



The Pedaling Angler— *Heritage Rail Trail*

by Derek Eberly photos by the author

Fishing and bicycling in Pennsylvania are a natural fit thanks to hundreds of miles of recycled railroad passages that have been repurposed into multi-use trails often known as Rail Trails. Many anglers are starting to recognize the vast amount of river miles across Pennsylvania that are readily available due to these easily accessible, smooth, low grade trails. I have been fly fishing for 20 years and adding a bicycle to my pack out has opened new waters and saved countless tough days, where pedaling a few extra miles has meant all the difference between a rough day and a great day.

Because of Pennsylvania's geography and history, the choices are seemingly endless for the pedaling angler to explore new trails and waters. We are going to focus on one segment of one such trail that runs south out of a former revolutionary United States Capital and also carried President Abraham Lincoln on his way to deliver the Gettysburg Address. The York Heritage Rail Trail is steeped in ties to early American culture and not only connects the historic towns along its route but also the present to the past while offering some excellent fishing along its way.

Starting at the Mason-Dixon line, the 10-foot wide trail rolls through the lush pastoral valleys of southern York



This Brown Trout rolled a Woolly Bugger streamer pattern variant on the first cast of the day.

County and picks up Old Mill Creek in New Freedom. From there, the trail runs north and picks up the South Branch Codorus Creek. Together, the Heritage Rail Trail and South Branch Codorus Creek gently roll for 21 miles along a low grade through meadows and villages on their way to York. Parking access for the trail and creek can be found at stops including Seven Valleys, Hanover Junction, and just outside Glen Rock. The trail and creek are mostly shaded along this section contributing to the quality of this water and the pleasure of riding this trail. Shade is a welcomed relief when temperatures rise in these valleys as summer approaches.

The creek

The South Branch Codorus Creek is a stocked trout fishery from just outside the town of Shrewsbury to its confluence with Codorus Creek, just south of York. While we visited the creek during trout season, it was towards the end of May, and the creek was starting to warm up. Even though we fished in the morning, we took the water



There are many fish habitat improvements along the creek. These areas are fish magnets and deserve a few extra casts. Search the areas along the banks near the head of the riffle/plunge pool. Often, you will find fish waiting to smash a well presented pattern.

temperature each time we visited. The lowest temperature we recorded was 62-degrees F with a high temperature of 68-degrees F during the morning of our last visit on the first week in June. Catch and release anglers should bring a thermometer this time of year.

While the creek is stocked, there is natural reproduction in parts of the creek and in several tributaries. The majority of the fish we caught were recently stocked trout with a mix of some fish that were either colorful holdovers or gorgeous wild trout. The presence of wild trout in the watershed is an encouraging sign that restoration projects and continued conservation efforts on the creek are in fact working. A brief inspection of submersed rocks and logs revealed a healthy population of a variety of mayflies, stoneflies, caddisflies, crustaceans, and baitfish.

Trout anglers should use a variety of tactics including conventional and fly tackle. While I primarily fly fish, I saw several anglers successfully employing the use of spinning tackle. I found success using small nymphs imitating the mayflies, stoneflies, and crustaceans we found. I caught fish on patterns such as the Prince Nymph, Hares Ear



South Branch Codus Creek is a healthy fishery. Turn over a few rocks, and you will find a wide variety of aquatic life that keep fish fed all year long.

Nymph, and scuds. Watching the spin gear anglers catch fish encouraged me to use streamer patterns like the Woolly Bugger, zonkers, and sculpin patterns that resulted in some great takes.

The height of trout season can bring plenty of anglers to the banks of the creek. Sharing the creek with other anglers is nothing new for this area. One way to beat the crowds and get to a good fishing hole quickly while getting in some low-impact cardio is to use a bicycle. We visited the creek several times throughout trout season, and our bikes got us away from the crowds and on fish in a hurry.

Bike fishing

When fishing from a bicycle, consider a few things. First, wear a helmet. Wear a helmet not for the “if” but when you fall off your bike. I have been riding bicycles for over 30 years, and I still fall, usually in spectacular fashion and especially when standing still or rolling slowly. Do not let a little fall turn into a big mess.

When I first started fishing from a bike, I used a mountain bike and a backpack—nothing fancy—just me, my bike, a 2-piece fly rod, a few fly boxes in my backpack with a bottle of water and snacks, and I was ready for fun. Today, my setup is a little different but not much. When riding a rail trail, you probably do not need the typical forward leaning posture/geometry provided by a mountain bike. Likewise, a road bike built for speed with skinny tires may also present different challenges. While you should use whatever bike you feel most comfortable riding, there are some styles that are a natural fit for bike fishing.

Styles to consider include touring, gravel, comfort, and off-road touring bikes such as fat bikes. The most important part of selecting a bike is finding a bike with the correct geometry and fit. This means choosing the right size bike for you and test riding bicycles for comfort before purchasing.

I use a Surly ECR 29+ semi-fat bike with racks on the front and back and two pannier bags for maximum capacity. This bike allows me to comfortably pedal for miles while also safely and securely carrying all my gear and even sometimes my friend's gear. The bike is rated to handle my weight plus any gear I bring and is designed for this exact kind of activity.

Consider packing a small tire repair kit, a small hand pump, and a bike tool in case you need to make adjustments on the trail or repair any breakdowns. I once had my rear axle slip 2 miles away from my truck while riding the Mid State Trail along Penns Creek. It was a simple fix, but I did not have a bike tool with me to make the repair. That was a long walk back to the parking lot with a bike on one shoulder. I learned my lesson and have a bike tool in my pack every trip. Also, bring a lock and cable or some other method to secure your bicycle. I use a heavy bike lock with a 6-foot cable that I often wrap around trees. There are no bike racks along the trail, and you can never be too careful, so making it as inconvenient as possible for someone to steal your bike in the woods while you are fishing on the water is often a practice in woodland ingenuity.

The trail

The Heritage Rail Trail offers anglers and cyclists of all skill levels a scenic and leisurely opportunity to explore more of Pennsylvania's vast outdoor resources within a short drive of several of the largest cities in the southeast/central region. Towns like New Freedom and Glen Rock offer great local eateries and curiosities while also opening a window to the past and some of the integral moments and movements of our nation's history.

The trail is made possible in part by the Keystone Fund, a Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources program that leverages public and private funds to create public access to resources like the Heritage Rail Trail and many other rail trails across Pennsylvania. The trail does pass through private lands, and all visitors must respect local land owners and posted lands for all of us to continue to enjoy this fishery.

One of the best parts of integrating a bicycle into your fishing is the ability to explore or "recon" new water. When the water temperatures rise and the water levels drop, it is a great time to put the trout gear away and explore new trails and waters for your next trip. ☐

