



THE *Bluewater Trails* SERIES FLOATING BUCK CREEK

Encounter the eerie cave smoke with this Pulaski County paddle

By Lee McClellan

OBIE WILLIAMS PHOTO

NO OTHER LANDSCAPE in Kentucky quite compares to Buck Creek.

Through the ages, rain soaking through the region's sandstone caprock and into the soluble limestone underneath carved out many caves in eastern Pulaski County; several of these surface along the banks of Buck Creek.

The caves pump cold air and fog over the surface of the creek, lending both the bracing refreshment of coolness with a slight feeling of eeriness, as if the underworld is venting its displeasure at paddlers trespassing on its holy waters.

"It is a gorgeous stream," said Mike Strunk, Southeast Wildlife Region coordinator for the Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources. "Buck Creek is one of the most unique streams in Kentucky with the springs and stream-side caves."

Rising at Halls Gap along Muldraugh's Hill in Lincoln County, Buck Creek flows through the outer edge of the Pennyroyal region before bisecting the Cumberland Escarpment at Stab, Kentucky. The creek then slices into the Cumberland Plateau on its way to upper Lake Cumberland, leaving in its wake one of the more scenic gorges in Kentucky.

Strunk is familiar with the area. Before joining Kentucky Fish and Wildlife 10 years ago as a private lands biologist, he served as

the Buck Creek Watershed Coordinator for The Nature Conservancy in Kentucky.

"It is a pretty neat stream as far as diversity," he said. "Buck Creek has more than 30 species of mussels and 77 species of fish. Several of those species are either threatened or endangered."

The creek is home to the rare ashy darter, as well as two freshwater mussels listed as endangered by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service: the Cumberlandian combshell and the Cumberland bean pearlymussel. These

rarities attest to the relatively pristine condition of Buck Creek.

The waters also hold flourishing populations of black bass and sunfish.

"It is a good smallmouth bass stream, similar to most of the better streams in the upper Cumberland drainage," said John Williams, Kentucky Fish and Wildlife's Southeast Fisheries District biologist.



MATT THOMAS PHOTO

Buck Creek is home to the rare ashy darter

"When you get to the right spots, you can see some nice smallmouth."

Buck Creek might lend the impression that smallmouth bass are literally bursting from the stream. "You can catch them from the time you put in to the time you take out," said Strunk. "On an ultralight outfit, you can't have any more fun than that."

While many of these bass range from the creek's 12-inch size limit up to 15 inches, Strunk occasionally catches an 18-inch smallmouth there. "Those areas with springs coming in hold good smallmouth bass in the warmer months," he said. "The stream temperatures drop in those areas and we've caught some good smallmouths there."

Chris Godby, the area's representative on the Kentucky Fish and Wildlife Commission, knows Buck Creek well — he's fished it since he was a kid. Godby never visits the creek without some Rapala Shad Rap crankbaits on hand.

"The small Shad Rap is the one I throw the most," he said. "Firetiger and clown are the colors I like best."

Crankbaits allow Godby to cover more water and deal better with the constant current. "You aren't going to get out of your boat a lot on Buck Creek," he said. "Your odds are better with a crankbait. I fish them year round."

Other suggested baits include a 4-inch finesse worm rigged on $\frac{1}{8}$ -ounce lead-head jig. Good colors include black or green pumpkin neon. Bass also hit 3-inch, Senko-style soft plastic jerkbaits in the green pumpkin magic color.

The sleeper lure, however, is a $3\frac{1}{2}$ -inch soft plastic jerkbait in smoke bluegill or natural shad. Nose-hook it with a 1/0 wide gap finesse hook then jerk it in the water and let it flutter back down. The newer styles with a skinny, straight tail are dynamite on this creek for smallmouths.

"You are not catching just smallmouth on Buck Creek either," Strunk said. "All day long, you'll catch bluegill, longear sunfish, rock bass, largemouth bass and spotted bass."

During the clear water conditions of fall, downsize to 4-pound fluorocarbon on the reel. Keep the drag light, retie often and use a longer, more sweeping hook set when fishing light line.

