

TRIBUNE-REVIEW

Sandy Creek Trail opens a window to nature

By Paul g. Wiegman

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When I was young, summer meant doing one of three things: riding my bike, wandering the woods near home in West View, or playing softball.

Fifty years later I still do one of three things in the summer: ride my bike, wander any woods, stream or field that is interesting and not posted, and in the evenings, play softball.

Since softball has little to do with the content of *The Natural Life* I'll skip heroic tales of clutch hits in the ninth inning to win the game. However, I will admit that playing the outfield does give me the opportunity to watch birds between pitches. I have a pretty good "birds seen while playing right-center field" list, which includes great blue heron, red-bellied woodpecker, Canada geese, and a great horned -- but that's another story.

Riding my bike and wandering the woods occupy a lot of my time during the summer. Fortunately here in western Pennsylvania I have abundant opportunities to combine both activities and explore the natural lands of the region.

In my quest for new outings, I recently discovered another rail-trail that is especially good for natural history -- the Sandy Creek Trail in Venango County. The trail actually follows East Sandy Creek on its course from the uplands of east-central Venango County to its confluence with the Allegheny River. It is an 8-mile path with an asphalt surface stretching from Belmar on the west side of the Allegheny River and downstream of Franklin, to near the village of Van along Route 322 southeast of Franklin.

To reach the west access of the Sandy Creek Trail at Belmar, take Route 8 north of Interstate 80 toward Franklin. About 3 miles south of Franklin, near the airport, turn east (right) onto Pone Lane. Watch for signs to the bike trail. You will pass the Franklin High School and continue to a "T" intersection, which is Belmar Road. Turn right, and in a couple of miles at the foot of a hill the trailhead parking area will be on the right. There are restrooms here, but not along the trail or at the other end.

From the parking lot the trail heads east. Almost immediately the Belmar Bridge looms ahead. This massive structure crossing the Allegheny River was built in 1907 as part of a railroad destined to carry passengers and freight from New York to Chicago. The complete route never materialized and what was built was later used to carry coal from Clarion County to Ashtabula, Ohio. Stopping in the center of the Belmar Bridge affords great views up and down the river where the channel sweeps through a wide bend. On the east side of the bridge look for a set of steps that lead down to another trail, the Samuel Justus Trail.

If you want to add to your trip either now or on your way back, take the stairs, which have a ramp beside them to roll your bike, down to the Justus Trail where you can go downstream to Indian God Rock on the Allegheny River, or upstream to the Route 322 Bridge at Franklin.

The 1,385-foot Belmar Bridge is the longest water crossing you will make, but it isn't the only one on the Sandy Creek Trail. In all there are seven bridges crossing meandering East Sandy Creek.

The route of the trail, especially the section near the Allegheny River valley, is through a deep, narrow, wooded gorge cut by East Sandy Creek. There are plenty of opportunities to stop, do a little bird watching, explore for wildflowers, or just enjoy the wild scenery. One of the certainties of the trail is that every phoebe has its bridge and every bridge has its phoebe. A stop in the middle of any of the bridges is bound to turn up this ubiquitous flycatcher. In places the railroad grade has cut into the hillside and there are steep rock cliffs. With patience you will find phoebes nesting in a more natural situation.

The bridges also afford a high vantage point above the forest canopy, which makes watching songbirds during migration a less neck straining activity. The warblers are getting ready to make their fall migration and this trail would be a good place to work on identifying the fall plumages of that group. When I rode in June, stopping at the end of one bridge brought me eye to eye with a beautiful indigo bunting.

At 1.4 miles from the Belmar access the trail starts a long sweeping turn to the left just before crossing a bridge that is high above the bed of Sandy Creek. On the left side of the trail, and below, is a large wetland. Look for a footpath starting on the left side of the path that goes down to the wetland just as you get a view of the bridge. The wetland is the habitat for several typical species including great blue heron, green heron, and a variety of swallows that kept sweeping over the patches of open water. I'm sure spending more time at this location would expand that brief list considerably. The day I stopped the bullfrogs were bellowing in full song and again longer visits at various times of the year should turn up a lot more amphibians.

The railroad was intended to be a double track so although the asphalt path occupies one lane, the corridor is wide and open. Much of the vegetation immediately alongside the trail is a typical array of pioneer wildflowers that are the first to reclaim the land after the cessation of management to keep the railroad bed clear. Familiar and abundant species such as coltsfoot, common and moth mullein, penstomen, fleabane, and oxeye daisy fill the unused portion of the path. But you never know what unusual surprises might turn up. Often the ballast for the ties and rails was crushed limestone, and there are instances where fringed gentian (*Gentianopsis crinita*) has been found growing along abandoned railroad beds such as this one.

The real adventure of the Sandy Creek Trail is Deep Valley Tunnel. It's about 30 feet wide, nearly 1/4 mile long and short enough to allow light to penetrate from both ends. Water drips from the ceiling and provides a quick shower in the center of the tunnel. On either side of the tunnel are bridges over Sandy Creek. Aside from the great views up and down stream, look for footpaths at the ends

of the bridges that lead down to the water and allow you to explore the stream. When I visited, the creek was low and there were lots of braided channels and in places sandy shores and rocky islands. These should be great spots to search for turtles and amphibians at low water. Keep in mind that portions of the trail go through private property and respect signs when you find them.

My first ride on The Sandy Creek Trail was in June and the spring wildflowers were finished. However, in places, small patches of mountain laurel (*Kalmia latifolia*) were still in bloom. I made a couple of stops to closely inspect the intricate flowers. Pollination of the state flower is fascinating. The filaments that hold the stamens are tensioned and held at the top so the 10 stamens are in little pockets around the outer rim of the fused petals. When a bee inserts its tongue in the crevice between the ovary and the base of the filaments, the tension is released and the hair-like structures with pollen filled stamens at the top spring toward the center of the flower. The stamens hit the bee on the back and pollen is deposited on the insect. The bee then carries the load of pollen to the stigma of the next flower. Looking at laurel flowers along the trail, it was easy to find some with filaments and stamens still tensioned and ready to be triggered, and some that had done their job and deposited their pollen on an unsuspecting bee.

Two other interesting botanical finds along the trail were a stand of American yew (*Taxus canadensis*) at 5.4 miles from the Belmar access and near the Van end of the trail. Although once common, high deer populations have diminished this species in the region and it was good to see a healthy stand. Also, near the east end several patches of bowman's root, or mountain Indian-physic (*Porteranthus trifoliatu*s) were in full bloom.

Once you reach the access at Van the trail ends, at least for now. At the parking area it is obvious that the railroad bed continues to the east. Signs declare that in the future this will connect with the Clarion Highlands Trail System providing yet another long-distance bike trail in western Pennsylvania. I checked my topographic maps and found that the line runs all the way into the Clarion River valley and then southeast to Brookville. For now you have to turn around and retrace the route back to Belmar.

Although comparatively short (8 miles one way), the Sandy Creek Trail offers a variety of scenery from the broad vistas of the Allegheny River to the wooded confines of the narrow Sandy Creek valley. Rides in the spring and fall should be spectacular with wildflower and birds. You can extend your outing by making the connection with the Justus Trail following the Allegheny River up or down stream adding a dozen or so miles. And, if you like crossing bridges, you'll love this trail, and the opportunity to stand high above East Sandy Creek and meet indigo buntings eye to eye.

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