

Niobrara River CANOE TRAIL

NEBRASKA GAME AND
PARKS COMMISSION

PO Box 30370, Lincoln, NE 68503
402-471-0641 • www.outdoornebraska.org

GENERAL INFORMATION

The Niobrara River, which was called Running Water by Indians and early settlers, extends across northern Nebraska from its narrow beginning in eastern Wyoming. It empties into the Missouri River some 300 miles east between the village of Niobrara and Niobrara State Park. The main sources of inflow are tributaries and Sandhills groundwater from the Ogallala Aquifer. Its springs and waterfalls make this river one of the nation's best canoeing waters.

SECTION DESCRIBED

Cornell Bridge to near Norden Bridge — 30.5 miles.

CHARACTERISTICS

The Niobrara River flows east across northern Nebraska. At Valentine, near its midway point, the Niobrara River has cut a valley nearly 300 feet deep and a half mile wide.

The Niobrara has steep sandstone canyons, areas of rock beds forming fast water, a few riffles and rapids, along with sandy calm stretches, islands and sandbars. Springs and waterfalls abound. The average depth is about two feet and the water is fast-flowing at 6 to 8 miles an hour, making this river challenging. Numerous springs contribute to its relatively clear, cold quality.

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

ACCESS SITES AND POINTS OF INTEREST

Valentine is located at the junction of U.S. 20 and 83 in north-central Nebraska. Take Nebraska 12 east from Valentine 4 miles to the refuge. At the **Fort Niobrara National Wildlife Refuge**, you will find a public access parking lot and restrooms adjacent to the **Cornell Bridge** launch site. A daily refuge access fee is charged and a sticker must be affixed to your vessel (canoe, tube, raft, etc.). Access the river from the Cornell Bridge launch site in the refuge.

About 3/4 mile after launching, there is a small area of fast water and a creek is entering the river on your right. Next to the mouth of the creek there is a path, which you may take to visit **Fort Falls**, also on the

Niobrara Refuge. The next 5 downstream miles you will pass through a national wilderness area with high cliffs and numerous springs from the aquifer. On the left downstream side of **Buffalo Bridge**, you will see a designated hiking trail to a high overlook above the refuge and the river. Refuge managers ask that you leave the gates as you find them.

The next access site is at **Berry Bridge**, which can be reached from Nebraska 12, or by driving through the refuge. This is a



Smith Falls
State Park

private site and fees are charged for access and parking. After passing under Berry Bridge you can stop to enjoy Berry Falls, which cascades directly into the river and can be wonderfully refreshing on a hot day.

From Berry Bridge to **Smith Falls State Park** is three river miles. You may also access Smith Falls State Park from Nebraska 12 at mile marker 15. You will find a visitor's center, restrooms, showers and camping at Smith Falls State Park. This is a great place to stop, rest, have a picnic, and enjoy **Smith Falls**, Nebraska's highest waterfall, plunging nearly 70 feet from the birch-crowned canyon rim to the lower canyon on its way to the river.

Three miles down river from Smith Falls State Park is **Brewer Bridge** and the Middle Niobrara Natural Resources District's (NRD) public access area. Restrooms and a parking area are available at this site. River access is from the left or downstream side of the bridge. This area can also be reached from Nebraska 12 at mile marker 18.

Two miles beyond Brewer Bridge is Conner's Rapids, which you will hear before you see them. Stay to the left, then make a sharp right turn and go directly down the middle.

One mile farther is Fritz Island. Go **left** around the island. Going to the right will take you over a rock ledge where it is easy to capsize.

Less than a mile farther is Fritz Chute, stay in the **middle** for a fun ride through choppy water.

Another hour, about 3.5 miles downstream, is **Rocky Ford**. Stay to the **left** here. There is a small set of rapids that you must portage around.

About two miles below Rocky Ford is **Franklin's Rapids**. Stay to the **left**. You must portage again. There is a large hole in the middle of the river which is disguised until it is too late. Two miles below Franklin's Rapids the river will speed up at **Egelhoff's Narrows**, where the river forms a quick S, stay in the **middle**. The river widens about a half mile below the Narrows.

