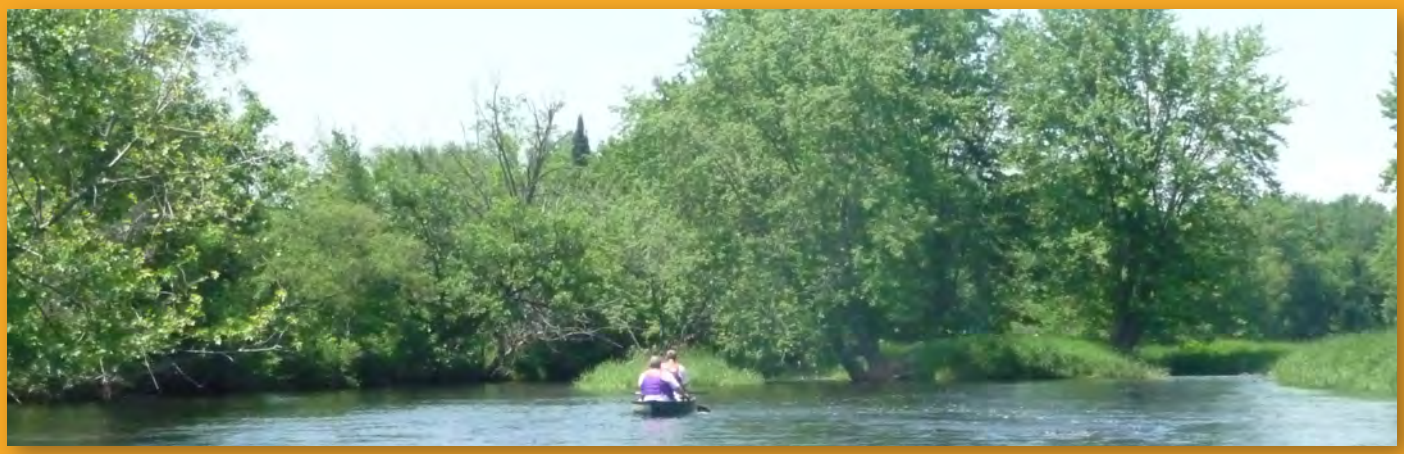
# Lower Eau Claire River Water Trail



## The Adventure in Our Own Backyard

The Village of Weston

Marathon County

# Our Vision

Our vision is for an enhancement of a Lower Eau Claire River Water Trail that...

- Expands opportunities for safe and fun paddling and floating.
- Grows recreational-based tourism development in the Wausau-Weston-Ringle area.
- Builds on related initiatives, like Wausau's master plan for the Eau Claire River Conservancy.
- Includes safe and well-marked put-in and take-out spots along the river, and advises people on how to get to these spots and navigate once there.
- Connects to and enhances destinations along the river, including parks and conservancies, campgrounds, school forests, and neighborhoods.
- Advances opportunities for land-based trails, picnic spots, and other activities along the river.
- Provides a consistent and appealing image through signage and informational materials.

## What is a water trail?

A designated route for paddling or floating along a waterway with strategically located access points; similar to hiking trails and bikeways but with one difference: **the "trail" already exists.**

## Benefits:

Recreation
Economic
Quality of Life/Health
Education/Information
Resource Stewardship
Community Identity

## Finding A Put-in Spot

Paddling and floating down the lower Eau Claire River is a rite of summer for many residents in the Weston-Wausau-Ringle area. The river offers a natural escape, a range of experiences, a path to healthy living, and most of all, fun! To date, most paddling occurs on an informal basis, sometimes offering a mixed quality of experience and safety. Many area residents are not aware of what the lower Eau Claire River has to offer, and others may be reluctant to canoe or kayak the river. Further, paddling down the river is not on the navigation chart of most visitors to the area.

Much of the proposed water trail goes through the Village of Weston. The trail also goes though parts of Wausau, Schofield, and Ringle, and passes by lands in the hands of scouting organizations, the D.C. Everest School District, and other organizations. This calls for an intergovernmental, collaborative approach to trail conception, development, and implementation.

