

# Irish Creek

## At a Glance

**Sam's Rank:** 🍷🍷🍷🍷

**GPS Fixes:** The *source fix* below is the actual USGS source. The *mouth fix* is for the lower end of the *Put & Take* managed water:

- Source fix: N37 86.256' W79 15.078' @ 2,762'
- Mouth fix: N37 80.487' W79 29.347' @ 1,102'

**Size:** medium at mouth

**Tributaries:** numerous *no names* are small and unfishable. *Rock Branch*, *Mill Branch*, *Craig Creek*, and *Big Bend Creek* are larger and fishable. *Nettle Creek* is by far the largest and most fishable.

**Gradient:** flat 2.4% source to mouth average (*13.1 miles / 1,660'*)

**Effort:** moderate - difficult

**Pressure:** moderate - heavy

**Fishing Quality:** good

**Species:** Rainbows, Browns & Brookies

**Access:** The *source fix* can be reached from MM 29 on the Parkway - exit onto the access road and then Irish Creek Road (*Hwy 603*). Turn right and head south for about .6 miles. The source fix is about 350' on the right. Park off the road.

The *mouth fix* can also be reached from MM 29 on the Parkway - exit onto the access road and then Irish Creek Road (*Hwy 603*). Turn right, head south for about 13.2 miles to the Ruined Bridge Lane bridge. The mouth fix is about 200' upstream. Park off the road. Some of the property may be posted – don't trespass!

## Overview & Description

One of the deepest gashes into the mountains along the Parkway in the Montebello / Lexington area is the Irish Creek watershed. The entire watershed is loaded with rich human and natural history and lore – *and big trout water!*

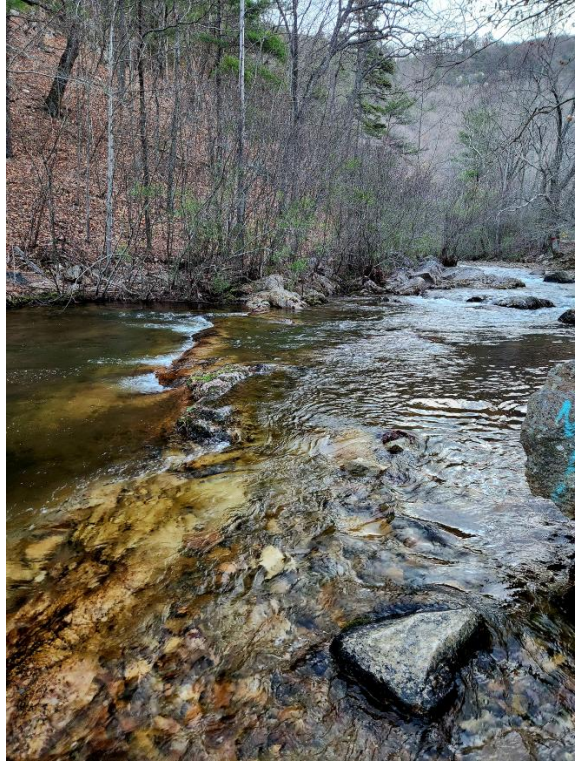
As far as the “*Irish*” thing in the creek’s name, there seems to be no direct connection with any nationality / ethnic groups that settled the area. In the early 1920s, like many mountain valleys, this watershed was a remote and rough place. Some of the locals were called “*Irish Creekers*” by outsiders. The name was attached to several families of mixed blood — white, Indian, and possibly Negro. Few of these folks are left here now – they seem to have been among the first to migrate to the area towns. But for some reason the *Irish* label stuck.

Today you can use Irish Creek Road (*Hwy 603*) to drive up the entire Irish watershed from mouth to source – a rare occurrence in these parts. But this was not always the case. Just a few years ago the road required numerous fords as it crisscrossed the creek. It was unpaved, rough, had lots of steep slopes and sharp turns. Considering the most common means of transport in the early years was horse or wagon, it's easy to understand the area's isolation. It would be the remnants of

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Hurricane Camille in 1969 that would destroy most of the old roads and bridges in the watershed. When rebuilt, the main road is the improved path of today and opened up the watershed to the world.

