

# TWO RIVERS RUN THROUGH IT

One day last week when that mysterious glowing yellow ball appeared in the sky I knew I had to take advantage of the situation. We filled a rucksack with honeycrisp apples, a Thermos of hot tea, and a small blanket and headed to Minnesota's most popular state park.

Mention Fort Snelling and most of us think of the historic fort operated by Minnesota Historical Society. But just below the fort's stone walls is Fort Snelling State Park, a natural paradise with plenty of its own history. This is where the Minnesota and Mississippi rivers join — an excellent place to build a fort, but also beautiful parkland for us today. Nearly 4,000 acres are crisscrossed with trails for skiing, biking, and walking. There are side lakes for fishing and swimming and even a couple islands to explore. The park has picnic shelters, a small interpretive center, a few signs here and there, but otherwise it's rather rustic.

The park is so easy to get to but a lot of people don't know about it. Take Post Road's exit just south of the main airport terminal and follow signs. We checked in at the ranger station, bought a \$5 daily pass, then parked under the towering Lafayette Bridge. Being so close to the airport and freeways I would have thought we'd hear more noise but we didn't hear anything.

As we walked on hard-packed snow over a bridge onto Pike Island I felt like we were up north. Sunlight streamed through bare tree trunks while open waters sparkled deep blue against the white landscape. We saw a downy



The floodplain forest of Pike Island is home to deer, fox, woodchucks, and badgers — keep your eyes open! Photo by Linda Koutsky

woodpecker pounding on a tree trunk then nearly missed five deer munching on grasses about 40 feet away. It was so fun to watch them watch us. Eventually we moved on — they didn't seem to care about us at all. The floodplain forest is full of a mix of trees including giant cottonwoods that are large enough to climb into! By the time we got to the end of

Pike Island I was ready for a rest. We unrolled our blanket, sat on a bench overlooking the two rivers and enjoyed the view. It didn't seem that cold out but steam rose from our tea and the apples were well-chilled.

For hundreds of years before this area became a park the riverbanks were dotted with Dakota villages. The confluence of the Missis-

## Fort Snelling State Park

**101 Snelling Lake Road, St. Paul**  
Park open 8 a.m.–10 p.m., interpretive center open 8 a.m.–4 p.m.

## Tea break

The closest tea for a warm-up is at **Caribou Coffee** (2340 W. 7th St., St. Paul)

sippi and Minnesota rivers was a sacred space to them — and still is. In 1805 U.S. Army Lieutenant Zebulon M. Pike led an expedition to locate sites for military posts. He negotiated a treaty to buy this land from the Dakota. After he left Minnesota, Pike went on his historic expedition through seven states and Mexico and saw the Colorado mountain peak later named for him. Near the interpretive center a Dakota Memorial honors those from the 1862 U.S.–Dakota Conflict.

Originally called Wita Tanka (Big Island) by the Dakota, the island is about a 3.5-mile walk from the parking lot to the tip and back. We saw one cross-country skier, several fat tire bikers, and a scattering of walkers. It was a beautiful sunny day and I got a healthy dose of Vitamin D. Clouds rolled in the next morning.

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