



Paddle Streams of Northwest Pennsylvania

by Darl Black photos by the author

I'm a paddler with a purpose, but my purpose isn't to paddle. Rather, it is to fish. I understand there are thousands of individuals who love to paddle for paddling's sake. However, my idea of fun in a canoe or kayak is slowly slipping downstream during warm weather while casting to cover and feeding stations for bass, pike, trout and panfish. I'll spend as much time out of the boat as in it in order to effectively fish each enticing section of stream.

Even though trailered fishing boats have been the mainstay of our angling excursions over the years, Marilyn and I always set aside time to explore the little blue lines that most anglers ignore. Today, with a kayak, it's possible to go where a two-person canoe cannot during low summer flows. Of course, there are limits even for a kayak. On some small streams during the driest seasons, anglers must wait for a summer rain to push the stream level upwards several inches before undertaking a float.

While most anglers are aware of the pitfalls of cold-water paddling on high raging water, late spring through early fall floats on small streams are not without dangers as well. Strainers, low-head dams, hidden subsurface logs or an unexpected ledge/rocky outcropping can spell trouble if not handled properly. On small flows stocked with trout, another "temporary hazard" must be anticipated in the late spring, the wading angler. However, the majority of these temporary hazards have departed the stream by mid-June.

If you're looking for a change of pace in your fishing, here's a quick overview of my favorite blue lines in northwest Pennsylvania.

Conewango Creek

From the New York line to its juncture with the Allegheny River in Warren, Conewango Creek is a must-fish stream. Tom Osborne, operator of Conewango Kayak-Canoe Rental, is a 30-year fishing veteran of the stream. "The stream is distinctively different north of Russell where water runs slow and deep over a clay bottom with an occasional gravel bar. Here, the primary species of interest are northern pike, walleyes and channel catfish. But, from Russell downstream to the Allegheny River, the creek is shallow and fast over a gravel and rock bottom—perfect smallmouth bass and big brown trout water. My secret lure for bass and brown trout is a countdown long-minnow plug. As an official Pennsylvania Water Trail, Conewango Creek has eight clearly marked kayak and canoe launch sites between the New York line and Warren. A Conewango Water Trail Map may be downloaded from the Pennsylvania Fish & Boat Commission (PFBC) website at www.fishandboat.com."



Mike Martin with a Conewango Creek smallmouth bass.

Brokenstraw Creek

Flowing west to east through a broad valley in central Warren County, Brokenstraw Creek is stocked with trout and supports a decent smallmouth bass population. Late summer flows generally restrict paddling to the lower section of the creek. Fly and kayak angler Gary Kell occasionally fishes Brokenstraw Creek during the summer for smallmouth bass, preferring the stretch from the city park in Youngsville to Buckaloons Recreation Area on the Allegheny River. "This float appears rather short on a map, but it takes me at least half the day or longer to effectively cover all the good water by frequently getting out of the kayak. My most effective fly is a Woolly Sculpin, which I tie both weighted and unweighted. Poppers are also very productive. Most of the smallmouth bass I catch are 10 to 12 inches, but a few are 15 inches or better. And, I've taken the occasional bass pushing 4 pounds from deeper pools. After passing under the Irvine bridge and before you reach the Allegheny River, watch for a small path on the left that goes up to the Buckaloons Day Use Area. This is the take out spot."



Debris is a dangerous strainer during high water. However, it is a great habitat for pike, muskies and bass in low summer flows and should be fished from a position that does not allow the current to pull the boat into the strainer.

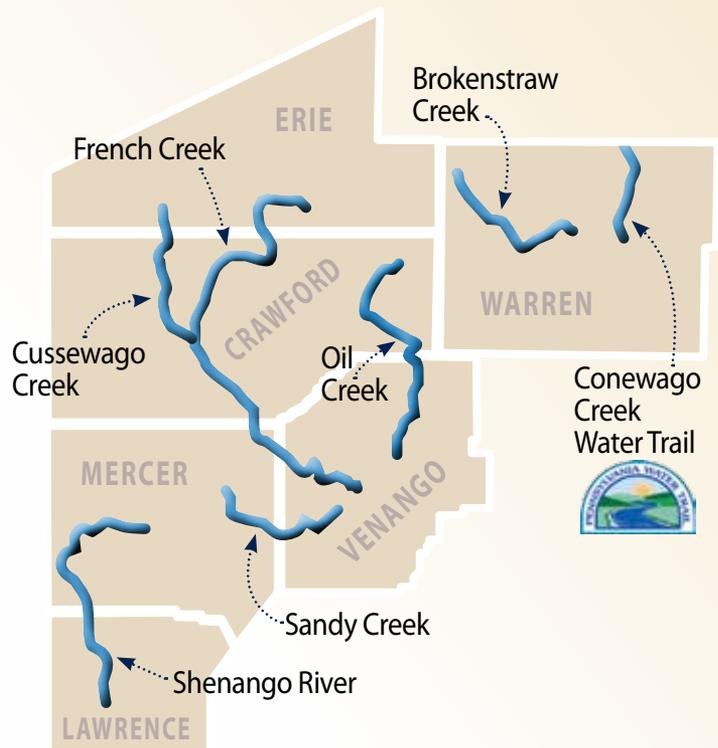
Oil Creek

Oil Creek, a tributary of the Allegheny River in Venango County, is famously known for the first commercial oil well in 1859. From Drake Well Museum outside of Titusville south to Rynd Farm north of Rouseville, Oil Creek flows through scenic Oil Creek State Park gorge. Smallmouth bass and stocked trout are the primary gamefish species in this section. Typically by July, the flow on Oil Creek is too low for floating. Kayak anglers wait for a good rain to raise the water level. Putting in at Jersey Bridge near Drake Well

Museum and taking out at Petroleum Center is a long paddle allowing little time to fish. A more manageable float from Rynd Farm Canoe Launch to Justus Park Canoe Launch in downtown Oil City (at the mouth of Oil Creek) is generally more productive for smallmouth bass.

