

Beyond the Gates – Boardman River

I love rivers. Absolutely love them. I have been down rivers all over the place: Michigan, Tennessee, Montana, Wyoming, New Mexico, Texas, Colorado, Utah, Idaho, California, Oregon, Maine, Canada, Florida, Arkansas, North Carolina, New Zealand, and probably many more. The Jordan River is a local favorite and I have many memories of gang trips in the old aluminum canoes, going through the tunnels under the road, and jumping off the bridge at the end. One of my top 3 rivers though happens to be just south of us called the Boardman River. The Boardman starts as two branches, the north branch and south branch. The north branch begins in a swamp just east of Kalkaska. The south branch starts in another swamp, not really near anything. The river runs east to west and then turns north toward Traverse City before it empties into Boardman Lake, near the Traverse City Airport, before it flows again as a river into Lake Michigan in the middle of Traverse City.



Starting in two swamps does not sound very appealing, but those swamps act as a natural filter and by the time the river really becomes a river, it has that amazingly clear copper tint color with a sandy bottom and refreshingly cool temperature. The current flows slightly faster than the Jordan but the river has about the same width. The main difference in the Boardman and the Jordan is you see almost no houses on the upper section; just evergreen trees arching over to make a tunnel or meadows full of wildflowers. I see maybe one other boat on the entire river during a 2 to 3-hour float so you nearly have the entire river to yourself. The river twists and winds back on itself which makes for a fun paddle. Eventually, the woods open to a huge open field with no trees at all, as this section used to be a lake called Brown Bridge Pond which was behind a dam. The dam was removed in 2012 to restore the health of the river. The change in scenery is dramatic and suddenly you feel that you may be going through a Western prairie, as the river has returned to its original channel.

There are two ways to enjoy the Boardman. You can drive to the Brown Bridge Road Quiet Area which is 1,300 acres of city-owned property that includes 6 miles of trails, including amazing overlook views of the river and open-space. The drive takes about 45 minutes to get there.

The other way to enjoy the boardman is to canoe, kayak, or paddle board it, although the logistics are not easy. You don't need to be a great paddler to manage this river, but you need to be decent at canoeing or managing a kayak. Kayaks are actually easier to manage on the twists and turns. Although you can paddle all the way through Traverse City, the most natural section is the upper part. There is a campground with a canoe launch near the intersection of Supply Road and Brown Bridge Road. Drop your canoe or kayak off here and drive your car down to the take-out at the intersection of Brown Bridge Road and Wadsworth Road. If you only have one car, things get trickier, but I have twice called a taxi (yes, a taxi) from Traverse City to come pick me up from the take-out and drive me back up to the starting point. This is always an interesting conversation with the taxi dispatcher, but the driver always understands. The beauty of this method is that when you are finished with the float, you just get in your car and drive home. I highly recommend stopping at Short's Brewery in Bellaire for some incredible pizza and craft brewery on the way home. The Boardman is a gorgeous river. Enjoy!

Best,
Frazer Buntin