

## Water Trail Routes

The Odessa Water Trail provides several marked routes to follow. On-water navigation signs, along with this trail map, will guide your way. Of course, you are free to stray off the trail to explore any or all 6,400 acres.



Put in and take out from the same access, or shuttle vehicles for additional trip possibilities. The descriptions below start at Schafer Access but all routes can be done in reverse, as an out-and-back, or in combination with other trails.

Paddling on flat water is a bit slower than on a river with a current. Allow about 2.5-3 mph for a novice paddler.

### North Trail (3 miles)

Put in at Schafer Access; turn left. Within a few hundred feet you'll enter the boundaries of Port Louisa National Wildlife Refuge. After about one mile, you'll leave the Main Lake and enter a series of narrowing chutes. When water is low, lotus beds can make the trail appear impassable. Keep going!

During summer draw down levels, this route will reward you with a wildlife show of pelicans, herons, egrets, broods of ducklings, and more.

Take out from the inlet ditch just off the big parking lot at Port Louisa. The bank is steep during low water.

 The Refuge is closed to all access September 15 - December 31 to provide refuge for migrating birds. The rest of the year, the refuge is open from sunrise to sunset.



### Goose Trail (4.2 miles)

After putting in at Schafer Access, head across the Main Lake, angling to the right. Look for the narrow "Lateral Ditch," marked with a navigation arrow. Keep going straight east until you go through the next narrow passage, then turn right.

This is a good route for late winter/early spring paddling. Look for eagles as well as eagle nests high in the trees.

Connect to South Trail to continue on.

 Parts of Goose Trail are not passable in very low water. This trail also passes through popular hunting spots. Paddling is not recommended during waterfowl season (typically mid-October to late November).



## Odessa Wildlife Complex

Explore the Odessa Wildlife Complex from a canoe or kayak to best discover its scenic beauty and abundant wildlife.

The Odessa Water Trail will take you through this 6,400-acre wetland complex of large shallow lakes, isolated ponds, timbered chutes, marsh and forest. Full of twists and turns, you never know what might be around the next bend.

It's no surprise that wildlife abounds at Odessa. The north half is part of Port Louisa National Wildlife Refuge and the rest is under management of the Iowa Department of Natural Resources. The entire area is managed for migratory birds.

Changing water levels are key to providing food and cover for birds stopping to refuel. It also means different paddling experiences through the year.

Make time to explore this wildlife haven - you'll be glad you did.

## Safety on the Water

- 1. Wear your life jacket.**
- 2. Watch the weather.** Don't go out in electrical storms. Strong winds can also be dangerous, especially in large, open water areas.
- 3. Know your abilities.** Paddling on flat water means no current to move you along. Consider that, along with your physical abilities, to determine how long your planned route will take.
- 4. Know your route.** It's easy to get lost in the maze of backwaters. Take a map along. On-water trail signs are not substitutes for a map; they are meant to be used together.
- 5. Be aware of hunting seasons.** Waterfowl hunting is popular on Odessa. The Mississippi River or South Trail are the best choices in October - November.
- 6. Check water levels.** Some areas are not accessible during very low water. The Mississippi River can be dangerous when the river is flooding.



### South Trail (6.7 miles)

Put in at Schafer Access and turn right. You will travel on the Main Lake for about two miles before entering the chute to Sand Run Access. After that you'll wind through timbered chutes and backwaters for about four miles to the Burriss Ditch Boat Ramp.



Photo by Jay Brooks

Wildlife viewing can be spectacular on this route with turtles sunning on beaver lodges, eagles on nests, sandpipers in the mud flats, egrets in the shallows and otters playing in the backwaters.

This trail is accessible year round and at all water levels.

### Mississippi River Trail (6.5 miles)

Put in at Port Louisa Boat Ramp and turn right to head down stream. To stay out of the main channel keep right.

If you're looking for a big adventure, drop your boat in the Mississippi River at Port Louisa and follow the loop back to where you started, about 17 miles total. You'll have to portage at the Toolesboro Ramp but it is an easy walk.

 Lock and Dam 17 is located at about 4 miles. If you stay on the Iowa shoreline, you will come to the spillway. You **must** exit the water and portage on shore. Below flood stage the spillway can be seen but during high water it is submerged.

**Boating during flood conditions is dangerous!** It is your responsibility to know the current water levels. Check the web site for links.

## Odessa History

The area that is now the Odessa Wildlife Complex changed dramatically from 1900 to 1954 but those changes actually brought the area almost full circle.

The water here was once a flowing part of the Mississippi River with steamboats pulling to shore at Sand Run Access. Flood protection levees were erected in the early 1900's and pumping stations helped dry the land for farming.

In 1939 Lock & Dam 17 went into service, creating a 9-foot deep channel for river traffic. The Army Corps of Engineers purchased all lands affected by the construction. Most farming was abandoned in the 1940's as pumps failed to keep the land dry enough.

