



Connecticut River Trip Report:

Ten Days on the Upper Connecticut River

by *Ralph Heimlich* Photos by *Ralph Heimlich and Dave Isbell*



Dave and Ralph, The Connecticut River Canoe Expeditionary Force. Photo by Robin Lauer.

My impression of the Connecticut River, one of America's first aquatic highways, was of a broad and slowly flowing "big" river hemmed in by old industrial buildings and major highways. If your acquaintance with the river is primarily from crossing it on interstates in Connecticut and Massachusetts, you can be forgiven for thinking that this is all the river has to offer. However, the headwaters of the Connecticut are far to the north, near the Canadian border, and the character of the river at its source is far different than its mature self as it nears the sea.

My friend, Dave Isbell, manager of Annapolis Canoe and Kayak (AC&K) in Maryland, inveigled me to join him for an extended canoe trip on the upper Connecticut River which forms the border between Vermont and New Hampshire. Robin Lauer, administrator of CanoeTripping.net forums,

volunteered to do our shuttle. Dave got the loan of AC&K's 19.5-foot light layup Kevlar Wenonah Seneca canoe. While it is a big canoe, it proved to be ideal as it passed over shallow gravel bars easily with its shallow draft.

We knew from studying the excellent Connecticut River Paddlers' Trail map and the guide book that the source was a narrow trout stream too small for canoe navigation, interspersed with big water reservoirs of Lake Francis, First, Second, and Third Connecticut Lakes [See ACK Vol 23 No. 7, October 2014 - Ed]. Instead we opted to launch at Canaan, Vermont, 38 miles from the river's source but still only a mile south of the Canadian border. We drove north from Maryland and spent the night at Robin's house. Early the next morning the three of us headed north. We pulled up to the steep ramp at about 11:30 a.m., unloaded our gear and the canoe, wished Robin a good trip home, and pushed off into the clear, quick water heading downstream from the bridge.

Right away, I knew we were on different waters than my previous impression of the Connecticut River. The shoal water rippled over rocks and formed banks of small rapids with no visible clear run. After a few solid thunks on rocks, we worked out our "command structure," with me in the bow calling out rocks ahead and steering around them, while Dave, in the stern, kept us heading reasonably straight down river. The rapids, or "quickwater" in New English, are dependent on water level and generally no more than class II or III. With another foot of water, we wouldn't have even seen these rapids, but with two or three feet more, we'd have been in the grip of a river too powerful for our feeble whitewater skills. Early July is a good time to do this stretch of the river: late enough to avoid the worst of flood waters and early enough to have sufficient water to make the run.

We soon left the rapids at Canaan behind and the river smoothed out and deepened to a swiftly moving flow. Land-



Dave at the first camp. Photo by Ralph Heimlich.

scapes of hayfields alternated with stands of spruce and towering white pines, with a nearly constant fringe of silver maples lining the river. At mile 13 (river mile 51), we passed under the Columbia covered bridge, the first of several notable examples of this New England staple. We were enjoying a great run, clocking something near six m.p.h., with a good current on top of our three m.p.h. paddling pace.

As the sun descended toward the Green Mountains, we approached the first caution on our map: the breached dam at Lyman Falls (river mile 59). Looking intently for some sign of the portage, we nearly missed the sudden dip in the river's flow before we thumped over a smoothly flowing hump of water. We saw a partly-obscured sign for Lyman State Park on the right bank and headed for a mud flat where a couple were fishing. Looking back upstream, we saw the concrete embankment of the breached dam and noticed that we'd come right over what remained of it. The dam was breached in 2001 and the steel rebar and scrap removed just recently, so there wasn't much of a hazard running the class I rapid there. We'd had a pretty good, though rocky, first day, covering 21 miles in about five hours.

After reconnoitering, we selected a primitive campsite in a clearing filled with wildflowers and pitched our first camp on the Vermont side of the river. When we stopped at Robin's house in western Connecticut, we saw what would be our only black bear strolling across his back field, so we knew we'd have to guard our food against the bruins up here in the north woods. Dave relied on his bear barrel, but I hoisted my food bags into accommodating trees. In the morning, mists from the river obscured the view, but we were awoken by the very vocal screams of a family of eagles out for breakfast.

