



Bring a fly rod along on your next river trip, and you might just hook up with some nice fish. Fly rods are great for catching small-mouth bass on many rivers, including the Delaware pictured here.

photo-Carl Haensel

# Fishing Pennsylvania's Water Trails

by Carl Haensel

A land of flowing water, Pennsylvania has over 20 designated water trails, each on a different section of river. Located across the state, they offer excellent access to top-notch fishing. From mid-size streams to large rivers, water trails will get you to the out of the way spots that fish love. Here's how to get started, and make the most of your experience.

## Get the guides

Anglers are fortunate that each water trail has a huge amount of information contained in maps and guides, which contain details on how to access the water, what fish species the waters contain and what you need to know to plan your trip. Get information for each trail at the Pennsylvania Fish & Boat Commission's web site at: [www.fishandboat.com/watertrails/trailindex.com](http://www.fishandboat.com/watertrails/trailindex.com).

## Safety on the water

Safety is the most important consideration of any trip on the water. Each water trail map and guide has a section that discusses safety on the water and highlights safety concerns on the stretch of the water that it covers. These issues range from rapids to low-head dams to barges and locks. Always wearing a life jacket is an important first step in ensuring your safety while fishing Pennsylvania's water trails.

## What boat to take

Sections of some water trails will accommodate almost any boat. If you're on the water in Philadelphia or Pittsburgh, even the largest fishing boats will work well. On the other hand, small Central Pennsylvania waters like the Conodoguinet, Yellow Breeches and Swatara Creek are best suited for paddle craft. While almost any boat can be fished out of, some make better angling crafts. Likewise, some fishing boats are not suited for river use. Royalex or other plastic canoes, sit-on-top kayaks and jon boats are

just a few examples of good boats to take fishing on a water trail. Rocks can damage fiberglass hulled fishing boats, and their use should be avoided on many water trails. Boats to specifically avoid include extremely narrow kayaks and ultra-small bass fishing boats. Any boat with poor stability does not make a good fishing boat on moving water.

## Plan time to fish

While any river trip takes planning, a fishing trip takes even more. Whether you're out for the afternoon or beginning a five-day excursion, you need to think about more than just paddling a canoe or motoring a jon boat. Remember to allocate how much time you will fish. If you plan to stop and anchor or pull up on the shore to get out and wade, you'll need even more time. River anglers often figure that while fishing moving water, they'll progress at about 1 mile per hour or even slower.

## When to go

While summertime is a great time to explore the water trails, you will find that the "dog days" of summer don't always offer the best fishing on all waterways. Spring and fall may be better for fishing success, just make sure to dress appropriately. Be aware of the possibility of hypothermia.

## Camping along the way

While not all of the water trails in Pennsylvania are suited for a river camping trip, some offer excellent opportunities. The Juniata River water trail highlights areas to camp, as does the Middle Allegheny water trail. The Susquehanna offers camping along some sections, but not others. Since most of the land along Pennsylvania's water trails is private, make sure to respect private property and camp only in approved locations. Most camping locations are not able to be reserved, and it's better to arrive early enough in the day to be able to set up camp comfortably. Then, you can head back out fishing until dusk.

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*Canoes are an optimal craft to fish from on Pennsylvania's water trails. If you're playing or landing a fish in a canoe, keep your center of gravity low by kneeling if necessary. Remember to attach your fishing gear to the thwarts in case your boat capsizes.*



photo-Bonnie Tobin



photo-Justin Torok

*A sit on top kayak is a great boat to fish from on a water trail, especially in warm weather. Even inexpensive models offer a good stable fishing platform.*



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| 1 - Middle Allegheny River Water Trail         | 12 - Swatara Creek Water Trail                  |
| 2 - Three Rivers Water Trail                   | 13 - Conestoga River Water Trail                |
| 3 - Youghiogheny River Water Trail             | 14 - North Branch Susquehanna River Water Trail |
| 4 - Upper Monongahela River Water Trail        | 15 - Lehigh River Water Trail                   |
| 5 - Clarion River Water Trail                  | 16 - Schuylkill River Water Trail               |
| 6 - Kiski-Conemaugh River Water Trail          | 17 - Delaware River Water Trail                 |
| 7 - West Branch Susquehanna River Water Trail  | 17a - Tidal Delaware Water Trail                |
| 8 - Middle Susquehanna River Water Trail       | 18 - Pine Creek Water Trail                     |
| 9 - Lower Susquehanna River Water Trail        | 19 - Juniata River Water Trail                  |
| 10 - Raystown Branch Juniata River Water Trail | 20 - Yellow Breeches Creek Water Trail          |
| 11 - Conodoguinet Creek Water Trail            |   |

### Fishing the water trails

When you're fishing Pennsylvania's water trails by boat, you'll have a limited amount of space and shouldn't be bringing along every rod or piece of tackle that you own. So, what should you bring? Most of the water trails in Pennsylvania offer good bass fishing, often for smallmouth bass and occasionally for largemouth as well. A medium action spinning rod with 8-pound-test line will cover most of the opportunities that you get for bass as well as walleyes. If you add a leader, you can even handle the occasional pike or muskellunge. For fly anglers, a 7- or 8-weight fly rod can catch most of the bass that you'll encounter. If you're fishing on a water trail that offers trout fishing opportunities such as the Yellow Breeches, Delaware, Middle Allegheny or Clarion, you should consider lighter weight fishing equipment. On these water trails, a fly rod

such as a 5-weight or spinning rod with 4- or 6-pound-test line may work better. Anglers targeting specific species such as flathead or channel catfish or muskellunge should bring equipment that is designed for large fish. Lure and tackle preference vary greatly from angler to angler. To begin, anglers fishing with spinning tackle should bring a good variety of jigs. Colors that mimic natural prey like minnows or crayfish are top producers, and sizes vary. Small and medium sized shallow running crankbaits are another great tackle box addition. Baits including worms or minnows can work well, but can be a challenge to manage on a longer river trip. Fly anglers should bring streamers and poppers for bass and nymphs and dry flies for trout when appropriate. Each water trail is different, of course, so do your research and be prepared with the right gear before you hit the water. ☐