

# BLUE WATER TRAILS



A Float Back in Time

Exploring the spring-fed passage of  
Russell Creek By Lee McClellan

ASHLEY REAVES PHOTO

**R**USSELL CREEK RISES, fittingly, in Russell County, where the Mt. Olive, Hudson and Williams creeks converge near the border of Adair County. The stream flows across Adair County and through Green County to meet the Green River just west of Greensburg.

Russell Creek is a special place.

Local officials recognized its potential to draw visitors and incorporated it into the Green River Paddle Trail. The effort includes improved access in the Green River drainage, plus canoe, kayak and cabin rentals in select locations. The website [Greensburgonline.com](http://Greensburgonline.com) offers more details.

To better appreciate your own paddling trip on Russell Creek, however, it helps to know the background of the area and what you might find in its waters.

Around 1800, settlers chose a site on Russell Creek for the town of Columbia, now the county seat of Adair County. On April 29, 1872, five men reputed to belong to the Jesse James gang robbed the Bank of Columbia, killing the cashier and absconding with \$4,000.

Today, floating Russell Creek brings a paddler through a slice of Kentucky still attuned to its agricultural heritage. The rural sections of Green and Adair counties are lands of rolling hills of pasturage, large expanses of row crops, ancient homes, cross-road villages of a bygone age and beautiful country churches. It is a Kentucky landscape of our great-grandparent's time.

Russell Creek flows through the edges of the karst geology that produced the world's largest cave complex: Mammoth Cave. Matt Thomas, ichthyologist for the Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources, says the ground water discharge from this network of springs helps maintain good water quality to Russell Creek.

Russell Creek is designated as an "Outstanding State Resource Water" by the Kentucky Division of Water due its water quality and habitat conditions that support a diverse array of aquatic organisms. As a result, the creek is home to some rare mussel and fish species sensitive to pollution.

The rare Kentucky creekshell mussel, as well as the federally endangered snuff-box and clubshell mussels, are found in Russell Creek. Visitors may also encounter the American eel, an elusive species that spawns in the Atlantic Ocean and migrates up the Mississippi, the Ohio and then into the Green River. Eels must traverse several locks and dams to complete their journey to Russell Creek. Eventually they return to the saltwater of the Atlantic to spawn, then die.

Russell Creek also is home to five species of fish found only in the upper Green River drainage in Kentucky and a small slice of Tennessee. These include the elegant madtom, orangefin darter, teardrop darter, Kentucky darter and bluegrass darter.

The creek's excellent water quality powers a strong forage base of shiner species, crayfish, sculpins and the colorful northern studfish. These in turn support a healthy smallmouth bass population.

"In our population sampling for smallmouth bass on Russell Creek, we captured 30 fish per hour, which is pretty good," said Jay Herrala, stream fisheries biologist for the

Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources. "Our biggest fish was 19.3 inches with a really good number of fish over 12 inches. About 15% of the smallmouths in Russell Creek are 15 inches or longer."

While most anglers will want to visit Russell Creek to fish for its smallmouth bass, sampling also shows the stream holds decent populations of spotted bass and good numbers of rock bass that often exceed 6 inches in length.

Two day-long floats ranging from 5.5 to 7.5 miles reveal the unique beauty of this special stream. Combined, these floats will take you from Adair County into Green County.

Creek flows from 85 to 350 cubic feet per second (CFS) are ideal for fishing and paddling. While you can float the creek outside of these levels, a flow rate lower than 80 may mean frequently dragging your boat over shallow shoals. A flow higher than 350 makes it more difficult to avoid the numerous fallen trees in the streambed.

Before embarking on the trip, paddlers should go online to [waterdata.usgs.gov](http://waterdata.usgs.gov) to check the stream's current flow. The United States Geological Survey maintains a gauge for Russell Creek at the KY 768 bridge in Adair County.

**Russell Creek's spring-fed waters support a variety of fish, including smallmouth bass.**



“ About 15% of the smallmouths in Russell Creek are 15 inches or longer. ”

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### FLOAT 1: MILLTOWN TO KEMP ROAD BRIDGE, 7.5 MILES

The first float begins in Adair County at a rustic access at the historic and now largely abandoned community of Milltown. This community was once a thriving mill center and shipping point for the Green River valley downstream. The mill, built in the 1820s by the Townsend family, grew into a hub for the local economy.

