

Jenn McDonald of Meaford paddles an open part of Beaver River. ▶

Beaver River Kayak Adventure

Written & Photographed by Sandra J. Howe

Paddling quietly over a deep, dark river pool, I see a black torpedo flash past my kayak. It emerges into flight directly in front of me, spraying water from its wings and lifts into a dead elm. It settles there with the other cormorants, spreading slate grey wings to dry. Maybe it caught a small fish while diving.

Kayaking the scenic Beaver River offers incredible natural beauty and abundant wildlife. It is a wonderful paddle any time the river is ice-free but summer is the best season because of the wild young. Waterfowl, raptors, heron, egret, beaver, muskrat, raccoons, and deer inhabit the silver maple swamp. The young are often very curious, and easy to spot, though elusive to photograph. For a novice or family outing, the Beaver

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▲ A cormorant that did not fly up as the kayakers passed.



Beaver River ▶

River is a perfect first choice for paddling. It is very accessible but much of it feels like true wilderness, not unlike the scenery encountered by early settlers.

The Beaver River meanders through the heart of Grey County's spectacular Beaver Valley. Formed by a much larger pre-glacial river, Beaver Valley cuts into the Niagara Escarpment for a full 40 km from Thornbury to near Flesherton. The smaller Beaver River as it exists today has headwaters in Grey Highlands, near Feversham. Several sites along the river have been used for power through the decades. Lake Eugenia, high on the Escarpment, was formed in 1915 by a hydro-electric dam built on the Beaver River. This power plant still feeds into the Ontario Hydro grid. Eugenia, Kimberley, Heathcote, Slabtown, Clarksburg, and Thornbury all used waterpower from the Beaver River to drive enterprises such as flour and saw mills. Beaver Valley history and development are intimately linked to the river.

Grey Sauble Conservation Authority monitors the Beaver River. They provide some information, signage and access to assist paddlers. Grey-Bruce Tourism has an excellent paddling brochure. Free Spirit Tours, located on the river at Heathcote, are friendly, and helpful. They have outfitting and shuttle services, and do a major river cleanup each year to keep the waterway open for paddlers. This is essential as deadfall, and logjams create major

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◀ Green frogs abound on the banks near Epping Sideroad.

John Vanderburgh of Paisley looks up at cormorants perched in a standing dead tree. ▶





▲ A juvenile bald eagle takes flight over the river.

hazards for kayaks, canoes, and SUPs, short for “stand up paddle boards.”

Access Points

Between Kimberley and Slabtown, the Beaver River is navigable for most of the spring, summer and autumn. High rainfall or drought can affect water levels so be sure to check local conditions before paddling. Always use appropriate gear and safety equipment to avoid trouble. There are four public access points in the navigable section with a total distance of 18 km on the river. All access points are marked off Grey Road 13, and have good signage and parking. Access #1, just north of Kimberley, offers about five hours of leisurely, downstream paddling to Heathcote. Be sure

to dress for the weather; use sunscreen; carry bug repellent. Don't forget water, and a picnic lunch; good food is essential to great adventures!

All set for an amazing day on the river, meet your paddling friends in Heathcote and transfer gear to their vehicle. Leave a vehicle in Heathcote for shuttle service at day's end. Driving south up Beaver Valley, the dolostone walls of the Niagara Escarpment tower above you forming the valley walls. Old Baldy Lookout is a high cliff face above as you park at Access #1, and unload equipment. Settle into your kayaks and the river's tranquility as you float past ancient silver maples that provide cooling shade. It is so peaceful on the river.



▲ Passing an impressive, massive silver maple on the river's edge.

Raccoons and other wildlife inhabit the silver maple swamp and are easy to spot but difficult to photograph. ▶

