KENDUSKEAG STREAM CANOE RACE
50th Anniversary
BY AIMEE THIBODEAU  
SPECIAL SECTIONS EDITOR

Fifty years after paddlers first took to the Kenduskeag Stream for the inaugural canoe race, the event is still going strong and has become the most popular whitewater race in Maine.

Bangor’s iconic canoe race attracts about 1,000 participants each year, with thousands of spectators — lovingly dubbed river vultures — lining the stream banks to watch as paddlers tackle the rapids.

The original race was the brainchild of Lew Gilman, who died in 2011, and Edwin “Sonny” Colburn. The actual conversation is reported in “Tales of the Kenduskeag” by Jim Smith and Fern Stearns, to have been a phone call that went like this:

Ed: “Lew, what do you think about having a canoe race on the Kenduskeag?”
Lew: “It sounds like a helluva good idea to me. Let’s meet tonight — get started right off.”

As a co-owner of Rivers & Gilman Molded Products in Hampden, Gilman once made simulated birchbark canoes that bore the tradename “Indian.” He later worked for the Old Town Canoe Co.

A lifelong Bangor resident, Colburn grew up in a large house near Six Mile Falls on Outer Broadway along the Kenduskeag Stream.

Gilman and Colburn first met in high school, and then encountered each other again through the Air National Guard.

In the late 1960s, the duo came up with the idea for the canoe race and eventually found a sponsor with Bangor Parks and Recreation.

The first canoe committee members were: Tony Trafton, Ed McKeon, Braley Gray Jr. from Old Town Canoe, Earl Baldwin, Lynn, Colburn, and Gilman. After Wendell Easler of Old Town Canoe spoke to the group about water safety, there were some concerns, according to a 1991 Bangor Daily News story.

In recent years, Lincoln Search and Rescue and Dirigo Search and Rescue have been the go-to safety crews for paddlers navigating the stream.

Lincoln is stationed at Six Mile Falls, a tricky whitewater area where paddlers often tip their canoes and kayaks. Dirigo, a larger operation from the Bangor area, patrols rapids below the falls, focusing on a series of rapids known as The Shopping Cart. And each year, a number of smaller search and rescue teams also are on hand to help, including members of Down East Emergency Medical Institute, Pine State Radio Amateur Club, and students from United Technology Center’s Public Safety Program.

That first year of the race, in April 1967, one report notes that seven of the 32 canoes that attempted to maneuver the stream failed to complete the course. Another says there were 34 canoes that raced that first year.

No matter how many took part that first year, it’s known that more than 28,000 paddlers have participated in the race since 1967.

Numerous records have been set over the years, but the current course completion record of 1:50:08, set in 1997, is held by Robert Lang of Renforth, New Brunswick. Lang is a well-known name among Kenduskeag Stream Canoe Race paddlers, having won a total of 11 times.

In addition to the record setters, there are a few fan favorites each year. Zip Kellog of Bangor stands in his canoe as he maneuvers the course each year. Kellog is always dressed in a suit and tie, the bow of his canoe decorated with flowers. Gumby — yes, like the cartoon character — is another crowd favorite that’s been part of the race since the early 90s. The green team even was featured once in Sports Illustrated magazine.

And while the participants are the focus of the race, it’s the spectators that create the atmosphere year after year.

“I think the spectators are what makes the race so much fun,” Gilman said in a 1991 interview. He mentioned how many people arrive hours early to claim a favorite rock for viewing. “We’ve seen them there year after year. They make the race special.”
Lew Gilman (rear) and Ed “Sonny” Colburn, founders of the Kenduskeag Stream Canoe Race.

Robinson and Elizabeth Speirs, lifelong Bangor residents, participate in the first Kenduskeag Stream Canoe Race. According to family lore, Elizabeth Speirs was the only woman in the field.

The Gumby group is another crowd favorite that’s been participating since the early 90s and once was featured in Sports Illustrated magazine.

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Did you know?

The name “Kenduskeag” is attributed to the Penobscot Indians, who called the stream “the place where eels gather,” “the eel catching place,” or “the place where eels are speared.”

The Kenduskeag Stream Canoe Race has never relied on corporate sponsorship.

