



Runoff from snow melt and spring rains rises the water level in area waterways, making canoe and kayak routes that are otherwise difficult to navigate due to obstacles such as rocks and sunken trees more passable for paddlers. COURTESY OF RAY WIRTH

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Union River watershed offers whitewater and

much more

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ELLSWORTH — Driving through the city’s downtown or along Water Street, it can sometimes be easy to forget that there is much more to the Union River than what can be seen from the bridge on Main Street or farther downstream at Harbor Park.

The river’s several branches and its watershed cover the width of Hancock County, from Burnt Pond and Phillips Lake in the west to Rocky Pond and the three Lead Mountain Ponds in the east to Alligator Pond, Great Pond and Brandy Pond in the north.

The southern extremities of the river, meanwhile — the serene surface of Leonard Lake, for example, and the flat, shallow expanse of the Graham Lake impoundment — belie the whitewater and rapids that can be found on the northern parts of the river at certain times of the year.

While that rushing water once served to carry cut trees downstream to sawmills and ships sailing out of Ellsworth, the log drives are now long a thing of the past and the river is instead a “recreational and ecological treasure... hidden in the woods of Hancock County,” in the words of College of the Atlantic professor Ken Cline.

While that may be news to some people, it is not to canoeists and kayakers who have paddled their way along the river



When he’s not teaching high school English classes, Waldo County kayaker Ray Wirth can be found on the water — either in Maine’s coastal waters in a sea kayak or paddling down one of Maine’s many streams and rivers, either

and navigated its twists and turns.

Among them are some members of the

Kindred Wave Paddlers, a self-described

“group of awesome folks who share a love of paddling,” as well as others who have explored the Union on their own.

recreationally or in organized races.
PHOTO COURTESY OF RAY WIRTH

Chris Audet, a kayaking instructor and enthusiast who lives in Searsport, started the Kindred Wave group on Facebook about five years ago as a way for fellow kayakers to plan paddling trips and share information. Facebook, he said, was a more efficient way of making arrangements than making dozens of phone calls.

At last count, the group — fittingly, given Maine’s telephone area code — had 207 members.

Those members hail from across Maine and some are in the Canadian Maritime provinces, and they like all types of kayaking.

“We share a lot of information about whitewater and ocean trips and island hopping,” said Audet.

Ray Wirth, who operates Water Walker Sea Kayaks in Waldo County, is one group member who has spent time on the Union River.

Wirth has done the Union River Salmon Run, a race held in May or June from Graham Lake Dam to Harbor Park in Ellsworth, at least a half-dozen times and been the fastest finisher on many of those occasions. The race is organized by the Maine Canoe & Kayak Racing Organization, which holds races across the state (such as the well-known Kenduskeag Stream race).



Cline has written an 11-page “Paddling Guide to the Union River” which outlines paddling options on the East, West and Middle branches of the river. While the West Branch is the best-known and most-often paddled, he said the others also present some good opportunities.

Area waterways provide plenty of paddling opportunities for members of the Kindred Wave Paddlers group, including the Union River in Hancock County and the Souadabscook Stream in Hampden (seen here).

MICHAEL DAUGHERTY PHOTO

The East Branch, for example, is smaller than the West Branch “but what it lacks in water it makes up for in scenery and remoteness,” according to Cline.

Wirth called the paddling on the West Branch “outstanding.”

“The river is larger and has stronger currents than most of our midcoast rivers,” he said.

The most popular stretch of the West Branch stretches from Great Pond to Amherst, a distance of about 11 miles or so, and Cline’s and Wirth’s accounts of traveling on the river underscore how exciting a trip it can be.

Rapids have names such as Captain’s Roll, The Scarecrow and Hell’s Gate. Cline said at “certain water levels,” the latter set of rapids “deserves its name.” Elsewhere, on a short run on the East Branch of the river, is a set of rapids named “Jaws of Death.”

The final set of rapids on the popular West Branch trip is at Tannery Falls, which qualify as Class IV (on a five-class scale, with V being the most challenging) when water conditions are right.

Brett Ciccotelli, a fisheries biologist with the Downeast Salmon Federation and a paddling enthusiast, noted that the Union River is “really a low-flow river,” meaning that in many times of the years low-water levels can make paddling a challenge. Cline talked of navigating one’s way through “rock gardens” in some stretches.

Ciccotelli said the best time is typically in the spring, “between the time that the ice melts and the roads dry out.” He and others noted the water levels sometimes come up

in the fall, too, presenting opportunities for late-season paddling.

One thing all of the paddlers talked about is the importance of not only dressing appropriately (the water can be quite cold in the spring), but also of scouting rapids rather than just going through them and hoping for the best.

Cline said that though the Union is beautiful, “its gentle waters are punctuated with steep drops and other hazards that could get a novice paddler in trouble.” Wirth said he “emphatically” agrees with the idea of scouting larger drops in advance.

Watching and learning from others also can be helpful. Michael Daugherty, who works for both Ellsworth-based Pinniped Kayak and Old Quarry Ocean Adventures in Stonington, recounted his experience of trying out the Souadabscook Stream in Hampden with Audet and other Kindred Wave members.

For the final part of that trip, going over a set of stair falls known as Great Falls, Daugherty recalled how “the other guys talked about what line to take, but I knew right away that mine was to stand to the side and take pictures while they did it.”

“I’d felt good about everything so far, but I knew I didn’t have the moves to do this properly,” he said.

For those who do not have the time to travel to Great Pond and then make an 11-mile trip down the West Branch of the Union River, the rapids at Ellsworth Falls near Route



Brett Ciccotelli, a fisheries biologist with the Downeast Salmon Federation and a paddling enthusiast, points out options available to kayakers and canoeists within the Union River watershed. The Salmon Federation has rented space on the corner of Main and State streets in Ellsworth, and the large map occupies one wall in that space.

PHOTO BY STEVE FULLER

IA are recommended by those who have paddled them before.

Ciccotelli said the stretch from above Ellsworth Falls to the top of Leonard Lake can be done in a half-hour or less, and Cline called it a “great whitewater stretch” — though, like the other rapids on the river, water level determines what the experience will be like.

In addition to all the whitewater opportunities, the river also affords visitors a chance to see plenty of plant and animal life.

The Maine Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife notes the stretch of the West Branch between Great Pond and Graham Lake hosts “several rare animal species,” including brook floater (a type of mussel), wood turtles and the ribbon snake.

On his trip, Wirth described seeing a plethora of ducks as well as other animals including deer, hawks, turtles, blue heron, cormorants, beavers and turkeys.

For the non-boating population, there also are opportunities to enjoy whitewater from the shore. In Mariaville, for example, the Frenchman Bay Conservancy owns 141 acres along the

West Branch at Mariaville Falls. Those falls are described as “dramatic stair falls” with a drop of about 10 feet, and they can be seen from a trail on the property.


In fact, that is the best way to see and appreciate that particular location.





Hell's Gate is one of the named sets of rapids on the West Branch of the Union River. Ken Cline, who has written a guide to the river for paddlers and gone down it himself multiple times, reports that at “certain water levels this rapid deserves its name.”

RAY WIRTH PHOTO

“This is a definite portage,” said Cline. “I have heard rumors of people running the falls, but the accounts never contained a description of what their boat looked like at the bottom.”

 Bio

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