



Unlike the much wider nearby Cedar River, the Wapsipinicon treats paddlers on hot summer days to refreshing shady stretches. The narrow valley provides visual interest with rocky bluffs, says Krebill. Here, writer Sam Samuels paddles in shade to escape triple digit heat indices upstream from Stone City. "It was a pleasant thing to do on a warm summer day. People were swimming, playing with their dogs and fishing to escape the heat. Whole families, teenagers and others made use of the river that day. It was a heavily used section. We were also in parts wild with eagles. There was no one around. It was a great feeling...a feeling that you were in the wilderness," says Krebill.



Foraging Wild Iowa

BY SAM HOOPER SAMUELS

A Vermonter and wild food expert spend a Wapsipinicon weekend living off the land in Grant Wood Country.

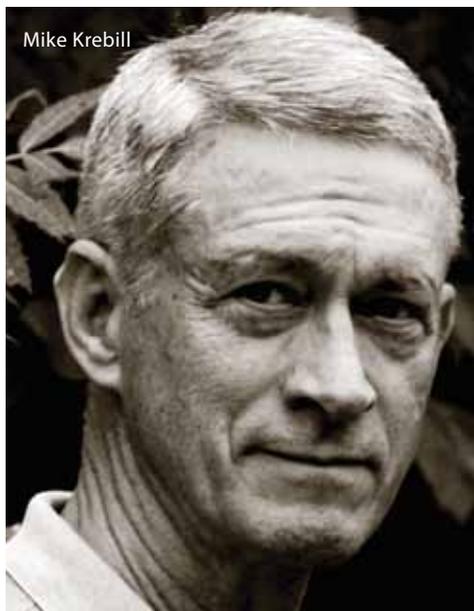
“I think the prudent thing is to take care of the body first,” says Mike Krebill as we empty a seemingly bottomless vanload of food, cooking gear, camping equipment, and bottle after bottle of drinking water from the back of his white Plymouth Voyager, supplies for our weekend canoe trip down the Wapsipinicon River.

For the next two days I will paddle hard, learn much, sweat quarts, and eat strangely but very, very well. Krebill, my guide, my teacher, and my cook for the trip, is a forager. He likes to find his meals in the woods or on a river. Every dish we share this weekend will consist in whole or in part of foods plucked from the Iowa wild.

Take care of the body. Clearly Krebill takes excellent care of his own. He needs no help to lift the canoe off the top of the car and right it on the ground. Lean and strong, he seems to be just limbering up for paddling in 110-degree heat indexes the 17 miles to Stone City by tomorrow evening. Under a baseball cap, his close-cropped hair is steely grey, his jaw line firm. His shoes are sturdy but with lots of holes to let out water after the inevitable wade. “May the Forest Be With You,” says his tee shirt. He turns 64 in a few weeks. I’ve just turned 46 and am already feeling phantom muscle soreness in anticipation of the paddling ahead.

Searching my childhood memories, I can recall the craggy face of Euell Gibbons, the Texas-born author of *Stalking the Wild Asparagus*, in television commercials for Grape Nuts cereal. “Did you know that many parts of a pine tree are edible?” Gibbons would ask, nibbling the crunchy nuggets straight from his hand. He passed away in 1975 but left behind a generation of disciples curious to feast on acorns and cattail rhizomes, a small but enthusiastic wild-food foraging subculture of which Krebill is a leader. On Gibbons’s death, the National Wild Foods Association began inducting members into its Hall of Fame. One of this year’s inductees was Krebill.

Krebill owns close to 200 books on wild edibles. In his 40 years as a naturalist and forager, he’s led more than 2,100 nature walks. An award winning seventh grade science teacher in Keokuk and former Michigan Teacher of the Year, Krebill has trained more than 300 teachers in



Mike Krebill

outdoor lore. He can start a fire by friction in seven seconds. The record is six and a half. His BABWA bread (Banana, Acorn, Black Walnut, Apple) once took first prize in a national wild foods contest. There's a loaf in our cooler.

Traveling with Krebill, you're never far from "a nice nibble."

By the side of the road, he picks through a nondescript patch of tall weeds like a shopper surveying the produce section. After a minute, he emerges with a handful of spindly seed heads, which he breaks open to release the pungent odor of garlic mustard seeds. In his other hand is a bouquet of lilac-colored flowers with tubular petals and pointed leaves.

