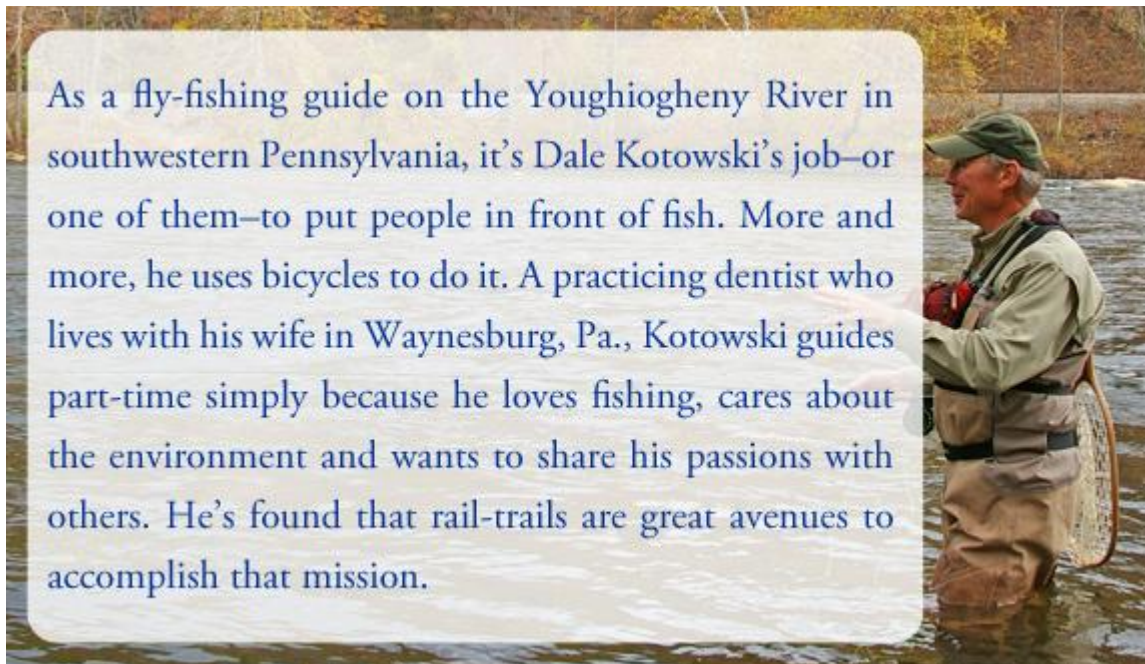




Dale Kotowski
Casting for Converts

By Bob Frye



As a fly-fishing guide on the Youghiogheny River in southwestern Pennsylvania, it's Dale Kotowski's job—or one of them—to put people in front of fish. More and more, he uses bicycles to do it. A practicing dentist who lives with his wife in Waynesburg, Pa., Kotowski guides part-time simply because he loves fishing, cares about the environment and wants to share his passions with others. He's found that rail-trails are great avenues to accomplish that mission.

Kotowski keeps meticulous journals of each outing, recording details such as location, fish caught and flies used. These notes reveal that during the last three years, anglers who bike actually do better than those who walk and wade or float the river in boats—and, Kotowski says, they unabashedly love it.

How did you get involved with fishing?

Where I grew up in Illinois, my grandmother was the matriarch of the family, so whenever we went on a picnic, she picked the place. And she always picked a place where we could fish because that's what she wanted to do. It wasn't trout back then so much as catfish and panfish. But I grew up with it.



Dale Kotowski on the bridge over the Youghiogheny River in Pennsylvania's Ohiopyle State Park. Look closely at the rear wheel of his bicycle and you can see the pouches, like carpenter's tape holsters, that hold his rods so they can be kept rigged and ready to fish.

When did rail trails become a part of that?

We moved here from Illinois in 1987 and went biking on the [Great Allegheny Passage](#) in Ohiopyle State Park not long after. We were pedaling along in July and the wild rhododendron was in bloom with all these white flowers, and I just thought, "This is the most beautiful place I've ever seen."

Then I looked down at the river, and it was so clear I could see fish, trout. The whole way back to the car, my life thought I was going to crash because instead of watching where I was going, I was looking for spots to fish when I came back. That all started because this was a biking destination.

What makes bicycle fishing so productive?

It's just a much easier way to fish a large segment of water. On a bike you can cover eight to 10 miles a day. You'd never walk that far and fish. And unlike in a boat, you don't have to worry about water levels being so low you can't get on the water, or so high you get one cast at a fish before the current takes you away.

On a bike, we can get on a lot more water in a lot less time with a minimum of effort, and we can pull over and concentrate on areas that are productive and bypass ones that aren't.

How have customers reacted to the idea of bicycle fishing?

It was a little bit of a hard sell in the beginning, which is funny because it's something we always did. When we were kids and mom had had enough of us in the house, she told us to go outside and find something to do. So we grabbed our rods and our bikes and went to the river to fish.

Now I do as many bicycle fishing trips as float trips, and absolutely every client I've ever taken out has found it to be a wonderful experience. A lot of them say, "Wow, I would never have thought to do this, but it's fantastic," and then they want to go buy their own bike.



Kotowski casts into the Youghiogheny River, which he believes is as good for trout fishing as just about any river in the country.

Is that because of the good fishing alone?

No. People today, and young people especially, want to maximize their free time. Just going fishing isn't enough. Just biking isn't enough. But if they can combine those two activities, and fish *and* bike, that really appeals to them.

Does that combination require any special gear?

Not really. I carry my rods in what look like carpenter's tape holders attached to a bike rack. The pedaling is easy, so you can even wear lightweight waders, and any bike will work.

And there are all kinds of fish—trout, smallmouth bass, walleyes, catfish, muskellunges—that you can catch on everything from flies to spinners to worms. There are lots of possibilities.

Do you have any favorite trails?

The Youghiogheny [on the Great Allegheny Passage] is one. The **Lower Trail** along the Frankstown Branch of the Juniata River is a beautiful ride with some wonderful spring creeks that are full of wild brown trout, too.

The **North Shore Trail** in Pittsburgh is great because you can go there in summer and catch loads of smallmouth bass and big walleyes. And the **Pine Creek Rail Trail** in Pennsylvania's Grand Canyon is a pretty, pretty trail where I can bike and fish and camp, so that's a winner.

But I've biked and fished lots of trails, like along Cranberry and Dogwood creeks in West Virginia, the Potomac River in Maryland, the Colorado River. There are opportunities all over the country.



A rainbow trout caught in the Youghiogheny River.

You've turned anglers into cyclists and cyclists into anglers. Why is that important?

We all want the same things. People who fish want clean water to support fish, boaters want clean water to paddle in, bikers want clean water to pedal beside, and we all want it in places that are scenic and beautiful and wild.

But we all preach to our own individual choirs: fishermen, boaters, bikers, all of us. We need to preach to a much bigger choir, the Mormon Tabernacle of choirs. If we work together, we're much more powerful advocates.

So what's in your future?

There are still a lot of trails I want to do. The trail along [Pennsylvania's Oil Creek](#) is one. It's paralleled by a tourist train. I'd love to pedal it and fish one way, then load my bike on the train and ride it back the other.

For those of us who like to suck the marrow from the bone, to live life to the fullest, that would be a day, wouldn't it?

Bob Frye is the outdoors editor of the *Pittsburgh Tribune-Review* and a freelance writer. He's also an avid angler, biker and all-around outdoorsman.