

Introduction

The Mississippi River has often been described as the backbone of America. While in past centuries its waters carried native peoples, fur traders and settlers, today it invites bicyclists to ride along its banks. In Wisconsin, the Mississippi River winds its way through the beautiful "driftless" area of the state. Also known as the "coulee region" because of its valleys, the Mississippi River forms the grandest valley of them all.

The Wisconsin Mississippi River Parkway Commission has been instrumental in enhancing the valley for tourism. The Great River Road has been designated for 250 miles in Wisconsin and the Parkway Commission has been supportive of improving accommodations for bicyclists on this road (primarily State Highway 35). Over the years, bicycling has become established as a popular activity in the valley. More recently, a national effort has created the basis for the ten-state Mississippi River Trail (MRT). For Wisconsin, the MRT follows the Parkway Commission's Bikeway Plan and is called the Great River Road Bikeway (GRRB) in this map guide.

Opportunities to cross the Mississippi River by bridge or ferry and access the Minnesota and Iowa segments of the GRRB are at Prescott, Hager City, Nelson, south of Fountain City, La Crosse, South of De Soto, Prairie du Chien, the Cassville ferry, and Dubuque. Amtrak passenger rail service, which includes the shipping of bicycles, is available at La Crosse, and St. Paul, and Winona, Minnesota. Rail passenger service without checked baggage (bike) is available at Red Wing, Minnesota across the Mississippi River from Hager City in Pierce County. Commercial intercity bus service is available at all the above named Amtrak stops, as well as Dubuque. The La Crosse Municipal Transit Utility (MTU), which provides local bus service in that urban area, has exterior bike racks on all its busses.

Weather

The climate along The GRRB is classically Continental, meaning large air masses can bring weather ranging from thunderstorms to languid humidity laden afternoons, to crisp clear mornings. Because the immediate Mississippi River valley is usually two to three miles wide or more, winds from the west across the open river, frequently are quite brisk. For the bicyclists along the route, any given day anywhere on the route may seem the same in Prescott as Cassville, especially during the peak summer months of June and July. The average summer highs range from 79 to 86 degrees along the MRT. During late spring to early autumn high temperatures range from 57 to 70 degrees.

Rainfall varies slightly month to month generally ranging from three to four inches per month from April to September. Rainfall drops closer to two inches for October.

GRRB Map Specifics and Use of Map

This map depicts conditions for bicycling on the GRRB and nearby roadways. Touring cyclists can ride the entire Wisconsin segment or choose smaller segments that are better suited to their experience level. Except the Great River State Trail, cyclists will be riding on highways with light to heavy traffic volumes.

The route itself is designed for those 16 years of age or older with a driver's license and several years of bicycling experience. The user of the map bears full responsibility of his or her safety, assumes all risks encountered, and is advised to use good judgment and obey all traffic laws. The State, counties, cities, villages and their officers and employees and those of the UW-Madison Cartography Lab, as well as all vendors of the map, shall not be held accountable in any manner for loss, damage, or injury that may be suffered by anyone using this map.

The Route

The GRRB in Wisconsin is located primarily on the Great River Road or State trunk Highway (STH) 35 between Prescott and Prairie du Chien. In Grant County (the southernmost county on the Wisconsin route) the GRRB is routed on a series of state and county highways and not always on the Great River Road itself. Traffic varies from low (400-700 autos per day) on the county roads of the GRRB to the most typical rural volume on STH 35 ranging between 1,700 to 5,200. In the small villages traffic increases with local use, but the major traffic volumes are in the La Crosse and Prairie du Chien urban areas, with 18,000 in Prairie du Chien and 20,000 in the La Crosse County area. Traffic volumes in the central part of La Crosse are higher, but there are numerous bicycle friendly alternatives to use that are provided in the map.








The typical image of the GRRB is found around Stockholm, Stoddard, DeSoto, and Bagley, where the road clings to a narrow ledge between precipitous bluffs on the east and an almost as precipitous drop on the west to the Burlington Northern Santa Fe Railroad and the Mississippi River, which is constantly visible throughout the rural portion of the road. This image is common on much of the Great River Road and is not unusual to experience long stretches of between 10 and 25 miles in length where this condition exists.

There are several interconnected alternate routes that bring the rider closer to the Mississippi River, and in addition bypass some of the heavier trafficked roadway portions. Most of the County and Town Roads that serve as informal alternate routes for the GRRB have little, if any, shoulders, but the lower traffic volumes make the ride less formidable than it would be on a heavier traveled road. Grant County actually has more choices for interconnected alternate routes than the other counties, but often the alternate route is not significantly closer to the Mississippi River and quite hilly. A completely separated bicycle touring trail exists between Onalaska and Marshland (from the La Crosse area to about 25 miles north).

Services

There are numerous small villages along the GRRB, and basic needs of drinking water, sanitary facilities, and food can be met at commercial establishments in these towns. Some of the smaller communities do not have full service restaurants. Overnight accommodations range from bed and breakfast inns, for which advanced reservations are advisable, "Ma & Pa" non-chain motels and hotels, and campgrounds ranging from commercial sites to camping in Village parks. Although many River communities claim to have "camping" facilities in their local parks, often times the policy is not formally stated, and it is best to ask before pitching a tent, even in the public campground. Most of the communities do not have a "bicycle shop" designated as such, but resourceful local individuals are often able to resuscitate a broken bike, and get you on your way again. See the icons listed on the map for more specific locations of services. State Parks directly adjacent to the GRRB are Merrick near Fountain City, Perrot near Trempealeau, and Wyalusing and Nelson Dewey near Bagley and Cassville. There are several "overlooks" or "turnouts" along The Great River Road, but most of these do not provide any toilet or water, or shelter facilities.

Traffic Conditions

-  Town Roads
-  Best Conditions for Bicycling
-  Moderate Conditions for Bicycling
-  Wide Paved Shoulders with Higher Volumes
2 Lane 4 Lane
-  High Volume; Undesirable Conditions
-  Off-Road Trail Symbolism
-  Bicyclists Prohibited or Not Recommended

Note: download the full legend for details

Trail Symbols

-   Great River Trail Route
-   Alternate Trail Route
-  Section Start/Finish Line (Matchline)



Other significant contributions: Mississippi River Planning Commission