"Crush those leaves and smell your fingers," he says. "What does that remind you of?"

There's no mistaking the scent of oregano. This is a prairie plant with many names, including horse mint and bee balm. According to Krebill it's a wild relative of oregano, and it makes a fairly drinkable cup of tea.

"I was thinking of some of these to accouter the fish," Krebill says, "should we be so fortunate."

Amazingly, Krebill himself has no sense of smell. He lost it to an illness. Maybe that's why he enjoys carpeting his palette with so many varied flavors.

"These are white mulberries," Krebill points out growing from a tree near the boat ramp. They look like ghosts of blackberries, with a mild sweetness and a soft, almost starchy texture. While Krebill ties the last bits of camping gear down to the canoe's thwarts, I stand at the tree plucking berries and jamming them into my mouth like a bear taking on calories.

The boat is ready. Krebill takes the stern, I take the bow, and we set out to find our dinner. For a novice angler like me, Krebill has brought along his classic Zebco Model 33 reel, a nearly indestructible old workhorse that's easy to learn on. With a little expert coaching, by midday I'm placing my lure right where I want it about two-thirds of the time, sneaking it under low-hanging branches into promising pools.

Well, it's nearly indestructible. After a few hours I've managed to jam the Model 33 irretrievably. We drift for a while as Krebill dismantles and tries to fix it. To preserve our fishing time, he decides to fix it later at home and hands me one of the spare rods he's brought for just this occasion.

"We're not going to let one problem dampen our enthusiasm," he says. "You always have to have a plan B." This, I will learn, is one of Krebill's great maxims. As the weekend progresses, there are few situations for which he hasn't prepared in advance, few setbacks for which he hasn't got a contingency plan.

We fish the morning away, sharing the river with feathered competitors. Kingfishers dart across the river. A great blue heron lifts from its sand bar and with a few flaps of its great wings ascends to a treetop several hundred feet down the river.

Time for lunch. We drag the canoe up onto a likely sand bar and unpack my first foraged meal.

More of a practical man than a purist, Krebill has gathered and prepared some of the food with his own two hands, but allowed some store-bought foods onto the menu



Krebill snips dark red fruiting heads of smooth sumac to prepare thirst-quenching sumac lemonade. In research this year, Krebill's Keokuk 7th grade students found the sourest berries make the best beverage. **RIGHT:** Early morning mist swirls over the Wapsi. Safety is essential as rivers can rise quickly with heavy rains. To prevent sand from entering the tent and food, Krebill uses a large tarp on sandbars and removing shoes before entering the makeshift food prep area or tent.

provided they can arguably be called “wild.” Our main course is summer sausage made with Iowa buffalo meat, yielding a distinctly less fatty sausage than I’m used to.

Hazelnuts figure prominently in this lunch. Roasted, they’re mixed into a high-energy gorp along with other nuts and bits of chocolate. But I find myself more partial to the raw hazelnuts. These were a last-minute find, something Krebill spotted growing on a bush on his way from somewhere to somewhere else. Each raw hazelnut looks like a tight little rose. With some effort, I peel the stiff outer leaves away to reveal the nut itself, a whitish-green nugget in a shell just soft enough for me to crush and remove with my fingers. Its nutty flavor is subtler than the roasted ones. Not crackly like a peanut, it’s more crunchy like the core of a raw broccoli stem, a moist, yielding hardness.

We wash all this down with sumac lemonade, a clear red concoction that contains sumac but no lemon. I know sumac as a pervasive, weedy tree that is the bane of prairie preservationists. I’ve seen its dark, purplish-red berry clusters, looking like miniature Christmas trees growing at the end of each branch. But I’ve never experienced the refreshing sourness they contain, which Krebill has extracted by steeping them in boiling water in a cheesecloth pouch, a technique he calls the “giant teabag method.” (Later at home, I’ll spend the next three weekends gathering these clusters with my 8-year-old son and making sumac lemonade, which we bottle and pack in our lunches for school and work.)