Religion and education came to the watershed about 1908 when *Miss Sally Bruce Dickinson* founded the *Irish Creek Mission* about eight miles up from South River. At the time, most of the watershed was described as “*an isolated, spiritually underprivileged mountain community.*” The Mission operated for years and benefitted the locals. But at some point it failed and became Mount Zion Presbyterian. As the “*Irish Creekers*” began to migrate



Irish Creek has miles of productive water paralleled by a road - great access all the way up. / Image by Author / 2024

from the area, the church dwindled, and was finally dissolved, and reemerged as a Presbyterian mission in 1962. Today it's the Mount Zion Baptist Church, still located on Irish Creek Road. The building is well painted and appears operational.

This watershed was, and still is, rich in natural resources. About a half mile into the gorge was the site of an iron furnace built in 1760 by Mr. Daniel Dougherty, III. Lore has it that this was the first furnace west of the Blue Ridge, and that cannonballs fired at Yorktown were cast here. The site is hard to find, and even though the road now goes through the actual furnace site, you can still find pieces of slag and charcoal if you know where to look.

Tin was also mined along the upper reaches of Irish Creek after cassiterite ore was discovered in 1846. The deposit is one of the few substantial tin deposits, possibly the only one, known in the United States. An Irish Creek tin mine operated from 1890 until about 1942 in the vicinity of Panther Run, an Irish Creek headwater. A huge horizontal steam engine was supposedly used there and is said to have taken a thirty-yoke oxen team to pull it up the mountain. Aside from tin, there has also been at least one quarry in the watershed that produced silicate rock used in the manufacture of steel.

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But in the end, it's been the forests that provided the most employment and income for the area. The *Buena Vista Extract Company* bought timberland with the intention of building a railroad into it to harvest chestnut bark. The railroad did not materialize and for a number of years Tanbark was hauled out by wagon. In 1916 the *South River Lumber Company*, a Pennsylvania company, bought the Buena Vista Extract Company assets and built a large sawmill on the South River at Cornwall, near the mouth of Irish Creek. A narrow-gauge railroad was constructed up into the far reaches of Irish Creek. It switches backed up the mountain until it reached most all of the Irish Creek watershed, even branching out to Crabtree Falls in Nelson County, and the Coffeytown area of Amherst County. Two notable camps were Hog Camp and Norvell Flats.

Today, folks' opinion of Irish Creek is a mixed bag from one person to the next. Some claim, with some credible evidence, that the watershed is ruined by overfishing, trash dumping, and just too many folks having access. Still others say it's a great watershed with beautiful landscapes and quality angling opportunities worth the time and effort. I'm generally aligned with those latter views.

What I know for sure about this watershed is that it has lots of fishable water – 13.1 miles, not counting feeders. Its water is “gin” clear and cold – the stuff trout like. From an extensive mix of long and deep runs, drop and flat pools, shoals, waterfalls, and riffles - you name it, it's got it. It's managed in the lower reaches as *Put & Take*, and as a *Wild Trout Stream* fishery in upper reaches. The road along its entire run makes access easy. In fact, every point on the river, including the mouths of its feeders, are accessible by this road. Finally, it has some stunningly beautiful topography that is sure to impress even the most jaded journeyman.

From just below the west side of MM 29.5 on the Parkway, Irish Creek sources at an elevation of 2,762'. It then starts a southwesterly run to its mouth 13.1 miles away. Along that entire run, Irish Creek Road (*Hwy 603*) tracks it - crisscrossing several times in the process. The Irish's watershed is a mixed bag – ranging from mature forest, gorge like topography, stretches of wide open, relatively flat, treeless pastures, with barns and houses. During its run, it picks up volume from numerous small *no names* and several larger ones with names like *Rock Branch*, *Mill Branch*, *Craig Creek*, *Big Bend Creek*, and its largest *Nettle Creek* – most of which are somewhat fishable. From source to mouth the creek averages a low 2.4% gradient, and at 1,102' it finally reaches its USGS mouth on the South River.

