

Middle Fork of the Vermilion River

East Central Illinois

Facts: The Middle Fork of the Vermilion River (“Middle Fork”) – about 77 miles long - is a tributary of the Vermilion River in Illinois. The Middle Fork rises in Ford County and flows southeast to join the Vermilion near Danville.

In 1989, 17.1 miles of the Middle Fork River, from Collison, IL downstream to near the US Highway 150 bridge (see map below) was designated as a “Wild and Scenic River”, Illinois’ only river to be so designated.

The river meanders deeply through Illinois’ Grand Prairie glacial deposits, exposing scenic, steep valley slopes with high bluffs of geological note. The valley’s unique flora and fauna are highlighted in several adjacent natural areas and nature preserves, both forested and prairie, along with the river’s recreational and historical characteristics. The majority of the designated river segment is publicly owned with a wide variety of access opportunities.

Fish and Wildlife: Fish in the Middle Fork include several state endangered species: Bluebreast darter and the dusky darter, are found only in the Middle Fork. Other rare fish found in the Middle Fork are the brindled madtom and river redhorse.

State endangered birds found in the Middle Fork are included the pied-billed grebe, least bittern, northern harrier, Cooper’s hawk, long-eared owl, veery, and Henslow’s sparrow.

The silvery salamander is only found within the river corridor in the state of Illinois.

Also found are the eastern wood frog, two-lined salamander, red-backed salamander, slimy salamander, northern ringneck snake, queen snake, midland painted turtle, Blanding’s turtle, and map turtle.

Landscape: The river corridor provides for a variety of habitats. There are upland forest, forested wetlands, seeps, and hill prairies. Forests of the Middle Fork are typified by rich herbaceous communities with a number of uncommon species, which combine to make the community distinct from similar woodlands in other natural divisions. The prairie habitats in the river corridor are dominated by grasses representative of the midwestern prairie area contains Indian grass and tall gayfeather. At least 62 prairie plant species are found in the corridor. The seeps are highly calcareous and support a variety of notable plants.

Quiet and serene, the view from the river is of trees, bluffs, or open fields with largely undeveloped shorelines.

Information: Canoe access is available at the Higginsville Bridge, Middle Fork Wildlife Area, Kennekuk Co. Park, and Kickapoo State Park.

The upper section behaves like a younger sibling; smaller, distracted and less tamed. The river bends and lurches like an impatient child, flowing around an exposed gravel bar island, discarded like a forgotten toy. Low bluffs checkered with forest and plains are interspersed with high, eroded cliffs weathered into sculpted poses along the banks. Apart from the sounds of water gurgling down from the seeps on the banks, the breeze swaying through the trees, and the bird songs and calls, all is quiet.

While shorter, this section can be more technical, especially at higher water levels, due to narrower stretches and greater possibility of downed trees or other strainers. Previous paddling experience suggested when levels exceed three feet.

For a trip on the upper section, launch canoes or kayaks at Kinney's Ford Canoe Access and wind through the river to Kennekuk County Park, approximately 5.5 miles. Shuttle busses will pick you up and return you to Kickapoo adventures; some waiting time is expected.

The lower section is where the Middle Fork earns its reputation. The forested valleys deepen, the cliffs tower higher, the river broadens with forces that have carved channels through the shale formations for millennia roil in small waves that shoot your watercraft downstream. With the wider banks, longer stretches, and fewer obstacles, this section makes an excellent choice for large group outings. Canoes and kayaks are perfect choices for a long remember excursion. (information from: <https://kickapoadventures.com/paddling/>)

Safety: The Middle Fork can be a fast-flowing river, particularly at higher water levels and can present opportunities Class Two or Three Whitewater at higher levels.

Although the lower section is considered a beginner friendly river, please note that all rivers contain potential hazards. The lower section includes the stronger 'riffle' areas, which can cause capsizes.

References:

The Middle Fork River on the National Wild and Scenic Rivers website for a good description of the river (much of the above information was sourced here)

<https://rivers.gov/river/vermilion-middle-fork>

For camping, hiking, mountain cycling, and even scuba diving and more visit Kickapoo State Park. When paddling the Middle Fork, you'll also want to take time to paddle on Kickapoo State Park's many lakes which offer amazing clarity:

<https://dnr.illinois.gov/parks/activity/park.kickapoo.html>

For kayak and canoe rentals and livery services on the Middle Fork, visit Kickapoo Adventures. They also offer boat and paddleboard rentals for the many lakes at Kickapoo State Park.

<https://kickapoadventures.com/>

Kennekuk County Park is where most paddlers begin their trip for the 7-mile trip downriver to Kickapoo State Park. There's lots to see and do there as well, including paddling on the 170-acre Mingo Lake

<https://vccd.org/kennekuk-county-park/>

Middle Fork State Fish and Wildlife Area is east and across the Middle River from Kennekuk Cove County Park. There are two canoe accesses that are part of this Fish and Wildlife Area: The Bunker Hill and Kinney's Ford access points. Details are available on their website:

<https://dnr.illinois.gov/parks/park.middlefork.html>

While the Middle Fork this far upriver is smaller with less-developed access points, it can also be explored much farther upriver at Middle Fork Forest Preserve in Champaign County. Middle Fork Forest Preserve offers camping and is also officially designated an "International Dark Sky Park" by Dark Sky International due to its exceptionally high-quality starry nights and for its nocturnal environment.

<https://www.champaignforests.org/forest-preserve/champaign-county/middle-fork-river>

