

# MEMORIES FLOW THROUGH IT

## The Greenbrier River

By Diana Kile Green

The scenic Greenbrier River flows through Watoga State Park in Pocahontas County. © Kent Mason

**F**or me, fond memories flow in the waters of the Greenbrier River. For four generations of my family, the Greenbrier has been a font of discovery and delight.

My father first experienced the river in the 1930s as a summer counselor at the Greenbrier Military School's Camp Shaw-Mi-Del-Eca, upstream of Caldwell. One of his favorite duties was leading campers on canoe trips down the river. Of course, there was fishing involved! From then on, the river kept calling him back. As a young man, he returned to the river when he needed to escape the demands of the business world.

Finally, in the early 1960s, my dad bought a farm near Lewisburg and introduced our family to the river. It wasn't long before the entire tribe fell under its spell. From aunts and uncles to the youngest cousins, all made regular fishing forays to "wet a line" in their favorite river.

The pristine headwaters of the East and West Forks of the Greenbrier River originate in the Monongahela National Forest. The forks are different in character, but both harbor native brook trout and are well-known angling destinations. The East Fork heads up in Blister Swamp in Pocahontas County, near Bayard Knob, and flows southward across Forest

Service Road 254. According to *History of Pocahontas County, West Virginia 1981*, published by the Pocahontas County Historical Society, a saloon and whiskey-making operation called the Pig's Ear once stood at this intersection.

The West Fork flows south from the hills and around the site of a long lost lumber camp called Wildell. Wildell once occupied a large, flat area at the mouth of Snorting Lick Run. The land is surrounded by high ridges, with Cheat Mountain to the west and Middle Mountain and the Laurel Fork Wilderness to the east. You can drive to this beautiful place, at the heart of the Mon Forest, and take in the scenery. A lovely trail, once the Western Maryland railroad grade, parallels this fork.

### Recreational Opportunities Abound

The celebrated Greenbrier River offers more recreational opportunities than almost any other stream in the state. First, it's great for canoeing, kayaking, and tubing. Then, of course, there's the fishing: trout in the headwaters and bass downstream. Some of its tributaries are also spring-fed, year-round trout streams. Indeed, the Greenbrier is a piscatorial Mecca!

The river flows through thousands of acres of public lands, including the Monongahela National Forest, Cass Scenic Railroad State Park, Watoga State Park, Calvin



**Horseback riders and cyclists** enjoy the Greenbrier River Trail. © Ron Snow

Price State Forest, Seneca State Forest, and the Spice Run Wilderness Area. In addition, tying the Greenbrier's mid-section together is West Virginia's renowned linear state park, the 78-mile Greenbrier River Trail. The trail was formerly the railroad grade of the Greenbrier Division of the Chesapeake & Ohio Railroad between Cass and Caldwell, and it parallels the river much of the way.

South from the confluence of the two forks at Durbin, there are at least three ways to enjoy the river: float a canoe or kayak when the river is "up," hike, or take a ride on the Durbin Rocket. The restored train travels a scenic, 10.5-mile round-trip from the Durbin depot.

From Cass downstream, the river flows more slowly through a ruggedly beautiful landscape, and there are many possible campsites along the way. The river is sometimes too low for a good float trip, but there is still plenty of fishing potential. The Greenbrier River Trail begins at Cass for hiking, biking, and horseback riding.

With the additional flows of Deer Creek and Knapps Creek, the Greenbrier becomes a larger stream south of Marlinton. The river down to Denmark is a pleasant canoe run, except in dry summer conditions, but one can always wade and fish at those times. By the time an angler reaches this point in the river, the waters are generally more suitable for bass and warm water fish than for trout, except for where the spring-fed tributaries flow in. For extended stays, nearby Watoga State Park has two campgrounds and cabins, and private cabins are available for rent at Seebert and Mill Point.

Along the Greenbrier River Trail, travelers will pass the sites of the many whistle-stops of yesteryear: Stony Bottom,

Clover Lick, Spring Creek Station, Renick, Anthony, Keister, and Hopper, to name a few. One of my favorite fish stories takes place in the Blue Hole, a deep pool and popular fishing area downstream from Anthony.

One leisurely, late spring afternoon, I was floating in my kayak along the river's west bank, casting a home-tied woolly bugger with my fly rod. At the end of a patch of water weeds, a very large smallmouth bass hit my lure and jumped completely out of the water. I landed the big bronzeback, and as I released it back into the water, I noticed it had a large notch out of the top of its tail.

Exactly one week later, I was fishing the same stretch with the same lure when I felt a big fish take the woolly bugger and run. When I finally reeled it in, I saw that, lo and behold, it was the same bass with the notch in its tail! I released it and watched it disappear into the deep, green Blue Hole.

The following weekend found me back on the river, stealth fishing yet again on the Blue Hole.

As I floated down the bank, I cast the same, now nearly worn out woolly bugger and caught lots of smaller fish. But when I passed that spot where I had caught the big bass, I cast the fly into the water just off the bank and BAM! Old "Notch-Tail" was on the line again! He put up an epic fight, with more spectacular leaps above the water. I released the old, hard-headed bass a third time and I haven't seen him since.

### **Pristine Woodlands, Idyllic Waters**

For the canoeist-angler, there are miles of idyllic water from Denmark all the way to Talcott, with plenty of access sites. In this section, the deep woods of the Monongahela National Forest lie along the east bank for miles, with thousands of acres of wild, undeveloped lands. Not far upstream of the Route 60 Bridge at Caldwell is historic Camp Allegheny, a summer camp for generations of girls. Campers ride a barge ferry to cross from the river road to the camp.

