

# What is Trailside Camping?



Source: @OneEyeWanderz

Trailside camping is a simplistic style of camping and can take different forms but is always a true wilderness camping experience. Campers hike, ride, pedal, or paddle to reach a location and spend the night without the presence of developed facilities. This trailside camping experience takes place off the beaten path, without piped water, restrooms, and other amenities. You pack in all you need, exchanging a few conveniences for backcountry solitude.

## Where to Camp

Pennsylvania has 2.2 million acres of state forest land with over 5,000 miles of trails and 5,132 miles of rivers and streams winding through it. Hiking, biking and multi-use trails traverse most state forest districts, and nine districts have designated water trails that transect state forest land.

## Guidelines

Those who are trailside camping are often referred to as backpackers, many of whom utilize tents; however, hammocks, bivy sacks, and other equipment are becoming increasingly popular. No matter your preference, be sure to be fully prepared with everything you'll need to spend a night in the woods away from your vehicle.

Beyond just the traditional, trailside backpacking, trailside camping includes overnight camping where all equipment is transported by other non-motorized vehicle methods, including watercraft, bicycle, or horse.

*Remember, in state forests, if you are camping close enough to your vehicle to access it to store gear and supplies, you are not primitive or trailside camping, but are motorized, roadside camping. A permit and fee is always required for motorized, roadside camping and can only be done at designated sites. Please plan appropriately.*

There is no fee for a state forest primitive or trailside permit. Primitive campers spending no more than one night at a campsite do not need a camping permit; however, a free camping permit is required if:

- You desire an emergency point-of-contact.
- You stay at a campsite more than one night.
- You stay at a campsite designated "permit required."
- A campfire is desired during spring wildfire season -- you must obtain permission from the state forest to have a campfire from March 1 through May 25; no campfires are permitted when the state forest district forester determines the forest fire danger to be high, very high, or extreme.
- You camp using a vehicle for storage or transportation.
- You camp within the Pine Creek Gorge along the Pine Creek Rail Trail in Tiadaghton or Tioga State Forests.

To request a free, state forest trailside camping permit, please contact the state forest district office for where you are planning to camp.

**Hiking in and putting up a tent where you choose, is NOT permitted in Pennsylvania state parks.** All camping must be in a designated camping area and on designated sites. Currently, there are five state parks that allow backpacking and overnight hikes. These parks provide backpacking trails

*Continued on Next Page...*

with overnight trailside shelters or sites. You must pre-register to hike and camp overnight at these state parks.

- **Laurel Ridge**
- **Moraine**
- **Ohiopyle** (but only because it's the entrance to the **Laurel Highlands Hiking Trail**)
- **Oil Creek**
- **Raccoon Creek**

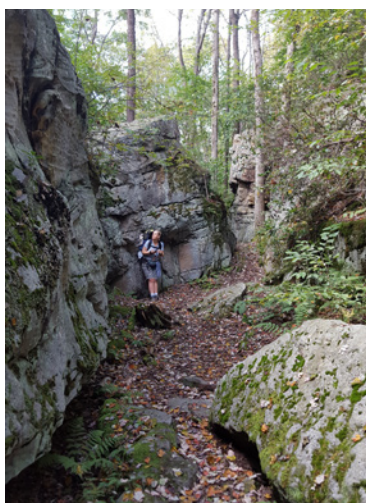


Photo Credit: Marci Mowery

## Water Trails

The Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission (PFBC) promotes 29 water trails throughout the state in cooperation with local partners.

The Bureau of Forestry manages many river islands along these water trails and allows trailside camping on designated islands which are marked with river island locator signs. River island campsites often receive minimal maintenance and can be difficult to identify. If unsure of land ownership at a given location, please do not camp.

Groups of 10 people or less may stay for no more than two nights at any one island campsite. All other State Forest Rules and Regulations apply.

Camping can also sometimes be found along water's edge for water ways passing through state forest.

Water trails with trailside camping:

- **Pine Creek Water Trail** has water's edge camping opportunities managed by Tiadaghton and Tioga State Forests. Permits are always required.
- **Middle Susquehanna River Water Trail** which runs from Sunbury to Harrisburg has 23 volunteer-maintained island campsites which are managed by the Weiser State Forest.



Photo Credit: Marci Mowery

- **North Branch Susquehanna River Water Trail** has multiple river island campsites that are managed by Loyalsock and Pinchot state forests.
- **The West Branch River Water Trail** has limited water's edge camping opportunities managed by Sprout State Forest.
- **Juniata River Water Trail** has six river island campsites managed by Tuscarora State Forest and additional, limited sites managed by Rothrock State Forest.
- **Middle Allegheny River Water Trail** passes through the Kennerdell Tract of Clear Creek State Forest, which manages the Danner Trailside Camping Area, a great option for overnight stay on the water trail.
- **Delaware River Water Trail** has one established trailside camping area along the Upper Delaware River owned by Delaware State Forest. Access to this parcel is **ONLY** by boat. The campsite is administered by the National Park Service and a permit is required. Permits can be obtained by contacting the National Park Service, Upper Delaware Scenic and Recreational River, at 570-685-4871; and entering extension 6608 (there is no voice prompt to enter extension number). Callers can dial option "2" at any time during the message to speak with a park ranger for a permit.