After a hearty breakfast of eggs and corned beef hash, we broke camp and launched into the rapids below Lyman Falls dam. After a few more rapids, we came to Bloomfield-North Stratford (mile 62), where the Nulhegan River enters the Connecticut from the northwest. The St. Fran-



Misty morning and riffles below Lyman Dam. Photo by Ralph Heimlich.



Logging crib anchor piles. Photo by Dave Isbell.

cis Abnaki people used the Nulhegan in their annual migration to the sea, and today it is where the Northern Forest Canoe Trail enters and joins the Connecticut.

Being Sunday, this was one of the busiest days we saw on the river. We passed several successful fishermen fly fishing for trout in this highly aerated cold-water habitat. We also passed a trio of kayakers floating lazily along with their feet in the water, and a whole gaggle of kayak fisherfolk camped on a large point bar. This stretch of the river, called the Upper Coos, passes through a broad alluvial floodplain characterized by high cut banks and large, sandy point bars, and lined by farmers' fields. With a still-swift current but no rapids, we amassed our biggest mileage, racking up 28 miles. We finally pulled up to the Scott

C. Devlin Memorial Campsite at mile 87, just above Guildhall, Vermont. This was a pretty, shaded site in a grove of old maples and pines, but buggy because of a backwater oxbow nearby.

Campsites are what make the Connecticut River Water Trail such a gem. There are 36 campsites and campgrounds on the river in the Vt.-N.H. section, most clearly marked on the map and with a sign and sign-in kiosk. Most have tables, fire rings, and outhouse toilets. The size and capacity of the sites vary. The sites are donated by adjoining landowners or land conservancies, and are managed by volunteer campsite maintainers. Like any such endeavor, they need constant support, so a financial donation is appropriate for campsite users.

After launching, we paddled a short



Bottom of portage around Wyoming Dam. Photo by Dave Isbell.

mile down to our first portage at the breached Wyoming dam in Guildhall-Northumberland (mile 88). This time, the breached dam had not been cleared of rebar and was much more hazardous than Lyman Dam, but the portage over the bridge on river right was clearly marked. We landed and schlepped our gear and finally the canoe over the hump and down to the beach below the dam. We had tried to limit our stuff to one large portage pack and one food bag each, but things expanded a bit. I had a total of 70 pounds of gear and food, and Dave carried a bit more at 100+ pounds. Portaging the gear and the canoe took four trips, but soon we were underway again.

We passed a large oxbow, one of many the river has created and destroyed as it chews its way to the sea. Just below that, we passed under the Mt. Orne covered bridge. We also passed mounds of rock in the river, arranged in pairs or trios. These are what remains of rock logging “cribs” that served as places to marshal rafts of logs in the drives conducted for over 100 years on the wild, undammed river. Logging of the red spruce and white pine on the upper Connecticut between 1869 and 1915 was so ferocious that locals described a “skinned” landscape, which also exposed many square miles of drainage to erosion and siltation. The last drive in 1915 employed 500 drivers and

moved 65 million feet of logs.

We ended our third day on the river at Gilman dam, an active hydroelectric site, clocking another 21 miles. We carted the loaded canoe from the take out at river left and stopped about halfway in the half-mile portage in a field full of wildflowers where we camped with the whirring turbine noise in the air.

We launched the following morning and ran another set of small rapids in the gorge below Gilman Dam, before entering the pool formed by Moore Dam. The prevailing wind along the river is from the southwest, directly in our faces for nine out of ten days. With little or no current on the Moore and Comerford Reservoirs and the wind in our faces producing whitecaps at times, this proved to be one of our hardest days, requiring constant heavy paddling and two portages. The hills close in on the reservoir, which was a treacherous gorge called Fifteen Mile Falls in the logging days that dropped 320 feet, and are covered with hemlock, spruce, and white pine, giving off a piney aroma. The waters are clear and deep, and the banks are mostly wild, with a few cabins along the shore.

