Kennebec River Paddle Section Descriptions

Intro

In July of 2024, Rivers for Change Ambassador Chris Morgan and team paddled source to sea down the Kennebec River. They have created a Kennebec Paddle Trail map and corresponding descriptions of the river sections..

PLEASE practice LEAVE NO TRACE principles, assess your paddling skills, and follow ACA Best Practices when undertaking a paddling adventure of any kind!

Map

Kennebec River Google Map: River Access, Camping and Food Map

Kennebec Section 1 – Moosehead Lake East Outlet to Indian Pond Boat Launch

Also known as the East Outlet, this 4 mile section gives you the feeling of a true wilderness paddle along with brief glimpses of its industrial past with various sections of cribbing that still channelize the current. The flow is controlled by a dam and has very few tributaries to increase the flow along the stretch. The minimum recommended flow to navigate a whitewater craft is 1200 cfs. There are multiple put in options which include the boat launch on the eastern side of the river on route 6. It is possible to walk your craft up the dirt road to Wilson's on the Lake following side trails that bring you down to the river.

The first few rapids are shallow which require some maneuvering around shoals. Fly fisherman wading on the banks and even on these shoals are a common site. The second rapid starts wide then falls off to the right but the deepest route seemed to be the middle since the right was littered with pour overs at the 1200 cfs release. A few beautiful campsites will be seen on river right after this rapid and can be driven into. The remaining rapids will be similar in nature as they are simple read and run Class 1-2 (depending on flow). The most significant rapid on this section is the final drop into Indian Pond. The river makes a right turn which is where the lake comes into sight. The feature is a slab that extends most of the way across the river but has a few openings especially in the center. See picture.

Once in the lake, continue straight through a few islands and stay along the left shore. The boat launch will be about a mile from where the river dumps into the pond.

It is possible to paddle across Indian Pond to Harris Station but requires a 9 mile paddle with very few camping options until Indian Pond Campground. Some of the islands have flat areas to set up camp but they are not maintained and could be privately owned.

Put In Coordinates: 45.58324, -69.71901

Take Out Coordinates: 45.54588, -69.77013

Flow Information: https://www.safewaters.com/facility/moosehead-east-west-outlet

Kennebec Section 2 – Indian Pond (Harris Station) to Carry Brook

This 4 mile section is the most popular whitewater run in northern New England and for good reason. The FERC agreement with Brookfield (the owner operator of Harris Station Dam), guarantees a minimum commercial flow of 4800 cfs daily from 10am-1pm between mid May to Mid October. Typically flow in recent years has been about 5000 cfs which allows for a slightly smoother ride. Commercial flow, as the locals call it, would be considered big water in most other rivers throughout the US with very few exceptions. There are 6 guaranteed high water or turbine test days when the flow is increased to 8400 cfs offering a true big water experience which is very similar to some of the rapids paddled in the Grand Canyon or Ottawa.

Flow is not limited to these two levels. Depending on power needs, snowmelt or rain, flow can vary quite drastically. In normal years, a fish flow of 340 cfs is released when not at commercial flow. Other common flows are 700 cfs, 1400 cfs and 2400 cfs. In the Summer months when Boston is in the 90's, 8400 cfs becomes a nice surprise for an hour or so in the late afternoon. These all offer different types of runs and the rapids can either get easier or more difficult. It is thought that somewhere between 2400 and 3500 is the sweet spot which allows for a more technical run with rocks and interesting hydraulics that give the river its Class 4 rating. This section can be lapped by putting shuttle vehicles at Carry Brook but it is encouraged that you take note of when the gate is locked at the put in so that your vehicle is not locked at the put in overnight. You can still park outside the gate if you think you will be running late and walking your gear the half mile or so to the "stairs". The following description is for the commercial release at 5,000 cfs.

The Rapids:

The Throat and Taster:

After walking your boat/gear down the stairs and putting on directly below the dam, you will notice steep walls lining the river. These will start to constrict over the next few hundred yards until you see a rock ledge on river right. This is the throat. Just after this, the river slightly widens and offers up various play waves on both sides of the river. If you aren't into surfing, just continue down and enjoy the wave trains and get warmed up for what is about to come. As the river starts to turn to the right, there will be large eddies on both sides of the river to group back up, especially if you have a beginner in the group. The next three rapids are nearly continuous and if someone swims, they could potentially be in the water for about a mile.