As you move upstream from the displaced mouth fix listed above, over the next 3.9 miles up to Craig Creek, the creek is wide open at about 40' - 45' wide. This lower stretch of the *Put & Take* water is relatively shallow – 6" - 18" in most places. But some pools and runs can be several feet deep, and you'll need weight to get down. The road above the creek has plenty of parking and allows a great vantage point to study the creek and spot the best places to drop in and fish. The creek is lined with trees, and the bed is littered with a variety of rocks and gravels, with some

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large and deep pools, small rapids and runs. Although this stretch of the creek runs through a small gorge, the banks and outer riparian zones are flat and open out to where the mountain slopes start to rise. The banks are easy to navigate along this lower stretch, and casting is open due to the high and wide canopy and banks. There is some posted property – respect it.

At the 1.4-mile mark, the first feeder, *Rock Branch*, enters creek right. Although it's managed as a *Wild Trout Streams* habitat, it's a pretty small creek and only marginally fishable in my opinion. From its source at about 2,225' from just under the Parkway, it flows steeply for about 1.7 miles to its mouth on the Irish. Although it's managed as a *Wild Trout Stream*, I did not take the time to fish it – *probably should have!*



A typical Irish Creek rainbow caught in the main run just above the confluence of Big Bend Creek. / Image by Author / 2019

On up at about 2.8 miles, another feeder, *Mill Branch*, enters on the right side. It's a clone of *Rock Branch* – except it's not managed as trout water of any kind. It's very small, possibly fishable, and steep. It flows for about 1.6 miles from its source at about 2,200' just off the Parkway's right of way. I didn't take time to fish it either.

As you approach the top of this first stretch at *Craig Creek*, the Irish's flow is still about 35' - 40' wide, with plenty of water, and even more rock structure to provide fishy water features. The creek is starting to leave the open valley of below, and the sides and canopy start closing in, but it's still easily wadable and fishable.

At about 3.9 miles you reach *Craig Creek* entering creek left. It's coming down out of the National Forest from about 2,000' and flows for about 1.8 miles to its mouth on the Irish. This creek is not managed as trout water of any kind either. It's small, steep, and like the other feeders up to this point, I didn't fish it either.

Moving upstream above *Craig Creek*, the next 3.3 miles to the top of the *Put & Take* water at *Nettle Creek* is flowing down through a slightly tighter terrain. There are lots of homesteads, hay / cow pastures, bridges, and side roads on one extreme, to stretches that are totally forested and uninhabited on the other. There are also lots of caged stone barriers lining the banks to prevent the wearing away by flood water. Along there, the Irish maintains a width of about 35' - 40' with plenty of water and

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structure for good fly fishing. These dimensions and features stay the same up to Nettles Creek.

At the 5.8 miles, two feeders combine just above the road and enter creek left. First, there's *Dark Hollow*. Although it's managed as a *Wild Trout Stream*, it's very small and marginally fishable in my opinion. I skipped it in favor of the next one.

*Big Bend Creek* is larger of the two and much more fishable. From its source at about 2,320', it flows for about two miles out of the National Forest to its confluence with *Dark Hollow*, then its mouth on the Irish a few yards below the road. It too is managed as a *Wild Trout Stream*. I did take the time to fish it. More on this one in the "*Tributaries*" section of this chapter.

