Are We Ready for Northern Tier?

Canoeing is one of the best ways to travel and camp by water. From the Native Americans, to the Voyageurs, to today’s modern campers, the canoe has always been the vehicle of choice in regions with access to water. A canoe can be loaded with gear, then easily unloaded and carried from one body of water to the next. Yet it is a craft that, while not difficult to learn, requires some training and skill to be safely and efficiently mastered. If your unit is planning a trip to Northern Tier, Cache Lake, or some other destination suitable for a canoe trip, knowing the skill level of your participants is important, and helping them train and improve will make your journey more fun, safe, and satisfying.

Wouldn’t it be great to do a practice trip to train, learn, and evaluate well before going on a long trip? Luckily, there’s a place in the WD Boyce Council that is perfectly suited for practicing a canoe trek. Located about an hour’s drive north of the Council Office, the Hennepin Canal offers a great place to simulate a canoe trek for a single day or even better, for a weekend camp out, to get a taste of what a trek will be like. This brochure will help you plan a trip on the Hennepin Canal so you can hone the skills you’ll need to successfully complete a longer High Adventure canoe trek.

I have the Canoeing Merit Badge, What More Do I Need?

What’s special about Northern Tier or Cache Lake? Why do I need more than just the Canoeing Merit Badge? Well, for one thing, successfully completing a Northern Tier trek involves way more than going canoeing on Lake Roberts for an hour a day. Going on a canoe trek means that you’ll be living in your canoe for a week, covering miles of water and many yards of portage trails. Your paddling skills will determine how efficiently you cover those miles, and how tired you’ll feel when it’s time to pitch camp and make dinner. The gear you will need will be different from what you might use when car camping or even from backpacking. Going on a canoe mini-trek will help you figure these things out, and the Hennepin Canal will help you do it safely and conveniently.
Why the Hennepin Canal?

The Hennepin Canal is a 75 mile long manmade waterway (105 miles if the Feeder Canal is included) originally constructed between 1892 and 1907. Its purpose was to provide a connection between the Illinois River and the Mississippi River for commercial water traffic. Barges were originally pulled along the canal by draft animals and steamers, and the original tow paths (excellent for hiking and bicycling) survive in most places. The canal was an engineering triumph in its day, with early construction of lift bridges and locks. The canal also allowed outsize and bulky cargo to be shipped that the railroads could not handle. Ultimately, competition from the railroads drove the canal out of commercial business, and its use from the 1930s on was mainly recreational.

For canoeing, the canal offers sheltered, very slow moving waters that offer the canoeist the chance to travel an extended number of miles and interesting continually changing scenery. Trees line much of the canal’s borders, which help a canoe traverse its length without undue hardships from the wind. For long sections of the canal, the intervening roads, railroads, and other structures were built with culverts underneath that easily allow passage of a canoe. These culverts also have paths constructed around them, so that if one desires to practice portaging, they offer convenient obstacles. Only a few obstacles require portaging, such as the lock and lift bridge at Lock 22 and the bridge and lock at Lock 21. For the most part, however, if one desires to avoid portaging, the canal accommodates. The canal offers easy access for canoeists and campers. Within a 12 mile section of the canal centered on either side of Illinois Route 40, there are three good locations for put-in and take-out, with two of those locations allowing camping.
What are the logistics for a trip on the Canal?

One of the first things you’ll need for a canoe mini-trek on the Hennepin Canal is… a canoe! Canoes are available to rent from the Council at both the Bloomington Scout Office and at Ingersoll Scout Reservation. Fees are very reasonable, and the canoes are in good shape. Both locations offer paddles to go with the canoes. While both locations advertise trailers, you may need to supply your own method of hauling the canoes to the Canal. You should also plan to supply your own Personal Floatation Devices (PFDs, or life jackets), or check to see if they’re available at the Office or Camp. Besides canoes, paddles, and PFDs, all the other equipment will be standard camping equipment your unit probably already has. If you really want to simulate a trek like Northern Tier, you’ll want to use your Unit’s lightweight backpacking stoves and cookware. You’ll want to pack your gear in waterproof dry bags or line your packs with plastic liners, in case of rain or capsize. Even with a small group, you will need at least two vehicles. You’ll need to drop one vehicle at the take-out point so you’ll have a way to return to the put-in point to retrieve your first vehicle.

How can I plan a trip there?

A group from Troop 88 did a mini-trek on the Hennepin Canal to demonstrate the route and to test the suitability of the route for training. The following information comes from that trip and will help you plan your outing.

The weekend starts at Lock 22 located north of US Highway 6 between Sheffield and Mineral, IL and ends at Lock 21, which is about 1.3 miles west of Wyanet, IL or 3.5 miles east of the
intersection of IL 40 and US 6. From Peoria, drive north on IL 40 until reaching US 6 just north of Buda, IL, then turn left. Approximately 3.3 miles west of the west edge of Sheffield, turn right onto County Road 270 East and cross the railroad tracks. Then immediately across the tracks turn right again and backtrack on 1575 C Avenue to the southeast to County Road 300 East. Turn left and go north on 300 E to the bridge, and you’re at Lock 22.

The campsite at Lock 22 has barbecue grills, a water spigot, and pit toilets available (see diagram). You can arrive at Lock 22 on Friday evening and set up camp. There is no picnic shelter at this campsite, so you will want to bring a dining fly in case of rain. The group from Troop 88 had two tents and a tarp shelter. The tarp came in handy that night and the next day due to rain. The Park Ranger comes by to check on the camp later in the evening and collect fees. There is a special rate for youth groups of $20 per night.

The Troop 88 group had to weather a storm on their Friday night. This is a concern at the campsite at Lock 22, because most of the trees are Ash trees that were killed by the Emerald Ash Borer beetle. You have to be careful selecting tent sites at this camp to ensure branches or trees won’t fall on you.

