

Pine Creek Water Trail

by Jim Hyland (from May/June 2007 *PA Angler & Boater* magazine)

Pine Creek is one of Pennsylvania's most scenic and historic water trails.

When not able to navigate the swift waters by canoe, native peoples walked an ancient footpath along the shore. Described as a "howling wilderness" by early pioneers, the Pine Creek Gorge and lower valley still offer an amazing natural experience to paddlers.

While navigating Pine Creek, one can't help but imagine what it must have been like some 200 years ago, given how spectacular it remains today. Historical accounts of the area describe huge pines and hemlocks, maybe 8 or 10 feet in diameter, and massive American chestnuts. The commercial value of those trees would bring significant and sometimes devastating change to Pine Creek's shores.

Water-powered sawmills began to appear as early as the 1790s, and scores more steam-powered mills came and went with the various floods of the 1800s. Massive logs were muscled into the creek and individually floated to distant markets, while others were lashed into huge rafts that even had their own living quarters!

Wildlife abounded, too. Herds of elk grazed on the shores, and panthers prowled among the high rock outcrops. The pools were full of native brook trout, and American shad seasonally migrated from the Atlantic. Like the shad, each year hundreds of people return to the creek to capture the profound experience of flowing with cold, clean mountain water downstream to the ocean.

Pennsylvania Official Water Trails

The Pennsylvania Fish & Boat Commission is the sole agency that designates official Pennsylvania water trails. However, individual trails and trail corridors are created and maintained by a network of volunteers, property owners, civic groups and associations. If you or your organization would like to create a water trail, or if you'd like to nominate an existing water trail for recognition as an official Pennsylvania water trail, contact the Commission by calling 717-705-7800 or on the web at http://sites.state.pa.us/PA_Exec/Fish_Boat/inform.htm. Visit the water trail pages on the Commission's website, www.fish.state.pa.us.

Planning your trip

Although Pine Creek can be paddled safely from Galeton, the Pine Creek Water Trail begins at the Big Meadows Access Area near Ansonia, Tioga County. Located closer to where Pine Creek plunges south into the Grand Canyon of Pennsylvania, and having adequate public parking, it's an appropriate place to begin.

Most paddlers start their journey at Ansonia, navigate the canyon, and then take out 17 spectacular miles later in Blackwell. This section takes about six hours to complete, but it can be done much faster or slower depending on the water level, boat types, paddling speed, stopping to fish, etc. There are state forest and private camping facilities in the area where paddlers can spend the night along the creek and then paddle on to points downstream for one, two, three or more days, depending on the distance you want to travel and the amount of exploring, fishing or sightseeing you'd like to do. Contact the Tioga or Tiadaghton State forests for camping information.

In the past few years, "recreational" kayaks have become popular among river trippers. Still, plenty of traditionalists prefer an open canoe (or raft) for journeying with spouses, gear, etc. Sturdy paddles are a must (plus a spare), and secured waterproof gear bags prevent soaked or lost clothing and equipment. Coast Guard-approved life vests are mandatory for all occupants, and wetsuits should be worn in springtime and fall when the water is cold.

If there is anything negative to be said about the experience of floating Pine Creek, surely it's the slight hassle of shuttling vehicles. Several boat and equipment rental businesses operate in the region that offer shuttle services for those renting equipment or without the means of planting a shuttle vehicle downstream. A fun option is to put a bicycle in your canoe and then ride it back upstream on the adjacent Pine Creek Rail Trail to reach your automobile.

Fishing

Pine Creek supports a diverse fishery that includes excellent trout fishing in the upper stretches. The lower part of the creek (Waterville and downstream) affords an opportunity to target warmwater species. The Fish & Boat Commission manages Pine Creek as approved trout water along the water trail

from Ansonia to Waterville. In fact, the Commission stocks trout starting at the Genesee Fork of Pine Creek and ending at Waterville, an amazing 56.7 miles of stocked stream. Pine Creek has more miles stocked with trout than any other stream in Pennsylvania.