As you reach the 7.2-mile point on the Irish, you reach the top of the *Put & Take* water as *Nettle Creek* enters creek right. *Nettle Creek* is as large as the Irish and adds a full 50% water volume to the Irish – *doubling its size!* It makes sense the *Put & Take* section ends at Irish's confluence with *Nettle* – the Irish is half its size above this point. *Nettle Creek* is four miles long, has several fishable feeders and waterfalls and is the largest and most fishable *Wild Trout Stream* feeder flowing into Irish Creek. I did fish the first mile or so of this creek - more on it in the "*Tributaries*" section of this chapter.

So how was the fishing the two times I fished these lower 7.2 miles of *Put & Take* water on Irish Creek? It was good – *4 stars!* Both times I fished an L.L. Bean 8050 (8' – 5 weight) bamboo and threw a mix of bugs on a dry / dropper rig. I caught mostly bows and brook trout in the 8" - 13" range, as well as a few browns.

Above the *Nettle Creek* confluence at 7.2 miles, I used the road to spot fish the next 2.9 miles up to a *no name* entering creek left. At the beginning of that stretch, the creek is still 18' - 20' across, with a healthy mix of pools, runs, riffles and undercut banks. There are places along this stretch that the cascades, pools, drop pools and slides make navigation difficult and time consuming. But with fishy obstacles come good fishing holes!

By the time you reach about 10.1 miles up, the creek constricts down to 8' - 10' across and starts looking and feeling like a small mountain stream. Other than the road shadowing it, and the occasional patch of civilization along the flat valley land along the road, it's still productive wild trout water that's easy to access.

The fishing was good along this upper 2.9-mile wild stretch but was much tighter, technical, and slower. Up there I switched to a Granger 7030 (7' – 3 weight) bamboo rod, and was fishing mostly dries – BWOs, Caddis and Adams. I caught brook trout in the 6" - 8" range.

I did not fish the final three miles up to the Irish's source near the Parkway. But I did drive along and scout it and saw more of what I had seen and experienced below – just smaller. There's fish up there for sure – probably brook trout

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exclusively. It's blue-line fishing at its best – small bugs, light rods, and stealthy techniques.

All in all, Irish Creek is a good watershed. I ignore the naysayers who say Irish Creek's best days are behind it. I'll go back and spend more time fishing it.

### Irish Creek Tributaries

#### Big Bend Creek

##### At a Glance

**Sam's Rank:** 👍👍👍👍

**GPS Fixes:**

- Source fix: N37 84.575 W79 20.816 @ 2,313'
- Mouth fix: N37 82.710 W79 23.407 @ 1,503'

**Size:** small at mouth fix

**Tributaries:** one very small *no name*, and *Dark Hollow*, entering just feet above Big Bend's own mouth.

**Gradient:** moderate 7.7% source to mouth average (2 miles / 810')

**Effort:** difficult

**Pressure:** none

**Fishing Quality:** average - good

**Species:** Brook Trout

**Access:** The *mouth fix* can be reached from MM 29 on the Parkway - exit onto the access road and then Irish Creek Road (*Hwy 603*). Turn right and head south for about 7.7 miles to the Irish Creek Cemetery on the right. The mouth fix is below about 300' on the left. Park off the road.

The *source fix* can best be reached from the Irish Creek Cemetery at the mouth. This will require a 2-mile hike on the trail that starts at the top of the cemetery. I know of no easier way. *Watch out for the spooks!*

### Overview & Description

The first time I fished Big Bend Creek was back in the late 70s with my brother TJ. It was early fall and late afternoon the day we fished our way up to its mouth on the Irish. TJ chose to fish up *Dark Hollow*, and I took the bigger Big Bend up by the cemetery - seemed fair at the time. As we parted, we agreed to meet back at the truck at dark – or before...

Having only an hour or so before dusk, I began fishing up the left side of the cemetery and for some reason I noticed two fresh graves with flowers. I was having good success with the wild natives who were eating just about anything I threw at them. This went on for a long while, with me becoming totally oblivious to the fact the sun sank below the ridges behind me. By the time I realized what was happening,