



Clarion River Water Trail Upper Section

Headwaters to Irwin Run

Map & Guide

Water trails are recreational waterways 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 stewardship of the resources. Explore this unique Pennsylvania water trail.



For your safety and enjoyment:

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



THE CLARION RIVER

The Clarion River meanders through more than 115 miles of narrow serpentine valleys and hardwood forests. Located in northwestern Pennsylvania, its headwaters break the surface in McKean County and join with the Allegheny River in Clarion County. The Clarion River's Water Trail Guides are divided into three sections: the Upper (Headwaters to Irwin Run), the Middle (Irwin Run to Mill Creek), and the Lower (Mill Creek to the Allegheny River). This guide covers the Upper Section, from the headwaters of the East and West Branches to River Mile 76.

Over the last two hundred years of European settlement, the history of the Clarion River has been a compelling story of resource exploitation, degradation, resilience, and recovery. The lumber industry was the focal point on the Clarion River during the latter part of the 19th century and into the 20th century. Timber cut along the Clarion River was floated down the river to Pittsburgh and sometimes as far as New Orleans. At the same time, industries such as coal mining, leather tanning and wood chemical manufacturing were also present along the Clarion River.

Today, the Clarion River is a popular paddling and fishing destination. Wildlife, intermittent riffles and rock outcrops provide a picturesque backdrop for outdoor recreation. Outstanding features include a nationally recognized old growth white pine and hemlock forest, and a federally designated 51.7-mile stretch of Wild & Scenic River. Adjacent public lands provide abundant opportunities for camping, hunting, hiking, bicycling, wildlife watching, picnicking or just enjoying the scenery.

The Clarion River is now recognized as a true natural treasure with a rich industrial history and a bright future, boasting some of the finest outdoor recreation opportunities in Pennsylvania. Once declared the most polluted river in the state, the river's water quality has experienced a tremendous recovery, thanks to the work of devoted citizens from local industry, government and non-profit organizations.

FLOATING THE RIVER

The Clarion River is considered a Class I river, making it a desirable river for paddlers of all abilities. On a scale of I-VI, Class I denotes fast-moving water with riffles and small waves; few or no obstructions, all obvious and easily missed with little training; risk to swimmer is slight; and self-rescue is normally easy. Keep in mind that these classifications may change with high water levels.

The best time to float the Clarion River is in the spring and early summer. Upstream of Ridgway, several challenges exist including limited public access and several potential hazards. Below Ridgway, the normal summer flow accommodates small, shallow-draft watercraft such as canoes and kayaks. In late summer, the river becomes shallow at times and boat bottoms can drag on the streambed. Plan accordingly. Your float time will vary according to the season and weather. Generally, assume four to five miles-per-hour during spring run-off, and two to three miles-per-hour at low water levels.



RECOMMENDED RIVER LEVELS

Stream flow can change rapidly creating potential unsafe conditions. Check available resources such as weather, precipitation, USGS gauges, and local outfitters to plan accordingly. Do a search for 'Ridgway USGS Gauge' on the internet. The lower limit upstream of Ridgway is 2 feet with optimal paddling being in the 3.5 feet range. The lower limit downstream of Ridgway is 2.5 feet with optimal paddling being in the 4-5 feet range. Liveries will not rent canoes at levels above 6 feet.

NATIONAL WILD & SCENIC RIVER

In 1996, 51.7 miles of the Clarion River were designated a component of the Federal Wild and Scenic Rivers System by Congress. This designation recognizes outstanding examples of the nation's free-flowing rivers in the hope of raising public awareness of the importance of America's river resources. Rivers are further classified as wild, scenic or recreational based on the number of impoundments, accessibility and development along its shoreline. The sections from Portland Mills to Irwin Run, and from Cooksburg to the Piney Dam backwaters, carry a "scenic" designation (sections of rivers that are free of impoundments with shorelines or watersheds still largely primitive and shorelines largely undeveloped, but accessible in places by roads). The remaining 34.7 miles are designated as "recreational" (sections of rivers that are readily accessible by road or railroad that may have some development along their shorelines).