Pine Creek also has two Delayed-Harvest sections where special regulations apply. The first section is from Ansonia (near Darling Run) to one mile downstream and ending near the confluence with Owassie Slide Hollow. A second Delayed-Harvest stretch is in Lycoming County from the mouth of Slate Run to Naval Run, a reach of about 1.2 miles.

Pine Creek's large size will challenge an angler's skills. Light- to medium-action spinning and baitcasting outfits are strongly suggested. Fly-fishing outfits of 5-weight or more and 8 feet or longer are safe bets when fishing what the "locals" call "Big Pine."

Although it holds large brown trout, Pine Creek provides more of a warmwater fishery below Waterville to the mouth near Jersey Shore. However, feisty smallmouth bass and walleyes can be caught from the canyon to the mouth. Pine Creek offers some excellent smallmouth bass fishing in the lower section. Other species in addition to trout and bass that are targeted less frequently by anglers are rock bass, suckers and carp, especially in the lower reaches.

Consult the current *Pennsylvania Fishing Summary* regarding Pine Creek. Use extreme caution when wading. Pine Creek is very swift, slick and unexpectedly deep in many places.

Note: Fishing information was compiled by members of the Jersey Shore Area High School Boating and Fly Fishing Club.

Flow conditions

Depending on the type of craft you are paddling (rafts are slow, kayaks are fast) as well as the strength and pace of the paddler, the mood of the creek, etc., people are able to move downstream at between 2 and more than 5 miles per hour. To rush the trip is to waste it, because the scenery will beg you to sit back and go with the flow.

Save the lounging for lazier water, however, because a few sections in the gorge approach Class III, which means that novice boaters need to stop, assess the situation and portage, if necessary.

Pine Creek's water levels usually begin to drop in June, but Mother Nature has the final say. Normally by mid-August, the tens of millions of trees in the forests of northcentral Pennsylvania are in stiff competition for a late-summer drink. Raindrops falling from hit-or-miss thunderstorms have little chance of passing through the gauntlet of thirsty roots and puckered soil. Consequently, the watersheds of the Susquehanna are able to contribute very little to the passions of paddlers. Heavy thunderstorms or tropical systems occasionally swell the creek enough to offer a few days of good late-summer or fall paddling.

By checking the USGS water level data for the gauge at Cedar Run (<http://pa.waterdata.usgs.gov>), boaters can view the creek's current water level. Readings between 2.5 and 3.5 feet are considered good, and below 2 means that you may scrape the bottom in some of the riffles. As you head south, the Pine takes water from Babb Creek, Cedar Run, Slate Run, Little Pine and many smaller streams, so scraping is less likely the farther downstream you venture. Read the water carefully.

Emergencies

In an emergency, dial 911. Cell phone service is limited, or nonexistent, in the Pine Creek Gorge.

Public telephones are located at Ansonia, Blackwell, Slate Run, Cammal, Waterville and Jersey Shore.

Contacts

- Tiadaghton State Forest, 423 E. Central Avenue, South Williamsport, PA 17702; (570) 327-3450;

www.dcnr.state.pa.us;

fd12@state.pa.us.

- Tioga State Forest, One Nessmuck Lane, Wellsboro, PA 16901; (570) 724-2868; **www.dcnr.state.pa.us;**

fd16@state.pa.us.

