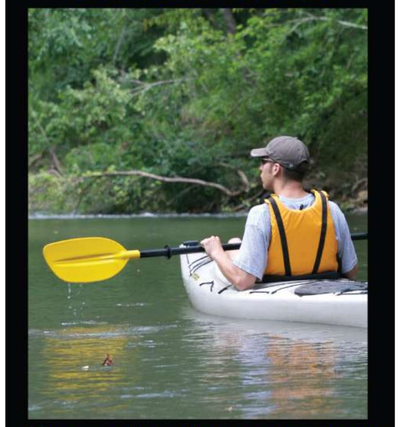
Yellow River Water Trail



One of Iowa's most remote and scenic rivers

This water trial guide was made possible by a partnership between

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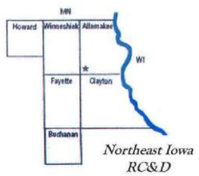
www.iowadnr.gov/watertrails/



Northeast Iowa Resource Conservation and Development Inc.
northeastiowarcd.org

The Yellow River Water Trail is maintained by the Allamakee County Conservation Board
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Canoe Rentals
Upper Iowa Resort & Rental
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Scenic View Campground
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Old Sixteen School House (Cabin)
Phone: 563-586-2721 or 563-535-7489

Hickory Knob (Cabin)
Phone: 563-539-2194

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Phone: 563-535-7634

Pine Bluff Camp Sites
Phone: 563-535-7256

Andy Mountain Campground
Phone: 563-586-2123

Yellow River State Forest Campgrounds
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Yellow River Valley Cabins
Phone: 563-539-2358

For more information contact
Allamakee County Economic Development
1-800-824-1424 or www.visitiowa.org

The Yellow River

The Yellow River is not only the longest coldwater trout stream in Iowa, it is also purported by Iowa DNR Fisheries to have the highest gradient of any canoeable stream in the state. The challenging rapids, limestone cliffs, towering bluffs, mature hardwood forests, and boulders the size of boxcars combine with high clarity water to make this a superior recreational experience. These characteristics alone may explain the popularity of the river but other attributes may also draw visitors. The river is known for its spectacular scenery, which includes high profile public lands. A segment of the river passes through one of only four state forests in Iowa, Yellow River State Forest. It continues on to the only National Monument in Iowa, Effigy Mounds National Monument (www.nps.gov/efmo) and empties into one of America's greatest treasures, the US Fish and Wildlife Upper Mississippi Fish and Wildlife Refuge.

The Yellow River Water Trail is not only one of the most scenic water trails in Iowa, it is also one of the most remote. It provides a chance for river enthusiasts to enjoy abundant wildlife, clear water, wooded bluffs and a bit of history. The Yellow River begins its journey in the farm fields of eastern Winneshiek County. It gains flow and travels through southern Allamakee County before it reaches the Mississippi River north of Marquette, Iowa. The Yellow River is over 50 miles long, but canoeing and kayaking is only recommended on the lower 35 miles. This guide breaks the river into four trips of varying length and difficulty. It also provides information about geology, plants and animals, fisheries, the history of the river, as well as safety and other useful information. It was developed by Northeast Iowa Resource Conservation & Development with the assistance of many partners through a grant from the Iowa DNR Water Trail Program.

About the River and Watershed

Geology

The Yellow River valley is noted for its rugged terrain with numerous rock outcrops, bluffs, steep slopes and springs. These features also make this Iowa Water Trail one of the best examples of a Driftless Area or Paleozoic Plateau river in Iowa. The geology of the region is especially evident on sections of the river that have cut down into the riverbed to flow directly on and beside bedrock. The river is fed by cold water springs and streams; springs bubble up in the riverbed or only a short distance away. Other sections of the Yellow River lose water into underground aquifers, creating a dynamic example of karst geology and hydrology. The landform region referred to as the Driftless Area or Paleozoic Plateau includes northwestern Illinois, southwestern Wisconsin, southeastern Minnesota and northeastern Iowa. In contrast to most of Iowa, which is covered by deep deposits of glacial drift, shallow limestone and sandstone bedrock dominate this area. This area is unique because it was bypassed by the last continental glacier. The term 'driftless' relates to the lack of glacial drift, the material left behind by retreating continental glaciers. Karst topography is also dominant throughout the Driftless Area. Karst topography is often found in areas where limestone bedrock dissolves and over time forms caves, sinkholes, springs and disappearing streams. In certain portions of the Yellow River Watershed sinkholes dominate the landscape resulting in no surface flow of water. Karst topography can play a major role in water quality as surface water can easily mix with groundwater.

