



## THE *Bluewater Trails* SERIES

# FLOATING ELKHORN CREEK

**A legendary stream packed with history – and smallmouth bass**

Story by Lee McClellan • Photos by Obie Williams

**N**ATIVE AMERICAN LORE has it that central Kentucky's Elkhorn Creek was born of a forbidden love and a magical animal determined to protect a star-crossed couple.

According to legend, a young brave stole away the daughter of a great chief in a blanket. The couple rode atop the back of a mighty elk for many days to escape the angry father's wrath.

The elk brought the young couple to a verdant valley, with the enraged chief in hot pursuit. The chief closed within bow range and placed a deadly arrow in the elk. As a last act of defiance, the elk turned toward the chief and used his enormous antlers to shield the young couple as they made their escape from the angry father.

The dejected chief gave up and the elk's antlers sank into the ground, leaving indentations that filled with water and began to flow. The couple named the new stream the

Elkhorn in honor of the animal that defended their love.

The sublime qualities of the whitewater rapids, stout bankside sycamores and towering limestone bluffs that make the main stem of Elkhorn Creek in Franklin County not only inspired Native Americans, but poet Walt Whitman in "Song of Myself."

Anglers have been attracted to the Elkhorn's feisty smallmouth bass for generations. Dr. James Henshall used his days of catching smallmouth bass from the Elkhorn as inspiration for his "Book of the Black Bass" in 1881. It was the first book devoted to fishing for black bass.

This fishing desire in the Bluegrass Region spurred the development of the Kentucky Reel, the first multiplying reel. Those built in Frankfort by Jonathan and Benjamin Meek and later their apprentice Benjamin Milam — along with craftsmen George Gayle and J.L. Sage — became world re-

nowned for their quality.

The modern baitcaster is simply an evolution of the Kentucky Reel.

The main stem of the Elkhorn begins where the North and South Forks of the creek meet outside of Frankfort. It ends about 18 miles downstream in the Kentucky River, at the site of the long-gone Mayflower Hotel and Fishing Camp. Still Waters Campground now occupies the site.

When you float and fish the waters of the Elkhorn, you are placing your hands upon one of the touchstones of American freshwater fishing. Biologists with the Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources say the robust population of smallmouth bass may equal those heady days of long ago.

"In our last population sampling, we had one of the highest catch rates of smallmouth bass over 14 inches long since the mid-1990s," said Central Fisheries District

Biologist Jeff Crosby. “We are back up to the numbers of smallmouth bass when it was great. The Elkhorn looked really, really good for smallmouth bass.”

Public access to the Elkhorn has improved over the years, and several floats showcase this historic stream. Elkhorn has it all for paddlers: an upper section with rapids that border on Class III in spring to the gentler downstream section that is perfect for anglers, beginners and families.

### FORKS TO CHURCH'S GROVE

The first float, which includes some of the most challenging whitewater on the creek, begins at the historic community of Forks of the Elkhorn off U.S. 460. It concludes after 4½ miles at a public access site off KY 1900 (Peaks Mill Road). This is also referred to as the Gorge Float.

Paddlers should consult the U.S. Geological Survey's online stream flow chart before they embark on the trip.

“As far as cubic per second (cfs) of flow, the best levels for fishing are from 300 cfs up to 800 cfs for the Gorge Float,” said Nathan Depenbrock, co-owner of Canoe Kentucky, a canoe livery and retail shop located in Peaks Mill on the Elkhorn. “A couple of the rapids in this stretch get pretty pushy above 800 cfs. It will definitely get you wet and you might get dunked a couple of times.”

Paddlers launching at the Forks may use a paid parking lot near the U.S. 460 Bridge. The parking fee is \$3 and must be paid at the nearby Elkhorn Campground, located off North Scruggs Lane.

Anglers passing underneath the U.S. 460 Bridge should probe the flowing shoals in this first stretch with a 4-inch black finesse worm rigged on a ½-ounce lead-head jig. Soon, however, paddlers will encounter a large pool created by the dam at Jim Beam Distillery. The head of this pool often

**The Elkhorn is known for its smallmouth bass.**

holds big smallmouth bass.