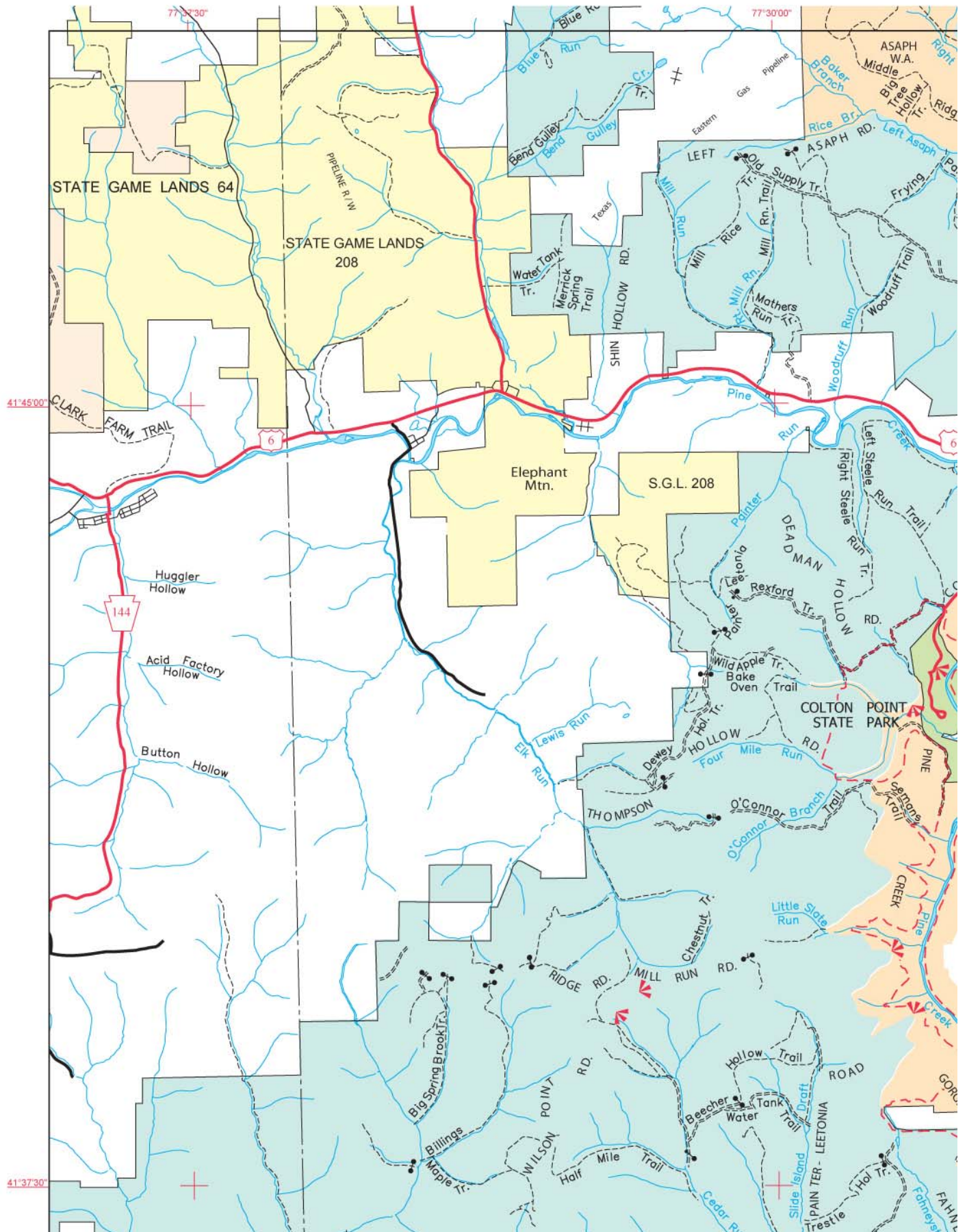
- Lycoming County Visitor's Bureau, 210 William Street, Williamsport, PA 17701; (570) 327-7700; 1-800-358-9900;

