

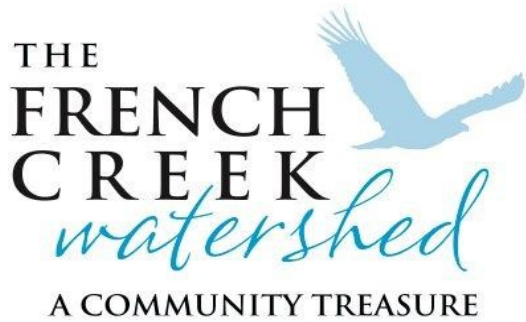


Lower French Creek Water Trail

A Community Treasure

Map & Guide

Water trails are recreational waterways on a lake, river, or ocean between specific points, containing access points and day-use and/or camping sites for the boating public. Water trails emphasize low-impact use and promote stewardship of the resources. Explore this unique Pennsylvania water trail.



HISTORY OF FRENCH CREEK

French Creek is arguably one of the most ecologically significant waterways in Pennsylvania and has been called "One of Pennsylvania's foremost aquatic treasures." From the point where it enters Pennsylvania, French Creek flows for 117 miles through Erie, Crawford, Mercer, and Venango counties before joining the Allegheny River at Franklin.

The French Creek Watershed covers approximately 1270 square miles, providing habitat for many types of wildlife and birds, as well as over 80 species of fish and 27 species of freshwater mussels. Scientists attribute French Creek's outstanding biodiversity to the fact that it is part of the rich Ohio River watershed and has maintained its high quality habitat including sand and gravel substrates, riffles, runs, pools and intact riparian zones. The French Creek drainage also has a good supply of alkaline groundwater resources that provide a buffer against the effects of acid deposition. French Creek was given its name in 1753 by George Washington who traveled along and on the Creek in an effort to dislodge the French from the area. During this period of colonization and westward expansion, the Creek served as an important waterway for the French Army and the early American settlers.



STEWARDSHIP

Protecting French Creek from environmental degradation is a shared mission. Help care for the land, water and cultural resources along the French Creek Water Trail by respecting wildlife, nature and other recreationists. "Leave No Trace," a national outdoor ethics program, provides some guidelines to minimize your impact. For more information about "Leave No Trace," visit www.Lnt.org.

Leave No Trace for camping and day use:

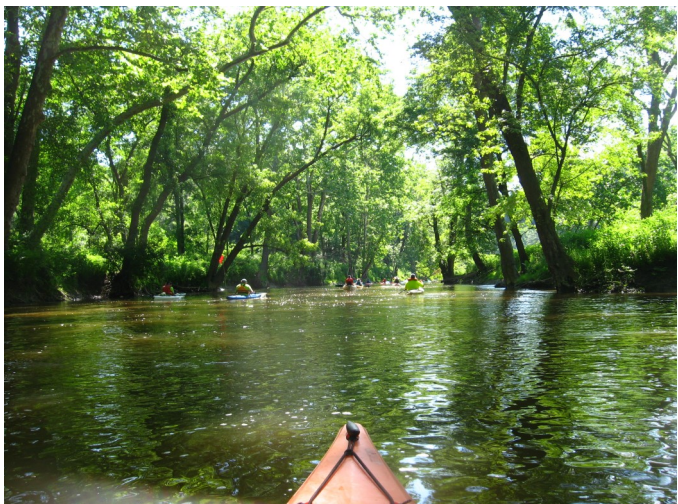
1. Plan and prepare for route, weather, emergencies, etc.
2. Utilize established trails and campsites.
3. Dispose of waste properly—pack it in then pack it out.
4. Leave what you find including rocks, plants, natural objects.
5. Minimize campfire impacts and extinguish fires completely.
6. Respect wildlife—do not feed, follow or approach wildlife.
7. Be considerate of other visitors.