Wildlife

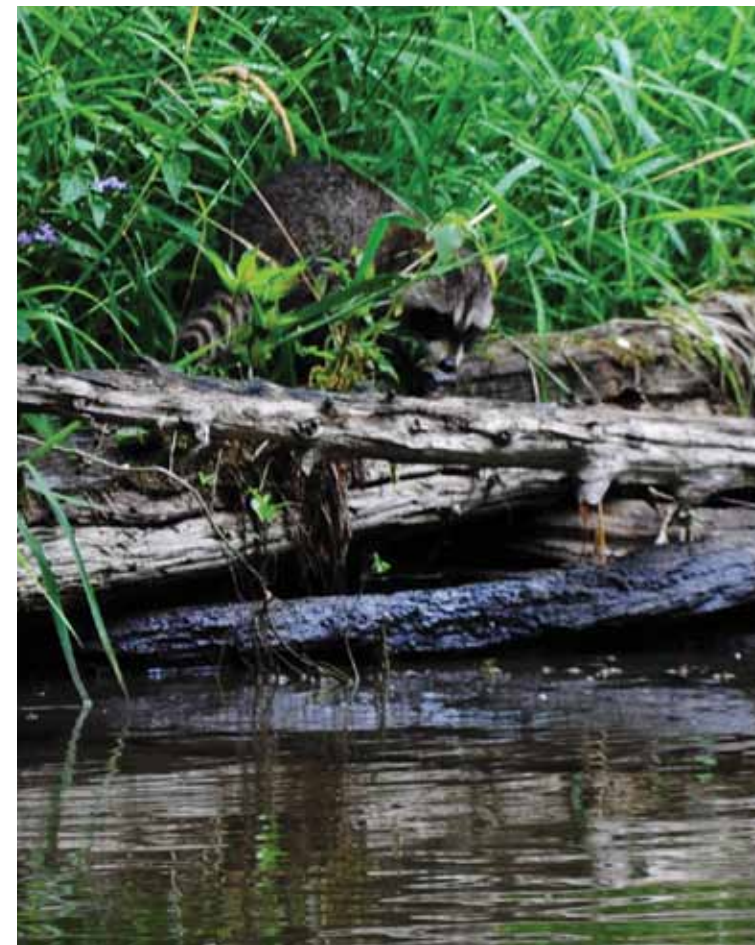
This section from Access #1 to Access #2 at Epping Sideroad is wide, lazy, and winding. It is an easy three-hour paddle to cover the 10 km. This area is deep swamp with massive trees overhanging the river, and little dry land to be seen. Beaver, the river's namesake, are plentiful; watch for beaver-cut trees, dams, lodges, and curious kits watching you. Mature and juvenile bald eagles seem to live in this section.

In high water times, be attentive to follow the mainstream, and not get lost. When encountering fallen trees in the river, first look for a way to paddle around. Since there is seldom dry land for portaging, you may need to get out of your kayak on the fallen tree, and

haul your boat over. This often involves someone falling in which is seldom dangerous and often hilarious. Expect to get wet and muddy!

Epping Sideroad, exit left bank, just after the bridge, is a great place to land, stretch, and have lunch. Be careful when walking because frogs are everywhere at this point. From here to Heathcote, Access #3, is another five km or two hours. The river and landscape change character here: the river narrows and flows quicker; banks are steeper with more cedar trees; farms are visible on the higher, drier land. You have left wilderness, and entered private property so please keep to the river. The river bottom here is

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▲ Egrets are lovely but too shy to let paddlers come close.

more gravelly which means you may see fish, and you may want to get out to splash or swim. Watch for a small swimming hole where Mill Creek flows into the Beaver at about one hour downstream from Epping Sideroad. On a hot summer day, it feels wonderful to float in the cooling water.

After Mill Creek the river begins a series of tight bends all the way to Heathcote. There is a beautiful, old steel bridge hung with flower boxes at Sideroad 22. You are close to Grey Road 13 now, and begin to hear traffic noise. Just before Heathcote, the river bends in great “S” curves in a farm field of livestock. The

Waterfowl, raptors, heron, egret, beaver, muskrat, racoons and deer inhabit the silver maple swamp along Beaver River.

cattle and horses watch paddlers with interest. They won't harm you, and be careful not to startle them. Exit in Heathcote, right bank, before the bridge, at Free Spirit Tours and your shuttle vehicle. Just down the street is Blackbird Pie, a great bakery with treats to celebrate your paddle adventure.

Each Beaver River journey is unique. Muskrats cruise by silently with long tails waving on the water surface; their mudbank homes line the river's

edge. A family of young raccoon gathers clams along the shore. Heron and egret stand silent on stick legs in the shallows, preparing to dive for fish. Watch for a glimpse of the majestic bald eagles who have settled here. Wildlife is abundant but you must be attentive to see it before it sees you.

The flora is less elusive: waterlilies, ferns, reeds, cattail, great trees, and the spectacular

cardinal flower. Exploring the Beaver River offers a gentle and fascinating adventure in nature's beauty and bounty. **NEV**

Sandra J. Howe writes, photographs, plays and guides adventure tours in Grey-Bruce. Her last feature for Niagara Escarpment Views was "Keeping the Light: Assisting at Cabot Head Lightstation" in Summer 2013. For more, see howesandraj.blogspot.com or Grey-Bruce Adventours on facebook.

*Eagle Adventures also offers kayak & canoe programs on Beaver River & elsewhere.
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◀ Cardinal flowers provide a spectacular punch of colour among the green banks.