

# Along the Middle Allegheny Water Trail

by Marilyn Black

*Kennerdell Overlook*



photo-Mike Henderson

photo-Dart Black

*This smallmouth bass was caught on a curly tail jig.*

When our family is in the mood for fishing flowing water, we head to the Middle Allegheny River no matter what the season. Sometimes, we rent a canoe or kayak. Other days, we wade. Most often, we enjoy the convenience of a jetboat rigged out for fishing comfort to pursue the bronze beauties, toothy critters and scenic views we know await us.

The 85-mile long Middle Allegheny River Water Trail

is the free-flowing section of “the beautiful river” from the base of Kinzua Dam in Warren extending downstream to Emlenton, where I-80 crosses the river valley. In addition to excellent angling and boating opportunities, this trail and its banks provide access to fascinating historic sites, cultural resources, hospitality services and unusual lodging along the way.

River width varies from 100- to 400-feet. The narrower parts are in the southern half of this water trail. The glacial age (extending over thousands of years) reshaped this river system significantly. Prior to this time, the Allegheny turned north at Franklin and proceeded up what is now called French Creek to Lake Erie. With that path blocked by glaciers, the Allegheny River cut a new course from Franklin through Kennerdell and Emlenton to Foxburg, where it joins the Clarion River and proceeds south to Pittsburgh. The steeper hillsides and narrower valley from Franklin to Emlenton have limited shoreline development

to a thin intermittent ribbon of cottages, resulting in a lush green corridor for this entire stretch. Long reaches have little vehicular access, with just the popular paved Allegheny River Bike Trail hugging the eastern shore from Oil City to Emlenton.

The northern segment of the Middle Allegheny River Water Trail features a wider valley with meadows along its banks and more mid-river islands. Adjoining land has been used not only for year-round and seasonal homes, but also for industry, agriculture and larger communities, as well as more roadways. Boat launches are closer together in this section, and views from the water include an interesting blend of cultural and natural patterns.

## Distinctive history

Native Americans fished, hunted, lived, planted, traveled and worshipped along the Allegheny River. Although canoes remain a popular way to float this river and many names of places reflect the Seneca language, fishing methods and other aspects of daily living have changed dramatically over time. Communities like Tidioute and Tionesta annually celebrate Indian history in their local festivals.

The best-known petroglyph is Indian God Rock, situated in Rockland Township, a bit upstream from Fishermen’s Cove on the east bank amidst a rapidly-flowing stretch of water. This huge boulder is individually listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Unfortunately, the numerous symbols which earlier people scribed into the stone have nearly been obscured by more recently etched graffiti. Examples of native works are illustrated on an informational panel on the adjacent bike trail.

A life-sized bronze statue of Chief Cornplanter is in Oil City, a community built on land given to this Seneca leader



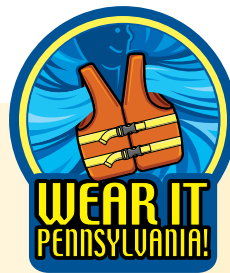
photo-Darl Black

photo-Marilyn Black

by the United States Government for his assistance during the Revolutionary War. To visit the statue from the river, pull into the canoe ramp on the river at the first bridge in downtown Oil City. You'll enter Justus Park and take the cement walkway up Oil Creek for one block to Creekside Park, where the statue depicting Chief Cornplanter as a young man stands on a boulder.

French explorers referred to this waterway as La Belle Riviere, which translates to the beautiful river. For decades, this part of northwestern Pennsylvania was considered French territory until young Lieutenant George Washington delivered a letter to the nearby French Fort LeBoeuf challenging that claim. His trip took him along French Creek and to Frazier's Cabin at Franklin on land that today is Franklin's Riverfront Park, which welcomes river travelers ashore for a break at the mouth of French Creek. Each August, Riverfront Park is the location for the Pennsylvania Stone Skipping Championship. It's also where the current World Record Stone Skip of 51 skips was achieved by Russell Byars in 2007.