PENNSYLVANIA BOATING REGULATIONS

- One wearable, Coast Guard-approved personal flotation device (PFD or life jacket) 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 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 life jacket at all times on the water.
- All boats must display an anchor light (a white light visible 360 degrees) 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 360 degrees), 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 (canoes, kayaks, rowboats, rafts) 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.fish.state.pa.us.
- 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.fish.state.pa.us.



PADDLING SAFETY TIPS

- 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 paddling.
- 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 are common and can turn a pleasant trip into a risky, unpleasant venture.
- Wear wading shoes or tennis shoes with wool, polypropylene, pile, or neoprene socks. Avoid cotton fabrics.
- Never take your boat over a low-head dam.
- Portage (carry) your boat around any section of water 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 secured.
- Never tie a rope to yourself or to another paddler, especially a child.
- Kneel in a canoe to increase your stability before entering rougher water, like a rapid.
- If you collide with an obstruction, lean toward it. This will usually prevent your 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.



ALONG THE WAY

River miles are used to identify the locations of various sites along the river. River Mile 0 is at the confluence of the Clarion River and the Allegheny River (Clarion River Mouth).

The river miles for the East and West Branches continue the mileage from the main stem with "E" added for the East Branch and "W" added for the West Branch.

River Left (RL) and River Right (RR) are used to indicate which side of the river a site is on. Orient yourself looking downstream to determine left and right.

EAST BRANCH CLARION RIVER

Mile 116E to 111E Elk State Park: Surrounding East Branch Lake, this park offers boating, fishing, hunting and picnicking. For more information, call (814) 965-2646, or visit www.dcnr.state.pa.us/stateparks

Mile 116E to 110.7E East Branch Lake: The dam on the East Branch Clarion River was built in 1952 to control flooding thus creating East Branch Lake, a popular destination for boaters and anglers. The Army Corps of Engineers operates a developed campground, picnic area and motorboat launch from the recreation area near the dam. For more information, call (814) 965-2065, or visit www.lrp.usace.army.mil/rec/lakes/eastbran.htm

Mile 111.9E to 106E State Game Lands 25: This game lands borders the East Branch Lake and East Branch Clarion River. For more information, call (570) 398-4744, or visit www.pgc.state.pa.us

Mile 110.6E to 109.4E Special Regulation Fishing Waters: Delayed harvest artificial lures only.

Mile 108E Glen Hazel: Visit the Dam Inn Bar & Restaurant featuring a wood deck with a gorgeous view of the river. A fish structure in this area could be hazardous to float over at low levels.

Mile 108E to 106.3E (RL) Bendigo State Park: This scenic park in the East Branch Clarion River valley offers picnicking, pavilions, and a swimming pool. For more information, call (814) 965-2646, or visit www.dcnr.state.pa.us/stateparks

Mile 107E Dam at Bendigo State Park: Do not attempt to float over this stream wide dam. This low-head dam was built to provide a swimming area for visitors. It now serves as a popular fishing site since the park added a swimming pool. There is an easy portage on the river left bank in the state park.

Mile 103E Domtar Mill at Johnsonburg: **WARNING!** Public use is not permitted where the East Branch flows through the mill. There is a low-head dam in this section that presents a serious safety hazard to paddlers. Fishing is prohibited by the PA Fish and Boat Commission since it is designated as trout nursery waters. Paddlers are advised to take-out at Bendigo State Park because there is no public access to the East Branch in Johnsonburg.

WEST BRANCH CLARION RIVER

Mile 109W Wilcox boasts the Winery at Wilcox and is close to the Twin Lakes Recreation Area, Bendigo and Elk State Parks.

Mile 107W to 106.4W Special Regulation Fishing Waters: Catch and release fly-fishing only.

