

## Portland Press Herald

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#### SEPTEMBER'S PERFECT FOR PADDLING ON THE SACO

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Ecclesiastes says it perfectly: There's a time to every purpose under the sun. And September is the time to quietly enjoy sunny canoeing on the sandy Saco River.

Solitude and quiet time on the Saco are rare during peak paddling season, when thousands of summer visitors and in-state vacationers congregate and crowd Maine's most popular canoeing mecca.

**Fred Westerberg**, supervisor of the Saco River Recreation Council, an association of canoe liveries, riparian landowners and state and private conservation agencies, estimates that during July and August as many as 6,000 canoeists per week paddle the Saco's most popular section, the 43-mile stretch between Route 302 in Redstone, N.H., and Route 5/113 in Hiram.

But after Labor Day the crowds disappear, and the river rewards canoeists seeking quiet waters with the glorious conditions that make the Saco so deservedly popular: clear water, moderate current and sandy beaches galore.

The sandy Saco is one of Maine's most accessible canoe adventures. The best put-in/take-out spots are within 70 minutes of Portland.

Count at least nine canoe liveries in two states along this stretch of the river. Oldest and largest of the Maine outfitters is Saco River Canoe & Kayak, located on Route 5 in Fryeburg, near Swan's Falls, the most popular put-in.

Owners **Westerberg and wife Prudy** have 130 canoes, a dozen-plus kayaks and four shuttle vans. The **Westerbergs'** small shop sells canoeing and paddling sundries and there's a clean portable toilet.

Rental cost is \$25.50 for a 17-foot Old Town Discovery, including paddles and U.S. Coast Guard-approved safety vests. Shuttle service is extra; the \$7 per canoe charge (\$10 minimum) for pickup at Walker's Bridge landing in Fryeburg is typical. Call toll-free 888-772-6573.

For those paddling their own canoes, there's no charge for launching or river use and there's free parking at most (but not all) access points.

Camping on the river's many broad sandbars is legal and free, while there are also six developed riverside campgrounds available for a fee.

Best guide to the river is a 22x17-inch foldout map. Printed in two colors and including camping and canoeing regulations, the "Saco River Map and Recreation Guide" is available at most liveries for a small charge.

Trips can be as modest as three hours for the four miles between Swan's Falls and Canal Bridge. A few ambitious canoe-campers spend three or four days on the river.

The Saco is novice-friendly and a great place to learn and practice canoeing skills. Averaging 60 feet wide, its current ranges from swift to slow.

There's no dangerous whitewater. The only rapids, two short pitches in Center Conway, involve more pushing than paddling in September's low water levels. Walker's Rips, in Fryeburg, rates a shout and quick thrill - and nothing more.

There's only one portage, and parties launching at Swan's Falls avoid it.

The banks of the Saco are mostly forested and undeveloped. A few miles wind through open farm fields, particularly in Fryeburg, and afford distant mountain vistas that range from Mount Trip Pyramid in Waterville Valley, N.H., to Evans Notch.

Two ponds in Fryeburg warrant short exploratory side trips. Pleasant Pond is lushly wall-to-wall with aquatic plants and flowers; most visitors will rouse a great blue heron and some will see a moose.

A tiny picture-perfect island in Lovewell Pond makes an ideal lunch stop, while the north shore has a monument to an Indian battle that was fought near here.

South of Lovewell Pond the river flows through Brownfield Bog, a state wildlife refuge.

Caption:

Scott Andrews photo Falmouth canoeist Jean Wandel enjoys a quiet afternoon paddle on the Saco near River Fryeburg. Canoeing crowds disappear after Labor Day, leaving uncrowded conditions on Maine's most popular canoeing river. PHOTO: color

Memo:

Scott Andrews is an outdoors enthusiast who lives in Portland.

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