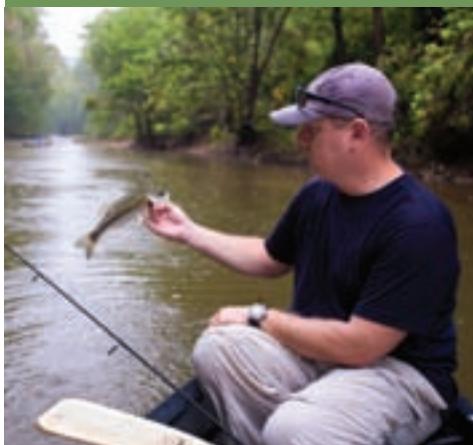
RAINEY ROAD TO STAB

The first float begins at the new Rainey



CHRIS GODBY PHOTO

Above: Chris Godby with a healthy Buck Creek smallmouth. **Below:** The creek also holds spotted bass.



OBIE WILLIAMS PHOTO

Road access, off Dahl Road (KY 1677) in Pulaski County. The take-out is slightly more than 4 miles downstream, ending at the KY 1675 Bridge in the community of Stab.

The creek bends left downstream of the put-in at a small bluff. The craggy rocks at the bottom of this bluff make a great spot to work a silver and black Rapala-like minnow lure. Smallmouths lurking in these rocks crush this presentation in fall.

Further downstream, Buck Creek rolls over some shallow sandy bars and then flows against a small bluff, making a sharp bend to the right. The deep pocket at the base of this bluff is a good spot to fish a Rapala.

After flowing against some gorgeous bluffs comprised of sandstone in the top layers with ancient limestone at the base, the creek takes a sharp bend to the right. The KY 80 Bridge soon comes into view. Continue downstream to the second bridge to find the take-out on the right. Locals call this iron truss bridge the old KY 80 Bridge, but current maps show the bridge on KY 1675 (Stab Road).

After taking out, enjoy an interesting side trip by continuing east on KY 1675 past the Shopville-Stab Fire Department. Turn right onto Short Creek Road. Soon, you will see Short Creek, one of the most accessible karst windows in Kentucky. The creek flows out of a small cave around a short bend and back into a cave, the water disappearing into the labyrinthine subterranean world of eastern Pulaski County.

STAB TO BENT ROAD BRIDGE

The next float begins at the KY 1675 Bridge at Stab and concludes about $7\frac{1}{2}$ miles downstream at the Bent Road Bridge (KY 1003).

The take-out at Bent Road Bridge requires a high clearance, 4-wheel-drive truck to reach streamside. Paddlers also may park at the top of the access road and carry out their boats, but this is a strenuous trip up a steep, rocky path.

Approximately $1\frac{1}{2}$ miles into the float, Buck Creek makes a sharp bend to left. Any submerged broken rocks at the base of the area's bluffs should be probed with the soft-plastic jerkbait for smallmouth bass.

After floating an additional $1\frac{1}{2}$ miles, the creek flows into a doorknob-shaped bend before entering an area known as The Bent. The first 90-degree bend signals the entrance into this curious square-shaped stretch.

Buck Creek cuts down into the St. Genevieve and the St. Louis formations of limestone, formed by ancient seas millions of years ago. This stretch of Buck Creek is incredibly scenic.

Inline spinners draw strikes from rock bass when worked above any woody cover in the deeper holes and pockets. Smallmouths lurk just above and below stream drops in this stretch. They attack a green-pumpkin 3-inch Senko-style bait rigged on a $\frac{1}{16}$ -ounce lead-head jig tumbled in the current.

The KY 1003 Bridge comes into view

Bent Road Fishing Access



BUCK CREEK

-  Carry-down access
 -  Boat ramp
 -  WMA
 -  Public Hunting Area
 -  City Boundary

A horizontal scale bar with tick marks at 0, 1, 2, and 2.5 miles. The segment from 0 to 1 is shaded light green, the segment from 1 to 2 is black, and the segment from 2 to 2.5 is light green.



a short distance past the last right turn of the Bent. The take-out is on the right, just downstream of the bridge. This is also referred to as the Bent Road Bridge.

BENT ROAD BRIDGE TO POPLARVILLE ACCESS

The next float begins at Bent Road Bridge and concludes nearly 6 miles downstream at the Poplarville Road (KY 3269) access.

