

Canoeing the Cass River's Upper Reaches – The Journey Begins

By Tom Lounsbury

That Saturday morning a couple weeks ago featured some chilling winds which were spitting snowflakes when my group launched their canoes and kayaks into the Cass River's fast-flowing spring current. This was near the Cemetery Road Bridge just south of Cass City and our little flotilla entailed 4 canoes and 5 kayaks, carrying 12 folks wielding paddles. Our goal was to reach Chippewa Landing just south of Caro by that afternoon, and this was the beginning of day-trips to complete a journey from Cass City, all the way downstream to Saginaw, to commemorate the Cass River becoming an official water trail, thanks to a great group known as the Cass River Greenway (www.cassriver.org). I'm estimating this will entail at least 4 days, because the Cass River isn't a tiny stream by any means.

The Cass River is divided into two stretches, the Upper Reaches which are upstream from Caro to the river's very beginnings, and the Lower Reaches which are from Caro on downstream to where the Cass eventually empties into the Saginaw River. My personal viewpoint has the Caro Dam (which

was constructed in 1906) as being the dividing point between the two stretches. In reality, both the Upper and Lower Reaches offer their own distinctly unique atmosphere, of which my group entailing avid river adventurers was ready to see and experience firsthand.

Native Americans had used the Cass River as a key travel corridor for eons, which is evidenced by the ancient Petroglyphs on the North Branch of the Cass in Sanilac County. There is also the primitive "tool shop" on the Cass's banks just a short ways downstream from Cass City where prehistoric Indians created the tools needed for survival from chert (a stone which can be chipped and shaped similar to flint).

The Upper Reaches entails two river tributaries which are the North Branch and the South Branch which converge to become one just south of Cass City. Prior to Cass City becoming a place on the map, this area was known simply as "The Forks", which was a notable elk hunting hotspot for hunters coming upstream from Saginaw into the Thumb wilderness prior to the Civil War, and why Cass City's township is named "Elkland". Although the Cass River is named after Lewis Cass (who signed the Treaty of Saginaw with Native Americans on the banks of the Cass near present day Bridgeport in 1819), there is no doubt in my mind Cass City is named after the river whose north and south branches join close by and floated a lot of logs downstream to feed hungry sawmills to create the necessary lumber for a fast growing young country. This timbering aspect and the Cass River played an important role to Cass City's early beginnings.

When it comes to the Cass River's extensive winding trail downstream westerly through the Thumb, I consider myself as being an "Upper Reaches" river-person. Although I've canoed in years past all the way downstream to Frankenmuth, my main

association since early childhood has been primarily in the Upper Reaches, which I have come to know quite well, and I first began canoeing this stretch nearly 60 years ago. Depending upon the spring runoff, this can often offer up to 3 months of canoeing opportunities, and also often again in the fall when autumn rains might frequently occur. I've always enjoyed paddling on an Upper Reaches fall color tour whenever the Cass River offers it.

The majority of adventuresome folks accompanying me on this recent Upper Reaches journey had never done it before, and I let them know the first few miles travelling downstream from Cass City were going to be a "wild ride" due to the distinct fall to the river entailing a multitude of rapids, which I have come to dearly love. I truly look forward to "shooting" them with my canoe each spring and I have come to know certain boulders quite well, a familiarity achieved from doing my best to avoid colliding with them for almost 6 decades. I can remember the time my canoe became hung up in a "sweeper" (a fallen tree which can add a whole new dimension to fast flowing rapids) and the current was so strong, it was nearly impossible to dislodge the canoe. The energy and power of the current through this particular stretch are nothing to take for granted.

Almost as if on cue, ospreys began escorting us down the river shortly after our launch, and we lost count of the number of bald eagles along our entire route. We also saw a multitude of songbirds and waterfowl (two naturalists paddling their canoe with us, Miles Willard of Mayville and Dan Duso of Bay City, identified 55 different bird species, some of which are quite rare) and though the river otters weren't seen, their notable "otter slide" into the river was quite evident. A herd of 10 deer also crossed the river in front of us, and deer were often seen along

the entire route. By midmorning the sun came out and it turned out to be an absolutely gorgeous day to be on the river.

In our group were two 14 year old young men. Hugh Walker of Cass City was the bowman for his grandfather Bob Walker of Kingston in their canoe. Grandpa Bob is a seasoned Upper Reaches river-person, and grandson Hugh knows how to skillfully wield a canoe paddle.

Kyle Fall was in a single-person kayak, as were his grandparents, Russ and Peggy Fall of Millington, and they all knew how to really handle a kayak. Kyle gave me the impression he was actually a part of his bright yellow kayak, and I was amazed by his skilled ability to paddle all around us, from bank to bank, in search of unique rocks which he collected.

Also in a kayak was Larry Kolb of Cass City, who just like me, grew up appreciating what the Upper Reaches of the Cass River has to offer in recreational opportunities. A skilled and seasoned paddler of both canoes and kayaks, Kolb has canoed and kayaked all over the country and Canada, and still considers the Cass his favorite river. According to him, the Cass River and its recreational capabilities is one of the best kept secrets which must be shared with others.

In another kayak was Terry Fahner of Sebewaing. Clearly a very skilled kayaker, this was her first adventure on the Upper Reaches of the Cass, and she obviously enjoyed every bit of our journey. The fact is, I have long considered myself a dyed in the wool canoe guy, but in watching the kayakers on this adventure and their ability to deftly maneuver around obstacles gave me a whole new and profound respect for kayaks. Needless to say folks, I'm going to get me one.

My wingman (no doubt to keep an eye on the “old man”, probably due to his mother’s orders) on this journey was my son Jake in a one-person canoe. You can say Jake is an Upper Reaches river-person too, because he has been experiencing the Cass ever since I put a life jacket on him as a toddler, attached a rope to him and me, and towed him behind me while I wade-fished. He and his two brothers can readily remember being tucked into the center of our canoe while my wife Ginny and I did our annual Memorial Day paddle down the Cass.

Riding in the front of my canoe was former Cass City resident John Scollon, who is now a professional photographer. His goal is to film my entire journey from Cass City to Saginaw, for the Cass River Greenway. I’m looking forward to seeing what he filmed in the Upper Reaches rapids, while we veered around boulders and even bumped into a couple, which I have long remembered as being very “personable” big rocks. I was pretty sure John’s knuckles were a bit white at times while he gripped his camera’s tripod in the bow of my canoe. He was definitely a seasoned Upper Reaches river-person when we beached our canoe at Chippewa Landing near Caro.

All present on that day agreed it was a great adventure on a fabulous river. Naturalist Dan Duso capped everything when he declared that the Upper Reaches of the Cass River reminded him of the AuSable River. I fully agree.

For me, I had a fine time with truly wonderful people who readily assisted other folks on the river whenever needed without hesitation, and it was clear they fully enjoyed the experience. I will do river adventures with all of them, anywhere and anytime.

Come to think of it, I will likely be doing just that, as they were all saying they were looking forward to the next leg of the

journey, which will represent paddling down the Lower Reaches of the historic Cass River.

Needless to say folks this story is just getting started.