



# Trout Fishing in Ohiopyle State Park

Angling options from a big river to brook trout streams, one hour outside Pittsburgh

by Ben Moyer    photos by the author

Some have called it a bit of the Rockies transplanted east—a big brawling river, bruiser trout, remote seclusion, drift boats and cascading trout-rich tributaries. All of this is set in 20,000 rugged acres of public land.

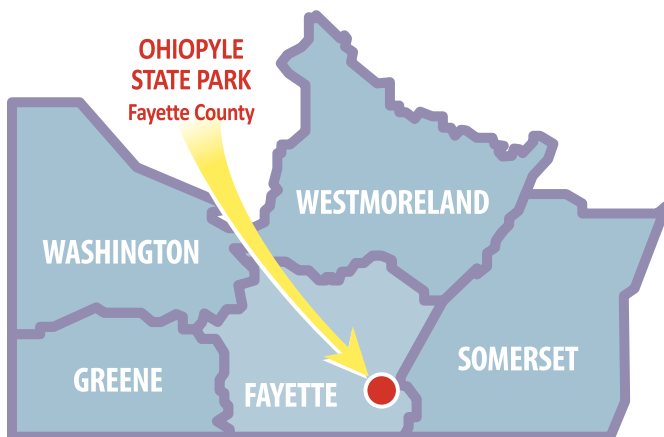
But, this trout destination isn't tucked into Colorado's peaks or under Montana's Continental Divide. It's Ohiopyle State Park in southwestern Pennsylvania's Fayette County. And, although its comparison to parts of the Rockies may come naturally, Ohiopyle is a trout-angling treasure in its own right.

Ohiopyle offers varied trout options, but the park's centerpiece for fishing and whitewater-thrill paddling is the Youghiogheny River. From its exit from Youghiogheny Reservoir at the confluence, the Youghiogheny River careens through a 1,500-foot-deep forested gorge for 28 river miles within the state park's boundaries. Except for convenient fishing spots at the town of Ohiopyle, that entire

wild stretch of river is inaccessible by road. On Ohiopyle's Youghiogheny River, you must earn your angling adventure by pedaling or hiking along the Great Allegheny Passage bike/hike trail, which parallels the river, or by paddling a kayak, canoe or raft downstream.

Paddling here is easier said than done. While the tamer Middle Youghiogheny River, a 9-mile stretch from the confluence to Ohiopyle, can be fished from an open canoe if steered by a competent stern paddler. The Lower Youghiogheny River below Ohiopyle is a boat-churner. Unless you're a whitewater expert with your own raft outfitted for fishing, the only reasonably safe way to fish the Lower Youghiogheny River by boat is with a professional guide. Big brown trout and rainbow trout lurk here, and bringing one into a net while the raft bucks through Class IV rapids is a world away from the comfy image of trout fishing as a tranquil sport.

Frequent Youghiogheny River anglers agree that the river holds a lot of fish, yet hides them well. The Pennsylvania Fish & Boat Commission (PFBC) stocks legal-sized trout in the tailrace below Youghiogheny Dam. Some of these stocked fish move downstream, but stocking adult trout throughout this big turbulent stream is costly. The returns to anglers are unknown. The Commission's strategy is to plant hundreds of thousands of sub-legal fingerlings in the 30 river miles from the confluence down to Connellsville every year, with Ohiopyle near the mid-point. Cold water, ideal habitat and available food assure that some of the fingerlings grow to large size at far less cost than raising them to adulthood in hatcheries.





Improving water quality and cold water are the keys to the Youghiogheny River's growing stature as a trout fishery. Chilled water churns out of the impounded depths year round, because the United States Army Corps flood control dam at the confluence is of bottom discharge design.

"It's remarkable to have a tailwater fishery like the Youghiogheny River in this part of the country," said Jim Geary, a trout guide for Laurel Highlands Guide Service. "I never had respect for the potential it has as a fishery until I moved to Colorado where I guided on famous western tailwaters like the Taylor River. Fishing the Youghiogheny River is like those western rivers. It's the real deal with large numbers of big fish. The fishing does go up and down. Some years are better than others depending on water quality and flows."

Catchable-sized trout also enter the river from stocked tributaries including Laurel Hill Creek, Meadow Run and Dunbar Creek. PFBC's stocking in the state park has been augmented by trout from the Chestnut Ridge Chapter of Trout Unlimited's (CRTU) cage-culture nursery, which confines fingerlings from PFBC's Cooperative Nursery Program in the Youghiogheny River Dam tailrace. CRTU has placed thousands of river-raised brown trout, brook trout and rainbow trout in the Youghiogheny River and its tributaries open to public fishing.

All Tackle Trophy Trout regulations govern fishing on the Middle Youghiogheny River section from the confluence with Ramcat Run downstream nine miles to the Route 381 bridge at Ohiopyle. Below Ohiopyle, the river is managed under PFBC's Miscellaneous Waters Special Regulations Program. Anglers can fish for trout there year round, but only three trout may be creel from Labor Day through the opening of trout season.

Wading the river can be difficult due to its power and width. Most anglers hike or bike along the Great Allegheny Passage to a likely spot, then hike down to fish from rocks along the shore. Bank-bound anglers

drift nightcrawlers, minnows or salmon eggs into any deep run they can reach. Fly anglers most often drift big stonefly nymphs or streamers like Woolly Buggers in olive or black. Despite their valiant efforts, there is so much water that they can never probe from shore.