Paddlers using the Poplarville access for the take-out should look for two sandstone chimneys that warmed the inhabitants of long-vanished log houses. A small parking area is located across the road from these chimneys.

This stretch of Buck Creek is one of the top floats in Kentucky for splendor and uniqueness. It's also the best water in the creek for smallmouth bass.

The first pool holds fish along the boulder-strewn bank on river left. The deep hole formed after the first drop of this float is worth some extra fishing time. A small crawfish-colored crankbait tossed in this flowing, frothy water just after the riffle fools smallmouth bass. This hole should be worked thoroughly.

Following some small rapids, Buck Creek flows into a landscape of gorgeous terraced banks festooned with mature hemlock and beech trees.

This stretch is relatively straight until a slight bend to the left. The eerie but mag-

nificent confluence with Whetstone Creek soon greets paddlers on river left. The lower section of Whetstone Creek drains a section of Pulaski County known as The Sinks, whose caverns produced saltpeter for black powder in the 1800s.

Springs from the Whetstone Creek complex lower Buck Creek's temperature, drawing numerous smallmouth bass during the warmer months. Whetstone Creek also serves as the boundary for the Daniel Boone National Forest. A small cracked knot of

bedrock emits a small amount of fog over the creek in this stretch that gives paddlers a slight sense of foreboding.

Whetstone Creek also marks the beginning of the deepest section of the Buck Creek gorge. The bluffs and rolling foothills of the Cumberland Plateau tower high above the water as the creek takes on a decidedly more mountainous character.

Paddlers will encounter an island downstream of this area. The best route is to the left, as the right chute may still be blocked by a fallen tree.

The hole downstream of the island is an excellent spot for smallmouth bass. Anglers can pick up fish by working minnow lures over the deep rocks.

Several drops in the lower stretches of this float include small waterfalls that could prove dicey at higher flows. Even during the low flows of fall, some of these areas are best walked rather than paddled through.

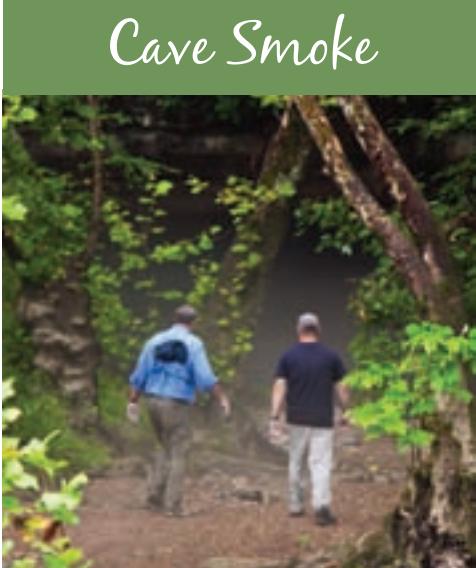
Buck Creek then flows straight before bending left. Paddlers on warm days will soon see fog, or what the locals call "cave smoke." This emanates from Dykes Cave on the right. It also marks the location of the KY 192 Bridge, also known as Dykes Bridge. Some guidebooks list this as an access. Paddlers may carry out on the left just before the bridge to a small parking area, but the path is steep and arduous. Boaters instead should stay on the water for another mile to reach the Poplarville Access, which has an easier take-out.

The first few pocket holes downstream of the KY 192 Bridge hold smallmouth. Buck Creek runs shallow for the next stretch — requiring paddlers to walk their boats through at normal fall flows.

Soon, boaters will encounter a thick blanket of cave smoke from the bracing cold air from Wells Cave on river left. This area is like paddling past the world's largest air conditioner, cranked down to its coldest setting.

After passing the cave, paddlers should look for a guardrail above the stream on the left. Here is a small parking lot and the Poplarville access. Depending on water level, paddlers will encounter the placid waters of the Buck Creek arm of Lake Cumberland if they miss the take-out.

Buck Creek is an experience of visual beauty, Earth's complex geology and great fishing. Fall is a great time to visit one of Kentucky's overlooked wonders. ■



Above: Chilled air rolls out of Dykes Cave. Below: Fog from caves floats across the creek's surface.

