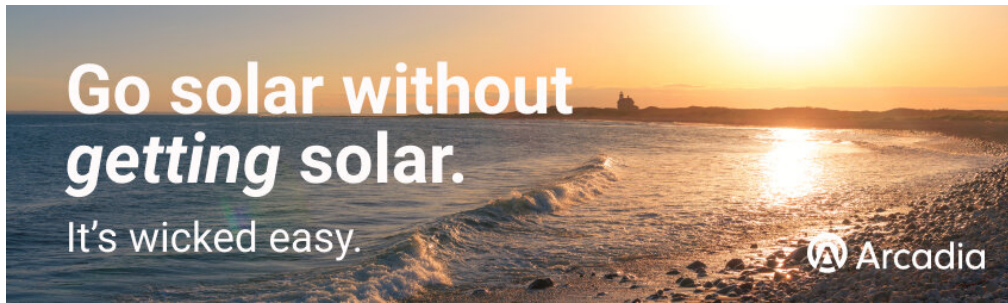


Health & Recreation



Two Years into Wild and Scenic Designation, Wood River Shines

July 15, 2021



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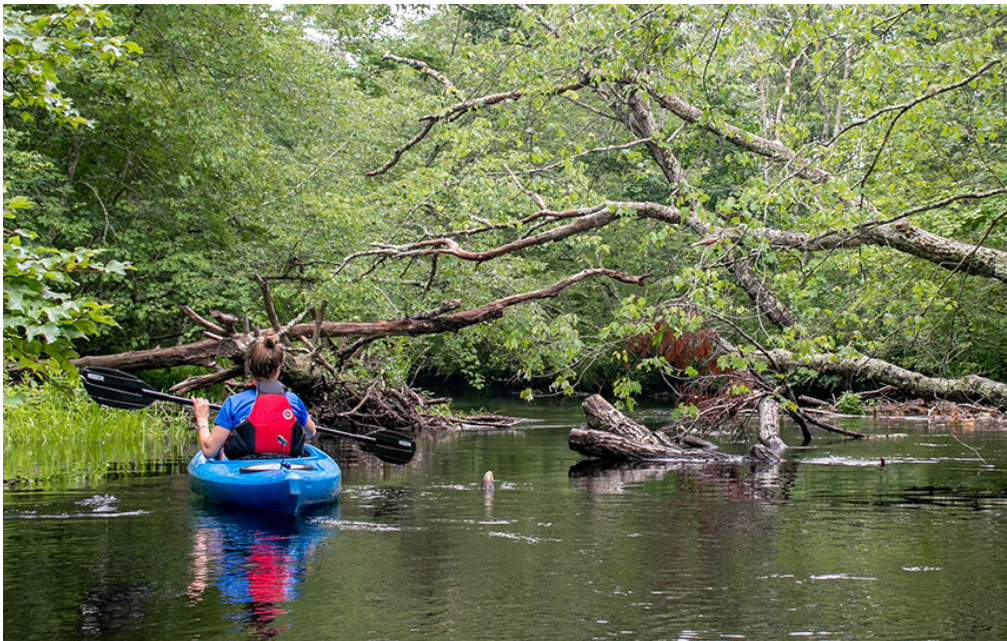
An angler stands in Wood River preparing a fly for a cast.

Photos and text by CAITLIN FAULDS /ecoRI News staff

HOPKINTON, R.I. — The fishermen wish us well as we unload our kayaks at The Pines access point and trundle down eroding wood steps to the water's edge.

The river is cool, clear and fast-moving with the recent rains. My sandalled foot plunges in heavy, unbalanced by the weight of the boat. A bullfrog gulps a nervous hello from the opposing riverbank and Kassi Donnelly holds the stern as I lift myself in, push out with the paddles and glide into the current.

She grabs her blue boat from the shore and smoothly launches next to me. And just like that, we're sitting in the Wood River — Rhode Island's wild, scenic and biodiverse gem.



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Coastal Rhode Island steals the show when it comes to tourism. A [report](#) on Rhode Island’s ocean-based tourism economy from the 2000s concluded that 30 percent to 40 percent of the Ocean State’s tourism was marine-dependent.

More than 26 million visitors traveled to Rhode Island in 2019, according to the [Rhode Island Commerce Corporation](#), generating \$7.1 billion and supporting more than 80,000 jobs pre-pandemic. And though data on tourist destinations and activities is hard to come by, a look through Rhode Island Monthly’s [summer 2021 visitor guide](#) shows a clear focus on the state’s sea-faring boats, beaches, sands and seafood.

But the Wood-Pawtucket watershed has something unique to offer. It stakes its claim as one of the “few remaining relatively pristine natural areas” within the densely packed region between New York City and Boston. Only 20 percent of the watershed’s 300 square miles is developed, and the area is home to some of the region’s darkest night skies.

The Wood River — the largest of six tributaries that link up with the Pawcatuck River to eventually spill into Little Narragansett Bay — is New England’s most biodiverse river, according to a National Park Service (NPS) survey in the early 1980s. The survey, in addition to pointing out the river’s attributes, sparked interest in the watershed’s potential and set in motion a decades-long drive toward preservation.

By 1983, communities had established the nonprofit [Wood-Pawcatuck Watershed Association](#) (WPWA), dedicated to keeping the area pristine and undeveloped.



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“outstandingly remarkable” rivers. The idea quickly gained support from watershed towns in both Rhode Island and Connecticut and, in 2013, a reconnaissance survey was requested by Rep. Jim Langevin, D-R.I.

