

Lansing, Iowa, to Prairie du Chien, Wis.

By Pamela Eyden

The 30-mile loop from Lansing, Iowa, to Prairie du Chien, Wis., and back, makes a varied and fascinating day trip, but it's a shame to cut this journey short. Better make a long weekend of it. There's simply too much to take in, if you enjoy any of the following: river vistas, backwater tours, prehistoric and historic sites, long hikes, antiques, museums, coffee houses, quirky shops, smoked fish, wine and birding.

Lansing, Iowa, grew up looking to the river for its prosperity. It was once a busy steamboat port, a mussel-harvesting and button-manufacturing town, and a commercial fishing center. Its handsome limestone buildings are proof of its prosperous history. Many of the homes have a great view of the river. Boaters and fishermen are drawn here today by the backwaters of Pool 9, some of the most sinuous and complicated on the upper river. If you don't have a boat, Mississippi Explorer Cruises (60 North Front St.) offers scheduled and private tours of Main Channel and backwater areas. The volunteer-run River History Museum opens by special request and during Lansing Fish Days, August 7 through 10.

Brave attempts to stimulate tourism have brought a few galleries and coffeehouses to town, joining old antique stores and Horsefall's Lansing Variety Store on Main St., which is crowded with an eclectic variety of old, new and odd-lot merchandise. The dining room of River's Edge offers great views of the river upstream, downstream and across.



The Black Hawk bridge spans the wide river bottoms near Lansing, on the right. (Pamela Eyden)

Mount Hosmer atop the bluff gets you higher over the river than any other spot that you can drive to.

As you drive out of town on Highway X52, keep your eyes peeled for the peregrines that nest on the bluffs above the Alliant Power plant.

By Foot and By Cart

Eight miles down the road is a striking stone church set against a picturesque hillside. Wexford

Church was constructed in the 1850s to serve the Irish immigrants who built it. The history is told in home-made pamphlets in the foyer. Visitors are welcome.

Turn left off the highway on **Red Oak Road** to the entrance of the dike and spillway of Lock and Dam 9. This is a fine short walk and a good place to fish. Birds sing from nearby trees and wetlands. When you get out to the spillway, the vast valley is a



Marquette moved an old depot from Blue River, Wis., to serve as its railroad museum. (Marquette Convention and Visitors Bureau)



Effigy Mounds National Monument encompasses 2,526 acres of bluffs, prairies and woodlands, and 206 mounds, like the bear effigy mound at left. Some trails are steep, but all are wide and well-maintained. (Effigy Mounds National Monument)

splendid sight. But if you know how crowded with islands the pool was before locks and dams were built, you may find this splendid emptiness sad.

Along the stretch from Lansing to Marquette there are several small summer communities of mobile homes and cottages on peninsulas and narrow stretches of land between the tracks and the river.

This loop of the river takes you by two of the remaining fresh fish markets on the Upper Mississippi. Mohn's near Harpers Ferry is one of them (see *Big River*, July-August 2005). **Harpers Ferry** probably has the best boat slip-to-population ratio on the river and is about as quiet and relaxed a

little town as you can find. A string of boat landings and marinas occupy the entire riverfront. A community of summer residents resides in old and new mobile homes, cottages and new condominiums built next to an old cemetery that's slumping toward the river. Slow down when you drive through town, and keep an eye out for golf carts.

Waukon Junction is a tiny settlement that grew up where the now abandoned rail spur from Waukon joined the tracks along the Mississippi. Part of the remaining railroad bed became a public hiking trail through the Yellow River State Forest. Unfortunately, private landowners

on the Waukon Junction end of the trail post "No Trespassing" signs, so the trail can't be accessed from this end. Indians maintained a painting of a mythical beast on the prominent limestone bluff here, Paint Rock, for many years. River pilots once used it as a landmark, but there's no sign of it now.

Hike the Forest

Iowa's **Yellow River State Forest** occupies seven separate units, most of them on the Paint Creek watershed. These rolling hills, trout streams, valleys and hollows are popular for hiking, fishing, hunting and birding.

The small museum is a gem, with modern displays and artifacts that light up the imagination, bringing life to the mounds and the people who built them.

The state would like to purchase land to connect the units, but the development of summer homes is making that increasingly difficult, according to forester Bob Honeywell.

Besides hiking and equestrian trails, there are equestrian, backpacking and regular campgrounds in the Paint Creek Unit of the forest.

