

# ENVIRONMENTAL Fact Sheet



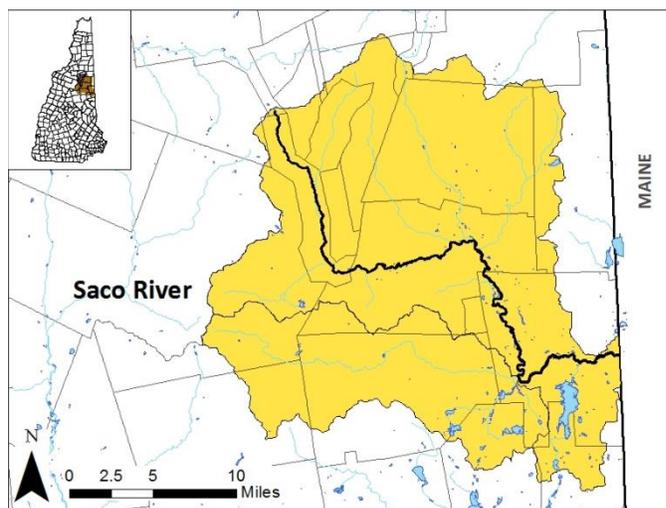
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## The Saco River

The Saco River lures recreationalists from throughout the Northeast for the fine fishing, canoeing, kayaking, sight-seeing, hiking and camping opportunities that abound on and around its waters. From its headwaters at Saco Lake high in the White Mountains, the river drops nearly 1,500 feet in elevation as it flows for 40 miles through Hart's Location, Bartlett, and Conway before entering Maine and continuing on to the Atlantic Ocean. The watershed upstream of the New Hampshire-Maine border drains approximately 425 square miles, 80 percent of which is within the White Mountain National Forest. The Saco River was one of the first rivers designated into the New Hampshire Rivers Management and Protection Program in June 1990, attesting to its importance to the people of New Hampshire.



Because of the region's popularity for recreation, development in the lower river valley has been extensive since the river's designation. While some areas of agriculture and river valley forests remain, many have been replaced with residences and commercial development in support of the tourism industry. River management concerns have increased concurrently, from wastewater treatment to riverbank impacts by large numbers of paddlers.

### Geology

In Hart's Location, the Saco River flows through Crawford Notch, a spectacular, narrow, steep-sided valley with exposed rock cliffs. The upper Saco River is characterized by fast-moving water, tumbling over rocks and boulders with frequent cascades. Near the mouth of Nancy Brook, the river has cut a narrow gorge into the bedrock, forming a short turbulent waterfall. A number of steep, sheer cliffs or ledges are also present near the river, including Frankenstein Cliffs, Humphrey's Ledge, Cathedral Ledge and White Horse Ledge.

### History

Evidence of inhabitation in the Saco River valley dates back nearly 10,000 years. Documented settlement of Native Americans, as recorded by Darby Field, dates to 1642, with the Pigwacket kin-based group. Major Native American trails have been found along the river, and the potential for further archaeological discoveries exists. In the early 1800s, small farmsteads dotted the valley, particularly in lowland areas adjacent to the river. Numerous stone fences, dug wells, cellar holes, and the famous paddleford style covered bridges (shown in the photo below) remain as evidence of early settlers. Two sites along the Saco River corridor are listed on the National Register of Historic Places: the Crawford Depot and the Crawford Artists Studio.

## **Wildlife, Habitat and Vegetation**

Because the Saco River flows primarily through the White Mountain National Forest, the river and its corridor support a large number of wildlife species, both common and rare. Among the state-listed threatened species found are two breeding peregrine falcon pairs nesting along the river, and the American marten. According to the New Hampshire Natural Heritage Inventory, a state-listed endangered plant species, the parasol sedge, occurs near Saco Lake at the headwaters of the Saco River. In addition, a rare natural community, the New England riverwash *Hudsonia* barrens, is found in five locations along the river. The presence of this community is significant because it is virtually nonexistent elsewhere on earth, resulting in its “globally rare” status by the National Heritage Network. Two significant plant species are found within the riverwash *Hudsonia* barrens. Though very rare in New Hampshire, the shrub, the hairy hudsonia, and the perennial herb, the White Mountain silverling, are listed as globally secure.

## **Recreation**

The natural beauty and recreational opportunities of the Saco River have been attracting visitors to the region for over 150 years. A regional boaters’ guide describes the Saco River



Watershed as the “most impressive in all New England.” The guidebook further describes the “majesty of this view” of the White Mountains from the riverbed as “breathtaking” on a clear spring or summer day. The presence of clear water and sandy beaches along the Saco River provide excellent opportunities for swimming and tubing throughout the summer. For those wishing to stay overnight, campgrounds are located along the river from Crawford Notch State Park to Conway, and wilderness camping is available within the White Mountain National Forest. Hiking trails ascend the adjacent mountains and offer views of the river, as do the cliffs formed by the river. White Horse and Cathedral ledges are among the most popular rock climbing sites in New England, while the Frankenstein Cliffs offer excellent ice climbing in the winter.

## **Boating**

The Saco River and its tributaries are used by thousands of people from throughout the Northeast annually for canoeing, kayaking, and rafting. In early spring, the upper section of the river offers one of the most exciting whitewater runs in all of central New England. Between the Gorge at Notchland and the center of Bartlett, five miles of continuous rapids and occasional drops require whitewater expertise to navigate. From Bartlett to Conway, the river offers a popular run of medium difficulty with quickwater and intermittent rapids. From North Conway to the Maine border, the river is primarily smooth water with the exception of a few rapids between Conway and Center Conway. Route 302 parallels the entire length of the Saco River and provides numerous access sites to the river. Paddlers and fishermen frequently use bridge crossings as river access points. In addition, Conway maintains three public access sites, and Bartlett’s town beach is located on the river.

## **Fishing**

The Saco River is a popular trout fishing destination in the Northeast. Angler demand and a decline in available high quality habitat has overwhelmed the natural reproductive capability of the trout populations that reside in this river. As a result, the New Hampshire Fish and Game Department stocks hatchery-reared brook, brown, and rainbow trout annually throughout the watershed. Recreationalists enjoy many fishing opportunities on the mainstem, as well as within the tributaries. On weekends, anglers congregate in the fly-fishing only section of the Saco River from Humphrey Ledge pool near the confluence of Lucy Brook downstream to where Artist Brook enters. There are several tributaries to the Saco that support fishable, self-sustaining populations of wild brook trout.

## **For More Information**

For further information about the New Hampshire Rivers Management and Protection Program, visit [the NHDES website](#) or contact the Rivers Coordinator, 29 Hazen Drive; PO Box 95; Concord, NH 03302-0095; (603) 271-2959; [riversprogram@des.nh.gov](mailto:riversprogram@des.nh.gov).