

# Coal Town to Tourist Town: West Virginia's New Elk River Trail System

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## Educational Objectives

- Participants will learn the benefits of a tourism-based economy.
- Participants will learn activities and amenities along the Elk River Trail System.
- Participants will become familiar with the Elk River Trail System location, access points and communities.

## West Virginia's Newest Rails-to-Trails System

In 2019, West Virginia Governor Jim Justice announced the newest addition to the state park system – the Elk River Trail System (ERTS). The ERTS spans three West Virginia counties, including Braxton, Clay and Kanawha. The rail trail, which will be operated by the Division of Natural Resources



*Elk River trail at Ivydale. The Elk River trail just north of the Ivydale road crossing. Submitted by vdeal at [www.trailink.com/trail/elk-river-trail-%28wv%29/](http://www.trailink.com/trail/elk-river-trail-%28wv%29/)*

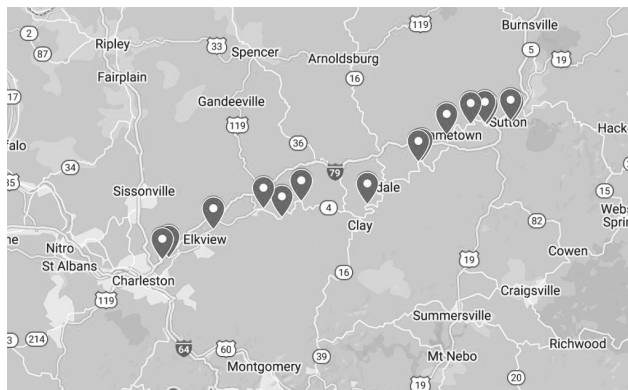
State Parks, offers hiking, biking and rail biking opportunities. The ERTS runs alongside the Elk River Water Trail, recognized under state law as a designated water trail, and boasts beautiful scenery and multiple access points for a variety of day float options.

The ERTS includes the major communities of Sutton, Gassaway, Clay and Clendenin with a host of smaller communities along the way. These towns are gearing up for visitors that the trail system will attract. A good number of new businesses are popping up in these small, rural communities like restaurants, Air BnBs, service stations and equipment sales and rentals.

Current and future rail trail heads and access points include (north to south): Gassaway, Coastal Lumber, Frametown, Strange Creek, Duck, Ivydale, Dundon (Clay), Hartland, Queen Shoals and Clendenin. Most trail access points include ample parking and convenient locations not far from major highways and amenities.

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Several public water access points owned or operated by the DNR can be found in the following locations: Sutton Dam Tailwaters, Elk River Hotel, Elk River Camp and RV,



First Energy, Sugar Creek Church, Coonskin Park, Frametown Bridge, Tate Creek, Duck, Mary Chilton Roadside Park, Elkhurst, King Shoals, Queen Shoals, Blue Creek, Clendenin, Bream (Big Chimney) and Mink Shoals. GPS coordinates for these locations can be found at [braxtonwv.org/things-to-do/elk-river-water-trail/map](http://braxtonwv.org/things-to-do/elk-river-water-trail/map). Additional privately-owned access points are being made available to the public, including sites near Ivydale and at Dundon, Clay Court House and Queen Shoals.

## Activities

### Walking, Hiking, and Running

The wide trails and compacted gravel surface are great for walking or running. Local college long-distance runners may be seen training on the trail. Many access points along the trail system allow for a variety of distances and sights to see. The first of what is planned to be an annual marathon was held at Dundon/Clay this fall. [wvmarathon.com/](http://wvmarathon.com/)

### Biking

The trail system is bike-friendly and the wide trail makes multi-use easy as there is plenty of room for walkers, runners and bikers going in both directions. The relatively smooth, flat surface makes bike riding easy even for your youngest riders. Don't forget your helmets for

the safest ride, and remember, helmets are mandatory per state law for anyone under age 15 and under.



### Jitney and Rail Bike Rides

An 18-mile rails-with-trail spur line near Clay runs up Buffalo Creek to the old coal-mining town of Widen. This spur offers rail bike and jitney rides. The rail bikes can be pushed or pedaled up, then pedaled back down. Taking this trip offers new sights and rich history, including wreckage from a train derailment and breathtaking waterfalls. The fish are also rumored to be amazing along this stretch of trail. Trout have been regularly stocked in Buffalo Creek during the last several years.

### Canoeing, Kayaking, Paddle Boarding, Floating and Fishing

The water trail offers a different vantage point as it winds its way through the West Virginia terrain. If you are looking for a more active adventure, you may want to try paddle boarding or kayaking. If you prefer a more leisurely activity, the fish are biting, and tubing is an extremely relaxing water activity. The Elk River is known for its muskie and bass fishing and is one of the most bio-diverse river basins in the United States. With a multitude of water access points along the trail in all three counties, water enthusiasts can choose from a broad range of trips to fit their schedule and ability levels. Don't forget your life jacket and a whistle for a safe trip worth remembering.





## Swimming

If you are using the rail trail and find that the flowing waters look too good to pass up, there are multiple swimming holes along the trail. From sand bars to rope swings, there are many options to cool off after an exhilarating walk or ride. Always be familiar with the depth of the water and the current you are swimming in.