No lunch is complete without dessert. Ours ends with shagbark snickerdoodles, a classic cookie recipe that Krebill has doctored by the addition of shagbark hickory nuts. For a final cool-down, he produces an ice-cube tray of wild grape popsicles.

“The summer grape is ripe now,” Krebill says. All around us, he points out trees dripping with grape vines that escaped my notice before. “But it has an aftertaste from the calcium tartrate crystals inside it.”

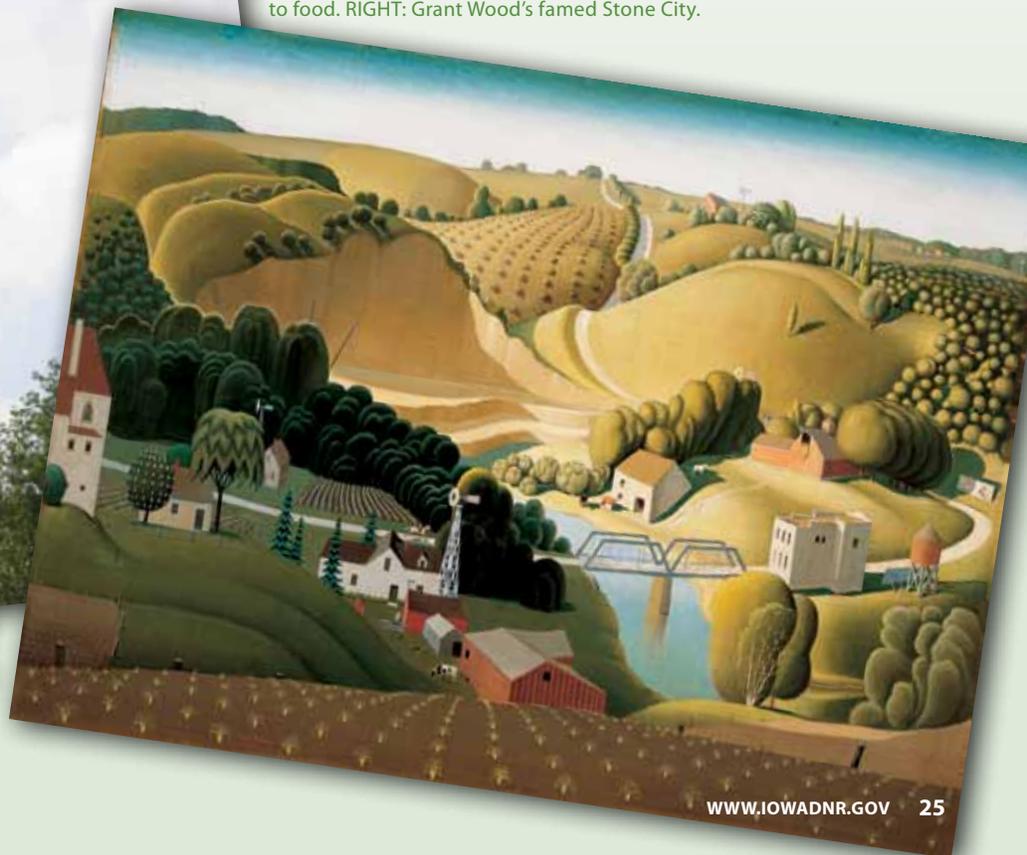
I’m beginning to see why he won that teaching award. Practically each moment is another chance to share knowledge. In his company, the landscape that seemed before to be merely pretty now takes on definition and purpose. To rid our popsicles of the offending tartrate, Krebill explains, he simmered the grapes for 20 minutes, strained them, then sugared and froze the resulting purple liquor.

“It might not be home free, but there will be less tartrate,” he says. Under the day’s intense heat, even in a sealed cooler our popsicles have turned into wild grape slushies. We adapt. Eaten with a spoon instead of on a stick, they’re still cold and bracingly sour. Without, as far as I can tell, a tartrate crystal in sight.

Back on the river, we return to the business of casting for our supper. By about 3:00, we have sighted our first bald eagle but still have no fish.