"You can only wade out so far," said Geary. "Out in the middle, you've got nice seams and eddies where the fish can be feeding like gangbusters."

Geary targets places where he's seen or hooked up with big fish on previous trips in his drift boat.

"We try to get aggressive," said Geary. "If my guests want to go for the big ones, we throw flashy articulated streamers tied to look like a small rainbow trout or brown trout. The smaller trout will chase it, but they won't eat it. This way, we're selecting for trout over 18 inches."

Some anglers are surprised at the big flies he recommends and their success.

"We had a guest last year on a float trip. He had a very small window to hit a spot with his streamer. There is usually a fish there, and he got the cast just right and hooked up with the biggest fish I saw last summer. I had to anchor and get in where he could fight it in a seam behind big rocks. We netted the fish, and it was just gorgeous, like a steelhead but on a 6-weight rod in heavy water. I can only describe the guy's reaction as shocked."

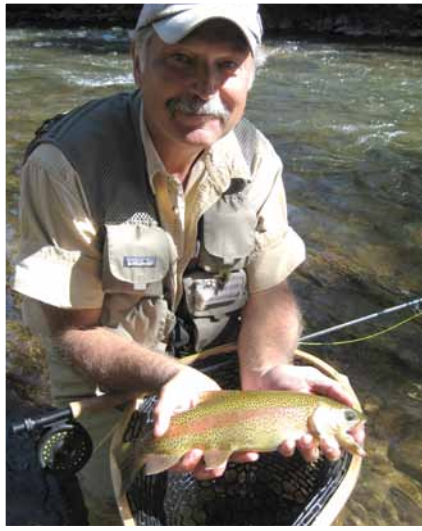
Youghiogheny River trout can also be lured to the surface. Fishing dry flies can be exciting at times, but it's inconsistent.

"The hatches on the river are good and gradually getting better. Tailwater hatches, though, are different," said Geary. "Some bugs do better in the colder waters. Others, you just don't see that many."

Geary credits CRTU, headquartered in Uniontown, and its cooperating agencies and organizations with the Youghiogheny River better water quality in recent years.

"Chestnut Ridge TU has really spearheaded acid mine drainage reclamation in the Youghiogheny watershed,"





he said. “The chapter’s acid treatment projects on Glade Run have done a lot to improve Dunbar Creek and the river downstream.”

Dunbar Creek is Catch and Release Fly-Fishing-Only water that enters the river just downstream from the state park, but CRTU has also implemented stream restoration projects, initially funded by Growing Greener, on Jonathan Run, which flows through the heart of the park, and on Morgan Run, bordering State Game Lands 51.

Jonathan Run was once on PFBC’s approved stocking list, but a mine drainage incident in the late 1980s tainted the stream to the point it could no longer be stocked.

The small but scenic creek tumbles to the river through a remote hollow. Once restored, it will offer anglers a small stream experience in a wild, walk-in setting.

“We are fortunate to have so many trout fishing opportunities so close together,” said Tom Shockey of Farmington, who fishes in the state park often. “But any time you can add yet another restored resource, that’s a great accomplishment.”

Shockey’s go-to trout spot in the park is Meadow Run, larger than Jonathan Run but more angler-friendly than the big river.

“Meadow Run is one of my favorite streams anywhere,” Shockey said. “I’ve been fishing it for 50 years. It’s a great setting and has strong hatches for this part of the state including a green drake hatch that’s beginning to attract attention. The stream holds trout well year-round, and there are big ones.”

Delayed Harvest Artificial Lures Only regulations cover a 2.2-mile stretch of Meadow Run, known to regulars as “The Loop.” No roads probe the loop, but anglers willing to hike find an alluring chain of deep pools linked by rapids and runs. A

waterfall on Meadow Run known as “The Cascades” rivals the more acclaimed Ohiopyle Falls in beauty and scale.

Above the SR 2011 (Dinner Bell Road) bridge, general trout regulations are in place on Meadow Run, and anglers may use bait and creel trout in-season.

Meadow Run receives a preseason stocking and in-season stockings in April, May and October. PFBC supplies the fish, and Ohiopyle State Park offers an all-terrain utility vehicle to distribute them throughout the loop. Interested anglers supply the muscle power to tote fish.

“Coordinating and sharing equipment enables us to provide the best possible fishing experience for our visitors, spreading the trout along the stream instead of in one or two holes,” said James Juran, DCNR’s Park Operations Manager at Ohiopyle. “I invite anglers to visit Ohiopyle and fish our mountain streams and try their luck along the Youghiogheny River.”

Stocking supports most of the trout fishing at Ohiopyle, but wild brook trout grace several smaller streams throughout the park. Park brochures don’t give away their locations, and local anglers and guides don’t say the names outside their own circles. But, anglers up to an exploratory hike can catch native brook trout in stunningly beautiful little streams.

“From a trout fishing standpoint, you have everything at Ohiopyle from the big river to wild brook trout streams,” said Ernie Pribanic, who also guides fishing trips for Laurel Highlands Guide Service. “An angler could spend a week just getting to know what’s here. But, what really sets this place apart is the Youghiogheny River. People love floating a clear, cold river surrounded by mountains and seeing wildlife like an eagle, an otter or a bear along the way. Our guests tell us the scenery alone is worth coming. The fishing at Ohiopyle can be very good. In a way, it’s only a bonus.” ☐