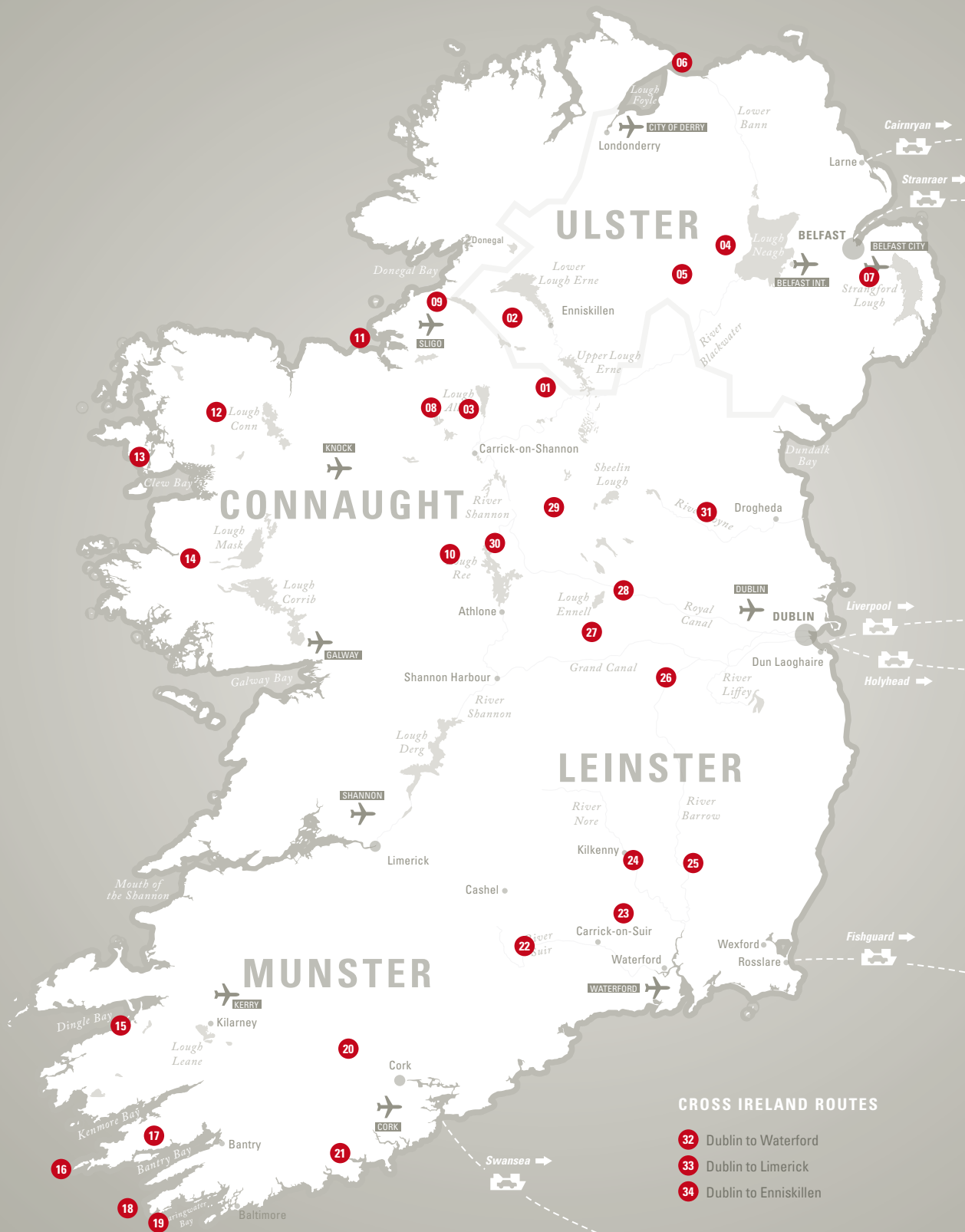




IRISH CANOE CLASSICS

THIRTY-FOUR GREAT CANOE & KAYAK TRIPS

*Eddie Palmer
& Tony Monaghan*



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Eddie Palmer
& Tony Monaghan