Mile 103 W to 102 Johnsonburg: Where the East and West Branches of the Clarion River meet. This town is dominated by a large paper mill located adjacent to the river. The mill once had a negative impact on the river's water quality until Willamette Industries made extensive renovations during the mill's modernization. A Cooperative Fish Nursery at the mill raises 12,000 brook and rainbow trout that are stocked in area streams and rivers annually.

CLARION RIVER MAIN STEM

Mile 102.6 to 94 Special Regulation Fishing Waters: Catch and release all tackle.



Mile 95 to 93 Ridgway: Built in the late 1800s, buildings and homes in Ridgway display the grandeur of the Victorian Era. Throughout the years, this little town of about 5,000 people has maintained its friendly small-town atmosphere. The area is graced with unique specialty shops, quaint restaurants, and charming bed and breakfast inns.

Mile 94 (RL) Elk County Historical Society Center House and Robinson Museum: The Elk County Historical Society is housed in an 1882 Victorian home at 109 Center Street, Ridgway. For more information, call (814) 776-1032, or visit: www.elkcountyhistoricalsociety.org

Mile 92.5 to 63 (RR) Allegheny National Forest: The only National Forest in Pennsylvania is open to hiking, camping, fishing, hunting, paddling and other outdoor recreation activities. For more information, call (814) 723-5150, or visit: www.fs.fed.us/r9/forests/allegheny



Mile 92.5 to 71.4 (RL) State Game Lands 44: This game lands borders the Clarion River downstream of Ridgway. For more information, call (570) 398-4744, or visit www.pgc.state.pa.us

Mile 91 (RL) Island Run Trout Nursery: This cooperative trout nursery is located off PA 949 south of Ridgway and is a partnership of the Island Run Sportsmen and the PA Fish & Boat Commission.

Mile 84 (RL) Portland Mills: Five sawmills were located in Portland Mills between 1856 and 1907. The rocky islands in the river here are the remnants of man-made cribs that anchored log booms used to corral logs into the mill. A leather tannery was in operation from 1891 to 1923, until the supply of local hemlock bark was exhausted. See historic picture on reverse side.

Mile 80 (RR) Beech Bottom Island: In the 1840s, this island was created when a mill race was dug to serve a sawmill. The complex also included a large dam built across the Clarion River. Traces of these historic features can still be seen today.

Arroyo in the mid-1800's



Mile 79 (RR) Arroyo: This mill town was founded in the 1830s. A tannery and sawmill were opened and serviced by the Clarion River Railroad until the resources were exhausted. The town declined and was vacated in the 1930s. Today, tours of the ghost town are available. For more information, contact the Elk County Historical Society at (814) 776-1032, or visit: www.elkcountyhistoricalsociety.org

Z Rapid



Mile 78-77 X Y Z Rapids: These three Class I rapids were formed in 1871 by the removal of a natural waterfall called Old Falls Rock by the Clarion River Navigation Company. See map for locations.

BOAT RENTALS - LIVERIES - FLY FISHING

Clarion River Adventures: Fly fishing guide and instruction. (814) 772-6217 www.clarionriveradventures.com

Love's Canoe Rentals and Sales: River mile 94. Boat rental and livery. (814) 776-6285 www.ncentral.com/~dlove/

Pale Whale Canoe Rental: River mile 50.1 (see Middle Section). Boat rental, livery and cabins. (814) 744-8300 www.cookriverside.com

Cook Forest Canoe Rental: River mile 50 (see Middle Section). Boat rental and livery. (814) 744-8094 www.cookforestcanoe.com

Pine Crest Canoe Rental: Boat rental, livery and cabins. (814) 752-2200 <http://users.penn.com/~pincrest/PC-canoe.html>