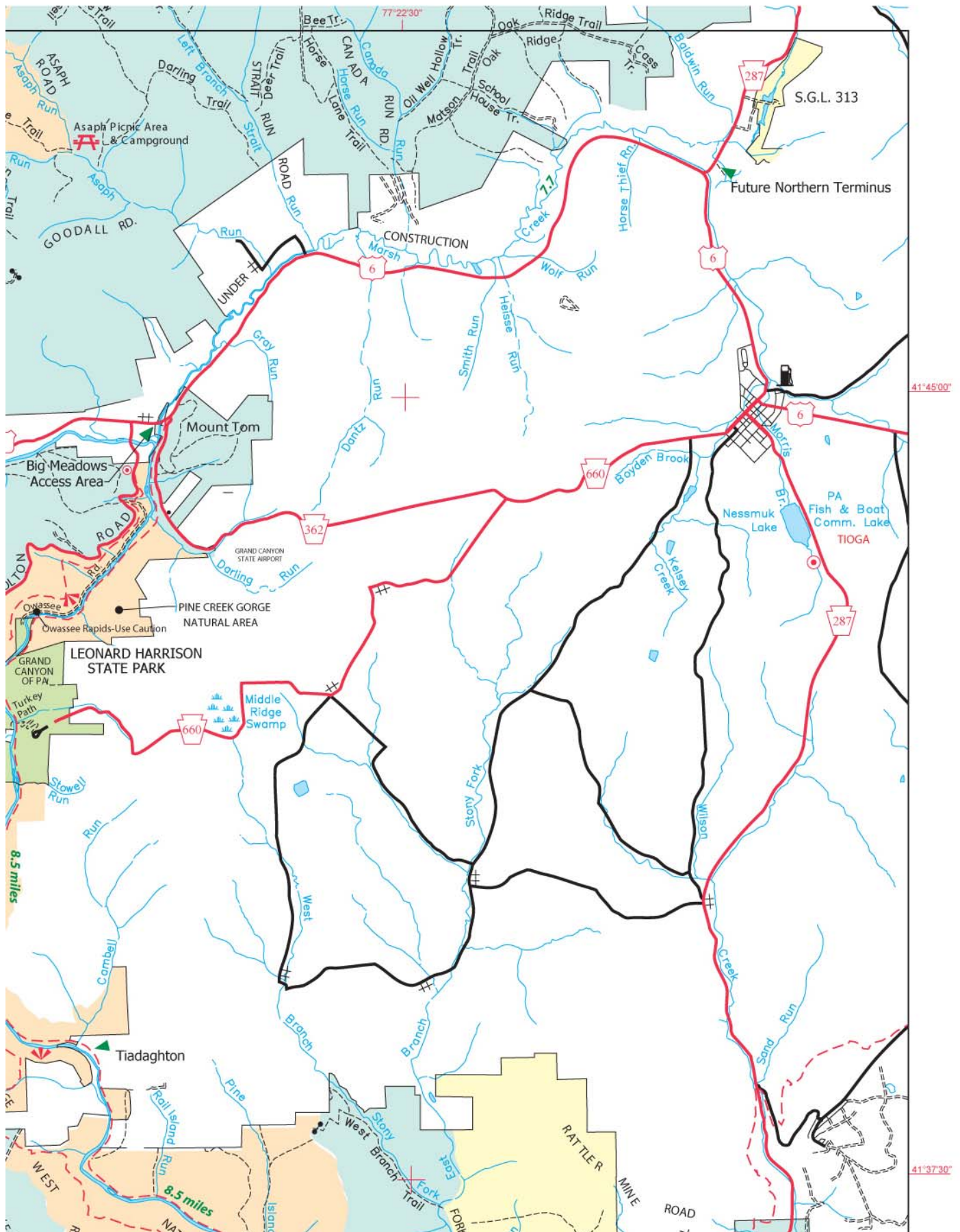
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