

Connecticut River Kayak Adventure: May 13 – 26, 2018

Through-Paddle from Pittsburg, NH to Saybrook Point, CT

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Summary

May is the time to through paddle! Cold at the north end and warm at the south end, we watched as spring arrived along the river. Twelve full days of paddling covered 383 miles from Pittsburg, NH to Long Island Sound. Paddle speed averaged 2.7 mph on reservoirs with no current and headwinds, and between 3.5 and 4 and up to 5.0 mph from Pittsburg to Canaan with whitewater for a total of 105 hours of paddling. Headwinds significantly hindered progress at times. Sightings included 8 beavers, 4 muskrats and otters, 1 mink, 1 snowy egret and 1 swan, a dozen eagles and many ducks, bank swallows and Canada geese. Primitive campsites were used and very much appreciated, but were widely spaced in the lower river. The river was mostly empty except near Dartmouth College with a lot of day paddlers and we never needed to share a campsite. We only needed to portage at existing dam sites, and ran rapids and falls which are highly dependent on river flow rate. Our avoiding non-dam portages may not be typical at other times of the year. Most portages were done in under an hour except Moore and Comerford dam portages which required 2 hours. Longer portages were shortened with rides at Bellows Falls from Bob the “River Angel” and at Turner Falls from the local utility. The amount of paddling effort required is significant as average river velocity was only about 1 mph even with higher than normal dam release rates. Our motto for this adventure became “Every Ounce Counts”. The kayaks were heavy when fully loaded! When having to unload each night and for every portage it is important to avoid taking anything you don’t need. Overall it was a great trip away from civilization, beauty abounded, and we were pleasantly surprised with the lack of visible development along the river. The lack of river boating this time of year made it easy in many reaches to imagine the river was the same as back in the colonial days.



Preparation

Preparation for the trip started in earnest in September 2017 after we discovered we both had a mutual interest in paddling the CT River from source to sound. Being on different coasts, we made a point to call each other every month at first, then weekly the last three months before the journey. Choosing the best time to go was researched using blogs from previous paddlers, weather records, and flow rate records. We wanted a high flow to experience some white water, but also wanted comfortable ambient temperatures. We settled on mid to late May. Too much earlier would have been too cold and we may have still had ice on the river; and too much later we would have lost flow rate and been too hot.

We established a shared Google Docs spreadsheet so that we could both add items as we thought of them. There were sheets for the itinerary (expected length of paddle each day and where to camp), our loadout

(everything we would bring), river flow rate, and meal plan. We kept track of which one of us was buying what supplies, and who was responsible for different aspects of the planning. Some supplies, such as tent and sleeping bag, were mail-ordered and shipped to CT to avoid carrying them on the flight from WA.

Leading up to the trip we each had our individual physical conditioning routines. In the winter months this included weight training and swimming at the YMCA, and as the weather got better, we moved outside and did local paddling up-river and running.



Food planning included taste-testing some of the typical freeze-dried MREs. Lasagna and sweet and sour pork were the chosen meals, with preference being the lasagna. We were taking a Jet Boil, so anything that used boiling water to prepare meals was considered. Instant oatmeal for breakfast, and soup with added minute rice for dinner were the staples. Foil packed tuna eliminated some weight from cans, but we did opt for plastic jars of peanut butter & jelly as well as canned soup. Individually

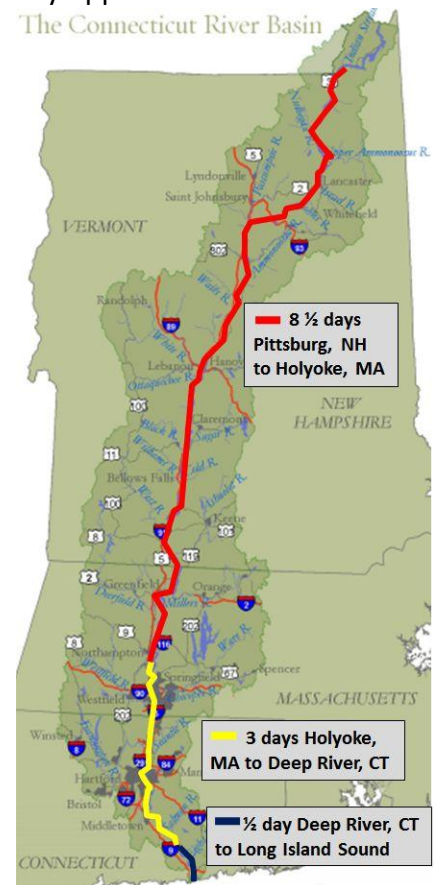
wrapped portions of mayonnaise and mustard were used because they didn't need refrigeration. Rice for the soups was vacuum sealed in meal-size portions, as was the oatmeal packets just to keep them dry. Re-provisioning was researched and intended, but in the end there weren't many opportunities.