It is important to wash footwear, boats and vehicles to minimize the spread of invasive species from one place to another. Some aquatic invasive species such as **Zebra Mussel** larva can attach to boats and other hard surfaces, while others such as **Eurasian water millfoil** or **Fanwort** can become tangled on propellers, anchor lines, or boat trailers. Many species such as **Round Goby** fish can survive in bilge water and ballast tanks. Some invasive species may hide in dirt or sand that clings to nets, buckets, anchors, and waders. Fortunately, completing simple steps can prevent the transport of aquatic invasive species. **Remember to Clean, Drain, Dry in between every waterbody—every time!** DISPOSE of unwanted bait, worms, and fish parts in the trash. When keeping live bait, drain bait container and replace with spring or dechlorinated tap water. Never dump live fish or other organisms from one water body into another. For more information check out: stopaquaticinvasive.org/



RESPECT LANDOWNERS

Please respect the privacy and rights of landowners along this trail by obtaining permission before entering any privately owned land. Unless you are otherwise certain, assume the land is private property. In any case, avoid loud noises and boisterous behavior. Remember that sound carries across water much more clearly than on land. Use the same courtesy that you would want. A friendly wave or quiet greeting is always welcome.



For your safety and enjoyment:

- Always wear a life jacket
- Obtain proper instruction in boating skills
- Know fishing and boating regulations
- Be prepared for river hazards
- Carry proper equipment

FRENCH CREEK WATER TRAIL

Originating in Chautauqua County in western New York, the French Creek Water Trail flows southerly through Erie, Mercer, Crawford, and Venango Counties, ultimately joining the Allegheny River in Franklin, PA. The creek, along with its tributaries, is responsible for draining 72 municipalities in four Northwestern Pennsylvania counties. French Creek is outstanding for fishing, paddling, and provides water for communities and agricultural activities. Thanks to its outstanding water quality, rich biodiversity, and notable history, French Creek is considered to be one of the most important streams of its size in the Northeastern United States.

PENNSYLVANIA BOATING REGULATIONS

- A U.S. Coast Guard-approved wearable personal flotation device (PFD or life jacket) is required for each person on board.
- From November 1 through April 30, boaters must wear a life jacket on boats less than 16 feet in length or any canoe or kayak during these cold weather months.
- Life jackets must be the appropriate size for the person intended and must be in good, serviceable condition.
- Life jackets must be worn by all children 12 years old and younger on all boats 20 feet or less in length while under way, and on all canoes and kayaks. Others are strongly encouraged to wear a PFD at all times on the water.
- Unpowered boats must carry a white light, either hand-held or installed, to be displayed in time to avoid a collision between sunset and sunrise and during restricted visibility..
- Operators of unpowered boats (canoes, kayaks, rowboats, paddleboards) are required to carry a device capable of sounding a prolonged blast for 4-6 seconds that can be heard by another boat operator in time to avoid a collision. An athletic coach's whistle is acceptable.
- Unpowered boats (canoes, kayaks, rowboats) using Pennsylvania Fish & Boat Commission or State Park or Forest access areas must either be registered OR display a valid launch permit. Launch permits can be purchased through the Commission's website at www.fishandboat.com
- Operating watercraft, including canoes and kayaks, under the influence of alcohol or drugs is illegal. This law is strongly enforced for user safety. For further information on boating regulations, contact the Pennsylvania Fish & Boat Commission at www.fishandboat.com.