After floating underneath a bridge leading to the distillery, paddlers must keep to the left as the dam is just around the bend. This dam, which is slightly less than a mile into the float, must be portaged on the left and respected at all water levels. Make sure to launch well downstream to avoid the wicked back current of the dam.

“This dam is a drowning machine,” Depenbrock said. “The portage around the dam gets really dicey at flows above 800 cfs.”

Paddlers don't get much time to rest as they hit a significant drop just downstream of the dam. This rapid is rated Class II at higher flows. Paddlers must keep their boats straight in this rapid.

After the creek makes a long bend to the right, look to the right for an old bridge abutment that once carried trains of the now-defunct Frankfort and Cincinnati

Railroad. A rapid just upstream of this abutment is fun during normal summer levels, but produces a powerful diagonal standing wave at higher levels.

Soon the creek collides into one of the most picturesque bluffs in Kentucky. Locals know the deep pocket gouged into the base of this cliff as the Hawk Hole. This may be the best spot on the Elkhorn to catch smallmouth bass over 18 inches long.

A skirted double-tailed grub, such as a Hula or Spider Grub, in the motor oil color is deadly fished slowly along the rocky outside bend. Anglers should also probe the flowing water at the beginning and end of this hole. This is a good place to paddle back upstream and fish the section again.

The creek bends left then flows over an abrupt ledge that is tricky at higher water levels. Novice paddlers may portage to the far right, but those shooting this rapid should use the pillow of water flowing against the left bank to turn their boats downstream.

Paddlers then float over a medium-depth hole followed by a series of shallow runs. In this stretch, the observant boater will see the ruins of Stedman Mill on river left. This mill was the major supplier of paper to state government in the decades before the Civil War. The owner also had contracts to print money for the Confederate government during the war.

Just after the Stedman Mill complex, the Elkhorn has several drops that make the paddling interesting at summer levels. These produce speed and standing waves at higher flows.

The creek then makes a sweeping bend to the left with a soaring bluff and an island in the middle. The left route on the island has some fun standing waves, while the right route has a large plunge that greatly increases a boat's speed, even at normal summer flows. This rapid approaches Class III in difficulty at higher flows, one of the most temperamental in the Elkhorn system.

Soon the creek takes a hard right and enters Church's



## Largemouth bass



Grove. Smallmouth bass often congregate along the rocky outside bend. This is a good spot to work a silver and black Rapala-style floating/diving minnow.

Just after rounding this bend, the limestone outcropping known as Indian Head Rock comes into view on the right. From upstream, the rock resembles the profile of a human face. Legend says a pioneer woman shot and killed an attacking Native American from the upper story of the nearby Church family home. His body supposedly came to rest at the base of the rock formation, inspiring the name.

The float concludes at the Elkhorn Creek Voluntary Public Access (VPA) No. 3, located along KY 1900 at Church's Grove. Parking is limited here.

### CHURCH'S GROVE TO KNIGHT'S BRIDGE

The next float is a pleasant 3-mile trip to the American Whitewater Access near Knight's Bridge. Those in search of an all-day float may also consider the 7½-mile trip from the Forks to Knight's Bridge.

Just after the launch after Church's Grove, the creek enters a placid pool. The tail of this pool holds smallmouth bass. The creek then drops and makes a nearly 90 degree turn to the right. Old-timers called this Catfish Bend.

The swirling water in this corner is an excellent place to fish a weightless, pearl-colored soft plastic jerkbait. Nose hook the bait from the bottom up with a 1/0 wide gap finesse hook and cast it into the frothy water. Jerk the rod and then let the lure fall in a death spiral that smallmouth can't resist.

The creek soon flows left against the bottom of a high palisade with huge boulders along the right bank. The mossy boulders and tree canopy here form some of the most pastoral floating in Kentucky.

The slack water behind the boulders is a productive place in summer. Tie on a ½-ounce lead-head jig, and then rig it with a 4-inch plastic lizard. Watermelon with red flake is a good color for your bait.

The creek soon turns hard left toward Knight's Bridge on KY 1900. The public access take-out is located on the left, just downstream of the bridge and the Canoe Kentucky facilities. Look for the concrete blocks that lead to the parking area at the American Whitewater Access.

