

# ENVIRONMENTAL Fact Sheet



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## The Ashuelot River

Rolling through southwestern New Hampshire in the heart of New England, the Ashuelot River has a drainage basin encompassing approximately 415 square miles. In its 64-mile journey from the town of Washington to its confluence with the Connecticut River in Hinsdale, the Ashuelot contains sites of state and federal cultural and natural resource significance. The Ashuelot River hosts the one of the oldest known sites of human activity in New Hampshire, dating back 10,500 years. The river has also been identified by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service as one of the four most important sites for the federally-listed endangered dwarf wedge mussel. The Ashuelot River became recognized as a state designated river in the Rivers Management and Protection Program in June 1993.

The Ashuelot River watershed is included in the Silvio O. Conte National Fish and Wildlife Refuge, which was established in 1991 to conserve, protect, and enhance the diversity of species that exist within the Connecticut River watershed. It is the only National Wildlife Refuge to encompass an entire watershed.



### Geology

The headwaters of the Ashuelot River begin in Pillsbury State Park at an elevation of approximately 1,600 feet. From there the river drops at a rate of 37 feet per mile over the first 30 miles, creating a steep gorge with numerous waterfalls in Gilsum. Several potholes, including Devil's Chair, are also located in this reach of the river. Throughout the river corridor, remnants of past glacial activity include varved clay deposits, deltas, drumlins, and glacial Lake Ashuelot. Also of interest are the high potential aquifers found in the river corridor and the many quarries in the area that produce sand, gravel, and semi-precious stones.

### History

The southern portion of the Ashuelot River Valley was first inhabited by the Squakheag Indians. Today, the Ashuelot River hosts 12 Native American archeological sites; seven in Swanzey and five sites from Winchester to Hinsdale. These sites range from the Paleo-Indian (10,500 years ago) to a hilltop contact period Native American fort (1663-64 A.D.). The lower river valley was later colonized by pioneers in the early 1700s, with settlement continuing to the upper valley by the latter part of the 1700s. Evidence of mills is still visible today in the riverfront towns where water power drove the growth of industry. Similarly, numerous sites along the river are listed in the National Register of Historic Places including Jones Hall, Dinsmoor-Hale House, and the Sawyer's Crossing and Coomb's Covered Bridges. The oldest covered bridge, Thompson Covered Bridge in West Swanzey, was built in 1832 and spans nearly 150 feet. Another notable historic site is the Gilsum Stone Arch Bridge. Built in 1863, the Gilsum Stone Arch Bridge is recognized as one of approximately 30 remaining dry laid bridges in the state and at 35.5 feet has the highest arch above-stream elevation.

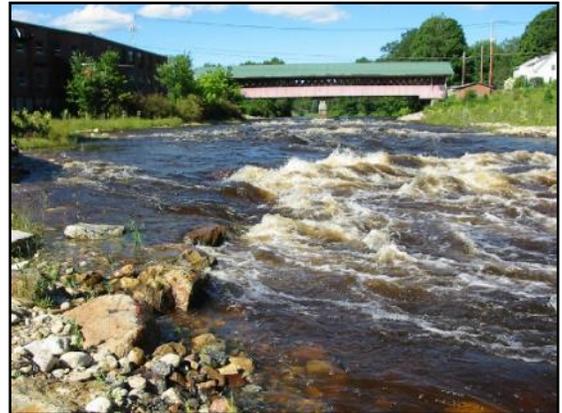
## **Wildlife, Habitat and Vegetation**

Several great blue heron rookeries exist in the Ashuelot River watershed. The river's general north-south orientation is a natural migratory path for raptors, waterfowl and songbirds. The river corridor also provides feeding and nesting areas for bald eagles and the state-listed threatened common loon. The northern harrier, a state endangered species, has been observed in marshy areas along the river. The state endangered common nighthawk has also been seen nesting and feeding along the Ashuelot River. The Ashuelot watershed is also one of four key areas for the state and federally endangered dwarf wedge mussel.

In addition, the Ashuelot River watershed hosts several state-listed plant species within its corridor. State endangered species include the resupinate bladderwort, sandbar willow and marsh horsetail. The eastern waterleaf and greater yellow lady's-slipper, both threatened species, have also been observed along the Ashuelot River. The river corridor supports several ecologically significant natural communities including Northern New England seepage marsh and Southern New England circumneutral talus forest/woodland in Marlow and Surry, respectively.

## **Recreation**

The Ashuelot River corridor provides the surrounding communities a wide variety of open space opportunities extending from Pillsbury State Park at the river's headwaters to Pisgah State Park in Winchester. Residents and visitors are attracted to these areas for swimming, boating, or exploring by land. Ashuelot River Park in Keene is popular with walkers, runners, and birders. For an extended outdoor experience, campgrounds located along the river include Pillsbury State Park in Washington, Surry Mountain Recreation Area in Surry, and Forest Lake in Winchester.



## **Boating**

The ponded sections of the river are enjoyed by those who own small watercraft and motorboats, while the flat, quick and white-water sections accommodate kayakers and canoeists of all abilities. There are five boat landings and ramps along the Ashuelot River, two in Washington at Pillsbury State Park and Ashuelot Pond, two in Marlow at Baptism Beach and Big Pond, and one at the Surry Mountain Recreational Area. Ashuelot River Park in Keene provides a small boat access, while numerous road pull-offs along the river provide informal access for paddlers. A six-mile stretch of river from the Gilsom Gorge to Surry has four miles of continuous Class II-III rapids with a spectacular drop at Shaw's Corner, and Class V rapids can be found in Winchester. Each spring, the Upper Ashuelot Canoe Race attracts participants from in- and outside the state to compete in this flatwater race.

## **Fishing**

The Ashuelot River is both a cold and warm water fishery that provides habitat for approximately 15 resident species including eastern brook trout, large and small mouth bass, and walleye. The river's upper reaches, with cold, fast-moving water, provide good habitat for rainbow and brown trout and offer some of the best fly-fishing in the region. Ashuelot Pond supports small and large mouth bass, pickerel, horned pout, and yellow perch. Walleye, bass, bullheads, and perch are the main catch at the river's confluence with the Connecticut River in Hinsdale. The river also contains a catadromous species of fish (lives in fresh water and breeds in the ocean), the American eel, a state species of special concern. The Ashuelot River has traditionally been included in the Connecticut River Anadromous Fish Restoration Program for smelt rearing and Atlantic salmon fry release. Because much of the river is accessible by road, informal fishing access points are frequent along the length of the river.

## **For More Information**

For further information about the New Hampshire Rivers Management and Protection Program, visit the [Rivers Management and Protection page](#) on the NHDES website, or contact the Rivers Coordinator, 29 Hazen Drive; PO Box 95; Concord, NH 03302-0095; [\(603\) 271-2959](tel:603-271-2959); [riversprogram@des.nh.gov](mailto:riversprogram@des.nh.gov).