Plants & Animals

The Yellow River Valley is home to numerous species of wildlife that live in various habits of the river valley. Deer, wild turkey, river otter, beaver, bald eagle and various species of waterfowl, birds and mammals make this valley their home.

The river above Sixteen Bridge Access is home to trout while smallmouth bass inhabit the lower portion of the river. More information about fish and fishing can be found in the fishing section of this guide. The major Yellow River valley plant communities are maple-basswood, oak-hickory and bottomland hardwoods. Prairie species may be found on dry bluff tops, rock outcroppings and steep slopes that face south and west.

Fish and Fishing

The Yellow River is a high quality river that supports a unique fish community. The majority of the Yellow River, from Old Stage Rd (Hwy W60) to Ion Rd (Hwy X36), is a coldwater trout stream. This is the largest coldwater stream in Iowa. Game fish populations in this portion of the Yellow are primarily rainbow and brown trout with the occasional smallmouth bass also present. Trout populations are maintained through the annual stocking of 50,000 four inch fingerling rainbow trout and 50,000 three inch fingerling brown trout. Trout exceeding 20 inches are caught annually from this portion of the Yellow River. The lower Yellow River, downstream of Ion Rd (Hwy X36), is primarily a warmwater river. Smallmouth bass, walleye and sauger can be found in this portion along with reduced numbers of rainbow and brown trout. There are no barriers to fish movement from the Mississippi River into the Yellow River and it is possible to catch a wide range of different fish species in this lower portion of the river. The Upper Yellow River, upstream of Old Stage Rd, is not a coldwater trout stream and does not support populations of warmwater game fish.

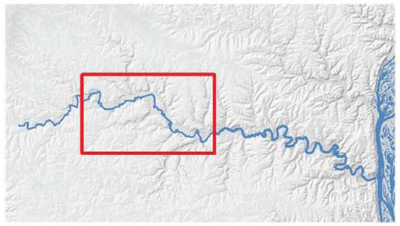
Yellow River - 1873-1911 Photo Samuel Calvin

History of the Area

Near the mouth of the Yellow River, more than 210 prehistoric mounds have been discovered and are now part of Effigy Mounds National Monument. Woodland period Native Americans built the mounds from about 500 BC until Europeans moved into the area. The 2,526 acres of Effigy Mounds National Monument offers many miles of hiking trails. More information can be found at the visitor center just off of Highway 76. The river travels trough Effigy Mounds National Monument for the last 4 miles before reaching the Mississippi.

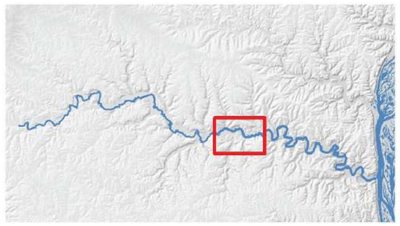
The area was also a stop for French voyageurs on the fur trade. French explorers in the 1700's gave the Yellow River its name. Later the power of the Yellow River was harnessed as many mills sprung up along its course. In its prime as many as 50 mills existed along the river. Around 1829 the first sawmill in Iowa was constructed on the Yellow River about 3½ miles from the mouth; Lieutenant Jefferson Davis oversaw the mill that produced wood for the construction of Fort Crawford in Prairie du Chien, Wisconsin. By the early 1900's many of the mills were gone and the Yellow was known as the "River of Lost Mills." Today only a few signs of this history still exist; the small town of Volney is one of only a few remaining settlements.

