

Western Pennsylvania Conservancy



West Branch French Creek Conservation Area (aka Lowville Fen Natural Area)

Location: Venango Township, Erie County, PA

Dates acquired: 1996 - 2009

Size: Separate parcels covering 518 acres

Notable features: slow-moving stream, floodplain and associated wetlands, alkaline fen, beaver ponds, hemlock forested wetland

Recreation activities (see below for details):

hiking, wildlife watching, hunting



Directions:

The main access to the West Branch French Creek Conservation Area is on the east side of Rt. 8, near the village of Lowville, approximately 4 miles north of Wattsburg, PA. To find the parking area, look for a dirt and asphalt pull-off set a short distance back from the road. Several vehicles may be accommodated. Other portions of the Conservation Area may be accessed from Page Road, which crosses the West Branch of French Creek to the north, and from Half Moon Road, which is on the east side of the creek.

For directions using Google maps, click [Here](#).

Delorme Pennsylvania Atlas and Gazetteer Map 27, D-7

Description: The West Branch French Creek Conservation Area includes old fields, successional woods, beaver ponds, wooded swamps, a hemlock forested wetland, an alkaline fen, and more than 4.5 miles of frontage along the West Branch of French Creek. There are extensive areas of forested wetlands associated with the active floodplain, containing silver maple, sycamore, and other trees adapted to periodic flooding. Within the floodplain are several oxbows and old side channels that provide important habitat for a diversity of plants and animals.

Hiking and wildlife watching: From the parking area off Rt. 8, a short, paved, **handicapped accessible path** leads to a covered pavilion containing tables and grills. Also from the parking area, a **1.1-mile loop unpaved hiking trail** leads north through an aspen stand, across a large utility right-of-way, and past old apple trees to a series of picturesque beaver ponds. A rough-hewn log boardwalk, or puncheon, traverses a wetland located just below a beaver dam. The trail then turns to circle an old Christmas tree plantation, containing rows of 20-30 ft tall spruce, pine, and fir trees. Along this section, the trail skirts an upland forest of mature American beech, sugar maple, and black cherry trees. The trail also follows the edge of the West Branch French Creek floodplain, offering glimpses of old meanders and oxbows. Depending on the season, portions of the trail may be quite wet (be sure to wear boots or shoes you don't mind getting

wet).

From Half Moon Road, visitors can walk along an old farm road through old fields and a reclaimed gravel mine to reach the edge of the floodplain forest. Near the end of the trail, a stone bench overlooks a small pond and wetland.

Additional trails may be established on the Conservation Area in the future. In the meantime, visitors are welcome to explore on their own, but should be sensitive to potential impacts upon the plants and animals.

Hunting: Hunting is permitted on this property in accordance with PA Game Commission regulations. Please exercise caution and wear blaze orange during hunting season.