## Going with the Flow

The idea of a water trail is not a new one, and paddling or floating down the river already provides a special experience for many people each summer.

The river, itself, is of course the most valuable asset. It is navigable from spring until late summer, and has few obstructions. During spring and early summer, when water levels are higher, the river provides an exhilarating experience for beginners and a test for more experienced paddlers. Later in the summer, the river takes on a lazier character, bringing out more first-timers and tubers. Starting in Ringle, then Weston, then Wausau, and finally Schofield, the character of the river shifts. In most places, the views from the water are similar to what they might have been 200 years ago.

There are already several launch sites that many people use each warm summer day. Some, like the County's launch site along Ringle Avenue in Ringle, are well-marked, include at least basic parking, a picnic spot, and a reasonable launch site. Others, like a spot at the County Highway J bridge in Weston, are very informal and not always safe in their present condition. Safety deficiencies at this and other spots often result from little to no parking, heavier car and truck traffic, and very informal or hidden put-in/take-out locations.

The communities along the river, Marathon County, local outfitters, and others also recognize the value and potential of the river in their efforts and plans. For example, the City of Wausau has recently established a master plan for its Eau Claire River Conservancy—City-owned land on the northern shore of the river. The land has a series of oxbow lakes, making it an ideal place to kayak and canoe.

The Village of Weston has, through its 2015 Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan, identified the water trail as a priority initiative. To advance that initiative, the Village has constructed a modern launch and parking lot at the Ross Avenue Bridge (see Fig. 1). This project was supported through grants from Marathon County, the B.A. and Esther Greenheck Foundation, and the Community Foundation of North Central Wisconsin. The Village is exploring similar improvements at Yellow Banks Park and the County Highway J bridge area, which are in need of funding support.

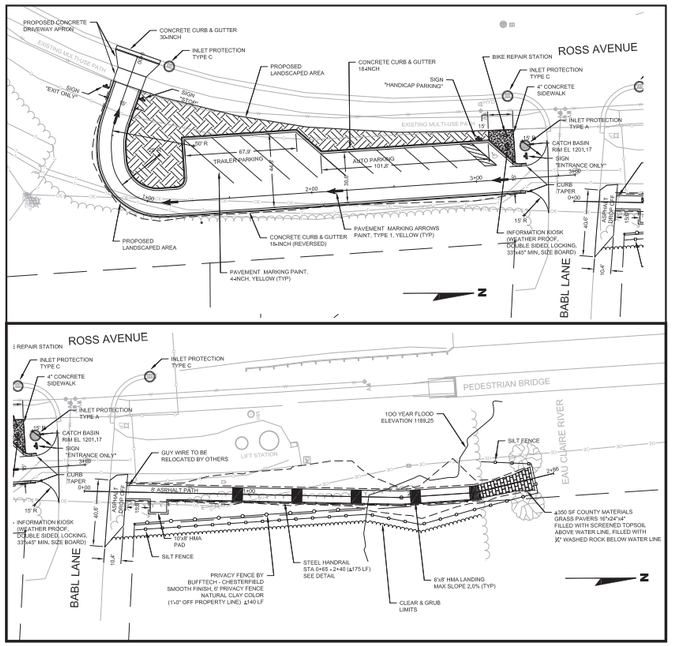



Figure 1: Engineering drawings for Ross Avenue Bridge river access point, including parking area, ramp and river launch, guided recent improvements at this site and may be a model for parking and access improvements at other spots.

**Canoeists on the Kickapoo spent over $1.2 million in rural southwest Wisconsin.* (1999)**

*Johnson, Lindsy "Case Studies of Water Trail Impacts on Rural Communities." Masters Thesis, University of Oregon, 2002. p.102.