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Maps – Bute Cartographic

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Important notice – disclaimer

Canoeing and kayaking are healthy outdoor activities that carry some degree of risk. They involve adventurous travel, often away from habitation. Guidebooks give an idea of where to access a river, where to egress, the level of difficulty and the nature of the hazards to be encountered. However, the physical nature of river valleys changes over time, water levels vary considerably with rain and features such as weirs, walls and landings are changed by man. Trees block rivers and banks erode, sometimes quickly. Coastal sections, sea loughs and large inland loughs are subject to the effects of tides and weather. This guidebook is no substitute for inspection, your own risk assessment and good judgement. Your decision to paddle or not, and any consequences arising from that decision, must remain with you.

Introduction

Welcome to *Irish Canoe Classics* – a simple and practical guide to the Irish rivers we feel are special. This is not a comprehensive guide to all waterways but rather a collection of the best routes we have paddled on the loughs, rivers, navigations, canals and around the coast of Ireland. They are all journeys which can be made in an open canoe loaded with camping gear, even in low water (and they are also ideal for touring kayaks).

We are aware people have paddled open canoes at higher parts of the rivers at higher grades. This is not what this book is about. This is simply a useful guide for the beginner or moderate paddler looking for enjoyable and memorable trips.

We decided to divide the sections of the book into the four provinces of Ireland: Ulster, Connaught, Leinster and Munster. The political boundary between Northern Ireland and the Republic gives way as rivers and loughs do not observe borders. The poem *Ard Ruide* (Ruide Headland) describes the five kingdoms (Meath was absorbed by the modern provinces of Ulster and Leinster). Translated from Old Irish:

*“Connacht is the seat of learning,
eloquence and judgement;*

*Ulster is the seat of battle valour, of
haughtiness, strife and boasting;*

*Leinster is the seat of prosperity, hospitality,
and imports, with noble men and beautiful women;*

*Munster is the kingdom of music and the arts,
with the greatest fairs in Ireland.*

*Meath is the kingdom of Kingship, stewardship,
of bounty in government, and contained the Hill of Tara,
the traditional seat of the High King of Ireland.”*





📷 Tony Monaghan and Eddie Palmer

The Authors

Eddie Palmer

Eddie built his first wood and canvas kayak some 50 years ago. He has paddled extensively in the UK, Ireland, Europe, North America and Southern Africa. He is a keen member of the Scottish Canoe Association, and is currently the Board member concerned with Access and Environment. His passion is for long-distance canoe touring and camping, although he also paddles whitewater, sails canoes and yachts. He is the editor of and a contributor to *Scottish Canoe Touring*, and author of *Scottish Canoe Classics* (Pesda Press).

Tony Monaghan

Since childhood Tony Monaghan has spent his free time in the outdoors, becoming an expert in bushcraft and camping skills. Having discovered the freedom the open canoe offers he has been canoe touring here in Ireland and in Europe ever since. Tony is a member of the Wildwater Kayak Club, Ireland and also kayaks and plays canoe polo.

Acknowledgements

All paddlers would really enjoy the beautiful book by Edward O'Regan entitled *In Irish Waterways*. It was written in the 1940s but only published in 2005. Edward travelled with friends on many of the Irish rivers and loughs between 1939 and 1949 in an eighteen-foot folding kayak christened *Minnie*. We were entranced by his accounts of the waterways we have covered during the last few years. Some places have changed a lot but most are as they were sixty years ago. We have included a number of quotes from this book with the kind permission of Currach Press.

Using the Guide

Each route begins with some quick reference information, relevant Ordnance Survey (OS) maps, length of the route in kilometres, portages, start and finish points and vehicle shuttle distances. This is followed an overall description of the area, details of access points and water levels and finally a route description with distances between the main features.

TYPES OF WATER



Canals, slow-moving rivers and small inland lochs which are placid water, and easy to cope with.



Inland loughs, still with no current or tide, but which in high winds can produce large waves.



