

Winona to Wabasha, Minnesota

By Reggie McLeod

Photographs by Pamela Eyden

This 30-mile loop passes through four unusual river towns. Two are built on hillsides so steep that practically every house has a panoramic view. Two have downtowns that segue directly to the riverfront with no highway or railroad cutting off access.

Explore Winona

Winona (pop. 26,537) is built on what is basically a sandbar between the Mississippi and Lake Winona. It's tricky giving out-of-towners directions in Winona, because the river flows west to east here. The town is protected by 11 miles of levees that stand about 15 inches higher than the 1965 flood.

You can see this and more from a bird's-eye perspective from **Garvin Heights Park**, on the bluff at the end of Huff Street. On a clear day you can see from Mount Trempealeau downriver to the power-plant smokestacks upriver at Alma, Wis., a span of 34 river miles.

Winona was built with lumber money in the 1880 and 1890s, when riverboats pushed huge rafts of logs

downriver to the sawmills that lined the riverfront. The downtown has some of the finest architecture of the era. Don't miss the **Winona County Courthouse, Merchants Bank and Winona National Bank.**

Since then, Winona has evolved into a college town. Winona State University (WSU) is now the largest employer, but Saint Mary's University of Minnesota and Southeast Min-

Stairways to the top of the peak at John Latsch State Park make the long climb fun and more manageable than it used to be. Try to count the steps.

nesota Technical College also bring many students to town.

The WSU campus is especially beautiful in summer and fall, when its landscaping and water features are at their best. Every species of tree native to Minnesota can be found there. The 400-acre SMU campus, tucked into the hills on the west end of town, is also picturesque, and it maintains miles of trails through the hills, which are used by cross-country skiers in the winter.

The city park at Prairie Island, upriver from downtown, has a campground, a boat ramp, and rents canoes and kayaks. **Latsch Island,**

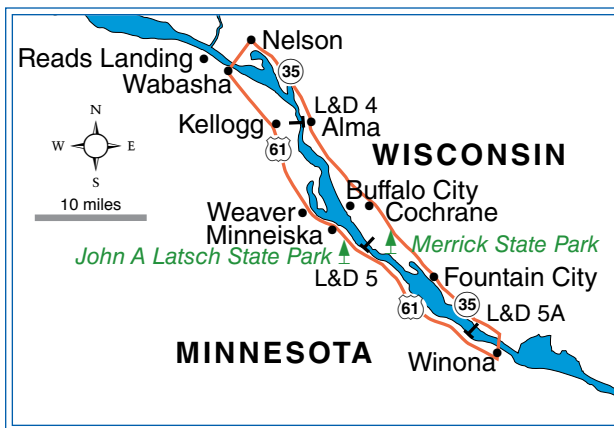
across the Main Channel from downtown, has a beach with no lifeguard and what is probably the only community of year-round boathouse residents on the Upper Mississippi. Walk across the old stone wagon bridge to Aghaming Park and Preserve, an 1,800-acre undeveloped floodplain forest that's popular with birders, hikers and anglers.

The **Winona County Historical Society Museum** (160 Johnson St.) includes interesting displays about the river, Native Americans and local history. The **Marine Art Museum** (800 Riverview Dr.) has three galleries: the river photographs of Henry Bosse; marine art and historical artifacts, and carvings by Fountain City, Wis., artists Leo and Marilyn Smith. The museum offers a view of the river and the working harbor. It may someday become the home of the retired dredge *William A. Thompson.*

Climb Latsch Peak

Upriver from Winona is Lock and Dam 5, often called Whitman Dam, and above that is **John A. Latsch State Park**, which is usually not staffed (it is administered by the staff at Great River Bluffs State Park, near Dakota, Minn.), has campsites and a great overlook with a view of the Whitman Backwaters, across the Main Channel. You can't drive to the top of this overlook, but stairways to the top of the peak make the long climb fun and more manageable than it used to be. Try to count the steps.

The park's three dramatic bluffs — **Faith, Hope and Charity** — have long been used as landmarks by river travelers.





