



Yough River Trail Fishing

by Bob Frye

Being labeled “contrary” isn’t necessarily bad, but it does suggest you’re a nonconformist. The Youghiogheny River is Exhibit A.

It stretches 132 miles, starting high on the Eastern Continental Divide along the Maryland-West Virginia border, entering Pennsylvania in Fayette and Somerset counties and emptying into the Monongahela River near McKeesport, Allegheny County.

Mostly, it flows north. The exception is where it makes a “U,” turning abruptly south to get around Ferncliff Peninsula Natural Area in Ohio State Park before quickly returning northbound.

Consequently, early natives, the Algonquians, christened it the Youghiogheny, which roughly translates to “stream flowing in a contrary direction” or “in a roundabout course.”

But, don’t take the river for a curmudgeon. It’s actually quite accommodating, thanks to water quality improvements like those evident in the 26 river miles between Connellsville, Fayette County, and West Newton, Westmoreland County.

Pete Cartwright of Smallies On The Yough Guide Service, smalliesontheyough.com, fishes that section extensively and ranks it second only to the larger Allegheny River as the best Smallmouth Bass water in western Pennsylvania.

“On any given day, as far as numbers go, in the summertime we average 20 fish for every 4 hours on the river,” said Cartwright, who grew up fishing the river in McKeesport. “That’s a lot of action.”

“Fish of 13 to 15 inches and 1 to 2 pounds are common, but many clients catch their personal best Smallmouth Bass from the river,” said Cartwright. His largest was 22½ inches long and 6 pounds.

“The Yough has come a long way from when I was a child. It’s getting better all the time, every year,” said Cartwright.

He catches most of his bass on finesse baits—tubes, swimbaits, plastic worms and hair jigs with soft plastic trailers—in natural colors fished on the bottom with 8-pound fluorocarbon line.

Elsewhere in this stretch, anglers catch trout stocked by local clubs. West Newton Sportsmen’s Club released \$15,000 worth of trout this year in three stockings between mid-March and mid-April.



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photo-courtesy of Storm Steinkopf



photos-Bob Frye

The Yough River is wadeable in most places between Connellsville and Cedar Creek, and it is easily accessible to paddlers, too, with a number of launches along that stretch. The official river trail map outlines all those places.

“That’s almost 1,000 pounds of fish for every stocking” said Bob Patrick, who leads the effort and runs the group’s Facebook page. “And, they are nice-looking trout, too. We stock Brown Trout, Rainbow Trout and golden Rainbow Trout, from 12 inches to 20 inches,” said Patrick.

Some fish are tagged for prizes, available to anyone who buys a “Stock the Yough” button from merchants in town.

This year was the club’s 50th stocking of the river. Smithton Sportsmen’s Club—which put in another \$12,000 worth of trout of the same species and size, spread over four stockings, just upriver—has done it for 53 years.

“All of those trout move, upriver and down, depending on conditions,” said Mike Hazy, chairman of the Smithton Sportsmen’s Club stocking program. “But, that’s okay. Exploring offers the chance to tie into something even bigger.”

Richard E. Nicholson, Fayette County, caught Pennsylvania’s state-record Walleye—18 pounds, 1 ounce—from the Yough in Fayette County in 2021. Hazy, who’s lived within 300 yards of the river for decades, wasn’t surprised. While that fish was exceptional, the Yough holds plenty of big Walleyes and more.

“I’ve seen some monster muskies,” said Hazy. “One of these days, someone’s really going to get into a big one.”

Cartwright agrees. He maintains a database of every fish he’s caught, under every condition, everywhere he’s been, back to 1994. Over those years, he’s seen the Yough—a Class I river,

navigable by even beginner paddlers, though he waded fishes—turn into something special.

“That river has really come a long way. You never know what you may catch,” said Cartwright. ☐



Weekends see a lot of paddlers on the Yough.