Rivers where flood conditions can make paddling difficult, and requiring a higher level of skill. The grade of any rapids is denoted from 1 to 3 within the icon.



Estuaries and sea loughs, where the direction of the tide is all-important, and usually cannot be paddled against.



Open sea, safer coastal routes suitable for placid water touring kayaks and canoes (in calm, stable weather).

The text points out the obvious difficulties. Beginners are urged to inspect waters before they paddle, especially rapids or weirs. Sea trips should be undertaken with the greatest respect and up-to-date weather information is essential. Ireland can be a rainy place, causing rivers to swell rapidly and flood. There are also many large loughs in which the waves can increase quickly with a sudden wind. These loughs can have similar conditions to the open sea, so the keyword is respect.

Finding canoeing instruction

Perhaps you are reading this book but have no paddling experience. It is essential you learn how to paddle from a qualified instructor. Your national governing body for canoeing can provide useful information and training courses. Please take advice and stay safe. Under no circumstances should you take to the water without prior training. For Northern Ireland, visit the Canoe Association of Northern Ireland (CANI) at www.nicanoeing.com. For the Republic of Ireland, visit the Irish Canoe Union (ICU) at www.icu.com.

Portages














Portaging is the carrying of canoes past obstacles or overland. We've generally kept portage distances down to carrying your boat around canal locks (a maximum of 100m). If you're undertaking an extended trip, it's a good idea to carry a portable canoe trolley with you.

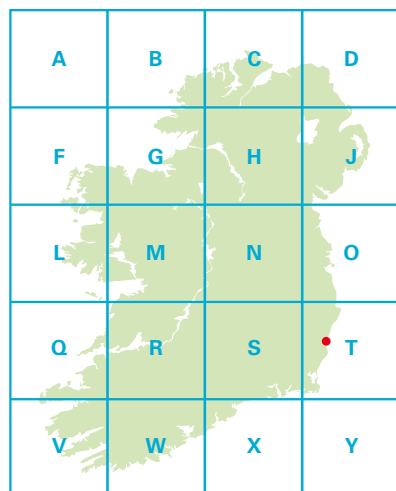
River grades

This book does not include whitewater paddling of Grade 3 or above. Rivers are graded by the international river grading system from Grade 1 to Grade 6:

- GRADE 1** Easy. Occasional small rapids or riffles, waves regular and low. Most appropriate course, with deepest water, easy to see from canoe or kayak and steer down. Obstacles e.g. pebble banks, very easy to see. Presents no problems to paddlers able to steer canoes and kayaks. Steering is needed, especially on narrow rivers.
- GRADE 2** Medium. Fairly frequent rapids, usually with regular waves, easy eddies, and small whirlpools and boils. Course generally easy to recognise, but may meander around gravel banks and trees etc. Paddlers in kayaks may get wet, those in open canoes much less so.
- GRADE 3** Difficult. Rapids numerous, and can be continuous. Course more difficult to see, landing to inspect may be wise. Drops may be high enough not to see water below, with high and irregular waves, broken water, eddies and whirlpools/boils. There is no water with rapids of above Grade 3 advised in this guide. Where there are Grade 3 rapids, avoiding or portaging is possible.
- GRADE 4** Very difficult. Long and extended stretches of rapids with high, irregular waves, difficult broken water, strong eddies and whirlpools. Course often difficult to recognise. High falls, inspection from bank nearly always necessary.
- GRADE 5** Exceedingly difficult. Long and unbroken stretches of whitewater with individual features, and routes very difficult to see. Many submerged rocks, high waterfalls, falls in steps, very difficult whirlpools and very fast eddies. Previous inspection absolutely necessary, risk of injury, swims always serious.
- GRADE 6** Absolute limit of difficulty. Definite risk to life.

Map symbols in this book

	start & alternative start		ferry, passenger & car
	finish & alternative finish		campsite / bivi site
	waypoint		bunkhouse
	portage		town / buildings
	described route		significant peak
	dam lock rapid danger bridge		castle
			prohibited area



1:50,000 Discovery map. © Ordnance Survey Ireland

Ordnance Survey map references

All map references given in this guide are based on Ordnance Survey Ireland's Discovery and Discoverer Series maps. These maps are printed at a scale of 1:50 000. The Irish grid reference system is one of 25 squares, each 100 × 100km, denoted alphabetically (omitting I and with A, E, K, P, U, Y and Z covering sea areas with no land).