Not every plant is good for eating. Some are good for other things, and others should be avoided. Every stretch of the varied riparian corridor offers some plant with a

LEFT: Treetop heron skitters downstream all day in advance of paddlers. Garlic mustard, below left, offers natural herb flavoring to food. **RIGHT:** Grant Wood’s famed Stone City.







different use or hazard to Krebill's studied eye. There's mullein, a tall, spiky plant with fuzzy leaves and yellow flowers that the Indians used to cure asthma, and which is still used by herbalists as a treatment for respiratory ailments. There's stinging nettle with its coating of fine hairs, each a hypodermic needle filled with a strong irritant. There's Indian dogbane, also known as Indian hemp because its outer peel produces a tough, sinewy fiber the Indians twined together for cordage and fishing lines. We pull the canoe to the bank, and Krebill harvests a few stems to show me how it's done. Using only his hands, he produces a short length of braided cord too tough for me to snap. Through the breaks in its skin, the plant oozes a milky white sap. Our hands are sticky with the stuff.

Our friend the blue heron keeps just ahead of us, playing an all-day game of keep away. Each time we get close, it takes off and disappears down river.

By 4:30, I wonder what plan B is in the event of no fish. Then Krebill's bobber dips into the water. A minute later, he's using his needle-nose pliers to extract the hook from the mouth of a 14-inch channel catfish. Working cautiously, he grips the fish with his thumb and fingers tucked behind its pectoral fins, pressing his palm against the dorsal fin to keep it flattened to avoid the sharp, venomous spines. I lift the cooler lid, Krebill tosses the fish in, and down goes the lid.

I never catch a thing. Krebill catches two more channel cats. Fish for dinner.

From where we sit, it's hard to believe that this river is really a narrow ribbon of wilderness snaking through the expanse of Iowa's cultivated farm fields.

By now I'm ready for it. Krebill has been filling me with calories steadily all day, but the river seems to suck them out of me even faster. He knows of a fine sandbar around mile 10 to set up camp. It seems never to arrive.

The last time I canoed this distance was as a Boy Scout about 30 years ago. There's a section of deltoid muscle, right along the front edge of each shoulder, that is killing me. It's the part in charge of pulling the paddle up and out of the water at the end of each stroke. Krebill has been letting me choose when we switch sides with our paddles. For the past hour or so, I've been switching sides every few minutes, letting that muscle have a rest and giving the good arm a turn.

Now there is no more good arm. No good leg either, just two cramped Slinkies that may or may not bear my weight if I ever give them a chance on dry land again.

Finally the sandbar arrives. Wide and flat, it's a fine spot for a meal and to spend the night. But there is work to do before we can have that dinner.

"If we don't do it," Krebill says, "it probably won't get done." From the kitchen gear, he extracts a prized

filleting knife in an ornately-stamped leather sheath. He's fashioned a lightweight, flexible cutting board from two sheets of textured plastic stapled together. Kneeling in the sand, he chooses a fish.

"Look at this," he says, pointing to the underside of the fish's chin. "It's a leach." Alongside the cat's fleshy barbels is what looks like an extra whisker, only shorter and darker. We are not the first to get a meal from this particular catfish. Unperturbed, Krebill coaxes the meat from the bones in large, clean fillets.

"One time as I was doing this," Krebill says, "I dropped a fish head and bones on the sand. A bald eagle dropped down next to me and carried it off." Today, he dumps the carcasses far from camp for some scavenging animal to make a meal of.

Meanwhile, I've been playing sous-chef, shredding wild oregano leaves, hauling dishwater up from the river, and assembling the requisite pots, pans, and utensils. Rummaging through the foods Krebill packed, I come across a shiny foil package.

"What's this?" I ask.

"That," Krebill says, "is insurance."

It's a vacuum-packed, mass-produced envelope of precooked grocery-store white meat chicken, which thankfully we do not open. Plan B. Take care of the body.

Stretching our legs out on the tarp that is our dining room, we dig in. The catfish, coated with a breadcrumb crust, pan fried, and sprinkled with our aromatic roadside oregano, is as moist and flaky as only a fish that was

cruising the river two hours ago can be. Krebill's BABWA bread marries the sweetness of standard banana bread with the strong woodsy flavor of ground walnuts and acorns. For our greens, we've par-boiled a mess of arrowhead leaves, slightly spinachy but with a firm texture.

