Float Trips, Camping, Vacationing

The Illinois River

The Upper Illinois

The Illinois River is Oklahoma's best known scenic river. Legislation in the 1970's officially designated the upper 70 miles of the Illinois River as a scenic river to protect the river for future generations.

The Illinois is a river cherished for its beauty. It's nestled in the heart of the beautiful Oklahoma Ozark Hills with their ever-changing oak-hickory forest There is breathtaking beauty spring summer, fall and winter. The upper Illinois is an easy-flowing river with delightful scenery and several stretches of mild rapids. It is an excellent fishing stream with smallmouth and largemouth bass, channel and flathead catfish walleye and various sunfish.

Canoeing is one of the most poplar activities on the Illinois. Floaters can enjoy 70 miles of interesting and sometimes challenging stream. You don't have to own a canoe or boat to float the Illinois; both can be rented at several locations along the river. Floating the Illinois is not dangerous, but certain safety precautions are in order anytime you are on the water. To get completely away from summertime canoe traffic, you must travel further upstream. The community of Watts near the Arkansas - Oklahoma State line has one or two canoe outfitters located in the area. This far upper stretch is floatable without much trouble except during the very low water flows in the heat of the summer. This upper stretch is lightly fished with many areas probably not fished at all. **Lifejackets are a must for non-swimmers**.

If you plan an overnight trip on the Illinois, you'll want to take along camping gear. Essentially the same as for other camping. Anything which might be damaged by water should be stored in waterproof plastic or rubber bags and tied with a short length of rope to the bracing of the craft. The length of the river (68 miles) makes it idea for multi-day floating and overnight camping. However, if one chooses to camp on the river, be very aware of the weather at all times. Even moderate rains upstream can cause the river to rise several feet very quickly.

There are over 70 species of fish in the river. Smallmouth Bass, Black Bass, Channel Catfish, Sunfish and larger Perch are the predominate "catchable" species. During the early spring of the year, Sandbass migrate up into the lower portion of the river from Tenkiller Lake on spawning runs.

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Primary food sources for the fish include crawdads, minnows, hellgrammites, sculpins and Madtoms (black catfish). These Black catfish are small (one to three inches in length), coal black, miniature catfish that burrow into the gravel in the shallows. Smallmouth and Black Bass go "crazy" over these delicacies and a large black weighted woolly bugger or other imitation can be very productive.

The stream is best fished from canoe or flat bottom John boat. Wade fishing at several access points is possible. However, the amount of water that can be covered at these access points is often limited due to deep water up and downstream from these areas. Most public access points will accommodate a hundred yards or more up and downstream for wade fishing. However, during the summer months most of these areas are usually populated by swimmers, sunbathers, beaching canoes and float outfitters delivering their customers to the stream.

Floating the river and beaching at likely spots along the rivers length provides greater access to productive water and far more enjoyment of the river, and your fly fishing trip.

Canoes can be a problem for the fly fisher during the summer months. On a typical hot, summer day, hundreds of canoeist and rafters will be on the river. The weekends are very crowded at times. The best time to fish the river is during the weekdays and early morning and late evening hours. If using one of the commercial canoe outfitters along the river, the upper portion of the river (upstream of Chewey Bridge to Round Hollow) receives less canoe traffic than the middle and lower portion of the river. Riverside Floats, one of the last upstream commercial Outfitters, traditionally runs this section of the river when water levels permit. A fourteen mile and seven mile float is available with put-ins upstream of Chewey Bridge or at the bridge for the seven mile trip. The take out point is at the Round Hollow Public Access.

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Floating the Illinois can be a delightful experience and you'll want to keep it that way for others who may follow. Leave your campsite clean and don't litter the shoreline or the water. A good motto for float trips or any other type of outing is:

Below Lake Tenkiller Dam lie the cold clear waters of the lower Illinois River. It is a beautiful bubbling stream. Fishermen have been coming to the lower Illinois since 1965 when it was established as Oklahoma's first year round designated trout stream. Because trout are such hard fighters once they are hooked, trout fishing continues to

attract more and more anglers. The state record trout, 10 lbs. 6 oz. was caught in 1966 and still stands. The Fisheries Division of the Oklahoma Department of Wildlife stocks trout every weekend from the end of March through the 4th Of July weekend. The rest of the year trout are stocked every other week usually on Friday. Contingent upon access and water oxygen content, stockings take place at 4 locations along the 7.7 mile stretch of the trout stream. All anglers must purchase a trout stamp. It is valid from January 1st until December 31st and is a necessity to fish any of the seven designated trout streams or lakes in Oklahoma. Fishermen are allowed to use any kind of bait: live or artificial. The limit is 6 per person, 12 in possession. It is legal to catch and release as long as the trout are not harmed. Trout are the only game fish that may be used for bait; and many do use them to catch the monster stripers found in the cold water. Four of the last six records for stripers have come from the waters of the Illinois River.□□It is an easy river to fish, and there is always an angler around with ready advice for the novice. Stripers (Striped Bass) are a salt-water fish that runs up fresh water rivers to spawn. By accident, some were trapped in fresh water and they survived and flourished, leading to the introduction of the species to fresh water lakes and rivers throughout the United States. During the Spring of the year, large stripers invade the stream from the Arkansas River in search of trout. Many striper fisherman are aware of this favored food of the stripers and will often use live Rainbows as bait on the lower part of the stream. Stripers in excess of thirty pounds are caught by this method toward the lower end of the river. □□Stripers are a schooling fish. Many times during the year, they can be found surfacing when they are feeding on bait fish, but don't count on it. During the summer months, they usually will be found in deeper cooler water in groups. Although the weather is colder and less conductive to going fishing, the winter months of November through April have excellent striper fishing. The stream has been stocked recently with German Brown's in addition to Rainbows.

There are several public access points along the stream. The two most well known access areas are at the dam site and through MarVal Trout Camp. By an agreement with the Oklahoma Wildlife Conservation Department, MarVal Trout Camp will allow free access to the river when possessing a valid fishing license and trout stamp. Marvel Trout Camp is one of the major stocking points on the river.

What follows is a description of access points and the more productive fly fishing water around each area beginning at the dam site. All descriptions are oriented facing downstream unless otherwise noted. The maps and descriptions are with very low water releases and "rough" but close enough to actual layouts for you to indentify the more productive spots.

Note: the lower Illinois is subject to wide variations in water level from sporadic power generation. Keep a careful eye out for rising water and quickly retreat to the side of the stream where your vehicle is located.

Source: www.shopoklahoma.com/illinoir.htm