Anglers are advised to respect private



## Longear sunfish



## Sauger

*You never know what you will catch...*

The Elkhorn Creek features a good diversity of fish to catch.

property in this area and avoid wade fishing away from the take-out.

### KNIGHT'S BRIDGE TO PEAKS MILL

The next float begins at the American Whitewater Access near Knight's Bridge and concludes 5½ miles later at the Peaks Mill VPA, near the intersection of KY 1262 (Sullivan Lane) and KY 1707 (Camp Pleasant Road). This is the best stretch of the creek for consistent smallmouth bass fishing.

Just after the launch, the Elkhorn flows against a large hill with some exposed rock and turns nearly 90 degrees to the right. The deep pocket gouged at the bottom of the bluff is known as Bass Corner – it's a consistent producer of smallmouth bass. A finesse worm in the green pumpkin neon color rigged on a ¼-ounce lead-head is hard to beat. Remember to stay in your boat and respect the private property here.

Paddlers then enter Mucci's Stretch, a series of flowing shoals punctuated by small riffles and gravel bars. The deeper pocket water just upstream and downstream of these shallows holds smallmouth bass. This is a good stretch to work a floating/diving minnow.

Soon, paddlers reach a long pool section that eventually flows into an S-shape. Most of this pool is located along the T.N. Sullivan Wildlife Management Area (WMA). A trail on the left ascends a bluff that leads to Sullivan Lane. This access is not recommended as a take-out or a put-in due to the arduous carry.

The flowing water of the pool holds summer smallmouth bass. Fish also hold in the water downstream of the gravel bars, waiting to ambush their prey. This is a great spot to crawl a green pumpkin Hula grub along the bottom.

After a long, shallow stretch of flat bed-rock, the Elkhorn drops down into the High Bank Hole, also known as Boathouse Hole.



*Spotted gar*



*Rock bass*

The head of Jackson's Hole is a good place to work a floating minnow for smallmouth bass. To catch some of the abundant rock bass found in this final section of the float, try probing the undercut banks around root wads with a 3-inch, black curly-tailed grub rigged on ¼-ounce lead-head jig.

At the end of Jackson's Hole, the creek splits. One branch goes straight while the other makes a sharp bend to the left. This is where buffalo once crossed while on their way to Big Bone Lick.

The right fork is notorious for deadfalls blocking the route. The left split channels paddlers through a challenging section known as The Claw, a swift rapid

and drop that hurls paddlers straight into a high dirt bank.

Spring flooding changed the dynamic of The Claw's drop. Adam Miles, team manager at Canoe Kentucky, said floodwaters deposited gravel along the left side of the drop, making it extremely shallow. The strong current pushes boats into right bank, which can cause a canoe or kayak to flip. If in doubt, walk through on the left.