Townsend Mill used Russell Creek's flow to power the huge stones that ground corn and wheat into meal and flour. The complex also contained a sawmill and a carding machine that produced wool.

The mill closed around 1920; floods reveal forgotten pieces of machinery washed downstream from the mill's ruins to this day. The remains of the mill are just upstream of the put-in and are not visible from the access point.

"This is a relaxing, peaceful float with enough current where you don't have to paddle much," said Mike Hardin, assistant director of Fisheries for Kentucky Fish and Wildlife. "I like it as much for the scenery as anything. It is a good mixture of paddling, relaxation and abundant wildlife."

The water at the put-in holds feisty

### Mike Hardin sneaks in a few casts at the Milltown put-in while others are shuttling.

smallmouth bass. Smart anglers would fish this area and the flowing water just downstream of the KY 768 bridge thoroughly. After this stretch, Russell Creek settles down and flows over a long, mid-depth stretch with a flat bottom that offers little habitat for smallmouth bass.

Russell Creek makes a horseshoe bend to the north and west after this long hole. Anglers here will experience the float's first bluffs and



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exposed rock. This also marks the first rapids since the put-in at Milltown – it's a good spot to slow down and fish with enthusiasm.

"We caught bass on Ned rig-style soft plastics with a little weight to get them down in the strike zone," Hardin said. "Where we had consistent running water, we threw a fluke-style jerkbait rigged weightless. This lure imitates the shiner species and minnows in Russell Creek."

The Ned rig is a finesse style bait consisting of a 2- to 3-inch tailless grub rigged on a mushroom-shaped jig head. They imitate small baitfish feeding on the bottom. To imitate the type of baitfish found in Russell Creek, Hardin suggests grey and white worm with blue flakes. Green pumpkin and black are also good as well.

The fluke is a plastic lure shaped like a minnow.

For fluke-style jerkbaits, use a size 1/6 wide gap finesse hook rigged weedless or hooked through the nose. This is a lure that closely resembles a disoriented baitfish. A slight jerk of the rod tip will create a spiraling fall that drives smallmouth bass crazy. This

**Small finesse worms fished Ned rig-style can be irresistible to smallmouth bass.**

presentation works best in moderate current.

Anglers should also try straight-tailed, 4-inch worms in the sexy shad, smoke blue-gill and black for smallmouth bass. Remember to rig any soft plastic lure weedless, as the prodigious amount of wood in the stream will catch an exposed hook point.

After paddling through another straight stretch, Russell Creek bends right and flows into a small rapid. This shoal is formed by the confluence with Big Creek on river left. You are now a fourth of the way through the float.

Russell Creek, because it has the gravel, cobble and sand substrate typical of eastern Pennyroyal region tributaries flowing from the south into the Green River, has surprising depth in many spots. Floods can more easily gouge deep holes in these streams than those in the limestone sections of Kentucky.

All deep stretches are not the same. In some sections of the creek, the sandy soils of the Russell Creek floodplain have settled and created soft areas on the bottom. Smallmouth bass, however, prefer clean, rocky bottoms.

The section of creek from the first bluffs to the confluence with Short Creek features many of these sandy bottoms.

A decent graphite rod can help you determine the bottom structure of the hole you're fishing. If you're bouncing a jig along the bottom and the rod transmits a soft and spongy feeling, move to another spot if you're targeting smallmouth. If the jig hitting the bottom feels harder and sharper, you're in the right place.

After the mouth of Big Creek, Russell Creek flows through an open area and several bends before reaching its confluence with Short Creek. This stretch contains much deep water with little current and high, mud banks. This is good water to paddle and make time on this long float.

Russell Creek changes character after it flows past Short Creek. Here paddlers enter a gorge-like section with impressive, layered bluffs that rise higher and higher as the stream flows northwest through northern Adair County.

The bluff complex of the end of this incised stretch is particularly scenic, of such height and majesty as to seem incongruent with the rolling Adair County countryside. This is one of the most striking stretches of any stream in south-central Kentucky.

**Rocks tumbled into the water from bluffs on the float offer ideal habitat for bass.**

This section is productive water for smallmouth bass. When the pleasant, gentle roar of Russell Creek flowing over rapids greets the ears, you've hit the good water. Slack areas behind instream boulders, seams where fast and slow water meet, and banks undercut by current all hold smallmouth bass.