The view from Garvin Heights in Winona, Minn., extends 34 miles, from Alma, Wis., to Mount Trempealeau, on a clear day.

The Main Channel hugs the base of the bluffs for about four miles, then at the little town of **Minneiska**, makes a quick turn to the east bank, as if to avoid the **Weaver Bottoms**, where the Whitewater River joins the Mississippi. A few decades ago, this large backwater area was full of emergent plants that drew waterfowl and fish. When the plants and wildlife quickly disappeared in the 1980s, this area became the poster child for island-building projects to repair backwater habitat loss on the Upper Mississippi. The Army Corps of Engineers and other agencies built two odd-looking islands in it in 1987, hoping to break

Locals disagree about which merchant sells the best ice cream in town.

up the wind fetch across the shallow backwater lake, improve water clarity and stimulate plant growth. It didn't work. By studying it and trying new techniques, the Corps has become much more effective at building islands, including a new one just across the river from Minneiska, at Spring Lake. The Pool 5 drawdowns in 2005 and 2006 brought thick stands of plants to shorelines and shallow areas in the area.

Hike Glacial Dunes

Just upriver from Weaver Bottoms, go for a hike in the **Weaver Dunes**, an unusual formation of sandy plains and hills left over from glacial runoff. Today it's home to a number of rare plant and animal species, including Blanding's turtles. **Half Moon Landing**, near West Newton, has a boat ramp and a canoe landing, both of which provide access to the Main Channel and Half Moon Lake, in the



A life-sized sculpture of two eagles hangs in the open atrium of the National Eagle Center in Wabasha, Minn.



The Minnesota Marine Art Museum overlooks Winona's commercial harbor. From the terrace or even from inside the gallery, you can watch towboats work.



A woody trail leads to the top of the bluff at Alma. It begins right in town, above the highest street on the hill.



Herman Rusch's imaginative Prairie Moon Sculpture Garden, near Cochrane, Wis., now includes work by other unschooled artists.

upper end of the bottoms. The state of Minnesota and the Nature Conservancy maintain trails through this wild area.

You have to go back to Highway 61 to cross the Zumbro River at the tiny town of **Kellogg**. Follow your map to Pioneer Dr. and drive a short way downriver to reach the Lock and Dam 4 dike, which is a great walk. However, it may be closed for construction this fall. A boat ramp below the dike provides access to the complex Finger Lakes backwaters — interesting to explore by canoe, kayak or motorboat. If you travel upriver, you will eventually reach Teepeeota Point, where the river homes are getting larger every year. As you head back toward the highway, you'll pass near Wilcox Landing, which connects to Robinson Lake, a backwater area below Wabasha.

Wabasha, Old and New

Wabasha (pop. 2,599) is one of those quiet rivertowns with neither a highway nor railroad tracks between it and the river. This is a mixed blessing, because having a noisy highway through the middle of town is good for business. Nevertheless, Wabasha has maintained a fine downtown currently on the upswing, thanks largely to the National Eagle Center, which moved into its beautiful new building

on the riverfront last year. New and established restaurants, and sidewalks are a little busier, especially during the warm months. Several of the restaurants let you keep an eye on the river while you dine.

Ice Cream and Swans

After you cross the river on the Highway 60 bridge over the Main Channel,

Some river lovers are drawn to walk the straight and narrow, the high roads atop the dam dikes. We like the clear views...

you'll find a couple of miles of backwaters, with three boat ramps. Turn onto Highway 35 at **Nelson, Wis.**, notable for several shops and bars, and an old cheese factory turned restaurant and gourmet food shop. Locals disagree about which merchant sells the best ice cream in town.

Rieck's Lake, just upriver from Alma, Wis., has become famous in recent decades for its annual massing of tundra swans. The big birds don't come here in the numbers they used to, but it's still a great place to see them in November.

Alma (pop. 909) stretches out

between the river and a steep bluff, giving nearly everybody in town a great view of the river. Main Street features an interesting collection of galleries, shops and restaurants in restored late 19th century buildings. There's even an ice cream shop with a many-leveled garden out back that has been built up into the hillside.