Oil fever and the rapid population shifts that came with it brought the most concentrated construction to the banks of the Middle Allegheny. Oil derricks, multiple rail lines, wharves for loading oil barrels onto steamboats, brick industrial buildings, refineries, churches, stores, commercial businesses and homes went up in the years from Drake's 1859 oil strike up Oil Creek through the turn of the 20th century. Yesteryear's industrial highway has turned into a recreational playground. But watch closely through the trees, and you may spot mansions constructed with oil money, modern pumpjacks quietly nodding or pipe-work connecting formerly active wells with small wooden storage tanks on the hillsides.



Use your smartphone (with a QR code app) and this QR code to access the PFBC Water Trails web page.  
(<http://fishandboat.com/watertrails/trailindex.htm>)

## Angling opportunities

Trout anglers concentrate their attention on the northern tip of this water trail—the tailwaters of Kinzua Dam above Warren. It's here that the water temperatures remain within this cool water species' comfort zone, and the changing volumes of water discharge stir up bait frequently. Trophy brown trout come from this spot with consistency.

Anglers seeking native rainbow trout should go to the President Village area on the Forest/Venango County line. Hemlock Creek, which enters the Allegheny River there, is known for its wild rainbow trout population.

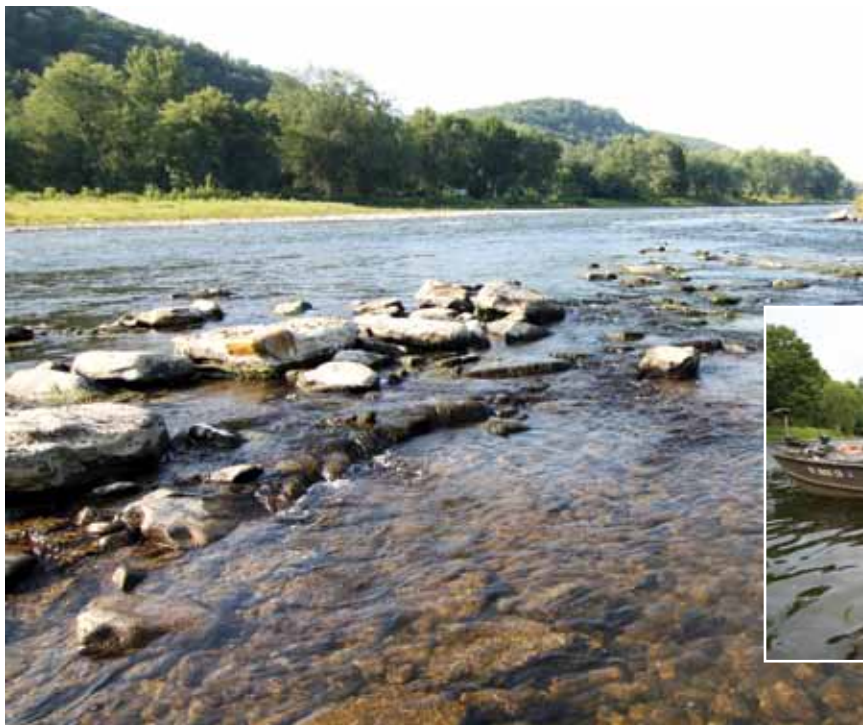
Brook trout move into the river from its tributary streams throughout the Middle Allegheny Water Trail, with locations varying in relation to season and fluctuating water levels.

The gamefish star on the Middle Allegheny is the small-mouth bass. This river section supports a healthy and balanced bronzeback population. An errant largemouth bass—most often an escapee from a farm pond or lake on a tributary creek—turns up occasionally in the river.

River areas with dense underwater vegetation are also home to what seems to be increasing numbers of northern pike. Husky muskellunge are at home in the major pools that have somewhat slower and deeper water. For instance, the Oil City pool and other clusters of threaded islands yield these fish along with occasional walleyes.

Flathead catfish and channel catfish patrol the slower pools and eddies. Serious anglers seeking these whiskered species and the mighty carp tend to fish at night with scent-laden baits and lures.

*Crystal clear water helps river visitors explore the Middle Allegheny's banks and islands.*



*Flathead catfish are caught on the Allegheny River after dark.*



*This modern lighthouse was constructed on a river island at Tionesta in the 21st century.*



## Boating and floating

This lovely section of the mighty Allegheny River contains chutes, riffles and pools. Water depths run from ankle deep to as much as 20 feet in spots which were dredged decades ago. Normal propeller-driven boats are suited only to isolated deep pools, immediately adjacent to launching ramps. Some cottage owners maintain pontoon boats for use in the immediate vicinity of their own docks. However, the optimal watercraft to explore this water trail are kayaks, canoes and jet-drive river boats.

