



# Shenandoah River Float Trips

by  
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and Stephen J. Owens

The Shenandoah River and its two major tributaries, the North Fork and South Fork, are sparkling jewels of the scenic and historic Shenandoah Valley in northwest Virginia. This river system flows northeasterly from its headwaters in Augusta and Rockingham Counties to its juncture with the Potomac River at Harpers Ferry in West Virginia. For the most part, these rivers are best navigated by canoe or kayak due to the numerous shallows, ledges, and rapids. However, the use of motorized johnboats by fishermen is common in the main stem of the Shenandoah River and in the impoundments on the South Fork. Prior to an outing, boaters should study a topographical map to help identify any potential hazards (rapids, dams, low-water bridges, etc.) in the section to be navigated.

The *North Fork of the Shenandoah River* begins in the mountains of northern Rockingham County, flows out into the Shenandoah Valley at Cootes Store west of Broadway, and works its way northeast across the valley until it joins Smith Creek immediately upstream of Mount Jackson. From Mount Jackson to Strasburg, the North Fork meanders along the western slope of Massanutten Mountain, which rises out of the middle of the Shenandoah Valley floor. At Strasburg, the North Fork turns east, wrapping around the northern end of Massanutten Mountain and making a beeline to its mouth at Riverton/Front Royal.

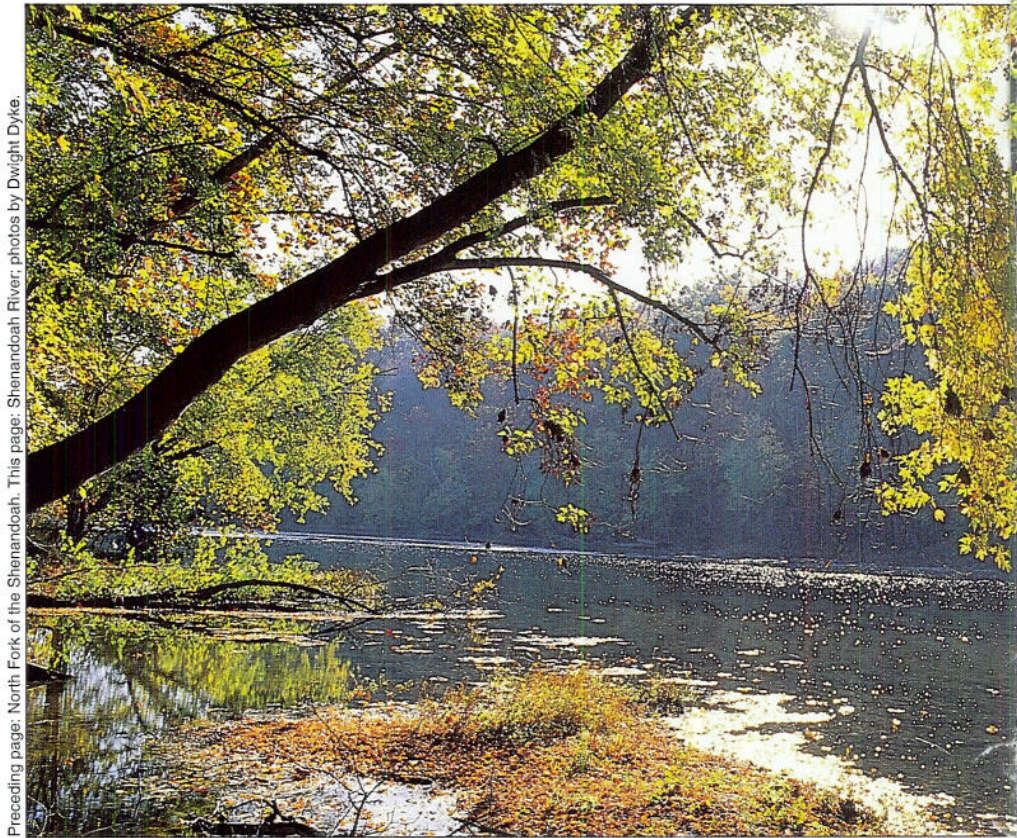
Public access is limited to three boat landings, one at *Meems Bottom* (I) (Route 730 near Shenandoah Caverns) offering canoe access, one 20 miles later at *Chapman's landing* (M) (Route 672 at Willow Grove, south of Woodstock) providing canoe access, and one 57 miles later at *Riverton* (R) (off Route 637, immediately downstream of the US 340/522 bridge). Paddlers will need

to seek landowner permission to camp along the North Fork or use any of the numerous private boat launching sites, since none of the public landings are close enough to each other for day trips.