Some paddlers have noted that the different colors of the many kayaks and canoes can be seen “painted” on the rocks just below the surface in certain shallow parts of the stream, which can take on the appearance of brightly colored aquarium pebbles.

There are Class IV rapids on the Kenduskeag depending on conditions, but paddlers avoid them with mandatory portages.

The “Shopping Cart” section of rapids on the Kenduskeag Stream, close to Bangor, got its name from a large number of shopping carts inexplicably dumped there years ago. To this day, the site is known to many locals as the “Shopping Cart Hole.”

2016 Race T-shirt designed by Debbie Gendreau, Bangor Parks and Rec assistant director who has served as the Kenduskeag Stream Race Director for the last nine years.
**1991**
- Overall Winner: Robert Lang
- Overall Runner Up: Fred Ludwig / Rick Swan

**1992**
- Overall Winner: Fred Ludwig / Rick Swan
- Overall Runner Up: Troy Francis / Scott Phillips

**1993**
- Overall Winner: Robert Lang
- Overall Runner Up: Fred Ludwig / Rick Swan

**1994**
- Overall Winner: Steve Moser
- Overall Runner Up: Fred Ludwig / Kenny Cushman

**1995**
- Overall Winner: Fred Ludwig / Kenny Cushman
- Overall Runner Up: Robert Lang

**1996**
- Overall Winner: Fred Ludwig / Steve Moser
- Overall Runner Up: Kenny Cushman

**1997**
- Overall Winner: Robert Lang
- Overall Runner Up: Fred Ludwig / Steve Moser

**1998**
- Overall Winner: Fred Ludwig / Steve Moser
- Overall Runner Up: Kenny Cushman

**1999**
- Overall Winner: Fred Ludwig / Robert Lang
- Overall Runner Up: Barry Fifield / Shane Oliver

**2000**
- Overall Winner: Kenny Cushman
- Overall Runner Up: Barry Fifield / John Mathieu

**2001**
- Overall Winner: Fred Ludwig / Steve Moser
- Overall Runner Up: Jeff Sands / Brian McCarthy

**2002**
- Overall Winner: Trevor MacLean
- Overall Runner Up: Robert Lang

**2003**
- Overall Winner: Trevor MacLean
- Overall Runner Up: Kenny Cushman

**2004**
- Overall Winner: Fred Ludwig / Kenny Cushman
- Overall Runner Up: Trevor MacLean

**2005**
- Overall Winner: Trevor MacLean
- Overall Runner Up: Kenny Cushman

**2006**
- Overall Winner: Kenny Cushman / Jeff Sands
- Overall Runner Up: Trevor MacLean

**2007**
- Overall Winner: Jeff Owen / Steve Woodard
- Overall Runner Up: Trevor MacLean

**2008**
- Overall Winner: Trevor MacLean / Christian Hall
- Overall Runner Up: Robert Lang

**2009**
- Overall Winner: Trevor MacLean
- Overall Runner Up: Robert Lang

**2010**
- Overall Winner: Trevor MacLean
- Overall Runner Up: Robert Lang

**2011**
- Overall Winner: Trevor MacLean
- Overall Runner Up: Robert Lang

**2012**
- Overall Winner: Trevor MacLean
- Overall Runner Up: Doug Archibald / Gary Stellpflug

**2013**
- Overall Winner: Trevor MacLean
- Overall Runner Up: Robert Lang

**2014**
- Overall Winner: Jeff Owen / Steve Woodard
- Overall Runner Up: Trevor MacLean

**2015**
- Overall Winner: Trevor MacLean
- Overall Runner Up: Chris Francis / Mark Ranco

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About 800 racers in more than 400 boats raced in 2014.
Maximize your river vulture experience

BY AISLINN SARNACKI
BDN STAFF

1. Dress for success
Layers are ideal, and if it looks like rain, make sure to pack a rain jacket. Umbrellas tend to tick people off. Everyone’s packed together to watch the race at Six Mile Falls and The Shopping Cart (named because several years ago a large number of shopping carts actually were discarded at this point in the stream), so don’t obscure everyone’s view.

2. Something soft to sit on
People don’t sit on bleachers to watch a canoe race (though bleachers aren’t particularly comfortable either). Here’s your choice of seats: pointy rock, lumpy rock, wet rock, lots of little rocks, muddy grass or plain mud. Whatever you bring to sit on, plan to get it dirty.