Except for another quick drop over a rock ledge at Kuhre's Rapids, about 12 miles downstream, and on the right, the river runs fairly flat for 32 miles to the **Norden Bridge**. Stay **left**; Exit 100 yards **before** the Norden Bridge. Be aware of a large hole and rapids just before, and under, the Norden Bridge. **Trip Ends.**

SCENERY

In May of 1991 a 76-mile stretch of the Niobrara River was added to the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System to preserve unique biological features. Eastern, western and northern species of trees and wildlife can be found intermixed on slopes along the river. In a 30-mile stretch east of Valentine, you will encounter more than 90 waterfalls along the south bank. Fenced herds of elk and bison can be seen at the Fort Niobrara National Wildlife Refuge.

COMMUNITY INFORMATION:

Valentine Chamber of Commerce
(402) 376-2969

Fort Niobrara National Wildlife Refuge
(402) 376-3789

Smith Falls State Park (402) 376-1306

Cherry County Sheriff (Valentine)

Non-Emergency (402) 376-1890

Keya Paha County Sheriff (Springview)

Non-Emergency (402) 497-3201

Brown County Sheriff (Ainsworth)

Non-Emergency (402) 387-1440

MEDICAL ASSISTANCE:

Cherry County Hospital (Valentine)

(402) 376-2525

Springview Medical Clinic (Springview)

(402) 497-2442

Brown County Hospital (Ainsworth)

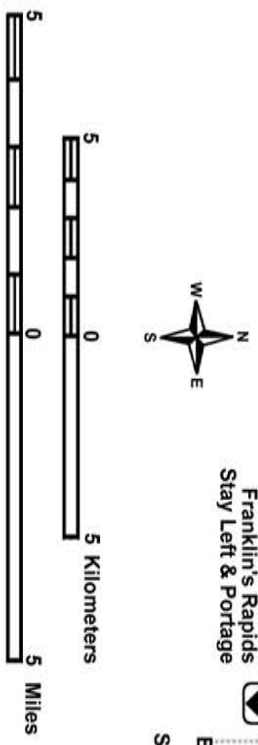
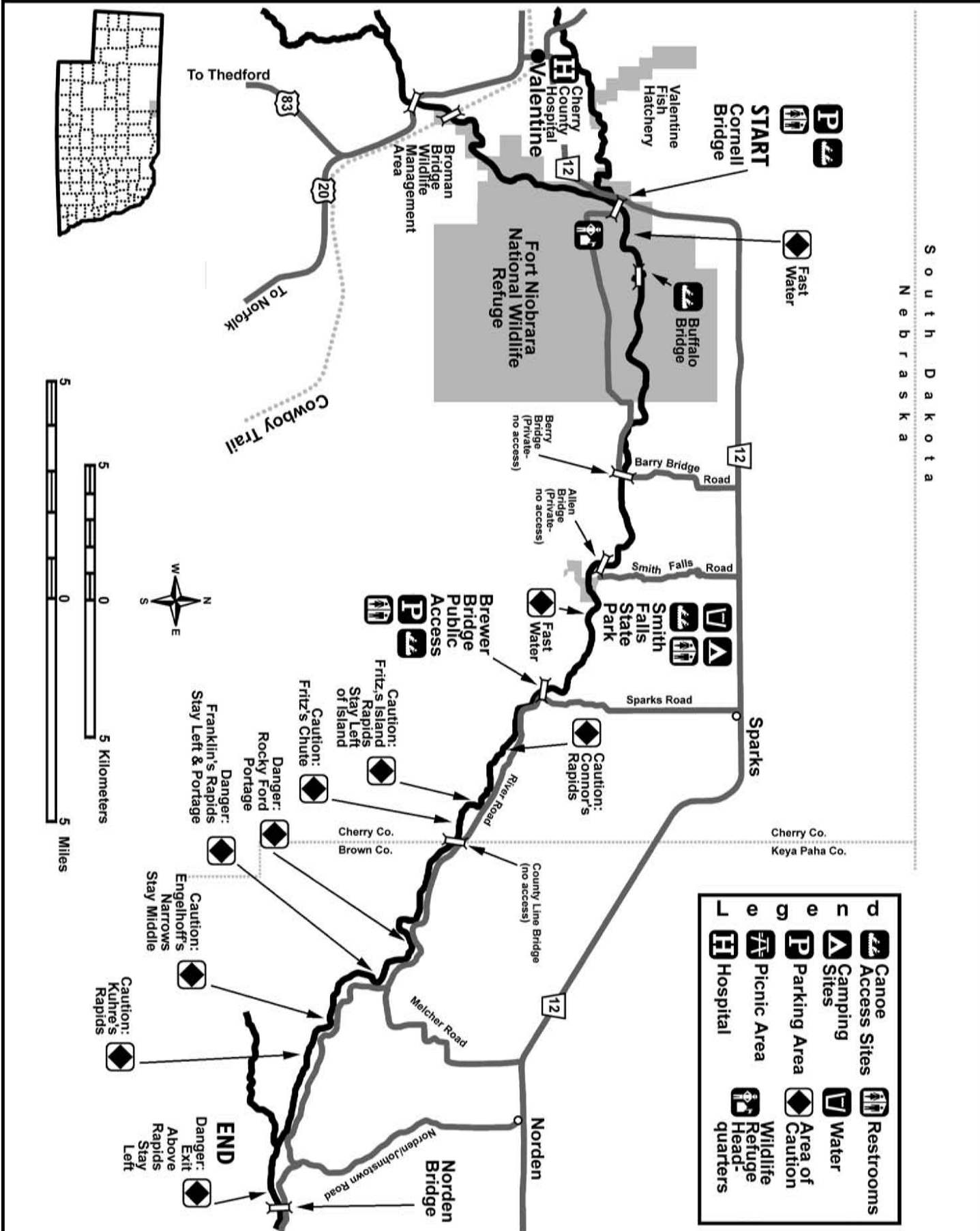
(402) 387-2800