Lands not needed for the navigation project were turned over to the U. S. Fish & Wildlife Service for wildlife habitat. Odessa was reconnected to the river in 1954 by water control structures, returning floodplain habitat that had been gone for fifty years.



Collection of U.S. Army Corps of Engineers

## Camping & Amenities

A campground is located along the South Trail, just past Schafer Access. The area is also accessible from County Road X-61. There are 30 sites with electricity and one tent-only site. Other features include latrines, water and a small day-use parking area with a walk-down launch for canoes and kayaks.

Information and restrooms can be found at the Refuge headquarters as well as at Toolesboro Indian Mounds & Museum. The refuge is open M-F during business hours and Toolesboro is open seasonally.

Wapello, the county seat, is the nearest city. It has groceries, gas, restaurants, parks and stores, as well as both a hotel and motel.



Photo by Jack Deinger

## Fish and Wildlife

As the name implies, the Odessa Wildlife Complex is managed for wildlife, so it's not surprising there are plenty of chances to see birds and other wild animals.

Bird life is spectacular and changes with the season and water levels. An important stop on many birds' migration route, the area will hold thousands of waterfowl in the fall and spring. In addition, shorebirds and wading birds find food sources in the water and mud flats as water recedes in the summer. Eagles use Odessa for winter habitat and for nesting.

Odessa is also home to a variety of turtles and snakes. While painted turtles are most commonly seen basking on logs, there are seven other types of turtles in the Complex, including some seen in few other locations.

Several rare species of water snakes are found on the area, none of them poisonous, though they can be aggressive if approached.

Beaver, muskrat, and an occasional river otter are among the mammals found swimming at Odessa.

Fishing opportunities include largemouth bass, crappie, bluegill, catfish, bullhead, white bass and carp. Since this is a state-owned lake, there is a 15" length limit on largemouth bass.

## Water Trail Partners

This trail is part of the Iowa Department of Natural Resources' statewide water trail system. It was created through the efforts of the following agencies and organizations:

- Iowa Department of Natural Resources
- Tri-Rivers Conservation Foundation
- Louisa County Conservation Board
- U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service
- Louisa Development Group
- Iowa State Extension, Louisa County
- Community Foundation of Louisa County

## Contact Information

[www.NaturallyLouisaCounty.com](http://www.NaturallyLouisaCounty.com)

Get all the information you need about the water trail and Louisa County

**Water Trail and Campground**  
Louisa County Conservation Board  
319-523-8381

**Odessa Wildlife Complex**  
Iowa Department of Natural Resources  
319-523-8319

Port Louisa National Wildlife Refuge  
319-523-6982

**Tourism and Amenities**  
Louisa Development Group  
888-894-2932

[www.NaturallyLouisaCounty.com](http://www.NaturallyLouisaCounty.com)



## Odessa Water Trail

Louisa County, Iowa

Odessa Wildlife Complex is located in Louisa County, Iowa. It is a half-day drive from Chicago, St. Louis and Des Moines, and less than an hour away from Iowa City and the Quad Cities.



For more information about Odessa Water Trail and other attractions in Louisa County visit:

[www.NaturallyLouisaCounty.com](http://www.NaturallyLouisaCounty.com)

# Odessa Water Trail

- North Trail 3 miles  
(closed September 15 - December 31)
- Goose Trail 4.2 miles  
(paddling not recommended during waterfowl hunting season and inaccessible during low water levels)
- Mississippi River Trail 6.5 miles
- South Trail 6.7 miles

Official vehicles only  
on refuge roads  
Hiking & Biking allowed  
Jan 1 - Sept 14

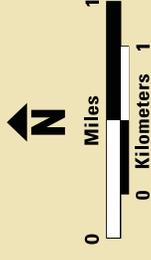
# Odessa Wildlife Complex

- Port Louisa National Wildlife Refuge  
Closed September 15 - December 31
- Odessa Wildlife Management Unit  
Open year-round



**Water**  
Note: Odessa water levels change through the year.  
Water shown on map may not represent the current water level.

- |                                                                                                        |                                                                                                                 |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <span style="border-bottom: 1px solid black; width: 20px; display: inline-block;"></span> Paved Road   | <span style="border-bottom: 1px dashed black; width: 20px; display: inline-block;"></span> Refuge Road (gravel) |
| <span style="border-bottom: 1px dashed black; width: 20px; display: inline-block;"></span> Gravel Road | Great River Road                                                                                                |
| Headquarters                                                                                           | Hiking Trail                                                                                                    |
| Boat Ramp                                                                                              | Bike Trail                                                                                                      |
| Canoe Access                                                                                           | Campground                                                                                                      |
| Portage                                                                                                | Restrooms                                                                                                       |
| Scenic View                                                                                            | Information                                                                                                     |



Boundaries posted in the field supersede all boundaries shown on map.

