

# Portland Press Herald

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### SUMMER'S END BRINGS PEAK PADDLING ON SACO

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In September, serenity returns to the scenic Saco River. And for those in the know, late summer and early fall offer peak paddling experiences on Maine's most popular river.

With its crystal-clear water, moderate currents, shallow sandy bottom and miles of scenery that varies from tall pine forests to majestic mountainscapes, the summer-season Saco has become too popular for many.

Easy access is one reason. Public put-in points abound; most lie within an hour of Portland and boast adequate parking, pit toilets and trash collection.

On peak summer weeks, as many as 6,000 paddlers crowd this watercourse, said **Fred Westerberg**, owner of Saco River Canoe and Kayak and supervisor of the Saco River Recreational Council. But after Labor Day, traffic drops dramatically, to a few hundred paddlers per week.

That suits Kathy Neuville, a Springvale canoeist who listed a few adjectives to describe her Saco experience last week: "Serene. Scenic. Tranquil. Calm. Peaceful. Relaxing." Neuville added: "It does the soul good. I think it's wonderful."

The 40-mile stretch between the Saco Bound livery in Center Conway, N.H., and the Route 5/113 bridge in Hiram is the most popular section. It's almost entirely easy flatwater and suitable for novices.

Here find numerous put-ins, one short portage and several scenic side trips. In Fryeburg, and Brownfield the river runs near boggy areas where water lilies blossom profusely in late summer and migrating waterfowl stop over as they wing southward for the winter.

Camping on the dozens of sunny sandbars is legal and free - and competition for a spot to stake your tent is near zero after Labor Day.

A dozen companies rent canoes, sell maps and paddling sundries and provide shuttle service. Maine's largest and most central livery is Saco River Canoe and Kayak. Located on Route 5 in Fryeburg near Swan's Falls, it's close to a popular put-in immediately

below the dam. Call 935-2369.

Through-paddling the entire 40 miles makes a relaxed three-day canoe-camping adventure. Or divvy it up into smaller one-day subsections. Some options: Center Conway, N.H., to Canal Bridge (Route 5) in Fryeburg, 10 miles. Flowing through farms and fields near the Maine-New Hampshire border, distant White Mountain views extend to Mount Passaconaway and Mount Trypyramid.

Current is generally good - except for the two-mile backwater behind Swan's Falls dam. Portage the small dam on the right.

Additional put-ins and take-outs at the Fryeburg town beach on Route 113 and Swan's Falls (behind the Fryeburg fairground) allow this section to be subdivided into micro-excursions as short as an hour or two.

Canal Bridge to Walker's Bridge (Route 302) in Fryeburg, seven miles. This short segment offers the widest, whitest, sunniest sandbars on the Saco and makes a perfect first excursion.

Walker's Bridge to Route 160 bridge in Brownfield, nine miles. This section is my personal favorite. Don't miss the side trip to Pleasant Pond. ``Seeing the mountains from the lake is really impressive,`` said Neville.

Route 160 bridge to Route 5/113 bridge in Hiram, 14 miles. The current slackens here - allow an extra two hours paddling time on this section - as the river loops and meanders through hilly terrain. Burnt Meadow Mountain and the cliffs of Mount Cutler provide the most prominent landmarks.

Caption:

Scott Andrews photo Kathy Neville of Springvale paddles past a sandbar on a much less crowded post-Labor Day Saco River. PHOTO: color

Memo:

Scott Andrews is an outdoors enthusiast who lives in Portland.

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