## Horseback Riding

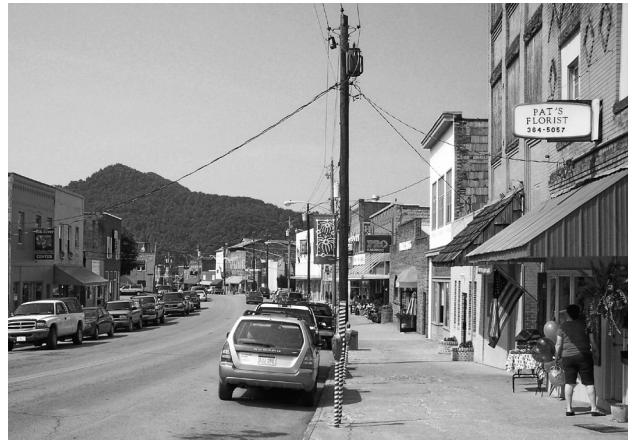
ERTS is a popular site for horseback riding, which provides additional opportunities for small businesses to develop around equestrian activities such as horse stables for overnight accommodations.



## Elk River Trail Development

Why are communities looking toward tourism as a major industry? Many coal communities are looking to diversify their local business base. With the decline of coal and other sources of revenue, towns and counties are facing major budget reductions. Families have suffered loss of income as well. According to the West Virginia Tourism Office 2020 Annual Report, West Virginia's state parks and forests welcomed more than 4.3 million visitors in 2020 – a 9% increase in visitation year over year. West Virginia hosted more than 65 million visitors on 49.8 million day trips and 16.6 million overnight trips. These visitors reported a 74% overall satisfaction rate.

So, what does this mean for our economy? Travelers spent \$4.6 billion in West Virginia, and 45,400 jobs were supported by tourism. Workers saw \$1.2 billion in earnings, and state and local tax revenue from tourism was \$534.5 million. Tourism in West Virginia is a big deal.



*Elk Street (West Virginia Route 4) in downtown Gassaway, West Virginia. By Tim Kiser. [commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Gassaway\\_West\\_Virginia.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Gassaway_West_Virginia.jpg)*

It will be a big deal for ERT towns and communities, too, as tourism-related activities and amenities continue to be developed. The ERT highlights the natural beauty of the area while allowing for recreational activities that attract visitors. Those visitors need places to stay, food to eat, supplies and much more. Many visitors are hoping to experience local culture and even bring a piece of it home with them in the form of gifts, tokens and local artwork that can be purchased from vendors and in stores. These needs basically demand small business development to accommodate the people who will visit the trail system. Small business development means jobs for people and a tax base for towns and counties, as noted above.

## Trail Amenities

Whether you are looking for food, fun or rest, many new amenities have popped up along the trail corridor to suit your needs. Be sure to check out Clay Yak Rentals, Clendenin Brewing Company, Walker Creek Farms, Yak House Rentals, Elk River Hotel and other new businesses. Trail amenities can be found at [elkrivertail.org/map/elk-river-trail-map-arcgis/](http://elkrivertail.org/map/elk-river-trail-map-arcgis/).





## The COVID-19 Pandemic

During the pandemic, travel became difficult, and even prohibited, to some popular destinations. Safer options, rural destinations with lower COVID-19 infection rates and outdoor recreational activities became popular travel destinations. In fact, even pre-pandemic, the 2019 *Longwood's USA Travel Report* shows three of the top four reasons people visited West Virginia were to visit landmarks and historic sites; to visit national and state parks; and to go hiking and backpacking. These visitors spent an average of 2.5 nights in West Virginia during their trip.

This has shown the possibilities for tourism in West Virginia and the challenges that these small towns face to become tourism-oriented. From infrastructure to a lack of necessary retail services, the needs of tourists are abundant. The potential for many small communities to thrive from a tourism-based economy has been recognized. More importantly, it has brought hope to communities that could once be described as feeling hopeless about their future.

If you and your family are looking for a fun, local adventure, the new Elk River Trail System State Park is the place to be. With walking, biking, floating, rail car rides and swimming holes, there's something for every age and ability. It's centrally located, and most access points are very close to I-79 and provide ample parking. Support local economies by visiting the newest trail system in West Virginia.

## Resources

[wvpublic.org/news/2020-06-29/coal-towns-were-counting-on-tourism-for-new-jobs-then-coronavirus-hit](http://wvpublic.org/news/2020-06-29/coal-towns-were-counting-on-tourism-for-new-jobs-then-coronavirus-hit)

[wchstv.com/news/local/governor-announces-new-state-park-featuring-72-mile-trail](http://wchstv.com/news/local/governor-announces-new-state-park-featuring-72-mile-trail)

[wvexplorer.com/2020/04/11/elk-river-trail-state-park-wv-economic-development/](http://wvexplorer.com/2020/04/11/elk-river-trail-state-park-wv-economic-development/)

Map – Visit Braxton, WV ([braxtonwv.org](http://braxtonwv.org))

Elk River Trail Map (ARCGIS) – Elk River Trail Foundation

[West Virginia Tourism Office 2020 Annual Report. Retrieved from wvtourism.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/T01CY\\_2020\\_15079-2.pdf](http://WestVirginiaTourismOffice2020AnnualReport.Retrievedfromwvtourism.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/T01CY_2020_15079-2.pdf)

2019 Longwood's Travel USA Report-West Virginia.

2022

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