Canoeing and Kayaking



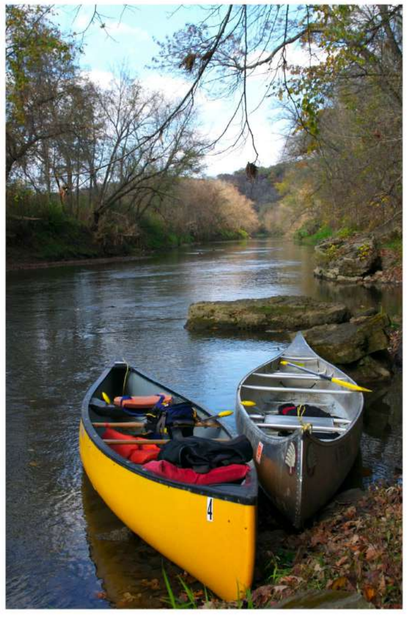
Upstream of Volney (14+ miles)

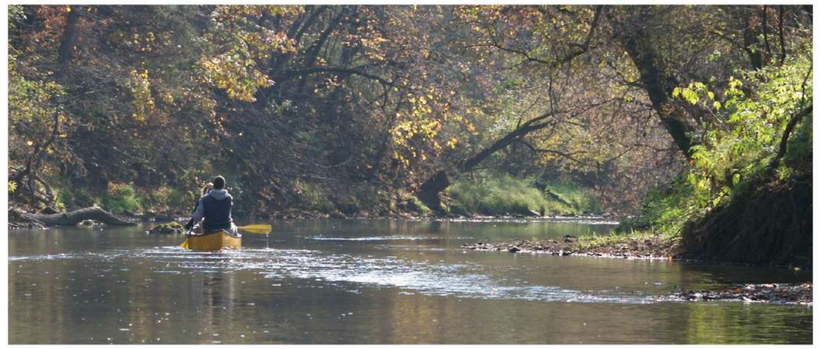
The Yellow River above Volney is not for everyone; it is called a Wilderness Canoe Trail for this reason. The river in this section has no official put-ins or take-outs and accessing the river from bridges can be difficult. Signage along this section is also minimal. This section of river can be shallow and may require portages over rock bars during low water. There may also be low fence wires crossing the river that will need to be navigated. For those venturing out on this section the rewards are great. This section provides the best brown trout fishing; some up to 28" have been caught. Beautiful tree covered bluffs line this section, and you might have the river all to yourself as it sees little use. This section of river has a gradient of 10.2 feet of drop per mile.

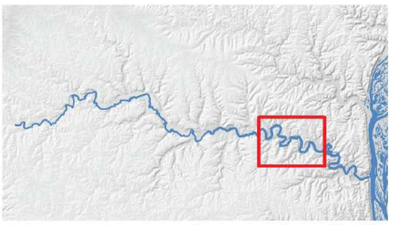


Volney to Sixteen Bridge Access (4 ¼ miles)

The 4 ¼ mile trip from Volney to the Sixteen Bridge Access should take only a couple hours and is perfect for a casual, easy float. Just downstream of Volney, limestone walls line the right bank. The river continues on and slows a bit while running through meadows and crop fields. As the river picks up the pace, sharp meanders begin to appear. These meanders often take the river along shear limestone walls. Keep an eye on the river as sharp meanders can mean logjams and may spell danger for canoeists or kayakers. The river makes it way through the narrow valley and continues over small riffles. The access at the Sixteen Bridge is just downstream of the bridge on river left. The gradient of this section is 7.4 feet per mile. Be sure to check the river gage before heading out; ideally flows should be above 80 cfs for canoeing or kayaking this section.

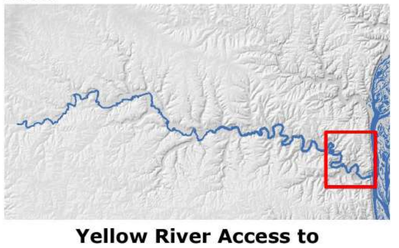






Sixteen Bridge to Yellow River Access (9 miles)

The gradient on this stretch of river increases to an average of 10.3 feet per mile and thus this section of river is the most challenging. The river meanders through the tree-lined valley with scenic limestone walls, some as high as 200 feet. During this section, watch for sharp turns as some can be difficult to navigate especially if logjams are present. Approximately 3 ¼ miles downstream of the Sixteen Bridge there is a farmer's ford; dangerous culverts mean a portage on river left is required. DO NOT try to navigate through the ford! Follow the portage signs to resume your float. Downstream of the ford, the river makes a couple of sharp turns and passes over a few riffles that contain some Class I rapids with waves up to 2 feet. You will pass the Ion Bridge. Access to and from the river is possible at this bridge, but difficult. The Yellow River access is much easier and is recommended. About a mile and a half downstream of the Ion Bridge there is a short section of Class II rapids. The Yellow River Access is a mile past the rapids on river left in the Yellow River State Forest.



