



Kiski - Conemaugh Water Trail

Upper Section

Johnstown-to-Blairsville

River Miles: 40

Map & Guide

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. Explore this unique Pennsylvania water trail. 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.



pennsylvania
DEPARTMENT OF CONSERVATION
AND NATURAL RESOURCES



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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.

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 USGS 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 81-78)



Photo: Greater Johnstown and Cambria County Convention and Visitors Bureau

In the mid to late 1700s, Johnstown was the junction for moving goods from the Juniata River system to the Ohio River system, and all points west. Horses hauled heavy loads of iron along the Frankstown Road to Johnstown. The iron was then carried by flatboat down the Conemaugh to the Allegheny River, to industrial users in Pittsburgh and as far away as New Orleans. The volume of commercial traffic was so great that the Conemaugh River was declared a public highway in the 1790s.

When the Main Line Canal came to Johnstown in the 1830s, the city became one of the primary inland ports in Pennsylvania. By the 1850s, the Pennsylvania Railroad replaced the canal system and kept Johnstown in the forefront of the industrial era.

In the mid 19th century, an era of industrial degradation began. 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, dramatically increasing flood risk. Sewage waste ran directly into the river. Johnstown suffered devastating public health consequences – illness and death ran rampant due to pollution and poor water quality.

The catastrophic 1889 flood made Johnstown infamous. When history repeated itself with the May 18, 1936, flood, Johnstown citizenry engaged in political advocacy resulting in a mandate to build a system able to control 1936 level flooding. Accordingly, the concrete channels were completed in 1953.

Time, the decline of the industrial age, and environmental restoration efforts have brought the rivers back to life. The view from the Johnstown Incline reveals work yet to be done where the AMD-polluted Little Conemaugh joins the better-restored Stonycreek River.

Johnstown is emerging as a surprising mecca for outdoor recreation enthusiasts. Featured are the area's only in-river whitewater park, year-round, world-class whitewater adventures on the Stony stimulated by regular releases from the Quemahoning Reservoir, and flat water paddling through the Conemaugh Gap. See www.TheStonycreek.com for water release schedule and updates.



Heedless to environmental and public health threats of unchecked industrial development, a 1917 Johnstown Master Plan included options for beautiful riverfront beaches. Image: Johnstown Area Heritage Association.



Tubers enjoy clean water recreation on the Stony

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.

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 access points, and is a hub between the **West Penn and Hoodlebug/Ghost Town Trails**.



Hidden steps hint at Blairsville's secret past



For regional trail maps, visit www.indianacountyparks.org/

NATURAL, HISTORIC AND CULTURAL FEATURES

NATURAL AND HISTORIC FEATURES

Paddlers will experience 6 miles of concrete flood control walls starting at river mile 82, passing the Johnstown Inclined Plane and the Conemaugh River Bridge along the way. The Inclined Plane, established in 1891, is the world's steepest vehicular incline. During the 1889 Johnstown Flood, the stone arch bridge blocked debris, which then caught fire and burned for days..

For seven miles, the 1560 feet deep Conemaugh Gorge - the third deepest river gorge in PA - cuts through Laurel Ridge. Efforts are underway to extend trails through the Gorge. A scenic overlook on Rt. 56 is a great place to view this marvel, and a 4.9 mile hiking trail in the Charles L. Lewis Natural Area on river right also provides fantastic views. The natural area, part of Gallitzin State Forest, was named for a newspaperman and first president of the Western Pennsylvania Conservancy.

Laurel Ridge State Park abuts State Game Lands 42 and includes the northern terminus of the 70-mile Laurel Highlands Hiking Trail near Seward.

The 1308 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, which makes for a peaceful paddle only occasionally rocked by a passing train.

FLORA AND FAUNA

Although the entire basin is recovering from years of post-industrial pollution, primarily abandoned mine drainage (AMD), fair numbers of smallmouth and largemouth bass, yellow perch and sunfish can be found. Anglers can also find local pockets of trout where clean, stocked streams meet the main stem. Practicing catch and release will help the fishery continue its recovery.

A majority of the river system is forested. Once heavily logged, paddlers will find a mosaic of eastern hardwoods – black cherry, oak, maple, hemlock and sycamore as well as mountain laurel and rhododendron are all prevalent.

Ospreys and even bald eagles, black bears, deer, wild turkeys, muskrats, blue herons, grouse, wood ducks, mallards and Canada geese all make their homes along the way.

CAMPING SITES AND VISITOR INFORMATION

The Kiski-Conemaugh Water Trail offers opportunities for primitive camping. Paddlers can extend a one day trip to a 2-3 day sojourn, while experiencing natural and recreational features as well as the culture of the river towns referenced in this guide.

Quemahoning Family Rec Area Boswell (814) 629-9744
Cernic's Campground Johnstown (814) 242-8187

For additional visitor services information, including bed and breakfasts and other lodging options in the corridor:

Greater Johnstown and Cambria County Convention & Visitors Bureau (814) 536-7993
www.visitjohnstownpa.com

The Alleghenies (800) 453-3433
www.thealleghenies.com

The Laurel Highlands Visitors Bureau (724) 238-5661
www.laurelhighlands.org

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



SUPPORT THE WORK OF ENVIRONMENTAL PARTNERS!

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.

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.

To learn more about watershed associations, conservation districts and other conservation groups, visit www.conemaughvalleyconservancy.org

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.



Photo: Len Lichvar

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. If your boat is 16 feet or longer, one throwable device (seat cushion or ring buoy) is required. Canoes and kayaks, regardless of length, are not required to carry a throwable device.
- 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.
- All boats must display an anchor light (a white light visible for 360°) when at anchor between sunset and sunrise. Boats can use a lantern or clip-on battery-powered unit to meet this requirement.
- All powered boats must show running lights between sunset and sunrise. Between sunset and sunrise, unpowered boats must carry a white light (visible for 360°), installed or portable, ready to be displayed in time to avoid a collision.
- All motorboats are required to carry a sound-producing mechanical device audible for a half-mile. Athletic whistles meet this requirement.
- All motorboats must be registered, regardless of where they launch.
- 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. Click on "Permits & Forms" and then "Boat Registration."
- 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

Help care for the land, water and cultural resources along the Kiski-Conemaugh Water Trail by respecting wildlife, nature and other people. "Leave No Trace," a national outdoor ethics program, provides some guidelines to minimize your impact. For more information about "Leave No Trace" outdoor ethics, visit www.lnt.org.

Leave no trace for camping and day use:

1. Plan and prepare.
2. Travel and camp on durable surfaces.
3. Dispose of waste properly.
4. Leave what you find.
5. Minimize campfires.
6. Respect wildlife.
7. Be considerate of other visitors.