3. Snacks
You can buy stuff from the Six Mile Falls store, but from my experience, this spectator event is kind of like a relay race. You don’t have much time to buy food along the way. You’re trying to find parking in a long line of cars, then you’re trying to find a seat, then as soon as the person you’re cheering for paddles (or swims) by, you’re off to the next spot. I remember running a lot to make it from Six Mile Falls to The Shopping Cart to the finish line in Bangor.

4. A camera
Even if you aren’t proudly watching a friend or relative paddling in the race, you’re going to want to take a photo of the ridiculous costumes that some of the paddlers are wearing. Don’t feel bad about taking their photo. Why else do you think that person dressed up like Gumby … Donald Duck … a toothless pirate?

5. Warm layers
It’s still April. I don’t care if it has been unseasonably warm. You might be sitting for hours at Six Mile Falls while you wait for the first paddler to come around the bend. It’s a long slog from the starting line to the exciting part (and by that I mean the rapids that tend to upend boats).

6. A good CD
Traffic might be pretty miserable.

10 miles of the race course are on flat water. The other 6.5 miles are more or less divided into Class I, II, and III rapids, with Six Mile Falls being the most treacherous for paddlers.

Shannon Fitzpatrick (from left), Brian O’Leary and Andrew Krause watch racers make their way down Six Mile Falls on the Kenduskeag Stream during the 49th annual Kenduskeag Stream Canoe Race in 2015.

Race enthusiasts watch racers on the Kenduskeag Stream in 2015.

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Hiking the Kenduskeag Stream Trail

BY AISLINN SARNACKI
BDN STAFF

Difficulty: Easy
The Kenduskeag Stream Trail is just under 2 miles, according to a trail map provided online by the City of Bangor. Surfaced with gravel in most areas, the trail is fairly wide and smooth.

How to get there:
The trail’s southern end is on the north side of Franklin Street bridge in downtown Bangor, on the west bank of the Kenduskeag Stream. There is parallel parking along the side of Franklin Street. The trail’s northern end of the trail is off Valley Avenue, 0.4 mile north of where Valley Avenue crosses under Interstate 95. There is a fairly large parking area just south of that end. The Kenduskeag Stream Trail also can be accessed at multiple points along the trail, including Lover’s Leap Park and Gateway Park, both on Valley Avenue.

Information:
The Kenduskeag Stream Trail is a walking and biking path that runs along the Kenduskeag Stream for about 2 miles, connecting downtown Bangor with a number of small parks and scenic outlooks on the stream. Along the way, displays provide information about features of the landscape, local wildlife and the stream’s history.

The trail’s southern end is the Franklin Street bridge in downtown Bangor, and its north end is upstream, near a parking area on Valley Avenue.

A number of benches and picnic tables are located along the trail for people to rest and watch wildlife. Dogs are permitted but must be kept under control at all times. Pet owners are required to collect and dispose of pet waste while in public parks, per Bangor city ordinance.

Starting at the trail’s southern end at the Franklin Street bridge, the Kenduskeag Stream Trail begins with a display entitled “Abuse and Restoration” about the stream’s history.

The Kenduskeag Stream originates at Garland Pond in Garland and flows southeast through the towns of Corinith, Kenduskeag and Glenburn before striking through the center of Bangor, passing through downtown and emptying into the Penobscot River.

While the stream isn’t pristine, it’s a great deal cleaner than it used to be.

During the 19th century, a variety of mills were constructed along its banks, including sawmills, a flour mill, a grist mill and a tannery. Also during that time, public and private sewers were being constructed to discharge directly into the stream.

The Kenduskeag wasn’t cleaned up until the early 1960s, when the city of Bangor built interceptor sewers to remove the sewer discharges and volunteers started picking up debris and planting trees and shrubs along the river. Since then, the stream mostly has restored itself. Nowadays, the streams pools are filled with alewives, eels, trout and Atlantic salmon, and the shrubbery along the stream house a variety of songbirds. Bald eagles have been known to nest by its bank, teaching their young to fish in its waters.

