

Musconetcong Waterway Trail Guide

The Musconetcong River is a part of the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System

www.musconetcong.org



The Musconetcong is one of several rivers deemed eligible for designation as a "Waterway Trail" under the New Jersey State Trails Plan, and deservedly so for the "Musky" one of the state's most scenic and interesting destinations for canoeists and kayakers.

However, before setting off on a trip down the Musconetcong there are important factors to consider such as water level, availability of public access, and the level of difficulty presented by a particular stretch of the river.

The purposes of the Musconetcong Waterway Trail Guide are to promote the safe and responsible use of the Musconetcong River and to foster greater appreciation and active stewardship for this remarkable river.

The Musconetcong River

The Musconetcong River begins at Lake Hopatcong (New Jersey's largest lake) and runs 42 miles down to the Delaware River at Riegelsville. Surrounded by rugged Highland ridges, the river flows by state and county parks, historic hamlets, nature preserves, and one of the region's most scenic agricultural valleys. The Musconetcong River forms the boundaries of Sussex, Morris, Warren and Hunterdon Counties, and its 157 square mile watershed includes all or parts of 25 municipalities.

Human habitation along the Musconetcong River began over 10,000 years ago when Paleo-Indians camped along the river's glacial waters. The Lenape Indians planted corn in the rich limestone river valley, and no doubt canoed down the river they named Musconetcong, or *rapid running stream*.

The European settlers displaced the Lenape during the early eighteenth century and built their mills and villages along the river. By the early nineteenth century the Musconetcong valley was one of the New Jersey's most important iron producing and agricultural regions, supplying both the New York and Philadelphia markets.

The Musconetcong valley remains an important agricultural region, and the river continues to provide power and waste treatment for industry and towns. The Musconetcong River contains an extraordinary number of historic places and structures, many of which are listed in the National Historic Register and can found along every section of the river. A list of historic features can be obtained from the Musconetcong Watershed Association.

The Musconetcong River watershed is the focus of several conservation and preservation efforts. Some of these include a 2006 Musconetcong National Wild and Scenic River designation for two segments of the river, New Jersey Green Acre's "Musconetcong Greenway" land acquisition program, and local farmland and open space preservation programs.

Despite the considerable efforts to protect the Musconetcong and its tributaries, it may be one of the most threatened rivers in the state. Water quality studies have shown that nonpoint pollution, or polluted runoff is by far the greatest source of contamination impacting the river. Bacteria, temperature and phosphorus levels have all been shown to exceed state and federal minimum water quality standards in some sections of the river.

The Musconetcong Watershed Association was formed in 1992 by local residents in response to concerns about the potential impacts of suburban development on the river and its watershed. MWA provides environmental education programs for children, landowners, and local governments, and sponsors river cleanups and recreational programs throughout the watershed.

Paddling the Musconetcong

As with most upland rivers, the Musconetcong is too shallow and rocky to canoe much of the year, except on the few dammed areas that provide deeper water. Conversely, after periods of heavy and/or extended precipitation the Musconetcong can reach dangerous levels and should not be paddled. The Musconetcong is usually "runnable" after significant rainfall or snowmelt, as well as during the annual fall release of water from Lake Hopatcong. A stream gauge is located at the Lime Kiln Road Bridge upriver from Bloomsbury. A gauge reading of at least two feet at this gauge should ensure sufficient flow to clear the river's many gravel bars and rocky riffles. Visual observation at any rocky section of the river will also help determine the navigability of the river. The gauge can be viewed online at http://waterdata.usgs.gov/nj/nwis/lv7?site_no=01457000.

Most of the Musconetcong River is poorly suited for beginners. However, there are some easy flatwater sections for the inexperienced paddler, and areas of gentle riffles can be found for the adventurous beginner. The level of difficulty for each river segment is described in the Waterway Trail portion of this guide.

River Etiquette

Thanks to state, county and local preservation efforts, public access to the Musconetcong is increasing and public land along the river is generally well marked.

However, much of the river is bounded by private property, some of which is not posted as such. The Musconetcong Watershed Association asks recreational users of the river to respect the rights of private property owners. Unless it is absolutely necessary, please do not enter private land, especially if posted "No Trespassing" (unless there is prior permission from the property owner).