The first three figures of the six-figure grid reference refer to the horizontal axis and the second three figures refer to the vertical axis. The first two digits refer to the numbers shown in blue on your map. The third digit is that square divided into tenths. For example, to describe the location of the red dot where the stream runs into the sea down from Tara Hill (above) we would give a grid reference of T 222 614.

Water levels

This guide has adopted a commonsense approach to the most appropriate level to paddle a river. For example, 'if the gravel at the small rapid downstream of the bridge is covered, the river is at an easy level to paddle'. Most rivers can be fairly easily seen from a road or bridge, and so the judgement of when to paddle can usually be easily made.

High water levels may be hazardous. When a river is flowing fast and the water is brown, stopping will become difficult, the banks and bends of the river may become turbulent and obstacles downriver may present greater dangers.

Information from the Inland Waterways Association

Useful additional information can be obtained for navigations from www.iwai.ie.

Travelling in Ireland

At present there are no canoe outfitters available in Ireland for renting canoeing equipment – so you will have to bring your own. Fortunately, getting here is very convenient. Depending on where you are planning to paddle there are ferry ports in Belfast, Dublin and Wexford.

The most central is Dublin. You can travel from Liverpool or Holyhead and arrive in Dublin Port (city centre) or Dun Laoghaire (12km south of city centre).

If you are planning a trip in the south a ferry service runs from Pembroke in South Wales to Rosslare in Co. Wexford. If you are paddling in the north you can travel from Stranraer in Scotland direct to Belfast.

A network of motorways allows for easy travel. However in the south these are tolled and payable only in Euro – so make sure you bring change with you. All signposts and speed limits in the south are shown in kilometres. The national speed limit on motorways is 120km and 100km on dual carriageways.

To give you a rough idea of travel times you can get from Dublin to Galway in about two hours, Dublin to Cork in two and a half, Dublin to Belfast in two and Dublin to Wexford in two. Just be aware that not all national roads (e.g. N11, N4) are dual carriageway, making travel times longer. There are very few motorway services; however you will find that most petrol stations provide a deli-counter and coffee facilities.

Access in Ireland

Countries in the United Kingdom all have different laws on access. Scotland has a clear legal right of access to most land and water, and canoeists should have no problem. England and Wales currently have active campaigns to follow Scotland's lead, with most water currently private and subject to a law of trespass.

In Northern Ireland, there are very few access problems and canoeists will have a warm welcome (especially on the Canoe Trails). The Republic of Ireland has an uncertain legal situation. We contacted the Irish Government for a clear statement on access without success. The only response received quoted the Irish Canoe Union's paper on access from a number of years ago! In practice, we encountered very few problems from landowners or fishermen.

The campaign Keep Ireland Open provided the following statement: “At present, canoeists in Ireland run the risk of being stopped for being on, or floating through, private land. Most other countries in Europe have moved, at varying speeds, to provide leisure users with rights. Unfortunately, Irish politicians consistently dodge the growing problems over public access rights. Failte Ireland (the tourism board) and various ministers dealing with access legislation will assure the public that all is well. That is until you go out on the rivers, lakes, fields and mountains of Ireland and discover you have virtually no rights to be there.

“Politicians are so unwilling to deal with this problem because the farmers are one of the most effective lobbying groups in the country. Under Ireland’s transferable voting system, the main farming groups – the Irish Farmers’ Association (IFA), the Irish Creamery and Milk Suppliers’ Association (ICMSA) and Irish Cattle and Sheep Farmers’ Association (ICSA) – combine to make a huge difference in general elections, especially in marginal rural constituencies. For years, these groups have advised their members not to grant public access unless offered direct payment for it, even though farmers enjoy considerable subsidies provided by the taxpayer. At the same time the government has made it clear that it will not become the only country in the EU to pay for access leading to a stalemate.