To look up a convenient launch, refer to the Middle Allegheny River Water Trail map and guide. Printed versions of the map and guide are available at [www.oilregion.org](http://www.oilregion.org), or you can download them at [www.fishandboat.com/watertrails](http://www.fishandboat.com/watertrails).

Outfitters in Warren, Tidioute, Tionesta, Franklin and Emlenton offer rental kayaks and canoes. Some outfitters also provide shuttle service. It's best to call ahead to verify equipment availability and operating hours.

## Riverbank lodging

An unusual array of lodging types can be found along the banks of the Middle Allegheny River Trail, with each proprietor welcoming water-soaked or tired paddlers and anglers. Bed and breakfast choices include Kellygreen at Tionesta (Victorian style), Turtle Bay Lodge at President (modern home with its own dock) and The Barnard House in Emlenton (relaxed Victorian). The Emlenton Mill is a full-service hotel, which even has an ice cream stand and weekend musical entertainment. Eagle Rock Motel in Tionesta also books rental watercraft.

Campers will find the Middle Allegheny especially inviting. Major campgrounds are at Buckaloons Recreation Area in Warren County and Kennerdell Scenic Campground in Venango County. Primitive camping is encouraged on the Kennerdell Tract of the State Forest, on the wilderness islands in the northern segment of the water trail and at Fosters Islands below Belmar. If you want to sleep in a teepee, then contact the outfitter at Tionesta. Rentals are available.

Whether you're planning an extended float trip or just a few hours of recreation, you will want to explore the Middle Allegheny Water Trail. I'm still sampling its bounty while savoring the views and new experiences along the way. ☐



photo-Marilyn Black

*Paddlers use widely varied kayaks and canoes on the Middle Allegheny Water Trail.*



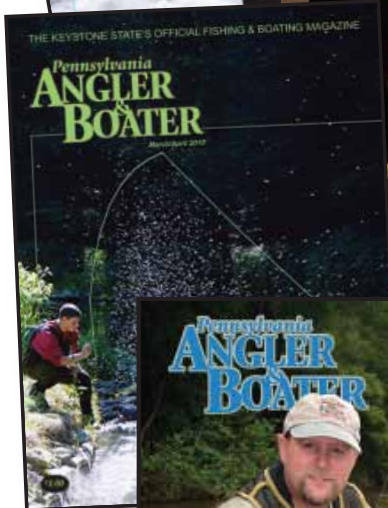
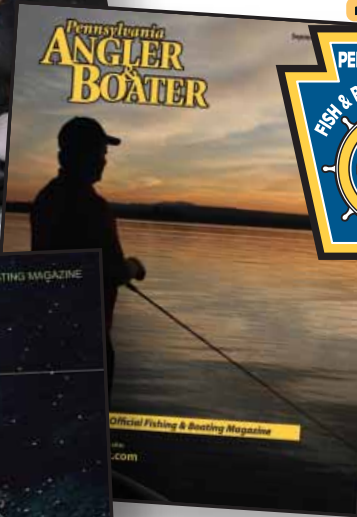
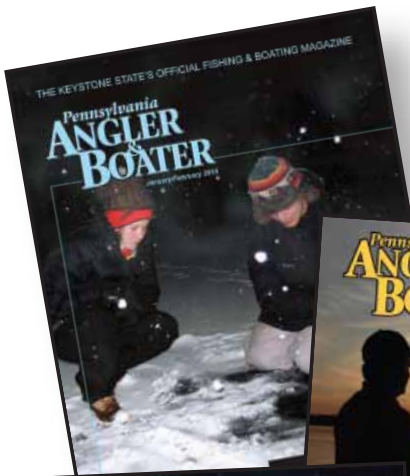
photo-Darl Black

*Three anglers display their Middle Allegheny Water Trail catches.*



photo-Marilyn Black

*Guests can relax on the rocking chairs on the front porch of Turtle Bay Lodge B&B at President Village along the Middle Allegheny Water Trail.*



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