Instead of kayaking the entire river from top to bottom we opted to kayak three days of the lower river first, from the Holyoke Dam to Deep River, CT. We packed everything we thought we wanted to take on the entire trip just to see how it would travel. This short leg gave us an opportunity to re-evaluate what we wanted to bring and what would actually fit in the two kayaks. It also gave us an opportunity to carry fully-loaded boats, primitive camp, and practice portaging using the home-made yokes. In addition, weather (river flow and temperature) supported paddling the lower river first. Deciding to do a three-day shake-down paddle close to home base was a good decision. We then proceeded north for the leg from Pittsburg, NH back down to Holyoke; followed by the finish from Deep River to Long Island Sound.

Lastly, reconnaissance of most of the rapids on the way up to Pittsburg, NH was very helpful. Actually seeing what we were up against was a plus.

Chronological Description

Map and milepost references in this section refer to the "Connecticut River Paddlers' Trail Map & Guide" for VT and NH. This map was essential to the trip. We found nothing similar for the Massachusetts and Connecticut parts of the river and instead used laminated photocopies of a DeLorme Atlas with campsites and mileposts we added using references from the "CT River Boating Guide – Source to Sea".



Paddle Day 1: Holyoke Dam, Holyoke, MA (MP 85.5) to Kings Island, Enfield, CT (MP 62.5) – 23 miles, average speed 3.5 mph

- Entry on east side of river just south of dam, good river flow rate.
- Springfield has very little waterfront footprint.
- Six Flags can be seen/heard from at least a mile away.
- Enfield former dam site was a bit bumpy/choppy but an easy run.
- I-91 noise heard for most of the day and at the campsite at night.
- Kings Island campsite on southeast corner of island, no designated tent sites but ample space on an elevated plateau.



Paddle Day 2: Kings Island to Harbor Park, Middletown, CT (MP 30) – 32.5 miles, average speed 3.3 mph

- I-91 noise continued until after Hartford.
- Northern Connecticut surprisingly empty on river due to width of the flood plain.
- Hartford has very little visible waterfront footprint.
- River flow noticeably slower.
- River Highlands campsite was initial plan stop but was too early in day; nice layout but lots of mosquitoes and mud on river bank was like quicksand. Opted for hot shower and real bed at home base.
- Observed two eagles and herons, many Canadian geese.
- Bright sun; sunscreen essential and must account for reflected sunlight (under hat brim).



Paddle Day 3: Harbor Park, Middletown, CT to Ferry Landing, Deep River, CT (MP 11) – 21.5 miles, average speed 3.7 mph

- Hurd State Park stop for snack, would have been better campsite option than River Highlands.
- Only 4 boats all day, plus Chester Ferry.
- Current so slow – not worth following channel.
- Strong headwinds in afternoon slowed progress, chop with spray over bow.
- Severe thunderstorm warning – off river just in time.



Reposition Day to Pittsburg, NH

- Stopped to check rapids/portages en route, around Pittsburg saw two moose along Route 3.

Paddle Day 4: Bacon St. Covered Bridge, Pittsburg, NH (MP 383) to Maine Central Railroad Trestle Campsite, Brunswick, VT (MP 341) – 42 miles with one portage, average speed 5 mph

- Launched under covered bridge in Pittsburg, steep bank only room for one kayak to launch at a time due to log debris in river. Immediate rapids after bridge.
- Rapids fun, and Beecher Falls easy. Kayaks without gear Pittsburg to Canaan portage.
- Canaan Dam portage easy with truck still available, loaded boats downstream of dam.
- Visitor Center Access listed on map at MP 336 not seen.
- Maine Central Trestle is large landmark, can't be missed, campsite on river right just past trestle (MP341).
- Campsite easy pull for kayaks to safe height, set up tents on grass near field beyond bank.
- Cold night (32 degrees in am) but so many stars...