If conditions are such that passage through private property is necessary (i.e. where a fallen tree or a dam blocks downstream passage), carry the boat around the river obstruction as expeditiously and discreetly as possible. Most property owners will be understanding, but not if you decide to stop for a picnic lunch on their lawn. The Landowner's Liability Act (N.J.S.A. 2A:42 A-2 et seq.) which was enacted in New Jersey in 1968 limits the liability of landowners where an injury has occurred to anyone engaged in an inherently risky recreational activity such as river paddling.

Paddlers are encouraged to "take only pictures; leave only footprints behind". This includes bio-degradable items such as apple cores and orange peels. Make a habit of picking up a bit of litter on each river trip.

Finally, since the Musconetcong is one of the most popular trout streams in New Jersey, it is not advisable to canoe the Musconetcong during the beginning of trout-fishing season, especially on weekends. Information on the trout season (which normally begins in early April) can be obtained from New Jersey Fish and Wildlife.

Nevertheless, meeting a fisherman on the river is inevitable. The best way to approach the situation is to gently alert the fisherman, who may be facing downstream. Give every courtesy by paddling away from the fisherman; announce your presence, but do it quietly! When approaching a fisherman, paddle gently and be one with the river.

River Safety

Canoeing is a great way to relax and enjoy nature, but as with any outdoor activity there are inherent risks that can lead to injury or death. Paddlers bear personal responsibility for their own safety. Common sense, caution, careful planning and being properly equipped will greatly reduce the risks.

A wealth of information is available on river safety issues and techniques. One of the best ways to learn about safety and improve paddling skills is to join a local canoe club. Experienced paddlers are eager to share their knowledge and demonstrate efficient, safety-minded paddling skills. The American Canoe Association offers paddling courses for all skill levels for both canoe and kayak, and the National Canoe Safety Patrol, local canoe clubs and the American Red Cross offer river safety and rescue courses.

The following tips will help ensure a safe and enjoyable river trip. But remember: Due to the ever-changing nature of rivers, weather conditions, and other factors, no guide can substitute for common sense, caution, and careful planning.

Safety Tips:

Paddle at your skill level: The Musconetcong offers flatwater for beginners and Class I & II for skilled paddlers. Class II rivers are often referred to as "technical" meaning that a degree of boat-handling skill is required to navigate rocks and boulders in swiftly moving current. Always make sure your paddling adventures are in sync with your skill level.

Paddle Prepared: Never paddle without wearing a Personal Flotation Device (AKA life jacket). Always carry water, a first-aid kit, and an extra paddle. In cold weather, dress accordingly and bring a change of warm clothing. In warm weather bring along insect repellent and sun block. Plan your trip carefully and seek out the latest information on ever changing river conditions.

Paddle Smart: Don't paddle alone, and if in a group, designate a lead boat (someone who knows the river and won't allow anyone to paddle ahead of the group), and a sweep boat (to ensure no one is left behind). When known or potential hazards are encountered, take the time to scout before proceeding downstream.

River Hazards:

Dams: There are several dams along the Musconetcong River, and most are potential killers, so approach each with caution. Even some of the broken down remains of mill dams and the small weirs built by fishermen should be approached with caution. Information on where to carry or portage boats around the major dams appears in the Waterway Trail descriptions.

Strainers: Strainers are fallen trees or debris piles that block all or a portion of the river. Like a kitchen strainer, a river strainer will let water through, but not you or your boat. Strainers commonly form on bridge piers or at the head of islands where trees are likely to be caught, but they can occur anywhere along the river. In some cases a strainer will block the entire channel, and this is even more likely to occur along a narrow river like the Musconetcong. Be alert for strainers, especially where the river narrows, and around sharp bends in the river where strainers may loom with little time to react. Scout the situation and if in doubt, carry the boat around on the safest shore.

Bridges: Bridge piers are common collecting points for strainers and often become completely blocked after a flood event. Some Musconetcong bridges have very low clearance and present a moderate to severe hazard depending on the water level. The low-clearance bridges are discussed in the Waterway Trails section of this brochure.

Cold: The best paddling opportunities are usually during late fall and early spring, when the water and air temperatures are cold. Even broken down remains of mill dams and the small weirs built by fishermen can be a problem for the unprepared paddler. To avoid the risk of hypothermia, wear synthetic fleece or wool, or special gear (i.e. wet suits) for thermal protection. At the very least, bring along a complete change of clothing in a dry-bag or double-bag your clothes with black plastic trash bags. Tie gear securely to the boat.

The Upper Musconetcong