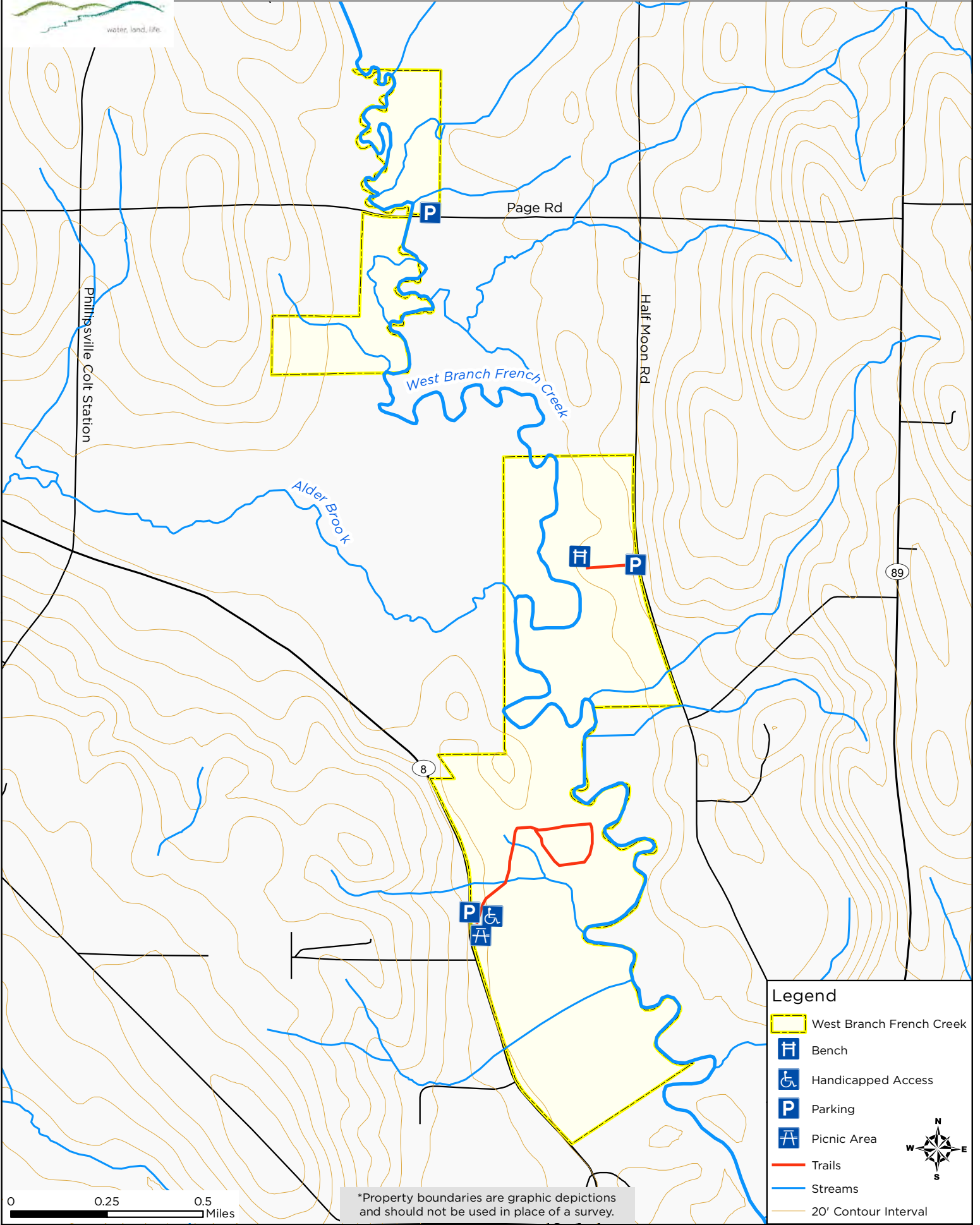
Unique species and natural communities: The Conservation Area is located within the upper French Creek watershed. French Creek is documented as having the highest level of aquatic biodiversity of any river of its size in Pennsylvania and all states to the northeast of Pennsylvania. Fourteen mussel species have been found within the watershed, including some listed as State and Federal Endangered. The watershed also supports at least 27 fish species, including several identified in the Pennsylvania Wildlife Action Plan as Species of Greatest Conservation Need.

The portion of the Conservation Area accessed from Rt. 8, on the west side of the creek, makes up what is also referred to as **Lowville Fen Natural Area**. This is due to the presence of a unique shrub-fen community. Fens are permanent wetlands, often with thick layers of undecomposed peat moss, fed by calcium rich groundwater that support species requiring a high pH. As fen ecosystems are rare in Pennsylvania, and limited to the glaciated northwestern region, they contain many rare plant species endemic to these areas. These species include highbush-cranberry, red currant, alder-leaved buckthorn, downy willow-herb, leafy northern green orchid, slender cotton-grass, and mud sedge.

Background: In 1996, the Western Pennsylvania Conservancy (WPC) acquired the first parcels comprising the Conservation Area from a local businessman. Following acquisition, the WPC partnered with Venango Township and DCNR to construct the parking lot and picnic pavilion. In 2006, 2007, and 2009 the WPC acquired key adjacent or nearby parcels. The WPC also has partnered with other landowners in the watershed to conserve additional property through conservation easements.

