



THE *Bluewater Trails* SERIES

# SOUTH FORK KENTUCKY RIVER

## Time traveling on the South Fork of the Kentucky River

Story by Lee McClellan

OBIE WILLIAMS PHOTO

**T**HE NARROWS OF the South Fork of Kentucky River once struck fear into the hearts of men who built rafts out of valuable logs cut from the nearby mountains, then commenced a wild ride downriver to the sawmills of Frankfort.

Just a few miles downstream of Oneida, Kentucky, the Narrows spill through a nearly mile-long gorge pocked with truck-sized boulders, drops, rapids and numerous rock gardens.

Shallow in summer, the Narrows turn ferocious when the river rises with the rains of early spring and turns a frothy brown. The spring “tide” provided the lift and horsepower necessary to get huge log rafts – some measuring longer than 100 feet – downriver and onto the waiting market.

A large, flat-topped boulder, known locally as Patty’s Rock, marks the beginning of the Narrows. Here the river bends sharp left with the current shooting straight ahead

into a cliff on the opposite shore.

Once the raftsmen reached Patty’s Rock, they had to steer their log rafts hard left and hold on for dear life. Some of the raftsmen who made this run recalled they felt the raft “pick up and fly” through this hairy stretch. A raft negotiating the Narrows in high water could outpace the fastest horse.

Those who didn’t wish to risk the Narrows run hired younger, braver men for \$2 a trip to float their log rafts downstream to Turkey Gap on the Clay/Owsley county line.

At normal summer levels, however, this stretch of the South Fork is suitable for beginner to intermediate kayakers and canoeists. It also offers some of the best river smallmouth bass fishing in southeastern Kentucky.

“I was absolutely blown away with it,” said Jay Herralá, stream biologist for the

**Danny Barrett holds one of numerous smallmouth bass anglers can expect to catch from the river.**

Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources. “For smallmouth bass, I would say catch rates during population sampling are in between Green River to Elkhorn Creek range. The South Fork was phenomenal, just great smallmouth.”

Scott Barrett, a fisheries biologist at the Minor Clark Fish Hatchery in Morehead, grew up fishing the river. “You can catch a ton of smallmouths up to 14 inches,” he said. “I’ve personally caught three smallmouths over 20 inches out of the South Fork in my life.”

The South Fork of Kentucky River is also one of Kentucky’s native muskellunge streams. “Muskie numbers are good in the South Fork and they are in excellent body condition,” Herralá said. “You don’t see



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LEE MCCLELLAN PHOTO

## Two views a century apart:

A raftsmen (left) prepares to shoot the rapids of the Narrows in spring. The run is far less harrowing (right) in the low flows of fall.

much in the South Fork that isn't in good shape."

Several floats highlight an incredibly scenic section of the South Fork from Oneida in Clay County to Bishop Bend on the Owsley county line. This stretch at normal flow levels has some drops that make the paddling interesting.

Consult the U.S. Geological Survey's gauge for Booneville before floating this section. Search under keywords "US streamflow South Fork KY River" for this page. The best flows for fishing are from 75 cubic feet per second (cfs) up to 350 cfs. Paddlers should expect to drag on shallow shoals below 150 cfs.

The Narrows grow teeth at flows above 500 cfs; only experienced paddlers should make the run at these levels.

### ONEIDA BOAT RAMP TO ROCKY BRANCH ROAD

The first float begins at the Oneida ramp on Newfound Road, via KY 66 north, near Oneida Elementary School. It ends roughly 7 miles downstream at the Rocky Branch Road Access, via KY 11.

The river flows deep for the initial stretch. "They call this the Long Hole," Barrett said as he paddled through it. "It is a well-known muskie hole. I've caught quite a few muskies in here."

Population sampling by biologists bears this out. "All of our muskie came downstream of the ramp," Herrala said. "All of our muskie came off the end of a tree that was out in the water a little ways."

Top-water lures with a revolving tail, such as the Whopper Plopper, draw strikes

from muskellunge when worked through the woody cover away from the bank. Barrett favors these lures in hues of blue, gray and silver. Smaller versions of this lure also attract chunky smallmouth bass.

Bucktail spinners in brown and orange with a gold spinner work well when fished around sunken treetops and brush.

Anglers seeking smallmouth bass should bypass this water and instead continue downstream to a line of water willow across the river. This is where Crane Creek enters the South Fork.

The deep hole just downstream of the confluence holds smallmouth bass. The seam water alongside the main flow is an excellent spot to work a green pumpkin, double-tailed skirted grub.

