

## LOCAL NEWS

### Outside Choices:

# AU SABLE RIVER MEMORIES: From Marathons to Family Fun

BY ERIN FANNING

The racers, carrying canoes over their heads, sprinted down the road and jumped into the Au Sable River, almost simultaneously leaping into their boats. My 10-year-old niece looked up at me, astonishment in her eyes.

Her thoughts rushed across her face as if spoken out loud, "How could anyone canoe all night and into the next day without stopping?" I understood her

amazement as I watched the competitors dig their paddles into the water with a rhythmic grace.

Yet, despite its challenging course from Grayling to Oscoda with six substantial portages, the 120-mile Au Sable River Canoe Marathon has been attracting canoers for the past 75 years. More than 100 teams, a record number, have entered the 2023 race, which will take place the last weekend in July (see <https://www.ausablecanoe-marathon.org/> for more in-

formation.)

But the Au Sable River is not only for serious paddlers; rather, it welcomes everyone from campers to anglers to families. The following sections are among my favorites and provide an excellent introduction to the river and its branches (for more information, including maps, visit <https://michiganbiyakng.com/index/>).

Upper Main Branch, County Rd. 612 bridge, Frederic, to Pollack Bridge Rd., Grayling (about 8

miles).

Beginning near the headwaters of the Au Sable, this seldom-paddled route starts out fast, passing quaint cottages, and then slips into a challenging, narrow section that might require portaging. The tempo soon slows again before picking up the pace as the river parallels Williams Forest Preserve and the picturesque cabins along Wendy Lane.

N. Branch from Dam 4 Rd. Fishing Site to Morley Rd. Access Site, Lovells (about 7 miles)

The North Branch of the Au Sable envelops paddlers in a peaceful float back in time. The river and shoreline appear untouched by the modern world from classic cottages and cabins to boat houses to fly fishermen with their Au Sable riverboats to uninterrupted woods. Expect to encounter anglers but other paddlers are rare. It's also unusual to



Keith and Jonah Radwanski in synch on the Holy Waters.







**Jonah Radwanski paddles near Burton's Landing on the Holy Waters.**



**Navigating the North Branch.**

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S. Branch from Chase Bridge Access Site to Smith Bridge Access Site (about 10 miles)

Combining solitude with miles of forest, this section of the South Branch unfolds through the Mason Tract, a pristine slice of Michigan, specially managed by the state to preserve the area for fishing. More than halfway through the trip, you'll come across the Mason Chapel, a good spot for a picnic break.

Main Branch from Burton's Landing to Wakeley Bridge (about 9-10 miles)

The Au Sable's Holy Waters, so named for its exceptional flyfishing, never fails to charm as it tugs paddlers past woodsy cabins and boathouses, and over clear water, making it easy to catch a glimpse of trout swimming against the pebbly riverbed. It's rare to be alone on this stretch of the Au Sable as its equally popular with anglers and paddlers, but definitely avoid kayaking here on summer weekends when the Holy Waters turn into a parade of floaters on tubes, canoes, and kayaks.

Still, I never tire of this section, probably my favorite, just as I never tire of watching the Canoe Marathon. Last year, I

ters.



**South Branch views from the Mason Chapel.**



**Taking a paddling break at the South Branch's Mason Chapel.**

stood on the shore of Foote Pond as the two lead teams raced across it. They paddled side by side, one team edging ahead, only to be overtaken by the other.

It occurred to me that the Au Sable River encapsulates Northern Lower Michigan. Its twisting shoreline melds with woods and hidden two-tracks. Birdsong and trees surround its visitors from diving eagles to anglers to

canoe racers, combining beauty with tenacity and strength, a reflection of the area's history and, hopefully, its future.

Bio: Erin Fanning has paddled 40 Michigan rivers and shares her kayaking and biking adventures at [michiganbiyaking.com](http://michiganbiyaking.com). Check out [erinfanning.com](http://erinfanning.com) for more information about her writing.