Rock Garden:

Just after the end of taster, there will be some calm but moving water with slower water/eddies on left and right. The river will start to turn right. Starting in the center to center right will allow a set up for a fun yet irregular wave train on the lower right side of the rapid. River left has 3 very large holes. The first two are often surfed by experienced kayakers while the third hole is somewhat retentive and shallow. They are quite the sight at fishflow since the rocks that make these holes are quite large.

Big Momma and the Sisters:

After you pass through the wave train at the bottom of Rock Garden, the river calms down for about 30 yards even though it is still moving quite quickly. About a hundred yards downstream on river right is another ledge which marks Big Momma. There is a brief series of large waves, a very short calm section and then more irregular waves leading into the main hit in Big Momma. To properly hit the wave, start center to center right as the current will drift you to the right. Big Momma is quite obvious being a large crashing wave. Punch the wave square and be ready for 3 more waves that occasionally crash and also get influenced by eddy water coming off the wall.

The Alleyway:

After another 20 or so yards, the river will start to turn back to the left. There is a wave train that starts in the center, a wave that can be punched which leads to slack water on the left and a hole on the right. The first two options are great to set up for your first time. The right side hole tends to flip beginners and can line you up to hit a rock called “Raft Ripper”. If you started left, work your way back into the wave train. You will notice the river turning to the right again and the waves becoming more and more irregular, crashing, and coming in diagonally off the walls. Whitewasher is the feature on river left as the current pushes off the wall which has been known to flip rafts. Just down stream is Kahuna which is another wide breaking wave. The river slightly widens again for a brief moment to catch your breathe before starting the lower alleyway. The easy line is center to center left down the wave train then pinching back to the right as you enter Cathedral Eddy.

Cathedral Eddy and Z Turn:

If you made it to Cathedral Eddy, you have made it through most of the difficult whitewater on this stretch. Take a break, enjoy the steep gorge walls, play in some of the eddies and boils, or share some stories with your group about some carnage that may have happened. The calm section will end with a straightforward rapid called Z Turn. There are a few surf waves at the top which end in a waves train pushing you into a wall. Slowly work to the left with the current as the river makes a 90 degree turn to the left. There will be some choppy water but you will be more focused on the horizon line marking Magic Falls about 100 yards downstream.

Magic:

The largest and most irregular waves in the Kennebec Gorge call Magic home. From top to bottom, this rapid takes about a minute to run. Most start about 15’ off the left wall with a slight angle toward 1 o’clock. If you hit the diagonal well, it will pull your nose back to the left and square up into house wave which is the most abrupt hit on the river. Once through that, be ready for offset waves and boils of all different sizes. Be aware of the large hole in the middle called maytag. It is rather shallow and most should not run it until the water is over 7500 cfs. The left side right off the bank has a few shallow rocks that should be avoided.

Once below Magic, you can relax as the river flattens out but still carries some good speed. The next rapids are all read and run starting with Swimmers. A few hundred yards after swimmers on river right is Endless Summer which is a fantastic wave to learn how to surf on. The eddy below the wave leads you into Dead Stream Falls, a tributary of the Kennebec. Just below the Falls is Dead Stream Rapid which is a fantastic, splashy, and fun class 3 with wave trains, some fun waves, and a few holes to play around.

On river left you will see a staircase coming down to the rivers edge, this is Carry Brook, a take out for the upper or a put in for the lower section.

Put In Coordinates: 45.45836, -69.86607

Take Out Coordinates: 45.4212, -69.90497

Flow Information: https://www.safewaters.com/facility/harris-indian-pond

Kennebec Section 3 –Carry Brook to the Forks

"The Lower" as the locals call it, is a 9 mile section that starts with some straight forward class two rapids followed by a fun and again splashy Class 3 called Black Brook then slowly gets easier the farther you float downstream. This is a great section for beginners as the water is still fairly deep in case there are swims or many rolls. There are a few take out options but most get out at "the Ballfields" which is a large parking area next to West Forks Campground and is also an easy walk to Barry's General Store where folks can get food while waiting for others to run shuttle. Another take out option is called "Crusher" which is another mile or so down on river left.

