

SIGNS OF LIFE



SUBMITTED PHOTO

Steve Yurkanin holds one of the smaller fish he has caught in Black Creek, a stream that was so yellow when he opened a business nearby that he never expected fish would survive in the water. Now, Black Creek has been classified as a wild trout stream.

Once polluted by mining, Black Creek running clear enough to be classified wild trout stream

BY KENT JACKSON
STAFF WRITER

Ted Sherrock has watched the Black Creek flow past Penn Rod and Gun Club as long as anyone.

"That water was terrible for years and years," Sherrock said of the stream long polluted by coal mine runoff.

More recently, he and other members of the club in Black Creek Twp. saw improvement.

"We've been noticing over the last several years how it's been cleaning up," Sherrock said. "Some of our members went fishing there last year, and they started to catch trout."

A natural revival

They're not the only people to find signs of life in the Black Creek.

A 2016 report by the state Department of Environmental Protection counted macroinvertebrates —

insects, worms or crawfish that make up the base the food chain — along the creek and said "the stream improved enough to look like a fair fishery."

Tim Ference said he and other volunteers who test water with Friends of the Nescopeck were surprised to look down from a bridge and see the creek bottom through clear water.

"It's hard to believe it is the Black

Creek ... We got to the bridge, we both thought we were somewhere different. It couldn't be that good looking, unbelievably pristine looking," Ference said.

And on Jan. 24, the Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commissioners voted unanimously to make Black Creek a wild trout stream along its entire length.

The designation means that trout reproduce naturally in the creek and will become official after a notice appears in the Pennsylvania Bulletin.

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CREEK: Designation means trout can reproduce naturally

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Already more than 4,590 different waters in Pennsylvania have wild trout classification, but for the Black Creek the label signifies that water quality improved as mining operations ceased and impacts of historic mining lessened naturally over time. Sewage treatment improvements also led to cleaner water.

In a survey, researchers for the Fish and Boat Commission found four native brook trout from 3 to 8 inches long where Black Creek flows into Nescopeck Creek. Also they noted 34 brown trout up to 17 inches long.

"I'm elated," said Sherrock, who watches trout at the rod and gun club. "I go to the bridge and see them swimming, see them jumping," particularly in May when the invertebrate hatch is dense. "It's exciting."

Sherrock said he has been at the club "since I was a kid" and figures he is the longest serving member.

He also chairs the board of the Greater Hazleton Joint Sewer Authority, which operates a sewage treatment plant in Valmont Industrial Park that discharges into Black Creek.

Chris Carsia, the authority's director of operations, said the treatment plant has helped creek water improve.

"I know our effluent is high quality thanks to upgrades," Carsia said. The plant also adds magnesium hydroxide, which reduces acidity from mine drainage.



SUBMITTED PHOTO

Marty Zybur takes a water sample while Cy Edworthy stands along Little Nescopeck Creek. The men volunteer with Friends of the Nescopeck, a group that also tests water in Black Creek, which a state agency classified as a wild trout stream Jan. 24.

The Black Creek, when he started working for the authority in 1984, "looked like a rainbow" from a chemical sheen.

Water bugs

About three years ago, however, when Carsia and other leaders met to discuss a regional sewage treatment plan, an official from the state environmental department read from a report about macroinvertebrates in the Black Creek that surprised him.

Before writing the report in December 2016 for the

Bureau of Abandoned Mine Reclamation, Joseph Cocco looked for aquatic life at five locations. At each spot, he kicked the creek bottom to allow sediment and creatures to flow into a screen.

Based on what he found, water had the highest score for aquatic life farthest upstream, before mine drainages entered, at the confluence of Cranberry Run and Black Creek.

Scores dropped as he took samples downstream from Tomhicken, Dainty and Derringer mine discharges but improved past those dis-

charges where Black Creek flows into Nescopeck Creek.

Moreover at each site, Cocco found more than 200 living things.

"While there were plenty of macroinvertebrates present," he wrote, "... scores were very low because few pollution sensitive bugs were present."

Using electrical gear that stuns fish at the confluence with Nescopeck, Cocco collected 10 different species, including four native brook trout.

Friends of the Creek

Near the confluence, the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation plans to replace two bridges along Interstate 80 that cross Nescopeck Creek.

Ference, whose Friends group takes its name from Nescopeck Creek, said openings called scuppers in bridge deck now funnel liquid into the creek. At an open house in December, he asked PennDOT officials to rede-

sign the new bridges to better catch anything that spills from vehicles such as tanker trucks.

"I suggested it is an opportunity to find an alternative approach and have a tremendous impact on the future of bridge building," Ference said.

Every month, Friends of the Nescopeck test the Black Creek about a mile downstream from the confluence.

Gary Leander, who heads the testing, said group members though Black Creek would resemble Nescopeck Creek, where he detects high levels of metals from the outfall from the Jeddo Tunnel that drains 32 square miles of mineland.

"We expected the Black Creek to be pretty poor," Leander said. "Actually, it's not."

The Friends test for pH and iron, but in 2019 a state environmental worker accompanied them and also tested for aluminum and manganese.

For all 12 months that year, the levels of iron and manganese were below criteria set in state law. Aluminum readings met criteria in 10 of 12 months.

In addition to measuring concentrations of metals, the Friends of the Nescopeck record the rate of flow so they can calculate total amounts of pollutants.

Leander hasn't noticed startling changes in total pollutants, whether during low or high water or in different seasons.

"We're trying to determine health, and if it's improving," Leander said.

Given the relationship that the Friends have developed with the state environmental department, he thinks the state would send an inspector if the group reported a decline in water quality.

Four year ago when huge soap suds churned up in the creek downstream of the industrial park, the department investigated and fined a