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By Mark Vanhoenacker

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Following a River Through the Heart of the Berkshires

A writer shares his favorite ways to experience the often-overlooked Housatonic River in the Berkshires region of western Massachusetts.

Mark Vanhoenacker grew up in the Berkshires and returns as often as he can.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2024/06/26/travel/berkshires-the-housatonic-river.html>

For much of my childhood in the Berkshires region of western Massachusetts, I didn't give a hoot about the Housatonic River. In contrast to the many lakes where my brother and I would swim or skate, attend Scout camps or sprawl out for family picnics, the hushed and shaded Housatonic seemed unfamiliar and at times downright eerie. Notions of Edenic riverbanks came from my mom reading "The Wind in the Willows" out loud after dinner — not from encounters with the actual river that flowed 330 yards from our front door.

Later, I came to associate the Housatonic with sorrow. An arched bridge over it, which I crossed on my walk to high school, marked the transition from home to the stresses of my teenage years. I learned, too, that reaches of the river acclaimed by Melville, Ives and Longfellow were laden with PCBs, an industrial pollutant.

Tourists, taking their cue from locals, have only rarely ventured down to the Housatonic's banks. But in recent years, the river's cleanup (the next stages of which remain a source of fierce community debate) has reminded everyone who loves the Berkshires that the Housatonic needs our attention and — whether from a canoe or a riverside trail — abundantly rewards our affection.

‘Beyond the mountain place’



A paper mill, Onyx Specialty Papers, on the Housatonic River in Lee, Mass. Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

The Hoosie, as locals call it, rises from several sources in central Berkshire County, joins up in my hometown, Pittsfield, Mass., and then parallels the Hudson River to the west and the Connecticut River to the east on its approximately 150-mile journey south toward Long Island Sound.

To experience the river’s loftiest reaches — Housatonic, in Mohican, means “beyond the mountain place” — walk the Berkshire Natural Resource Council’s Old Mill Trail in Hinsdale and Dalton, Mass., a few miles downstream from Muddy Pond, the Housatonic’s highest source and the start of its eastern branch.

This 1.5-mile riverside path leads through hemlock and hobblebush to overgrown reminders — the foundations of old mills, and the trenches that formerly channeled hydropower — of the industry that once capitalized on the Housatonic’s precipitous descent from Hinsdale to Dalton, where paper for U.S. currency has been produced since 1879. Grab a leaflet or scan the trailhead QR code to better appreciate the region’s natural and socioeconomic history, and don’t forget to sign the logbook, tucked away by a pair of benches. Previous entries include “Holy crap it’s cold,” “Thank you to the trail keepers” and “Sasquatch was here.”



The 19th-century library, by Leopold Eidlitz, in Hinsdale, Mass. Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

Then head south to Hinsdale, where the town's public library — an 1866 Tudor-style beauty by Leopold Eidlitz, who also worked on Albany's Capitol building and the first Brooklyn Academy of Music — stands on the Hoosie's right bank. Just across the river you'll find Ozzie's Steak and Eggs, where I recommend the Ozzie Platter (two eggs, hash, home fries and French toast, \$14.95).

‘Outdoor rooms’ and other Pittsfield favorites



Teo's, in Pittsfield, Mass., specializes in a local favorite, baby hot dogs. The restaurant, along with Hot Dog Ranch, has a very loyal clientele. Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

After breakfast, head downstream to Pittsfield. In the West Side neighborhood, the heart of Pittsfield's Black community, there's no better symbol of the river's reintegration into city life than the Westside Riverway Park, which opened in 2021.

Tessa Kelly, a Pittsfield native and Harvard-trained architect, was part of its design team. Her goals — the results of a community-engagement process — were to ease river access for a new generation of nature enthusiasts while also creating a venue that would support the neighborhood's tradition of block parties. I love the park's three grass-covered mounds, which create cozy spaces she described as "outdoor rooms." Note, too, the performance pavilion, the sleek, steel landscape edging, and the seating hewed from Berkshire granite.

Local loyalties have long been divided between two restaurants, Teo's and Hot Dog Ranch. Each specializes in baby hot dogs (a Pittsfield tradition), each has its own secret sauce, and they're located along separate branches of the Housatonic. Ms. Kelly is all in for Teo's — "I'd have a root beer and dogs there with my dad after gymnastics," she recalled — while the actor, director and Pittsfield native Elizabeth Banks is partial to Hot Dog Ranch (\$1.90 per mini frank; Tater Tots, \$3.50).

After lunch, head to Fred Garner Park, where a short path leads to the confluence of the river's western and eastern branches and the beginning of its mainstem. I love to come here in summer, when birds and insects dance and dodge over the entwining streams, and at colder times, too, when crimson leaves or dissolving snowflakes touch down in the rush to the sea.

On the water



"Fishing is meditation through activity," said Harry Desmond, the owner of Berkshire Rivers Fly Fishing, which offers catch-and-release outings on the Housatonic. Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

No scenic overlook substitutes for getting on the water. I recommend the Mass Audubon's naturalist-led summer canoe trips, which my husband and I first took during the pandemic. As the built world disappeared behind the river's embowered curves, I gave in to the dreamlike motion — nearly

effortless, until we finally turned to paddle upstream — and felt more in tune than ever with the ecosystem that fringed my childhood.

