

Chasing Steam on the River Sub

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Milwaukee Road 261 is an S3 class 4-8-4 Northern locomotive. Built in a group of 10 by American Locomotive Company in 1944, the 261 saw regular service between Chicago and Minneapolis until retirement in 1955. When the 261 was built, it was “the last word in 4-8-4 design”, featuring roller bearings, precision firing equipment, 74" drivers, 26 x 32 cylinders, 250 psi boiler pressure, 460,000 lbs operating weight, 62,040 pounds of tractive effort, Milwaukee’s solid cast pilot and all weather cabs. After three years in storage, the locomotive was donated to the National Railroad Museum in Green Bay, WI. The 261 remained in Green Bay until 1992, when North Star Rail received a long term lease of the locomotive and moved it to their shops in Minneapolis, MN. After extensive reworking, the 261 was back under steam on September 14, 1993.

Milwaukee Road 261 makes a number of appearances each year for a variety of events. This happens to the annual fall foliage run, which runs south out of the Twin Cities along Canadian Pacific’s River Subdivision to La Crosse, WI. The River Sub runs along the Mississippi River and MN Highway 61. Ironically, the CP River subdivision was previously the Soo Line’s, who purchased it from the Milwaukee Road. The 261 ran this line in regular service years ago, and is back on her ‘old turf,’ for lack of better terms.

I decided to start in Red Wing, MN just south of the Twin Cities. If I was going to have any shot at keeping up with the 261, I would have to be clear of the Cities when she got rolling. CP Rail’s River Subdivision follows the Mississippi River from the Twin Cities to La Crosse, WI. Following the river naturally provides easy grades and smooth curves, something that is right up the alley of a Northern class locomotive for maintaining track speed.



Here is Milwaukee Road #261 drifting into Red Wing, MN on October 9.

Pulling in to Red Wing at 0915 yielded the positive results I was looking for. There were a dozen guys standing around with radios and cameras waiting on the 261. It is important to remember that the River Sub is CTC controlled, so CPR is rather quiet on the radio. A scanner locked down to AAR #44 will be minor help except for conversation between the train crews. Scanning the group I recognized a familiar face from the CPR. The 261 was following Amtrak and was expected to pass at 1015. Sure enough, Amtrak arrived at 1009 and departed at 1012 (official times to the River Sub dispatch). At 1017, the 261 made her appearance with cheers and shutters clicking, gliding into the Red Wing depot riding the drifting throttle with a distinct steam whistle. After a few low-speed run by photos, I was running south along Highway 61.

I found the turnout I was looking for and quickly left my truck, which I pointed out for a quicker get away, and found the photo angle I wanted. Running about 100 yards down from the truck produced the results that I wanted with good angles and no other photographers in my viewfinder. I no sooner had some of the weeds stomped down and the scanner came to life.

“Milwaukee 261 to CPR River sub dispatch, over”

“River sub dispatch, go ahead 261, over” came the female dispatcher back.

“Milwaukee 261 in Red Wing at one zero one seven, departing at one zero three one, over” replied the engineer. You could hear the 261 pulling to get the train up to speed in the background.

A quick look at my watch showed I found my spot none to soon.

“Milwaukee 261 appr....”

The scanner went dead, but it was still running and receiving. Through the morning haze you could hear 261 pounding, then a moaning steam whistle at the crossing just north of where I left my truck.



Here is 261 “giving her the groceries” just south of Red Wing.

The sight of 261 coming out of the trees in the cool Minnesota morning was astonishing. The graceful and rhythmic whuff, whuff, whuff, whuff and the white vapor shooting just out the stack and laying back along the train made me realize just how impersonal the diesels of today are. 261 talks to you, and tells you how things are going, and things were going just fine today, thank you very much.

The 261, being followed up by the observation from Milwaukee's famed Hiawatha, was no sooner was out of site and the scanner came back to life.

"261, you're looking good on the roll by."

There was a CP rail freight sitting in the hole just south of our location, and more than willing to break the radio silence.



The 261 had the Milwaukee Road Hiawatha observation *Cedar Rapids* on the tail.

"Thank you, looking good yourself," came the reply from the 261.

"So 261, how hard are they letting you run today?"

"We're running at expeditor speed," replied the 261.

Great, that means 60 mph. I'll have my work cut out for me to catch her again before Winona, 45 miles south. With a little luck I could pace her, depending on how many other rail fans were trying to do the same thing.



One mile north of Minnesota City.

261 went past the Wacouta detector with a clean bill of health.

“Detector, MP 361.4, no defects. Axels: seven zero. Length: one one zero zero. Temperature: five one. Work safe, detector out”

That puts the 261 three miles down from me. My chance to catch her again will be when Highway 61 turns to four lanes. The scanner, fresh smoke hanging in the cool morning air, and approach signals temporarily slowing the ‘expediter’ speed allowed me a chance.

Thirty minutes later we were on the four-lane with the tail end in site. The highway makes a brief separation from the tracks that felt like an eternity, but when we rejoined the tracks we were dead even with the 261. There was only one other person that even noticed the 261 was running parallel, and most were irritated that two of us were camped out in the passing lane doing 60 mph. A few pictures out the window at ‘expediter’ speed and the 261 called an approach signal.



261 drifting downhill approaching Minnesota City, MN.

That approach was the last thing I wanted to hear, one more mile and the tracks would be above the highway, a location hopefully yielding one of those fancy speed shots you always see in the magazines. The 261 cut back to 40 mph from the expediter pace, so I went ahead to get set up for a few more run by pictures with the 261 running above, not below, my shooting angle.

261 came strolling by with the brakes smoking. The next signal must be red?!?! A half mile down just off a county road, the 261 came to a stop on the main. A west bound (map north) auto parts train cleared the main by running through the hole. The 261 gave two hard blasts on the whistle. Then came the cylinder blow down to remove moisture. I didn't get my speed shot, but a blow down shot works just as well.



261 going through a cylinder blow down.



261 is waiting for a westbound (northbound) auto parts train.

If you see nothing else of a steam locomotive, see it when it starts. It starts quietly, almost without effort, and smooth. 261 was wasting no time getting up to speed and I stood and listened as 261 and the fall excursion faded in to the distance. Whistling for crossings and the pumping of the cylinders getting faint, coal smoke drifting off with the morning fog.

261 had no sooner disappeared in to the morning haze when a gentleman about as young as the 261 came wandering over asking what all the commotion was. After a brief explanation, he smiled and added, "I remember the Hiawatha's running past here all the time with steam. You could set your watch to the train. You could tell which engineer was running that day by the whistle. That was the glory days of railroad."

I couldn't agree more.



Here is 261 rolling toward Minnesota City.