

# Water quality, access define river

## Miles of shoreline access for fishing

By Bill Byrns

bbyrns@daily-journal.com  
815-468-7346

The Kankakee River is a truly unique stream from its marshlands in Indiana to the clean, rocky run between Kankakee and Wilmington.

It's a mix of habitats that produces legendary smallmouth bass, record walleye and plentiful channel catfish.

But look just a bit deeper to really understand why the Kankakee is a river like no other.

### Water quality maintained

"I would say its water quality first," observes veteran river guide Matt Mullady of Kankakee. "We've maintained good water quality; the river is cleaner now than it was back in the '40s and '50s when we had cabins dumping raw sewage into the river."

"Water quality is what maintains the food source," Mullady says. "All those beautiful fish that we see pictures of are at the top of the food chain. Everything they eat — the crayfish, hellgrammites and minnows — live in the rocks at the bottom of river. The food

source in the Kankakee has always been incredible."

Like many others, Mullady knows the river faces its own threats.

"The sand is a problem. The Aroma Park area has been depleted — I'd say 90 percent of the (river bottom) habitat there has been lost."

But, he adds, look what we do have.

### Miles of public access

"Go anywhere else in the Midwest and you won't find anywhere that has the miles and miles of public access that the Kankakee River has. We have 17-plus miles of public access just in the Kankakee Park District," notes Mullady who was recently elected to the park board. "That's not even considering the 14 miles of river access at the Kankakee River State Park."

Add to Mullady's list shoreline access at the Aroma Park Forest Preserve and at local park districts in Momence, Bourbonnais Township and Wilmington.

"That kind of accessibility to some of the finest game fish in the country is something you just don't find anywhere else," Mullady says.

### Top smallie stream

Anglers rate the river as one

of Illinois' top smallmouth streams. The section downstream from Kankakee — shallow and wadable most of the year — is a bronzetack fisherman's paradise.

A slot limit and springtime catch & release season have helped keep the smallie breeding population stable.

Special regulations have also aided in the rebound of walleye, thanks to a stocking program by state fisheries biologists. Helping protect the big eyes is a 16-inch (or larger) length restriction and a three-fish limit.

Channel cats are perhaps the river's most dependable catch. Tough and aggressive, the river cats are perhaps the most under-rated gamfish.

The slower-moving Iroquois River and tributaries like Beaver, Spring and Sugar creeks offer some of the basin's best catfishing, although, unlike the Kankakee, access to the Iroquois is largely by boat.

Both rivers also offer a variety of 72 different species of fish including smallmouth and largemouth bass, rockbass, walleye, northern pike, crappie, bluegill, and catfish. Rare in Illinois but commonly found here is the river are redhorse and blacknose shiner.

## River facts

- The river is 150 miles long running from South Bend, Ind. to the Illinois River west of Wilmington. 62 miles of the river lie in Illinois.
- The entire basin includes 3.3 million acres in Illinois and Indiana.
- The Kankakee River Valley takes in 2,019 square miles (1.2 million acres) in northeastern Illinois. The area includes most of Kankakee and Iroquois counties and parts of Will, Ford and Vermilion counties.
- The Iroquois River begins in Jasper County, Indiana with 55 miles of its reach in Illinois.
- Biologists rank the Kankakee and Iroquois and nine of their tributaries as "highly valued aquatic resources."
- Five tributary streams are deemed "Biologically significant" because of the diversity of life they support.
- Size varies from 200 to 800 feet at widest point and 15 feet at its deepest.
- River bottom falls more than 5 feet per mile from Momence through the Kankakee River State Park.
- The Iroquois falls a half-foot per mile over its lower 80 miles.
- An estimated 375,000 acres of wetlands once composed the Kankakee River Valley.
- The Momence Wetlands running along six miles of the river between Momence and Indiana is a remnant of that original Grand Marsh.