

Dismal River CANOE TRAIL



NEBRASKA GAME AND
PARKS COMMISSION

PO Box 30370, Lincoln, NE 68503
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GENERAL INFORMATION

The Dismal River is a true Sandhills river, having its beginning and ending in the grass-cloaked hills that cover some 20,000 square miles in north-central Nebraska. It is short by most Nebraska river standards, flowing only 80 miles to its confluence with the Middle Loup River at Dunning. It is the state's wildest and most undeveloped river, and was identified by the National Park Service as being worthy of designation in the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System.

Note: This Dismal River takes experienced canoeists with the ability to muscle their way, for hours at a time, down the river. Not everyone is ready for this task.

SECTION DESCRIBED

Nebraska Highway 97 bridge to Whitetail Campground in the Nebraska National Forest — 56.5 miles.

CHARACTERISTICS

Known by some couples as the divorce river, the Dismal is **not a river for the novice canoeist**. This river is a canoeing challenge, difficult because it runs deep and fast, with a current of 6 to 8 miles per hour. Its continually winding, with areas of heavy deadfall (trees that have fallen into the river, mostly Cedar, around almost every bend, that aren't visible until canoeists are in the turn. In some places, openings have been cut through the deadfall to permit passage. To keep from being swept into the deadfall barricades, a canoeist must be prepared and float into the bends at a 45-degree angle to prevent a collision.

Barbed wire fences necessary for ranchers in cattle country cross the rivers. **Do not** cut or loosen the wires. Most fences are not marked and are difficult to see, though some have been tied up to permit passage. **Use caution.**

Low bridges can be obstacles that challenge even an avid canoeist. As soon as a bridge comes into sight, immediately determine whether the space between the river and the bridge will allow passage. Make any necessary adjustments before the bridge. **When in doubt, portage.**

Springs abound on this river. Some springs emit water so rapidly that they seem to boil out of the ground. **Caution; Do not wade in these areas, occasionally quicksand will be found near the springs.**

Recommendation: Please read the General Canoeing Introduction pages before your trip. They are good review for the avid canoeist and a quick lesson for the novice canoeist, and they might be the difference between an adventure and a nightmare.

ACCESS SITES AND POINTS OF INTEREST

The trip begins at the **Nebraska Highway 97** bridge. On the southeast, downstream side of the bridge is a place to unload canoes and gear. The river is 50 - 60 feet from the unloading area. Use caution, the trail to the water is steep. Please move your vehicle to another location after unloading.

About 2 hours after launching from Nebraska 97, a small spring is visible and beyond it about 200 yards is a low water bridge. It is made of two I-beams. It should **not** be floated under. If possible, push your canoe under and walk around the bridge.

Caution: About half way between **Nebraska Highway 97** and the **Seneca Bridge** you will encounter a narrow waterfall that **will require** portaging. You will hear the falls before you see it. Watch for the cedar tree marked with a PVC pipe about 50 yards upriver and around a bend (you cannot see the falls from this area). You need to land here and portage around the falls. A rock shelf ends and the river drops about two feet across a sloping shelf ten feet long. **Do not** canoe this section, it is too shallow and could cause a canoe to capsize.

Just over an hour below the waterfall is another drop of about one foot that can be canoed easily. Downstream a short distance are two areas of fast water each about 20 yards long that make this trip interesting.

From **Nebraska 97** to **Seneca Bridge** is 15 river miles (6-8 hours). Access is available on the northeast, downstream left side of the bridge. A private campsite is located nearby.

Note: You can leave a vehicle at the Seneca Bridge for a good one-day trip. The road north from the Seneca Bridge to Nebraska 2 is a narrow ranch road, so use caution while traveling on it. The first bridge after the Seneca bridge is a private ranch bridge with no access. From the **Seneca Bridge** to the **Jameson Bridge** (second bridge) is 12 river miles (3-4 hours). This bridge has a primitive campsite and access on the north, upstream left side of the bridge.

Recommendation: This is a good place to exit. Then launch at the U.S. 83 bridge.

From the **Jameson Bridge** to **U.S. 83 Bridge** is 12.2 river miles (6 hours). This area of the river is not recommended because of the cattle confinement yards along the river, tightly stretched barbed wire fences in this area, and the river becomes extremely wide and shallow.

North on U.S. 83 is the town of Thedford. The Thedford Park located on

the southwest edge of town is open for camping with facilities available.

From **U.S. 83 Bridge** east to **Whitetail Campground** (in the Nebraska National Forest) is 20+ river miles (7-9 hours) and is recommended for experienced canoeist who are in good condition.

Access is available near the U.S. 83 bridge. Downstream is the old highway bridge which is now used as a lookout point. A parking lot and picnic area is on the south side of the river, between the bridges. The best launching area is on the southeast, downstream side of the old bridge. Cross under the old bridge and through a closed gate for launching.

The first part of this stretch is full of deadfalls (not always cut to provide passage), curves, and fences. The last section of this river is very wide and shallow, with several fences and four low water ranch bridges. It is recommended to **portage all low water bridges**. The final stop is located on the north, left side of the river in the Nebraska National Forest. **Trip ends.**

The Forest Service provides electrical and primitive campsites, picnic and restroom facilities, potable water and shower house facilities along with recreational activities. Fees vary according to services utilized. The entrance road to the Nebraska National Forest is from Nebraska Highway 2, west of Halsey. The Whitetail Campground is 13 miles from Halsey.