Paddle Day 5: Maine Central Railroad Trestle Campsite to Gilman Dam, Gilman, VT (MP 302) – 39 miles with one portage, average speed 3.6 mph

- One adult and one immature beaver sighted shortly after launch.
- Three muskrat at intervals during morning followed by loons.
- Stopped at Scott Devlin Memorial Campsite (MP 323) for snack. Great view from privy! Watch slippery mud on bank up to campsite.
- Stopped at South Guildhall Campsite for lunch (MP 317).
- Map “Beaver Trails Campground” has been renamed to Riverside Camping & RV Resort and has no easy river access (MP 314).
- Gilman Dam Portage (MP 302) only portage to allow camping; very convenient as saved one unload/load. Large grassy area along portage route. Camped close to end of portage, had dam flow noise during night.



Paddle Day 6: Gilman Dam to Stevenson Campsite, Monroe, NH (MP 280) - 22 miles with 2.5 portages, average speed 3.4 mph

- Saw four otters, eagle and beaver on Moore Reservoir.
- Moore Dam portage included an uphill for 50 yards, then long and sometimes steep walk to put-in location. All clearly marked. We used homemade yokes to carry kayaks



on shoulders and large decoy mesh bags to carry gear on backs (on second trip).

- No river current on most of either reservoir.
- Comerford Dam portage hardest portage of trip. Very steep downhill. Used leapfrog technique – carried gear first then the two of us carried one kayak then the other at intervals for first part of portage. During very steep grassy slope (with wet grass) slid kayaks down slope braking by using rope tied to stern and pulling back as kayak tried to run away down slope. After grassy slope, resumed leapfrog along gravel walk and down stairs to put-in point.
- Significant flow from Comerford Dam but rapids were easy.
- Portages more tiring than expected. Rained from portage to campsite.
- Stevenson campsite included picnic table. Used surrounding trees and tarp to set up rain shelter. Collected rain water from tarp to water jug to replenish fresh water (did filter in addition).
- Beaver near campsite; didn't see but heard it splash in protest to our presence even before leaving campsite.



Paddle Day 7: Stevenson Campsite to Bugbee Campsite, Bradford, VT (MP 249) - 31 miles and two portages, average speed 3.7 mph

- McIndoe Falls Dam portage easiest of trip. Used leapfrog technique.
- Ryegate Dam portage signs were misleading, pointed down-river toward the dam. We took out closer to the dam than intended. The last sign for the portage should have said "Take Out Here – Portage Trail" instead of having an arrow pointing down-river. It may have been confusing because the buoy line was not in place at the time we were there. Followed sign, took out near dam with steep bank (although shorter portage). Treacherous footing walking down hill. Used leapfrog technique.
- Narrows near Woodsville were easy. Saw deer nested in east bank of river in Woodsville.
- Howards Island Campsite lunch stop (MP 265) buggy with sites at north and southeast side of island.
- Harkdale Farm Campsite (MP 259) for afternoon snack, seemed like good campsite for overnight.
- Many bank sparrows at MP 253.
- Bugbee Campsite (MP 249) is upriver paddle from Connecticut River. Access launch with small camping



area on side. Selected to resupply from Bradford Hannaford grocery store. Long walk avoided by borrowing car from fisherman at access. Had store-prepared meal and ice cream that night!

Paddle Day 8: Bugbee Campsite to Gilman Island, Hanover, NH (MP 217) – 32 miles, average speed 2.9 mph

- Heavy fog in early am.
- Stopped at Pastures Campground (MP 239) for snack/water. Campground is set up for RVs but has running water and showers available to paddlers.
- Pulled up to left bank near MP 233 for lunch and a mink came over the bank edge. All were surprised!
- Headwinds in p.m., hard paddle.
- Dartmouth crew shells (8s and 4s) rowing on river.
- Stopped at Ompompanoosuc River Access for snack (MP223). Out of the wind but located some upstream distance.
- Multiple kayaks/canoes in use at Hanover, river actually seemed crowded!
- Gilman Island campsite – others were headed to Titcomb Cabin but we had campsite to ourselves. Mosquitoes at dusk. Conducted tent repair and tick removal.



