

Namekagon River Trip Report 2010

By Rhett Taber

We had originally intended to paddle the Mississippi River from Lake City to the Minnesota-Iowa border. However, due to unusually heavy fall rains, the Mississippi was in flood stage over most of our intended route. We opted for Plan B: the Namekagon River in northwestern Wisconsin.

The Namekagon is a part of the St. Croix National Scenic Riverway. The river has its headwaters in Namekagon Lake, in north central Wisconsin and flows generally west south-west through Wisconsin. It joins the St. Croix River about 4 miles east of Riverside Landing, which is on Wisconsin highway 35, north of Danbury.

For all appearances, the Namekagon is a wilderness river, although we did have some vehicle and train noise at a number of the campsites. There are designated primitive campsites along the way, both group and individual sites. The group sites all had picnic tables, fire rings, and pit toilets.

We, Cindy Terry, John Mayerle, Bobby Gillies, Tom LeMay and Rhett Taber, begin our trip on Monday, October 11, 2010. We chose to begin at Hayward, Wisconsin as the Namekagon is much more navigable from that point downstream. We launched about 2:00 p.m. on a cool, crisp fall day and immediately encountered a number of class 1 rapids. But, aside from leaving some fiberglass on the frequent rocks we were able to run the river without problem, and made camp at a group campsite after three hours of paddling.

We spent the next five days paddling down river, with a nice assist from the 2-3 m.p.h. current. We had no trouble paddling 15-18 miles per day, and finding suitable campsites. There was one portage, at the Trego Dam. We were able to drag the boats up and over the embankment without the necessity of unloading. We arrived at Riverside Landing on Friday afternoon, after 70 miles on the river. Cindy left the group at Riverside that afternoon as she wanted some extra time to prepare for an upcoming trip to Mexico for a dive trip. On Saturday, the remaining crew paddled another 13 miles to Thayers Landing, a few miles west of Danbury, Wisconsin, to end the trip.

The river is quite scenic, although we missed the fall color by about a week. We saw dozens of bald eagles and other waterfowl, but no other wildlife. The weather was cool, with temperatures below freezing several nights. The river is quite shallow in sections, and there are numerous class 1 rapids. Some whitewater experience would be helpful, although with one exception all rapids were negotiated without incident. The river is certainly doable in sea kayaks, although I don't recommend glass boats as there are many rocks and shallow sections.