

Niobrara River

WATER TRAIL

NEBRASKA GAME AND PARKS COMMISSION

PO Box 30370, Lincoln, NE 68503
402-471-0641 • www.outdoornebraska.org

GENERAL INFORMATION

The Niobrara River is scenic throughout its 535-mile course from its source in eastern Wyoming and through northern Nebraska to its mouth at the Missouri River near Niobrara. But at Valentine, things are spectacular.

In 1991 a 76-mile stretch of Niobrara was designated as a National Scenic River deserving special protection and recognition. Within this stretch, now managed by the National Park Service, the river has carved its way through up to 300 feet of earth and below the surface of the vast Ogallala Aquifer, the primary source of its flows. Groundwater seeps from banks and bubbles from springs, in some places forming streams that have created more than 200 waterfalls, some visible from the Niobrara River Water Trail. Smith Falls, the state's highest at 63 feet, is the centerpiece of Smith Falls State Park.

Aspen trees and the state's only stands of paper birch grow in the cool, moist, spring branch canyons on the river's south bank. Five ecosystems meet along the water trail – Rocky Mountain pine forest, Eastern deciduous forest, tallgrass prairie, Sandhills prairie and northern mixed-grass prairie – earning the region the title of biological crossroads of the Great Plains. Wildlife abounds, with 268 bird species, including bald eagle and wild turkeys, beaver, river otter, white-tailed and mule deer and even elk.

The combination of spectacular scenery and an easy float trip have made the Niobrara one of the top canoeing rivers in the country, drawing tens of thousands of people each year. In some spots, rock beds form short stretches of fast water and riffles, and even four rapids that require a portage for all but the most experienced canoeists and are marked with signs by the Park Service. For the most part, however, the Niobrara flows lazily along at 2 to 3 mph across a sandy bed, and it's often said you don't have to touch your paddle if you don't want to. Summer weekends are the busiest, but you often have the river to yourself on weekdays and on spring and fall weekends.

Several outfitters offer canoe and tube rentals, shuttle service and private camps and access along the water trail. Those who want to outfit their own trip down the Niobrara River Water Trail can utilize four public access points, including Smith Falls State Park.

SECTION DESCRIBED

Cornell Bridge to Norden Bridge:
30.4 miles.

RECOMMENDATION

Please read the general information on water trails at www.OutdoorNebraska.org before beginning. They are a good review for the avid canoeist and a quick lesson for novices.



Smith Falls
State Park

ACCESS SITES AND POINTS OF INTEREST

Valentine is located at the junction of U.S. 20 and 83 in north-central Nebraska. Take Nebraska 12 east from Valentine 4 miles to the Fort Niobrara National Wildlife Refuge and the Cornell Bridge launch site. A daily refuge access fee is charged and a wrist band must be worn by all floating the river through the refuge. Alcoholic beverages, water guns and playing loud music is prohibited on the refuge.

About 3/4 mile below the Cornell Bridge, below a small area of fast water, visitors can stop and hike up to Fort Falls. For the next 5 miles, the river flows through the 4,635-acre Fort Niobrara Wilderness Area. A trail through the area begins on the left downstream side of Buffalo Bridge. Refuge managers ask that you leave the gates as you find them.

The next access site is at Berry Bridge, which can be reached from Nebraska 12 or through the refuge. This is a private site and fees are charged for access and parking.

From Berry Bridge to Smith Falls State Park is three river miles. The park, accessible from Nebraska 12 at mile marker 15, offers a visitor's center, restrooms, showers and camping. This is a great place to stop, rest, have a picnic and enjoy Smith Falls, or follow a nature trail hike from the river to the edge of the sandhills. Camping sites fill up quickly, so plan ahead and reserve a site prior to your trip.

Three miles downstream from Smith Falls State Park is Brewer Bridge, a Middle Niobrara Natural Resources District (NRD) public access site offering restrooms and a parking. River access is from the left, downstream side of the bridge. This area can also be reached from Nebraska 12 at mile marker 18.

Two miles beyond Brewer Bridge is Conner Rapids, which you can hear before you see. Stay to the left, then make a sharp right turn and go directly down the middle of the river.

One mile farther is Fritz's Island. Go left around the island. Going to the right will take you over a rock ledge.

Less than a mile farther is The Chute (Fritz's Narrows). Stay in the middle for a fun ride through choppy water.

Another hour, about 3.5 miles downstream, is Rocky Ford (Class 3). Stay to the left here and portage around the rapids.

About two miles below Rocky Ford is Egelhoff's Rapids (Class 2-3). Stay to the left and portage again, or you will be surprised by a large hole in the middle of the river that is disguised until it's too late to stop. Two miles below Egelhoff's Rapids the river will speed up at Egelhoff's Narrows. The river widens about a half mile below the Narrows.

Except for another quick drop over a rock ledge at Kuhre's Rapids (Class 2+), about 12 miles downstream, and on the right, the river runs fairly flat for 2.9 miles to Norden Bridge. Stay left and exit 100 yards before the bridge. Norden Chute (Class 4) is located just upstream from the bridge.

The Niobrara River Water Trail ends at Norden Bridge, but the remainder of the National Scenic River, which continues to the Highway 137 bridge is canoeable throughout much of the year, the exception being during the heat of summer, when low flows can require paddlers to pull their canoes through shallow water.

COMMUNITY INFORMATION:

Smith Falls State Park, (402) 376-1306,
www.OutdoorNebraska.org

National Park Service, (402) 376-1901,
www.nps.gov/niob
(includes detailed river guides)

Valentine Chamber of Commerce,
(800) 658-4024,
www.VisitValentine.com

Fort Niobrara National Wildlife Refuge,
(402) 376-3789,
www.fws.gov/FortNiobrara

MEDICAL ASSISTANCE:

Cherry County Sheriff, Valentine,
(402) 376-1890
Keya Paha County Sheriff, Springview,
(402) 497-3201
Brown County Sheriff, Ainsworth,
(402) 387-1440
Cherry County Hospital, Valentine,
(402) 376-2525
Brown County Hospital, Ainsworth,
(402) 387-2800

**Dial 911 to reach emergency
personnel in the area.**

N i o b r a r a R i v e r

South Dakota
Nebraska

Legend		Canoe Access Sites		Restrooms
		Camping Sites		Water
		Parking Area		Area of Caution
		Picnic Area		Wildlife Refuge Headquarters
		Hospital		

