



Kiski - Conemaugh Water Trail

Upper Section
Johnstown-to-Blairsville
River Miles: 40

Water trails are recreational corridors on a lake, river or ocean between specific points, containing access points and day-use and/or camping sites for the boating public. Water trails emphasize low-impact use and promote resources stewardship. The Kiski-Conemaugh is located in southwestern Pennsylvania, and flows along the borders of Somerset, Cambria, Westmoreland, Indiana, and Armstrong Counties into the Allegheny River north of Pittsburgh. This section of a two-map guide focuses on the river from Johnstown to Blairsville.

For your safety and enjoyment:

- Always wear a life jacket.
- Obtain proper instruction in boating skills.
- Know fishing and boating regulations.
- Be prepared for river hazards.
- Carry proper equipment.



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DEPARTMENT OF CONSERVATION
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Pittsburgh-To-Harrisburg Main Line Canal
GREENWAY™

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FLOATING THE CONEMAUGH RIVER

The headwaters of the Conemaugh originate at around 3,000 feet above sea level and the course of the river drops to 957 feet above sea level at the mouth of the Kiskiminetas. Like many rivers, the ability to paddle the Conemaugh varies throughout the year. Peak water flow occurs from February through May. In July and August, the river may be below desired levels and some sections may be quite rocky. Float speed is approximately 2 to 3 miles per hour — but a good rain will affect float speed and the ability to paddle any section.



cr: Watersmith Guild



cr: Watersmith Guild

Stream flow can change rapidly creating potentially unsafe conditions. Check weather, precipitation, and local outfitters to plan accordingly. For current water levels, do a search for “Ferndale USGS Gauge” or “Seward USFS Gauge” on the Internet. The suggested minimum at Ferndale is 300 cfs and at Seward it is 400 cfs.



The Kiski-Conemaugh Rivers are an important part of the Pittsburgh-to-Harrisburg Main Line Canal Greenway™, a 320 mile corridor of heritage sites, hub communities and outdoor recreation opportunities that is “Making New Connections Between Old Neighbors™.” The Greenway follows the route of the historic canal system, and you will find remnants of this little-known transportation corridor during your float.

JOHNSTOWN (RIVER MILES 84-78)

Johnstown’s storied past is informing its promising future. Grass-roots community revitalization and visionary leadership are banking on Johnstown’s resilience to create an exhilarating new reality.

Consider a few details assembled by the Cambria County Regional Chamber of Commerce, and you’ll know what all the fuss is about. Within short driving distance of Johnstown there are 323 miles of biking on 17 rail-trails, 100s of miles of flat water canoeing and kayaking, 15 class 3 waterways for 73 miles of whitewater paddling, 250 miles of hiking on 48 trails, 41 mountain biking trails, 1,800 miles of trout fishing, 4 ski resorts plus 99 miles of Nordic skiing, 14 state parks and 4 National Parks!

Johnstown is emerging as a mecca for outdoor recreation enthusiasts and an affordable place to live with an emerging economy. Most workers have an easy commute, averaging 23 minutes. There is a talented skilled labor pool and more than 45,000 college-educated employees, 11 nearby universities and colleges, close to 5,000 enterprises. Locals and visitors enjoy 21 museums and cultural centers, 67 festivals, 30 craft beer hotspots, and 28 diverse music venues.

Surprised? Johnstown’s rich history makes the city uniquely buoyant. In the 1700s, Johnstown was the junction for moving goods from the Juniata River system to the Ohio River system, and all points west.



Johnstown at night from Inclined Plane, cr: Visit Johnstown

The Conemaugh River was declared a public highway in the 1790s. In the mid-19th century, mills used the river as a slag dump. Streams were dammed to feed steel mills. The width of the river was cut in half, and a natural erosion buffer was lost as trees were shorn from the hillsides. But Johnstown always fights back - coming out of an era of 19th century industrial environmental degradation, surviving 3 devastating floods in 1889, 1936, and 1977, and poised to establish a new, “Mountain Town” identity to follow the steel era.

The stubborn spirit of environmental stewards brought the rivers back to life, and this hardy community with it. Local citizens engaged in this transformation to unite Johnstown’s past and future, driving ideas into action with vision and hard-work to create a new reality.

BLAIRSVILLE (RIVER MILES 50-46)

Founded in 1818 as a stagecoach town, much about Blairsville can be understood through the evolution of transportation systems: stagecoach, river, canal, rail, auto and today, bike and pedestrian travel. Although the railroad industry made the primary mark on the town, the river literally shaped Blairsville.

