



## Views Galore Prairie du Chien to Cassville, Wis.

By Reggie McLeod



Guttenberg, Iowa's mile-long park overlooks Lock and Dam 10. (Reggie McLeod)

The stretch of river from Prairie du Chien to Cassville, Wis., includes three remarkable state parks with inspiring river overlooks. Two of those parks have campsites so close to the bluff that you can enjoy a stunning view of the river valley from the comfort of your campfire or even from your tent.

Wisconsin's **Wyalusing State Park**, across the Wisconsin River from Prairie du Chien, is perched on a prominent bluff overlooking the confluence of the Wisconsin and Mississippi rivers. Many of its 109 campsites

overlook the bluff above the Wisconsin River, with great views of both river valleys, Prairie du Chien, and McGregor and Marquette, in Iowa. Hiking and biking trails link the bluff to the rivers, and a marked five-mile canoe trail winds through the Mississippi backwaters near the confluence.

On the Iowa side of the river, the overlook at **Pikes Peak State Park**, just downriver from McGregor, is aptly called the Crows Nest, because it juts out from the bluff, providing a dizzying view. You can watch traffic on the Main Channel, 500 feet below,

or look across the Mississippi to the vast expanse of the Wisconsin River Valley and the Wyalusing State Park bluffs. This park's 77-site campground is set back in the woods away from the bluff, near the entrance. Miles of hiking trails wind up and down the bluffs. While both Wisconsin and Iowa parks charge a fee for camping, Iowa state parks have no entrance fee, so I rarely drive past Pikes Peak without stopping to take a peek.

In high summer there are a surprising number of people in campgrounds and cottage communities in the out-of-the-way rivertowns on this stretch.

You probably won't find yourself in Wyalusing, Bagley or Glen Haven, Wis., unless you're lost or you go there on purpose. Wyalusing is the first town downriver from the confluence of the Mississippi and Wisconsin rivers. There's not much here but a spacious beach at a beautiful spot on the river. Beaches this fine are a rarity on the river. This one is a perfect place to while away a summer afternoon. There's another on the island across the channel.

The road along the farm fields and backwaters to **Bagley** (pop. 309) has a few twists and turns, but often not much of a shoulder. You pass Jellystone Park Camp-Resort and Bagley Bottoms Small Boat Access right before you get to town. Bagley is an attractive little town, with a store and a few restaurants and bars. Just across the tracks, at River of the Lakes



The sun rises over the Wisconsin River, as seen from an overlook at Wyalusing State Park. (Reggie McLeod)



McGregor takes pride in its historic Main Street. (Marquette-McGregor Chamber of Commerce)

Campground and Resort, a delightful jumble of trailers, and upscale and basic cottages line the imaginatively named streets. A little farther downriver, Jays Lake Recreation Area provides access to a scenic spot on the river.

**Glen Haven**, the next town downriver, is nestled into a narrow coulee that opens up onto the river. The town has an isolated, picturesque, peaceful air, but it looks a little shopworn, and most of the storefronts have been converted to homes.

The bluffs soak their feet in the water on both sides of the river in this stretch, so there are a number of places where the highway climbs the ridge to follow the river. The road between Glen Haven and Cassville is one such stretch.

**Cassville** (pop. 1,008) is spread out along the river between two power plants owned by two utilities — Alliant Energy and DTE Energy. Here you'll find restaurants, shops, lodging and an ecotourism operation. A beautiful park lines the riverfront.

**Nelson Dewey State Park**, about a mile upriver from town, has 45 tent and RV campsites, including four walk-in campsites that present stunning views of the river valley. In the spring, these campsites also offer a

perfect opportunity for lazy birding. Just make yourself comfortable, with your binoculars and field guides close at hand, and wait for them to come to you. The park also has interesting trails, Indian mounds and goat prairies.

Across the road from the park, **Stonefield**, a Wisconsin historic site, replicates a 19th century farming community, including 30 furnished shops. The Wisconsin Agricultural Museum,

*The highway to Marquette is squeezed between the bluff, the railroad tracks and the river.*

which shares the site, has the biggest collection of farm machinery in the state.

The **Cassville Ferry** departs from the upstream end of the city park and is the only crossing in the 53-mile stretch of river between Prairie du Chien and Dubuque, Iowa. After a short voyage to Iowa, the ferry docks at the end of Oak Road, which winds through bottomland cornfields and leads to 360th Street, then to Highway C9Y at the crossroads of Millville. As you drive toward Millville, look

to the right at the bluff with the flagpole on top. This steep, narrow bluff carries a row of large Indian mounds on its back, known as the **Turkey River Mounds**. You're probably safer admiring this site from a distance than climbing the treacherous, crumbling trail to the top.

Highway 52 to **Guttenberg** takes you over another ridge. Watch for a small parking lot on the right just after the road starts heading downhill. The overlook here presents a nice view of the town, backwaters and Main Channel.