Put In Coordinates: 45.4212, -69.90497

Take Out Coordinates: 45.33815, -69.96665

Flow Information: https://www.safewaters.com/facility/harris-indian-pond

Kennebec Section 4 – Forks to Caratunk

A fantastic tubing or beginner paddleboard section. This section is a mix of Class 1 and moving water. You can put in at the Ballfields in the Forks or Crusher and either take out at the Caratunk take out or if you want to paddle a little flat water, the Caratunk boat launch on Wyman Lake. If you choose to take out at the boat launch, you also float by a common bald eagle nesting site and the only place where the Appalachian Trail requires a ferry to cross a body of water. Keep in mind before putting on, the water release from the dam takes about 3 hours to reach the Forks.

Put In Coordinates: 45.33815, -69.96665

Take Out Coordinates: 45.24025, -69.99566

Flow Information: https://www.safewaters.com/facility/harris-indian-pond

Kennebec Section 5 – Wyman Lake

This is a reservoir backed up by Wyman Dam. It is roughly 15 miles long. If you can catch it on a still day, it is a beautiful lake with a handful of nice islands to rest on but beware of strong headwinds as you could be in for a long day. Be aware of debris floating if releases out of Harris Station are high or during

periods rain. The take out is on the river left side of Wyman Dam and the portage will take some time walking down a trail.

Put In Coordinates: 45.21065, -69.98903

Take Out Coordinates: 45.07563, -69.90148

Flow Information: Flatwater

Kennebec Section 6 – Moscow to Solon

This is another great section for tubing or beginner paddlers. You can start below the dam or put in at the Bingham boat launch a few hundred yards downstream. There are a few channels that you can choose from so it could be worth trying a few different routes. They could also slightly change depending on flooding. There is a rail trail that runs along the left side if you don't want to float across the reservoir. Once in the reservoir, you will notice the sorting stones from the log drives and also some power lines for the CMP power corridor.

Put In Coordinates: 45.05313, -69.88603

Take Out Coordinates: 44.96352, -69.86579

Flow Information: https://www.safewaters.com/facility/wyman

Kennebec Section 7 – Solon to Madison

This would be a great float in a canoe. The put in is just below the Caratunk Falls Dam in Solon. It is mostly moving water with a few more channels to choose from. Staying left is probably the best option. It really starts to slow down as the Carrabassett River enters in Anson. There is a takeout in North Anson or a flatwater paddle of about 5 miles to Madison. The take out in Madison is marked by a large dock on river left.

Put In Coordinates: 44.95704, -69.87043

North Anson Access: 44.85822, -69.87279

Take Out Coordinates: 44.80452, -69.88659

Flow Information: https://www.safewaters.com/facility/williams

Kennebec Section 8 – Madison to Skowhegan

This section will vary greatly depending on flow from the dam. There are a few put in options below the dam depending on the craft used or water level. The very first rapid below the old spillway is a shallow class 3 with a few offset holes. The second put in which is a 50-100 yards down stream starts out with the lower end of that rapid which is still shallow but a class 1. The first few miles will be a mix of moving

slack water and some moving water. At super high flows, one of the best river waves in New England forms at the put in. After a few miles you will see the Sandy River enter on river right. You will also notice the river bed starts to become “sandy” and the river starts to flatten. The next few miles will change depending on flooding from the Sandy and trees could be scattered on the banks and in the shallows. From here, the Kennebec is a slow moving river until Skowhegan which is about 13 miles downstream. If you don’t want to go all the way to Skowhegan, it is possible to take out in Norridgewock which is about 8 miles from the Sandy.

Put In Coordinates: 44.78645, -69.8887

Take Out Coordinates: 44.76274, -69.72048

Flow Information: https://waterdata.usgs.gov/monitoring-location/01047150/#parameterCode=00065&period=P7D&showMedian=false

Kennebec Section 9 – Skowhegan Gorge

This is a park and play section that is about a mile long which flows through the heart of Skowhegan. The put in is river right just below the second dam. Construction will begin in 2025 on a whitewater park which will have various features for all types of craft. Be careful as you exit the gorge as there is some metal in the water middle left (at the time of this writing in 2024). Be sure to stop in to Skowhegan Outdoors! The trail back up is river right.