Eventually, the creek makes a long bend to the right, flowing against a gorgeous bluff on river left with open fields on the right. Boulders spawned from the bluff above line the creek. Russell Creek flows progressively deeper through this stretch; boulders in the stream bed are fantastic hides for smallmouth bass.

The boulder-strewn bank is a good spot to throw a green pumpkin/blue  $\frac{3}{16}$ -ounce jig with a matching small beaver-style trailer for big smallmouth bass. Probe water behind boulders or swim the jig just above the deepest bottom – this stretch may harbor the largest smallmouth bass on this float.

After the bluffy stretch, Russell Creek bends left and flows west to the take-out at Kemp Road bridge. This section features several areas of deep water flowing over submerged trees. Sunken trees with flow over them often hold smallmouths and make good spots to fish a Rapala-style floating/diving minnow lure over the sunken trees.

Traditional colors still work: a silver body with a black back is best on bright days while a gold body with a black back is a good choice on overcast days. A floating/diving minnow can help avoid lure-snagging submerged trees and draw smallmouths from the woody cover, making them easier to bring to hand.



ASHLEY REAVES PHOTO

**Mike Hardin is all smiles as he holds a healthy bass caught from Russell Creek.**



ASHLEY REAVES PHOTO

## FLOAT 2: KEMP ROAD BRIDGE TO RUSSELL CREEK ROAD BRIDGE, 5.5 MILES

The second float begins at Kemp Road bridge and concludes 5.5 miles downstream at the Russell Creek Road bridge in southern Green County.

This float begins with a long, flowing hole that eventually constricts into mild rapids. The woody cover and undercut banks in this stretch hold smallmouth bass. A black Ned rig style worm works well through here.

The water flows through a canopied, more intimate stretch before a bluff begins to rise on river left. The stream makes a sharp bend to the right – here the current has carved a deep hole along the bluff. It rivals anything found in Russell Creek's mother stream, the Green River.

The head and the tail-out of this hole should be thoroughly probed with a green pumpkin or black Ned style worm or a green pumpkin/blue  $\frac{3}{16}$ -ounce jig. You'll want to paddle back upstream to fish this gorgeous spot again before you move on.

Just after this deep hole, the creek narrows enough to nearly throw a stick across, but it remains deep enough to float your hat. Paddlers will discover several similar spots on this float; look for smallmouths holding near current breaks created by submerged trees or rocks. These areas are best fished by beaching your boat and wading.

Russell Creek widens, with occasional deeper pockets and runs that hold smallmouth bass. A faster-moving bait such as a 3-inch swimbait in the electric shad color or the Rapala-style floating/diving minnow lure allows you to cover this wider expanse of water faster.

Paddlers will soon float underneath the Bramlett-Kemp Road bridge, which is approximately one-third of the way through the float. There is no access for paddlers at this bridge or the KY 487 bridge near the community of Bramlett.

The water downstream of the Bramlett-Kemp Road bridge features long stretches of flat bedrock bottom and shallow to mid-depth water with little smallmouth bass habitat. This is good water to practice your paddling stroke and make time to fish the excellent smallmouth water downstream.

Paddlers may encounter several fallen trees that require portaging. Trees across the stream in areas of current can land an inattentive paddler into a world of trouble. It's best to beach your boat and carry it around any fallen

trees blocking the stream.

The same forces that toppled massive silver maples and American sycamores into the creek also created some great fish habitat. These huge root wads diverted flood waters, causing the current to gouge deep holes in the malleable bottom. These spots often have everything a mature smallmouth bass needs: flow, depth, ambush cover and food.

About a mile downstream of the Bramlett-Kemp Road bridge, Russell Creek makes a long, northward bend to the left (flowing north). This section contains several spots with excellent smallmouth bass habitat.

In the lower flows common in summer, a double-tailed skirted grub, commonly called a Hula grub, in the green pumpkin color works great in these areas. The skirt of this lure slows its fall in the water column and perfectly imitates an unaware crayfish stumbling into a smallmouth's lair. Fish it in the crayfish-like colors of motor oil or green pumpkin.

Scour holes around root wad complexes also make a good place to fish a fluke-style soft plastic jerkbait.