SCENERY

On the upper half of the river, springs seep out of narrow, deep Sandhills canyons and over ledges of impervious rock. The canyon walls rise more than 150 feet above the river in this area. In the middle section, springs ooze from the canyon floor and trickle to the river's edge under fallen cedars cloaked with grapevines, or through tall grass. Farther downstream, where the valley is broad and the river widens, springs seep into marshy areas on the floodplain or bubble up from the river's sandy bottom.

COMMUNITY AND AREA INFORMATION:

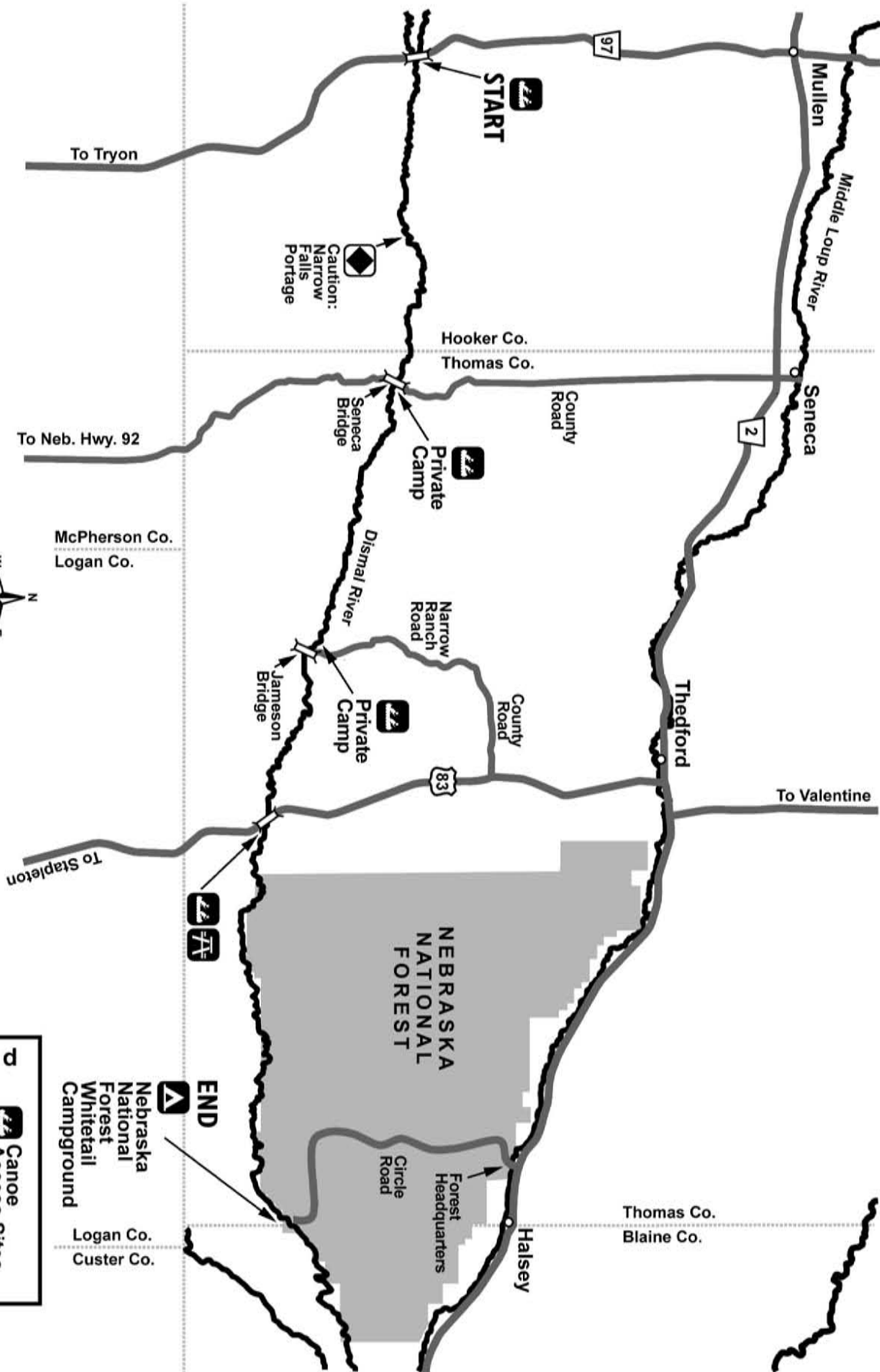
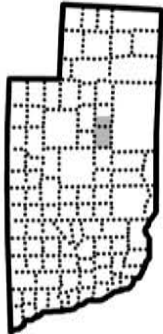
Nebraska National Forest,
Bessey Ranger District, (308) 533-2257
Hooker County Sheriff (Mullen)
(308) 546-2290
Thomas County Sheriff (Thedford)
(308) 645-2418 or (308) 645-2221

MEDICAL ASSISTANCE:

Sandhills Family Medicine (Clinic in Mullen)
(308) 546-2213
Great Plains Regional Medical Center
(North Platte Hospital) (308) 534-9310

Dial 911 to reach emergency personnel in the area.

D i s m a l R i v e r



Legend	
	Canoe Access Sites
	Camping Sites
	Picnic Area
	Bridge
	Area of Caution
	END
	Nebraska National Forest
	Whitetail Campground
	Logan Co.
	Custer Co.