

Connecting with nature

Lower Trail offers year-round recreation

By John Kasun

Located just minutes from Altoona and easily accessible from all points within central Pennsylvania is a recreational jewel in the form of The Lower Trail, a part of the Rails to Trails System.

The first point of clarification in conjunction with the Lower Trail is how to properly pronounce the name. The trail's name rhymes with "flower" and honors the memory of the wife and son of the late trail benefactor, T. Dean Lower.

While the trail is normally thought of as a bike trail, it actually offers all-season recreation for bikers, hikers, horseback riding, cross-country skiing and snowshoeing. But it doesn't stop there as it also offers bird watching and wildlife viewing opportunities in addition to photographic opportunities and river access for fishing, canoeing and kayaking.

Much of the Lower Trail parallels the Frankstown Branch of the Juniata River, which was part of the original towpath of the Pennsylvania Main Line

Canal, which operated in the mid-1800s. Following the end of the canal era, the Pennsylvania Railroad took over the property and developed the Petersburg Branch of the Pennsylvania Railroad.

In 1979, the rail corridor was abandoned, the rails scrapped and the land put up for sale. In 1989, Rails to Trails of Central Pennsylvania Inc. purchased the first 11 miles of the Lower Trail from Williamsburg to Alfarata from the Penn Central Corp. In 2004, the line from Williamsburg to Sinking Springs was added.



Alleghenies Adventure photo
by Gary M. Baranec

**Spectators watch as
participants in a 5K race
compete on the Lower Trail.**



The trail is approximately 17 miles long, running from Flowing Springs, (near the Canoe Creek State Park in Blair County to Alfarata (near Alexandria in Huntington County).

The trail is privately owned and is maintained by a dedicated group of volunteers who wish to preserve the trail's natural history and share it with the community. Today the trail is approximately 17 miles long, running from Flowing Springs, (near the Canoe Creek State Park in Blair County to Alfarata (near Alexandria in Huntington County).

The surface is well maintained and is comprised of 85 percent rolled crushed limestone and 15 percent paved surface, making it ideal for biking. Hybrid bikes with wider tires work much better than those with skinny racing tires, which are designed mainly for paved surfaces. The trail is extremely flat with only a slightly noticeable grade of .2 percent grade from east to west. While the trail is open year-around for numerous activities, motorized vehicles of any type are restricted at all times.

When traveling the trail, either by foot or bike, remnants

of the canal era, including remains of locks and foundations of lock tenders' houses as well as the historical Mt. Etna iron plantation area, can be seen. There are a number of bridge crossings of the Juniata River and one covered bridge over the tail race of a historic mill stream. There are still some remains of tipples and massive concrete rock crushers from abandoned stone quarries along the trail which hint of the once industrial nature of the now-unbroken forest beside the river.

The trail winds between the river and mountains and shelters and benches can be found along its length where riders or hikers can stop to rest and enjoy the surrounding natural beauty. Even on its busiest day, the trail is still quiet and serene as users are normally spread out along its length. It is safe and friendly, making it ideal for those wanting some solitude as well as families desiring to spend some quality time together.

The trail supports many different plant and animal species, and the Audubon Society has identified portions of the Lower Trail as "Important Birding Areas."

A number of Bald Eagles and Osprey have been spotted along the trail. There are also many beautiful and some rare plant species along the trail. The trail passes through some of Pennsylvania's best wildlife habitat, making wildlife sightings varying from turtles and squirrels to turkey, deer, back bear and everything in between possible at any time.

However, remember that these animals are truly wild and should not be approached. If you spot wildlife, remain motionless and simply enjoy the experience. The best time for wildlife sightings are early morning and early evening.

The trail is easily accessible from six trail heads along its length — Flowing Springs, Ganister, (aka Grannas Station), Williamsburg, Cove Dale, Mt. Edna and Alfarata, where adequate parking is available. The trail heads are sites of former railroad stations and are located between 2 and 4 miles apart.

The locations of the trail heads make it easy to plan your trip and break it into lengths that will suit your time and ability. Note: Toilet facilities are located only at the trail heads. There is no drinking water available on the trail so it is recommended to carry a water bottle to meet your needs.

The Lower Trail is part of the Mid State Trail and the Pittsburgh-to-Harrisburg Main Line Canal Greenway and has been designated a National Recreation Trail by the National Park Service. It is a beautiful, very family-friendly rural trail through wooded areas with few road crossings and provides access to the adjacent Juniata River Water Trail.

For more information on the Lower Trail including maps indicating trail heads and points of interest, go to www.rttcpa.org or contact the Allegheny Mountain Convention and Visitors Bureau at (800) 842-5866 or The Alleghenies at (800) 458-3433 or at www.TheAlleghenies.com. Another source of good trail information are bike shops. 📍



Alleghenies Adventure photos by Gary M. Baranec

Children take off running at the beginning of a kids race on the Lower Trail, which is also used by cyclists, such as Joan and Dave Plummer of Altoona. Below, Andre Sweeley of Altoona fixes the number on the shirt of his son, Kasen, 2.



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