

Interactive map helps paddlers plan trips on the Kankakee

By JOSEPH DITS | Posted: Wednesday, September 9, 2015 6:00 am

A new, interactive website explores 133 miles of the Kankakee River — access points, distances, parks and good places for paddlers to stop — from its origins as a ditch on South Bend’s far west side, through the straight channel that was dredged about 100 years ago to its much more natural state at the Illinois line, squirming back and forth.

The so-called “map journal” by Story Map combines a map with photos, description and links at kankakeeriverwatertrail.org.

It will help you to plan trips, but it’s also part of a local effort to gain federal recognition for the Kankakee as a “National Water Trail.” Ultimately, that would make the river more paddler friendly by increasing the access points and places to camp. The application was filed this summer, and we may hear the outcome this fall, says Dan Plath, president of the Northwest Indiana Paddling Association, which is leading the drive with support from more than 60 government agencies, groups and officials in Indiana and Illinois.

I joined NWIPA’s paddle last year on bayous near the Kankakee Fish & Wildlife Area at the Indiana-Illinois line, which offer a glimpse of the Grand Kankakee Marsh before it was dredged. NWIPA’s annual Kankakee River Sandhill Crane Paddle will be on Oct. 18. Watch for details here and at nwipa.org.

And in late August, NWIPA led a 15-mile trip down one of the Kankakee’s tributaries, the Iroquois River, departing just east of the town of Brook in Indiana’s Newton County. The Iroquois eventually hooks up with the Kankakee near the town of Kankakee, Ill.

The map shows distances for 16 recommended trips on the Kankakee and the Iroquois.

Organizers also are working to establish primitive campsites that would be accessible only by water,



Paddle a better Kankakee route and pedal 2 awesome rides

Kankakee River paddlers cross under the State Line Bridge leading from Indiana’s dredged portion to Illinois’ wild, wiggling river last year. The Northwest Indiana Paddling Association is seeking to make the Kankakee a “National Water Trail.”
SBT Photo/JOSEPH DITS

making it easier to plan multi-day paddling trips down the Kankakee, Plath said.

Next week, from Monday through Friday, NWIPA will take hundreds of area school students to explore the river on 24-foot voyageur canoes, departing from Baum's Bridge in Porter County. The schools are all booked, but there's room for organized youth groups, like Scouts, in the afternoons and evenings. If interested, contact Plath at dkplath@gmail.com.

Also contact Plath if you have photos, video or other content from the river that could be added to the website.

Dog paddle

Leanne Whitesell, of Indianapolis, takes her two dogs paddling in her canoe. They'll put you to shame if you don't wear a life preserver. They do. The tiny guy, a 5-year-old miniature pinscher mix named Terrence, even wears a visor to shield him from the sun. This safety-conscious pooch is such an ambassador that he has his own Facebook page (I've just posted it at my Facebook page), where you'll see how he volunteers for therapy and to encourage kids to read (he's a good listener).

Whitesell's other dog, a Labrador mix named Linus, also wears a life preserver. He loves to swim, but hey, even dogs drown when they get overwhelmed by currents and fatigue.

If you can't find them in stores, Whitesell says you can find the dog life preservers online, including at ruffwear.com. Terrence will only wear his sun-protective dog visor while paddling. Whitesell found it at Amazon.com.

Bike like a German

A fun-loving German oompah band will play for bicyclists who make it to a new rest stop in New Carlisle as this year's Bike Michiana for Hospice ride embarks on Sunday. Got little ones? You can jump in on a family-friendly option of 3.5 to 11 miles that stops at South Bend's Pinhook Park, where kids will find games and a bounce house.

The German band couldn't make it last year since its musicians are in extreme demand. They'll play for riders on the 46-, 66-, 102- and 125-mile routes as they stop at Memorial Park in New Carlisle, a switch from the prior years' stop at Spicer Lake Nature Preserve.

Otherwise, cyclists will find the usual stops on slightly tweaked routes. It remains a feast on wheels, with locally owned restaurants serving special dishes at each rest stop and at the party afterward. New this year, Kate O'Connor's Irish Pub and Allie's Café & Catering join the familiar lineup of eateries. Expect a mix of live and deejay music at the stops.

The ride starts from St. Patrick's County Park between 7:30 and 10:30 a.m. and also ends there with an after-ride party featuring deejay music, pasta and stir fry, plus beer by Evil Czech Brewery.

Register online until 5 p.m. Friday at bikemichianaforhospice.org. Cost in advance is \$60 per adult or

\$20 per student (free for 12 and younger). Or adults can register for \$65 on the day of the ride. Proceeds benefit both the Bike Michiana Coalition and the Center for Hospice and Palliative Care.

Lions ride for Harold

If it hadn't been for Harold Russell, the Rolling Prairie Lions Club may never have launched its annual bike tour of LaPorte County's rural woods, hills and wetlands. The Harvest Bicycle Tour will make it to its 10th year on Sept. 20, but without Harold. He died of heart attack on June 30 to everyone's surprise, including mine. I'd often receive emails from Harold inviting me to round up friends for cross-country skiing on his farm property in Rolling Prairie and, when that melted, to ride a long bike trail in another state.

Harold, who was 75, had the drive and push to get things going. Ron King, a club member who's served as the ride's co-organizer for five years, complemented him with organizational skills. They were a "good match," Ron says. Harold's dad was one of the Rolling Prairie club's charter members and its first president in 1939. Harold joined 10 years ago thanks to another cyclist in the club. And the Harvest Ride became his passion. It's hard work. He looked weary when I chatted with him at last year's ride, wondering if he really wanted to do it yet another year when the most the event ever attracted was 135 riders.

But the payoff is great. You follow a laid-back autumn tour on quiet roads as the countryside is just starting to turn color. Thanks to sponsors, the Lions reap support for a range of community projects, like Christmas baskets for the needy.

"We're definitely missing his input and his presence," King says.

The routes of 15, 25, 40, 62 and 100 miles will depart from Rolling Prairie Elementary School, 605 E. Michigan St., Rolling Prairie. Cost is just \$20 and includes lots of fruit and snacks. T-shirts, with a sharp design that incorporates Harold's mug, are an extra \$10. Register at rollingprairielions.org/HBCT.html

Mazes in maize

Autumn's corn mazes have begun. An elaborate one recently opened at 505 N. Morton St., Shipshewana. Cost ranges from \$5 for kids ages 5-11 to \$9.50 for adults. Details are at shipshevanacornmaze.com.

Potato Creek State Park in North Liberty will open its prairie maze this Friday. Same idea, only in tall prairie grasses. Know of some other good mazes in our area? Drop me a line. We'll make a list.

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