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South County Has Rhode Island's Only Officially "Wild and Scenic" Rivers

Celebrate the national designation with the Wood-Pawcatuck Watershed Association at the Seven Rivers Festival on June 25 and 26.

June 21, 2022

by Lauren Clem



A kayaker paddles on the Wood River. (Courtesy of the Wood-Pawcatuck Watershed Association)

In 2019, the National Park Service bestowed an unusual honor on Rhode Island and southeastern Connecticut when it recognized the Wood-Pawcatuck Watershed as part of the [National Wild and Scenic Rivers Systems](#).

The official status recognizes the rivers' cultural, recreational, scenic and environmental value and adds an extra level of federal protection. According to Kassi Donnelly, wild and scenic rivers coordinator for the Wood-Pawcatuck Watershed Association, it's one of the few places in the country where the designation recognizes an entire watershed instead of a single river.

This weekend, June 25 and 26, local groups will celebrate the designation and spread the word about the beautiful, natural treasures flowing through southern Rhode Island at the [Seven Rivers Festival](#). The festival involves more than twenty-five events along with special deals and promotions designed to get people on the water and enjoying the outdoors.

"By having these outdoor events so kindly provided by our community partners, this offers an opportunity for people to enjoy the outdoors and realize that this national designation was bestowed upon the natural resources in this area," Donnelly says.

Some of the highlights include a [guided mushroom walk](#) with the Mushroom Hunting Foundation and a [presentation](#) of a tribal and cultural perspective on the rivers with Cassius Spears Jr. of the Narragansett Tribe as part of the Tomaquag Museum's Culture Bearer series. Visitors can search for wild amphibians with staff from Mystic Aquarium and take advantage of free kayak rentals from Queen's River Kayaks in South Kingstown or Mechanic Street Marina over the border in Stonington, Connecticut.

Other activities planned for the weekend include guided walks and nature encounters with the Audubon Society of Rhode Island, Hopkinton Land Trust, Appalachian Mountain Club, Nature Conservancy, Watch Hill Conservancy, Westerly Land Trust, Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management, Rhode Island Canoe and Kayak Association, local libraries and more.

Website: [map.ai](#)

The Wood-Pawcatuck Watershed. (Courtesy of the Wood-Pawcatuck Watershed Association)

In addition to the events, several local businesses are also offering special promotions for guests to enjoy after their river adventures. [KNEAD Doughnuts](#) in Westerly is offering one free doughnut per person, and [Leyden Farm Vineyard and Winery](#) is offering two tastings for the price of one. [Shaidzon Beer Company](#), [Mia's Cafe](#), [Little Country Pizza and BBQ](#), [Next to Nowhere Creamery](#) and [Stagecoach House Inn](#) are also offering promotions for the Seven Rivers Festival.

The 2019 designation came after years of advocacy from environmental groups and community leaders. According to Donnelly, who was involved with the efforts, it took two acts of Congress, ten years of work and a stewardship plan before the federal government finally deemed the rivers worthy of "wild and scenic" status.

"We've seen in the last two years with COVID that a lot of people are turning to the outdoors to relax, get a sense of peace, connect with friends and family. This watershed is amazing for that because of the amount of preserved land and fifty-four miles of kayaking," she says.

The Wood-Pawcatuck Watershed — and its wild and scenic status — is officially made up of seven rivers, including the Shunock, Green Fall-Ashaway, Beaver, Queen-Usquepaugh and Chipuxet. All of these rivers eventually flow into the Pawcatuck that runs through downtown Westerly and empties into the Atlantic Ocean at Little Narragansett Bay. Along the way, the watershed touches twelve towns, incorporating about a quarter of the state of Rhode Island and a sliver of Connecticut.

"That ranges from being in the middle of the forest on the Wood River or the middle of the swamp on the Chipuxet or upper Pawcatuck to 'Watch out for boat traffic, I'm headed for Napatree Point!'" she says.

"A lot of (local) leaders know about the designation, but I want the locals to know about the designation and have pride for these rivers that are running through their backyard," she adds.

Many of the events require registration, so be sure to check the event page and host website prior to attending. For a full list of events and promotions, visit the [Seven Rivers Festival website](#).

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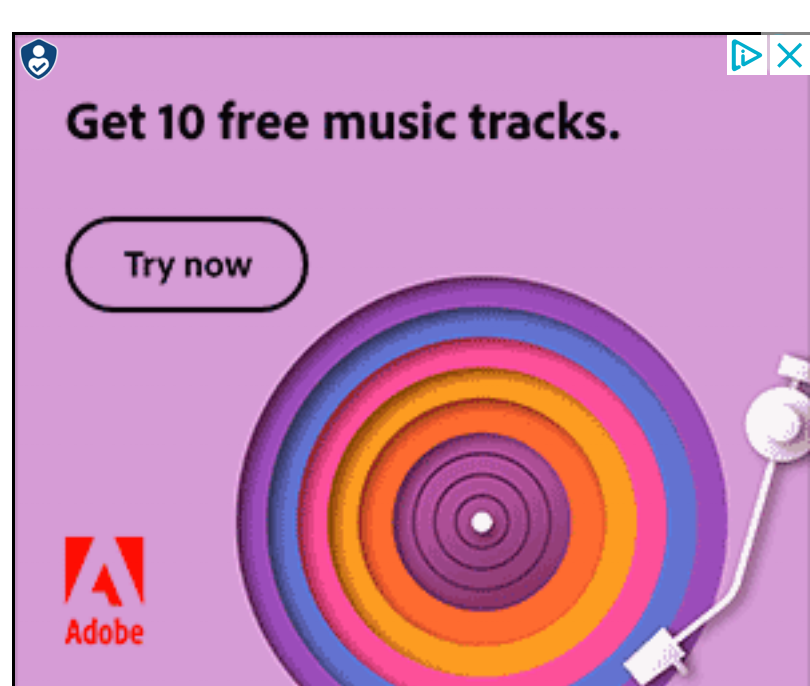
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