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The First 40 Miles

A photographic journey down the wild upper stretches of the Mississippi
From the famous headwaters at the outlet of Lake Itasca in Itasca State Park (previous page), the Mississippi River begins its cross-continental journey. Winding through a broad valley rimmed by pine-topped ridges, the river first flows north toward Lake Bemidji. Its ultimate destination, the Gulf of Mexico, lies more than 2,300 miles south. Visitors on this wild stretch may encounter bird life from bald eagles to kingfishers, green herons, and spotted sandpipers. Summer days often start with a misty morning on the water.
**With occasional riffles** and only a few small rapids, the far north Mississippi is mostly lazy and meandering, dropping about 4 feet per mile. The gentle gradient is a product of geology. The river crosses ancient lake beds and outwash plains of receding glaciers. The piney ridges that reach like fingers into the river valley are terminal moraines, deposits of glacial rubble. Wetlands, marshes, and oxbows create water-rich habitat for wildlife, such as an immature red-winged blackbird.
Trumpeter swans make a splashy exit on a calm stretch of the river. Downstream, water tumbles over the wooden remains of Vekin’s Dam (left). The old logging dam requires canoeists to portage. Cattails, which sometimes line the river in dense stands (top right), provide a perch for a river jewelwing damselfly. Wild rice (far right) grows in the water, lying flat on the surface until it ripens and stands up later in the season. Atop a grassy rise, blazing star brings a touch of contrasting color to this green landscape. Much of the first 40 miles flows through the 45,000-acre Minnesota Headwaters State Forest.
All the way from its headwaters to the Iowa border, the river is a state water trail. This upper portion is perhaps best seen up close from the seat of a kayak or canoe. A side channel (above) provides paddlers with an entry point to the river at Pine Point Landing near the 40-mile mark. A bankside rope swing (left) both beckons and dares river travelers to experience the Mississippi in a more visceral way. Maps to this and other state water trails are available at mndnr.gov/watertrails.