

# Schuylkill River *Water Trail*

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*Boaters on the Schuylkill River can combine paddling with pedaling at Upper Schuylkill Valley Park, which has a natural-surface trail. There's also a wildlife center, fishing, picnicking and a variety of family-friendly wildlife and nature programs.*

**by Bob Frye**

Whoever first described rivers as arteries came up with an accurate comparison.

They—like the blood vessels that carry oxygen-rich blood through our bodies, keeping them humming—carry water, sediments and nutrients across the planet, from headwaters to oceans. In doing so, they sustain a rich and diverse web of life. Likewise, especially in the days before planes, trains and automobiles, rivers moved raw materials and finished goods upstream and down, supporting people and economies.

But, as any cardiologist knows, arteries neglected and abused can clog, with dangerous consequences. That, too, is true of rivers. And, there's perhaps no better—or maybe worse—example than the Schuylkill River.

Stretching about 135 miles from Schuylkill County to Philadelphia, the river's doom was seemingly set with the discovery of anthracite coal in 1790. It helped spawn the Industrial Revolution but at a tremendous environmental cost. In the coming decades, mines, iron works, mills, blast furnaces, railroads, oil refineries, company towns and cities sprung up along the Schuylkill River's banks. All used it as a dumping ground.

According to "The Encyclopedia of Greater Philadelphia," as early as 1866, the city's Bureau of Engineers said the river had a "dark, dirty, milky appearance" and was so filthy it was perhaps already unfit as a drinking water source. Sixty years later, the United States Army Corps of Engineers estimated the river was polluted with 38 million tons of coal waste.

Not surprisingly, long stretches of the Schuylkill River were dead, unable to support aquatic life.

That shaped how people viewed the river.

Noah Phillips is the Executive Director of Take It Outdoors Adventures. This non-profit paddling and river advocacy group is a sister agency to Schuylkill River Greenways, which manages the Schuylkill River Water Trail. Together, the organizations work "on connecting people to the Schuylkill River." That often starts with getting them to forget what they think they know.

"The Schuylkill River has had a bad reputation, because it used to be disgustingly polluted," said Phillips. "For a long time, people jokingly said the water was too thick to drown but not thin enough to drink."

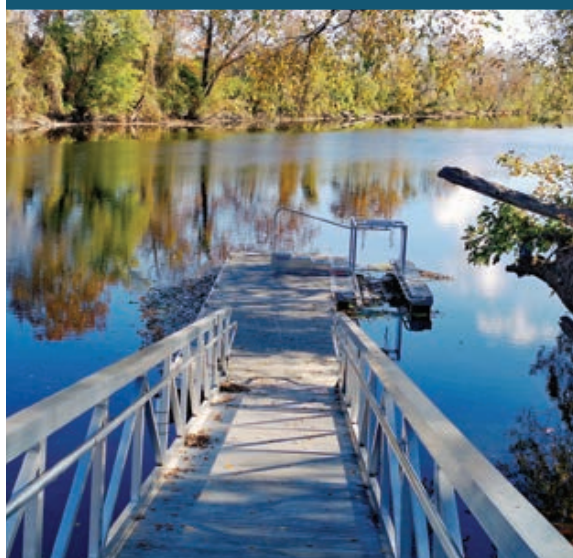
Cooperative state and federal cleanup efforts—some among the first and largest of their kind—started to change that in the 1940s. They were successful enough that Pennsylvania designated the Schuylkill River its first Scenic River in 1978.

Today, more than any time in the last 250 years, the river is worthy of that title.

"The Schuylkill River is now really beautiful for paddling, fishing and enjoying nature," said Rosemary

photo-Bob Frye





photos: Bob Frye

*The Hanover Street Access on the Schuylkill River has a handicapped-accessible boat launch for paddlers. The adaptive launch sits at the end of a metal ramp.*

Keane, Communications Director for Schuylkill River Greenways. “We’re so happy and excited to see people talking about it. It really is a great vehicle for exploring the outdoors and some of our local history.”

Phillips, whose organization works to “get butts in boats and out on the Schuylkill River,” said about half of the growing number of paddlers using the river are locals. The rest come from elsewhere including New York City. Three years ago, his organization was guiding about 3,000 people a year. Two years ago, that was 3,500. Last year, it was 4,000. Many more paddle on their own.

Some paddle for an afternoon. Others do a multi-day trip including all or part of the Schuylkill River Sojourn, an annual week-long paddle in June, covering 112 river miles from Schuylkill Haven to Philadelphia ([schuylkillriver.org/programs-projects/schuylkill-river-sojourn](http://schuylkillriver.org/programs-projects/schuylkill-river-sojourn)).

Whatever paddlers plan, the Schuylkill River Greenways has an interactive online map ([schuylkillriver.org/trailpress/schuylkill-river](http://schuylkillriver.org/trailpress/schuylkill-river)) to make things easy. It shows the location of “landings”—boat access points—and amenities, from parking and gas stations to restaurants and lodging. The Schuylkill River Greenways also has a printed river guide, updated in 2022, available for purchase to carry on the water.