The North Fork is a pleasant little river to float due to its clear waters, pleasant scenery, mild whitewater, and abundance of wildlife. However, low flows during summer may require paddlers to walk their boats through some of the shallows, especially upstream of *Meems Bottom*. The primary hazards to navigation on the North Fork are six dams and several low-water bridges. The first dam is an 8-foot structure just upstream of Timberville; three dams are located between Edinburg and the Route 758 bridge east of Woodstock; and two small dams are found between Strasburg and Riverton.

quently encountered. Largemouth bass, bluegill, redbreast sunfish, channel catfish, and muskellunge may also be caught by the angler, especially in the impounded pools behind the dams.

The *South Fork of the Shenandoah River* begins at Port Republic where the cold waters of the South River join the combined warm waters of the North and Middle Rivers. This lengthy river meanders northeasterly through the part of the Shenandoah Valley called Page Valley, sandwiched between the Blue Ridge to the east and Massanutten Mountain to the west. Paddlers will find that public access points are numerous the entire length of the river, making trip planning easy. In addition to the VDGIF landings, the U.S. Forest Service has canoe launching sites on some of their lands border-

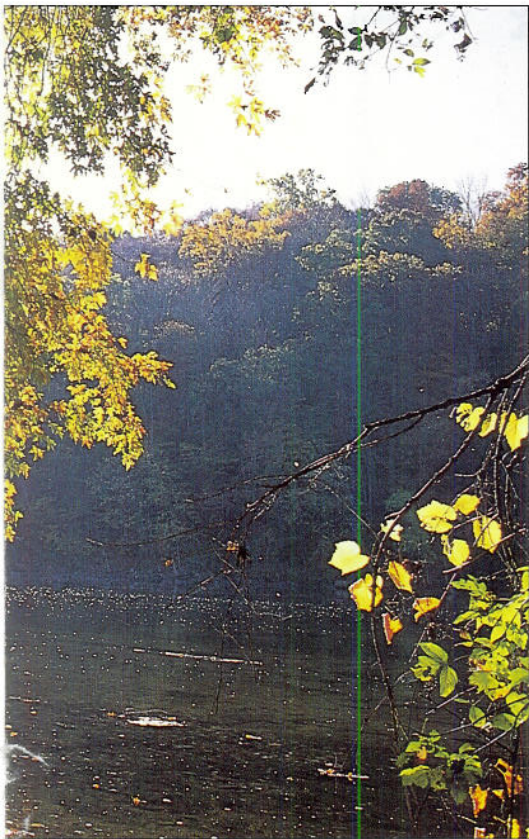


Preceding page: North Fork of the Shenandoah. This page: Shenandoah River; photos by Dwight Dyke.

The North Fork supports a diverse sport fish population, with rock bass being the most abundant. Smallmouth bass are commonly caught in this small, shallow river, but larger smallmouth are infre-

ing the river. Overnight camping on National Forest lands is permitted, but boaters should contact the Lee Ranger District office in Edinburg (703/984-4101) for locations and details.

The moderately clear water, mild whitewater, mountain scenery, and good smallmouth bass fishing contribute to the popularity of the South Fork. This popularity, assisted by several canoe liveries operating between Luray and Front Royal, can make for a busy river during the warm months. The primary hazards to navigation on the South Fork are four dams. The first dam is located a couple of miles above *Island Ford*. Though it may be tempting, do not attempt to run this old power dam as it has claimed several boats in recent years; portage to the left instead. The second dam is located at the Town of Shenandoah and should be portaged on the right. The third dam is at Newport (approximately one mile upstream of the *Newport* access site) and has a moderately difficult portage on the



right. The last impediment is the Luray Dam (located approximately two miles upstream of the Inskip access site) which has a very difficult portage on the left side.

