

Juniata River *Water Trail*

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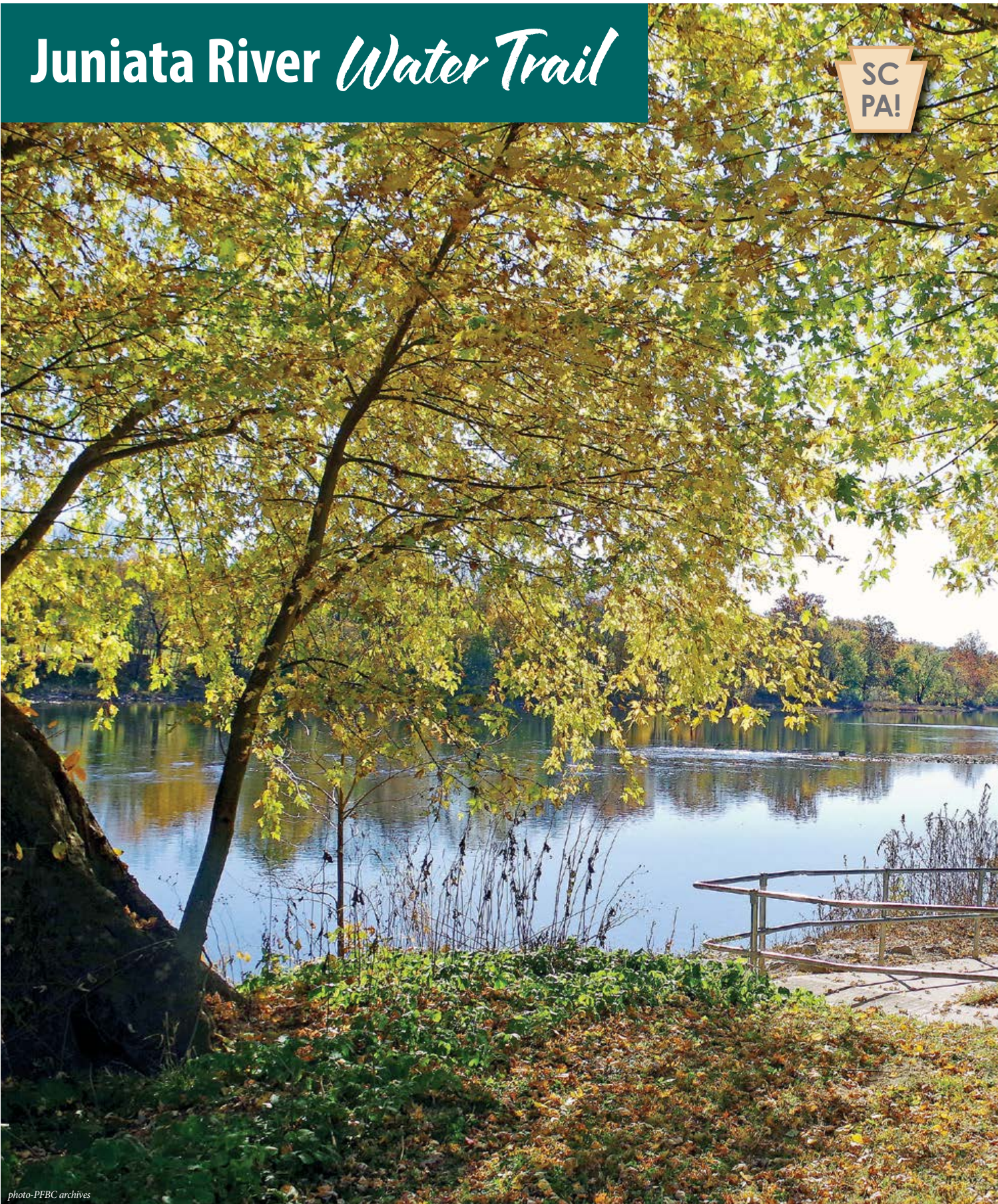


photo-PFBC archives



Howe Township Access, Perry County, features an Americans with Disabilities Act accessible boat launch on the Juniata River. A concrete walkway with a railing leads to the water.

by Bob Frye

If you've ever looked at a photograph in a magazine or on a website and thought, yeah, that's somewhere I want to explore, you know what Jane Sheffield's thinking.

She's the Executive Director of Allegheny Ridge Corporation, the Altoona-based nonprofit organization charged with restoring and developing the "historic, cultural and natural resources of the Allegheny Ridge Heritage Area" in central and western Pennsylvania, which includes Main Line Canal Greenway. The group also oversees the Juniata River Water Trail and Raystown Branch Juniata River Water Trail.

Maps of the upper, lower and Raystown Branch highlight points of interest for paddlers including publicly-owned islands where paddlers can camp.

The Juniata River Water Trail Lower Section map includes a photo of a tent on one island, the misty river flowing silently by and the far bank shrouded in fog if not also mystery. It's captivating.

"When I see that, I want to be there," said Sheffield. "I want to be in that tent. These camping islands are great, and they're very photogenic."

Each branch passes through or along state forests, state parks and state game lands, by little towns big on character and around wildlife.

The paddling is relatively easy, too. Both branches are Class I waters, meaning their riffles and rapids are suitable for beginners under normal conditions. There are always potential hazards on any river. The maps point out known ones, but paddlers need to pay attention to water levels. The Raystown Branch Juniata River Water Trail as well as the Frankstown Branch and the Little Juniata River, outlined on the upper section map, get shallow in the summer. Even on the mainstem Juniata River, there are places where the water gets low. Check the maps for recommended water levels, measured in feet, then compare that to real-time conditions on the United States Geological Survey website at waterdata.usgs.gov/pa/nwis/rt.

