Paddling Northern Nebraska:

The Niobrara National Scenic River

and

Merritt Reservoir, 2023

By Leslie Taylor

Sunday, May 28: Trip Organizer Sue Hughes, and Tim Fletcher, Jud Hurd, George Ottenhoff and Leslie Taylor had campsites at Smith Falls State Park, about 20 miles east of Valentine, Nebraska; it's on the river, midway between the first put-in and the last take-out. The visitor center hours were 10AM to 2 PM, so they didn't have a chance to chat with rangers the day they arrived. It was a good thing Sue did some exploring while the others were at dinner and discovered the old take-out was washed out, but that there was a "swimming hole" in the section the park is developing a bit upriver that would be perfect.

Just at bedtime a thunderstorm arrived to rumble and flash continuously for over an hour. Sue put her Crazy Creek chair over her head because she'd forgotten a step setting her tent up and had some drips. Leslie's new tent got a good test; fortunately, she was cozy and dry.

Monday, May 29: They followed the plan to launch at Cornell Bridge, upstream of Smith Falls, and paddle back to the campground. Everyone purchased the mandatory $1 wrist-bands at the kiosk, but they did not exit at Fort Falls to do the side hike. Apparently, they missed a hike of a hundred yards into a juniper-filled sandstone canyon, to reach the 40-foot-high falls.

Berry Falls

As predicted, they had almost continuous riffles to whisk them five miles through the Fort Niobrara National Wildlife Refuge. The GPS clocked them at about 4 miles an hour with no paddling, just steering.

They passed six-foot-high Berry Falls as it spilled into the river, one of the scores of freshets from the Ogallala Aquifer that plunge down the valley walls.

When they reached Smith Falls State Park (mile 16), they beached on river right and tied up the boats for the next day. Their campsites were a short walk across an old pedestrian bridge that had recently been moved to the site. Again, they'd gotten to camp too late to talk to the ranger.

Tim clocking 4 miles per hour, but not getting much exercise

George tying up the boats at the Smith Falls take-out

After looking at the map and eating some supper they scouted for the next day's end point in George's truck. There are many private campgrounds that charge $10 and up to $25 for each boat take-out. Two of the $10 spots did not look like easy landings. The second one was the Sunnybrook Camp, just after Fritz's Island and the Class II rapids. The water was flowing fast and deep right up to the bank. The public landing spot at Brewer Bridge before Fritz's Island looked doable, but the distance from Smith Falls Campground was only about 4 miles.

TUESDAY MORNING, MAY 30: Everyone paddled except for Jud, who went home with a broken seat back. Because of the iffy take-outs, the group decided to only do the short section to Brewer Bridge. They promised themselves not to paddle, just steer, to make the float last. At times some people actually paddled backward to slow down.

They got back to camp early enough to consult with the Ranger, who suggested a takeout called Rocky Barn, which was not listed by name on the map. However, it was past Rocky Ford Rapid, rated as Class III, with a portage trail marked, and no one had brought helmets, so they decided to save that for another trip.

One of several swallow condominiums in the sandy cliffs they passed along the river

TUESDAY AFTERNOON: George took off to Lake McConoughey, where his wife was camping, and Tim, Sue and Leslie packed up and went to Merritt Reservoir. They didn't find the main office or get a map, but lucked into perfect $15 basic campsites with a secluded, sandy beach ideal for launching at Cedar Bay campground. [Located with a red star on the map on the next page.]

Campsite 15, Cedar Bay area

Their beach at Lake Merritt

They set up tents, rolled their boats down a short sandy walk, and paddled off to explore; Sue left her red flag on a branch so they could find the narrow path on the way back.