Feisty smallmouth bass dominate the diverse sport fish population in

this moderate-sized river, giving plenty of action for anglers. The pugnacious redbreast is the dominant sunfish in the South Fork, but bluegill may be encountered in some of the impounded areas, along with largemouth bass. Lunker channel catfish and muskellunge lurk in the deeper holes and impounded reaches as well. Rock bass are present but not very abundant. Late-summer anglers should be prepared to contend with an abundance of submerge aquatic vegetation ("grass") in the shallows of the South Fork that can significantly hinder fishing.

The main stem of the *Shenandoah River* begins at Riverton/Front Royal with the confluence of the North and South Forks, and flows gently into West Virginia (Note: the West Virginia section of the Shenandoah River develops into Class III whitewater as it approaches the Potomac River). The well-spaced public access points allow paddlers to design a trip to their liking. Boaters will need to seek landowner permission to camp along the river or use alternative launching sites.

Although not very popular to paddlers due to the amount of flat water, the main stem of the Shenandoah in Virginia offers pleasant scenery (downstream of *Morgan's Ford*) and good fishing for smallmouth bass, redbreast sunfish, largemouth bass, bluegill, channel catfish, and muskellunge. The only two navigational hazards are located on the upper reach of the river: a dam approximately four miles downstream of *Front Royal* which must be portaged on the left (resulting in a long carry), and a low-water bridge at *Morgan's Ford* (Route 624).

On a more somber note, anglers should be aware that fish consumption advisories have been placed on portions of the Shenandoah River system due to a long and tragic history of industrial pollution. Mercury originating from the South River has contaminated fish in the upper end of the South Fork, prompting the following health advisory for the South Fork between Port Republic and the Page/Warren County line: "Eat no more than one meal (1/2 lb.) per week of

fish from these waters. Small children and pregnant women should not eat fish from these waters." PCBs originating from an industry in Front Royal have resulted in the following health advisory for the entire main stem in Virginia, that portion of the South Fork downstream of the Route 619 bridge near Front Royal, and that portion of the North Fork downstream of the mouth of Passage Creek: "Fish caught should not be consumed." Anglers interested in more information regarding these health advisories should contact the Virginia Department of Health at 804/786-3551.