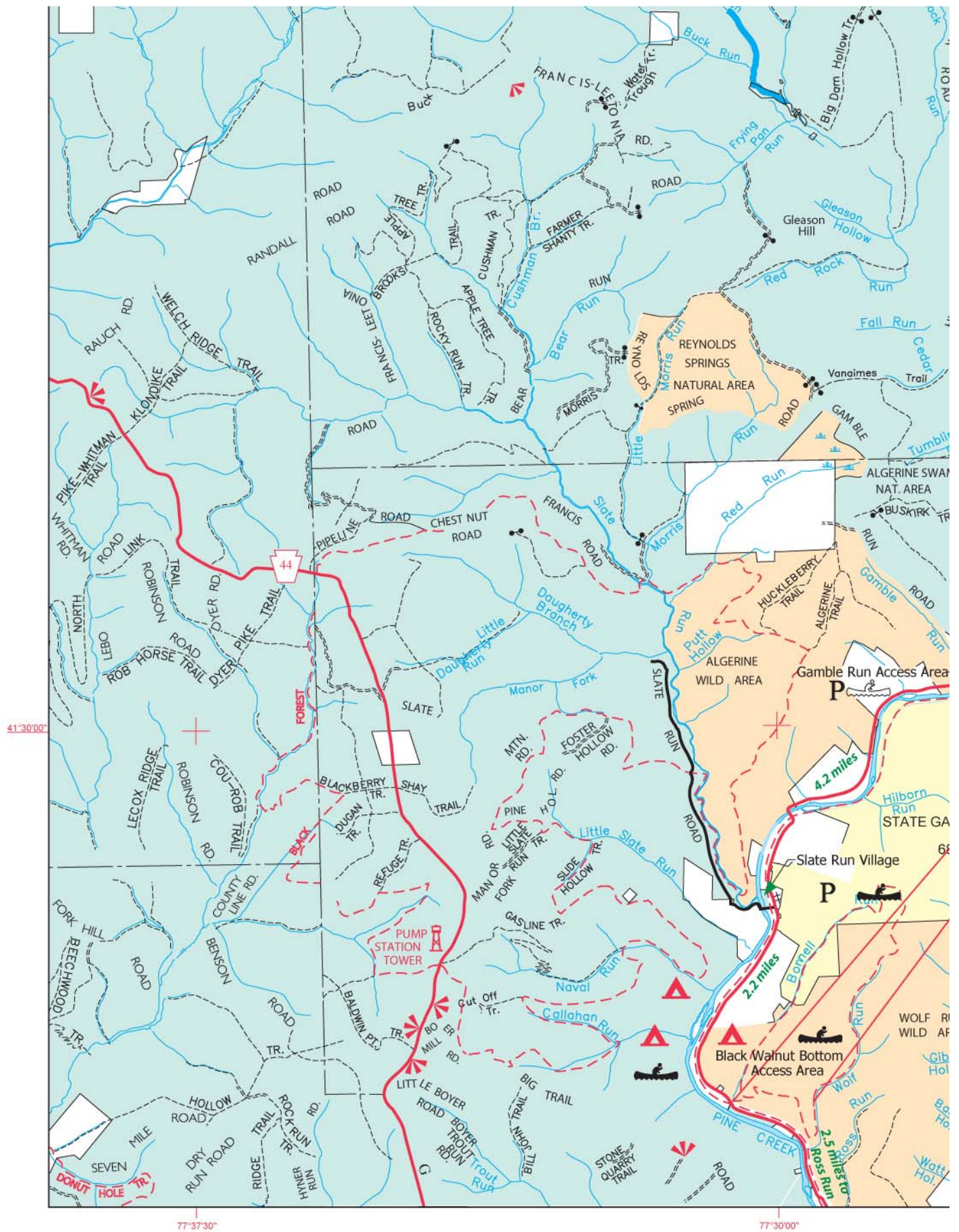
visitorinfo@williamsport.org.