By the end of 2014, the Wood-Pawcatuck Watershed Protection Bill (Study Bill) had passed through the U.S. House and Senate. On March 12, 2019, after the completion of the study, the Wood-Pawcatuck watershed was granted Wild and Scenic River status.



A great blue heron pokes its head above the vegetation at the southern end of Frying Pan Pond.

Donnelly has worked as WPWA’s Wild and Scenic Rivers coordinator since late 2018, a few months before the designation was made official. Building off the work of former project coordinator Denise Poyer, Kassi recruited members for the Wood-Pawcatuck Wild and Scenic Rivers Stewardship Council and organized working committees.

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with a couple of horses and her growing family. She has witnessed sand banks shift in Frying Pan Pond, knows where to find the best swimming holes and works on and off the water to push forward WPWA's goals.

She's an attentive tour guide, gushing about WPWA's work in the same breath as pointing out dangling poison ivy. She spots purple grapes overhanging the waterway, still green in not-quite-ripeness. Then, arrowheads' tapered leaves and sweet pepperbush — also known as soap bush, she says, because if you take a leaf and “rub-a-dub-dub it” it creates a sudsy lather.

Downed limbs and overgrown trees nearly block the river at times. But every potential blockade gives way to reveal a path just wide enough to paddle through — at times with head tucked to knees. The Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management (DEM) and WPWA are quick to get out to clear the branches, Kassi says, often waiting until low water to cut them out with a chainsaw.

Today, in early July, the water is high and deep, and we sail past any remaining underwater stumps with ease.



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Two and half years after the Wild and Scenic designation, community support is still strong. Federal funding helps support a portion of staff time for the Wild and Scenic Rivers coordinator and a National Park Service technical assistant and projects identified by the Stewardship Council, pending congressional allocation and approval.

The Stewardship Council, established in 2019, is composed of representatives of the watershed towns, the Narragansett Indian Tribe, Rhode Island and Connecticut state agencies, the NPS, Save The Bay and the WPWA.

The council is working to prioritize the projects outlined in the [Wood-Pawcatuck Wild and Scenic Rivers Stewardship Plan](#) and turn them into reality, Kassi says.

Recently, the council's members have seen success in getting green and white river signage onto roadways. It's a small step, Kassi says, but important in publicizing the area's waterways and increasing public consciousness of their Wild and Scenic status.

After a delay due to the coronavirus pandemic, the WPWA is starting new education programs this summer. Kassi has group paddles and programs arranged with The Greene School in West Greenwich, the Rhode Island National Guard's Family Program and Movement Education Outdoors.

The nonprofit is also making progress on [flood resiliency plans](#), developed in tangent with the stewardship plan. Towns are looking into flooding solutions, replacing and enlarging culverts for better water flow and aquatic organism passage, building rain gardens to

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The WPWA also has “great collaborations” with fishing groups in the area, according to Kassi. Trout-based groups contribute to the watershed’s [water quality monitoring project](#), which encompasses dozens of sites in the region. The Wood River Fly Fishermen used to meet every Wednesday at WPWA headquarters, on Arcadia Road in the village of Hope Valley, she says, and Trout Unlimited has done “amazing” work in the area.

We have them to thank, Kassi says, for the stairs we trekked our kayaks down back at the start of our journey.



A great blue heron takes flight after carefully keeping an eye on two kayakers.

Halfway back to Barberville Dam, Kassi paddles over to a clump of green fronds hanging just underneath the water. These patches of milfoil are a bad omen, Kassi says, a sign of invasive species spreading through the region.

Aquatic invasives can threaten local water ecosystems by

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Rhode Island. But if they're left uncontrolled, their dense growth can squeeze out native species and completely cover open water.

Milfoil, unfortunately, spreads extremely easily, Kassi says. The stems tangle in boats and paddles and break off. Each small fragment can spread downriver and can easily hitch a ride upstream, or to other waterbodies, with unaware boaters. Simply touching the feathery stems can be a risk, she says, lest an unnoticed piece make it into the cockpit of the boat and stick around till the next outing.

It will take a lot of work to stop invasive spread in its tracks, she says. There isn't much public awareness for now, so the WPWA needs to commit more resources to the issue and educate boaters on the go-to prevention method: clean, drain, dry.

Clean the boat after use, drain any water in boat crevices that could contain invasive organisms and dry it out to rid organisms that survive in the smallest pools of standing water, Kassi says.

Building boat wash stations at access points could help make this strategy easier and more obvious. They are already common in other regions of the country but haven't yet made it to Rhode Island.

The 3-mile stretch from The Pines access back to Barberville Dam is full of whirligig beetles spinning circles in shallows, gray catbirds wailing from swamp rose-covered riverbanks and turtles plunging into water from low stumps.

But the heavy, reedy cry of a blue heron has taunted us all morning. We've glimpsed flashes of its streaked head and wide wings a couple of times, but our chatter and the splash of our paddles have scared it

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We're nearly back to WPWA headquarters when we finally get a good look at its sinewy neck and long jutting beak behind the reeds. Whether it is the same bird that has trailed us our whole journey, I can't tell. But this time the heron pauses. It eyes us carefully as we drift quietly by. Then it lifts its wings and glides north over Frying Pan Pond, back into the quiet curves of the Wood River.

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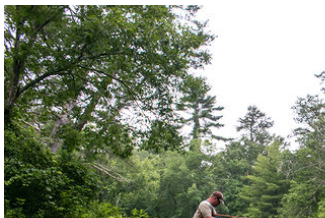
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