For more information, please contact:

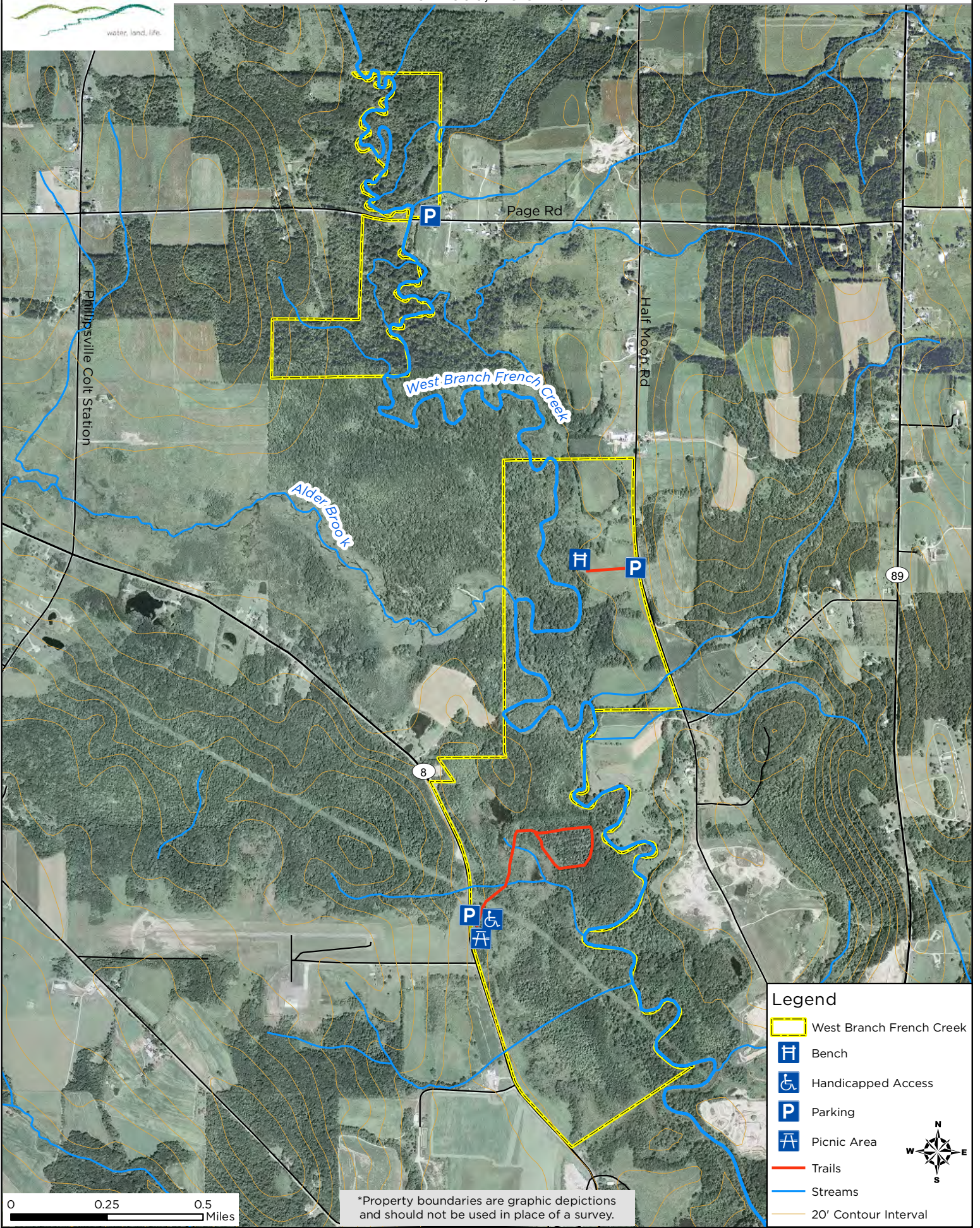
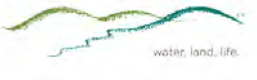
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Legend

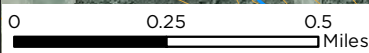
- West Branch French Creek
- Bench
- Handicapped Access
- Parking
- Picnic Area
- Trails
- Streams
- 20' Contour Interval

*Property boundaries are graphic depictions and should not be used in place of a survey.



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