

White River great for paddling, not swimming

I never paid much attention to the White River, despite being a lifelong resident of Indianapolis. It was a brown ribbon briefly glimpsed as I sped over a bridge. It was never the destination ... until recently.

Two years ago, my mom bought a couple of kayaks and the Department of Natural Resources river guide. She and her husband would paddle the boats from Waverly to Henderson Ford in Morgan County or from Martinsville to

Gosport. They portaged around dams, waded in the river and sometimes got accidentally dunked in it.

My reaction was: Are you crazy? Do you know how diseased that river is?

In college, I visited the Indianapolis wastewater treatment plant on Harding Street during a geology class. The plant is

a combined overflow system located on the southside, so it discharges sewage-contaminated water into the White River, even after a light rain. If you get in the water, you could be exposing yourself to all kinds of creepy-crawlies.

Now, however, I love paddling on the river as much as they do. It's a great way to get out of the suburbs to enjoy nature on a moment's notice and get some exercise and sun.

I've even developed a talent for rationalizing: "It hasn't rained in a while, so the e-coli concentration is probably pretty low" or "I'll just make sure I stay inside the boat."

No full body immersion

Kevin Hardie, executive director of Friends of White River, said the river is actually healthier than it was in 1950s, but he still doesn't recommend "full body immersion" for river lovers south of the city. There are also warnings about eating most of the fish you catch because they are probably contaminated with mercury.

The water may also contain agricultural run-off, animal waste, motor oil from numerous parking lots and leakage from thousands of septic tanks in the river's watershed.

So, experts encourage people to enjoy



Above: Jackie Stantz of Martinsville paddles on the White River just north of Henderson Ford Road in Morgan County. **At left:** Stantz checks the boats before launching at the Waverly access site. **Staff photos by Amy May**

the river; just don't swim in it, at least not in some areas.

I have paddled from Riverside Park in Indianapolis to Gosport, 56 miles, on various trips. We usually take two trucks and leave one at the endpoint and then drive back and get the other truck. The DNR has created several public access points with parking lots and boat ramps.

Most of the river runs through rural areas. The West Fork, which runs through Indianapolis, begins in a farm field in Randolph County, south of Winchester. It flows west through Muncie, Anderson and Noblesville before heading south to Indianapolis. It flows southwest past Martinsville and meets the East Fork in Daviess County, just above Petersburg.

The river completes its journey 45 miles later at the Wabash River and the Illinois state line.

Most of it is pretty calm. It's been dammed and contained through Indianapolis, and when it floods, it spreads out in the rural areas. But there are some Class I and II rapids at Martin County's Hindostan Falls.

The most interesting stretch for me was from Indy to the Waverly access, a trip that takes about 8 hours and takes you from heavily populated industrial areas to tree-lined solitude. We paddled under highway bridges and saw countless fishermen out enjoying the day.

We were treated to a unique and rare view of the Indianapolis skyline and saw White River State Park from the river. We had to get out and carry the boats at two dams, one quite easy and the other treacherous with huge chunks of concrete with rebar sticking out of them.

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River

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The dams aren't really dams, more like piles of rocks to slow the flow. Nevertheless, only the foolhardy would paddle over them in a fiberglass kayak.

We passed the sewage plant. The water was extremely calm with dragonflies and gnats hovering over its surface. We saw the huge discharge pipes, but fortunately, nothing was coming out of them that day. It was still pretty odiferous, so we paddled by in a hurry.

We saw a power plant, which uses the river water to generate the steam it needs to produce electricity. Its outflow pipe emitted a rushing waterfall at least 20 feet high. The plant also installed a floating thermometer in the center of the river. The hot water generated by such plants is considered "thermal pollution," so it must be monitored.

We paddled under the Interstate 465 bridge and were treated to the sound of semis pounding overhead at 70 mph and got to see some interesting graffiti. At the levy on Bluff Road, people were fishing or just sprawled on blankets to

enjoy the sunshine and the view.

As we floated south, we saw more people out fishing. Some of them had even set up little camps, complete with grills and pop-up campers, while others just had a lawn chair and a cooler. Nearly everyone waved or hollered a greeting.

One day, we "chased" a blue heron for a few miles. The bird was wading in the shallow edge and kept a watchful eye on us as we floated closer. Then, it suddenly took to the air and disappeared downstream, head turned sideways so he could keep an eye on us.

We'd round a bend, see it again perched on a fallen tree and the process would start over.

Hérons, eagles and catfish

In Johnson County, the river runs through the northwest corner of White River Township. It has cut deep crevasses in the land, so you get the feeling of paddling through a canyon.

There is a great blue heron sanctuary at the Marion-Johnson county line. As many as 300 of the birds have been spotted there. Fishermen have netted flathead and channel catfish, sucker and rock bass, as well sturgeon, south of the city. Bald eagles

have also been reported in the area.

Johnson County is also where the litter starts to slack off.

I knew the White had pollution issues, but I was stunned by the amount of trash floating in it. The banks were littered with beer cans and junk people leave behind, such as bait cans, fishing line, old tackle boxes, Styrofoam coolers, clothes, shoes, building materials and containers of all shapes and sizes. We also saw a loveseat caught in some trees along the banks and a flat-bottom boat with a hole in it beached upside down ... that one, at least, made sense.