The half-mile portage on river right around Moore Dam at mile 120 proved to be very easy on our wheels, with a broad grassy slope from the upriver level of the reservoir to a wooden ramp down to the river outflow. We basically loaded the canoe on the cart at the top, piled a lot of the gear, and walked it down the grass in one go. If this was what portaging was all about around the dams, we were all for it.

Comerford Reservoir, immediately downriver at mile 127 is narrower and shorter than Moore Reservoir. We landed at a swimming beach on river left, prepared for another easy one-third mile portage. Unfortunately, the view on the downriver side of 170 foot Comerford Dam resembled the Grand Canyon, with the outflowing river far, far below gushing white from under the dam.

There was a paved road from the beach parking lot, so we loaded the canoe on the wheels, put the gear in, and trundled off.

After a short roll, the portage path departed the paved road, descended (very!!) steeply into a grassy ravine, hooked downhill very steeply to the left, descended a set of 35 wooden steps (did I mention these were very steep steps?), hooked left again, and finally took another 100 yards of rough, rocky fill to the launch. This was also the hottest day of our trip, with temps reaching into the mid-90s by late afternoon. I scouted the road briefly, but it seemed to veer away from our intended launch, and the guidebook didn't even mention the road. We decided to try the marked portage and got the canoe down into the ravine, loaded it and tried to move it along, but it immediately slipped off the cart. We decided to lighten the load and grabbed a couple of bags to check out the rest of the portage. I told Dave I'd go all the way down with my load and see if the road connected. After trudging down the ravine, the steps, the slope, and the rocks, I dropped my bags at the launch, splashed through a small stream, and trugged up a long, rocky dirt road out onto the paved road a mile away. Returning, I found Dave sweltering by the canoe trying to figure plans B and C, and told him the road went through. We manhandled the canoe back up the steep slope to the road, set it on the cart, and moved the remaining gear up to and into it.

By this time, the long paddle in to the wind, the heat and the trudging around had turned us to zombies, so we slowly rolled down the paved road and off into the woods road. The wheels on the cart mired down at places on the woods road, and jarred over large rocks in others. At one place where the cart jammed, we pulled too hard and a resounding crack and slump left us with a "wounded" cart. Frustrated, we unloaded, straightened the bent pieces, loaded it up again but carried the heavy portage packs, and finished the last haul down to the rocky beach. Nearly wiped out, we soaked in the cold river. We finally loaded the canoe and climbed in for the last part of our longest day, with the "Portage from Hell" behind us.

We paddled down the narrow gorge



Easy portage around Moore Dam. Photo by Dave Isbell.

below Comerford Dam, navigated the braided channels called The Nine Islands, where the Passumpsic River enters from the northwest, and finished at the Stevenson campsite opposite Stevens Island at Barnet, Vermont (mile 130). We'd done 22 miles against the wind on the two reservoir pools and completed two portages, one easy and one very hard.

Stevenson campsite is a narrow triangle of land slumped down to the river level below a steep cutbank. While not very roomy, it had all the amenities and we decided to spend two nights there, doing a "make and mend" on the second day to recover from our exertions on the previous day. While we were there, we noticed a sharp fall, then rise in the river's flow. This section is dotted with orange signs warning of rapid changes in river level from the operations of the dams by TransCanada power company. We almost regretted our decision to stay another night as the water rose and the current picked up (free energy), but by the time we realized what was going on, it was too late to alter our plans.

After resting weary back muscles, washing clothes and generally getting back in shape, we launched on Thursday back on the river. We again had two portages on our plate and hoped they would be easier than

the last. The first was a McIndoe Falls in Monroe, NH (mile 134), a pretty easy 200-yard cart from the landing above the falls on river left to just above a rock and sand beach. The only tough part was getting the canoe and gear down over the rocks to the beach to launch. McIndoe Falls dam had an interesting "sweeper" to collect trees and other flotsam in a side eddy and deposit it in dumpsters along the dam. There was a lot of stuff coming down the river to collect.