Kayak and canoe rentals and shuttle services

- Allegheny Outfitters
www.alleghenyoutfitters.com
814-723-1203
- Carried Away Recreation
www.carriedawayrecreation.com
724-343-1313
- Conewago Kayak-Canoe Rentals
www.paddleconewago.com
814-688-7647
- Outdoor Allegheny River Services
www.oarsontheallegheny.com
814-388-9122
- Stoney Crick Kayak & Canoe
www.stoneycrick.com
814-626-1114



Brown trout



Northern pike

French Creek

The Big Daddy of small streams in northwest Pennsylvania is French Creek, floatable for 70 miles all summer long from Union City to the Allegheny River at Franklin. Nine public access sites (both municipal and PFBC) plus additional slip-in sites allow for a wide variety of float options. Dedicated kayak angler John Wilpula floats sections of French Creek weekly during the spring, summer and fall. “Kayak buddies and I seldom encounter another paddle angler on the stream—except on holiday weekends,” said John Wilpula. “Our focus is smallmouth bass, but there are a wide range of species to be caught including walleyes, northern pike, muskies and crappies. However, smallmouth bass fishing during the summer is so awesome that I rarely go anywhere else. Although you must keep an eye out for typical hazards like strainers, the only significant dangerous spot is an old lowhead dam at Saegertown, which should be approached river left with boats taken through the breach on hand lines. During extreme low flow years, thick mats of vegetation can impede paddling and fishing.”

Sandy Creek

Flowing from Lake Wilhelm eastward to the Allegheny River, Sandy Creek features smallmouth bass, holdover trout and occasional pike. “Although there are some nice rocky pools on this flow, Big Sandy Creek doesn’t receive a lot of attention from angling paddlers because of extreme shallow-water stretches,” said Ryan Wiegel of Wiegel-on-the-Water Kayak Shop. “Water levels drop quickly by early summer. If you are the adventurous type, just wait for a little rain to kick up the flow but not too high, because it may become too dangerous for a novice paddler. For a put-in site, there is a little parking area with a path to the water where Route 965 crosses the creek. Take out is PFBC’s Fishermen’s Cove Access on the Allegheny River, approximately ¼-mile downstream from the mouth of Sandy Creek.”



Like many small stream kayak anglers, John Wilpula focuses on smallmouth bass and always practices catch and release.

More streams to consider

- Conneaut Creek, Erie County
- Neshannock Creek, Mercer County
- Otter Creek, Mercer County
- Sugar Creek, Crawford County
- Tionesta Creek, Forest County



French Creek



Shenango River below Pymatuning Dam

Cussewago Creek

Perhaps the least utilized flow in northwest Pennsylvania, Cussewago Creek originates in southern Erie County flowing south to meet French Creek at Meadville. “This mud bank stream is largely hidden from view in the center of a marshy bottomland,” said angling expert Dan Shay. “It’s impossible to float due to flotsam debris and downed trees blocking the narrow flow—except for the final 4 or 5 miles near Meadville, which can be reached from PFBC’s Cussewago Access Site off Kerrtown Road. From here, you can paddle upstream into a truly wild section. Then, turn around and float down to French Creek, taking out at Bicentennial Park—with an easy portage around a small dam two miles upstream from the mouth. Why do this? Simple, Cussewago Creek offers a very good musky fishery. In addition, there are impressive largemouth bass and pike populations in this small section as well, and it receives practically no fishing pressure.”

Shenango River

There is no better waterway to wrap up the small flow story than the wild and scenic upper Shenango River. For over four decades, the section of river from Pymatuning Dam to Greenville had been blocked by dozens of downed trees making any float attempt incredibly difficult, if not impossible. Enter Hugh Clark and the Shenango River Watchers, who raised funds to open up the river to paddling. In 2011, the Pymatuning to Greenville section was cleared, and additional obstructions from Kidds Mill Bridge to New Hamburg were removed in 2012. These two sections are incredibly beautiful and isolated from development. Today, you can kayak or canoe from the outflow of Pymatuning Dam all the way to the United States Army Corps of Engineers access at Big Bend with two public launch sites in between—City Park in Greenville and Kidds Mill Covered Bridge. Anglers are beginning to appreciate what the Shenango River has to offer: walleyes, crappies, muskies, channel catfish, bass and yellow perch as well as a spring run of white bass from Shenango Lake. And, there is a new kayak rental business in Greenville catering to river trips. ☐



Channel catfish

Universal tackle pack for small flows

Some kayak anglers like to carry every bit of tackle they can squeeze into their craft. On the other hand, I’m a minimalist when it comes to tackle for small streams. With this streamline spinning selection, I am prepared for whatever gamefish are present as well as for both clear and dingy water situations (since many floats will occur after rains have raised the water level). Everything below will fit into two or three small utility cases.

- Lightweight leadheads in $\frac{1}{32}$, $\frac{1}{16}$, $\frac{1}{8}$ and $\frac{3}{16}$ -ounce
- Soft plastic bodies for the above jigheads including action tail grubs, tubes and 4-inch worms in both muted natural color for clear water and white or black for dingy water
- Straight shaft spinners in sizes 0, 1 and 2—silver, gold and painted blades to address both clear and dingy water
- Floating long minnow—gold in my favorite color
- Small crayfish style crankbait
- $\frac{1}{4}$ -ounce spinnerbait
- Topwater chugger
- $\frac{1}{8}$ -ounce buzzbait