

ENVIRONMENTAL Fact Sheet



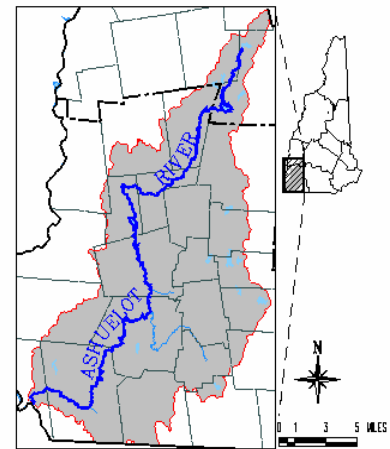
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The Ashuelot River

Rolling through southwestern New Hampshire in the heart of New England, the Ashuelot River has a drainage basin encompassing nearly 420 square miles. In its approximately 64 mile journey spanning from the towns of Washington to Hinsdale, the Ashuelot affords areas with both cultural and environmental significance. The river boasts the site of the oldest known evidence of man in New Hampshire, dating back 10,500 years, and has also been identified by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service as one of the four most important refuges for the federally-listed endangered dwarf wedge mussel. The Ashuelot became recognized as a state designated river in June 1993.



The Ashuelot River watershed is included in the Silvio O. Conte National Fish and Wildlife Refuge Act. The Act was passed in 1991 to conserve, protect and enhance the diversity of species that exist within the entire Connecticut River watershed. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, which administers the program, has identified special focus areas throughout the watershed where resources are deemed highly valuable. The upper reach of the Ashuelot River is one such focus area, recognized for the rare dwarf wedge mussel and fine fishery supported there. The agency will direct its efforts for protection of these sites through various programs, including environmental education and habitat management.

Geology

The headwaters of the Ashuelot River begin in Pillsbury State Park at an elevation of approximately 1,600 feet. From there the river drops at a rate of 37 feet per mile over the first 30 miles, creating a steep gorge with numerous waterfalls in Gilsum. A number of potholes, including Devil's Chair, are also located in this reach of the river. Throughout the river corridor there are remnants of past glacial activity including varved clay deposits, deltas, drumlins and glacial Lake



Ashuelot. Also of interest are the many quarries in the area producing sand, gravel, and semi-precious stones, and the high potential aquifers found in the river corridor.

History

The southern portion of the Ashuelot River Valley was first inhabited by the Squakheag Indians. Today, the Ashuelot River hosts 12 Native American sites; seven in Swanzey, and five sites from Winchester to Hinsdale. These sites range from the Paleo-Indian (10,500 years ago) to a hilltop contact period Native American fort (1663-64 A.D.). The lower river valley was later colonized by pioneers in the early 1700s, with settlement continuing to the upper valley by the latter part of the 1700s. The river was a major source of food and power for the people of the region. Evidence of mills is still visible today in all of the riverfront towns where industry grew. There are numerous sites along the river listed in the National Register of Historic Places, including Jones Hall, Dinsmoor-Hale House, and Sawyer's Crossing and Coomb's Covered Bridges. Another notable historic site is the Gilsum Stone Arch Bridge, built in 1863 and recognized as one of approximately 30 remaining dry laid bridges in the state, also prided with having the highest arch above stream elevation, at 35.5 feet.

Wildlife Habitat and Uncommon Vegetation

Several great blue heron rookeries exist in the Ashuelot River watershed, and due to the river's general north-south orientation, it is naturally used as a migratory path for raptors, waterfowl, and songbirds. The river corridor also provides feeding areas for the federally-listed threatened bald eagle. The northern harrier, a state-listed threatened species, has been observed in marshy areas along the river. The blue-gray gnatcatcher, common loon, and the common nighthawk, all state-listed threatened species, have also been seen nesting and feeding along the Ashuelot River.

The state-listed endangered wild sensitive senna and spiked needlegrass, as well as several other state-listed threatened vegetative species, have been observed along the Ashuelot River. The river corridor supports two ecologically significant natural communities: Northern New England seepage marsh and Southern New England circumneutral talus forest/woodland, in Marlow and Surry, respectively.

Recreation

The Ashuelot River corridor affords the surrounding communities a wide variety of open space opportunities extending from the 9,000-acre Pillsbury State Park at the river's headwaters to the 13,400-acre Pisgah State Park in Winchester. Residents and visitors are attracted to these areas, or those in Surry, Keene, and Swanzey for swimming, boating or exploring by land.

Numerous covered bridges are located in Swanzey and Winchester, all of which provide a picturesque glimpse of New Hampshire history. The oldest, Thompson Covered Bridge in West Swanzey, was built in 1832 and spans nearly 150 feet across the river. Three campgrounds are located along the river at Pillsbury State Park in Washington, Surry Mountain Recreation Area in Surry, and Forest Lake in Winchester.

Boating

The ponded sections of the river are enjoyed by those who own small watercraft and motorboats, while the flat, quick and white water sections accommodate kayakers and canoeists of all abilities. A six-mile stretch of river from the Gilsum Gorge to Surry is a very popular run for kayakers as well as whitewater canoeists. The run has four miles of continuous Class II-III rapids with a spectacular drop at Shaw's Corner in Surry. The Ashuelot River provides an area of Class V rapids, three miles south of Winchester, for the experienced kayaker. Each spring, the "Upper Ashuelot Canoe Race" attracts participants from outside the state to compete in this U.S. Canoe Association sanctioned race, executed on a flatwater course.

There are five boat landings along the Ashuelot River, two in Washington at Pillsbury State Park and Ashuelot Pond, two in Marlow at Baptism Beach and Big Pond, and one at the Surry

Mountain Recreational Area. These access areas are equipped with boat ramps and landings. Ashuelot River Park in Keene provides a small boat access, while the proximity of roads along the river and numerous pull-offs provide informal access to cartop boats along much of the river's 64 miles.

Fishing

The Ashuelot River is both a cold and warm water fishery that provides habitat for approximately 15 resident species, including eastern brook trout, large and small mouth bass, and walleye. The river also contains a catadromous species of fish, the American eel. The Ashuelot River is currently included in the Connecticut River Anadromous Fish Restoration Program for smelt rearing and Atlantic salmon fry release.

Ashuelot Pond supports small and large mouth bass, pickerel, horned pout, and yellow perch. The river's upper reaches with cold, fast moving water provide good habitat for rainbow and brown trout. Local fishermen extol the portion of the river between NH Route 10 in Gilsum and Surry Mountain Lake as some of the best fly-fishing for trout in the region. Walleye, bass, bullheads, and perch are the main catch at the river's confluence with the Connecticut River in Hinsdale. Because much of the river is accessible by roads, fishing is not limited to the areas mentioned.

For further information about the N.H. Rivers Management and Protection Program go to <http://des.nh.gov/organization/divisions/water/wmb/rivers/index.htm> or contact Steve Couture, Rivers Coordinator, 29 Hazen Drive, PO Box 95, Concord, NH 03302-0095; (603) 271-8801; steven.couture@des.nh.gov.