Put In Coordinates: 44.76384, -69.71675

Take Out Coordinates: 44.77005, -69.70788

Flow Information: N/A

Kennebec Section 10 – Skowhegan – Waterville

This 18 mile section is mostly slow moving water. There are a handful of islands and some shallows which tend to catch large trees which were moved from the highwater. There is a boat launch in Hinckley if you need a resupply point or want to shorten the trip by about 8 miles. The next launch is at the Shawmut Dam another 5 miles downstream. The put in at Shawmut Dam will put you into a shallow possible class 1 rapid. It may channelize at certain levels but will start to deepen as it goes. As the river turns left below the I-95 bridge, you will notice a horizon line. This marks the start of Fairfield Rapids. We stayed right as it looked the deepest but think that there are probably a few fun lines depending on the flow. Another channel splits off to the right which again, looked shallow so we stayed in the current that brought us down a fun little drop. There are a few more easy “rapids” before flattening out again as the reservoir from the Waterville dam started to form. There are some rocky islands in this section that looked very much like the islands seen on the coast. From here, it is about a mile to the boat launch above the first dam in Waterville. Take out River left just after the old bridge abutment.

Put In Coordinates: 44.76384, -69.71675

Take Out Coordinates: 44.57122, -69.61021

Flow Information: N/A

Kennebec Section 11 – Waterville to Augusta

There are various put ins and take out options on this section and it can easily be extended. The distance between the two towns is about 18 miles and can easily be split in half by starting or ending in Sidney. Keep in mind, there are no longer any dams downstream so you can start to see migratory fish and depending on the tides, you may catch a little extra current. We were told this section has very dense bald eagle population and we can confirm that. There are eagles everywhere. This section requires a little bit of skill reading water as there are channels that are deeper, and some simple Class 1 rapids scattered throughout. In June and July, you can easily see the sturgeon jumping. There seemed to be more between Sidney and Augusta. These fish are huge (4-5' long) and can jump a few feet out of the water to feast on the insect hatches. Although this section connects two of the larger cities in Maine, it feels quite remote for most of the trip. Once you get close to Augusta, you will notice the old foundation of the Edwards Dam, which was the first power producing dam that the government declared to be more valuable being removed than to keep in service. It was removed in 1999. There is a takeout at the dam and also in town on river left. You can also continue 2 more miles down stream to take out in Hallowell.

Put In Coordinates: 44.53896, -69.63168

Take Out Coordinates: 44.31383, -69.77147

Flow Information: N/A – Tides start to have influence.

Kennebec Section 12 – Augusta to Richmond

This 18 mile section is mostly all flatwater and is influenced by the tide. There are multiple put ins and take outs in Hallowell, Gardiner, and (other town). When planning for this section, it is very important to keep the wind and tides in mind as there are a few long straight sections that can become a wind tunnel. There are a few islands to pull off if the weather rolls in or a break is needed.

Put In Coordinates: 44.31383, -69.77147

Take Out Coordinates: 44.08715, -69.79923

Flow Information: N/A – Tides have an influence here.

Kennebec Section 13 – Richmond To Bath

This is the section where the Kennebec starts to feel coastal and the influence of the tide is very noticeable. The river splits around a large island and then dumps into Merrymeeting Bay. Merrymeeting Bay is a large estuary that marks the confluence of multiple rivers with the Kennebec and Androscoggin

being the largest. The exit is a 200 yard wide opening called the Chops which has some incredibly sporadic currents and exposed rocks depending on the tide level. If you catch the tide going out, this will be a super fun and fast section as the tide and all of the water from multiple rivers is racing out to the sea. There are various islands to take breaks on if needed but be aware of your location and the tides. It is about 15 miles from Richmond to the boat launch in South Bath after the shipyard on river right. Do not get too close to the shipyard as the coast guard will be aware of your presence.

Put In Coordinates: 44.08715, -69.79923

Take Out Coordinates: 43.88905, -69.81696

Flow Information: N/A - Tides have an influence here.

Kennebec Section 14 – Bath to Popham Beach

This 11 mile section is quite coastal. If you put in at the South Bath boat launch with an outgoing tide, you can be at the beach in about 2 hours. The current can be quite fast which allows you to focus on the scenery more than the paddling. You will go through another gorge and a few larger bays before Fort Popham comes into site. Be aware of the seals, osprey, and other wildlife. Once at the beach, be careful as the currents can easily pull you out to see. It is advised to take out on the right side of the fort where there is a parking area.

Put In Coordinates: 43.88905, -69.81696

Take Out Coordinates: 43.7363, -69.79452

Flow Information: N/A - Tides have an influence here.