



Watching the River Run





Chapter One

To the River

Any one of us who ventures to the edge of the Youghiogheny River in Ohiopyle State Park, or for that matter anywhere along this tumbling stream in Pennsylvania and Maryland, might sense the special nature of an extraordinary waterway along with that of the emerald mountains it intersects.

Staring into the flow, and paging back to some of my earliest and most formative childhood memories, I'm awestruck at the beauty, the power, and the captivating appeal of this Appalachian artery. After learning more about its exceptional place on earth, I'm also impressed at how important this ribbon of free-flowing water is to all who live along it and to all who visit from near and far.

This destination pulls many of us back again and again. Beyond the limited boundaries of two state parks, the entire river—spring-fed source bubbling down from lofty heights to languid finale in the Monongahela River's flatwater south of Pittsburgh—the Youghiogheny (yaw-ki-GAY-nee) offers a kaleidoscope of scenery delivering both high adventure and deep solace.

Consider the surprising superlatives here in what was once a forgotten backwater of our eastern mountains. Ohiopyle is Pennsylvania's largest state park in land area and among the top

With high runoff from recent storms, the Youghiogheny drops through Entrance Rapid while autumn colors of the Appalachian forest peak in October.



Rafters plunge through Cucumber Rapid. The Youghiogheny is among the most paddled whitewater rivers in America.

five in numbers of visitors, more than one million per year. Whitewater here ranks among the best and the most paddled in America. The river includes not only the extraordinarily popular rapids below the town of Ohiopyle but also gentler flows in the park above, intensely cascading mileage farther upstream in Maryland, and calming riffles in the lower half of the river as it emerges from mountain gorges to drift among westward foothills.

From the 1960s to the early 2000s, brilliant whitewater was the Youghiogheny's major claim to recreational fame, but now Ohiopyle and much of the river's length are also known for a world-class bicycle trail, the Great Allegheny Passage. This traverses the Ohiopyle State Park, follows the river down to its confluence with the larger flow of the Monongahela, and continues in a short urban stint to the glass and steel

towers of Pittsburgh. Going the other way, this bicycling route runs from Ohiopyle upstream and eastward to the town of Confluence, climbs the Youghiogheny's principal tributary, the Casselman River, then crosses the Eastern Continental Divide for a total of 150 miles to the North Branch Potomac River at Cumberland, Maryland. And there's more. The seamless trail continues downstream along the historic Chesapeake and Ohio (C&O) Canal and main stem Potomac for an uninterrupted peddle-powered odyssey of 333 miles, from Pittsburgh to Washington, DC. We can bike across the entire Appalachian range, from hilly western foothills to the largest estuary of the Atlantic Ocean.

However, there's no need for boats or bikes if one simply wants to absorb, appreciate, and be nourished by the essence of this river. State parks at both Ohiopyle

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and upstream at Maryland's Swallow Falls lure visitors to stroll along watery edges, swim in chilling pools, or relax at the interface of what is wild with what is tame. The Youghiogheny invites us to come, stay, and eagerly return, as I've been doing for a lifetime.

Even more vital, the river and its centerpiece park at Ohiopyle provide essential habitat for an intricate web of life where plant and animal species mix and migrate in timeless patterns. Towering hardwoods and hemlocks blend in seamless shades of green bridging the biological treasure house of the Southern Appalachians with the scenic Northern Hardwoods array of trees with their contrasting remnants of glacial epochs from cooler climates, a varied community that, though imperiled, endures in sequestered gorges.

The recreational appeal of the river, the whitewater, the bike trail, the footpaths, the campgrounds, and the postcard-perfect scenery have long drawn people to cherish this world apart. However, among the festive opportunities for daily, weekend, or vacation escape, the more essential workings of nature can easily be taken for granted. For that reason, the main purpose of this book is to highlight the natural world of the Youghiogheny and all that it offers to everyone.

The river and its surroundings surely reflect beauty and wildness, though not without their share of modern problems and plagues. Coal mining for the past two hundred years with the resulting water pollution that sterilized streams if not whole rivers still continues, though at far reduced levels compared to the basin's checkered past. Old problems have become aggravated by fracking for "natural" gas along some tributaries, all while the age of fossil-fuel-burning enters its diminished but lingering stages. Likewise, land development creeps ever outward from the cities, towns, and brightly lit highway interchanges with effects felt even at remote



retreats. More ubiquitous but less noticed by many people, exotic plants and pests have invaded here by means as surreptitious as ornamental shrubbery imported for yards and gardens but unknowingly infected by pathogens promising a death sentence to native life. Courageously confronting these problems, dedicated caretakers along the Youghiogheny strive to safeguard the best that remains and to restore the workings of the natural world where possible. Their success at dozens of streams and mountainsides has been promising, enriching, and inspiring.

In my earlier book, *Youghiogheny: Appalachian River* (first published in 1984, then updated in 2023), I focused on the big picture of this intriguing watershed while delving deep into history and cultural intricacies, from journeys of George Washington to the

Bicyclists breeze through Ohiopyle State Park on the Great Allegheny Passage bike trail. Combined seamlessly with the C&O Canal towpath along the Potomac River, this is America's longest continuous bike trail that does not use segments of roads.





complexities of today's world, unimagined just one lifetime or even a few decades ago. The Youghiogheny's mix of what has long been wild with what has become a popular playground now motivates me to write this follow-up book featuring photographs of the river's surviving natural wonders along with scenes that have been restored by visionary stewards of these borderlands between the urban maw of the East Coast and that of Pittsburgh with its industrial outliers fingering out toward the Midwest.

Knowing that the Youghiogheny River and Ohio-pyle State Park are remarkable might be self-evident, reinforced in the words of chapters that follow. But seeing is believing, and a picture, as they say, can be worth a thousand words. So the photos take center stage in this book that accompanies my earlier story of the river and its people.

Exploring, once again, the stream's shores, forests, and rugged mountain slopes, I sought out scenes that show what is truly irreplaceable and eternally natural about this part of the earth in its whitewater and in its quiet pools, its intimate edges and boldly towering ridges, its rocks, trees, illuminating sunsets and darkening storms. To me, every bit is enticing. However, photos offer only an introduction to what's really here. So in this book I invite you to go, to look, and to find for yourself all that this river has to offer, from rock-hard fossils of giant tree ferns thriving three hundred million years ago to bubbling rapids that change hourly with the weather and the water, renewed every day as we stand along these shores, watching the river run.

Cucumber Run approaches its mouth at the Youghiogheny River. Treatment of mine drainage has reclaimed this stream from the orange stains of sterilizing acid and toxic iron pollution that prevailed in the 1960s.

