

Fox River

Northeast Illinois



Facts:

- 202 miles long, beginning in the Halbach swamp in Colgate, WI, ending in Ottawa, IL
- 12 dams that require portage in Illinois

Fish: Smallmouth bass, largemouth bass, walleye, catfish, bluegill, bluegill, crappie, northern pike, muskie and more

Wildlife: Eagles, great blue herons, mallards, Canadian geese, kingfishers, deer, turtles and more

Landscape: Commercial and heavy recreational use in Chain O'Lakes area changing to a scenic river passing through forest preserves, downtown areas, and into the picturesque Starved Rock area before joining the Illinois River.

Information:

The Fox River comes into Illinois as a small river. It quickly flows into the Chain-O-Lakes where paddling can be dangerous with heavy motor boat traffic. It's recommended to paddle in the off-season or early morning hours in this area.

You can lock through (in season) to the 'upper and lower' Fox River or portage at the McHenry Dam. McHenry to Algonquin is also very heavy with motor boat traffic and caution is advised. Additionally, a waterway sticker (\$20 for kayaks) is required for all paddling in Illinois NORTH of Algonquin.

The dam in Algonquin begins the section where no stickers are needed and more kayak-friendly waters can be found here. The river is smaller and more scenic, with little to no motor boats. The dam in Carpentersville was removed in 2024 but there are 10 remaining dams downriver. There are many scenic areas, mostly paddling through forest preserves or people's backyards. The current is normally minimal, around 1 mph. There is not much deadfall but be careful when the water is high. The depth is generally around 5' or so.

The dams range from easy portages, to long walks through congested downtown (St Charles Portage) leaving many opting to paddle in between the dams. There are 2 popular "up and back" paddle locations, Voyageur Landing in Elgin and Ferson Creek Park in St Charles so you don't need to shuttle. Both locations are fairly easy to paddle upstream.

In Yorkville, there is a whitewater bypass on the dam which is a fun couple minute ride with some mild rapids. It's a popular destination for those working on moving water skills.

The Yorkville to Ottawa stretch contains the most scenic sections of the Fox River. There are not many public put-in's but many of the private ones are \$5-\$10 and the motor boat traffic is minimal. This is also a wonderful Fall Colors paddle.

The last dam is the Dayton dam. Once you portage this dam, the river will connect with the larger Illinois River and you will encounter more boats and barges.

Reference:

<https://fabulousfoxwatertrail.org/>

<https://www.foxwaterway.com/>

<https://www.foxwaterway.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Fox-River-Dams-1.pdf>

<https://water.noaa.gov/gauges/05550001> (For Algonquin - chose additional gauges up or down stream from this link)