For hikers and mountain bikers, the rail trail ends at Caldwell. For boaters, there's a nice riverside park in Caldwell to put in or take out. From the park to the old railroad and mill town of Ronceverte (French for *greenbrier*), the river passes through more good fishing sections. It's a short float trip suitable for an afternoon run.

Howard's Creek adds volume to the river at Caldwell, and just upstream of Ronceverte, the remains of manmade "islands" from the logging days are still in place. It is noteworthy that before the railroad line was built, logs were floated down the river during high water for processing in the lumber mills at various towns along the way.

Boulders and cliffs add to the scenic riverscape from



▲ **Cyclists cross the Greenbrier** River via a bridge on the Greenbrier River Trail. Photo by Steve Shaluta, West Virginia Department of Commerce

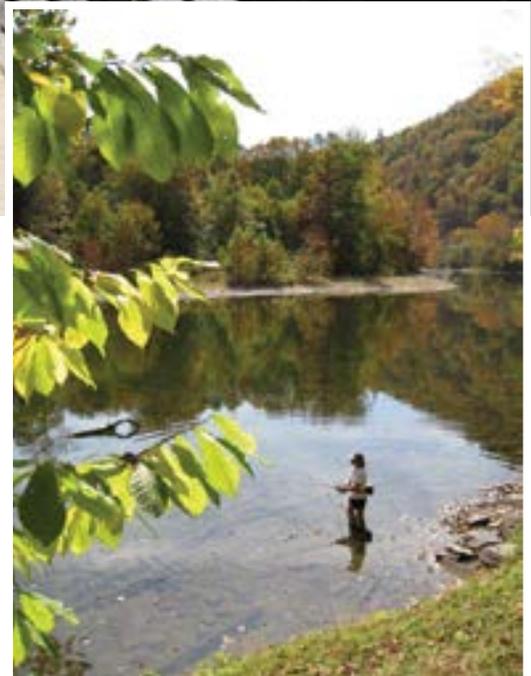
► **Author Diana Kile Green** fishes in the Blue Hole, a popular fishing spot downstream of Anthony. © Ed Maguire

Ronceverte to Fort Spring. At Fort Spring, the famous Davis Spring enters the river. The waters of the spring add thousands of gallons of cold water to the river, making the immediate area more hospitable for trout. If the river is “up” a little, the Fort Spring to Alderson section is a fun whitewater run for boaters.

Once, three women friends and I decided to run this “exciting” section of the river. Though we had only one 17-foot canoe for the four of us, it was a warm, sunny day, so one friend’s husband asked to go along. We ended up running the river with me paddling at the bow and my tallest friend paddling at the stern. Behind us we towed the husband and a cooler in a rubber dinghy. The gunwales of the canoe were barely above the water; it was about as maneuverable as paddling a log. We got splashed in the rapids and had to bail out the canoe a few times. It was a day I will never forget!

### **Historic Alderson**

Alderson, another venerable railroad town, has two bridges over the river and a collection of historic buildings. The town has a vintage charm about it that recalls former times, and



its annual Fourth of July celebration is a popular tradition in Greenbrier County. The town itself straddles the river and half of it is in Monroe County. Camp Greenbrier, a summer camp for boys, is located on the bank of the river just upstream from the town.

From Alderson downstream to Talcott, the Greenbrier is ideal for a lazy float trip, and the lower end of the river has some muskellunge and walleye for the angler. A local outfitter guides fishing trips and has a reputation for catching “muskies” with a fly rod. Although this is a more populated

and heavily fished section, it is still known as a place for catching some “lunker” bass.

For inexperienced canoeists it’s best to take out at Talcott. Downstream of Talcott, the river is somewhat complicated by a rocky ledge known as Bacon Falls, which involves a significant drop at runnable water levels. Further down is the noteworthy “Armory Rapid,” across the road from the local National Guard Armory. There is no clear line to run this Class II rapid, which includes lots of boulders to dodge at moderate to higher water levels. From there, it’s just a short distance to the Greenbrier’s confluence with the New River.

The Greenbrier River offers not only serene and majestic beauty but outstanding recreational opportunities as well. For anyone who loves nature and the outdoors, it’s the perfect place to spend an afternoon, a vacation, or a lifetime!

Check out these websites for more information on the Greenbrier River: Pocahontas County Convention & Visitors Bureau: [pocahontascountywv.com](http://pocahontascountywv.com); Greenbrier County Convention & Visitors Bureau: [greenbrierwv.com](http://greenbrierwv.com); Monongahela National Forest: [fs.usda.gov/mnf](http://fs.usda.gov/mnf); Greenbrier River Rail Trail State Park: [greenbrierrailtrailstatepark.com](http://greenbrierrailtrailstatepark.com); Cass Scenic Railroad State Park: [cassrailroad.com](http://cassrailroad.com); Watoga State Park: [watoga.com](http://watoga.com); Greenbrier State Forest: [greenbriersf.com](http://greenbriersf.com).

*Author Diana Kile Green of Charleston has spent countless vacations and weekends enjoying the Greenbrier River. She has hiked, biked, canoed, kayaked, and fished her way from the headwaters to Hinton and mountain biked from Cass to Caldwell. When not on the river, she works for an energy company in Charleston.*



**Outdoorsman Vic Green enjoys** an outing on the Greenbrier River with his daughters, Meg (left) and Diana. Photo courtesy of Diana Kile Green

