

Little Juniata River Float

by Vic Attardo

The Little Juniata River is part of the Upper Juniata River Water Trail. This section features great trout fishing.



The best fishing is an adventure, and adventures include stunning scenery, strenuous undertakings and a strong dose of incomprehensible nature.

Four of us met the criteria for adventure last May on a canoe trip down the Little Juniata River.

Parts of the Little Juniata River are frequently fished but just as infrequently floated for good reason. The river's middle reaches can be dangerous. Halfway through our float, when we came upon the crushed remains of an aluminum canoe wrapped around a wet boulder like a gleaming but misshapen bow tie, the danger was confirmed.

When a 4-foot rattlesnake slithered out from shore and crossed over the tip of a friend's wading stick in chest-high water, there was no doubt that the threads of adventure and danger had become entwined.

The trout you reach in spots not often fished is also the stuff of adventure. When an agile brown trout tugs down hard, pulling a fly line through a twisted course of sharp rocks and gushing waters, the fun is highlighted. This is why you float the Little Juniata River.

The float with Tim Bowersox, Allan Everett and Joe Mickulanis was to have lasted two days. Original plans and packing had taken two days into account. But, the river, as so often happens in spring, blew up like a balloon from long, strong rains. Having some sense of discretion, we waited out the first day. The second day saw a marked reduction in flow, so we lit out.

"Lit out"—that would be a phrase Tom Sawyer would use on a wider river in the South. Indeed, I felt like Aunt Polly's Tom as we slid, first an aluminum canoe and then a composite canoe, into the churning waters above the Spruce Creek Church. We still weren't sure of the wisdom of the float, but we kept it to a whisper, so there was adventure again raising its risky but appealing head.

Stunning scenery came on quickly. The white spire of a Pennsylvania church is manmade, but floating by its historic tower is striking. A low bridge with divided arches was over us before we were even settled in our seats. The currents took us quickly.

As we passed the pastured field on the east bank, we heard a tom gobbling in spring madness. Over and over, like a junkyard cat, it cried for company. Quickly, the west bank steepened and grew thicker. Here was a vantage point from which I always wanted to fish. Wriggling currents run close to that side, and I believed the deep waters would hold trout. They do, but they also hold boulders that in high water are tough to fish and tougher to stand along. The wade is less than a fly rod's length from the steep wooded shore. With dense trees and brush, deft backcasts were out of the question.

With no trout, four return to their canoes and push downstream.

Soon the river bows and a great divide opens up ahead. A wedge is cut in the distant mountain. In mid-May, the hillsides are a deep, dark green. Blue sky fills the mountain void, a curved window of vibrant light. Men and maps call it Short Mountain. At 1,800 feet, I see nothing short about it.

We find a curve of land to disembark. Behind us is a possible campsite. Notes are made for a future float. Some of the shoreline is sandy with trees reaching out to the current. Here, we fish again. And, this is where the rattlesnake appears.

photo-Vic Attardo



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I'm downstream from my friend, Tim Bowersox, when I heed a shout. Tim doesn't shriek, but his words are filled with trepidation.

"Rattlesnake!" is all I hear clearly.

I look and see a slithering "S" winding over the surface, fortunately heading to the opposite shore. I've seen this shape before, and there is no mistaking the ridge of a rattlesnake's back. Not an eastern garter snake, not even a copperhead has that A-frame construction.

I rush up.

"It went over the end of my stick," Tim says excitedly, very excitedly.

We watch the snake disappear into the dark holes of the far bank.

Tim has taken some photos with a small camera. They're out of focus, and the snake was already too far away, but its colors and pattern are unmistakable. We think the rattlesnake mistook his tethered wading stick as a mate, or rival, and came to see.

Minutes later, humor takes over as a large frog swims behind me. Imagine my thoughts before I realized its identity. Then, a spider the size of an apple swims along the bank. For the rest of the float, we keep a wary eye on the surface. And, we're talking about overnight camping. Sheez!

Then, come the trout. I've switched from a streamer to a double-nymph rig. I'm slow to make the change, because I haven't brought two rods for the back-and-forth as I like. When the nymphs go on, a heavy Beaverkrat for the bottom fly and a Golden Pheasant Tail Nymph for the top, I start catching trout.

Not knowing exactly how far or how long the float, we get back into our canoes. A pair of immature bald eagles look down at us from their great heights. Lower down, black caddis, a few light cahills and some sulphurs are skittering. I know that when the locust trees are flowering and the honeysuckle, white and pale yellow, are in bloom, it's time for sulphurs in central Pennsylvania.

The river narrows with islands and torrential chutes. We see the crumpled canoe and get out to fish. There are good numbers of brown trout in this run, and we hook up.

But then, other anglers start appearing from unseen roads. We're closer to the railroad bridge—the mighty Norfolk and Southern trains, black hulking diesels with 100-car processions that dogged us along.

We proceed downstream to where other anglers can reach the eastern shore but cannot cross without real peril to fish the western bank. Here, I find trout hugging the borders between current and slack.

The Little Juniata River is really giving up trout now, and I'm feeling better about my skills. The trout I catch are not large, but they have nice heads and full-rounded bodies.

With the day getting tired, one of our canoes continues downstream. Tim and I stay with it for another hour or two. The Sulphurs are still irregular, but the trout are willing to tag one here and there. It takes me time to rerig to a dry fly and a lot longer to get into position for one rising fish.

I wait to find the fish's exact lane and wait again after it has swallowed a natural. Then, I send out a perfect-curved cast with the fly line off to the side. The Parachute Sulphur rides right down the track—a rise, a grab, a fight and a netting.

After this satisfying surface win, I call it quits. Tim and I paddle down and take out somewhere in a spate of the Rothrock State Forest. My body is barely able to lift the canoe on the stashed trailer.

It was a shorter float than we originally planned, but it certainly met the criteria for adventure. ☐