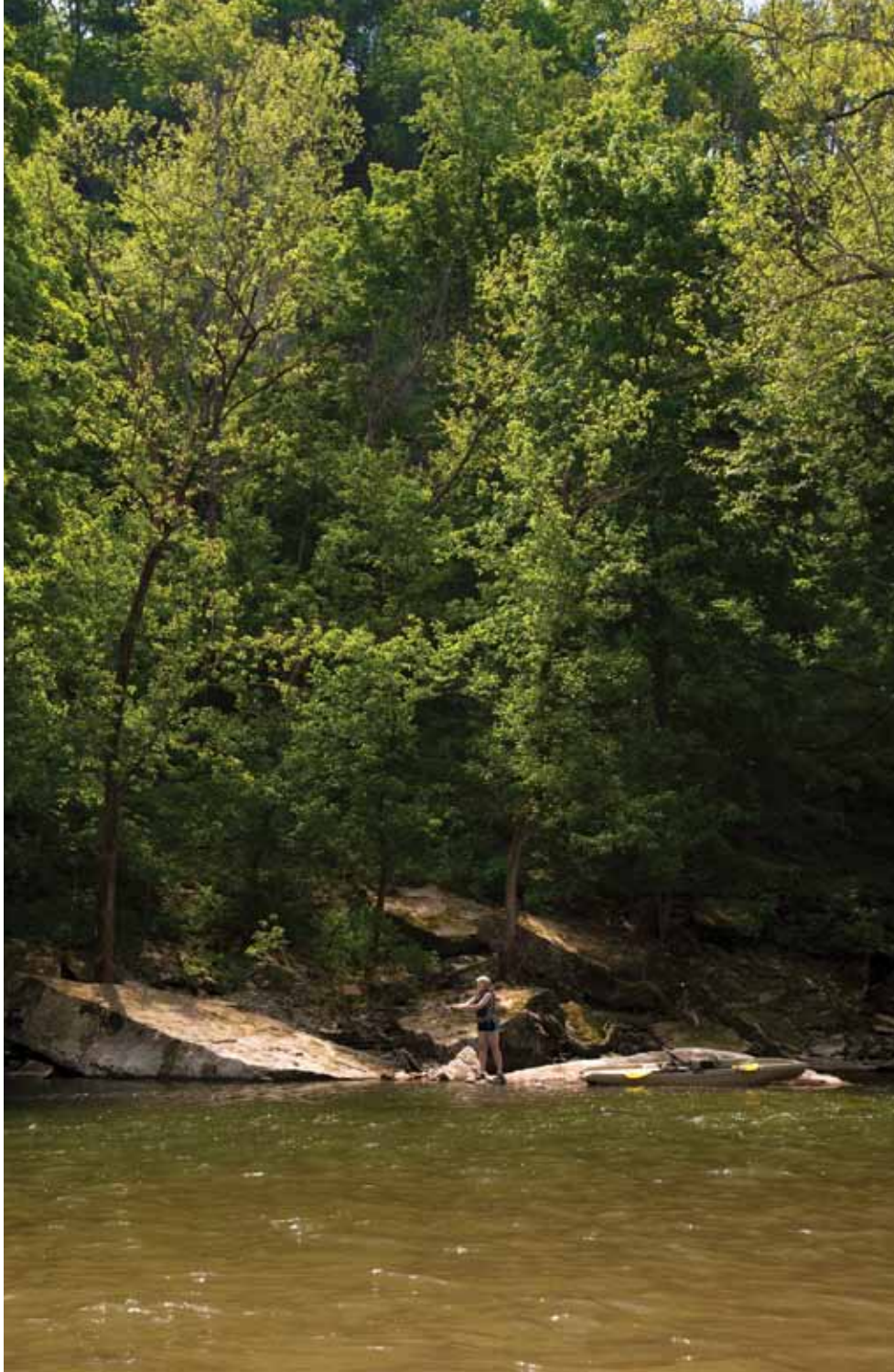
The creek now enters a canopied section that is one of the most productive stretches on the Elkhorn for smallmouth bass. Fish the undercut banks and root wads here with a soft plastic jerkbait.

Soon a series of mid-depth shoals greets paddlers before the stream broadens and deepens. Locals have referred to this stretch as The Meetinghouse Hole for well over a

The left bank of this hole drops off quickly into deep water, attracting smallmouth bass in summer. A black 4-inch finesse worm fished on a ¼-ounce Shakey head works well here.

Look for a series of pocket water before the creek bends to the right and enters a straight stretch. This downstream section is usually tepid water for fishing in summer.

The creek then flows left against a tall bluff, making the last turn of what was once known as Gault's Bend. The rocky flowing water at the base of the bluff is a great place to work a finesse worm or weightless soft plastic jerkbait. At the end of the bluff the creek flows left, straightens and gradually deepens. You are floating into Jackson's Hole, one of the most historic fishing spots on the Elkhorn.



century. This is a good place to fish a floating/diving minnow as the bottom substrate holds smallmouth bass.

The creek bends right then flows into the community of Peaks Mill. While milling began here in 1817, the community's namesake, John J. Peak, did not buy the works until the late 1830s. Residents adopted Peaks Mill as their community's name after a post office opened under this name. Paddlers can still see remnants of the stone walls of the old mill on the right, located just

**A canoe or kayak provides access to some gorgeous sections of the creek.**

after the bend.