From Franklin Street, the trail travels upstream and enters the woods, the hilliest area of the walk. A short distance down the trail, it crosses the stream on a footbridge behind the Maine Educational Center for the Deaf and the Hard of Hearing on Harlow Street. The iron-and-wood footbridge replaced the Morse Covered Bridge in the mid-1980s after it was destroyed in a fire.

After the bridge, the trail follows the stream’s east bank, which is lined with a wooden fence to prevent people from falling down the steep bank. Use caution in this area, especially if walking with children.

You’ll cross the stream again on the Harlow Street Bridge and then come to Gateway Park, where display offers information about the wildlife commonly seen on and near the stream. At the park, you’ll find a covered picnic table, as well as a lawn shaded by pines. This is a good spot to look for waterfowl in a relatively calm section of the stream.

Continuing on, the trail parallels Valley Avenue and soon comes to Lover’s Leap Park, where there’s an observation deck overlooking the stream and a 150-foot-tall cliff called Lover’s Leap. The cliff is named after a legend of two lovers who were forbidden to be together and leapt to their deaths long ago, according to a display at the park.

After the lookout, the trail crosses the stream again on a road bridge, then travels under Interstate 95 and leads to an interesting wooden platform that zigzags out above the rapids. The trail then enters what’s known as Kenduskeag Stream Park, A covered picnic table near the edge of the stream and a sign marks the north end of the trail, which appears to continue on but enters private property.

Bangor’s city trails are co-maintained by the Bangor Parks and Recreation Department and Bangor Forestry Division of Public Works. For information about the trails and their ongoing development, call 992-4900 or visit bangorparksandrec.com.

For more of Aislinn Sarnacki’s adventures, visit her blog at actoutwithaislinn.bangordailynews.com. Follow her on Twitter: @1minhikegirl.
How to register

There are four ways to register for the Kenduskeag Stream Canoe Race. Phone registrations are not accepted.

1. You may register for the race by downloading the 2016 registration form at kenduskeagstreamcanoerace.com or bangorparksandrec.com and mailing the form in with your payment.

2. You may register and pay online. This is a newer service provided by Bangor Parks & Recreation. NOTE: even if you sign up online, you will still need to download and sign the fillable form - and it can be sent to Bangor Parks & Recreation via mail (or stop by the office).

3. You may also register in person by visiting the Bangor Parks & Recreation office at 647 Main St. Registration forms are accepted at the Parks & Rec office up until the Friday before race day; the deadline is 1 p.m.

4. Finally, you may register in Kenduskeag on the morning of the race. Registration on race day is from 6:30-7:30 a.m.

A $5 cancellation/transfer fee may apply.

Side note: No more than three boats can be registered from a single household. There are 24 classes to enter in, so there is a spot for everyone. Whether you canoe, kayak or paddleboard, there is a class for you.

If possible, don’t wait until race day to register. Who needs the last minute stress of waiting in line to register when you could be socializing or prepping your boat on the morning of the race?

It has been said that pre-registering can sometimes land you a better spot in your class, which can be helpful in avoiding the masses of paddlers who start later.

Once you finish the race, Darling’s Agency sponsors a warming tent at the takeout point — Gomez Park — where free hot chocolate and goodies will be available.

Win an Old Town NEXT Canoe

Darling’s Auto Group has donated an Old Town NEXT Canoe which will be raffled - winner will be drawn on race day - with all proceeds going to the Bangor Parks and Rec summer camp scholarship program. The 13-foot canoe is valued at $1,000 and features both canoe and kayak characteristics, a three-layer hull and removable Element seating.

Tickets are available at:

- Darling’s Bangor Ford, Volkswagen & Audi, 403 Hogan Road
- Darling’s Bangor Honda, Nissan & Volvo, 114 Sylvan Road
- Darling’s Bangor Used Car Center, 58 Sylvan Road
- Darling’s Agency, 96 Parkway South, Brewer
- Epic Sports, 6 Central Street, Bangor
- Bangor Parks and Rec Department, 647 Main Street.
- Or online at bangorparksandrec.com

Tickets are $5 each or five for $20.

The BDN would like to thank Michael Alden, photographer and creator of kenduskeagstreamcanoerace.com for his assistance in making this section possible. His website includes photo slideshows of past races, info about the 2016 race, and a blog where he will post race results once the event is over.