"The Juniata River is not the Susquehanna. It's not the Allegheny," said Sheffield. "It is a smaller river."

Don't read that to mean tame or boring, though. Some of the paddling feels wilder than you think. The 3-plus miles of the Juniata River between Mapleton and Mount Union, Huntingdon County, for example, pass through Jacks Narrows, the state's deepest gorge.

According to the Raystown Lake Region tourism bureau, the peaks of Jacks Mountain on the south side of the gorge are just over 2,120 feet in elevation, and 2.9 miles away, on the north side of the gorge, they are just over 2,320 feet.

"The river surface of the Juniata River drops from 566 feet above sea level at Mapleton to 545 feet above sea level 3.3 miles downstream at Mount Union. That makes the gorge nearly 1/3 of a mile deep," said Sheffield.



photo-Bob Frye

Many anglers target Smallmouth Bass on the Juniata River. But, it also holds good populations of Channel Catfish, Flathead Catfish, Muskellunge and Rock Bass. Those fishing at night may even catch American Eels, given their successful reintroduction.

These branches sometimes fish like bigger water, too.

According to Bryan Chikotas, the Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission's (PFBC's) Southcentral Region Fisheries Manager, PFBC biologists annually survey the river to monitor Smallmouth Bass, the most abundant gamefish available in this waterway. Surveys show a healthy population of sometimes big fish. The 2024 survey, for example, found lots of Smallmouth Bass, 25 percent of them longer than 12 inches and 10 percent longer than 15 inches.

"The lower section primarily has a greater abundance of fish over 15 inches, and among those over 15 inches, quite a few are over 18 inches. You don't really see too many over 20 inches, but they're there in pretty good numbers," said Chikotas.

By the lower section, he means the stretch from Newport to the mouth. "It's good because of habitat, deep pools mixed with shallow riffles and runs with an influx of clean water from limestone tributary streams and an abundance of rusty crayfish for forage," said Chikotas.

The area between Mapleton, Huntingdon County, and Newton Hamilton, Mifflin County, is full of rubble and cobble. It can also produce some nice quality fish.

Two other species providing good fishing on the Juniata River are Rock Bass and Muskellunge. The former are almost always found in greatest abundance where there's eelgrass, a flat-bladed plant, or water willow, otherwise known as lizard's tail, alongside rocky habitat. In those places, anglers get into fish up to 9 inches.

As for Muskellunge, PFBC stocks them at numerous sites as 12-inch fingerlings in odd-numbered years. Anglers should look for them

first and foremost "wherever there's a colder-water tributary coming in," said Chikotas.

"If we get down to where a small trout stream comes in, like Cocolamus Creek or Delaware Creek, certain times of year Muskellunge really like to inhabit those cooler areas, where that colder little tributary pushes out into the river. They'll be in that cold-water plume," said Chikotas.

The upper section, from where the Little Juniata River meets the Frankstown Branch to form the mainstem, down to Huntingdon, seasonally holds Brown Trout.

The Raystown Branch, meanwhile, is smaller and holds less fish but has Smallmouth Bass and a few trout that move in and out of its tributary streams.

In the mid-19th century, to move goods east and west, engineers built Pennsylvania's Main Line Canal. It was a series of locks that took materials up the Juniata River by boat across the Allegheny Mountains by way of the Allegheny Portage Railroad and back down the other side along the Kiski-Conemaugh rivers. Remnants of that canal remain visible in numerous places. Near the Lewistown, Mifflin County, boat launch is a trail that leads to a restored 1.5-mile-section of the canal with a towpath. The site's listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

The river trail maps list other historic sites. Kiosks at every launch site along the river highlight some of what you may see in that area as well.

Main Line Canal Greenway:



photos-Bob Frye



Some parts of the Juniata River attract motorboat anglers looking to catch Smallmouth Bass and other fish species.



The Lewistown Narrows Boat Access on the Juniata River offers a concrete ramp and lots of parking.



Kiosks, like this one at the Mifflintown Access, provide information about their respective stretches of water.

Whatever gets you on the water, the history, the fishing or the island camping, visit some of the towns along the way. They offer paddlers places to stay, places to eat and places to explore. Plans are in the works to make more of that information available to paddlers for each community.

“I think the beauty of these rivers is that they’re former transportation corridors and were for a long time, so you’re going through communities with a lot of character,” said Sheffield. Visiting these communities enhances the experience of the user by providing a better understanding of the area. ☐

More Information

Free, downloadable maps of the Juniata River Waters Trails are available at mainlinecanalgreenway.org. Every effort is made to keep these maps up to date, but things change. If you have any questions, call Allegheny Ridge Corporation at 814-940-1922.

To combine hiking with paddling, consider the Thousand Steps near Jacks Narrows, Huntingdon County. Part of the 85-mile Standing Steps Trail is a climb of about 850 feet in a little under a mile, up rock steps built by quarry workers. There are great views from the top. Visit standingstonetrail.org.

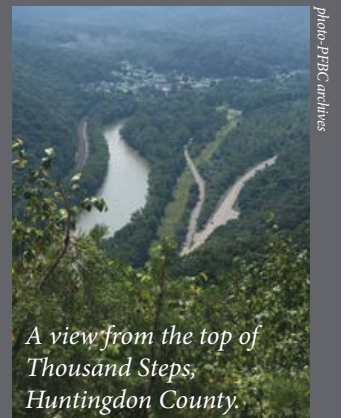


photo-PRC archives

A view from the top of Thousand Steps, Huntingdon County.