Paddlers will notice bluffs and exposed rock in this area. Fish the flowing water at the base of the steep bank on the left with 3-inch black soft plastic stickbait, such as the Senko.

This is a choice section to park the boat and wade fish. The flowing water on river right holds smallmouth bass while the downstream hole holds muskellunge in the submerged treetops.

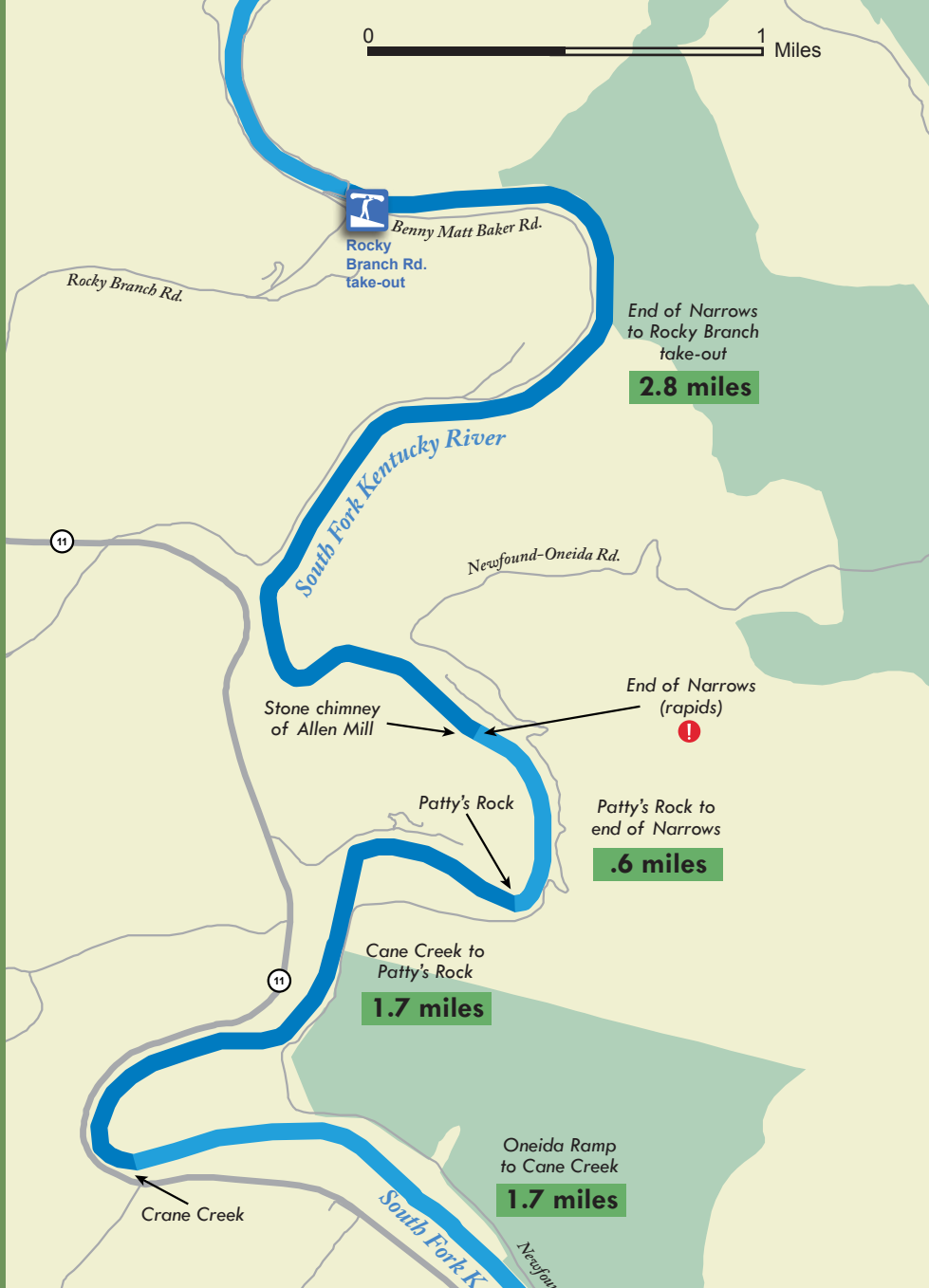
Continuing downstream, the river bends to the right before settling into a series of shoals and mild drops. This is productive water to work the black 3-inch Senko.