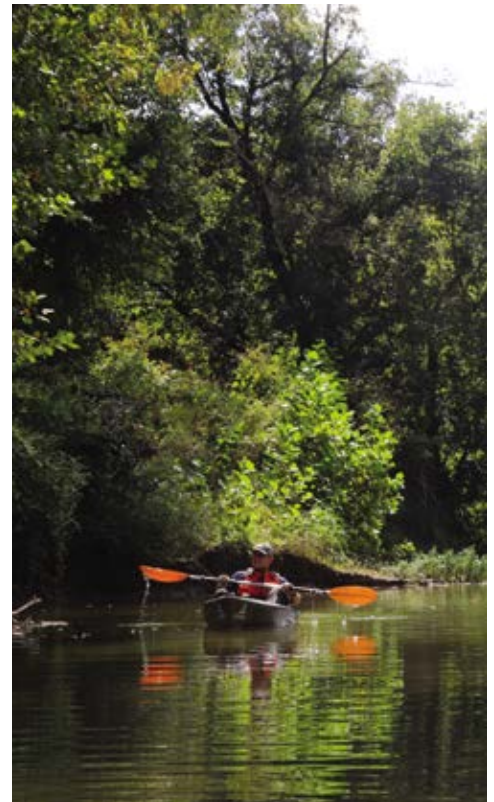
After the creek completes its bend to the north, paddlers will see an area on river left that may include tents or picnickers. This is privately owned property and is not a take-out. However, the float is about 90 percent complete at this point. Much of the water from here to the take-out is mid-depth with a flat bottom.

Soon, vestiges of the grey supports of the Russell Creek Road bridge appear through the trees, denoting the end of this float. The take-out is on river right, just upstream of the bridge.

Smallmouth bass are not the only species of interest to anglers in Russell Creek. The



NATHAN SANGSTER PHOTO



ASHLEY REAVES PHOTO

### This 5.5 mile float contains sections of good smallmouth bass habitat.

stream holds some fat rock bass that usually hang near root wads or brush and hit 3-inch, black curly-tailed grubs rigged on  $\frac{1}{8}$ -ounce lead-head jigs.

Anglers can also probe sunken woody cover in the creek's deep holes for spotted bass. A black or smoke 4-inch finesse worm rigged weedless on an  $\frac{1}{8}$ -ounce bullet-shaped lead-head works extremely well on spotted bass.

Russell Creek falls under statewide regulations for spotted bass and smallmouth bass: Both species have a 12-fish daily creel limit. Smallmouth bass must be at least 12 inches long for anglers to keep them, while there is no size limit for spotted bass.

Paddlers also will notice many sucker and redhorse species in Russell Creek – indicative of its good water quality.

Russell Creek is a gorgeous stream of aquamarine water, fat smallmouth bass and extremely rare species of mussels and fish. This stream flows through one of the most bucolic regions in Kentucky and is a fantastic, overlooked paddling destination. ■

