

KEYSTONE LAKE at Keystone State Park



by *Charles N. Cantella*

photos by the author

The world was buzzing with events at the turn of the 1900s—Ernest Shackleton was looking for the South Pole, Theodore Roosevelt was President of the United States, and in Pennsylvania, the humble beginnings of today's Keystone State Park were taking shape. America was changing quickly, helped along by changes in technology, which made life easier, more comfortable and healthier. But, something had to power this change, and that something was coal, and coal mining was a big industry in Pennsylvania.

In 1909, high in the Laurel Highlands, near Derry, the Keystone Coal and Coke Company began excavation of a 78-acre lake that would someday become the focal point of the Keystone State Park, but whose original use was simply to hold water to wash the coal, cool the coke and provide the miners with drinking water. Today, the lake and park provide a beautiful place for recreation, relaxation and fun.

The Bureau of State Parks purchased Keystone Lake and surrounding land in 1945, naming the visitor center after Mr. James A. Kell, who was instrumental in acquiring the property. Currently, the front of the visitor center displays a coal cart as a reminder of the park's beginnings and to honor the hard-working coal miners. Keystone State Park is an excellent example of repurposing.

What can we do there?

Boating: A boat launch and mooring area are available near the dam. Be sure your boat, kayak, canoe or other watercraft have proper registration. The 78-acre lake has an electric motor only restriction. Be sure to have life jackets for each occupant.

Fishing: Keystone Lake offers anglers the unique opportunity to catch both warmwater and coldwater fish from the same waterway. Trout stockings occur throughout the year, and other targeted species include Black Crappies, Common Carp, Largemouth Bass, Yellow Perch, bullheads and tiger muskellunge. There is an Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) accessible fishing area by the spillway, and fishing is prohibited at the beach, boat launches and mooring areas.

Anglers have the opportunity to catch larger-than-average bass since the lake is managed as a Big Bass lake, meaning the minimum harvest size for bass is 15 inches, and the daily creel



A coal cart sits outside of the James A. Kell Visitor Center, Westmoreland County, as a reminder of the area's past.

limit is four bass (combined species) except for the 8-week period from mid-April through mid-June where harvest is prohibited. For more information, www.fishinpa.com/largemouth-smallmouth-spotted-big-bass/.

Bicycling: Lakeside Trail is a 2-mile, level trail that follows park roads or gravel walkways around Keystone Lake. Bicycles must stay on roads or gravel walkways. The other paths are for walking.

Swimming: A sandy beach is open from mid-May to mid-September from 8:00 a.m. to sunset. The beach is not supervised, so swim at your own risk. There is a concession stand nearby that is open during Memorial Day to Labor Day weekend.

Picnicking: There are numerous picnic tables and two pavilions that can be reserved for up to 11 months ahead of time. Unreserved pavilions are available on a first come, first serve basis.

Winter activities: Winter activities include ice fishing, ice skating, sledding and cross country skiing when conditions are right. Be warned that ice thickness is not monitored.

Spend the night

- There are 100 tent and trailer sites available from the first Friday in April until the third Sunday in October. Modern bathhouses and sanitary dump stations are available.
- Three cottages (that sleep five in bunk beds) have electric heat, porches, picnic tables and electricity. One cottage is ADA accessible.
- Eleven modern cabins are available year-round. Each cabin sleeps six in two bedrooms. A double bed is in one bedroom, and two bunk beds are in the other bedroom. Each cabin also offers a shower, kitchen with stove, microwave and refrigerator. There is a fire ring, grill and picnic table outside. Cabin 11 is ADA accessible.
- There are two yurts (round canvas and wood-walled tents) with a wooden deck. Bunk bed sleeping arrangements, stove, microwave, refrigerator and electricity are included. One yurt is ADA accessible.

Whether you are looking for a nice afternoon picnic location, a place to camp overnight or to spend the day on the water, the cool, clear waters of Keystone Lake and the beautiful Keystone State Park will fill the bill. ☑



James A. Kell Visitor Center.



A yurt at Keystone State Park.

Hiking trails

The wooded landscape lends itself to exploring the park and surrounding areas. Hikers and casual walkers will find the landscape offers relatively easy hiking, with one trail, Stone Lodge Trail, offering a bit more challenge. Below are the trails, distances and a brief description of each.

Davis Run Trail: 3 miles—easy hiking through wetlands and a forest of hardwood trees, with a few conifers in the mix.

Lakeside Loop: 2.2 miles around the lake on park roads and gravel walkways. Be alert, as bikes share this trail.

McCune Run Trail: 0.5 mile—this short trail leads to an abandoned beaver pond and a wetland meadow. It eventually connects with Davis Run Trail.

Pine Trail: 0.3 mile—this trail offers glimpses of pine tree plantations, farm fields and large chestnut oak trees.

Stone Lodge Trail: 1.5 miles—this trail varies from easy to more difficult. It starts at the James A. Kell Visitor Center and winds up a steep climb that brings hikers past the remnants of an old springhouse and homestead.

Strawcutter Trail: 0.6 mile—this easy trail offers views similar to the Pine Trail.

Getting there

From West: Take the Pennsylvania Turnpike (I-76) to exit 57 for I-376/US-22 toward Pittsburgh/Monroeville.

- Follow signs for US-22 East for 18 miles
- Turn right onto PA-981 South, on 981 for less than a mile
- Turn left onto Keystone Park Road

From East: Follow route US-22 West

Keystone State Park
1150 Keystone Park Road
Derry, PA 15627-3679