LOWER WOOD RIVER: HOPE VALLEY TO ALTON POND

The Lower Wood River offers lots of scenery, with steep wooded banks covered in mountain laurel, swamp azalea, silky dogwood, and swamp rose. There is very little industry on the river, but the paddler will get to see two mill ruins and three dams. It’s a great area to see wildlife, with osprey nests, beaver lodges, and the ubiquitous painted turtles.

Put in at the Hope Valley Fishing Access located off Rt. 3 in Hope Valley, behind the Dow Little League Baseball Fields. In about one mile, several large boulders in the river indicate the approach to the Hope Valley Dam. Take out on either side of the river is possible but both are challenging. To continue downstream, put-in across the bridge on river left, down a step bank. Use caution – this short section is rocky with some quick water. The USGS gaging weir can usually be run at higher water levels. Be prepared for the abrupt drop. Portage on the right if water level is too low. The Rt. 95 Overpass provides great nesting sites for barn and cliff swallows.

The Switch Road Fishing Access is the recommended put-in for this section of the river. From here the river passes under the road and winds through mostly forested areas until it enters a large marsh complex at about 5 miles. Black Farm State Management Area has a wide diversity of habitats for many forms of wildlife. An old railroad bridge abutment is at the end of the extensive wetland and the beginning of the pond above the Woodville Dam. It remains from a spur line that served the mills. The Woodville Dam is the last dam to be portaged. Cautiously take-out on river right onto Woodville Road through a small opening in the vegetation on the riverbank. Cross the Woodville Bridge and put-in on river left through a small clearing. The river double backs on itself in 0.5 miles before continuing south. Take a sharp left to continue in the main channel or continue straight to an old mill race and the remains of the former Tefft Sawmill. From this point the river again winds through primarily forested area until it comes out to another marsh and the head of Alton Pond. This section of the river has large populations of the invasive plant Variable Milfoil, which can make paddling difficult in mid-summer. Take out at the Alton Pond Landing on river right.
WOOD RIVER

The Wood River is Rhode Island’s premier river for fishing and paddling. According to a study by the National Parks Service, the Wood River has the highest biodiversity of any river in New England. It has been recommended for inclusion in the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System. The Lower Wood River is a better choice to paddle in low water because it is wider and has more flow than the upper section. The challenges on the Lower Wood River are the three dams that need to be portaged. Mountain laurel is particularly scenic along the river in June. River conditions related to blowdowns can be found on-line at www.wpwa.org/river.php.

HISTORY

Native Americans first occupied the area soon after the retreat of the glaciers, about 25,000 years ago. In the winter they used in-land areas such as the Tomaquag Valley, not far from Alton Pond, and migrated to the coast in warmer months. European settlement began in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, primarily with farms and small villages. Dams along the river provided power for sawmills, gristmills and carding mills. In the nineteenth century railroad lines provided more efficient transportation required by increasing industrialization, such as textile and machine tool production. Many of the small mills were converted into larger industrial complexes. A good example of this is the Hope Valley Mill, where a marker at the dam reads “Old Stone Dam Circa 1765. This dam, typical of those found in some areas of the English countryside, was erected about 1765. Later, two mills, one on either side of the river, used the waterpower to turn wheels for manufacturing. The remains of one of the sluiceways are still visible immediate to this sign. Originally called Carpenter’s Mills, the dam now sits between the towns of Hopkinton on the West and Richmond on the East.”

ECOLOGY

The intermixing of various cover types along the Wood River, ranging from open water to marsh to shrub and wood swamp are highly attractive to wildlife, particularly waterfowl and other wetland birds which use the corridor extensively during migration. The riparian habitats of the Wood River and its tributaries provide excellent habitats for a diverse group of animals including beaver, otter, raccoon, mink, muskrat, coyote and fox. Ruffed grouse, woodcock, turkey, cottontail rabbits, squirrels, and white-tailed deer utilize upland areas. Numerous song birds, such as warblers, wrens, thrushes, vireos, swallows and sparrows nest along the river corridor. Birds of prey, including hawks, osprey, and herons feed from the river. Dragonflies, mayflies, freshwater mussels, crayfish and other insects and invertebrates form the basis of the food web. At any time in the summer numerous flowering plants, such as fragrant white water lilies, pickerel weed, cardinal flowers, native rhododendron, and arrowhead, can be seen. The extensive wetlands complex along the Wood River is one of the most diverse and valuable wetlands for wildlife in the entire state.