

THE LEHIGH RIVER IS ALIVE AND WELL

Article and Photo by Charles R. Meck



The best way to fish the Lehigh River is from a drift boat, which gives access to many river sections.

“If I didn’t know better, I’d swear I was fishing in Colorado or Montana.” That’s what I blurted out as I exited the drift boat completing my first float trip on the Lehigh River in eastern Pennsylvania. That first event occurred more than five years ago, but the fantastic scenery and the high quality of fishing will last forever.

The Lehigh River wasn’t always a quality fishery. It and many other eastern Pennsylvania waters like the Schuylkill and Little Schuylkill rivers were once dead. For years those rivers suffered from the consequences of mining, and the waters were mostly void of any aquatic life. They were barren—hopeless streams that nobody cared about. Why should anyone have cared about them? They transported raw sewage and held few fish.

But, these waters have vastly improved in the past couple decades—they have evolved into unpolluted, respectable, highly productive trout waters. The Lehigh River from White Haven to Walnutport has developed into 40 miles of quality trout water that runs 100 to 200 feet wide and drops 1000 feet in elevation.

Several years ago, local anglers discovered that trout had returned to many of the areas of the Lehigh River well below the stocked sections, especially near colder tributaries like Hayes, Hickory, and Pohopoco creeks. Up to that time trout had been stocked in the upper areas of the Lehigh, upriver from White Haven. But much of the lower end, because of its drainage from old anthracite mines, remained contaminated for years. The Lehigh River Stocking Association (LRSA—www.lrsa.org) foresaw the potential and began stocking the river more than a decade ago. The Lehigh Coldwater Fishery Alliance (LCFA) headed by Dean Druckenmiller also saw the possibilities as an outstanding trout river in the east. The main objective of LCFA is to preserve the river as a coldwater domain for trout. You can support this worthy cause by joining the organization. More information is available at www.thelehighriver.org.

Francis Walter Dam just upriver from White Haven will, to a great extent, determine the future viability of the fertile river below. Operated by the Corps of Engineers, the dam, designed as a flood control project, holds bottom-release gates. If used properly the bottom release could guarantee cool water on almost the entire route of the river. But the Corps of Engineers is interested in their major concern—flood control. Rafting has become quite popular on the river and the Corps releases



The author displays a nice Lehigh River brown trout. Photo by Dean Druckenmiller.

water on weekends for that purpose. On some weekends in June, July, and August, that extra shot of water is warm, and the tepid temperature curtails productive, trout fishing downstream.

Is the river now thriving? As part of a field day on a recent late May date, I took a second float trip with members and guests of the LCFA. On this trip, a dozen dignitaries were in attendance and fished the water from Bowmanstown to Walnutport. Walnutport is considered by many local anglers as the lower end of the quality trout water. Joe DeMarkis, one of the top guides on the river, says although most trout fishing ends at Walnutport, “There are pockets of good trout water all the way to Allentown.” Joining us were notables like Doug Austen of the Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission (PFBC); Bob Bachman, Commissioner for PFBC; Chris Kocher, Wildlands Conservancy; Lauren Imgrund, Conservation Landscape Initiative; Cindy Dunn, Department of Conservation and Natural Resources; Ray Youngblood, Western Pocono Trout Unlimited; Justin Poremba, Senator Specter’s office; Bill Derhammer, Lehigh River Stocking Association; and guides Joe DeMarkis, Jake Markezin, Paul Davidson, and Dean Druckenmiller. In a scenery-laden eight-mile, seven-hour float trip the group caught more than fifty trout, some as large as 20 inches long. Those trout included several heavy brown trout, a lot of aggressive rainbows, and several native brook trout caught where some of the cooler tributaries entered the river.

The best way to access the river and get a good flavor for its character is to float it. In a good number of sections it’s the only way to access the river and fish productive water. We entered the river at a new access area in Bowmanstown.

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Ray Youngblood and a Lehigh River rainbow he caught.
Photo by Dean Druckenmiller.

Since much of the river is inaccessible, there is a dire need for additional access sites. Three or four new strategically located access areas would do wonders and greatly enhance floating the river. Some of the existing access sites are old and in poor shape. You can float the river from White Haven to Walnutport, a distance of about 40 miles.

There are several good guide services available on the Lehigh: Rivers Fly Fishing with Joe DeMarkis and Tim Skoraszewski; Fly Fish PA with Dean Druckenmiller and Jake Markezin; Skinnners Guide Service with Paul Davidson; The Evening Hatch Fly Shop with Jack O'Donnell and Mark Davenport. These are among the top services and guides on the Lehigh. They offer half- and full-day float trips.

Hatches have returned in good numbers and you'll find sulphurs, blue-winged olives, light cahills, march browns, slate drakes, and many others in abundance. Upriver from White Haven the river holds a green drake hatch, and all the early season bugs like the quill gordon, blue quill, and hendrickson. The river does warm and many locals don't fish it from late June through early September.

Don't overlook this fine gem, located less than 50 miles north of Philadelphia, 75 miles southwest of New York City, and 15 miles north of Allentown. Has the Lehigh River emerged from its sordid, polluted stages of past years? It has made tremendous advances, and thanks to organizations like the Lehigh Coldwater Fishery Alliance and the Lehigh River Stocking Association it should become a premier spot for all Eastern fly fishers. Yes, thanks to some very dedicated people like Dean Druckenmiller and his cohorts on the LCFA, the Lehigh River is alive and well. What is the prognosis for the future? Expect even better things, and mark my words: "The Lehigh will be one of the top trout destinations in the east in the years to come."

Charlie Meck has authored many informative fly fishing books, the latest being—Fishing Tandem Flies, published by Headwater Books, www.headwater-books.com. Charlie is a regular contributor to this and other fishing publications. ←

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This huge rainbow is a fish of a lifetime for many anglers. Don't go thinking these fish are easily caught.

option in the growing changes facing our fisheries. With the declining water quality and fish populations in many of our public fisheries, fee fishing is a way to supplement your opportunities. Whether it is acceptable or not it is up to the individual angler.

Listed below are the fee fishing establishments that I am familiar with. Use the contact information for rates and other details.

GEORGIA

Black Hawk Trophy Fly Fishing
Clarksville, Ga.
info@blackhawkflyfishing.com
706/947-3474

NORTH CAROLINA

Davidson River Outfitters
Pisgah Forest, N.C.
www.davidsonflyfishing.com
888/861-0111

PENNSYLVANIA

Moore's Run Fish and Game Preserve
Austin, Pa.
814/647-5563.

Conewago Fly Fisherman
Arendtsville, Pa.
www.caddisshack.com
717/253-4547

Bill Skilton's Anglers Envy
Fly Fishing Retreat
Boiling Springs, Pa.
www.billskilton.com
717/258-0642

VIRGINIA

River Bound X-Stream
304/922-4563

Bob Clouser is an avid smallmouth bass fisherman and recognized for the many productive fly patterns he has designed. Bob has authored two books and is highly sought for his fishing presentations. Along with his wife, Joan, he owns and operates Clouser's Fly Shop in Middle-town, Pa. www.clouserfly-fishing.com. ←

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