On May 31, 1889, people in Blairsville didn’t know why the waters were rising until 6:00 p.m. when a telegram was received stating that a mighty torrent of water was carrying hundreds of people away. The raging waters of the Johnstown Flood traveled down the Conemaugh to Blairsville to the Kiski and eventually down the Allegheny to Pittsburgh. That day people with ropes lined the Blairsville (now 217) and Cokeville bridges hoping to rescue any who might pass under, but darkness came on, and the bridges later collapsed.



Blairsville Riverfront Trail



Packsaddle Gap



Knotweed Festival in Blairsville

Devastation caused by repeated flooding led to the flood control area in Blairsville, and construction of the Conemaugh Dam in 1949.

When the dam’s reservoir is full, the entire flood area can be backed up for 21 miles and all elevations up to 975 feet would be under water. The properties near the river, including large areas of Blairsville, and nearly all of the now-ghost communities of Cokeville and Bairdstown, are managed by the Army Corps of Engineers.

Today Blairsville embraces its river heritage with two river access points, its Blairsville Riverfront Trail, and annual river events. The community is a hub between the West Penn and Hoodlebug/Ghost Town Trails.

SUPPORT THE WORK OF ENVIRONMENTAL PARTNERS!

YOU CAN BE PART OF A SUCCESS STORY

As you enjoy the scenic and recreational amenities of the Kiski and Conemaugh Rivers, keep in mind that decades of work by environmental conservationists made that possible. Once among the Commonwealth's most polluted, some paddlers may remember when not that long ago, these rivers literally ran red.

COMMUNITY SHIFT

In 2017, the Conemaugh Valley Conservancy published a State of the Kiski-Conemaugh Watershed Report that summarized exactly how much these rivers have progressed since the 1999 River Conservation Plan. Most aquatic life needs a pH between 5 and 8 to survive. In 1993 the Conemaugh River in Blairsville had a pH of 4.8, which is comparable to beer. In 2017 that site had a pH of 7.8. A 1997 fish survey documented 14 species of fish, mostly pollution-tolerant species. A 2015 survey found 16 species, but the survey was dominated by pollution-sensitive fish like banded darter and logperch! While the basin's streams and rivers have changed from net acidic to net alkaline – fish poor to fish rich – much work remains. Treatment systems built in the 1990s risk failing and must be maintained, erosion and sedimentation is replacing Abandoned Mine Drainage as primary source of pollution, combined sewer overflows dump untreated waste water into the rivers.

Meanwhile watershed associations – true heroes of western PA – struggle to attract volunteers and leaders. Often with 30+ year legacies, these and other conservation groups are STILL doing fantastic work to enhance our quality of life. Find them. Celebrate them. Support them.

To learn more about stewardship organizations and find Community Shift: The State of the Kiski-Conemaugh Watershed Report, visit: conemaughvalleyconservancy.org.

The Stonycreek-Conemaugh River Improvement Project was founded in 1991 to abate abandoned mine drainage (AMD) in the Stonycreek and Little Conemaugh watersheds. SCRIP has coordinated the installation of millions of dollars worth of successful AMD abatement projects, restoring aquatic life and fisheries on many miles of previously AMD impacted waters. To learn more visit: www.scrippa.org.

FLORA AND FAUNA

- Fair numbers of smallmouth and largemouth bass, yellow perch and sunfish can be found, along with local pockets of trout where clean, stocked streams meet the main stem.
- A mosaic of eastern hardwoods – black cherry, oak, maple, hemlock and sycamore as well as mountain laurel and rhododendron are all prevalent.
- Ospreys and bald eagles, black bears, deer, wild turkeys, muskrats, blue herons, grouse, wood ducks, mallards and Canada geese.



Blue heron, cr: Steve Smith



Otter, cr: Thomas Serfass

NATURAL AND HISTORIC FEATURES

- 6 miles of concrete flood control walls.
- Johnstown Inclined Plane, est 1891, world's steepest vehicular incline.
- Conemaugh River Bridge - stone arch bridge blocked debris during 1889 flood, which caught fire and burned for days.
- 1,560 feet deep Conemaugh Gorge – the third deepest river gorge in PA.
- Charles L. Lewis Natural Area, part of Gallitzin State Forest.
- Laurel Ridge State Park abuts State Game Lands 42 and includes the northern terminus of the 70-mile Laurel Highlands Hiking Trail near Seward.
- 1,308 feet deep Packsaddle Gap is formed where the river cuts through Chestnut Ridge and features extraordinary PA Canal remnants – Lock #5 and 2 miles of revetment wall. Much of Packsaddle is in State Game Lands 153.