The biggest surprise to my tongue is lightly boiled milkweed pods. I've seen these in the wild in their mature state, dried out and bursting with feathery seeds. These are younger, green and tender. Their outer skin bristles with soft, pointy spines that tickle my tongue. When I break one open in my mouth, the inside is filled with mild-flavored seeds, each the size of a tiny caviar egg.

From where we sit, it's hard to believe that this river is really a narrow ribbon of wilderness snaking through the expanse of Iowa's cultivated farm fields. Our Iowa, the one Krebill and I are experiencing today, seems the polar opposite of the Iowa just outside our view, just beyond the river's wild edge. The fields beyond the trees here are the picture of efficiency in food production: managed, mechanized, uniform. But our Iowa, the Wapsi with its endless surprises and flavors, is a diverse culinary mess.



As I'm learning, it is an enormous job to extract a day's food from it, and the rewards are great but unpredictable.

"Foraging takes an immense amount of time," Krebill says. I can only guess how many hours it took him to gather the ingredients for today's meals. The hickory nuts alone are tremendously laborious to crack.

"People who lived by foraging did it in all their waking hours," Krebill muses. "For each food, they had to ask themselves, 'Was it worth the effort?'"

My answer, as I wrap myself around a spoonful of chocolate mousse improved by wild black raspberries and wash it down with a swig of wild mint tea leaves, is yes.

That night, lying on a thin inflatable pad on the hard sand, I look up at the stars through the screens of our tent and listen to the distinctive call of a barred owl: "Who cooks for you? Who cooks for you—all?"

The next morning, fortified by a breakfast of wild rice and hickory nuts drenched in maple syrup, we get back on the water to find trouble.

A few weeks ago, Krebill canoed this same stretch of the Wapsi and encountered a tangle of fallen trees in the river between our campsite and where we will stop for lunch. Since then it's gotten much worse. Up to now, we've had to skirt around the occasional fallen tree or slip through a gap between two messes of branches. This

time, there is no between, just branches.

Our first attempt is to hug the left bank. It's a dead end. Back-paddling hard against the current, we back out by a few yards. We each grab a branch of a fallen tree and hang on. Temporarily anchored, we stop to study the river. Krebill considers our options, searching for plan B.

"In some situations, we would portage here," Krebill says. The problem is the topography. The river bank is high and steep, hollowed out by water to form a bluff that overhangs the river. One of us would have to climb up this dirt wall and stand at the top while the other passed each item up to him. I picture myself holding that heavy canvas rucksack over my head while standing in the canoe. Somehow this mental movie always ends with the canoe upside-down and me and all that equipment in the river.

There may be better places to unload up river. The current here is fairly fast, so to do that we would have to paddle hard for some distance against it. We'd also have a much further distance to carry all that equipment over land.

Looking at the tangled trees, Krebill analyzes them in search of a path. To paddle through this mess, we would have to go back into the same cul de sac we just backed out of, then turn hard right and paddle across the river and upstream through a narrow corridor that zigzags between two fallen trees. This seems promising, but dangerous. It could pin us sideways against the tree trunk.

That's plans A, B, and C, none terribly appealing. Slowly, a fourth begins to occur to Krebill. This is what we do.



Writer Sam Samuels seeks relief from 110-degree heat indexes near the Matsell Road Bridge. Trees and limbs are lodged under bridge girders and cables, testimony to high, powerful floods. Above, arrowhead grows in shallow ponds and marshes, but none were found along the 17-mile trip due to scouring floodwaters. Krebill prepacked arrowhead and cattail for the voyage. Peeled and used like potatoes, arrowhead tubers are worked loose by wading and using the feet or a long-handled tool. Tubers float upon release for easy harvest.

We make our way slowly back into the cul de sac, but do not turn. Instead, we pull in our paddles and Krebill grabs the branches of the upstream tree. Hand over hand, Krebill monkey-bars along the branches, moving us slowly across the current until we reach the gap ahead. My role in this maneuver is to record it for the public.

At last, we reach a narrow gap in the downstream side of this labyrinth, nose into it, and pause for a moment before tackling the last hard run to open water.

Behind us is one danger narrowly avoided. Just ahead is another. Krebill is still hanging on to a tree to keep us from being swept forward and possibly smashed against a gnarled mess of lumber. Maybe it's not the final assault on Everest, but by my standards this qualifies as a breather in the middle of a dicey situation.