**Ashley Reaves caught this nice bass while kayaking and fishing Russell Creek.**

# RUSSELL CREEK

Milltown to Russell Creek Road



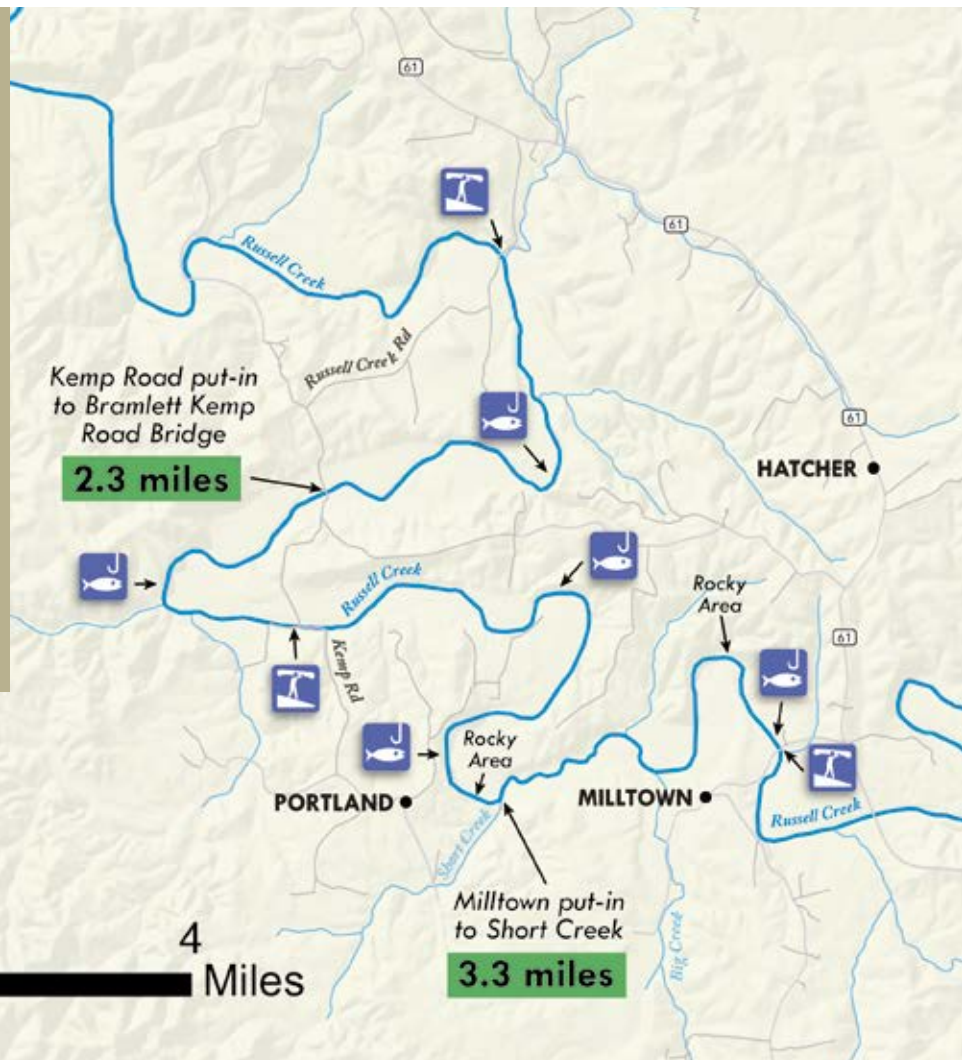
Carry down access



Fishing hole

Milltown put-in to Kemp Road  
take-out 7.5 Miles

Kemp Road put-in to Russell  
Creek Road take-out 5.5 Miles



ASHLEY REAVES ILLUSTRATION

## FLOAT 1 ACCESS POINTS

### Put-in

GPS coordinates: 37.12373761294996,  
-85.40550551592219

Take KY 61 north from Columbia. Turn left onto KY 768 (Milltown Road) and continue less than a mile to the bridge over Russell Creek. Go another quarter mile and look to the left for a small gravel and dirt road that looks like a farm road. (If you make it to the small concrete block building that once housed the Milltown post office, you've gone too far.)

A path leads to the creek. This is a primitive access that requires a carry down to the water. Field parking is available at the access site.

### Take-out

GPS coordinates: 37.136542881203994,  
-85.4580104038823

The take-out is beside the bridge at the intersection of Kemp Road and Bramlett-Kemp Road. From the put-in, take KY 768 south. As you travel, look to the right for the stately white frame Mercer house overlooking the collapsing remains of the old Mercer store. The abandoned buildings in what was once the heart of Milltown are poignant reminders of the area's lost vibrancy in modern times.

Continue on KY 768. Just past the Tartars Chapel United Methodist Church, turn right (north) onto KY 1702. Continue into the crossroad community of Portland; once you reach the Portland store, take the next right onto Kemp Road, a distance of slightly more than 1.5 miles from the KY 768 intersection. Kemp Road crosses Russell Creek. There is a parking area to the left of the Kemp Road bridge before you cross the creek. (Visitors should note the Bramlett-Kemp Road bridge, located just north of the Orr cemetery, is not an access point.)

## FLOAT 2 ACCESS POINTS

### Put-in

GPS coordinates: 37.136542881203994,  
-85.4580104038823

Bridge at Kemp Road; please see Float 1 take-out directions for more information.

### Take-out

GPS Coordinates: 37.169765557443924,  
-85.43545232520944

From the Kemp Road put-in, go north on Bramlett-Kemp Road for approximately 1.6 miles. At Summershade United Methodist Church, turn right onto Russell Creek Road. Continue for approximately 2 miles to the bridge over Russell Creek. The take-out is located to the right before the bridge.

This access site includes two parking areas and a gravel ramp for ease of carrying out canoes and kayaks.