

Lehigh River *Water Trail*

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The southern section of the Lehigh River Water Trail offers calm, Class I paddling and plenty of nature.

by Bob Frye photos by the author

The more dire the suffering, the deeper the well of despair, the harsher the circumstances, the more epic the salvation—if it comes to pass.

There are no guarantees. Sometimes, ashes are just that—the sooty embers of what once was rather than the seeds of a phoenix.

Fortunately, for anglers and boaters, the Lehigh River in eastern Pennsylvania has risen.

It was, until 1967, the nation's only privately-owned river. Pennsylvania's legislature gave it to the Lehigh Coal and Navigation Company to build a series of locks and dams between Easton and Jim Thorpe and later White Haven in the 1820s. The idea was to provide a way for moving anthracite coal from northeast Pennsylvania to Philadelphia, New York City and elsewhere.

“It was characterized at one point in history as black flowing lava from all the coal silt that was coming down,” said Chris Kocher, Wildlands Conservancy President.

Then, things got worse.

The wastewater from developing communities and other industries along the river—most famously steel—together with acid mine drainage further fouled it. By the time the state took ownership of the river back, it was pretty much devoid of life.

Redemption, though, has followed transgression.

Cleanup work remains to be done, but it's cleaner today than at any point in the last 150 years. It's now viewed as a community resource rather than something to be avoided. The popularity of the 72-mile Lehigh River Water Trail speaks to that achievement. Stretching from White Haven to Easton, it draws paddlers and anglers in numbers once unimaginable.

What those visitors can expect depends on where they go. The Lehigh River is, in many ways, two rivers in one.

The Lehigh River Water Trail's 41 northernmost miles—28 of them part of Pennsylvania's Scenic River System—are wild, rugged, rough and tumble. Starting at White Haven, almost immediately entering Lehigh Gorge State Park, and running to Lehigh Gap, the river moves fast, racing between steep-sided, forested, canyon-like



One highlight of paddling the lower Lehigh River Water Trail is passing what remains of the stacks from the Bethlehem Steel plant. The plant was once the second largest steel maker in America.

walls. There are regularly scheduled whitewater and “fishing enhancement” releases from the United States Army Corps of Engineers-owned Frances E. Walter Dam, Luzerne County.

The 31-mile southern section of the water trail is calmer, beginner-friendly Class I water. It flows through the “metro wilderness” of Allentown, Bethlehem—with the remnants of its hulking steel mill on river right—and Easton.

“The differences in the two sections allow boaters of all skills to experience the river,” said Kocher.

They also let anglers target their fishing.

The Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission (PFBC) annually stocks the northernmost section of the river with adult trout at several points and has even put fingerlings in on occasion. Other groups, notably the Lehigh River Stocking Association, add more.

“There are so many stocked trout in that river,” said Cooper Barshinger, PFBC Fisheries Biologist. “But, as you move up, you get into some better quality habitat and colder water, where trout are going to be holding.”

It’s not necessarily easy fishing; even wading the river can be tricky. And, warm water often cools the fishing by early June.

But, it’s good enough for long enough to support multiple outfitters offering guided trips.

Interestingly, the northern section is not the only place on the Lehigh River to find trout.

Some of the larger Class A wild trout streams in this part of the state—Saucon Creek, Lehigh and Northampton counties, Monocacy Creek, Northampton County, and

Little Lehigh Creek, Lehigh County—empty into the river. Their fish, mostly Brown Trout, show up in places you wouldn’t normally expect from winter through spring. The stretch of river from Allentown to Easton is one example.

“They’re not there in large numbers. As water temperatures start to rise, they go back to the creeks,” said Barshinger. “But, some of these fish stick around in the larger river system for a while. They’re another option for anglers.”

The wild trout can get big, too. It’s not uncommon to find some 20-inches long or longer.

“They’re not the biggest fish to be had, though. The PFBC stocks muskies in the Lehigh River and follow-up surveys have revealed fish 40-inches long and longer from Northampton downriver,” said Barshinger.

“So, that’s another interesting aspect to the Lehigh River we see,” said Barshinger.