Hardie calls litter "visible pollution." He said it comes from people pitching trash off bridges or access areas. Trash is also washed downstream during floods and it is left behind by "inappropriate recreational use and thoughtless behavior," he said.

Friends of the White River, an advocacy group formed in 1985, works to protect and improve the quality of the river. One of its volunteer projects is picking up trash along the banks. They organize several clean-ups a year and pick up

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“The sign of a good falconer is not the size or species of bird, but the condition of the bird.”

Kurt Dorman, Bargersville falconer

Falconry

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food than it needs and store it in its crop. The bird then goes up in a tree and may take two to three days to digest it. If she's full, she won't come back to him when hunting.

If this happens, Dorman said he goes back later and tries to lure her down. Sometimes, however, the bird flies away.

If people notice a loose falconer's bird, one that has bells or jesses, they can report it on the Indiana Falconers Association Web site, www.indianafalconersassociation.org.

Caring for the bird

Dorman has been the president of IFA for eight years and it's important to him that the sport be ethical and truthfully represented.

“They should make sure they always keep the bird's best interest in mind,” he said. “The sign of a good falconer is not the size or species of the bird, but the condition of the bird.”

He pointed out Cayenne as an example. She sat on her perch preening, a sign of contentment and frequently ruffles, or rouses, her feathers, another indication of a healthy bird.

Falconry is not a sport to take on casually. It's not a hobby, but a lifestyle decision and a major commitment, Dorman said.

He can't go on vacation and have the neighbors look in on Cayenne, as he could with a dog or cat. He must have another licensed falconer care for her.

Migratory birds, which include all raptor species, are protected by laws and regulated by the United States Fish and Wildlife Service and the Indiana Department of Natural Resources. It is against the law to possess the birds unless you are a federally licensed wildlife rehabilitator or a falconer.

Both agencies collect fees and require annual reports from falconers, as well as periodic inspections of their facilities. Another permit is required if the falconer wants to trap a raptor.

“You open up your life when you do this,” Dorman said.

Becoming a falconer

It's not easy to become a falconer. An interested person must get a general or master class falconer to take him on as an apprentice for two years. Dorman said masters won't take on just anybody.

The person must show a genuine interest and respect for the birds and the prey, and come to the hunts to learn.

An apprentice can have one red-tailed hawk or kestrel. The beginner must pass a 120-question written test that covers everything from bird diseases to behavior. Dorman said the Indiana Falconers Association is working with the DNR to update the test.

A general falconer can have two birds and is not limited to red-tailed hawks or kestrels. Five years later, he progresses to master and can have three birds. Dorman is a master falconer, but he has chosen to have just one bird at a time.

Dorman prefers the red-tailed hawks. “It's the most versatile species for our habitat and a species in this area,” he

said.

The goshawk, which hunts from the fist, not from a treetop, is considered one of the prized species for falconry but falcons fly so fast, up to 200 mph, they are more suited to the open expanses of the west than Indiana. Dorman said those falconers may even use telemetry to keep track of their birds.

Other falconers work with peregrine falcons, Harris hawks and even owls.

It's all falconry to me

The sport is called falconry regardless of the type of bird. In modern falconry, *buteos* — broad-winged hawks such as the red-tailed hawk — are often used, and the words “hawking” and “hawker” may be heard at times.

Still, the term “falconer” applies to all people involved in falconry.

A falconer can keep the bird as long as he wants.

Dorman knows a falconer who has had the same bird for 21 years. Dorman had one bird for seven years, but it died during the West Nile virus outbreak.

He's had three or four birds he's only flown for one season before letting them go. He is very fond of Cayenne. She's a very dynamic bird and he enjoys hunting with her.

He got interested in falconry as a boy. He found an injured red-shouldered hawk and, with the help of a vet, nursed it back to health and released it.

He started going on the hunts with falconers and struck up a friendship with the raptor expert at the Indianapolis Zoo, who took him hunting 14 years ago. He's done it ever since.

River

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tons of junk. The litter, Hardie said, is one of the main reasons the group was formed. Check www.friendsofwhiteriver.org for the clean-up schedule, as well as other river facts.

The river is an important resource for central Indiana.

“We don't have mountains or beaches, but we do have a river that is a definite geographical feature. It's an opportunity to connect with nature, provides habitat and is home to wildlife,” Hardie said. “It

provides 60 percent of the city's water and is used in power generation and manufacturing.”

It also provides recreational areas. Parks and trail networks along a river are called a “blueway,” and the White provides areas for trails like the White River Wapahani Trail or the future South White River Trail and other interconnecting trails through downtown and the north side. Many parks, including the White River State Park and canal, are next to the river.

Lake Indy, a dammed section of the river, is home to the International School's rowing competition. The canal

headgates on the north side provide a place to water ski, speedboat, hold fishing competitions and install public boat ramps.

Although I wouldn't necessarily want paved trails down south, I would love to see another DNR access site between Riverside Park and Waverly, maybe around Southport Road. It's a long paddle from the city to the country.

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