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CANOEING WITHOUT CROWDS

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Article Text:

Indian summer is the perfect season to enjoy the paddling pleasures of the picturesque Saco River, by far Maine's most popular place for flatwater canoeing.

Summer crowds disappear after Labor Day, leaving a pristine paradise in September and October.

The Saco rises in the White Mountains of New Hampshire and flows more than 100 miles to the sea at Biddeford and Saco. Canoes can navigate most of the distance.

The most popular stretch is the 40 miles between Center Conway, N.H., and Hiram, characterized by easy paddling, mountain views, wide sandy beaches, bucolic countryside - and outstanding fall colors.

Wildlife abounds on the river and nearby bogs, ponds and tributaries. Birds, including thousands of swallows, are abundant. Alert canoeists may even sight the great blue heron, Maine's largest bird.

There are interesting side trips in the section of the Saco between Route 5 in Fryeburg and Route 160 in Brownfield.

Paddle up the Old Course to Hemlock Bridge, a photogenic old covered structure.

Pleasant Pond is a very short side trip that offers an abundance of aquatic fauna and flora plus unusual views of Pleasant Mountain.

Two primitive campgrounds, operated by the Appalachian Mountain Club, are on the river, as are two more developed private campgrounds.

In the slow-flowing current of fall, allow 30 minutes per mile of leisurely paddling or 20 minutes per mile for a more determined pace.

The liveries also sell a waterproof map (under \$1) and distribute an information pamphlet detailing rules, regulations and river etiquette. Parties using their own canoes should also get these.

Canoe liveries with shuttle service include Saco Bound, Route 302 in Center Conway, N.H., (603) 447-2177; Canal Bridge Canoes, 125 Main St. in Fryeburg, 935-2605;

Saco River Canoe and Kayak, Route 5 in Fryeburg, 935-2369; and River Run Canoe Rental, Route 160 in Brownfield, 452-2500, which also has a campground.

Memo:

Scott Andrews is a sports enthusiast who lives in Portland.

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