

Swimming “The River that Flows Uphill”

A 183 mile virtual swim in the Willamette River from Eugene, Oregon to its merge with the Columbia River. Use your practice pool yardage to complete this swim.



The Willamette River is the longest river in the United States that flows primarily North. So it has been described as “flowing uphill,” map-wise, that is. This is not a simple stream but is the 13th largest river in the United States in volume of water. The Willamette begins its nearly 300 mile journey in the high Cascade Mountains southeast of Eugene. Winding through forest, farmland and city, it travels northward the length of the fertile Willamette Basin before joining the Columbia River in Portland. Along the way, it changes from a rushing mountain stream to a big river, more than a quarter-mile across. Nearly 70 percent of the state’s population lives in cities along its banks. The Army Corps of Engineers map to the right is designed for viewing on your computer. It is in multiple colors. See it in color at usms.org/fitness/virtualswims.

This swim is divided into three sections so you can do any or all of the segments. These include:
Eugene to Albany- 61 miles
Albany to Newberg – 72 miles
Newberg to the Columbia River – 50 miles

Chart your progress on the chart provided at usms.org/fitness/virtualswims

As you start downstream beware of whitewater stretches, shallows and rocky shoals, narrow side channels, trees, stumps and branches in the water, powerful currents and river eddies, low dams and a

major waterfall. There are still polluted sections where, among other things, storm drains carry nasty stuff into the river when it rains. You also need to watch out for boats, personal watercraft, other swimmers, skiers and fishermen. Water temperature is usually below 60 degrees. The weather can bring wind, rain, snow, fog, sun glare and lightning. Wouldn’t you rather swim this river in your own pool?

Before we virtually dive in, let’s stop for a brief look at the history of this exciting river. There is evidence that Native Americans lived along the Willamette for 10,000 years. They lived on nuts, berries, and roots plus hunting animals with snares, traps and bow and arrow. Smallpox and malaria wiped out 80% of the native people by 1833. The first Europeans were fur trappers, working for Hudson’s Bay Company and missionaries. The end of the Oregon Trail was at Oregon City, south of Portland. Along this harsh route came a stream of Americans to settle in the fertile valley.

In addition, French Canadians settled in the area south of Newberg. Oregon became a big supplier of wheat and goods for the California Gold Rush and steamboats traveled the river taking goods to the Columbia and on to the ocean. By 1900 the river was heavily polluted and neglected. Industries, cities and towns dumped their wastes into the river until after World War II. By 1970 the cleanup programs were success stories and the river was declared safe for swimming in 1972. In 1998 the Willamette was named an American Heritage River, a federal designation to assist in restoring and protecting the river.



Steamboat on the Willamette in the late 1800’s.

Section One- River Mile 183-122 (61 miles)

Note: River miles are the Marine Board's way of knowing where you are if you need a rescue on the river. This river has almost 300 River Miles total.

We are starting this swim at Alton-Baker Park in Eugene, Oregon. This is the biggest riverside park in the city and home of the annual Hemp Festival. (don't get wild ideas – it is billed as a celebration of all the products one can make with hemp). Eugene is home to the University of Oregon, appropriately known as the Ducks. It is also described by some as the "Peoples' Republic of Eugene" because the population enjoys doing things its own way, often a bit to the left on the political spectrum. Here the water is fast and there are four significant rapids. It is shallow so watch your body parts on the rocks! In 30 miles we will reach the Ducks rival team – Oregon State University, home of the Beavers, at Corvallis. Now the current slows and the river is a deeper, single channel. Watch out for the University women's Crew team as they practice on the river. The remaining 11 miles is a pleasant, easy swim. Soon you will be in Albany, home of the first major industries along the river's banks. Get out at Hyak Park. You have completed Section 1 of this swim.



Section Two – River Mile 122- 50 (72 miles)

This is the historical section of the river. Many pioneers who traveled the Oregon Trail settled here because the farmland was wonderfully fertile. Many prosperous towns and river landings sprang up. Now most are a faint memory but you can look for some of the abandoned steamboat landings as you swim by. At Independence, 25 miles into the swim, watch for the old ferry landing, which is still visible. There are two of the old river ferries still running since their start in the early 1850's. They are at Buena Vista (14 miles into the swim) and Wheatland (54 miles into this swim). The river here runs slow and is 12-15 feet deep. Enjoy the pastoral setting and you swim by farm after farm. Some farms grow bulbs of iris and daffodil or rhododendron plants, and other nursery stock so you may see vibrant colors if

the season is right. Bring your bike back someday and ride this part of the valley. You will pass the state capital city of Salem at 37 miles into this swim. See if you can see the gold pioneer statue on top of the capital building. Get out at Rodger's Landing at River Mile 50 and walk into the town of Newberg. Here you can rent a car and tour many fine wineries in the area. Be sure to come back as we swim to Portland in Section 3.

Section 3 River Mile 50-0 (50 Miles)

When we leave Newberg, we will be swimming eastward for twenty miles before we turn north for our final swim to the Columbia River. The river here is placid and slow-moving. We are entering the area where the vast majority of Oregon's population lives. When we reach Oregon City, 24 miles into this swim, we will encounter the impressive 41-foot Willamette Falls. Until 1873 all riverboats had to stop here. Then a series of locks were built around the falls. Below the falls the river is congested with recreational and commercial river traffic. Still you will see blue heron, waterfowl, vegetation and wetlands as you swim. Look for the beautiful skyline of Portland as shown in the picture to the right. You will swim under ten bridges on your way to Kelly Point State Park, the end of your 183 mile swim.



The Portland skyline on a day with no rain.

This swim was created by Pam Himstreet, USMS Fitness Chair and a member of the Oregon LMSC.

Much of the information for this swim was collected from the [Willamette River Recreation Guide](#), a 36 page booklet with maps, history and detailed descriptions of the river. The entire guide is designed to make it easy for you to experience the river—whether by boat, bicycle, car, or on foot. You may read the booklet or print your very own copy by going to www.oregonstateparks.org/images/pdf/will_river_guide.pdf Plan to visit our beautiful state soon.