

Riding the Rifle

We crossed over Moffitt Bridge and turned into the gravel road that leads down to the Rifle River State Access Site. The day was warm and sunny, perfect for tubing. “Ignore the water temperature when you first get in” I said. “It takes a few minutes for your body to adjust to the cold.” After giving a few tips on steering in the swift current, my friends and I all sat down in our designated inner tubes with a yelp and some splashing.

At this point, I usually inform newcomers to keep away from the “huge blood suckers in the water.” Also, I instruct them to lift their bottoms while floating over big rocks because “that’s where Crayfish wait to bite you.” After getting splashed in the face a few times and fielding mean looks coming my way because of my baloney stories, we soon settled into a slow easy ride compliments of the Rifle.

While floating along, I began to think how much tubing and kayaking have increased in popularity on the Rifle. When we first vacationed at Forest Lake back in the 70’s, the River was used mostly by people in rented canoes that sometimes got in the way of a few fishermen. Once we even witnessed an amphibious/car banging along on the rocks. With much difficulty, the driver slowly turned his vehicle around and left the water resolving never to return. Weekends then and today, however, still look more like expressways during rush hour than a leisurely river ride in the wilderness. Although we can’t see anyone from our property, by the noise they make we always know when river traffic picks up.

I vividly remembered one of those weekends when we heard raised voices and loud drum sounds which broke the silence of our canoe ride. The drum sounds turned out to be paddles beating on canoes. As we rounded a bend in the river, we saw a large audience of bystanders urging on two young men sitting in canoes at the top of a high embankment. Much to our astonishment, the canoes were pushed forward and each one began picking up speed as they headed toward the water. An abrupt stop as each canoe hit the river bank ended the ride and launched each passenger headfirst into the water like bullets coming out of a gun. Surprisingly, no one was injured with the exception of major brush burns on one of the young man’s chest. From what I’ve heard, this ritual is quite common with partiers on the river.

With all the traffic on the Rifle, it’s hard to believe that animals such as beavers could live along its shores. Yet one day, while sitting up high on a bluff with some friends, I noticed and pointed out a beaver den made of piled up branches and twigs. Not long after we watched a beaver swimming down the river at a surprisingly high speed. Because he was moving away from us and since beavers have become mostly nocturnal because of man, we were astonished

when just a few minutes later we heard rustling in the brush. In the next instant, up and over the bluff walked a beaver. We stood frozen to the ground as he casually took notice of us. He didn't panic but kept on walking at a slow pace until we could no longer see him. This was the first and last time I ever saw a beaver in the wild. In spite of this I've noticed evidence of beaver activity on fallen trees in Forest Lake, especially around the bluff at the end of Brian's Trail and off the fishing trail which meanders around the woods behind the spillway.

Over the years I've observed much wildlife near or crossing the Rifle River. This included muskrats, deer coming for an evening drink, eagles, herons, ducks, even an otter who I found was an extremely fast swimmer, and various fish. In fact, back in the 1970's huge salmon were numerous due to a stocking program run by the DNR. A lot of these fish swam up our spillway right to the base of our small dam making them easy to catch.

Reason dictates that viewing wildlife of this kind would naturally be expected in a somewhat wilderness river setting, therefore, I was not prepared for the time when the water itself changed dramatically. While sitting near the river bank just enjoying the day, I noticed the water suddenly begin to turn green. Soon the whole river as far as I could see was a bright emerald green. For someone who did not understand why it was happening, it was a somewhat scary experience. Later I found out it was just the DNR putting chemicals in the water at Moffitt Bridge to control the Lamprey population.

As our tube ride came to an end, I tried to imagine what the Rifle meant to those early inhabitants of the area, different Indian tribes that depended on the River for transportation, food, and clothing. What about the early trappers or the lumbermen that came after them? Did they ever take a moment to enjoy the delicate wildflowers that grow and color its embankment or find pleasure listening to the symphony of water bubbling over its numerous boulders. When we originally bought our property, our salesman never mentioned that such a beautiful semi-wilderness area existed so near us. Also, we had no idea then how much we would come to love this River and all that it has to offer. I can only hope the people using it today will recognize the value of this amazing Michigan waterway and help keep it safe for future generations to enjoy.

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