## South Fork of the Shenandoah

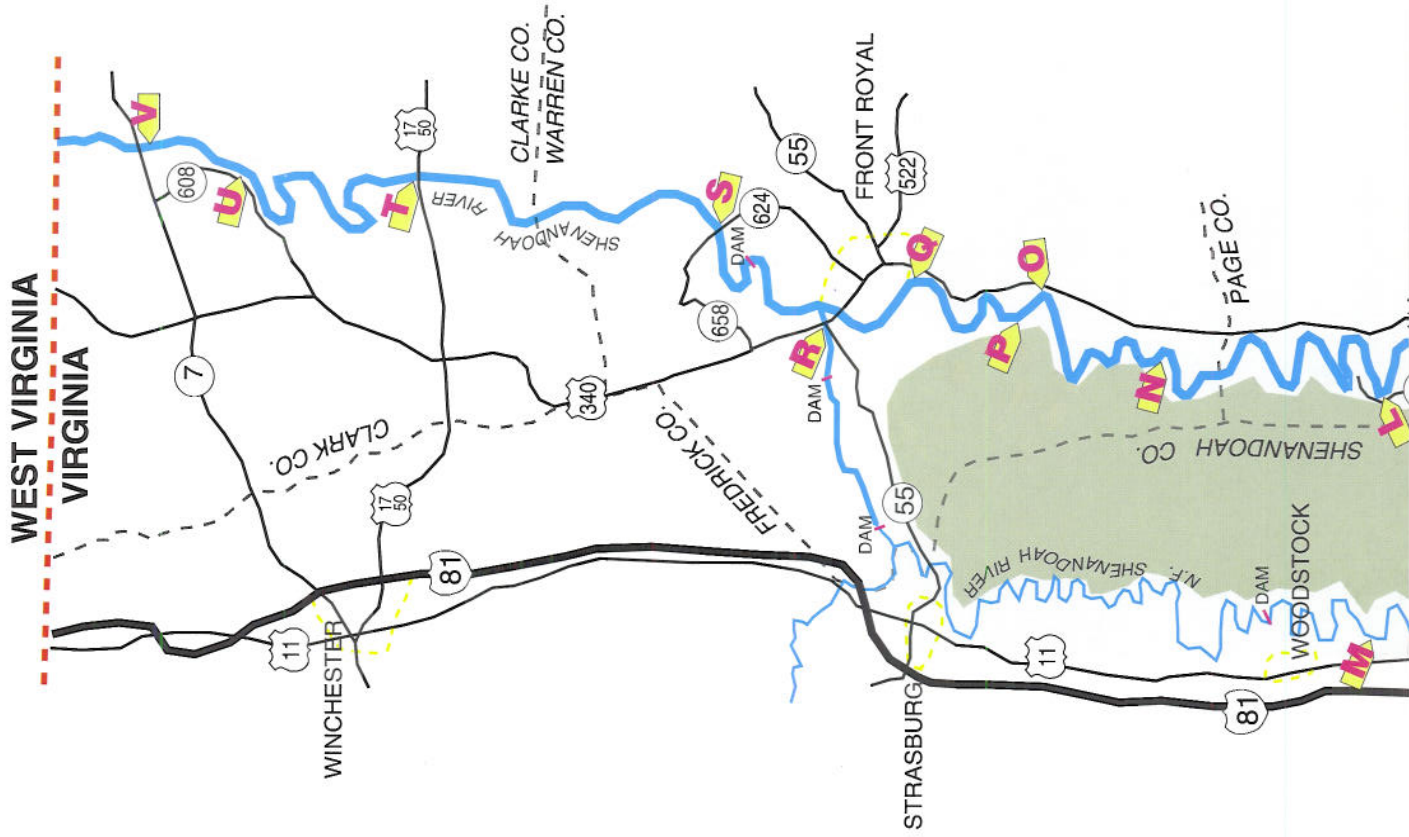
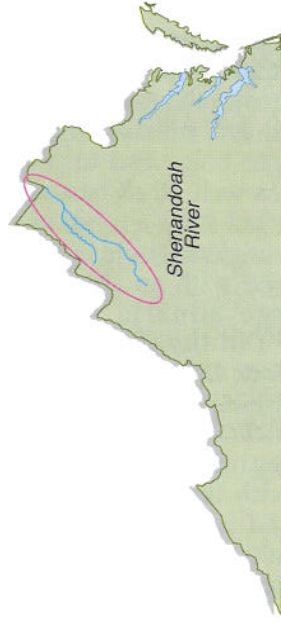
### *Port Republic to Island Ford* 10 miles (A-B)

A boat ramp was constructed by VDGIF recently at Port Republic at the confluence of the North River and South River. This facility can accommodate up to 25 vehicles and is one of the most scenic spots on the South Fork of the Shenandoah River. As you approach a big island about one mile below Port Republic, take the channel to the right. It is deeper and provides better fishing than the left-hand route. Boaters must take precautions as they approach an old power dam above Island Ford. Portage your canoe (to the left of the dam), as running it is impossible. Long, flat runs and pools provide exciting redbreast sunfish angling. Smallmouth bass can be taken in fair numbers along this reach.

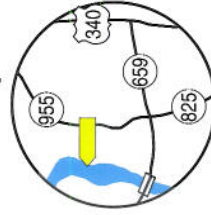
### *Island Ford to Elkton* 7 miles (B-C)

A picturesque float, the South Fork meanders through farmland, once again providing excellent redbreast sunfish and rock bass fishing opportunities in the deep pools, and lots of small smallmouth bass action in the riffles. A Class I-II waters with one small ledge below Island Ford. Look for the new VDGIF landing on the right-hand side of the river going downstream near the Rt. 33 bridge.

