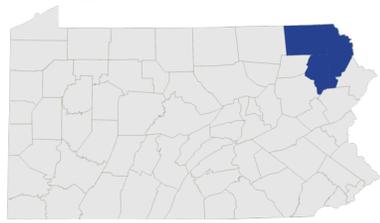


My Story



A Long History

Delaware and Hudson Trail

By Jim Kessler, Retired Forester

“The bottom line is that this rail trail has lots of variety and a wealth of learning opportunities. Scenery is always changing and the uses are many.”



I worked as a forester with the Pennsylvania Bureau of Forestry for over 40 years. Most of that time was spent learning about our local forests, wildlife, agriculture, and rural way of life. Every time that I visited a private forest landowner, they would share their personal experiences. This gave me the background to see our forests through the years, far beyond my own time. I retired in 2009, but I still have the chance to continue working with the people I have enjoyed my entire career. This background is key to my understanding of the rail trail.

This rail trail begins in Union Dale, in the southeastern corner of Susquehanna County. The trail runs along the Lackawanna River, from the Scranton area to Susquehanna Borough near the New York state line.



Photo: Butch Comegys

Keystone Fund Investment: \$152,800
Total Public/Private Investment: \$305,600

My first experience on this area was as a forest fire fighter back in the early 1970s. We commonly had fires along the railroad tracks. This was an active train track at that time. The trains had to climb over 500 feet between Uniondale and the village of Thompson, then descend back down to the Susquehanna River at Susquehanna

Borough. The locomotives would be working to their maximum, blowing carbon sparks from their exhaust. These sparks would commonly land in dry leaves, starting forest fires. My most unusual discovery was finding a set of tracks with indentations where the engine would just sit and spin its wheels until the friction melted the iron. The molten iron flowed down to some dry leaves, starting a 150-acre fire.

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This trail has a long history of fires all along this railroad track. Much of the timber along the trail shows evidence of fire damage. You can see rotten spots on the tree trunks, mostly on the uphill side of the tree. These rotten spots are commonly known as *catfaces*, and they indicate wind direction at the time of the fire.

All along the old train tracks were lots of signs of local history, such as fires, stream washouts, animal skeletons, and others. Then the trains stopped running, the tracks were removed, and the roadbed became a nature trail. Now, we can learn from this window into the past.

These days, the trail has a whole new generation of users. In the winter there are people on snowmobiles, cross country skiers, hikers, teachers, and learners. In the summer there are bikers, hikers, scout groups, and more teachers and learners. Through the four seasons there is always something to learn. Animal tracks are always present, either in the snow or in the mud.

We can learn about forest ecology by looking at different timber types along the trail. We can see solid hemlock forests, and then come into an old livestock pasture that has grown up to a pioneer forest of birches, aspens, and crabapple trees. We can see down to the Lackawanna River and see remains of the old gunpowder factory that blew up many years ago.

Tree identification is always a challenge for the typical hiker. But I have been able to show the differences between maple, cherry, beech, ash, and birch, even in winter. I just tell people to look for the most unique features, such as bark color, texture, bud size and shape, and color. We look at opposite or alternately arranged twigs and buds. We can see that maple, ash, and

dogwood are the so-called MAD trees with opposite twigs and buds, whereas all others have alternate twig arrangement.

Common animal tracks show that deer are definitely the most abundant animal. Squirrel and rabbit tracks are anywhere. But we can also find the tracks of coyotes, bobcats, fishers, mink, and weasels. Skunk, raccoon, and opossum tracks are found in the warmer months. There are crows, wild turkeys, hawks, and lots of species of small songbirds. May is certainly the top month for birding because the neotropical migrants are passing through.

The bottom line is that this rail trail has lots of variety and a wealth of learning opportunities. Scenery is always changing and the uses are many. This is a great rail trail.

Come to Union Dale and bring the family for a fun outdoor learning experience.

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