Acrophiles' Delight

Just across the street is an open-grid pedestrian bridge over the railroad tracks, which leads to an observation deck where you can watch boats lock through **Lock and Dam 4**. The trip over the bridge is thrill enough for some of us acrophobes, especially when a train roars through town.

For an acrophile's four-star aerial view of the lock and dam, and all the backwaters nearby, drive or hike up to **Buena Vista Park** at the top of the bluff. If you want to watch eagles or walleye anglers, visit **Wings Over Alma**, the nature and arts center on Main Street, just below the dam, or dine in one of the nearby restaurants with a river view. A fishing float operates across the channel below the dam.

Great River Harbor, a couple of miles downriver, is a popular marina and campground.

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Toiling to the top of the stairs at John Latsch State Park puts you up where eagles fly. The dike road to Whitman Dam (Lock and Dam 5) is just across the river in this view. The maze-like Whitman backwaters are inside the dike.





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Lock and Dam 5 Dike Road

Some river lovers are drawn to walk the straight and narrow, the high roads atop the dam dikes. We like the clear views, we like the birds, and we like being able to see open water on one side and dark, complicated backwaters on the other. The fishing can be pretty good here, too. The Lock and Dam 5 dike has it all. Drive through **Buffalo City** (pop. 1,099) to

*There are more toys up there
than you can imagine, so
give yourself time to stir up
some old memories. Oh yeah,
kids enjoy it, too.*

Spring Lake Landing at the end of the dike. Park here to admire some recent river restoration handiwork. Spring Lake had become a big shallow open lake after most of the islands in it had eroded away. Island building and channel dredging, along with the Pool 5 drawdown a couple of years ago, brought back a rich variety of plants and wildlife. The Whitman backwaters area, behind the dike, is one of the largest pristine backwater areas on the Upper Mississippi.

Folk Art Treasure

Next up on your river loop is the **Prairie Moon Museum**, a folk-art treasure of large concrete sculptures, easily found on Prairie Moon Road just off Highway 35. Rocket ships, gazebos and other large-scale ornamented constructions were made by Herman Rusch over a period of years.

He first bought a dance hall and, "to kill old-age boredom," turned it into a museum for his collection of odd things. That done, he set about decorating the grounds. The sculptures have been featured in national and regional publications and shows devoted to unschooled artists.

Boat access is easy on this stretch of river. Kamrowski Road takes you past several — first a boat ramp at the end of a long, one-lane road through

bottomland forest, then, a little farther along, two resorts with ramps and docks on Indian Creek Road. Nearby **Merrick State Park** also provides easy access to the river, as well as river's-edge campsites, canoe rentals and picnic areas.

City of Fountains

Continuing down Highway 35, as you enter **Fountain City** (pop. 954), you pass the Army Corps of Engineers' boatyard in Fountain City Bay. This is the home base for the Corps' dredges and other boats and equipment used to maintain the shipping channel on the Upper Mississippi. This bay is also the main water route to Merrick Park and the two resorts.

Fountain City, like Alma, is also stretched out between the river and a steep bluff. Stairs and some very steep streets run up the hill. Many houses are built into the slope. Most of the houses have a great view of the river. If you go for a walk, visit the cemetery up the hill for a good view of the river and town.

The town has several restaurants, a mural of Wisconsin's endangered species in the **Post Office** and a small museum in the back of the post office with, among other items, a large collection of arrowheads. Another collection, **Elmer's Auto and Toy Museum**, on the ridge above the town, displays gargantuan collections of old cars and toys in several large buildings with panoramic views of the river valley. There are more toys up there than you can imagine, so give yourself time to stir up some old memories. Oh yeah, kids enjoy it, too.

As you continue down Highway 35, you pass another fishing float below Lock and Dam 5A.

Turn right at the light to return to Winona, but just before the first bridge, you can turn into a parking lot and access to **Mertes Slough**, one of the few "electric motor only" areas in the Upper Mississippi River National Wildlife and Fish Refuge. The slough, on the Wisconsin side, which only connects to the river during high water, is a popular place to fish and an easy, sheltered place to paddle. 🎣🐟