PADDLING SAFETY TIPS

- **Wear your life jacket.** Some 80 percent of all recreational boating fatalities happen to people who are not wearing a life jacket.
- **Expect to get wet.** Even the best paddlers sometimes capsize or swamp their boats. Bring extra clothing in a water-proof bag.
- **Be prepared to swim.** If the water looks too hazardous to swim in, don't go paddling.
- **If you capsize,** hold onto your boat, unless it presents a life-threatening situation. If floating in current, position yourself on the upstream side of the capsized boat.
- **Scout ahead whenever possible.** Know the river. Avoid surprises.
- **Be prepared for the weather.** Get a forecast before you go. Sudden winds and rain are common and can turn a pleasant trip into a risky, unpleasant venture.
- **Wear wading shoes** or tennis shoes with wool, polypropylene, pile, or neoprene socks.
- **Never take your boat over a low-head dam.**
- **Portage** (carry) your boat around any section of water about which you feel uncertain.
- **Never boat alone.** Boating safety increases with numbers.
- **Keep painter lines** (ropes tied to the bow) and any other ropes coiled and secured.
- **Never tie a rope to yourself** or to another paddler, especially a child.
- **Kneel to increase your stability** before entering rougher water, like a rapid.
- **If you collide with an obstruction, lean toward it.** This will usually prevent your capsizing or flooding the boat.
- **File a float plan** with a reliable person indicating where you are going and when you will return. Remember to contact the person when you have returned safely.



TOWNS AND TOURISM

These towns along French Creek hold a great history and importance to the region as well as offering valuable community opportunities.



Cochran Situated at the confluence of Little Sugar Creek and French Creek, Cochran is said to have been settled as early as 1805 when the first house was built by John Adams. Cochran is a Borough of Crawford County and was officially created on April 5, 1885. Today's borough is made up of the original land grants of John Adams and Thomas Cochran, for whom the village was named. Currently, Cochran Area Redevelopment Effort (CARE) has been working to keep improving the Cochran area. The town has seen additions including a credit union, pharmacy, two doctors' offices, a launch and landing site along French Creek, a community playground at Lions Park, and the French Creek Heritage Event held in Mid-July.

Utica Located in Venango County, Utica is a small borough situated along French Creek where a boat ramp and canoe access is available at Mile Marker 10 of the French Creek Water Trail. The community is very family friendly offering various camping and recreational opportunities including a fishing tournament held each year in June at French Creek Farm.

Franklin Serving as the county seat of Venango County, Franklin, has a population average of 7,000+. Every major architectural style used in western Pennsylvania from 1830 to 1930 can be found here giving Franklin the title: "The Victorian City." The Historic District, from Federal Hill to Miller Park, is registered in the National Registry of Historic Places. Franklin's location, at the confluence of French Creek and the Allegheny River was a key spot during the French and Indian War. Today, Franklin is home to Applefest, which is the largest craft festival in Western Pennsylvania. Hotels, taverns, theaters, and full dining options are a few of the many recreational amenities provided by the town.



POINTS OF INTEREST



Ernst Bike Trail is constructed over the old Meadville-Linesville Railroad line. The trail passes through the lush bottomlands of the French Creek valley and traverses terrain with imprints of ice-age glaciations. The paved trail is five miles long and runs from Park Avenue Plaza in Meadville to Route 19.

Geneva Marsh is the largest natural wetland in Pennsylvania and is home to a tremendous variety of wildlife and plants. It is designated by the National Audubon Society as an **Important Bird Area** and has at least two active Bald Eagle nests in or very near the marsh. The marsh also provides a resting place for many species of migratory birds. Fishing and viewing the flora and fauna of the marsh is best accomplished with canoes and other small boats. Geneva Marsh is located in southern Crawford County, directly off of Interstate 79 at Exit #141.



The French Creek Feeder Canal construction began in 1827 and added to the state wide canal transportation system that would eventually connect the lake port at Erie to inland areas and the Allegheny River at Franklin. The canal operated from 1834 to 1871 and crossed French creek on an aqueduct near the current route 322. Beginning north of Meadville near the Bemus Mill, the canal traveled down the eastward bank of French Creek and reached Shaw's Landing just north of Cochran. Remnants of the canal can be seen in a few places along French Creek reminding visitors of the Creek's historical past.



