The Au Sable has been featured in many books and fishing magazines for years and is considered to be one of the 50 best places to fish in the United States. The “Holy Waters” of the Au Sable are those upstream from U.S. Forest Service (USFS) 4001 Bridge on Au Sable River Road (also known as Federal Route 4001) near Glennie, Michigan, but what about the waters below the bridge? Books, magazines, friends, guides and Internet search engines could easily have you believe that after 60 miles of river starting in Fredrick, the river simply ends at the 4001 Bridge. Even the river maps that you purchase from area fly shops will end at the 4001 Bridge as if the water just flows off the end of the earth. Of course, we know the water doesn’t drop off of the earth. Right?

What you may not know is that there is another 60-plus miles of the AuSable River from USFS 4001 Bridge downstream to Oscoda where it enters Lake Huron. The 4001 Bridge might be considered the end of the trout water, but is just the beginning of the warmwater, fraternal twin of the upper river. It has the same high water quality and natural beauty, but the lower Au Sable supports different species of fish like smallmouth bass, Northern pike, bluegill, crappie, wall-eye, perch and steelhead. Even though the species mentioned in the last sentence may not be as high on the want-to-catch list of many anglers, I really enjoy having any one of them at the end of my line. Best of all I don’t
have to put up with the crowds often encountered in the famous trout water upstream of the 4001 Bridge.

GEAR AND FLIES

Before we discuss the different parts of the lower river, where to gain access and how to approach catching the fish in each section, let’s spend a few moments reviewing equipment. A 7- or 8-weight fly rod is perfect for this section of the Au Sable. I like to use a full-sinking line with a 1- to 4-foot 1X leader, but I could also use a floating line with an 8-foot sink tip if that were my preference.

Streamers are a great way to tease the fish into action using retrieves that may vary from low- and slow to strip-as-fast-as-you-can methods. When possible, I bring two rods and rig one with a weighted streamer such as a Woolly Bugger or Matuka Sculpin to fish the many deep bends in the river; on the other rod I attach a nymph like a Hellgrammite or a heavily weighted EZY Crayfish. The river can be waded in spots, but the best way to fish it is with a float tube or kayak/canoe. Both have advantages. A craft like a kayak will allow you to cover more water and to paddle back upstream to re-fish a productive section, while a float tube will allow you to hold your position in the gentler current, to maneuver with your flippers or to navigate to shallow water to stand in the tube while making a presentation or tying on a fly.

Now let’s take a look at the river section by section to give you an idea of what’s available and how you might consider approaching each.

USFS 4001 BRIDGE TO ALCONA DAM

As the Au Sable River passes the 4001 Bridge, the water conditions change as the water flows for two miles into the Alcona Dam Pond. The Alcona Dam Pond is a 975-acre impoundment about three miles west of the town of Glennie, Michigan. It is roughly 3.2 miles long and half a mile wide. The majority of the land surrounding the pond is privately owned with a large parcel within the county’s Alcona Park with a campground and three boat ramps. Fishing is excellent for smallmouth bass, largemouth bass, pike and assorted pan-

fish between the 4001 Bridge and the pond. The pond has many shallows and flats with cover and structure for fish. Both the river section above the pond and the pond itself can be floated easily by float tube, canoe or kayak. The most productive areas for the fly fisher are at the north end of the pond as the river enters it and at the south end near the dam.

ALCONA DAM TO LOUD DAM AND FIVE CHANNELS DAM

After the Alcona Dam, the Au Sable transforms back into a river for the next 12 miles as it makes its way to Loud Dam Pond. This section of the river has excellent fly fishing for smallmouth bass with a few walleye and trout mixed in to provide variety. The river picks up cool water from Hoppy Creek, the South Branch River, Smith Creek and Stewart Creek. A few sections can be fished by wading, but I prefer to float the river. Access is easy at the Alcona Dam off Bamfield Road or on Au Sable River Road for the first two
miles below the dam. After the first two miles, access is better on the west side of the river from Michaud Road, Curtisville Road or Pinkys Drive. Farther downstream, access to Loud Dam is on the east side of the impoundment off Loud Dam Road. Riparian lands between Alcona and Loud Ponds are managed by the USFS as a quiet area with motorized vehicle access to the river being prohibited. As a result, this reach provides a special wilderness setting that is unique to Lower Peninsula rivers. The water depth is about 10 feet in the river channel along the south side of the pond and less than 6 feet outside the river channel. I prefer using a sinking line throughout this section of the river.

Five Channels Dam Pond begins immediately below Loud Dam. This three-mile impoundment requires fast-sinking line to fish due to the 20- to 30-foot depths along the river channel gradually getting shallower into the 10-foot-deep range nearer the shoreline.

**Cooke Dam Pond and Foote Dam Pond**

Both of these 8-mile-long impoundments have similar qualities. The upper sections of the pond have a river-like setting before opening up to a lake and bay area. I use a sinking line to target bays, inlets, points of land, islands and the edges of weed beds along the shoreline, keeping to areas where the water is less than 10 feet deep. Access points to the Cooke Dam Pond are at the dam or below the Five Channels Dam, the boat ramp and the Saw Mill Point campground. Foote Dam Pond starts below Cooke Dam Pond and is basically the second part of one continuous body of water. The first mile and a half is river-type environment before it opens into a true sense of an impoundment. Cooke Dam Pond sees much more recreational watercraft than the other impoundments due to the easy access for the 525-site, Old Orchard Campground and the nearby roadside park.

**Foote Dam to Lake Huron**

The best section of the river, this is my favorite part! Below Foote Dam, the Au Sable is free from barriers as it wanders downstream on its way to Lake Huron. This is where the smallmouth bass fishing graduates from “good” to “excellent.” From the boardwalk along the south side of the river below Foote Dam, you can see bass quietly holding behind the structure and in eddies close to the water’s edge.

It is possible to cautiously wade some sections of the river for the first half a mile below the dam, but I’ve found a kayak gives me much better and safer fishing opportunities. This section of the river is full of structure with sunken logs, deep pools and ripples; in other words, everything you could ever want for great smallmouth bass, streamer fishing. Access to this section is available below the Foote Dam, the Rea Road boat launch, the High Banks overlook on River Road and the Whirlpool boat ramp. The first two winding miles of the river – from Foote Dam to High Banks overlook – can easily be covered in a two- to four-hour float trip. Luckily, it’s only a 1.25-mile walk back to the parking lot to get your vehicle. For a longer float I recommend taking your watercraft out at the Whirlpool boat ramp, but you will need a ride to retrieve your vehicle. Because I prefer the section directly below Foote Dam, I have not spent much time farther downstream near Lake Huron, but it is a beautiful area with many fishing opportunities.

Is the lower 60 miles of the Au Sable River as good of angling waters as the famous upper section? Only you can make that call, and for each person that decision would be very personal. For me I’ll take the quiet solitude and great warmwater fishing on the lower river every time. Maybe after reading this article I’ll see you there, or I can wave from my kayak as you drive by on your way to deal with the crowds on the upper river.

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