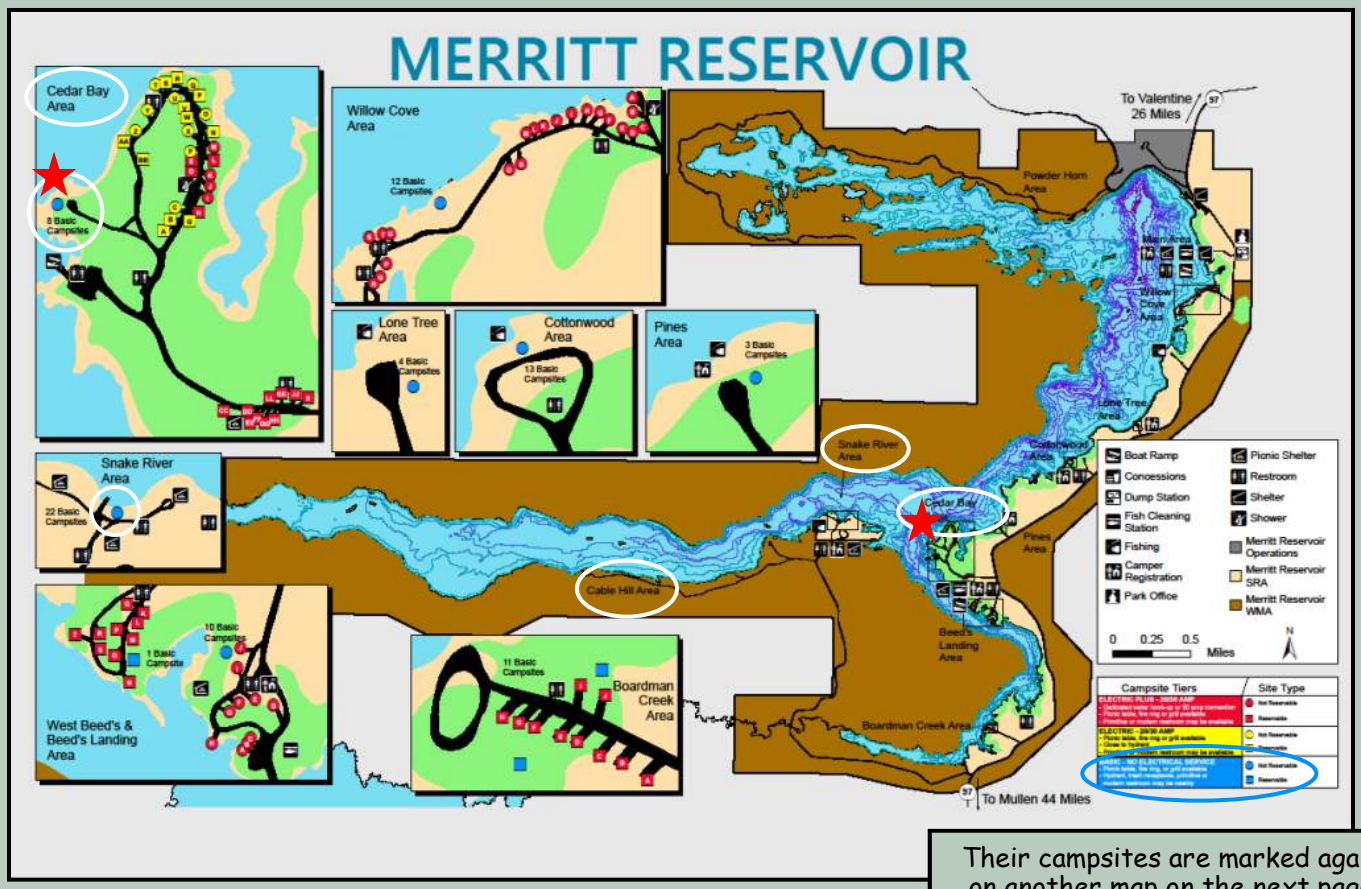
The weather was beautiful and the lake calm. They went left, into the Snake River area and turned around. Returning was faster with the wind at their back, and they went a little past their campsites into Boardman Creek. Back at camp, Sue loaded her boat, but Tim and Leslie tied up so they could paddle again in the morning.

Just as Leslie wanted to cool off after squirming around to get settled, a big storm rolled in and blew and blew and blew cool air from the lake. Another good tent test.

WEDNESDAY, MAY 30: Tim and Leslie launched at about 7AM and went as far as they could up the Snake River. The river disappeared (to be underground?) at about 2.7 miles upstream. They paddled a little more after getting back to camp. The paddle was beautiful and calm. Very few motorboats were around.

On the way back they took a break to use a vault toilet and discovered another set of camp sites that would be good for launching kayaks. [They were sites 7, 8 and 9 in the Cable Hill/Snake River Area. The map says they are not reservable (blue circles), but close by were sites G, H, etc., which were electric sites for $30 and can be reserved. There is a vault toilet.]

Tim and Leslie called it a day after seven miles on the GPS. They broke camp and rolled out at about 11:30AM to drive home.