"This is an edible plant," Krebill says, noticing something creeping on the dead tree to which he's clinging for our two dear lives.

At this moment, I recognize a quality in Krebill's speech reminiscent of the voice of an airline pilot coming over the public address system. It's that slow, measured tone that throws a gentle blanket of calm over every situation, the kind of voice that never loses its don't-worry-this-happens-to-me-all-the-time confidence, regardless of whether it's telling you (a) that the flight attendant will be by shortly with the beverage cart or (b) that this might be an opportune moment to strap on your parachute. Somehow I know it's all going to come out all right.

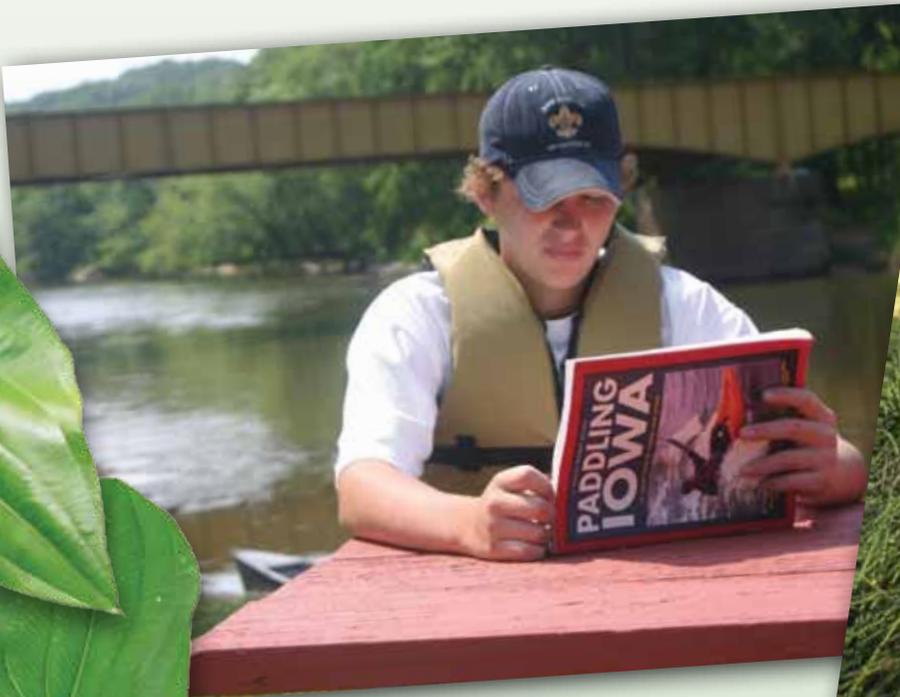
"It's a ground cherry," Krebill says, "very much like a tomatillo. They're poisonous if they're not ripe, which unfortunately these are not. Otherwise this would be a nice pleasant nibble."

Krebill lets go of the tree, releasing us into the current. We paddle as hard to the left as we can and just make it around that last tangle of branches, home free. After that, it's nothing but wild blackberries and smoked venison jerky all the way to Stone City.

At the end of our trip, after the gear is stowed and we're back to civilization, Krebill has offered to provide me with one more dinner, this time at a real restaurant. I scan the menu. Chicken. Pork. Beef. I contemplate ordering milkweed pods, just to see how our cheery waitress will react, but think better of it. We both order the Wiener schnitzel. It is unobjectionable.

A few days later, I'm home in Vermont, on my way from somewhere to somewhere else, I notice for the first time a broad-leaved vine inching along the edge of a cement porch I pass almost every day: wild grape. I find a nice, reddish Y-shaped tendril and, just like Krebill showed me, tear it off and chew it, releasing a burst of sour flavor that makes my salivary glands gush.

At the back of my mind, I can almost hear a slow, quiet voice saying, "That's a nice thirst quencher." 🐼



Adam White, a sophomore and senior patrol leader with Boy Scout Troop 43, studies on an exploratory trip with foraging expert and Keokuk science teacher Mike Krebill before Krebill and writer Sam Samuels paddled the river weeks later. **RIGHT:** Mullein, an herb used to treat cough, sore throat and asthma symptoms.