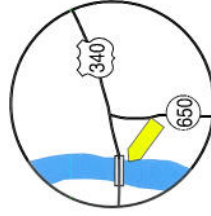
# Shenandoah River Boat Landings



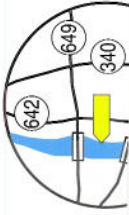
**A** Port Republic



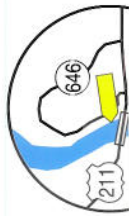
**G** Alma

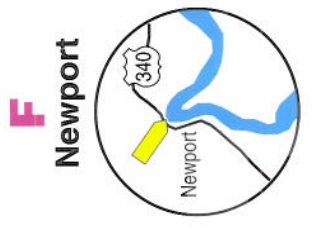
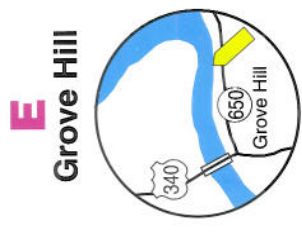
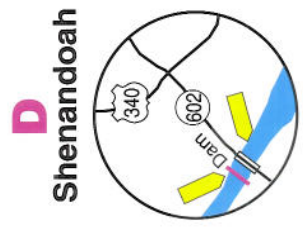
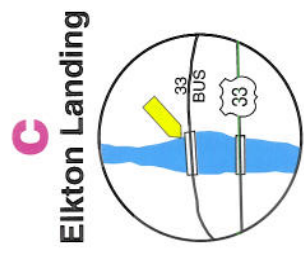
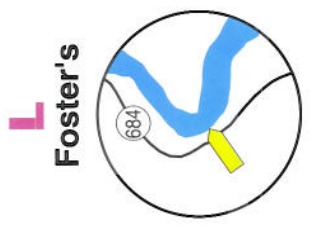
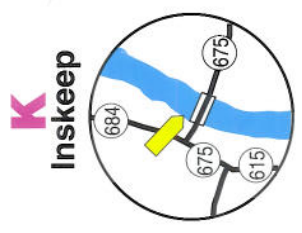
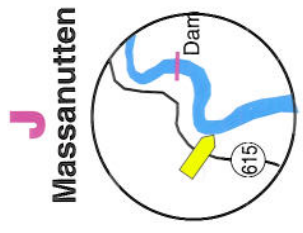
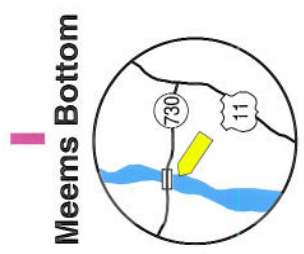
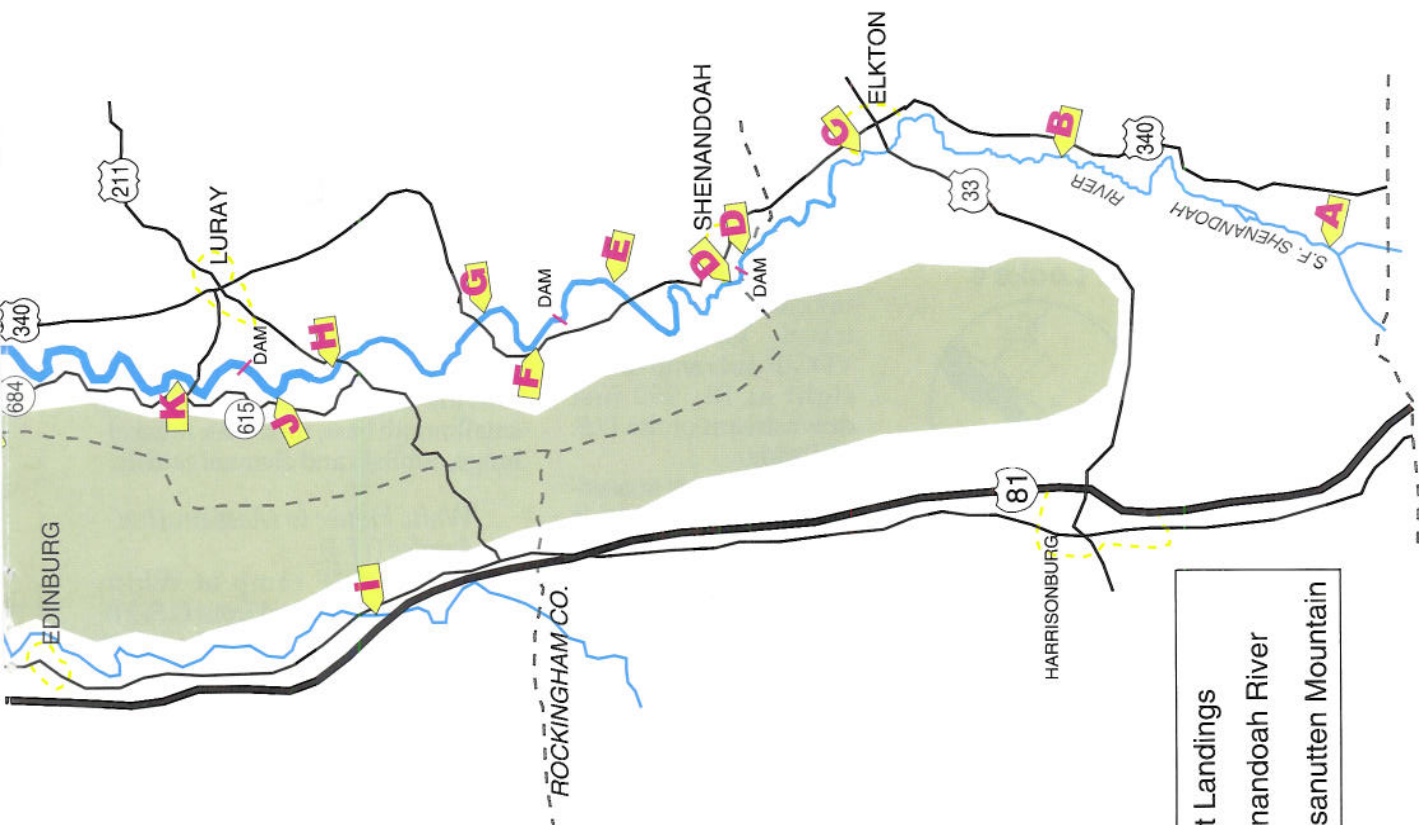