“Fortunately, the legal mess on the ground and on the water does not reflect the generally friendly demeanour of those you will meet. But it does mean that, when push comes to shove, the canoeist on private land has virtually no rights. Until Irish politicians take courage and deal with the issue, Ireland will never develop its enormous potential as a great place for outdoor pursuits. In the meantime, paddle on regardless.”

Responsible Camping

Great care should be taken when camping. Current Irish law states landowner’s permission should be sought prior to camping. This is not always possible and, on most occasions, camping on riverbanks, the side of loughs or on islands will not be a problem.

If there is a formal campsite, please use it; sadly, these are rare and normally only found in populated areas. If wild camping, please obey the ‘leave no trace’ policy. Your campsite should be impossible to distinguish within a few days. Use a gas or petrol stove to cook on rather than a fire. If lighting a campfire, please do so with consideration and care. Burn dead wood and only in a fire-pit or on a mound of sand. Never light a fire on peat surfaces, as the ground can smoulder for days. Latrine holes should be dug to a depth of 9cm. A collapsible spade or trowel is useful for this purpose. Take everything away with you, including all rubbish. It is good practice to clear up campsites left by other people, as litter attracts more litter.





20 Cork Blackwater



OS Sheets 79, 80 & 81 | Rathmore to Cappoquin | 120–145km (3 days)

Shuttle	152km, 2 hours, from Rathmore to Cappoquin via the N72. 25km, 30 minutes, from Cappoquin to Youghal via the N72 and R671.
Portages	Four: at Sugar Factory Weir above Mallow, Fermoy Weir, Clondulane Weir (below Fermoy) and Lismore Weir.
Hazards	The river is usually a Grade 1–2, but in flood rapids could become Grade 2–3. There are small ledges or weirs at almost every bridge, which disappear in high water. The Blackwater in flood is a serious proposition, and should be treated with respect. Floods do occur in summer.
Tidal info	At Youghal, HW is at 1 hour 30 minutes after HW Cobh. Maximum spring flow is 3 knots.
Start	▲ Rathmore (W 180 932) in high water, Banteer (W 382 988) in low water
Finish	○ Cappoquin (X 101 995) or Youghal (X 108 780)

Introduction

The Blackwater is normally called the Cork Blackwater, to avoid confusion with two other Irish Blackwaters. It is one of the longest rivers in Ireland (third after the Shannon,



which is a navigation, and the Suir, which is surprisingly a few kilometres longer but much smaller). It is a beautiful majestic river, although the whole valley is intensively cultivated. The first recording of the river being paddled was made in the 1930s. It is similar to the Spey in Scotland with many easy rapids and a good flow and is refreshingly unpolluted.