Yellow River Access to Mississippi River (10 miles)

This section is very different from upstream sections of river, although there a still a few riffles. This section of river has a lower gradient and the pace slows. It also marks the entry into the Yellow River State Forest, which offers miles of hiking trails and many campgrounds, which are not directly accessible from the Yellow River. The Yellow River State Forest headquarters provides additional information and is located on county road B25, approximately 3 miles northeast of Highway 76. Downstream of the access point at river miles 6 ¾ and 4 ¾ are primitive camping sites adjacent to the river. These two campsites are only accessible by canoe or kayak and are available year round on a first come-first serve basis. The upstream campsite, Ridgetop, and the downstream site, Prairie, are marked by signage along the river. The only amenities at the campsites are a fire ring, tent pads and benches. Expect lovely views. Expect to bring in your own drinking water. Please practice "Leave No Trace" ethics by packing out solid waste and any trash (learn more at LNT.org). As the river nears the Mississippi it slows and widens and passes under a pedestrian bridge at Effigy Mounds, the Highway 76 and railroad bridge, and then converges with the Mississippi River. The take out is on the Mississippi River approximately 300 yards downstream of the Yellow River on the right. Follow the signage to the take out location. Along portions of the lower stretch, the Yellow River passes through the Effigy Mounds National Monument, the only National Monument in Iowa. Please be aware that there are special rules restricting certain recreational uses and activities allowed on National Park Service property.

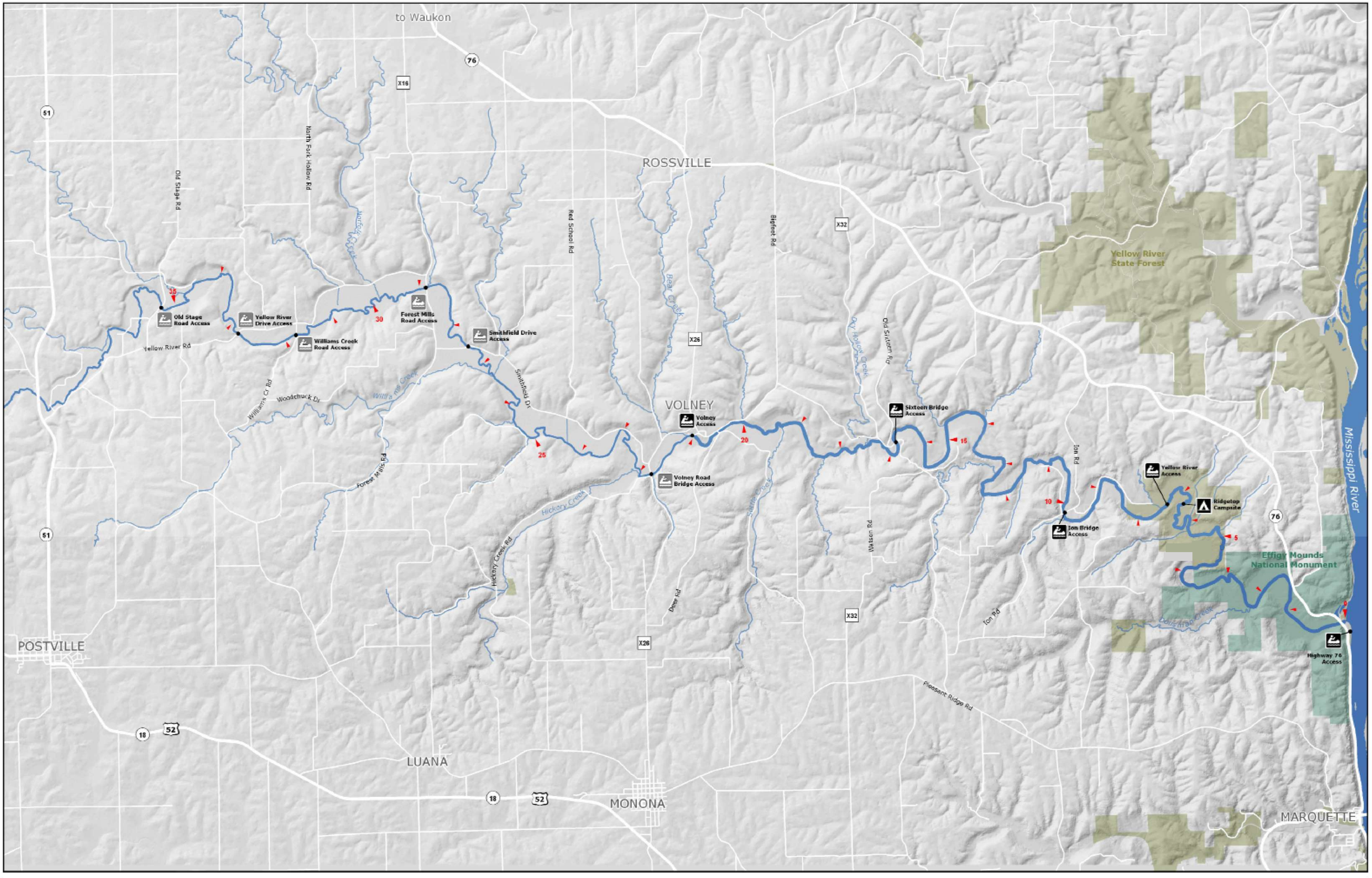
Bridge over the Yellow River within Effigy Mounds National Monument.

