

ENVIRONMENTAL Fact Sheet



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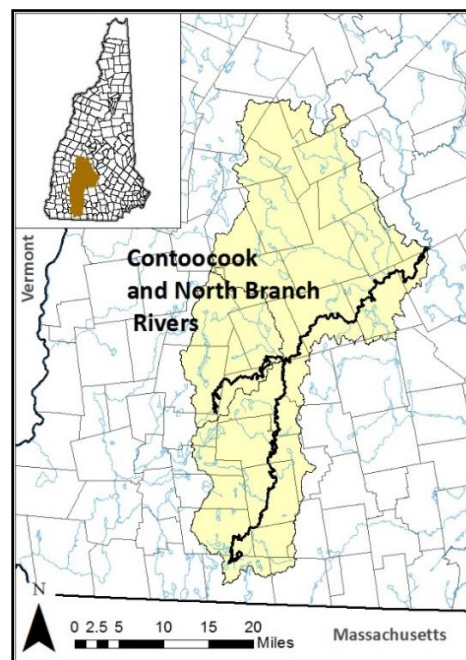
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The Contoocook and North Branch Rivers

The Contoocook River flows for 71 miles from Poole Pond in Rindge, N.H., north to the state capitol in Concord, where it enters the Merrimack River. Encompassing a drainage basin of approximately 760 square miles, the Contoocook has a total drop of over 700 feet, which affords one of the premier whitewater boating stretches in New England.

The North Branch River is a major tributary of the Contoocook and flows for 16 miles from its headwaters in Stoddard through Antrim and Hillsborough, where it joins the main stem of the Contoocook River. The entire lengths of these two rivers were designated into the New Hampshire Rivers Management and Protection Program (RMPP) in June 1991. Another major tributary, the Warner River which enters the Contoocook River from the north in Hopkinton, was separately designated into the RMPP in 2018.



History

The Contoocook River's north-northeasterly flow pattern made it an important travel and communication corridor in pre-colonial times and during settlement. The area was home to the Kon-wa-teg-ok trail, which connected the Native American villages along the Contoocook River north to the river's confluence with the Merrimack River. Seven archaeological sites have been recorded along the Contoocook River profiling the Penacook people's lifestyle based primarily on salmon fishing and agriculture.

Early European settlers established the villages of East Jaffrey, Peterborough, Bennington, Hillsborough, Henniker, Contoocook and Penacook to take advantage of natural falls and the waterpower that could be harnessed by dams at these locations. Numerous sites in the Contoocook River Valley are listed on the National Register of Historic Places. One notable site in Hillsborough is the homestead of Franklin Pierce, the only New Hampshire native to serve as President of the United States.

Wildlife and Plant Resources

At least 117 species of birds depend on the Contoocook and North Branch Rivers and their corridors according to recent tallies. Two state-endangered species, the northern harrier and the common nighthawk, are among those living in the river corridor. Other species sighted include the state-threatened common loon, purple martin and pied-billed grebe, as well as the bald eagle which continues to be a state species of special concern.

The variety of plant life in the corridors is as diverse as its wildlife population. Arethusa, hoary mountain mint, sweet coltsfoot and green-adders mouth are among the endangered species which are part of the diverse habitat in the Contoocook and North Branch rivers' corridors according to the New Hampshire Natural Heritage Inventory. Three exemplary natural ecological communities are found in Stoddard and Antrim along the North Branch River. These communities are an Atlantic white cedar swamp, southern New England level bog, and southern New England acidic seepage swamp.

Boating

Much of the Contoocook River is enjoyed by boaters. The upper portion of the river provides a mix of quickwater and moderate rapids. Farther downstream, the Contoocook River flaunts one of the most popular whitewater runs in New England. The rapids between Hillsborough and West Henniker offer high quality, Class III-IV (expert) whitewater including the famous Class IV "Freight Train Rapids." The lower part of the river between Contoocook Village and the Island in Penacook is largely flatwater and is used by a variety of motorboats, party boats, canoes and rowboats. The North Branch also has an excellent section for expert whitewater paddlers. These rapids, which are rated as difficult as Class V, are located in Antrim between the double stone arch bridge on NH Route 9 and the old Hawthorne College campus. Official access points located on flatwater sections of the river are suitable for launching motorboats. These access points include the New Hampshire Fish and Game Department site at the covered bridge in Greenfield, the River Road access in Henniker, and the Island access in Penacook. Bridge crossings over the river offer other informal access points for car-top boats.



Fishing

The Contoocook and North Branch Rivers provide both cold and warm water habitats for several species of recreational and sport fish. The Contoocook River has also been a vital component of the anadromous fish restoration program for the Merrimack River watershed. It is viewed as an outstanding nursery area for young Atlantic salmon. The most significant, high quality habitat for these and other cold water fish is the section of rapids in the Hillsborough-West Henniker area. The slower moving sections of the river and impounded areas provide excellent warm water fish habitat. Fishing is popular above Peterborough along Route 202 and in most of the impounded areas and flat water stretches of the river.

Recreation

The scenic views of the rivers are diverse and impressive, from the panoramic view of Crotched Mountain across Powder Mill Pond to the sights and sounds along the community trails in Peterborough and Hillsborough. For those interested, there are also maintained trails along the river in McCabe Forest in Antrim and riverfront parks in and Jaffrey and Henniker.

For More Information

For further information about the New Hampshire Rivers Management and Protection Program visit the [Rivers Management and Protection page](#) on the NHDES website or contact the Rivers Coordinator, 29 Hazen Drive; PO Box 95; Concord, NH 03302-0095; [\(603\) 271-2959](tel:6032712959); riversprogram@des.nh.gov.