

North Branch, Dead River, Maine

A report by Michael O'Neill, NFCT member

This report is based the May 16-19, 2010 experience with the following canoeists from Saint-Georges, Quebec: Laurent Moreau (our fearless leader and celebrated chef), Richard Morin, Nancy Labbé, Steeve Grondin and Yoland Létourneau. Special thanks are extended to Bert Grenier of Saint-Prosper who helped plan and scout the trip in October 2009.

Introduction

The North Branch of the Dead River is an interesting paddling experience and offers the following advantages:

- The North Branch can serve as an optional entry into the Flagstaff Lake area of the Northern Forest Canoe Trail.
- The North Branch offers a varied paddling experience: a series of ponds, some pleasant river paddling, a few Class II rapids and a small section of Class III rapids.
- Paddlers witness some history as they go over part of Benedict Arnold's unsuccessful expedition to invade Quebec, Canada. Now it can be done the easy way, that is, downstream. Arnold and his men were beset by heavy rain and floods in October 1775 while going upstream
- It can serve as the first part of a 3-4 day trip down the North Branch to the eastern end of Flagstaff Lake.

General information

The North Branch is easily navigable in May and early June. You might want to use a wetsuit if the weather is cool. Remember the water is still very cold in May. An unlucky spill can slow you down considerably. If you put in early, you can easily reach Eustis in a full day. There are no organized camp sites before Eustis. The ideal place to put in is at the Natanis Point Campground. The owners offer a shuttle service for your baggage down to Eustis (Cathedral Pines Campground) and for cars down to the south-eastern end of Flagstaff Lake. You can reserve a site near the dock at Cathedral Pines Campground. I recommend having your baggage shipped downriver because the North Branch can have up to 6 mostly short portages, depending on water levels. Travelling light affords a more enjoyable paddle and saves quite a bit of time going down the river.

Paddling the North Branch to Eustis (19 miles)

Put in Natanis Point Campground and paddle five miles in a south-easterly direction across the Chain Lakes, a series of five ponds in almost pristine wilderness. Route 27 runs parallel to the North Branch and is mostly out of sight. The ponds provide a lovely paddle framed by rolling hills and mountains. The prevailing winds are at your back.

At the end of the last pond, there is a small dam to portage around. The River begins here with 0.75 mile of fast water. This swift current is a bit of a surprise after the quiet water of the Chain Lakes. Quick water continues until you pass under the Route 27 Bridge. Continue with good current for 1.5 miles until you hear Sarampus Falls. These smallish falls merit respect; a three-foot ledge awaits. After the portage, there is a nice picnic area with facilities, an ideal spot for a break or for lunch. Within fifty yards, you come upon Little Sarampus Falls which may require another portage or lining your craft. Continue along the river for 4.25 miles to Shagadee Falls which has ledges on either side. Another portage.

Another 4.25 miles of paddling brings you to Upper Ledge Falls where another portage on the left may be required, depending on water levels. **Now you'll see some action.** About 150 yards of Class II rapids lead you right into some 300 yards of Class III. Ledge Falls requires some scouting. ATTENTION!! Try to stop before getting into this section that begins with a sharp drop by a boulder on the left. Continue 2.25 miles to Eustis Dam. Here you will have a 200 yard portage around the hydro-electric dam. The river now widens considerably. Head for Cathedral Pines Campground on the right after the low bridge. You'll see a large dock with canoes, kayaks and pedal boats onshore. Sites are large and can easily accommodate 2 or 3 small tents. Enjoy the showers after a very full day.

The next morning, head out on the wide river into Flagstaff Lake. The NFCT Guidebook and NFCT Map #9 provide a lot of quality information to guide you. To that detailed information, I would add:

- Do not waste time looking for sites like the one near Old Flagstaff Village or the one south of Picked Chicken Hill. They are hard to locate, primitive and not maintained. Head for Hurricane Island, a nice site on a small island. It can be breezy here, which is helpful in buggy weather.
- We did not stop Savage Farm but it looked acceptable.
- Myers Lodge at the west end of the lake and Round Barn (and several nearby sites) on the southeast are maintained sites with facilities. However they have road access so they do fill up with campers and some party-seeking rowdies especially on weekends.

You can take out at Bog Brook Landing, the south-east tip of Flagstaff Lake. Your vehicles will be parked here if you arrange for a shuttle. It is an easy drive back to route 27.

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Handy References

Campgrounds:

Natanis Point Campground
19 Natanis Point Rd
Chain of Ponds, ME 04936-4000, United States
(207) 297-2694
<http://www.natanispointcampground.com>

Cathedral Pines Campground
Eustis, ME 04936
(207) 246-3491
<http://www.gopinescamping.com>

Documents

Appalachian Mountain Club. *Maine River Guide*, 4th edition. 2008.
The AMC Maine River Guide is a basic reference for all rivers and lakes not part of the Maine section of the Northern Forest Canoe Trail.

Arnold Expedition Historical Society. *Arnold's Wilderness March*. www.arnoldsmarch.com
2009.
A detailed map and guide that helps you visualize Arnold's expedition from the Kennebec River to Lake Megantic.

Clark, Stephen. *Following Their Footsteps: A Travel Guide and History of the 1775 Secret Expedition to Capture Quebec*. Clark Books. 2004.
Clark's book provides a thorough overview of the Arnold expedition. It includes detailed information on the North Branch and Flagstaff Lake.

Delorme. *Maine Atlas Gazetteer*. 2001
The essential reference of Maine's geography. It offers valuable information on access roads, lakes, rivers and campsites. Look for a new edition.

The Northern Forest Canoe Trail. Map 9. Flagstaff Lake Region, Maine. Mountaineer Books. 2005

The Northern Forest Canoe Trail. *Official Guidebook*. Mountaineer Books. 2010