RECREATION

For more on recreation and heritage in the corridor, see our Kiski-Conemaugh Water Trail Interactive Web Maps at: <http://mainlinecanalgreenway.org/experiencing-the-greenway/traveling-by-boat/>.

For more on the area's regional bike trail system go to: <http://www.transalleghenytrails.com/>.

SAFETY AND STEWARDSHIP

BOATING AND PADDLING SAFETY TIPS

IN CASE OF EMERGENCY: DIAL 911

- Wear your life jacket. Some 80 percent of all recreational boating fatalities happen to people who are not wearing a life jacket.
- Expect to get wet. Even the best paddlers sometimes capsize or swamp their boats. Bring extra clothing in a waterproof bag.
- Be prepared to swim. If the water looks too hazardous to swim in, don't go boating.
- If you capsize, hold on to your boat, unless it presents a life-threatening situation. If floating in current, position yourself on the upstream side of the capsized boat.
- Scout ahead whenever possible. Know the river. Avoid surprises.
- Be prepared for the weather. Get a forecast before you go. Sudden winds and rain can turn a pleasant trip into a risky, unpleasant venture.
- Wear wading shoes or tennis shoes with wool, polypropylene, pile or neoprene socks.
- Never take your boat over a low-head dam.
- Portage (carry) your boat around any waterway section about which you feel uncertain.
- Never boat alone. Boating safety increases with numbers.
- Keep painter lines (ropes tied to the bow) and any other ropes coiled and secure.
- Never tie a rope to yourself or to another boater, especially a child.
- If you collide with an obstruction in a kayak, lean toward it. This will usually prevent capsizing or flooding the boat.
- File a float plan with a reliable person, indicating where you are going and when you will return. Remember to contact the person when you have returned safely.

PRIVATE LAND

Plan and make stops on shorelines open to the public. Respect the privacy and rights of landowners by obtaining permission before entering any privately owned land. Avoid loud behavior and making loud noises. Remember that sound carries across water much more clearly than on land. Share the same courtesy that you would want others to provide. A friendly wave or quiet greeting is always welcome.



Apollo storm drain art, cr: Apollo Ridge Education Foundation

PA BOATING REGULATIONS

- One wearable, Coast Guard-approved life jacket (personal flotation device or PFD) in serviceable condition and of the appropriate size is required for each person in your boat.
- Life jackets must be worn by all children 12 years old and younger on all boats 20 feet or less in length while under way, and on all canoes and kayaks. Others are strongly encouraged to wear a PFD at all times on the water.
- Unpowered boats using Pennsylvania Fish & Boat Commission access areas must either be registered OR display a valid launch permit. Launch permits can be purchased on the web at www.fishandboat.com.
- Operating watercraft, including canoes, kayaks and rafts, under the influence of alcohol or drugs is illegal. The law is strongly enforced for user safety.
- For further information on boating regulations, contact the Pennsylvania Fish & Boat Commission at www.fishandboat.com.

STEWARDSHIP

Care for the resources along the Kiski-Conemaugh Water Trail by respecting wildlife, nature and other people. "Leave No Trace," a national outdoor ethics program, provides guidelines to minimize your impact. Visit www.lnt.org.

Leave no trace for camping and day use:

- Plan and prepare.
- Travel and camp on durable surfaces.
- Dispose of waste properly.
- Leave what you find.
- Minimize campfires.
- Respect wildlife.
- Be considerate of other visitors.

OUTFITTERS, CAMPING AND VISITOR INFORMATION

Coal Tubin'
Johnstown - (814) 254-4393
<https://www.facebook.com/CoalTubin/>

Quemahoning Family Recreation Area
Hollsopple - (814) 233-9512
www.quefamilyrec.com

Cernic's Campground
Johnstown - (814) 242-8187

Visit Johnstown
(814) 536-7993
www.visitjohnstownpa.com

The Alleghenies
(800) 458-3433
www.thealleghenies.com

GO Laurel Highlands
(724) 238-5661
www.golaurelhighlands.com

Indiana County Tourist Bureau
(724) 463-7505
www.visitindianacountypa.org



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FISH & BOAT COMMISSION