More information can be found at:

- [Pennsylvania Water Trail Guides and Maps | Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission](#)
- [Find a Forest | Department of Conservation and Natural Resources | Commonwealth of Pennsylvania](#)
- [Water Trail Designation | Department of Conservation and Natural Resources | Commonwealth of Pennsylvania](#)

## Bike Trails

- **Pine Creek Rail Trail** offers primitive, trailside camping opportunities along its length at Darling Run, Tiadaghton, Hoffman, Tomb Flats, Black Walnut Bottom, and Bonnell Flats Camping Areas. A permit is required and can be obtained from the PA Parks and Forests Reservation System.
- **Great Allegheny Passage** offers a hiker/biker campground in Ohiopyle State Park. This campground was made possible by a generous donor to the Pennsylvania Parks and Forests Foundation.

Bicycle users can also ride many shared use trails throughout the state forest in which trailside camping opportunities may exist. Bicycle users and horseback riders may not be permitted on some trails; and there may be unique camping regulations for these uses, so remember to check with the state forest district office. These opportunities are limited and not often pursued.

Continued on Next Page...



Gravel bike riders may also find the designated, roadside campsites in state forests as a good option to bikepack. These sites require a permit from the PA Parks and Forests Reservation System and are traditionally used by campers utilizing cars and small RVs or trailers and so is different than typical trailside camping.

More information can be found at:

- Pine Creek Rail Trail Map and Brochure
- Biking at Ohiopyle State Park | Department of Conservation and Natural Resources | Commonwealth of Pennsylvania
- See the Spring 2023 issue of Penn's Stewards on the PPFF website

## Reminders

- Know and follow all state forest or park rules and regulations.
- All camping should be at least 100 feet from any stream or open water source.
- Bathe and wash dishes or clothes using a container. Washing in a spring, lake or waterway is prohibited. Dispose of wash water at least 200 feet from water resources after filtering for organic and inorganic debris.
- Non-native invasive plants, animals and pathogens threaten Pennsylvania's biodiversity. Help minimize the spread of invasive species by not transporting them. Before leaving a site or body of water, clean off shoes, clothing, pets, watercraft and all gear. Stay on designated trails and do not move firewood.
- Make wise choices in the backcountry setting where emergency response may be delayed, and medical help is not readily available.

## Trailside Camping with Children

- Start small with a day trip to a nearby forest or park. This trial run offers children a chance to spend extended time in nature. Next, try an overnighter in the backyard to help assimilate to night sounds and sensations. These preludes will also help you plan a realistic itinerary and allow you to develop a family checklist of things you'll need to pack.

- Pre-trip planning and organizing are key elements to a successful outing. Involving children in the planning process stirs excitement and encourages responsibility. When appropriate clothing, reliable equipment, ample food, a water supply and an emergency plan are taken care of in advance, the trip will be far more enjoyable for the whole family.
- Make activities kid-friendly; adjust time and distance of hiking, biking or canoeing excursions to fit everyone's interest and ability. Children will have a greater interest if the trip is filled with exploration, adventure, quality time together and fun snacks.
- Keep activities simple and focus on fun.
- Trailside camping may build confidence and expand a child's view of the world.

## Bears

An estimated 18,000 black bears inhabit Pennsylvania, so there is potential to encounter a bear while camping. Wildlife is a thrilling part of the camping experience. Help protect black bears and keep encounters positive by using these guidelines:

- Pass up campsites with obvious signs of bear activity.
- Keep a tidy camp and don't feed bears.
- Store all food and scented objects in sealed containers away from your tent. Suspend containers with dark cord 100 yards away, ten feet off the ground, and five feet from tree trunk.
- Cook food away from the sleeping area.
- Wild animals typically avoid people. Discourage a bear from snooping around by making loud noises such as blowing a whistle, yelling or banging loud objects together.

## Leave No Trace

- Plan Ahead and Prepare.
- Travel and Camp on Durable Surfaces.
- Dispose of Waste Properly - trailside camping is a pack in/ pack out form of camping.
- Leave What You Find.
- Minimize Campfire Impacts by using designated fire ring if available and extinguishing your fire completely.
- Respect Wildlife.
- Be Considerate of Other Visitors.



Connect with us!



PAParksAndForests.org | 717-236-7644