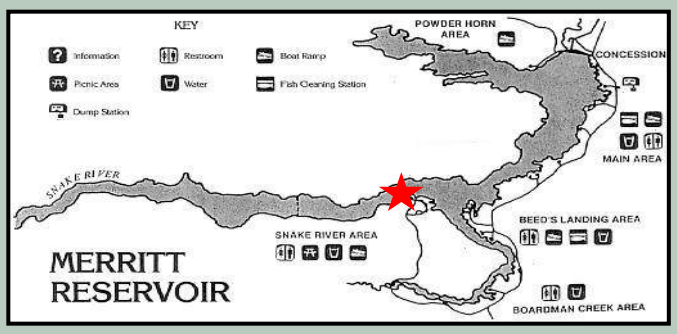
Their campsites are marked again on another map on the next page

The trail to the put-in between Site 14 and 15

CAMPGROUND NOTES: The sites where they stayed, 15 and 16, were first-come-first served, in the Cedar Bay Area. [Not-reservable sites are marked with blue circles on this map; enlarge your .pdf to see them].

The sites felt wild and isolated, but the toilets and showers were just a short walk across a field. Take quarters for the shower; the water was hot.

The neighboring campsite, 14, was right next to a swampy area that looked like it might be buggy. It also had the most robust patch of poison ivy they'd ever seen.



SUE'S NOTES: This is a trip that I've wanted to do for years. I'm so glad we didn't get spooked by the rainy weather forecast; mostly it was wonderful.

The days were clear and warm but not hot, with no problem winds. There were two rain storms, but both were after we went to bed.

Driving all over after the first day's paddle looking for a take-out downriver of Smith Falls State Park was lovely. The countryside was so green and lush; we saw lots of healthy looking deer and dozens of turkeys who were acting like there'd be no Thanksgiving. And there was no traffic! However, we passed a huge number of canoes and float rafts stacked in piles waiting for people to rent. Beware, I've heard it's a wild scene on summer weekends.

As Leslie mentioned, several of us left Smith Falls after the second day's paddle on the river and went to camp at Merritt Reservoir. That worked well and would make a good two-part plan because the reservoir is too far from Smith Falls to go back and forth. Also, we found prime campsites at Merritt, really the nicest ones I've ever seen, that had a short trail right to a sandy, shallow put-in.

Here are more specifics about both Smith Falls State Park and Merritt Reservoir:

- All campsites at **SMITH FALLS** are large and nice; these have trees: 33, 31, 24, 20
- The Rock Barn landing the Ranger at Smith Falls suggested is below the Rocky Ford rapid that has a portage icon by it! It's on private land; she said call Scott about the landing: 800-335-6252
- Our take-out on the second day was at Brewer's Bridge. It is only a short paddle from Smith Falls, but it's a public landing and was the only one we scouted that didn't have a steep drop-off. FYI: the only other public access was our first put-in at Cornell Bridge and the one at Smith Falls, between the two.
- Maybe the problem with the take-outs was due to the really rainy spring they'd had this year. Plan to get to Smith Falls early enough in the day to talk to the rangers, or call ahead to ask about the landings.
- The campground at **MERRITT RESERVOIR** is huge, and the map that's on their website is confusing and the icons hard to read. It would be a good idea to come early in the day to explore the many camping areas and snag ones that have a natural launch spot.
- The isolated-feeling campsites we found that had a sandy path to the water were Sites 14, 15 and 16 in the Cedar Bay Area. In addition to Leslie's suggestion of the Cable Hill Area, check the Snake River Area, which also has blue circles representing not-reservable sites. You can call 402-376-3320 for more information.
- Actually check everything! We were in a hurry to get campsites and get on the water, we didn't stop at the Main Area and we didn't get a map. That probably explains the confusion. I phoned the ranger to clarify my memory and he said our campsites were in Cedar Bay, but Leslie and Tim think they might have been in Beed's Landing. Tim thinks the area they scouted the next day might have been Boardman Creek. Leslie said maybe it was the Cable Hill area, although that doesn't appear to have vault toilets, and I wondered if it was in the Snake River Area. Confused or not, we had a wonderful time!

The turnoff onto Highway 97

- Someone at Merritt also recommend looking at Valentine National Wildlife Refuge, south of Valentine on Highway 83. It appears that some of those small lakes have drive-in access.
- I drove up through Arthur and then to just short of Hyannis and turned east on Nebraska 2, marked as a scenic road, to Mullen, where I turned north on 97 to Merritt. They were all good roads with no traffic.
- Take a road map; my phone wasn't always helpful.