

# Rock River

## Northcentral Illinois



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### Facts:

- 320 miles long, beginning in Brandon, WI and ending in Rock Island, IL (confluence with the Mississippi)
- 7 dams that require portage in Illinois (23 total dams, including the WI section)

**Fish:** Over 80 species of fish including Catfish, Walleye, Small and Largemouth Bass, Northern Pike, White Bass, Crappie, Bluegill, Drum and Carp.

**Wildlife:** Eagles, Hawks, White Pelican, Great Blue Herons, Mallards, Canadian Geese, Kingfishers, Warblers, Woodpeckers, Deer, Turtles, Muskrats, Beaver, Mink, Otter, Snakes and more.

**Landscape:** Varies from natural, scenic sections to paddling through backyards and small cities. There is significant boat traffic and 'city vibe' when paddling through Rockford, the largest city on the Illinois section.

### Information:

The Rock River is a great paddling river for all skill levels. The water in most areas is deep and reliable for paddling with a gentle current, around 1mph. Keep in mind the current is faster below a dam. Beware, as the river is known for its headwinds. Watch the wind predictions and know it will likely be stronger on the water. There is an excellent website ([link below](#)) outlining every section of the river with access points, dams, and mileage.

The first Illinois section (Beloit, WI to Rockford, IL) can have low water at certain times but is a beautiful paddle. As you progress to Rockford, and the river gets deeper, there can be significant boat traffic and the landscape changes to backyards of the more densely populated greater Rockford area. There is a portage in Rockford that is nearly impossible to do. It's a very long walk, down city streets, through a very industrial area. It's best to end your trip at the brewery at the Rockford take-out and enjoy a nice lunch and do the portage using a car.

The river most scenic section of the river is Oregon to Grand Detour. Here you will find stunning rock formations around the Castle Rock area. Stay to the right of the islands for the best views. There are also views to river left so we recommend paddling this section multiple times, taking a different route around the islands each time. There are also more rock formations around Lowell Park, which are beautiful but not quite as stunning as Castle Rock.

South of Sterling the river becomes wider and slower. There are river camping opportunities south of Oregon as well. The Dixon area is most known as the childhood home of former President Ronald Reagan. He served as a lifeguard on the Rock River in his teen's.

The dams vary from easy, such as the Oregon Dam, to tricky, like the Dixon Dam where the takeout is steep and the put in is incredibly rocky with a difficult access point. Additionally, there are 2 dams, back-

to-back, located in Sterling. It's best to take out at the first dam and drive to the second to put in. There are not good access points and it's extremely industrial. Once you make it past these dams, you have clear sailing until the last dam before the confluence with the Mississippi. You should take out at Ben Williamson Park to end your Rock River trip.

### **Ironman 70.3 Rockford IL**

As of 2025 the only official Ironman race in Illinois is held in Rockford with the swim taking place on the Rock River. Kayak/SUP/Canoe safety volunteers are needed to keep the swimmers safe along with a huge variety of other volunteer positions. Use the link below if you are interested in learning more about the race or volunteering.

<https://www.ironman.com/races/im703-rockford-illinois>

### **Reference:**

<https://rockrivertrail.com/water-trail/>

<https://waterdata.usgs.gov/monitoring-location/USGS-05437645/> (for Rockford, IL. Choose additional gauges up or down stream from this link)