Custaloga Town Boy Scout Camp is a campground used by the French Creek Council of The Boy Scouts of America. The facility got its name from Custaloga, the chief of the Munsee or Wolf Clan of the Delaware tribe. This historical figure was living at Venango (now Franklin) when Washington visited the area in November of 1753 on route to Fort LeBoeuf. Located at the mouth of Deer Creek, Custaloga Town now serves as a year round facility for Boy Scouts, Cub Scouts and Venture crews. There are opportunities to rent certain sections of the camp and enjoy hiking and other activities the camp has to offer.



FRENCH CREEK CREATURES

More types of fish and mollusks are found in French Creek than any other stream in Pennsylvania. The watershed is home to 27 species of freshwater mussels, over 80 species of fish—including 15 species of darters, and includes four nationally designated Important Bird Areas (IBA). Many species that thrive in the French Creek watershed have been extirpated from their natural ranges due to habitat loss and degradation of water quality. Nevertheless, French Creek remains relatively healthy, leading The Nature Conservancy to include the French Creek Watershed in its listing of national "hot spots" with ten or more at-risk fish and mussel species and citing it as a critical watershed to conserve these species.



Mussels were once common throughout the eastern United States but have decreased in numbers due to their sensitivity to pollution and destruction of habitat. Out of the 27 species of mussels in French Creek, four are nationally endangered. These species have lost 95% of their historic ranges but fortunately, healthy populations can still be found in French Creek.

Darters are small fish that only reach 3-5 inches, can lay on the bottom of the stream, hover in the water and are sometimes mistaken for minnows. Darters, like mussels, require a high quality of water and are non-migratory. There are 15 species of darters found in French Creek, including the Eastern Sand Darter, which was once thought to be extinct. Three other species are nationally endangered and several are rare or threatened.

The **Eastern Hellbender**, Pennsylvania's largest salamander, can be found in French Creek as well. Known as a devil dog, mud devil or snout otter, this nocturnal aquatic salamander with its flat head and body and its distinctive wrinkled skin can reach up to 29 inches long and can weigh up to five pounds. Hellbenders thrive in rivers like French Creek with clean water, a rocky substrate and significant current that will provide them adequate oxygen and abundant crayfish, worms, insects and small fish to eat. While Hellbenders are not protected under the federal Endangered Species Act, some states give them protected status. In Pennsylvania they are a "species of special concern".



Birds like Bald Eagles, Great Blue Heron, Green Heron, geese, a variety of ducks and even occasionally Osprey are commonly seen while near French Creek. The four Important Bird Areas as well as the abundance of other natural areas in the watershed offer great habitat and a chance to see a multitude of birds, including warblers—especially during spring and fall migration.



POPULAR ACCESS POINTS

Wilson Chutes: Follow Rt. 322 for 2.3 miles south of Meadville, turn right on to Wilson Chutes Road, then left into the parking lot just before the bridge. **Parking available.**

Shaws Landing: Follow Rt. 322 for 6.1 miles south of Meadville, turn right onto SR 2005, then left onto Dutch Hill Road (dirt) and follow for 0.5 miles. Located next to Conneaut Outlet. **Parking available**

Utica Access: About 7.5 miles west of Franklin and 9 miles from Meadville on Route 322, there will be a paved cross-roads with a sign for Utica. Turn onto Utica Road. After driving down a steep hill, look for the parking area on the right side next to the railroad tracks before you cross the bridge over French Creek. **Parking available.**

Franklin Access: Located in Franklin, south of the Route 322 bridge, along Elk Street between 3rd and 4th streets. **Parking available.**

FOR EMERGENCIES CALL 911
NEAREST HOSPITAL: MEADVILLE MEDICAL CENTER
751 Liberty Street, Meadville PA 16335
(814) 333-5000

VISITOR OPPORTUNITIES

Crawford County has Land, Water and Craft Brewing trails. Events all year-round for family fun! There are thousands of things to see and do- you just need to know where to look! Call for your FREE Visitors Guide and Event Brochure- 800-332-2338



Crawford County Visitors Bureau:
814-333-1258
visitcrawford.org



French Creek Valley Conservancy:
814-337-4321
frenchcreekconservancy.org