

Driftless Region

The Driftless Region is one of the most distinctive landscapes in North America. Located across southeastern Minnesota, southwestern Wisconsin, northeastern Iowa, and a small portion of northwestern Illinois, the region stands apart from the surrounding Midwest because it largely escaped the flattening effects of the last Ice Age glaciers. While most of the Upper Midwest was reshaped by glacial drift—sediment left behind as glaciers melted—the Driftless Region remained mostly untouched. The absence of this glacial drift is where the region gets its name.

Because glaciers did not level the terrain, the Driftless retains steep ridges, limestone bluffs, narrow valleys, and a dense network of spring-fed streams. Rain and snowmelt filter through porous limestone bedrock and re-emerge as cold groundwater springs. These springs feed thousands of miles of creeks and small rivers, creating ideal habitat for trout and one of the most productive cold-water fisheries in the United States.

The geological story of the Driftless Region stretches back hundreds of millions of years when ancient seas covered the area. Over time, layers of limestone, sandstone, and dolomite formed. Rivers gradually carved deep valleys into these sedimentary rocks, creating dramatic bluffs and coulees—long, narrow valleys common across western Wisconsin and southeastern Minnesota.

This limestone landscape also explains why so many streams maintain stable water temperatures throughout the year. Groundwater emerges from springs at relatively constant temperatures, helping trout survive both hot summers and cold winters. The combination of cool water, gravel streambeds, and abundant insect life creates ideal conditions for naturally reproducing trout populations.

The Rush River is one of the most respected trout streams in western Wisconsin and a favorite destination for fly anglers throughout the Midwest. Flowing through Pierce County before entering the Mississippi River near Maiden Rock, the Rush is known for its clear water, strong insect hatches, and healthy populations of naturally reproducing brown trout. The river winds through rolling farmland and wooded valleys, offering both scenic beauty and productive fishing. Many anglers consider the Rush River an excellent place to develop fly fishing skills because it rewards observation, patience, and careful presentation.

Often referred to simply as “the Kinni,” the Kinnickinnic River flows through western Wisconsin and has become one of the most famous trout streams in the Midwest. Originating near River Falls, the river runs south before eventually reaching the St. Croix River. The Kinni is known for its cold spring water, abundant aquatic insects, and strong populations of wild brown trout. Its relatively open banks and consistent flows make it particularly attractive for fly anglers learning



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dry-fly fishing techniques. Ongoing habitat restoration efforts have helped improve stream structure and trout populations over the past decade.

The Whitewater River system in southeastern Minnesota is another cornerstone of Driftless fly fishing. Located within Whitewater State Park and surrounding valleys, the river and its branches offer scenic limestone bluffs, wooded slopes, and miles of accessible trout water. The river supports brown, brook, and rainbow trout and is known for both dry-fly fishing and nymphing opportunities. Because of its beautiful setting and varied water types, the Whitewater River is often recommended as an ideal destination for anglers exploring the Driftless Region for the first time.

Today the Driftless Region attracts anglers, hikers, cyclists, and outdoor enthusiasts seeking landscapes that feel different from the surrounding Midwest. Unlike many large western rivers, Driftless streams encourage a quieter and more intimate style of fishing. Anglers move slowly along small creeks, observing currents, insect activity, and trout behavior.

Beyond fishing, the region has developed a distinctive culture rooted in agriculture, conservation, and outdoor recreation. Small towns, local wineries, farm-to-table restaurants, and scenic drives contribute to the Driftless experience. Conservation partnerships among landowners, state agencies, and organizations such as Trout Unlimited continue to improve habitat and ensure these rivers remain healthy for future generations.

For visitors and anglers alike, the Driftless Region represents a rare landscape where geology, ecology, and human stewardship combine to create something enduring. Whether someone arrives to learn fly fishing for the first time or to return to familiar water, the rivers of the Driftless continue to offer both challenge and inspiration.