

# The historic “Dead Waters” of the Cass River

By Tom Lounsbury

A lengthy portion of the Cass River, from Wickes Park in Saginaw to Enos Park on M-46 near Vassar, has been recently designated a “Pure Michigan Water Trail”. This was due primarily to the efforts of the Cass River Greenway (CRG), of which I’m a proud member. The CRG and its dedicated volunteers have long promoted the Cass River for its quality ecotourism and other recreational opportunities, including great fishing ([cassriverwatertrail.org](http://cassriverwatertrail.org)).

The 62-mile-long river is divided into two sections at the Cass River’s historic “Oxbow”, where the Caro Dam near Caro is located. From the dam downstream is known as the Lower Reaches, which entails the present water trail designation, and from the dam upstream is known as the Upper Reaches. The entire Cass River and its associated creeks and streams played an important role in the lumber industry for about a 50-year stretch from the 1830’s to the 1880’s, floating countless logs downstream to various lumber mills. This in turn would create the settlements at Bridgeport, Frankenmuth, Tuscola, Vassar, Caro and Cass City. Cass City has the distinction of being located where the North and South Branches of the Cass River join (known historically as “the forks in the river”) to become the main stretch of the river the remainder of the way downstream.

I’ve had a lifetime association with the Cass River, primarily the Upper Reaches of which I live nearby. Others and I would like to see the official water trail extended into the Upper Reaches all the way upstream to Evergreen Park, on M-53 in Sanilac County. To assist this effort, there is now a canoe/kayak launch at Evergreen Park (which also offers kayaks for rent), as well as downstream to the “Kelly Road canoe/kayak Launch” near Cass City, both of

which allow excellent access points. Otherwise, the only access sites from Caro upstream are located at country bridges (which I have regularly used).

Evergreen Park is located along a unique stretch of the Cass River, which has been long known as the historic “Dead Waters”. The name is derived from the fact there is very little to no current caused by a pair of limestone shelves just over a mile apart which act as glacier-made dams, creating a catch basin of sorts featuring some deep holes. It is the only stretch on the Cass River system to offer such a distinct setting.

The Dead Waters have long been considered a fishing “hotspot” on the Cass River (there was even a fishing lodge located there in 1900), and my late mother grew up right next to it and thoroughly enjoyed the dependable fishing opportunities such offered (it was an important food source for her family and others during the Depression). It is where she frequently took our family for fishing outings and picnics, and it is where I caught my first fish as a toddler sitting on my mother’s lap. Our main fishing tackle was long cane poles (which due to length, had to be strapped along the outside of the car during travel) and featured red and white stick-bobbers, with the hooks being baited with worms freshly dug up from the barnyard. It was a fishing technique which worked, and I still enjoy, with the only difference being my cane poles today come in sections and are far more compact for travel. Yep, folks, my favorite tackle for fishing on the Cass River remains to be an old-fashion cane pole, because it is simplistic “stick and string fishing” and can be very effective in a river environment, even when using artificial lures.

The Cass River Greenway is working with the Evergreen Park to have a unique and family-orientated fishing contest on the Dead Waters called the “Cass River Rough Fish Derby”, where all fish species count including suckers, carp and even chubs (to name a few), besides northern pike and bass, can win prizes for the “longest” fish in a specific species. There will be a Bingo card involved for recording different species, with an award for the most species caught. A DNR Fisheries Biologist and other experts will be present to help identify and record fish species, and the DNR is very interested in what

species can be found in the Dead Waters (so am I). This “hook and line only” event is primarily catch and release, but anglers can keep fish which are legal to do so. Besides fishing from the shore along Evergreen Park’s spacious and lengthy shoreline on the south riverbank, fishing from kayaks and canoes will also be allowed. There will be a specific location for identifying and measuring fish and iPhone and camera pictures for recording different species can also be used.

The Free Cass River Rough Fish Derby will take place on Saturday, June 7, 2025, during the Michigan Free Fishing Weekend, when adults don’t need a fishing license. Registration begins at 8:00 am and the contest runs from 9:00 am to 4:00 pm, after which an awards program will be held. Food and refreshments will also be available to participants.

For more information, contact Evergreen Park at (989) 872-6600.

Note:

Tom Lounsbury will be giving a “Cass River Highlights” presentation at the Good Shepherd Lutheran Church in Cass City at 6:00 pm on Thursday, May 8, 2025. It is free and open to the public (and includes snacks).