**Dial 911 to reach emergency
personnel in the area.**

N i o b r a r a R i v e r

S o u t h D a k o t a
N e b r a s k a

- Legend**
- Canoe Access Sites
 - Camping Sites
 - Restrooms
 - Parking Area
 - Picnic Area
 - Water
 - Hospital
 - Wildlife Refuge Headquarters
 - Area of Caution



END
Danger: Exit Above Rapids Stay Left

Cautions:
Kuhre's Rapids
Engelhoff's Narrows Stay Middle

Danger: Franklin's Rapids Stay Left & Portage
Rocky Ford Portage
Cautions:
Fritz's Chute
Fritz's Island Rapids Stay Left of Island

Cautions:
Connor's Rapids
Allen Bridge (Private - no access)
Berry Bridge (Private - no access)

Valentine Fish Hatchery
Buffalo Bridge
Bromman Bridge Wildlife Management Area

START
Cornell Bridge
Cherry County Hospital
Valentine

To Theftord
To Norfolk

Cowboy Trail

Sparks Road
Smith Falls State Park
Smith Falls

Cherry Co. Brown Co.
County Line Bridge (no access)

Melcher Road
Norden
Norden Bridge
Norden/Johnstown Road

83
20
12

12

12

12

12

12

12

12

Fast Water

Fast Water

Fast Water

Caution: Rapids

Cherry Co. Brown Co.

Melcher Road

Norden

Norden Bridge

Valentine Fish Hatchery

Buffalo Bridge

Smith Falls State Park

Caution: Connor's Rapids

Cherry Co. Brown Co.

Melcher Road

Norden

Norden Bridge

Cherry County Hospital

Barry Bridge

Smith Falls State Park

Caution: Connor's Rapids

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