**Guttenberg** (pop. 1,913) is stretched out between the highway and the river. As you might guess from the name, it was settled by German immigrants — a fact that is celebrated every fall during German Fest. The festival takes place in the mile-long park overlooking the river downtown. The park helped get the town on *Forbes Traveler's* list of 20 of "America's Prettiest Towns."

You get a good view of the river and **Lock and Dam 10** as you walk through downtown. In a brick building near the lock you'll find a free aquarium operated by the Iowa Department of Natural Resources. It's a cool place to study native fish on a hot summer afternoon. If you're



The bridge from Marquette, Iowa, to Prairie du Chien, Wis., arches high over the Main Channel. (Reggie McLeod)



Locals say that McGregor is so small that its town square is a triangle. (Marquette-McGregor Chamber of Commerce)



At the Sny Magill unit of Effigy Mounds National Monument, nearly a hundred Indian mounds line the banks of Johnson Slough. (Effigy Mounds National Monument)

in a shopping mood, Kann Imports, downtown, contains an amazing array of items from all corners of the world.

On the upstream end of town a sizable marina and campground bustles with activity through the summer.

If you want to follow the river, be careful to take Highway X56 out of town rather than Highway 52. You'll soon pass by Abels Island, a long island filled with cottages and a small private airport.

The highway climbs up the ridge again and intersects the road to **Clayton** (pop. 51), the county's namesake. The only road to and from Clayton winds for about a mile down through a narrow valley to open up onto the river, where cottages line the streets. This tucked-away resort community is quiet in the summer and becomes very quiet in the winter, when even the Clayton Lighthouse Wine and Dine closes. A huge sand-and-gravel operation operates on the downstream end of town.

The highway to McGregor, X56, dips down briefly from the ridge to cross **Sny Magill Creek**. A dirt road follows the creek under the railroad track to a picturesque boat landing. Before you reach the landing, a trail on the left leads through bottomland forests to one of the most amazing collections of Indian mounds in the area. This unit of the Effigy Mound National Monument contains nearly 100 mounds in a small park-like expanse on a small rise above beautiful Johnson Slough. There are a couple of large bird and bear mounds in the assembly, but most of the mounds are large and small conical mounds.

The 6.1-mile **Johnson Slough Canoe Trail** begins at the Sny Magill boat landing.

## McGregor

The highway continues up to the ridge again, passing Pikes Peak State park, then winds down into **McGregor** (pop. 831), a beautiful rivertown with some unusual and interesting shops on its long and historic Main Street. You'll find period clothing shops, antiques, books and toys, gourmet foods, rare books and a classy brew pub. The downtown is pretty lively during the summer. A



The Wyalusing State Park overlook has one of the region's most sweeping vistas, showing the confluence of the Wisconsin and Mississippi, and hundreds of acres of bottomland forest. (Wisconsin Department of Tourism)

variety of motels, B&Bs and guest-houses includes a log cabin right downtown.

The town is nestled in a long valley with steep sides, giving it a protected feeling. Some of the backyards run up against a rock cliff with small caves. The valley opens up onto the Mississippi at the spot where Alexander MacGregor and Thomas Burnett established their ferry landing in 1837.

The riverfront is not big, but it includes a small park with benches, a motel right on the riverbank, a bar and restaurant with a big window on the river and a warm-weather beer and bratwurst place overlooking the river by the marina.

If you head downriver from downtown, you'll quickly find **River Road**, a dead-end road that follows the river a short distance downstream past a parking lot for the state park and a connection to its trails. Heading upstream from downtown, the highway to Marquette is squeezed between the bluff, the railroad tracks and the river. This mile-long segment of highway has been the focus of several frustrated attempts to create a recreational trail linking the two towns. The trail may end up climbing over the ridge.

**Marquette** (pop. 438) has an interesting railroad museum that recalls its importance as a railroad town. Until 1961, a floating railroad swing bridge crossed the Main Channel here. Now the riverfront is dominated by the Lady Luck Casino.

Across the bridge, **Prairie du Chien** (pop. 5,839) has a lot going on. **St. Feriole Island** is a good place to start, with the Villa Louis, River Sculpture Park, Lawler Park, and plenty of space to wonder around in. (See "River Loop — Lansing, Iowa, to Prairie du Chien, Wis.," *Big River* July-August 2008.) This place was probably a seasonal gathering place for centuries before the Europeans arrived. Early French traders, then the British and U.S. military used it as a seat of influence and power on the frontier. One of the reasons for its importance is the Wisconsin River, which joins the Mississippi about four miles downstream of the city. Up the Wisconsin, a short portage at Por-

tage, Wis., links it with the Fox River, providing a very important route between the Great Lakes and the Mississippi for Indians, traders and early European explorers for centuries.

Follow West Black Hawk Avenue east across the small channel to downtown, where you'll find a variety of stores that you rarely find outside of a shopping mall anymore, including an outdoors store, coffeehouse, sporting goods, a large clothing store and a bike shop. South of downtown, the **Fort Crawford Museum** and the **Prairie du Chien Museum**, side by side on Beaumont Street, present military, medical and community history. 🏰