The South Fork makes a sharp left at the end of this shoal water. Look for a large flat rock thick with young trees on the left. This is Patty's Rock, the signpost for rafts-



OBIE WILLIAMS PHOTO

### Fisheries Biologist Scott Barrett samples the Crane Creek confluence for bass.



# SOUTH FORK KENTUCKY RIVER

-  Boat ramp
-  Carrydown launch
-  National Forest (Redbird District)



## Extend your float

There's more to explore on the South Fork of the Kentucky River. Add more than 7 miles to the trip by paddling from the access points at Rocky Branch Road to Bishop Bend School Road. This section features less drops and is easier to paddle than the Narrows section.

Paddlers can split up the trip by going 2½ miles from Rocky Branch Road to Cedar Valley Road, and slightly under 5 miles from Cedar Valley Road to the Bishop Bend School Road access.

Anglers starting their trip at Rocky Branch Road should fish the first few holes thoroughly.

The access at Cedar Valley Road appears after the river takes a sharp, horseshoe-shaped bend to the right. "The rocky banks above Cedar Valley hold a ton of fish," said Fisheries Biologist Jason Herralala.

To reach this access by road, cross the river at Rocky Branch and continue northwest on Newfound Road for approximately 3 miles. Turn left onto Cedar Valley Road. Continue to the access at the old ford.

"Cedar to Bishop Bend is a great smallmouth bass float, but it is my suggestion for all species," Herralala said. "We saw good smallmouths, muskie and rock bass. There are fat channel catfish through that whole stretch of the South Fork."

Paddlers will hear road traffic from KY 11 as they make their way around Bishop Bend. The final take-out soon appears on the left.



OBIE WILLIAMS ILLUSTRATION



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**Counterclockwise: These drops (above) signal the end of the Narrows; the stone chimney of historic Allen Mill; Scott Barrett releases a bass.**



OBIE WILLIAMS PHOTO

men that trouble was just around the bend. “They had to get hard to the left and touch Patty’s Rock to make the turn,” Danny Barrett noted as he paddled his ancient Sears aluminum canoe toward the outcrop. Barrett, Scott Barrett’s father, knows the area and its history well. “If they didn’t get far enough left to make the turn,” he continued, “they would smash the end of their raft on the cliffs there on the right.” Danny Barrett has a deep knowledge of

the river. Prior to his retirement in 2003, he served as the Upper Kentucky River manager for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. Patty’s Rock marks the beginning of the Narrows, a nearly mile-long section strewn with boulders, rapids, rock castles and smallmouth bass. Run the first river-wide rapid to the left. Be sure to observe the river bottom in this section carefully, as many boulders lurk just beneath the surface. These obstructions

can pin a boat and flip it, especially at higher flows.

After a while, start listening for the roar of rapids. This signals the end of the Narrows section.

At higher flows, this rapid presents strong currents and standing waves. At normal, lower flows, run this rapid on the left and work toward the center. Avoid the sharp drops on the right.

The final drop of the rapid marks the end of the Narrows. The rocky bar on the left makes a good lunch spot, as well as a window into pioneer-era Clay County. Just behind this bar is a side chute with a mushroom-shaped rock projecting out.

Downstream of this rock is a stone chimney marking the remains of the historic Allen Mill. Revolutionary War Capt. Adoniram “Tege” Allen, who served with distinction against the British during the Battle of Kings Mountain in 1780, built the mill in 1807. He was 70 at the time.

Neighbors thought Allen was tedious and persnickety in his work. The word “tedious” became corrupted to “Tege,” and the sobriquet stuck to the captain. The community of Tege near the mill site and the nearby Upper and Lower Tege creeks are named in his honor.

Just downstream of the Allen Mill ruins is a flowing hole where Scott Barrett caught his largest smallmouth bass in the South Fork, a 22-inch brute. Smart anglers should work this area thoroughly.

The South Fork next flows into a deep S-shaped hole that holds muskellunge. The river continues to the right, into a boulder-laden stretch with good depth and flow. Kayak anglers should paddle back upstream and fish this stretch at least twice.

The rest of this float settles into a predictable pattern of deep holes that hold muskellunge and shallow shoals with water willow-lined chutes of water. Expect to drag your boat through these chutes in the fall.

After a long, relatively straight stretch, paddlers will see a settlement-era stone wall on river left. The take-out at the Rocky Branch Road bridge comes into view soon afterward.

A float through the Narrows gives a paddler perspective on the bravery of the log raftsmen who risked their lives to provide a little more for their families a century ago. For all of the upheaval of modern life, the South Fork still echoes those earlier times. ■