any time budget. A typical rental cost is \$25 per canoe - including paddles and life vests - plus \$10 for a shuttle. Discounts and package programs abound.

A free map and mileage chart are included by most liveries. Frequent paddlers typically spend \$1.50 for the AMC's 11- by 22-inch two-color Saco River map. Some companies also rent kayaks and float tubes. The largest livery is Saco Bound, on Route 302 in Center Conway. This company also has satellite bases in Fryeburg, Brownfield and Hiram, plus two riverside campsites for its customers.

Maine's largest livery, with 130 rental canoes, is **Saco River Canoe and Kayak** on Route 5 in Fryeburg. This 25-year-old outfitter provides the most convenient access to Swan's Falls, the Saco's most popular put-in.

Canoeists who want their cars waiting for them at the take-out can rent from two Brownfield companies: Woodland Acres Camp 'n' Canoe or River Run. This option is especially popular for groups that may start paddling together in the morning, then spread out over the course of a day.

The Center Conway-Hiram section is too popular, say many, who note that in some sections, 100 paddlers per mile is common at midday and that every sandbar will sprout at least a couple of tents by late afternoon.

To mitigate the overpopularity of the river at peak periods, the Saco River Recreation Council has been regulating the river since 1983. The council is an association of canoe liveries, riverside landowners, state governments, the Appalachian Mountain Club and local conservation agencies.

The SRRC employs three professional river runners, who continuously paddle the river, monitor traffic and advise canoeists and campers of regulations. On weekends the council also employs people to help direct traffic at the most popular launch sites.

By contrast, the 40 miles from Hiram to Biddeford-Saco offer good canoeing, far fewer people and a far more varied experience. There are several small rapids, one expert-only rapid and one fearsome waterfall that must be portaged. Four dams - at Hiram, Bonny Eagle, Bar Mills and Dayton - must also be portaged.

But day trips that avoid these obstacles can be enjoyed on shorter segments, and many paddlers find the comparative solitude of the lower Saco is ample compensation for some added effort.

Below Hiram, sandbars and beaches are less frequent and much stricter camping regulations apply. Two Rivers Canoe of Limington is the only outfitter on the lower section; the company can arrange campsites

for its rental customers.

PITCHING A TENT on the many sandbars between the state line and Hiram is free and legal, a feature that attracts many canoe-campers who take one-, two- and three-day trips. Nearly all the land along the river is private, but camping is allowed on most of the beaches and sandbars.

“As long as people are not on posted property, the only thing that is required of the canoe-camper is a campfire permit,” says SRRC supervisor **Westerberg**, owner of Saco River Canoe and Kayak.

Campfire permits are free. They are available at Village Variety in Fryeburg and Grant's Citgo in Brownfield. (Permits are not required for gasoline or propane cooking stoves.) Another rule pertains to trash: “It's strictly carry-in, carry-out,” says **Westerberg**.

Joyce Parker, co-owner of River Run Canoe Rental in Brownfield, emphasizes that the Saco's liberal overnight camping regulations are possible thanks to cooperating landowners, and that canoe-campers must behave themselves or lose these privileges.

“It's all private property, and they must highly respect that,” Parker says. Campers who choose July or August weekends for overnight adventures can expect tent site neighbors.

“If you pull out and set up camp on a beautiful sandbar, you're not guaranteed to have it all to yourself,” says Parker.

“A weekend's fine for a lot of people who like crowds,” advises **Westerberg**. “For that camper who likes a lot of people, he or she should do the weekends.”

Westerberg adds: “But if you're looking for a quiet, pastoral time to relax with family and friends, go midweek or after Labor Day.”

Five supervised campgrounds - some with hookups for travel trailers and RVs - are strung along the Saco in Fryeburg and Brownfield: at Swan's Falls, Canal Bridge (Route 5), Walker's Rips and a pair near the Route 160 bridge.

The AMC runs tent-only campsites at Swan's Falls and Walker's Rips, while the commercial campgrounds at Canal Bridge and Route 160 offer widely varying facilities to all comers.

Caption:

Scott Andrews photo The section of the Saco from Conway, N.H., to Hiram has great sandbars for camping, and they get crowded early in the day. Camping spots are scarcer in the less crowded lower section of the river, from Hiram to the coast.

File photo On the lower end of the Saco River, the banks aren't as sandy but the water is a lot less crowded.

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Memo:

GETTING LAUNCHED

Six companies provide rental canoes and shuttle service on the upper Saco, between Center Conway, N.H., and Hiram:

Saco River Canoe & Kayak, Fryeburg, 935-2369.

Canal Bridge Canoes, Fryeburg, 935-2605.

Woodland Acres Camp 'n' Canoe, Brownfield, 935-2529.

River Run, Brownfield, 452-2500.

Saco Bound, Center Conway, N.H., 603-447-2177.

State Line Store, Center Conway, N.H., 800-447-2460.

One livery serves the Saco below Great Falls Dam in Hiram:

Two Rivers Canoe, East Limington, 637-2169.

CAMPING RULES

The Saco River Recreation Council recommends the following rules for camping at undeveloped

campsites:

Bury human waste. Carry a trowel or shovel and bury human waste 4-6 inches deep in topsoil as far away from the river as possible.

Respect the privacy of others. The solitude and tranquility sought by river users can easily be disrupted by large boisterous groups, loud music and public drinking. Avoid damage to private land to ensure continued cooperation between landowners and river users.

Carry in, carry out. Do not leave any trash or garbage at your camp or picnic site. It will only resurface, littering the riverbanks and polluting the river. Leave any piece of land you camp on as clean as or cleaner than you found it.

Put out your fire. Put out your fire with water, not sand. Hot buried coals can continue to burn for hours.

Do not cut live trees. The cutting of live trees is destruction of private property and a natural resource.

Please use only down and dead wood for fires. Memo:

Scott Andrews, a free-lance writer from Portland, has been paddling Maine rivers for four decades.

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