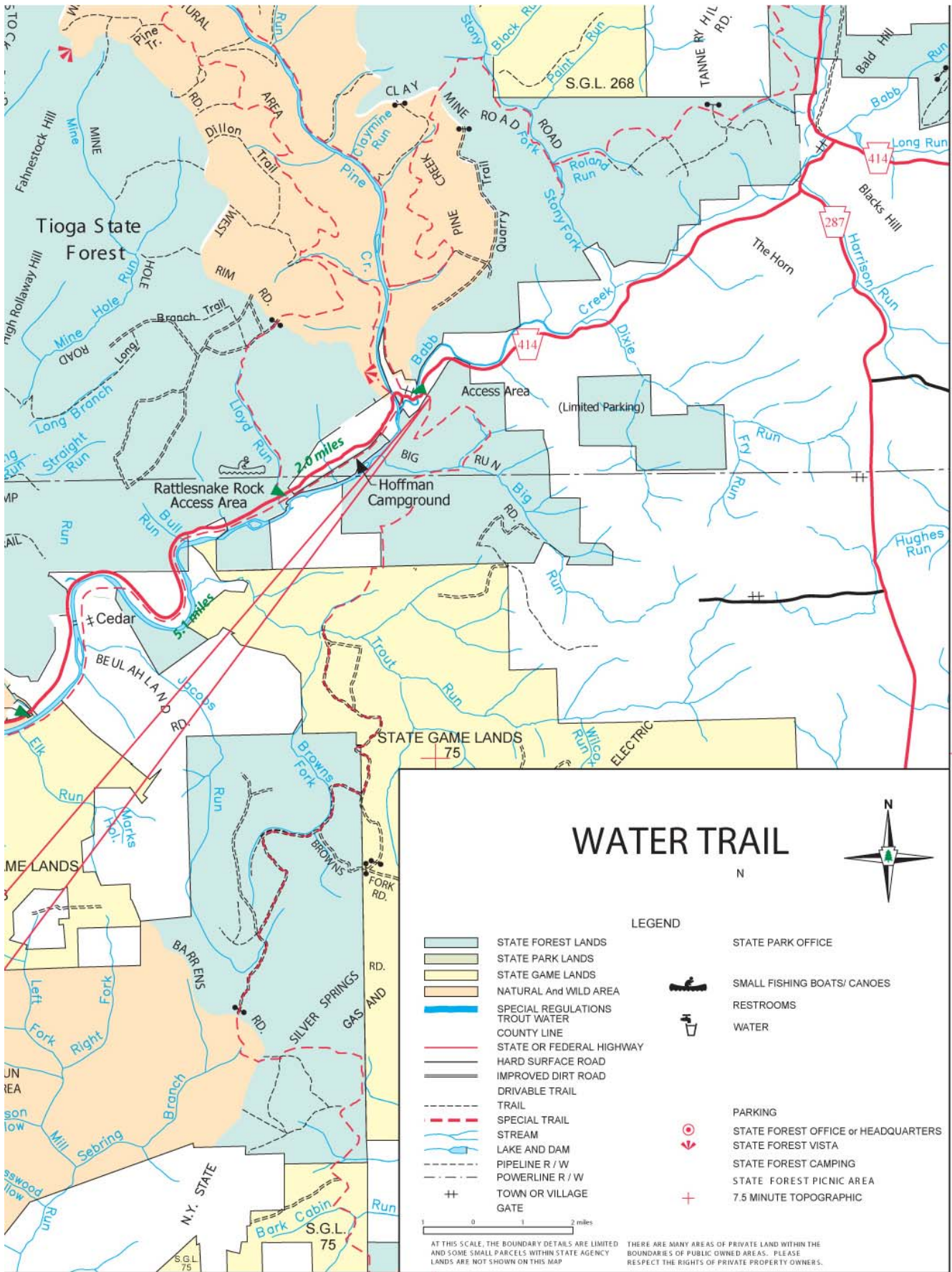
- Tioga County Visitor's Bureau, Historic Jail Annex, 114 Main Street, Wellsboro, PA 16901; 1-888-TIOGA28; (570) 724-0635; **www.visittiogapa.com;**

tiogapa@epix.net.









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