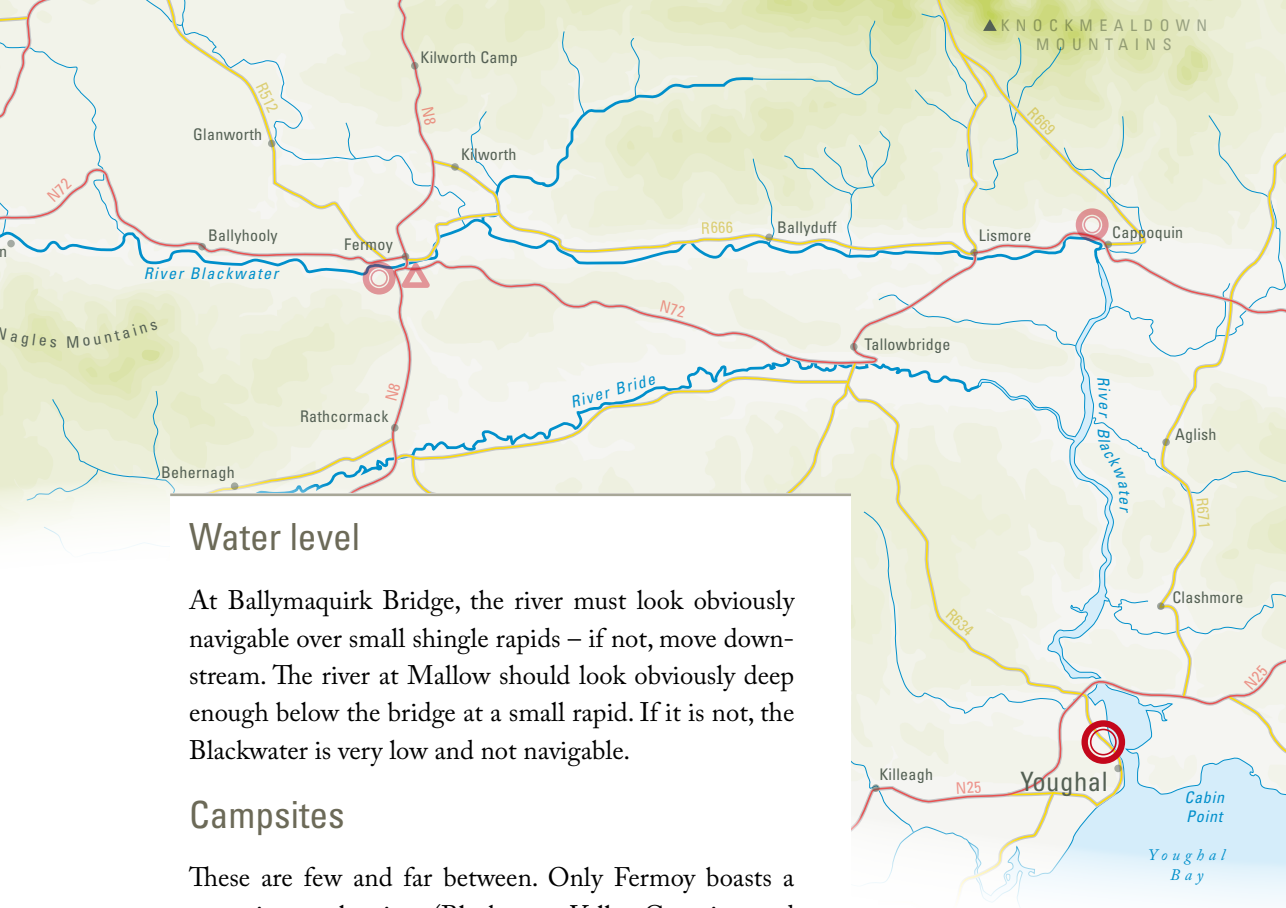
The river's contributory streams rise in the Derrynasaggart Mountains on the Cork/Kerry border and the hills to the north of Rathmore. The Blackwater flows eastwards, turning sharply southwards where it becomes tidal at Cappoquin. The tidal part is regarded by many as the finest scenic estuary in Ireland.

The Blackwater valley splits into various different sections. Upstream of Mallow, the river meanders over a rather flat plain of sand and gravel and is well wooded in summer. Mallow to Fermoy is perhaps the most scenic, with high limestone cliffs and lovely woodland as far as Ballyhooly. Downstream of Fermoy is a more obviously farmed landscape, with cattle fields right down to the river around Ballyduff. The landscape becomes manicured parkland from this point downstream to Lismore, and is flat and marshy from Lismore to Cappoquin.

The river is in a good state ecologically, with many water birds including herons, little egrets, dippers, sand martins and wagtails. Kingfishers are seen regularly, and several pairs of peregrine falcons inhabit the valley. Unfortunately, as the river valley is so quiet, the number of cars parked overnight which are broken into is disproportionately high. The Gardai strongly recommend that vehicles are not parked in lonely places overnight.

Access & egress

Locations to either put in or take out include: Mallow Bridge (W 562 980) (the first major town); Killavullen Bridge (W 648 998) (the only egress on this stretch); above the weir at Fermoy Bridge (W 810 985) (the largest town on the route); Cappoquin car park (X 101 995) (the normal finishing point as the river becomes tidal); Youghal Bridge (X 098 809) (the last bridge over the estuary); or Youghal Quay (X 108 780).