“Just about anyone can handle the Schuylkill River, as it’s very beginner friendly,” said Phillips.

“It’s kind of a unique river,” said Phillips. “With all the remnants of the canal systems and dams, moving water features are few and far between. You might have a class 1 feature, but then you have 10 miles of perfectly flat water,” said Phillips.

A few old dams remain and must be portaged around, according to the map. Others have been partially or even completely washed away, though, and are runnable in a kayak or canoe outlined on the map.

What paddlers expect to see on the Schuylkill River depends on which sections they hit. Its upper reaches,

north of Pottstown—roughly the mid-point of the water trail—are more remote.

“Up near Auburn or Hamburg, you might not see a house for 10 miles. You don’t see a bridge for a long time. You feel like you’re out there,” said Phillips. “Then, as you come down, it just gradually gets a little more developed.”

The trade-off, if there’s one, is that the upper section has fewer launch points. It’s also smaller and shallower. The part from about 20 miles north of Pottstown upstream is best paddled before July. The river downstream of Pottstown can be a reliable run all year.

There’s history to see, too. One particularly special place to paddle is the Lock 60 Loop ([schuylkillriver.org/trailpress\\_itin/lock-60-loop-2](http://schuylkillriver.org/trailpress_itin/lock-60-loop-2) or [schuylkillcanal.org/page-326460](http://schuylkillcanal.org/page-326460)). Located in Schuylkill Canal Park, Montgomery County, it’s a restored, fully functional 1820s-era canal originally built as part of the Schuylkill Navigation System. Paddlers can float 2.5 miles downstream on the river, then turn around and paddle the flat water in the canal back to their starting point.

“That is the busiest section of the Schuylkill River, because it’s such a unique feature,” said Phillips.

There and elsewhere, proof of the river’s ongoing return to health is also found in the quality of the fishing.

“It’s true that acid mine drainage continues to impact some sections of the river, mainly through its tributary streams,” said Mike Porta, the Pennsylvania Fish and Boat

## Schuylkill River Greenways:

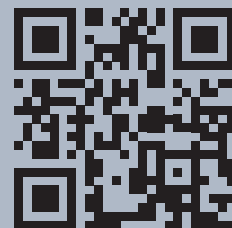




photo-Bob Frye

*A young angler fishes from the boat launch along the Schuylkill River at Upper Schuylkill Valley Park, Montgomery County.*

Commission's (PFBC's) Area Fisheries Manager with responsibility for the Schuylkill River. But, the once-dead river again holds fish.

Smallmouth Bass are the most common, with the "typical" Schuylkill Smallmouth Bass averaging 9- to 12-inches. But, PFBC biologists have seen them in the 15- to 17-inch range, and there are likely larger fish in the population in deeper pools and more complex habitats.

One stretch of river particularly worth fishing is from Hamburg downstream to near Lower Felix Dam Park in Reading, Berks County.

"This section supports good habitat consisting of island complexes, riffles, bridge pilings and tributary mouths," said Porta. "These habitats create areas with deep water that hold larger fish."

The river also holds Channel Catfish and Flathead Catfish, especially in the middle and lower reaches. Walleyes congregate below some of the river's remaining dams in spring, while Muskellunge draw anglers to the river between Reading to Norristown.

All that would have been unthinkable once. The Schuylkill River, witness to all sorts of American history—George Washington and his army camped along it at Valley Forge—was ravaged and foul. That's true no more.

"Once people went out of their way to avoid anything to do with the Schuylkill River, but more and more people today see it as a resource—a recreational asset. That's a great turnaround," said Phillips. ☐



photo-courtesy of Schuylkill River Greenways Association (Kara Foran)

*Kayakers during the annual Schuylkill River Sojourn.*

photo-courtesy of Schuylkill River Greenways Association (Kara Foran)



*The annual Schuylkill River Sojourn offers beautiful views of the Schuylkill River.*

## Discover More

Want to make your Schuylkill River trip into a pedal-and-paddle experience? Look to the Schuylkill River Trail.

It's not finished yet. Another project of Schuylkill River Greenways, it will eventually stretch 120 miles from Frackville, Schuylkill County, to Philadelphia, Philadelphia County. But, 75 miles are ready to ride, mostly on abandoned railroad lines.

Click the "Schuylkill River Trail" tab at [schuylkillriver.org](http://schuylkillriver.org) to view an interactive map and get additional information. The Schuylkill River Greenways also offers guided pedal-and-paddle trips. Find these trails on the website, too.

Meanwhile, if you fish the Schuylkill River, watch for Freshwater Drum and Blue Catfish. Neither are native to the Delaware River Basin, so PFBC biologists are asking for the public's help in monitoring their presence. Anglers who see or catch either species are asked to photograph them and report it to [pa.gov/en/services/fishandboat/report-ais.html](http://pa.gov/en/services/fishandboat/report-ais.html).