

**Exploring the St. Croix River Valley: Adventures On and Off the Water**, by Angie Hong. 2024. University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, Minnesota. 368 pages. \$34.95 (paperback). ISBN: 9781517916404.

Possessing a rich history filled with stories of fur trappers, lumber barons, immigrant farmers, and much more, the St. Croix River Valley of Wisconsin and Minnesota is one of the most underappreciated geographic areas in the Upper Midwest. Angie Hong's new tome does its best to help visitors, and even long-time residents, understand better the rich storehouse of natural resources along the river's course.

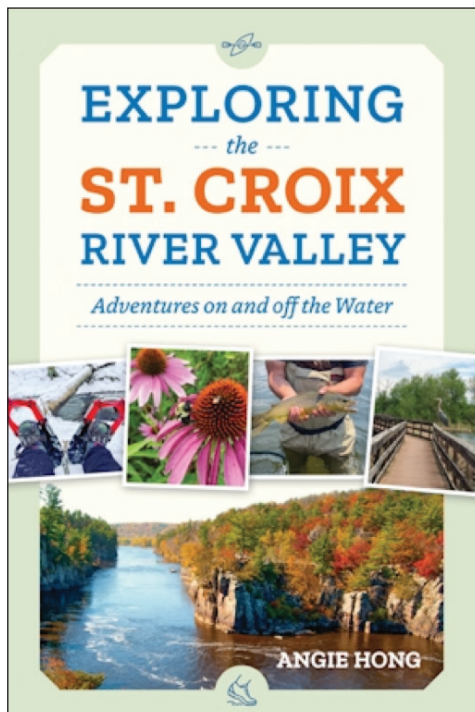
Following a prologue, *Exploring the St. Croix River Valley* is divided into two parts, including a description of the natural resources of the St. Croix River Valley. The second is an interesting section, most useful for beginners, on the "hows" and "wheres" of exploring the outdoors.

Part 1 begins with an in-depth focus on the many unique biological and geological features of the St. Croix River National Scenic River. Established in 1968 by an Act of Congress, the Scenic River originally included the upper reaches of the St. Croix River and its tributary the Namekagon River. Subsequent legislation passed in 1972 included the lower St. Croix River in the protected area. I spent many hours of my youth in northern Wisconsin canoeing and exploring the upper St. Croix River and especially the Namekagon River. It's one of the most peaceful places that I have ever visited in the Lower 48 states.

Other components of Part 1 include: Prairies and Grasslands; Forest and Woods; Lakes, Rivers, Streams and Wetlands; and Unique Geological Features. Each section contains a lively discussion of what is to be seen and learned in the areas highlighted. Those chapters are also liberally peppered with excellent color imagery that make the areas come alive.

Public lands, especially State Parks and State Natural Areas, are widely and wisely the focus of most of the areas to explore away from the National Scenic River. I was pleased to find that several of my most favorite areas to explore were included. Among them is the incomparable Kinnickinnic River Valley from its source in St. Croix County to its confluence with the St. Croix across the river from Afton State Park on the Minnesota side. Anyone seeking a near wilderness experience close to the Twin Cities metro area needs only to travel to the "Kinni" to satisfy that desire. Make sure you bring your fishing rod because you will be exploring among the best trout waters in the Upper Midwest. One word of advice—be careful where you step along the lower Kinnickinnic River because *Crotalus horridus* Linnaeus (Timber Rattlesnakes) love to sun themselves on rocky outcrops and they are not timid about letting their presence be known!

Despite this book's many positive attributes, there is one glaring omission that I simply cannot understand. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service began purchasing wetlands and



adjacent upland habitats for waterfowl and grassland bird nesting habitat in 1974. These lands became a component of the National Wildlife Refuge system and were managed as Waterfowl Production Areas (WPAs). Each property was preserved with funds provided by anyone who purchased a Migratory Bird Conservation Stamp, also known as a “Duck Stamp.” Originally managed by the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, responsibility for the areas was transferred to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in 1992. Today, more than 3,521 hectares in 44 separate units have been preserved mainly in St. Croix and Polk counties, Wisconsin.

Drive through central St. Croix County from Roberts north through New Richmond to Star Prairie, visitors pass by several Waterfowl Production Areas including Kerber WPA, the first property purchased in 1974. Despite this large area of land and water protected for wildlife and for humans, there is not one word about the Waterfowl Production Areas in Hong’s book. I remain baffled by the lack of inclusion of one of the most important components of the landscape of the St. Croix River Valley.

The book concludes with an extensive section useful especially for beginners, on the how-to’s of exploring the natural features of the Valley. Of particular interest to me was the section on birding that contains snippets of information on areas from the Namekagon River southward. I was surprised that so few words were devoted to birding *Crex* Meadows, and nothing at all in this section about Neotropical migrants at Afton State Park on the Minnesota side of the river. Sadly, no mention was made of the abundance of migrant and nesting songbirds that can be found in the “race” section of the Willow River downstream from the State Park near Hudson, Wisconsin. Perhaps it is the retired research biologist in me that was disappointed not to find a reference to published research on fish and wildlife resources and geological features, or at least the resources used as references in writing the book.

As a native of the Cheesehead State, it would be easy to bring up the rivalry between our side of the river and Minnesota. And, yes, Wisconsin does have more lakes than Minnesota. This book seems to be more heavily weighted toward areas to explore on the Minnesota side of the river than in Wisconsin. Why, for instance, is there no mention of Straight Lake State Park in Polk County? However, that trivializes the importance of Hong’s extensive work.

The purpose of this easy-to-read book is to increase awareness of the rapidly diminishing natural world, and Hong has done a superb job of that here despite several important areas that were completely overlooked and several others that were only briefly mentioned. I hope everyone using this book is inspired to do some exploring on their own. When you go to an area outlined here, ask yourself what lays around the next bend in the road and go look. *Exploring the St. Croix River Valley* is an excellent first step in making those discoveries happen.

**Book Reviewer:** Craig Faanes, Research Biologist (retired), U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Sarasota, Florida 34232 USA.