

Kankakee flowers treat paddlers

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Nature is putting on a big flower show over the next few weeks on a little corner of the Kankakee River, ripe with marshy inlets, that feels like what the Grand Kankakee Marsh must have been before it was drained.

Hundreds, maybe thousands, of a native hibiscus flower are coming into bloom, known as the swamp rose mallow, here at the LaSalle Fish and Wildlife Area, which is on the Indiana-Illinois border.

It's worth a paddle for an hour or two or more if you're willing to just sit and mellow out. There's no current to fight. Just poke your way in and out of the inlets. Stay quiet. Let the birds do the talking. Enjoy the lack of invasive plants.

But know that most of the swamp rose mallow should be blooming by the time of my Aug. 10 column, and the optimal viewing should last about two weeks, says Gus Nyberg, director of NICHES land trust, who often paddles these waters.

I'll share much more about this gem in my Aug. 10 column, plus photos, from my paddling trip there last weekend with the Northwest Indiana Paddling Association and a producer of the Kankakee documentary "Everglades of the North." I'll include nearby places to explore relicts of the Kankakee's original luster.

Meanwhile, here's how you find the paddling spot.

It's in southern Lake County about a two-hour drive from South Bend. From U.S. 41, turn west on 241st Street near the small town of Schneider. Drive about four miles, then turn south on State Line Road and follow it to a parking lot in the LaSalle Fish and Wildlife Area. (Trust me. Follow these directions and don't try approaching from the south side of the river -- the map may show a bridge, but it doesn't function.)

Put in the Kankakee River and meander to the left. If you paddle right, you'll go under an old bridge



swamp rose mallow

Hundreds of this native flower, the swamp rose mallow, will be blooming in the marshy inlets of the Kankakee River at the LaSalle Fish and Wildlife Area at the Indiana-Illinois border over the next few weeks.

and into Illinois, which is cool because the dredging stopped at the border. Look to Indiana, and you'll see how dredges straightened it like a bowling alley. Look to Illinois, and it winds just as rivers naturally do. If you venture into Illinois, know that the state requires paddlers to have a permit -- just in case their DNR folks catch you.