

BANKFULL: WHAT IT IS AND HOW TO LOCATE IT

WHY BANKFULL?

Several procedures in this manual require you to locate what is known as the “bankfull channel edge,” or more simply as “bankfull.” This is an important concept in understanding the workings of a stream.

HOW DOES A “BANKFULL” GET CREATED?

Most lower portions of streams in our area are alluvial, meaning that they create their own channels by moving sediment from the surrounding hillslopes and from the stream channel itself. Major episodes of such movement occur during floods and are called “channel-forming events.” These events determine the size of the channel needed to convey the water. In a period of relatively stable climate and land-cover, a stream system will develop an equilibrium between its flows and the size of the channel, whereby the channel is large enough to contain the stream under most flow conditions. When flows are greater than this capacity, the stream overflows its banks and flooding occurs.

In such streams, the channel is usually big enough to contain a high-flow event that recurs on an average of every 1.5 years (which we call the “1.5-year flood”). Such a frequency of inundation is frequent enough that perennial vegetation can't grow there, either because its roots are too wet or its seedlings get swept away. So usually, what you'll see if you look at the cross-section of a stream channel is a sort of “bowl” that contains the stream most of the time, inside which no perennial vegetation grows, and a place over the top of this bowl where the water can flow during a high-water event greater than a 1.5-year flood. This “floodplain” may be on one or both banks, depending on the site.

WHAT ARE INDICATORS OF BANKFULL?

Most stream systems are in a continual cycle of change, and every site is unique; thus, no single indicator of bankfull can always get you the “right answer.” There are several indicators

which can help to identify the bankfull channel edge, and you should consider all that are present at a given site:

- A. **Bank slope:** In stream channels with natural (undiked) riparian areas and a low, flat floodplain, the bankfull edge is located at the edge of this plain. Often the floodplain will slope down very gradually and then more abruptly. This abrupt slope-break is usually a good indicator. However, you may find such a slope-break on only one bank, or none at all, for instance if the channel has cut down into the streambed. Or the slope-break may be impossible to find on a bank that is slumping or undercut.
- B. **Vegetation:** The bankfull edge is often indicated by a demarcation line between lower areas that are either bare or have aquatic and annual vegetation, and higher areas with perennial vegetation such as ferns, shrubs, and trees. (Keep in mind, though, that the vegetation line is always in transition, retreating during wetter periods and advancing during dryer ones. So except for ferns, you should rely most heavily on perennial vegetation which is more than 6 feet high.) One particular confusion arises from willow or alder trees growing within the bankfull channel, because the channel has migrated into them, or they fell into the stream and managed to reestablish themselves. Therefore, when you look at vegetation, you should also look at soils...
- C. **Soils:** Look for a transition as you move up the bank, from cobble/gravel to sand/silt to soil. Above bankfull level, you should find old leaf litter forming into soil with organic matter. (Beware: this may be covered by flood deposits, so you may have to dig down.)
- D. **Point bars and bank undercuts:** Often on the inside of meander bends, the stream will build up a bar of sediment from the eddy current created by the bend; the top of such a bar is the minimum height of

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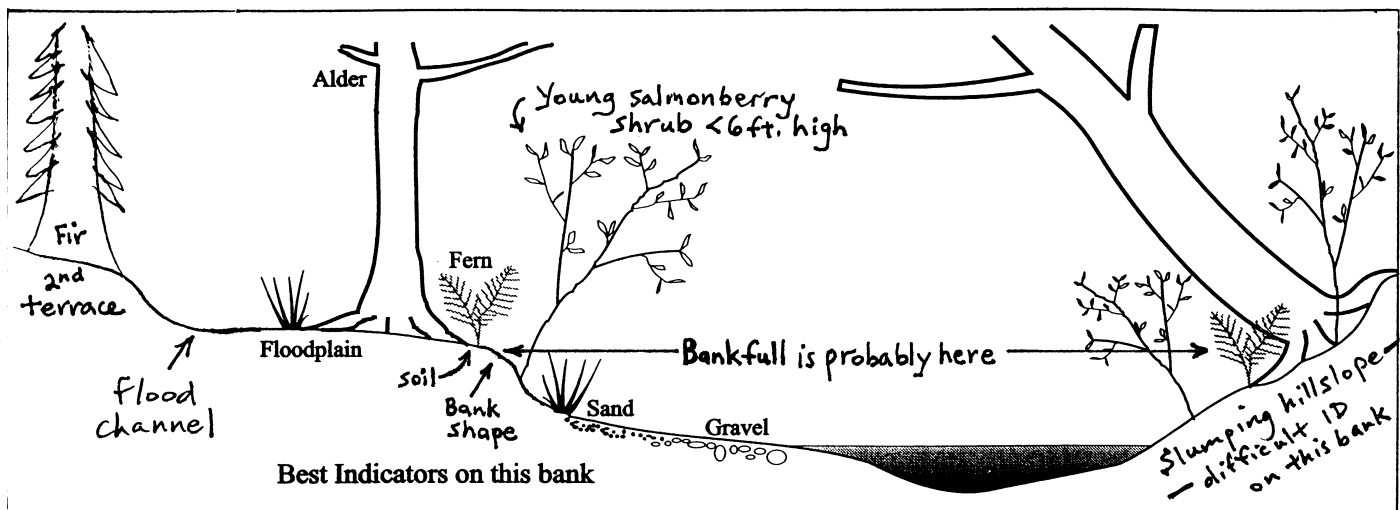
bankfull. Similarly, on the outside of such bends, the stream will often undercut the bank and expose root mats. If you reach up beneath this mat, you can estimate the upper extent of the undercut. This would also be the minimum height of bankfull.

- E. Lines on boulders/bedrock:** If you're in a steep channel with no clear floodplain, look for the highest mineral-stain line or the lowest line of lichen or moss on stable rock.
- F. Adjacent indicators:** If the indicators are unclear where you're looking, try looking up- or downstream to see if there is a clear bankfull line from which you can extrapolate.

HOW SHOULD I LOCATE BANKFULL?

The following method was found by the TFW program to maximize data precision and minimize bias toward over- or under-estimation of bankfull elevation:

1. Start on the bank with the best bankfull indicators.
 - a. Move up the bank from the channel, observing the indicators listed above.
2. Now follow the same procedure on the other bank. If it is not possible to accurately identify the bankfull level on that bank (which often happens on the outside bank of a meander bend), locate it using a level line from the bankfull point on the first bank.



Typical bankfull ID situation, adapted from Pleus and Schuett-Hames, 1998.

(Also referenced for this section: Harrelson et al., 1994.)