Water level

At Ballymaquirk Bridge, the river must look obviously navigable over small shingle rapids – if not, move downstream. The river at Mallow should look obviously deep enough below the bridge at a small rapid. If it is not, the Blackwater is very low and not navigable.

Campsites

These are few and far between. Only Fermoy boasts a campsite on the river (Blackwater Valley Camping and Caravan Park, Mallow Rd, telephone 025 32147).

Agriculture and fishing

Irish farmers jealously preserve their land and even stopping briefly for a break on a field with cattle is not a good idea. For most of the length of this valley, wild camping would not be tolerated (see the Access section at the front of the book). There is fly fishing for salmon just below Banteer (400m), between Killavullen and Ballyhooly (800m) and both above and below Ballyduff Bridge for a few kilometres.

Description

The river is a delight with very few people to be seen on the banks between the towns and villages. Three small rivers merge at Rathmore and are joined by a fourth just downstream at Shamrock Bridge. Inspection is easy from the roads nearby, especially the N72 heading west to Killarney.

This first section to Banteer is only possible after rain, and is impossible in any sort of dry summer. It is 28km long – a long day's paddle in low conditions – with four bridges



Blackwater below Mallow | Eddie Palmer

on the way. The river meanders interminably with small gravel rapids. There is a weir under the bridge at Rathcool (Colthurst Bridge) and then a large weir about 2km before Ballymaquirk Bridge.

Banteer is a good starting point as it gives a short first day to Mallow (24km) and is easily found off the N72. There are three road bridges crossing the river. Shortly after the bridge, the Allow joins from the north and the Glen from the south. It is a bit of a slog down to the first bridge at Roskeen, but then the river speeds up with many small rapids between Roskeen and Lombardstown Bridge.

Below Longfields Bridge, the approach of a large town becomes obvious and Mallow race course is on the left bank. On the right bank before Mallow is a sugar beet factory, the location of a tricky weir-cum-fall which has shoots on the extreme left and right. Both are possible with care in high water; the left side is shallower but the right has some rocks sticking up. In low water, boats will have to be carried over the rocks in the centre.

Mallow suddenly appears with a railway then road bridge (the motorway by-passing Mallow). It is a further kilometre to Mallow road bridge where there are two vehicle parking possibilities. There is a car park at playing fields on the left before the bridge. There is access down a ramp to the river, downstream of the bridge on the right-hand side of the river. The left bank at this point has new and high flood prevention defences. Mallow is a very pleasant and unspoilt market town, with a main street and small shops in a traditional Irish style.



If short of time, then paddling the Mallow to Fermoy stretch (of some 33km) on its own would be highly recommended. Downstream of Mallow, a real treat commences. The entire route to Killavullen Bridge is an unspoilt section of thick woods, rocky cliffs and undisturbed wildlife. The river winds up against high cliffs with overhangs. At Killavullen itself a house high up on the right bank can be seen and a cliff with caves below it. Lovely places can be found for stops on this stretch.

On a right-hand bend just after Killavullen the result of a major cliff fall (2008) from the left bank can be seen stretching halfway across the river. After this point you come across various small interesting islands, all thickly vegetated. After another couple of kilometres, you arrive at a very large and long island (W 686 992). High on the left bank not far downstream, invisible from the river, is the ruin of Bridgetown Priory which is well worth a visit.

An angling stretch follows with more isolated steep banks. Ballyhooly Bridge (W 729 998) and the village (with shops) can be seen on the left. The river valley then widens out to reveal quite a spectacle. The magnificent and totally restored Georgian Castlehyde House appears on the left bank, and you will feel like you are in a private backyard. It has the appearance of either a formal government residence or a very up-market hotel, but is in fact the home of Michael Flatley of Riverdance fame. The house and grounds are quite something, so savour it as you glide by.