You can park and hike through the Luster Heights Unit on a network of fire lanes and cross-country ski trails through the pines. The Department of Corrections leases some of the land, and inmates live in the minimum-security prison year round. If you follow the signs to a "camp" and end up in a compound where uniformed



The museum at Effigy Mounds National Monument stages Junior Ranger Saturdays and guided bird walks in summer months. In fall, hawk watchers come from all over to watch migrating raptors. (Effigy Mounds National Monument)



An artesian spring, heirloom gardens and several other houses and outbuildings are spread out on the Villa Louis estate on Prairie du Chien's St. Feriole Island. (Pamela Eyden)



A life-sized bronze sculpture in Sculpture Park honors Blackhawk, a Sac and Fox warrior who fought to return to his people's lands. (Prairie du Chien Convention and Visitors Bureau)

men come out to greet you, you'll know you've discovered the prison farm.

Maps of all units are available on the internet, or you can stop in at headquarters a couple of miles up Highway 76.

Mounds and Trains

A few miles away, the Yellow River enters the Mississippi quietly at **Effigy Mounds National Monument** (\$3 per person or \$5 per car). The small museum is a gem, with modern displays and artifacts that light up the imagination, bringing life to the mounds and the people who built them. You can drive to a few handicapped-accessible mounds, but if you're up for a hike, you can't beat

the 14 miles of relatively steep, but well-marked and well-maintained hiking trails that lead to hundreds of burial and effigy mounds, and some of the best overlooks on the river.

Just downstream, the town of **Marquette** was once a railroad town, but it's now known more for its riverboat casino and a big pink elephant that is a local landmark. This small town has antique shops and a winery that offers free samples of an impressive list of wines. A small overlook in town marks the spot where the old bridge crossed the river. Railroad buffs will enjoy the Marquette Depot Museum, which displays railroad artifacts and some surprising photos of the early town: Marquette had a roundhouse, where engines and cars were turned

around on a kind of turntable. A floating pontoon bridge here carried trains across the Mississippi and swung open for river traffic until 1961.

A long blue bridge crosses the Mississippi at Marquette, spanning the



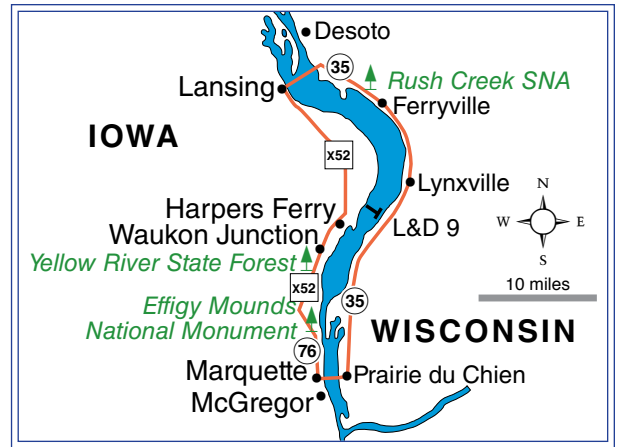
Some Late-Summer 2008 Events on the Loop

- July 9 City Walking Tour, Prairie du Chien, Wis.
- July 19-20 War of 1812 in Wisconsin, Fort Crawford, Prairie du Chien, Wis.
- July 19-20 Emma Big Bear Tribute at Eagles Landing Winery, Marquette, Iowa
- July 25-26 Prairie Dog Blues Festival, St. Feriole Island, Prairie du Chien, Wis.
- July 25-26 River Bluff Days, Ferryville, Wis.
- Aug. 7-10 Lansing Fish Days in Lansing, Iowa
- Aug. 23 Guided Bird Walk, Effigy Mounds Monument, Marquette, Iowa
- Sept. 6-7 Carriage Classic, Villa Louis, Prairie du Chien, Wis.

Aerial view of Prairie du Chien, Wis., shows St. Feriole Island on a floodplain separated by a narrow channel from the city. (Prairie du Chien Convention and Visitors Bureau)



Pete's Hamburgers is a popular spot on Prairie du Chien's Blackhawk Avenue. Their T-shirts boast, "Standing in line since 1909." (Pamela Eyden)



Main Channel and many smaller ones. At a parking pull-out, a sign announces the Sturgeon Slough Hiking Trail. We'll explore that next time, as the water was too high on this visit.