We passed the Fiddlehead Island campsite at mile 135. This small island was apparently flooded over in the Spring floods this year, but you couldn't tell by looking at it in July. The second portage was a longer quarter-mile haul on river left at the Rye-gate Dam at Dodge Falls (mile 137). While longer, this portage was also no problem for our cart, even weakened as it was.

Our next challenge was the "Narrows" above Woodsville (mile 142) where the Ammonoosuc River enters on river left. High flows and a quick succession of sharp turns in the gorge above the junction where the river narrows through granite walls can cause whirlpools and strong currents. We had read of a crew who kept right to avoid the whirlpool and dumped in the rapids there. We grasped our paddles a little tighter and hunkered down as the gorge narrowed



Perfect paddling, but 15-mph winds and whitecaps ahead. Photo by Dave Isbell.

and the current picked up. Well, river level is all when it comes to hazards. At the July level, our biggest hazard was the lines from a trio of fishermen. We could see that another couple of feet of water could make things more exciting, but were happy with what we had.

Woodville was where, during the French and Indian War, Robert Rogers and his Rangers, returning from a successful raid on the native town of St. Francis in Quebec, were disappointed not to meet a relief column supposed to meet them in October, 1759. Starving and nearly out of hope, Rogers and two others left the main body on a raft and went down the wild river to the Fort at Number 4 for help. The first raft came apart when they attempted to run Sumner Falls at mile 205, so they had to build another raft (by burning down trees since they lost their axes) and complete the rest of the journey. Guys were much tougher in those days! [Read an excellent novelization of this adventure in Kenneth Robert's *Northwest Passage* - Ed.]

We ended our day with a swim off the campsite beach at Howard Island (mile 145). We were fixing dinner when a terrific thunderstorm blew in. We had pitched a tarp because of the forecast, but the wind-

whipped rain soaked us, so we sat in our rain gear and waited the storm out. I had thought that the milder temperatures this far north would moderate the ferocity of thunderstorms, but this one was every bit as strong as the ones we get in Maryland.

We launched next day and drifted past the historic Round Barn at Knoxland Farm, then around the Great Oxbow and Cohass Meadows (mile 149). We stopped for a rest at the site of the Bedell Covered Bridge State Park (mile 156). All that remains are the stone abutments and bridge pier in the middle of the river, which is ironic considering that a six-year restoration of the old bridge in 1979 was destroyed three months before the grand reopening in a freak windstorm. Not long after, we landed at Vaughn Meadow Campsite (mile 157) completing our shortest day of 12 miles. Vaughn Meadow is a large sandy site on a double flood terrace amongst groves of silver maples. It had the fanciest privy of the trip, complete with a canvas shelter that did double duty as a bird blind and not one but four deodorizers. Friday being the Fourth of July, but not a very bright day weather-wise, we did not have high expectations for fireworks displays. However, as soon as the sun went down, the sky lit up with Roman Candles,

sky rockets, and every description of aerial bombs from all directions. I spent quieter nights on the Gun Line off the DMZ in Viet Nam.

The weather improved next morning, and after a breakfast of pancakes, bacon, and hash, we were out on the river again. This section runs by a series of high granite cliffs on the Vermont side from Sawyers Ledge above Bradford to High Peak near Thetford. While there are supposedly Peregrine Falcons restored to these cliffs, we couldn't see any from the river.

There is not much current in this stretch (the Wilder Dam supposedly pools water for 42 miles upriver), so the slog in the face of the wind convinced us to pull in at Pastures Campground (mile 171) at Orford, N.H., after only 14 miles. We had called the campground earlier in the week and were dubious they would have any room on the 4th of July weekend, but when Laurel heard we were "river rats" she said they'd find us a corner, and only charge us \$10 a night. When we arrived, some cancellations gave us a prime spot on a nice grassy lawn next to the river. Unfortunately, no trees to hold up my camping hammock, so I had to pitch it as a low-slung tent (more of a bivy sac with mosquito netting). We walked down the road and across the bridge to Fairlee, Vt. where we stocked up on fresh fruit and bought subs for a nice change from dehydrated dinners.