Paddle Day 9: Gilman Island to Springfield, VT (MP 188) – 29 miles, average speed 3.8 mph

- Beaver sighting in a.m.
- Wilder Dam portage (MP 215) using leapfrog technique, lots of water being released by dam.
- White River did not add much flow.
- Burnap's Island Campsite (MP 208) is on southwest end of island, not on river left as shown on map. Good stopping place to prep for Sumner Falls run. Sumner Falls, we ran on river left based on river right side shore recon on way to Pittsburg. Lots of water was breaking over bow (skirts a must). Falls came in two intervals with eddy on river left in between, giving us time to stop and plan second half. On second half run, river tries to force kayak to sideways right near stuck log which could catch unsuspecting kayaker.
- Looking back from river left below falls, perhaps better line to run is near center.
- Burnham Meadows Campsite (MP 202) for lunch. Rain started so used ground tarp and tipped up picnic bench to make lean-to so could enjoy dry lunch. Path of Life Sculpture garden was immediately upstream of campsite.
- Were unable to find SCA Campsite at MP 188. Found sign floating in debris downstream. Kind owner in area on river right allowed us to camp in yard. Searching added 2 hours of unproductive paddling, could have stayed at Wilgus State Park Campground 5 miles earlier.



Paddle Day 10: Springfield, VT MP 188 to Wantastiquet Campsite, North Hinsdale, NH (MP 142) – 46 miles, average speed 4.3 mph

- Rained hard at night, packed up wet.
- Encountered beautiful wooden boat on river, while talking to owner, saw beaver swim by.
- Bellows Falls portage was made much easier by Bob the “River Angel” who saw us coming and arrived with pickup truck while we were still getting out of kayaks.
- P.M. headwinds (again) made slow progress.
- Wantastiquet Campsite is across from active saw mill (just beyond a railroad bridge not on map) on river left. Good site but mill was noisy and sawed wood well into the night.



Paddle Day 11: Wantastiquet Campsite to Whately Oaks Primitive Campsite, Whately, MA (MP 105) – 37 miles, average speed 4.1 mph

- When passing Vermont Yankee Nuclear Power Plant found two beavers, swam near kayak for extended period.
- Vernon Dam portage was one hour using yoke method.
- Saw immature eagle try to grab baby ducks, but mother duck prevented capture.
- Munn’s Ferry (MP 128) is very nice park, stopped for lunch.
- Had one reach with wind at back! Used paddles to hold up end of tarp and made good progress downwind under sail.
- Saw one tree with two eagles, underneath was swan and snowy egret.
- Turner Falls portage is supported by local utility. Truck arrived about 25 minutes after calling, cooperative and much appreciated. Put-in location has very steep bank after truck drops off.
- Whately Oaks Primitive Campsite in excellent shape, but two flights of stairs above muddy bank. Hauled kayaks to top of first flight. Campsite had platforms for tents, first campsite that we stayed the night that had this. No log book to sign in. Nice privy!



Paddle Day 12: (Half day) Whately Oaks Primitive Campsite to Holyoke Dam Portage, Holyoke, MA (MP 85.5) – 19.5 miles, average speed 3.9 mph

- Leaving campsite Sugarloaf Mountain looked red in morning light.
- Headwinds slowed progress approaching last reach before Holyoke.
- Pulled out at Holyoke portage.

Paddle Day 13: (Half day) Ferry Landing, Deep River, CT (MP 11) to Saybrook Point Lighthouse (MP 0), Long Island Sound – 11 miles, average speed 3.1 mph

- Eagle shortly after launch, many ospreys.
- Boat traffic heaviest of trip near Essex/Old Saybrook.



- Headwind and incoming tide slowed progress.
- Stopped immediately north of bulkhead at Saybrook Point for snack before continuing to Saybrook Point Lighthouse finish line. Touched wall of lighthouse. Returned to Saybrook Point for pull-out.