## Economic Benefit

The economic impact of recreation water trails has been documented by a number of studies since the early 2000s. For example, in 2012 the Outdoor Industry Foundation estimated that the annual national active outdoor recreation economy, including resources such as hiking trails and water trails, contributed $646 billion to the U.S. economy.[1] In a 2009 study of the economic impact of the Rogue River in Oregon, ECONorthwest found that river-based recreation contributed at least $30 million annually to the surrounding local economies.[2] In 2008, the North Carolina Paddle Tourism Study estimated that paddlers spent more than $1 million dollars annually on paddle trips in North Carolina.[3]

[1] The Outdoor Recreation Economy. 2012. Outdoor Industry Association. https://outdoorindustry.org/pdf/OIA_OutdoorRecEconomyReport2012.pdf May 2012.
[2] Helvoigt, Ted L. ECONorthwest. 2009 Regional Economic Impacts on the Wild and Scenic Rogue River. http://www.oregonwild.org/sites/default/files/pdf-files/Rogue_Economic_Impact_Report.pdf
[3] Beedle, Jennifer. 2008 Paddle Tourism Study: North Carolina State Trails Program. 2008. www.ncparks.gov/About/docs/paddle_report.pdf. June 2012.

This page shows the 15-mile extent of the Lower Eau Claire River Water Trail, existing and proposed access points, distances between points, other key spots along the river, and improvement opportunities. These opportunities focus on parking, ramp, picnic, restroom, and signage/wayfinding improvements for each of the access (put-in/take-out) spots--see details on next page. Some access points require minimal improvements; others require more significant investments to ensure safe and visible access. The map also shows key road and land trail connections, both existing and proposed. Because lands, trails, roads, and other facilities associated with the water trail are under different ownerships, collaborative action is required to realize the full potential of the water trail.

| # on map | Access Point Name | Current Condition of River Access | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | Parking | Ramp | Picnic | Restrooms | Signs / Wayfinding |
| 1 | Club House | on shoulder | unimproved | no | no | no |
| 2 | Riverside School Area | on street | unimproved | no | no | no |
| 3 | Mountain Bay Trail | on shoulder of Ringle Ave | unimproved | yes | no | no |
| 4 | Highway J | on shoulder of County HWY J | unimproved | no | no | no |
| 5 | Planned Park | no current public access | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| 6 | Ryan Street | no current public access | --- | at Kellyland Park | --- | --- |
| 7 | Ross Ave | yes | recently improved | no | porto-let | yes |
| 8 | Yellow Banks Park | yes | recently improved | yes | yes | no |
| 9 | Eau Claire Conservancy | yes | no | yes | no | no |
| 10 | Brooks & Ross Dam | yes | yes | yes | porto-let | no |

**3**- Mountain Bay Trail

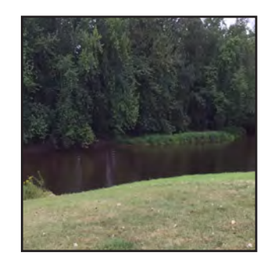
**4** - Highway J

**7** - Ross Ave.

Downriver →

| Access Distance (miles) | | 1 | 3 | 4 | 7 | 8 | 10 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Club House | 1 | | 1.6 | 3.9 | 7.1 | 10.1 | 14.9 |
| Mountain Bay | 3 | 1.6 | | 2.3 | 5.8 | 8.5 | 13.3 |
| Highway J | 4 | 3.9 | 2.3 | | 3.5 | 6.2 | 11 |
| Ross Avenue | 7 | 7.1 | 5.8 | 3.5 | → | 2.7 | 7.5 |
| Yellow Banks Park | 8 | 10.1 | 8.5 | 6.2 | 2.7 | | 4.8 |
| Brooks & Ross Dam | 10 | 14.9 | 13.3 | 11 | 7.5 | 4.8 | |

Downriver ↓



**8** - Yellow Banks Park

**10** - Brooks & Ross Dam

## The Value of Signage

Informational, directional, and wayfinding signage is an important amenity for trail users and provides a visible benefit to the surrounding community. A good signage system increases user comfort, assists in navigation, warns of approaching obstacles, and guides users through unfamiliar terrain. Signage can direct people from road or parking to water, advise on current location and destinations, and provide directions and distances.