More frequent are the catch-and-release trips of Berkshire Rivers Fly Fishing. (Fish caught in the Housatonic in Massachusetts should not be consumed.) Harry Desmond, the owner, fished with his dad throughout his Berkshires childhood, before moving to Montana in 1998. After training as a fishing guide and working at Yellowstone, he returned home in 2009, and soon went into business to introduce both locals and visitors to the Hoosie and the trout, smallmouth bass and northern pike that now thrive in it.

Based on weather and water conditions, Mr. Desmond chooses one river landing as a starting point. From there you'll float downstream to finish at another (half-day tours, \$350 for two). Mr. Desmond also offers tailored experiences for veterans, Gold Star families and trauma survivors. "I promise to hold space for them, a safe space on the boat, out of their normal day-to-day," he told me. "Fishing is meditation through activity," he said. "Sometimes I'll ask a guest, 'what have you been thinking about?' And the best answer is 'nothing.'"

The river in Stockbridge



The grounds of the Norman Rockwell Museum in Stockbridge, Mass. Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

Time-constrained Berkshire visitors may find themselves torn between natural splendor and cultural pursuits. They'll find both at the Norman Rockwell Museum in Stockbridge. While Rockwell isn't known to have painted the Housatonic, his museum is perched above some of its most captivating meanders. Pick up art supplies at the gift shop and perch on the museum's lawn or riverside meditation bench. Once your plein-air masterpiece is complete, take a picnic down to the pedestrianized Butler Bridge. My mother and I often came here in the years when her health precluded long walks.



The mid-18th-century Mission House, once the home of the missionary John Sergeant, in Stockbridge. Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

Also in Stockbridge is the mid-18th-century Mission House, home of the missionary John Sergeant, where exhibits and a medicine garden recall the importance of the Housatonic Valley to the Mohican civilization. (Today, the Stockbridge-Munsee Community Band of Mohican Indians is evaluating the impact of Housatonic restoration plans on riverside cultural sites.) The house, a National Historic Landmark, is part of the town's Mohican History Walking Tour.

The River Walk



Great Barrington, Mass., is home to the shady, half-mile-long Housatonic River Walk, lined with native plants. Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

From Stockbridge, head south to Great Barrington, home to the Housatonic River Walk. Starting in 1988, Rachel Fletcher — theater designer, activist and late-1970s resident of the former church in downtown Manhattan that became the nightclub *Limelight* — devoted three decades to organizing the cleanup of a stretch of the river fouled by neglect. This spring, over lunch and a stroll, she described an era in which household waste was routinely discarded into the river, and the burned-out remains of a pharmacy would be simply pushed down its bank. Volunteers removed tons of debris — rusted appliances, a safe, countless Spam cans — and constructed a walkway. The first stretch opened in 1992. “It was 136 feet long,” Ms. Fletcher said. “I thought, if it doesn’t go any further, it’ll be a nice little park.”

Today, the River Walk — its fans include the writer and environmentalist Wendell Berry — comprises around half a mile of shaded riverfront walkway, lined with native plants maintained by volunteers and Greenagers, an organization that connects young people with conservation and farming work. The upstream segment begins by Green Branch Urban Farm Apothecary & Provisions at 195 Main Street. You’ll shortly pass under 15 Dresser Avenue, the former home and studio of the Hungarian-born photographer Lucien Aigner — known for his shots of Einstein and Haile Selassie.



Contemplating the river at Fred Garner Park, where a short path leads to the confluence of the river's western and eastern branches. Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

Across the river you'll see the foundations of the laboratory where in the late-19th century William Stanley Jr. — known for vacuum-sealed drinkware — developed practical electrical transformers that would revolutionize life by enabling the efficient long-distance transmission of power. Stanley's factory in Pittsfield was acquired by General Electric in 1903, eventually employed about 13,000 people, and sustained the middle-class community of my childhood; it also became the source of the PCBs whose removal from the river remains unfinished.

As Ms. Fletcher and I looked out over the river I thought of my upstream hometown and its long-shuttered factories. I remembered my parents, as well, and their deep love for the Berkshires. After they died, it seemed right to scatter a handful of their ashes on the river that runs so close to home.

I asked Ms. Fletcher about the sources of her devotion to the Hoosie. She quoted the civil rights leader and Great Barrington native W.E.B. Du Bois, who wrote that he was “born by a golden river” — the Housatonic, discolored by the waste of mills. In a 1930 speech, Du Bois urged his hometown to care for its long-neglected artery — to answer “its gracious invitation” and let it become the center “of a town, of a valley...of a new measure of civilized life.”

After a short silence, Ms. Fletcher, who’s 76, also shared a story from her childhood in a Baltimore suburb. When she was 8 or 9, her father found her playing near a sewer’s outlet in a neighborhood brook. She’s never forgotten his angry and fearful tone as he forbade her from ever again going near it.

“I guess I waited until I grew up, and found a river scaled up to my size,” she said with a smile. “And so maybe this cleanup was in the back of my mind, something I was always waiting to do.”

Mark Vanhoenacker is an airline pilot and the author of “Skyfaring” and “Imagine a City.”

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