

Floating the Pere Marquette River

by
Jeff Warden

The Pere Marquette River is a very popular fishing and canoeing stream. Its crystal clear water and the variety of terrain and vegetation along its banks are attractive enough for it to be classified as Michigan's first National Scenic River.

The current is fairly swift, but the river has a minimum of hazardous rapids and can be canoed or floated by novices. Peace and tranquility are natural features of the river. Many species of wildlife may be sighted by the quiet canoeist and fisherman.

One note about rapids. There is at least one section of rapids - hence the name "Rainbow Rapids". It's a blast on a pontoon boat. But depending on the water level and flow - there have been times I think I would have thought twice about running a canoe through there. I'm not sure a novice would want to run them when they are a bit rough. Although, you'd have to ask Mike Wolford (toflysh@woh.rr.com) and Rod McFarland to see if they thought it was risky for canoes - or at least novices.

My basic assumption is that you are floating a pontoon boat.

If this will be your first time floating on a river and you are going by yourself, you might want to try the Barothy to Walhalla float to get the hang of maneuvering the river. You can run into some tight spots with trees, etc. down in the river, and you have to be mindful of other fishermen as well - not spooking their fish, and not running into them. It will depend on the water level of the river as to how many good fishing spots will be in this stretch. We didn't see a lot of good spots last year (for 5 people to stop and fish) once we left the Barothy property boundary.

You can wade the river from Barothy to Taylor Road - too deep, etc. in spots. We float to a fishing spot, anchor the boat, and fish a while (up or down stream of the boat). You just have to pay attention whether you are on public or private land. You can't beach your boat or walk on private land.

Ken Hudak and I bought 3 lb anchors for our 1-man pontoons. We picked them up at Cabela's (1lb or 3lb). Looks like this one.

LEAVE YOUR FINS AT HOME. YOU WON'T NEED THEM.

Pack some bungees to tie your rod to the boat. A rod holder doesn't work that well on this river. It's safer along side the pontoon. You have to constantly watch the rod as you go under/through trees/branches, etc.

You might want a dry bag to pack an extra set of dry clothes.

They come in handy if you end up going for a swim. Also you might want to pack a towel to dry out the inside of your waders. The Orvis shop in Baldwin has dry bags for about \$20.

We pack coolers with water, pop and food for the day. We eat lunch on the river.



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!! IMPORTANT !! Watch the air in your pontoons during the day. As it sits in the sun during the day, the pressure builds up and could potentially blow one. Check throughout the day to make sure they aren't too tight, and let out some air as necessary.

As far as the times, they are straight float/paddle times. It's approximately how long it would take you to float/row from point to point if that's all you did. You just have to keep in mind how far you've gone and how far you have yet to go to make sure you get back before dark. It really depends on how often you stop to fish and for how long.

You don't ever want to go past Walhalla Bridge when floating downstream. It turns into mostly sand after that bridge. One map mentions "Between Walhalla and Indian Bridge, the river breaks into numerous channels. Finding your way through this area is difficult. Be cautious." - Yeah! We must not have had that map the year we floated there - through the land of a thousand channels. It looked more like the flats.

Our first float was from Lower Branch to Barothy. We underestimated the time, and started late in the day. We radioed to someone in the lodge to come out with a flashlight so we didn't pass Turkey Lodge. We did a lot of heavy paddling to make it back in very little light (about as dark as we ever care to row on the PM). However, when you start early enough, you can make a day of it from Lower Branch to Walhalla Bridge.

Our map shows:

From	To	Time	Miles
Upper Branch	Elk	0:10	0.5
Elk	Lower Branch	1:05	2.6
Lower Branch	Log Mark	1:10	2.7
Log Mark	Walhalla	1:50	4.8

Log Mark is a bit upstream of the Taylor Road access (public access up the road on US 10 close to the lodge). This might also be marked as "Maple Leaf" on some maps.

If you basically just want to float to Barothy, you probably don't want to put in any further up than "Upper Branch"

By the way - the "access point" for 'Lower Branch' is a pull off on the side of the road just past the river (coming from US 10). Park by the guard rail to unload your gear - (then move vehicle up the road a bit). Drag boat to river launch (somewhere around 25 yards from where you drop your gear.)

You can probably easily fish anything less than 5 river miles in a day. Using our map, I calculated 13.3 miles and 5 hours to float Sulak to Walhalla - that wouldn't leave much time for fishing.

We try to be on the river no later than 9:00 AM. I think we've come off the river as late as 8:00 PM.

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One of our usual floats is from Green Cottage to Gleason's landing (1:30, 4.7 miles). But we stop and fish a lot all day. (NOTE: this is ALL catch and release water!) We fish this early in the week. We have also fished this if we know this is where the fish are and want to catch fish more than we want meat to take home.

Here are some other floats we've done in a day of fishing:

From	To	Time	Miles
M37	Green Cottage	1:30	3.7
Rainbow Rapids	Sulak	1:15	3.1
Lower Branch	Walhalla	3:00	7.5

Sections of the river are different every year. Clay Banks is generally packed with Salmon. But last year - not so much - a lot fewer fish in that spot.

River Etiquette:

- Be mindful of where you are floating. Try not to spook the fish if you must float over/through someone's fishing hole;
- Try not to run into other fisherman;
- Pack your trash out - there's no excuse. I always carry bread bags with ties in my fly vest - for packing my own trash out, and trash left behind by others.
- Some of the land along the river is private.
 - Respect other's property.
 - Don't walk on private land (unless it is too dangerous to wade the river to get by)
 - Don't park your boat on private property.

Parking Pass:

You will need a parking pass if you drive to your access point and leave your car. From what I have seen on the web, it matches the information on our maps. Vehicle Passes cost \$3.00/day, \$5.00/week, or \$20.00 annually. Some access points have self service stations. We find it is easier to buy the one week pass - however, its getting harder to find some one that sells them. The Orvis shop and Baldwin Bait & Tackle no longer sell them. Sometimes the self service stations are on the road in the Park/Forest. They are not always at the parking lot. Not every access point sells them. The fine for not having the pass displayed correctly (or writing the incorrect dates on the pass) is rather steep. They check regularly too!

Here's a link to some maps. If you just float downstream to Barothy, you'll only need the "East" half of the map.

<http://www.fishbaldwin.com/LocalInfo/PMMaps/PMMaps.cfm>

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Also, as the web page says, the map is available at Baldwin Bait & Tackle. They are on M-37 (go past the Orvis shop, and past the turn off to Green Cottage. The shop will be on your right. If you get to the grocery store - you've passed the shop.

Here's another link with float times and river miles (similar to the map we use.)

<http://www.ivanscanoe.com/maps.html>

We got our map from the Baldwin Field Office on M-37 right in town on the left.

Sometimes they have copies at the access points as well (like Green Cottage.)

Here are some links:

Baldwin Bait & Tackle - <http://www.fishbaldwin.com/>

Pere Marquette River Lodge - <http://www.pmriver.com/> (← the Orvis shop)

Red Moose Lodge - <http://www.redmooselodge.com/>

Whispering Oaks Campground - <http://www.michigancampground.com/>

USGS real time water data - <http://waterdata.usgs.gov/mi/nwis/uv?04122500>

Ivan's - <http://www.ivanscanoe.com/index.html>

Barothy Lodge - <http://www.barothylodge.com/>

Hope this helps. Good luck! Jeff Warden