**B** Island Ford

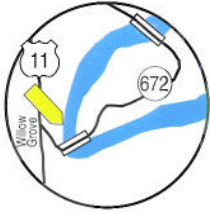


**H** White House

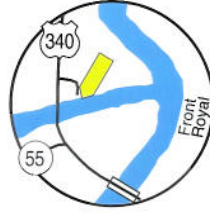




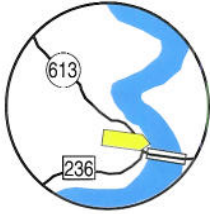
**M**  
Chapman



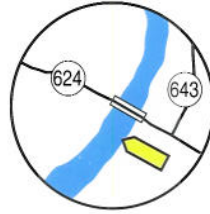
**R**  
Riverton



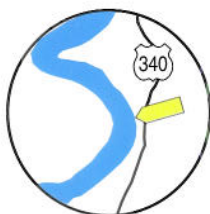
**N**  
Bentonville



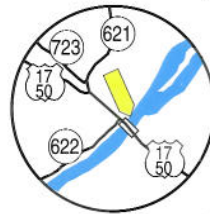
**S**  
Morgan's Ford



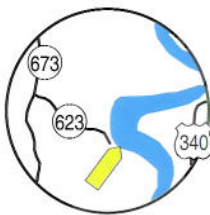
**O**  
Karo



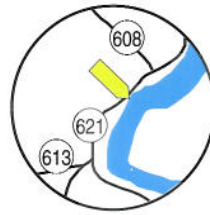
**T**  
Berry's Ferry



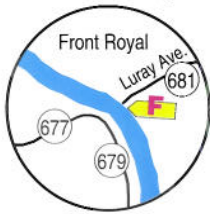
**P**  
Simpson's



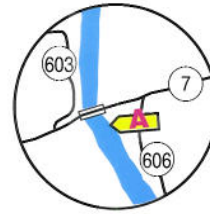
**U**  
Locke's



**Q**  
Front Royal



**V**  
Castleman's Ferry



*Elkton to Shenandoah*  
7 miles (C-D)