Troop 88 had rain all night for their trip, but all the campers stayed dry. Due to the rain, there was no point in getting up early, so they took their time getting up and getting ready on Saturday morning. The tarp shelter/dining fly that was set up the night before provided a dry place to relax and fix breakfast. Placing the stove on the ground allowed breakfast to be prepared without heat from the stove damaging the tarp. The menu was coffee, juice, link sausages, and crepes with syrup, jam, and whipped cream for breakfast. This menu was possible due to...
the closeness of the vehicles; a real trek up north would have a simpler menu. The campsite has good cell reception, so you can keep an eye on the radar. Later in the day, the radar looked like the weather would be a clear afternoon for paddling.

At about 11:30 in the morning the rain moved off and the weather started to clear. The group decided to make a run for it and do the paddling. Since the forecast was for additional storms on Sunday, the group had already decided to limit the trip to just Saturday. So the group struck camp, packed gear into the SUV, and drove over to the take-out point at Lock 21. The trailer for the canoes was dropped there, and then the group drove back to the put-in point at Lock 22. The paddling started by about 1:00 pm.

The first step is to haul the canoes, paddles, water, and personal gear to the put-in point, which is about 110 yards east of the lock on the north bank. This is the first location where the canal bank is low enough to put a canoe in the water and enter it safely. Up north, you’ll do “wet-foot” portaging, where you walk into the water to about 2 feet deep and enter your canoe from there. The banks on the canal are steep enough that you can’t wet-foot portage very well on the Hennepin Canal.

There is a certain amount of flow to the canal, but not enough to slow your progress. The first landmark you come to is the culvert under County Road 350 East. This one is good to paddle through. The next landmark you come to is the Feeder Canal. This is a canal much like the main body of the Hennepin, but it comes in from the northwest to keep water levels up in the main canal. If the wind is blowing, there is not much shelter in this area, and good sized waves can build up. Troop 88’s weather was nice and calm, so there was not much trouble. At the east end of the area where the Feeder Canal feeds the Hennepin, there’s another culvert under County Road 100 East. If you want to practice portaging, this is a good place to try it. You can make landfall on either bank, but the south bank makes for a longer
portage. You can follow the tow path along the south bank to the road, then follow the path next to the road to the north bank where there’s a good crossing across the roadway. The tow path continues east of the road along the north bank, where there are several good locations to put the boats back in the water.

After paddling through a large lily pad field, you will eventually come to the bridges where the canal goes under Interstate 80. Troop 88’s group must have been visible from the Interstate, because many of the vehicles approaching the bridge honked their horns. Passing on from the I-80 bridges is where the canal becomes very pretty. You will pass under a couple of old railroad bridges and eventually come to the Visitor Center. On the southern bank of the canal at the Visitor Center, there is a little bay you can paddle into, and there’s a dock right at the Center. Troop 88’s group paused there for a break. They had eaten breakfast fairly late, so they didn’t bring lunch, but this would be a perfect location for a lunch break.

The Visitor Center is slightly past the halfway point. Moving on from the Visitor Center, you’ll pass through additional tree lined areas for a while, before coming out into an area surrounded by more cropland and with fewer trees. There is a long straight stretch of about 2-1/2 miles with little tree cover. Make sure to save some drinking water for this stretch, because on a sunny day with little wind, this section can get hot! For the Troop 88 group, the water in everyone’s personal bottles plus an additional 10 liter dromedary was enough for four paddlers. When you reach the curvy section at the end of the straightaway, you know you’re nearing the end of the day’s paddle. The curvy section has the last two culverts to pass through before reaching your take-out point at the Lock 21 campsite. You’ll want to watch for a buildup of duckweed at the last culvert. The wind can jam up this culvert with duckweed and foul smelling mud, making it very difficult to paddle through. Luckily, there is an easy take-out point along the southwest bank, making for an easy portage. If the culvert is not blocked, there is a boat ramp on the east side of the culvert that makes for an easy take-out with plenty of space to maneuver vehicles and trailers.
If you’re planning a full weekend event, Lock 21 has several places suitable for camping, with a picnic shelter, pit toilets, and a water spigot. At the campsite, there are old concrete structures extending out into the water that were formerly used as a dry dock to work on barges. East of the campsite, there is another lift bridge and the lock structure that is interesting to view. This would be a good time, as camp is being set up, to send adults back to Lock 22 to retrieve the vehicles left there. Once camp is set up, you can fix dinner, and settle in for the night.

The entire route took about 4 hours to paddle for the Troop 88 group. The skill level of the paddlers ranged from intermediate to very good, and this pace allowed for lots of on-the-water breaks. The trip can be run the other direction as well, but going eastward in the afternoon puts the sun at your back.

What should I expect to learn?

This trip will show you the skill level of the paddlers in your Unit. If you find that a paddler does not have the skills to do the j-stroke or the other steering strokes, they may be able to function very well as a bow paddler who provides much of the power. You can also do the paddling with minimal gear in the boats and carry your camping equipment in the vehicles, if you’re mainly doing the trip for fun. If you really want to simulate a Northern Tier trek, then you can plan to carry all the gear in the canoes. This will help you demonstrate what a portage is like. The surfaces of the portage paths at the Hennepin Canal are all well prepared, so you should caution your participants that Northern Tier has much more irregular and rocky paths.

To summarize, the water in the Hennepin Canal is surprisingly clear (especially if you are used to the Illinois River), the current is very mild, and the scenery is pleasant. If your unit is looking to incorporate aquatics into your outdoor program, this would be a fun trip that involves a low level of cost and logistics planning that your participants will be sure to enjoy. For more information, contact Gene Olson, Wood Badge Class C3-138-17 at golson@flypia.com.