Just around a wooded corner is the start of Fermoy, and rowers from the Fermoy rowing



Kingfisher with catch | Shutterstock.com

club are often seen up to this point. Fermoy is another very typical Irish market town with all facilities. Parking is above the weir on the right bank (you won't miss the large weir). The campsite is located on the left bank opposite the rowing club building. The field on the riverside belongs to the campsite owner and the cows seem to behave when campers walk up the side of the field. The local Tourist Information Office in the town to the right is amusingly in a fishing tackle shop.

At Fermoy, a decision must be made. The easiest plan from many points of view is to paddle all the way down to Cappoquin (35km) although it is a long day with the current slowing up. Access at either Ballyduff or Lismore is very difficult because of the terrain.

Launching at Fermoy is easy below the weir on the left bank downstream of the bridge, where there is a ramp and car park. The scenery now changes and is not so wild. The river bends northwards for a bit, with shingle rapids on bends and grassy fields. The rivers Funshion and Araglin join from the left and Clondulane Weir (normally shootable in high water, or carried over on the left) is located just after this point. The countryside changes from farmland to parkland, with Mocollop Castle and House high on the left bank. Ballyduff (W 965 991) follows after another 4km. We can only assume that local landowners do not want anybody walking on their land, as the bridge has no parking and no route down to the banks.

The Lismore estate parklands now dominate, with many magnificent trees and Lismore Castle high on the right bank. The village and church at Lismore are well worth visiting.



Lismore Weir is just before the castle and can be carried over. The right hand of the river carries a sluice stream behind an island; the left bank is easier for portaging, but the weir can be shot.

Shooting the weir

Shooting the weir is possible, as our friends in the 1940s described: “We did not want to carry the canoe, so after emptying the vessel of all the chattels, I paddled out to midstream, the canoe was quickly caught by the rapid and powerful current, and carried silently towards the weir. She leaped over the edge, plunged almost halfway under the upsurge, bounced up again like a cork, and shot at a tremendous rate over the rough to the smooth water beyond. The fishermen gave a little cheer!”

Source: *In Irish Waterways*

There is one possible exit from the river here if required. Downstream of the bridge on the right-hand side, up a steep bank of some 7m or so, there is a path which exits near the bridge with some temporary parking (X 049 989).

Note the floodplain character of the river as you paddle through Ballyrafter Flats, with



📷 Sunset at Youghal Beach, County Cork | Shutterstock.com walsphotos

flat marshy banks and islands. A local canal from Ballyrafter village joins the river from the left after a couple of kilometres. The ruin of Ballyea motte and bailey can be seen on the right bank. A picnic site is located on the left bank when the river starts to bend to the right after a long left-hand bend (X 085 998). As Cappoquin Bridge appears, the river bends very sharply to the right to begin its tidal stretch to the sea.

Immediately after the bridge is an obvious grassy area beside the river on the left side, and a car park set back from the water. This is journey's end, unless you are going to paddle the tidal part. Cappoquin is only a small village with few facilities.

Continuing to down to the sea

The river runs through several hill ranges, so the scenery is far more interesting than might be expected. The usual crop of castles and great houses can be seen. This part of the trip is 25km, with six possible egress points all reached down narrow lanes. A run straight down to Youghal is recommended.

The estuary widens out considerably at Youghal Bridge (there is an old girder road bridge and the new motorway bridge just downstream). If there is any strength of wind, an egress at Youghal Bridge might be preferable to plodding on to Youghal itself, some 3km further downstream. After the narrow Youghal Harbour, you will find yourself at sea.



Irish Canoe Classics

THIRTY-FOUR GREAT CANOE & KAYAK TRIPS



An illustrated guide to some of the finest tours of Ireland's waterways. Wild loughs, placid canals and broad rivers, as they can only be seen from a canoe or kayak ...

Eddie and Tony have chosen the best inland touring routes. They are described in great detail and illustrated with numerous colour photos and maps.

The selected routes are suitable for open canoes, sit-on-tops and touring kayaks. Many of them can be tackled as a single voyage; others as a series of day trips, with campsites en route. The journeys are all accessible but highly varied, taking place on inland loughs, very sheltered coastlines and rivers of an easy nature.

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A wonderful book for planning voyages, inspiring dreams, or sharing your experiences with others.