(*continued on next page*)

## Sharing Our Float Plan

**Each access location should ideally be developed with:**

- A parking lot or safe pull-off area, ideally for at least 10 motor vehicles including a few with trailers (See Fig. 1, on earlier page).
- Wayfinding signage to get to each parking area, and from there to the launch (Fig. 2-A).
- A permanent display near the put-in spot that would include a "you are here" map showing other put-in/take-out spots, distances, other riverfront destinations, and navigation tips (Fig. 2-B).
- A launch, designed with a firm surface (despite changes in sedimentation levels), a launch area of 15 to 25 feet long and 6 to 12 feet wide, slopes of not more than 15 percent (or 8.33 percent where possible to meet ADA accessibility standards), and water level of at least two feet. Handrails, step-down designs, or ropes can help paddlers balance their weight during put-in and take-out (See Fig. 1 on earlier page).
- An area with a picnic table or two and a bench overlooking the river.
- Along the river, minimal signage is advised to provide a navigational aid while maintaining the natural experience. Each bridge should be signed, and a sign indicating the location and distance to each upcoming take-out spot should be included (Fig. 2-C). Some other modest navigational signage may be beneficial, particularly for beginners and emergency service personnel. These may include $\frac{1}{4}$ or $\frac{1}{2}$ mile markers (Fig. 2-D), and arrows to help users avoid non-navigable forks (Fig. 2-E). Alongside the river, land trails should be developed and possibly co-branded with the water trail (See map on earlier page).
- Signage should be developed and installed in accordance with a unified theme. The accompanying conceptual graphics provide a starting point for more detailed design work (Fig. 2 and Fig. 3).

Figure 2: Examples of wayfinding and informational signage incorporating a unified graphical identity.

## Scouting the Route

**Specific efforts to develop the water trail include:**

- Adaptation of this document to serve as a project brochure, including an accompanying route map.
- Final signage plan, including final types, logo, design, placements, and "you are here" route map, and then build and install the signage.
- Engineering design and development of put-in/take-out points—some require minimal improvement while others require more significant time and investment.
- An annual community "riverfest" event, including introductions to the river for first-time users and fun activities like a rubber ducky race.
- Educational and promotional programming, such as a YouTube video, on river use and paddling skills.
- Collaboration with and among riverfront organizations and businesses, and encouragement of more.

**The Village of Weston cannot complete these efforts or develop the Lower Eau Claire River Water Trail alone.** Intergovernmental partnership with Marathon County, City of Wausau, City of Schofield, Town of Ringle, Town of Weston, and Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources is essential, and partnerships with other riverfront recreational land owners and outfitters are desired. Potential funding sources include local health care and wellness organizations, paddlers, Marathon County's Environmental Impact Fund, State Stewardship and Federal LAWCON (River Protection and Enhancement) grants, the Community Foundation of North Central Wisconsin, and the B.A. and Esther Greenheck Foundation.

Figure 3: Visualizations of water trail signage in context.

## The Value of Signage

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The signage system must be visible but not obtrusive, and distinctive but not distracting. It should provide information in an understandable and logical way. The user should understand at a glance what information is being conveyed. The system must also harmonize with the environment it inhabits or it will detract from its surroundings.

Providing clear, concise and consistent wayfinding has many benefits. Good signage, by increasing user comfort level, can lead to increased usage. By providing a better experience, users are more likely to return. Good signage also makes for better and easier management of trails. By providing appropriate information at access points and on the water, the incidence of user conflict and negative resource impact can be reduced. Accurate location information, at predictable intervals, also provides improved EMS response and maintenance access.

# Lower Eau Claire River Water Trail

## The Adventure in Our Own Backyard

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