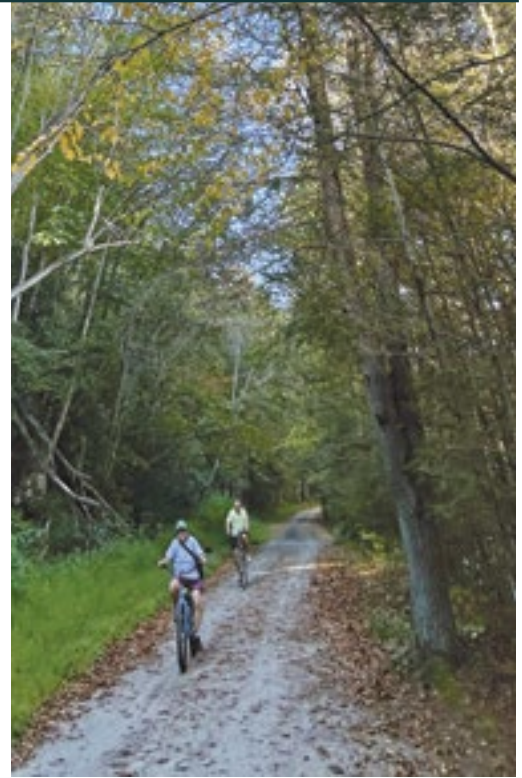
Meanwhile, the Lehigh River’s Smallmouth Bass—the most abundant gamefish in the river and the most widespread—offer what some call “sneaky-good” fishing. They’re more numerous than big, with 12-inch bass typical. But, some larger ones are caught.

“You can catch Smallmouth Bass throughout the Lehigh River, pretty much all the way up to the headwaters of the river,” said Barshinger.

Anglers and boaters can get on the river and see what’s available, north or south, in lots of places. The Lehigh River Water Trail supports 22 accesses. Some have been specifically improved with anglers in mind. Others are located near sections of the old Lehigh Canal that still hold



Paddlers launch on the Lehigh River Water Trail and head downstream from the Sand Island access in Bethlehem, Northampton County.



Bikers on the D&L Trail near Rockport Access on the Lehigh River, Carbon County.

water. It's possible for paddlers to park in one spot and paddle the canal upriver and float the river back down or vice versa. Still, other accesses are located along the Delaware River Water Trail and Lehigh River Water Trail, meaning people—on their own or using a local outfitter—can go up or down the river on the water and return by walking or biking the trail.

“That all gives folks a lot of options and opportunities to get out on the water and experience nature firsthand in the Lehigh Valley,” said Kocher.

That any nature still exists, ironically, is attributable to that which almost eliminated it.

“Lehigh Coal and Navigation Company’s ownership of the river protected much of the land around it,” said Kocher. It was bordered by a railroad on one side and by the canal on the other side.

Land that may have otherwise been developed now supports wildlife such as eagles, ospreys, deer and ducks, all common sights along the river corridor.

“You can be on pretty much any section of the Lehigh River and kind of lose yourself a little bit,” said Kocher. “Even between Allentown and Easton, in the heart of the Lehigh Valley, you can float and see a lot of nature, catch a lot of fish and not even realize you’re in the city limits.”

“And, we wouldn’t have this natural, wonderful corridor had it not been for the Lehigh Coal and Navigation Company owning the power of the water for so many years. It’s one of the best comeback stories as far as water resources, clearly in Pennsylvania if not in the country.” ☐

More Information:

- For information on the Wildlands Conservancy and the Lehigh River Water Trail, visit wildlandspa.org.
- For the United States Army Corps of Engineers 2026 schedule of Lehigh River water releases, go to nap.usace.army.mil/Missions/Civil-Works/Francis-E-Walter-Dam/Flow-Management-Plan-Schedule/.
- For Lehigh Gorge State Park, explore pa.gov/agencies/dcnr/recreation/where-to-go/state-parks/find-a-park/lehigh-gorge-state-park.
- For the Lehigh River Stocking Association, see lrsoa.org.
- For information on the D&L Trail, check out delawareandlehigh.org.



The Lehigh River flows through Lehigh Gorge State Park, Luzerne and Carbon counties.