

## Perfect place to pedal

Unchallenging terrain of Pennsylvania trail offers beautiful views, chance to see animals

By Bob Downing, Beacon Journal staff writer

Published on Sunday, June 13, 2010

---



The Allegheny River Trail stretches 34.2 miles north-south next to the Allegheny River in western Pennsylvania. (photo by Bob Downing)

BELMAR, Pa.: The Sandy Creek Trail is one of the prettiest rail trails you will ever find. It's also where I ran into an unusual critter: a porcupine. That's not something you will find in Ohio, unless it is in a zoo.

The quilled creature was munching on plants along the trail. I pedaled up and got a close look at the scraggly and bedraggled little porcupine as it waddled away.

I took its picture without getting stuck with quills, but it was obvious that the porcupine was very glad to see me get back on my bike and pedal off.

Welcome to the wild Penn's Woods country along the Sandy Creek Trail in northwestern Pennsylvania.

The 12-mile bike-and-hike trail near Franklin features one spectacular trestle, an old tunnel and seven bridges over the splashy and wild East Sandy Creek.

The wood-decked trestle over the Allegheny River is 1,385 feet long and about 80 feet above the river. From atop the Belmar Bridge, you can see a long, long way and almost kiss the clouds.

A pair of white-headed adult bald eagles flapped overhead in search of dead fish for a meal.

The bridge was built in 1907 by local oil man Charles Miller and John D. Rockefeller, who intended to connect New York City and Chicago.

The 3,800-ton bridge became part of the Jamestown, Franklin & Clearfield Railroad.

Construction of the line took 1,200 immigrant laborers and 20 steam shovels to move 16 million cubic yards of earth. In all, four tunnels and 56 bridges between Franklin and Brookville were built.

The rail line, completed in 1909, hauled Pennsylvania coal from Clarion County to Ashtabula on Lake Erie.

The Sandy Creek Trail was built between 2000 and 2005 in Venango County. The western terminus of the trail is four miles west of Belmar at Fisherman's Cove near Brandon.

It is an area that is wild, largely undeveloped and very pretty. East Sandy Creek empties into the Allegheny River there.

The eastern terminus is at the village of Van on U.S. 322.

East of Van, the trail connects to a trail on State Game Land property and to the Clarion Highlands Trail. The trail is open but it is rough, advised spokeswoman Debra Frawley.

You can hop on the east-west Sandy Creek Trail at Belmar off state Route 8 about five miles south of Franklin. That's only two hours from Akron, on the west bank of the Allegheny River.

From there, it is four miles west to Fishermen's Cove or eight miles east to Van.

There are few amenities along the Sandy Creek Trail. A few benches and interpretive signs are the only signs of civilization.

One of the popular spots on the Sandy Creek Trail is the 967-foot-long Mays Mill Tunnel, also called the Deep Valley Tunnel.

It was 29 feet wide and 22 feet high. Work started on building the tunnel in 1905.

The rail line was abandoned in the 1980s and getting the tunnel reopened was a major engineering feat. It included adding 250,000 scrap tires to fill the void between the old tunnel and the new tunnel.

There are six planked bridges over the creek in the first four miles, and the scenery is first-rate — unlike some rail trails around the country. East Sandy Creek is a state-designated scenic stream.

From the Belmar Bridge, bicyclists pedaling east will encounter a slight uphill grade, but it's not bad at all. It also makes the return trek easier.

Two other trailheads provide access to the Sandy Creek Trail: at Van and off Rockland Road.

On the eastern edge of the Belmar Bridge, you can also hop aboard the 34.2 mile-long Allegheny River and the 5.3-mile Samuel Justus trails that run next to the Allegheny River.

It is 67 steps down from the Sandy Creek Trail to the Allegheny River Trail.

The Allegheny River-Justus trails run from Oil City south to Emlenton. The eight-foot-wide asphalt-paved trail is tucked between the river and surrounding woodlands.

The biggest attraction along the Allegheny River is about 3.5 miles south of the Belmar Bridge: Indian God Rock with its petroglyphs.

That's the name given to the rock at the edge of the water where more than 50 carvings were made by Native Americans between 1200 and 1750 A.D.

It is believed that the petroglyphs are of Algonquin origin, although it is not known what the messages might be.

A small observation deck marks the spot, although most of the carvings have faded badly on the 22-foot-high sandstone boulder. The carvings were mostly on the edge of the rock facing the water. More recent carvings of names and initials dominate the rock's trail-side face.

Indian God Rock is on the National Register of Historic Places.

There are also two tunnels along the Allegheny River Trail.

The Kennerdell Tunnel is 3,350 feet long. It is 15 miles south of Franklin. The Rockland Tunnel is 2,868 feet long and is 21 miles south of Franklin.

This section of the Allegheny River was added in 1992 to the National Wild and Scenic River System with a recreational designation in the federal system. The designation covers three stream segments in Warren, Forest and Venango counties that together stretch 86.6 miles. The Allegheny flows south to Pittsburgh to form the Ohio River.

You can hike or pedal past the remains of the River Ridge mansion-farm of oil magnate Joseph Sibley. That's midway between Oil City and Franklin on the Justus Trail (actually a northward extension of the Allegheny River Trail).

The old railroad town of Foxburg lies three miles south of Emlenton. The trail to Foxburg is not improved, but you can ride it on a mountain bike and continue another four miles to where the Clarion River empties into the Allegheny River and to Parkers Landing.

To get to the Belmar Trailhead from Akron, take Interstate 76 east and pick up Interstate 80. Proceed to Exit 29. Head north on state Route 8. Turn right (east) on Pone Lane. The road dead-ends into Belmar Road. Turn right. The parking lot is on the right at the bottom of the hill. It's about six miles from the state Route 8 turn.

The three trails are all federally designated National Recreation Trails.

They are managed and being developed by a grass-roots group called the Allegheny Valley Trails Association.