Lessons Learned and Other Useful Information/Observations:

- Designed and built wooden yokes for long portages, would take again.
- Meal planning important due to limited resupply options. Breakfast was 3 packages of instant oatmeal per person with trail mix added. Morning snack was two granola bars and raisins. Lunch was foil-packaged tuna or peanut butter&jelly on rolls or bread. Afternoon snack was trail mix and apple or orange. Dinner was either freeze-dried meal packet (Lasagna the favorite) or canned soup (1 per person) which was heated then 1 cup of instant rice added (after 5 minute wait was a substantial meal).
- Started with one gallon jug of water plus half dozen smaller bottles, used filter to purify water to replenish.
- Saved ½ rolls of toilet paper from home and individually vacuum-sealed to keep dry. Hung roll from neck with shoestring while visiting privy.
- Most access points don't have trash cans, so plan to hold trash for a few days.
- Plan on only one person per tent. Trying to fit both of us in the same tent would have been very difficult with all our gear.
- We spent considerable time picking campsites in advance, but stayed at almost none of them as distance travelled varied from intended plan.
- Waterproof camera was more important than anticipated. Animal sightings required fast response. Getting second camera out of dry sack took too long.
- Having topside dry storage proved to be very helpful. We used these yellow "garages" for anything we thought we'd need easy access to during the day, like snacks, lunch, cameras, etc.
- When your hands are cold, taking down the tent can be challenging. Specifically the clips and snaps are hard to remove when you can't feel your fingers.
- Verizon was the carrier of choice in north river country. We had Sprint and were without service for four days. A Verizon burner phone could have been useful.
- We entered portages and campsites into a handheld GPS before setting out. The GPS showed us where we were and where the campsites were, but the distance assumed using roads which wasn't helpful. Didn't use GPS much.
- Even with a map readily available during paddling, the lack of landmarks made our current position uncertain at times. The various towns have little to no river footprint. Patience and stamina were



needed to keep paddling until a usable feature was seen, especially when looking for a campsite after long day of paddling.

- Headwinds were worse than lack of river current in the reservoirs. Don't rely on weather forecasted wind direction, the wind generally blows up (much less frequently down) river.
- With a kayak skirt and rain jacket, paddling in rain was not a problem as long as the wind was not in your face. At times it was preferred to paddle in the rain than during a hot sunny afternoon.
- Setting up camp in the rain was challenging.
- One kayaker wore a full length wetsuit during most days. Would not use it on a second trip. Two-piece wetsuit a better option.
- Waterproof booties are essential, especially on muddy banks. We became quite proficient at dipping muddy feet in the river to remove mud and letting drip for a few seconds before putting them in kayak which minimized dirt in the boat.
- Canada geese were the most prevalent animal seen. Up river they were much more skittish and would fly earlier (generally 100 yards downriver which frequently resulted in multiple interactions per group of geese).
- We noted very few fisherman and few fish jumping on the upper river.
- There is some debate on the internet on where to position the kayak within the width of the river. We found that unless the river flow was fast, the added benefit of being in the outside portion of a curve with higher current did not overcome the added distance travelled. For most of the trip, we went inside corner to inside corner. The exception was rapids where we generally stayed outside unless the river read indicated otherwise.

What we didn't take that we wish we had:

- Warmer sleeping bags. Ours were rated for 40°F, but just didn't cut it at 32°F. Tents were watertight but retained no heat.
- Metal utensils. Plastic ones didn't last.
- Fingernail clippers. (It is amazing how much your nails grow in 12 days)

What we took that we didn't need:

- Too much camp soap. Had three bottles, didn't finish one. Our wives would argue this point - we stunk pretty bad at end of trip!
- Jetboil gas canisters. Took three, didn't finish one and we cooked two meals per day for two people.
- Handsaw and fire starters (might still take next time, didn't make any campfires).
- Second bottles of suntan lotion and bug spray. First one essential.
- Flashlights – needed two, took at least six.
- Most of first aid kit, but tweezers handy for tick removal.



In Conclusion

We paddled 105 hours, 383 miles and still found plenty of things to talk about. Overall, it was a nice trip and gave two friends an opportunity to fulfill a mutual goal together.