The Elkhorn widens into a hole and flows past the take-out for the Canoe Kentucky livery on the right. This area holds some impressive smallmouth bass in summer.

Stay to the right when encountering the island downstream of Canoe Kentucky. Deeper pockets of water at the tail of the

island hold smallmouth bass in summer, as does the hole under Peaks Mill Bridge at KY 1262. The Peaks Mill VPA take-out is located just past this bridge on the right. Please observe the rules posted on brown Kentucky Fish and Wildlife signs at this access.

**PEAKS MILL TO KENTUCKY RIVER**

The next float begins at the Peaks Mill VPA and concludes approximately 5 miles downstream at the Still Waters Campground Boat Ramp. This ramp is just upstream of the Elkhorn's confluence with the Kentucky River. The campground charges \$3 to use the ramp.

Downstream from the launch at Peaks Mill, the creek drops in several locations. Try tumbling a black 4-inch finesse worm for smallmouth bass through the swirling water found here.

The creek widens and slows as it flows into Graham's Hole. The root wads and undercut banks here are home to some nice channel catfish. Cast some smelly dip bait near these lairs and let the scent waft downstream. Channels will follow the smell to the bait.

Stay to the right as the Elkhorn braids again. When the branches come together, the creek makes a pronounced drop into a deep hole. Probe the root wads and undercut banks on the right for fat smallmouth bass. A soft plastic jerkbait shines here.

After a time, a barn and silo come into view above a small bluff on the left. Water above and below the drop here are prime spots for a chrome cigar-shaped topwater lure such as a Spook. The walk-the-dog technique is effective for summer smallmouth bass here.

The creek splits at the end of this deep hole. The hole to the left, known as Catfish Hole, holds channel catfish beneath root wads. The right fork is home to smallmouth bass.

The creek braids as you reach Kentucky Fish and Wildlife's Pfeiffer Fish Hatchery at Indian Gap Road. History abounds here as well – the road was named for the route the last war party took to enter the Elkhorn valley.

The left braid flows through several pools and with some shallow riffles that cause dragging in summer, but there is a hole just after the first drop that holds smallmouth bass against the right undercut

## RESOURCES:

**Elkhorn Campground**  
elkhorncampground.com  
(502) 695-9154

**Canoe Kentucky**  
canoeky.com  
1-800-CANOEKY

**Still Waters Campground**  
stillwaterscampground.com  
(502) 223-8896

bank. The right braid is easier to paddle, but holds fewer fish.

The area where these braids rejoin can be quixotic at higher flows as it creates a wicked cross-current. Paddle hard and keep your boat straight.

A long hole greets anglers next. Some Elkhorn anglers call this the Mile-long Stretch, although it is actually just short of half a mile. The upper section holds smallmouth bass all summer long and will occasionally produce one over 16 inches.

The creek becomes a series of drops and small holes before turning nearly 90 degrees to the right. This stretch can be challenging for paddlers at higher flows, but it's just plain fun during normal summer flows. Just before the turn, the creek narrows and pushes boaters to the left. Avoid ramming the bank or any driftwood with the nose of the boat or it could flip. This pocket is sometimes called Dead Horse Hole.

After the turn, paddlers should stay to the left as the creek braids again. After the creek comes back together, the right bank transitions from a muddy shoreline into a rocky bank. This is a highly productive spot for smallmouth bass in late summer.

Soon, the U.S. 127 Bridge comes into view. Swimmers for generations have leapt off rope swings into the hole just above the bridge, known locally as Deep Hole or No

Bottom Hole. This area also holds smallmouth bass in summer.

A wicked ledge greets paddlers after they go underneath the bridge and round a bend to the right. The ledge should be scouted as it is easy to hang a boat here at low water.

The creek then flows under a second bridge at Strohmeier Road. Any undercut bank or root wad from the bridge to the

take-out should be probed with a soft plastic jerkbait or floating/diving minnow.

The Elkhorn makes a 1½-mile loop around the bend that ends at Still Waters Campground. The ramp and take-out is on the left after a short slack water paddle.

Anglers who fish the Elkhorn nourish their fishing souls with the waters that inspired books, legends and fine baitcasting reels. ■