You would think July 5th might be a quiet night, but apparently the bad weather on the 4th stifled folks' explosive urges because the 5th was another night of fireworks. It did quiet down eventually. In the morning, while the rest of the camp slept, I woke to a hissing sound and looked up as a colorful hot air balloon drifted over from the east, crossing the river at treetop level, then turning on the gas to ascend the Palisades behind Fairlee. The balloon, the green and rocky mountain, the mirror-like water, and the Morey Bridge made a beautiful picture.

We had planned a second night at Pastures Campground, but with a cool, fair wind from the north, we decided to pack

up and head downriver again. We ducked into Clay Brook, under the Edgell Covered Bridge at mile 174, because the guide book said moose had been seen there. It was pretty, but the moose wasn't on duty.

We passed the Ompompanoosuc River coming in at mile 187 from the west, and shortly thereafter saw a swimmer in the river pushing what looked like an inflatable kayak. Rescue instincts kicking in, we altered course and paddled hard to her, only to have her laugh and tell us she always used a little float to keep her up. We chatted, then sheepishly bid farewell. A bit later we landed at the Ledyard Canoe Club dock in Hanover, N.H., at mile 191.

John Ledyard is Dartmouth's most famous drop out. In May 1773, he cut down a white pine, fashioned his own dugout canoe and paddled away for good, starting a life of adventure that included sailing with Captain Cook, working with John Paul Jones on a fur trading scheme, traveling overland across Russia and Siberia, and finally dying by accidental poisoning in Cairo in 1789. The Ledyard Canoe Club has a race downriver every year to commemorate his departure. We asked if we could pull out and unload in their parking lot for our pick up and they were obliging. We then paddled downriver a mile to our last camp on Gilman Island (mile 193). On Sunday afternoon, the river was alive with canoes and kayaks. We had conversations with several who dropped in to use the privy, and watched a war canoe race. Later we hiked to the north end of the island and visited with a mother and her kids using the nice little log cabin rented by the club.

We decided to end our trip here as the river was getting a bit too civilized for our tastes, with speed boats and bass boats becoming more common. The nature of the river had changed considerably in the 156 miles we had traveled.

Monday morning we finished the pancake mix, put on our cleanest go-to-town clothes, paddled upstream to Hanover, and walked up the hill into town. We did a Cook's tour of Dartmouth College. Dartmouth has a very active Outdoor Club because of the



The Fairlee Palisades. Photo by Dave Isbell.

river, the Appalachian Trail, which crosses through town, and long winters for skiing, snowshoeing, and other winter sports. We window-shopped, browsed bookstores, and had a nice lunch before paddling back to camp, just ahead of the rain and a brief thunder storm.

On Tuesday, we packed up in a misty fog and bade tearful goodbye to the river. We threaded our long canoe through the legions of crew out rowing in the early morning and landed once again at the Ledyard Canoe Club for our final portage up the hill. A few minutes after nine a.m., Robin hove into sight and we loaded up and headed out on the long road home.

Note for kayakers:

While canoes are the best means of paddling in the rockier and shallower northern stretches, much of the route we covered could have easily been done in kayaks, including most of the cartable portages around the breached and working dams. Kayaks would have been preferred in the long pools behind the dams with little or no current and persistent head winds (usually not very strong). The stretch from the Ryegate Dam at mile 137 to the Wilder Dam at

mile 195 is 58 miles of portage-free paddling that could easily be done as a multi-day kayak camping trip.


Connecticut River Paddling Trail

connecticutriverpaddlerstrail.org/. Its Waterproof Recreation Map and Guide can be purchased from this site.

Connecticut River Watershed Council

www.ctriver.org. This site has much useful information on the river, including *The Connecticut River Boating Guide, Source to Sea*, which is available here.

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