Put in at the VDGIF boat ramp at Elkton (scheduled for completion in 1994) and rig up a small crayfish imitation for some smallmouth bass excitement. Get out of your canoe occasionally to wade the riffles and runs for best bronzeback results. Rock bass and redbreast sunfish add to the angling fun. A long power pool exists behind the 10-foot high dam at the town of Shenandoah. Pig-and-jig for largemouth bass or use live minnows for a trophy musky. Take out is on the right side of the river above the dam.

*Shenandoah to Grove Hill*  
8 miles (D-E)

Access the river at the VDGIF ramp downstream of the Shenandoah hydro dam near the Rt. 602 bridge crossing. A ramp is located upstream of the dam on the right but is not recommended except for takeout or upstream travel. Takeout at the VDGIF dirt ramp on the right at Rt. 650 just downstream of the U.S. 340 bridge.

The river is accessible only to canoes at this location. This is an easy float mixed with flat stretches and Class I rapids. This stretch has numerous smallmouth bass, rock bass, redbreast sunfish, musky, channel catfish, and in the slower reaches largemouth bass and bluegill.

*Grove Hill to Newport*  
6 miles (E-F)

Access is at a VDGIF ramp located on Rt. 650 near Grove Hill. The takeout is on the left, downstream from Newport on U.S. 340. Both access sites are dirt and are not accessible to trailers.

This section of river is comprised of several large pools and allows the angler a chance to fish for muskellunge, largemouth and smallmouth bass, bluegill, redbreast sunfish, and channel catfish.

*Newport to Alma*  
3 miles (F-G)

Launch at the VDGIF ramp located north of Newport on U.S. 340 and takeout on the right side of the river upstream of the U.S. 340 bridge at Alma. Both access points are primitive and not recommended for trailers. This section is riddled with Class I riffles and runs which provide for quality smallmouth bass and rock bass fishing.

*Alma to White House*  
7 miles (G-H)

The VDGIF access site at Alma is located just upstream from the U.S. 340 bridge on the right side of the river. The takeout is downstream of the U.S. 211 bridge on the right bank and can be accessed by Rt. 646. The Alma launch site is primitive and trailers are not recommended.

This stretch has a diversity of habitat: pools, runs, and riffles that provide angling opportunities for smallmouth bass, rock bass, muskellunge, sunfish, and channel catfish.

*White House to Massanutten*  
4 miles (H-J)

The VDGIF ramp at White House can be accessed from U.S. 211 by taking Rt. 646. The takeout at Massanutten is on the left bank of the river and can be reached from Rt. 615. Both ramps are concrete and can be utilized by trailers.

The river in this stretch is characterized by large pools which provide excellent musky habitat.

Largemouth bass, bluegill, and channel catfish may also be found in the deeper pools, while smallmouth bass and rock bass may provide action in the riffle and transition areas.

### *Massanutten to Inskip* 3 miles (J-K)

The Massanutten VDGIF ramp can be reached from Rt. 615. The takeout at Inskip can be reached off Rt. 675, downstream of the bridge on the left bank. Trailers cannot access the Inskip ramp. This float has a dam that must be portaged halfway through the float.

This section of river has many pools and provides excellent muskellunge, largemouth bass, and smallmouth bass habitat.