Safety Information

It is important to make safety a priority when enjoying recreational activities on the Yellow River. Be sure to dress properly for the trip. Users should wear a personal flotation device at all times when on the river. Life jackets save lives! A brimmed hat, sunglasses and comfortable fast-drying clothing are also recommended. Water shoes or sandals that strap securely to the foot will be needed for put in and take out as well as for any portages. While traversing the river, be on the lookout for potentially dangerous situations. Rocks, heavy current and downed trees or log jams can all present drowning hazards. Portaging around dangerous situations is recommended. Alcohol consumption may impair judgment and delay reactions leading to accidents on the river. Please limit your intake of alcoholic beverages before and during your trip. Always let others know where you plan to be on the river in case of an accident and keep other members of your party within eye sight during your trip.

Stay legal! The river is open to the public but please respect private property as most land along the Yellow River is privately owned.

River level information can be found at http://waterdata.usgs.gov/nwis/uv?05389000



River Access
River Access (Not Maintained)
Primitive Campsite
River Mile (Starting from Mississippi)
Canoe Trail (Volney to Mississippi)
Wilderness Canoe Trail (Upriver of Volney)
Streams
State Forest/Other Public Land
National Monument

Yellow River Water Trail

0 1 2 4 6 Miles

Access Point Name	Access Road	River Miles to Next Access	UTM X	UTM Y
Old Stage Road Access	Old Stage	2.64 Miles	619248.5	4779700.5
Yellow River Drive Access	Yellow River Dr	0.98 Miles	621104.8	4779038.4
Williams Creek Road Access	Williams Cr. Rd	2.95 Miles	622529.1	4779004.6
Forest Mills Road Access	Forest Mills Rd	1.49 Miles	625694.4	4780158.2
Smithfield Drive Access	Smithfield Drive	5.63 Miles	626685.7	4778715.9
Volney Rd Bridge Access	Volney Rd	0.92 Miles	631157.7	4775613.3
Volney Access	Big Foot	4.31 Miles	632190.4	4776567.0
Sixteen Access	Linton Dr	6.91 Miles	637105.6	4776354.6
Ion Bridge Access	Ion Rd	2.45 Miles	641199.6	4774635.3
Yellow River Access	Old Mission Dr	7.59 Miles	643667.7	4774890.4
Highway 76 Access	Hwy 76	End	647982.4	4771956.5