FISHING, CAMPING, HUNTING AND ATVS

FISHING

- Pennsylvania Fish & Boat Commission rules and regulations apply.
- East Branch Lake: Reservoir contains walleye, smallmouth bass, tiger muskellunge and lake trout. Ice fishing is popular.
- East Branch Clarion River: Stocked with trout. Delayed Harvest Artificial Lures Only section from dam downstream 1.2 miles. Bendigo State Park provides good trout fishing into summer.
- West Branch Clarion River: Stocked with trout. Catch and Release Fly-Fishing Only area upstream of the Tambine Road.
- Clarion River between Johnsonburg and Ridgway: This section is designated Catch and Release All-Tackle and has excellent brown trout fishing. There is no public access, so landowner permission is necessary before crossing private property.
- Clarion River between Ridgway and Cook Forest: Brook trout can be found near the mouths of the stocked tributaries. Excellent smallmouth bass fishing.

CAMPING

There are limited opportunities to camp along the upper stretch of the Clarion River. The Corps of Engineers operates a full service campground at the East Branch Dam Recreation Area. The campground is about one-half mile walk from the boat launch. The only other camping along the upper stretch is on the Allegheny National Forest (ANF), downstream of Ridgway on river right. Campers are permitted to camp anywhere on ANF land except in Arroyo, where camping and campfires are not permitted between the bridge and Crow Run on river right. ANF campsites are not improved beyond offering a cleared space to camp and a rock fire-ring. Please choose established campsites rather than creating a new site.

Camping is not permitted on State Game Lands, State Park Land or private land. Rangers patrol areas not open to camping, so be aware of your location. Leave No Trace.

HUNTING

Be aware that hunting occurs on public and private lands all along the river primarily September through February and late April through May. River users should wear blaze orange so they are visible to any hunters in the area. Visit the PA Game Commission website for more information: www.pgc.state.pa.us

ALL TERRAIN VEHICLES

All Terrain Vehicles (ATVs) are only permitted on designated trails on Allegheny National Forest lands. Respect other recreationists and nature. Stay on designated trails.

RESPECT THE PRIVACY & RIGHTS OF LANDOWNERS

Although the access points highlighted in this guide are open for public use, some of the shoreline along the water trail is privately owned. Respect the privacy and rights of landowners by keeping off their property unless you receive permission. Unless you are otherwise certain, assume the land is private property. Avoid making noise and boisterous behavior. Remember that sound carries across water much further than it carries on land. Many landowners enjoy the river's peace and solitude from their decks and living rooms. Share the same courtesy that you would want. A friendly wave or quiet greeting is always welcome.

STEWARDSHIP

Help care for the land, water and cultural resources along the Clarion River by respecting wildlife, nature and other recreationists. It is important to wash footwear, boats and vehicles to minimize the spread of invasive species from one place to another. "Leave No Trace," a national outdoor ethics program, provides some guidelines to minimize your impact. For more information about Leave No Trace, visit www.LNT.org.

Leave no trace principles for camping and day use:

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

EMERGENCY INFORMATION

EMERGENCY: 911 Cell service is unreliable in most of the Clarion River valley. Public phones are marked on the map.

NEARBY HOSPITALS

- St. Marys, Elk Regional Health Center: Follow PA 255 north from St. Marys toward Johnsonburg. (814) 788-8000
- Ridgway, Elk Regional Health Center: From Main Street (PA 948) turn on South Mill Street, then right on South Street, then left on Euclid Street. (814) 788-5555
- Brookville Hospital: Follow PA 28 south of US 322 in Brookville, then left on S. Main Street. (814) 849-2312

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Great effort was expended collecting and verifying the information in this publication. However, we realize that conditions change on the waterways, and that some of this information may not be accurate. We welcome your comments on errors and omissions. Questions, comments or errors should be directed to: Clarion River Municipal Partnership - c/o Millstone Twp - 2329 Route 3001 - Sigel, PA 15860



VISITOR / MORE INFORMATION

Ridgway Welcome Center: 300 Main Street Ridgway, (814) 776-1424
Northwest Pennsylvania's Great Outdoors Visitors Bureau: (800) 348-9393. www.pagreatoutdoors.com