

# Hidden in Plain Sight: Spring Creek Canyon Opens to the Public

by Joe Baker

## Trailhead

About a quarter mile up the Spring Creek Canyon trail from the parking area, I glance at my cell phone's screen and notice the small "No Service" in the upper left hand corner; it's a very good sign. My car is one of only three in the parking area. Despite the fact that I am only a few miles away from booming State College, I am in the depths of a forested canyon, next to a fine trout stream and beyond the reach of cell towers. It is a crisp October day, rich with the smell of fallen leaves. I have a daypack on my shoulders, a split bamboo fly rod in my hand, and I am entirely alone.

In part, this is illusory. If I were here in June when the Sulfur Mayflies emerge, I would have plenty of company, but even then, the roadless four plus miles of this canyon between Benner Springs and Fisherman's Paradise allows ample room to spread out. This reach of Spring Creek offers some of the fabled stream's very best fishing, as well as first-rate hiking, mountain biking, birding, large and small game hunting, and even kayaking just a few minutes drive from one of the Commonwealth's fastest growing communities. Of course, it didn't used to be quite this wild. In the late 18th and early 19th centuries, this was a landscape of iron furnaces and rolling mills and charcoal kilns; a place hidden in a haze of belching smoke and ringing with the din of trip hammers. With the decline of the local iron industry later in the 19th century, this was a quieter but still tamed place of saw mills, gristmills and orderly farms. The current pristine character of the canyon owes much to its 20th century owner. The Rockview State Correctional Institution started acquiring land in the area in 1912. For nearly a century, the prison did not allow public access to the acreage they owned in the canyon. The area remained sparsely visited and beyond Commonwealth-owned trout hatcheries, unimproved.

*Spring Creek Canyon between Benner Springs and Fisherman's Paradise offers some of the stream's very best fishing.*



photo-Ted Walke



photo-Joe Baker



Spring Creek Canyon Cooperative Management Area

photos-Ted Walke

Without foundry workers, millers, farmers and recreational visitors, the place got quiet, and the woods grew back.

I walk the trail for about an hour until I am more or less in the middle of the canyon, and then I descend to a wet and brushy floodplain that promises access to a delicious-looking pool. On the way, I have seen a Pileated Woodpecker, a flock of turkeys and nearly stepped in a very fresh deposit of bear scat left directly in the middle of the trail. Halfway to the creek, I step over a downed log, and there is a sudden heart-stopping roar of wings right next to my feet that nearly propels me into the air. A woodcock! I haven't seen a woodcock in years. This place is full of surprises.

## Saving the canyon

In 2006, 135 acres of Rockview State Correctional Institution holdings outside the Spring Creek Canyon were transferred from Commonwealth ownership to the Centre County Industrial Development Corporation. This

spurred local conservationists, government officials and landowners into action. Concerned with the potential for incompatible development and the loss of habitat and water quality, a coalition formed to advocate for the preservation of the canyon acreage owned by the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections. Benner Township, working with the ClearWater Conservancy, Pennsylvania Fish & Boat Commission, Pennsylvania Game Commission and The Pennsylvania State University, with funding from the Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources and the cooperation of the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections, produced the Spring Creek Canyon Conservation Strategy, a document intended to guide the future management and public use of the area. The plan proposed options for environmental and cultural preservation and education and for passive recreation. All that was needed to seal the deal was the land itself.

In 2010, House Bill 1890 authorized the conveyance of 1,827 acres of land to the agency partners to be preserved and maintained as the Spring Creek Canyon Cooperative Management Area. On September 30, 2011, about a month before my visit, a formal dedication ceremony opened the area to the public (to view the dedication ceremony photos, visit [www.SpringCreekCanyon.com](http://www.SpringCreekCanyon.com)).

Parking facilities at Benner Springs State Fish Hatchery and downstream at Fisherman's Paradise allow foot and bicycle access to the old gated gravel road that is the primary trail in the canyon. From this old road, there are a variety of informal paths and old roads that allow ingress to most of the acreage. You can also explore off trail, taking due care for hazards like boggy areas, greenbrier, poison ivy, loose rocks and so on. The new management area is a wild and lovely place. It's also a conservation success story; a monument to the accomplishments of concerned citizens and enlightened agency and legislative leaders in a time when good environmental news can be awfully hard to come by. It is a place to be savored.



photo-Joe Baker

A summary of regulations for Spring Creek Canyon Management Area is posted on-site.



## Riffle and pool

Like a great many Pennsylvania anglers, I am a product of Penn State's famous fly fishing course, started by the inimitable George Harvey back in the 1930s and still taught today. That course, the first of its kind in the country, was developed and in part taught on Spring Creek. One of the lessons I learned from my instructor, Joe Humphreys, in 1977 was to cast less and watch more when fishing quiet pools. This lesson was imparted just downstream a couple miles at Fisherman's Paradise, America's first catch and release fishing area. So, after the hip boots are donned and the rod is strung up, I kneel in the tall brush along the bank of Spring Creek. From this vantage place, I watch. Just across the stream, a kingfisher also stands sentinel, watching more expertly than I could ever hope to. There are only a few very small midges evident in the air and none on the water. Even the Blue-Winged Olive mayflies are over for the year. I methodically scan the depths of the pool with my polarized glasses, starting with the water right in front of me and slowly moving my gaze upstream back and forth across the bottom. Up near the head of the pool, where a stretch of riffle water ends, I detect motion and a subtle flash deep in the water. I sit tight. In a minute or so, I see it again. There's at least one trout feeding near the bottom. As stealthily as possible for a 55-year-old man who has eaten too well, I move myself into position to make a good cast with a small

For more information, Summary of Regulations, photo gallery and Trail Guide, visit [www.springcreekcanyon.com](http://www.springcreekcanyon.com).

nymph and pause again to be sure I haven't spooked the trout. As I wait him out, there is time for reverie.

I wonder at the unruly wildness of the canyon and how far it has come from its industrial past. I reflect on the sporting heritage of Spring Creek and the role it's played in the history of trout fishing and coldwater conservation. I am gratified at the leadership and foresight that have preserved it for the future. I'm already planning my visits next spring and summer for the good hatches and fine dry-fly fishing.

The trout winks at me again from his refuge near the stream bottom, and I check my knots and pinch a small split shot six inches above the nymph. Smiling at my great good fortune to be in this beautiful place and to have it to myself, I place my cast a couple feet above the fish, and I watch the place where the leader enters the water intently, waiting for the subtle twitch. ☐

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