### *Inskip to Foster's* 9 miles (K-L)

Access to the Inskip VDGIF ramp is from Rt. 675 on the left bank of the river downstream of the bridge. The Inskip ramp is primitive and trailers are not feasible. Takeout at Foster's on Rt. 684 on the left bank of the river. A Forest Service canoe ramp at Bealer's Ferry is located approximately 3/4 of the way from Inskip, also on the left bank.



A diversity of habitats are found in this section of the river as riffles, runs, and pools which provide angling opportunities for smallmouth bass, rock bass, muskellunge, redbreast sunfish, largemouth bass, and channel catfish.

### *Foster's to Bentonville* 18 miles (L-N)

Foster's can be accessed from Rt. 675 downstream of the bridge on the left bank of the river. The VDGIF takeout ramp at Bentonville can be reached from Rt. 613 downstream from the bridge on the left bank. Three Forest Service canoe ramps are located between the Foster's and Bentonville ramps. The Forest Service access points are Goods Landing (2 miles), Seakford (6 miles), and Batzell (11 miles). Canoe and trailer access is available at the Foster's and Bentonville ramps.

This section contains numerous Class I and Class II rapids which provide excellent canoeing and fishing. The best angling opportunities in this section will be for smallmouth bass, rock bass, and redbreast sunfish.

### *Bentonville to Simpson* 9.5 miles (N-O-P)

Put in at Bentonville VDGIF ramp on Rt. 613. Takeout at Simpson VDGIF access on Rt. 623 (canoe access only). A rough trailer ramp is located at Karo (Rt. 340) approximately 1/2 mile upstream from Simpson. A shallow section of river with mostly rocks and ledges makes this good smallmouth territory. Class II rapids between Karo and Simpson could add a little excitement to the trip.

### *Simpson to Front Royal* 6 miles (P-Q)

Put in at VDGIF ramp on Rt. 623. Access limited to canoes only. Takeout at Front Royal boat ramp on Rt. 681. This section is shallow, with lots of riffles and rock cover. It is a fairly easy float with good smallmouth bass cover.

### *Front Royal to Riverton* 4 miles (Q-R)

Put in at Front Royal VDGIF boat ramp on Rt. 681. Takeout on Riverton boat landing, 1/4 mile upstream on the North Fork. This section offers good smallmouth fishing along with an easy, short float. There are some good deep pools near the end.

## Main Stem of the Shenandoah

### *Riverton to Morgan's Ford* 13 miles (R-S)

Put in at VDGIF ramp located off of Rt. 340 beside the bridge over the North Fork in Front Royal. Takeout at VDGIF ramp at Morgan's Ford on the right by the low-water bridge (Rt. 624). This section of the river is slow-moving and deep, producing quality catfish, bluegill, largemouth bass and carp fishing. A dam four miles downstream requires a portage. Takeout allows rough trailer access, although a canoe is recommended for this float due to the portage.

### *Morgan's Ford to Berry's Ferry* 11 miles (S-T)

Put in at VDGIF ramp beside the low-water bridge on Rt. 624. Canoes and limited trailer access is available at this ramp. Takeout is under the Rt. 50 bridge at the VDGIF concrete launch on the left side of the river. This is an 11-mile float with a fairly even mix of riffles, runs and pools. It offers excellent fishing for smallmouth and bluegills, as well as muskellunge. Canoeists of all experience levels should enjoy this float.

### *Berry's Ferry to Lockes* 10 miles (T-U)

Put in under the Rt. 50 bridge east of Winchester. Take out on left at Lockes, Rt. 621. Both VDGIF sites offer concrete ramps for canoe or trailer launching. Numerous small riffles and Class I rapids combined with an abundance of aquatic vegetation offer spectacular angling opportunities. This section boasts one of several Indian fish trap remnants found on the river system.

### *Lockes to Castleman's Ferry* 5 miles (U-V)

Put in at ramp on Rt. 608 in Clarke County. Take out at the Rt. 7 low-water bridge. Both VDGIF access sites offer concrete ramps for canoe or trailer launching. This section has numerous riffles and Class I rapids. Lots of rock cover adds to the smallmouth fishing. Bluegills are plentiful in this section, also. □



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For more information, call the  
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Photo by Dwight Dyke