Fish and History

Prairie du Chien, population 6,047, is the largest city on this stretch of river, and there's lots to do here. Just across the bridge, stop at the Valley Fish and Cheese Market, the second local fish market on this tour. Valley's sells fresh, pickled and hickory-smoked river fish, at the store.

If it's time for a break, check out the restaurants, bars, or Simply, a very civilized coffeehouse downtown, at the lower end of Blackhawk Avenue. On weekends, Pete's Hamburger Stand serves up delicious water-grilled burgers. People have been standing in line for them since 1909. The Gokey family still cooks and serves. Don't ask for a hotdog or fries. All they make at Pete's is burgers — with onions or without.

St. Feriole Island

Cross a small bridge at the end of Blackhawk Avenue to get to St. Feriole Island. Big boats dock here — the *Julia Belle Swain*, when on an overnight cruise from its home port of La Crosse, and Mississippi Explorer Cruises, which offers popular two-hour eco-tours as well as Friday night cruises with music provided by

local musicians. Every Friday night at 7 in the summer, there's a waterski show on the riverfront. Other events, including the Prairie Dog Blues Festival, are also staged in the island's large open spaces, which once held one of the areas oldest neighborhoods. Clammers used to process the mussels

Two of the prairies were burned off last spring and should be full of wildflowers this summer.

in what is now a city park. Persistent flooding prompted the government to move the residents off the island in the 1970s.

One of the buildings that remains on the island, the **Villa Louis**, was built on a large Indian mound by the pioneer fur-trading Dousman family, in the 1840s to 1870s. It was meticulously restored a few years ago. Descendants donated original furniture, photographs, diaries, china, table linens, wallpaper samples and even recipes, which were imaginatively used to create a disarming step back in time. Guided tours are \$9 for adults, \$7.75 for seniors and \$4.50 for children.

On Sept. 7 and 8, Villa Louis stages the Carriage Classic, in which fine horses, and period-dressed drivers in fancy carriages race each other around

tracks and cross country.

Stroll around the grounds and across the street to the Mississippi **River Sculpture Park**, with life-size bronzes of Blackhawk, the renowned Sac and Fox leader, and other historical characters, sculpted by artist Florence Bird. Several marked and unmarked Indian mounds dot the island.

Next on the list of historical sights is **Fort Crawford**. Flooding prompted the army to abandon its first fort on the island and rebuild on higher ground on Beaumont Street in 1829. It was here that Blackhawk was brought to surrender in 1832, ending his people's long resistance to the white seizure of their lands.

Part of the fort was restored and made into a museum. Paintings, military artifacts and many medical displays, including a fully appointed pharmacy of the day, are all worth seeing. The Prairie du Chien Museum, next door, celebrates the history of the community. Entrance to both museums costs adults \$4.25, seniors \$3.50, K-12 \$2.25, family \$12.

If you're not in a hurry, you might want to leave town via N. Main St., which takes you past the old French cemetery (across the street from Calvary Cemetery) and Ambrough Slough, where there is a summer river community and several boat ramps.

(Loop continues on page 48)

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Rollercoaster Road

It's fun to drive State Highway 35, a National Scenic Highway, that climbs up and down the flanks of the bluffs along the river. Much of this river road is lined with a short concrete retaining wall to catch the rocks that fall from the bluffs above. A few miles up the highway, Picatee Creek Road enters from the right. On the left, a U.S. Fish & Wildlife sign marks a trail out to the backwaters. It's a rich birding area, but the path was flooded during our visit.



Fort Crawford was built from 1829 to 1834, with local limestone and the labor of soldiers. (Prairie du Chien Chamber/Tourism Council)

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Lynxville and Ferryville are two small river towns along this stretch of the road. Each has a boat landing. Ferryville's Sugar Creek Park is the site of a market on summer weekends. It also has a campground on the river. The town was named for the ferry that once crossed to Lansing, Iowa.

Last stop on the loop is a rich and interesting part of the country called **Rush Creek State Natural Area**, where you can explore a trout stream, woodlands and a remarkable two-mile-long series of high goat prairies overlooking the river. Two of the prairies were burned off last spring, said Armund Bartz of the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, and should be full of wildflowers this summer. Drive about a half-mile up Rush Creek Road, park in the lot and hike the marked trail to the blufftops.

The drive to back to Lansing via the Blackhawk Bridge crosses many backwater islands and sloughs. 🌿