

Dublin on the Double – Paddle Georgia 2011

June 24—Oconee River

Distance: 22 miles

Starting Elevation: 177 feet

Ending Elevation: 150 feet

GPS Coordinates: Lat: 32 47 14.1072 Lon. -82 57 26.6358

Restroom Facilities:

Mile 0	Balls Ferry
Mile 8.5	J.C. Landing
Mile 17	Blackshear Ferry
Mile 22	Buckeye Park

Points of Interest:

Mile 4--Bluff on River Left—Here the character of the river changes dramatically. After weaving and winding through the floodplain, the Oconee runs headlong into a high ridge running from above the town of Oconee to Cow Hell Swamp. The ridge contains the river's wandering ways and keeps it on the straight and narrow for three and a half miles. Springs drip from this high ridge into the river and for a moment you'll feel like you are back in the Piedmont.

Mile 3—Herons for Dummies: Blue, Green, Snowy, White & Black-Crowned—We're all herons and if that's not confusing enough, sometimes us white herons are actually blue...but then there's the Great Blue and the Little Blue!?! To clear up the confusion, here's our Dummies Guide to Herons. There are many of us on the Oconee—and, for heaven's sake, don't call us "herring"—that's a fish!

Great Blue Heron--The largest of the herons, it is blue gray in color with light highlights on the neck and belly, stands three to four feet tall and has a wing span approaching six feet. You'll see it patrolling the shoreline looking for fish and amphibians that it spears with its long beak.

Great Egret—Similar in size to the great blue, but white as a roll of toilet paper—with distinctive yellow bill and black legs.

Green Heron—The smallest of the Oconee's herons and much more elusive than the great blue and great egret. It hides in the trees and strainers along the river's edge. It is dark in color with brown and green markings. Ornithologists give the additional helpful hint for identifying the Green: "Another characteristic behavior of the Green Heron is its tendency to fly away from a disturbance giving a squawk and defecating in a white stream behind itself." The Green also ingeniously uses tools to catch its prey, dropping everything from insects to twigs and feathers into the water to attract small fish.

Little Blue Heron—Here's where it gets confusing. Common on the Oconee, little blues are miniature versions of the great blue, prompting some to assume they are immature great blues—they are not. A distinct species, adults have dark gray, blue plumage and lack the white highlights of the great blue, BUT the young little blues are actually pure white—like the great egret—but similar in size to the snowy egret (a separate and smaller species that looks like the great egret). When snowy egrets are around, the young blues will blend into these colonies, increasing their ability to catch fish and avoid predators. But snowy egrets are rare on the Oconee, preferring Georgia's coastline. So if you see a little blue heron in the company of a white-plumaged heron, you are likely seeing an adult and yearling little blue herons.

Black-Crowned Night Heron—Since they hunt at night, it's unlikely that you'll encounter one of these birds, though they can be spotted at day. You'll be able to identify them by their black cap, gray wings and white underside. They are about the size of the Little Blues. Proving that ornithologists are a strange lot, here's this from Cornell University's Ornithology website: "Young Black-crowned Night-Herons often disgorge their stomach contents when disturbed. This habit makes it easy to study its diet."

Mile 5.5--"Mussel Shoals"—The shoal here was likely created in the 1800s in an attempt to constrict the river's flow and create a deeper channel for steamboats plying the Oconee. Today, it's a great place to find some of the Altamaha River basin's endemic mussel species, including the Altamaha Slabshell and the Georgia Elephant Ear. Watch where you step—they are everywhere! Though found in abundance here, these special critters are found only in the Altamaha basin—and nowhere else in the world. From this spot to Dublin, the mussel hunting is prime. You'll spot the discarded shells (former dinner food for muskrats, otters and raccoons) on the river bottom if you keep your eyes peeled. Look for wing-shaped patches of white. Live ones are more difficult to locate because their brown shells blend with the river bottom. The unsung heroes of Georgia streams, these bivalves filter nutrients from the water and help keep our rivers clean. They also serve as important food sources for fish and mammals.

Mile 7 Beaverdam Wildlife Management Area--Beaverdam WMA consists of 12,000 acres of mostly bottomland hardwood forest known as Beaverdam Swamp. They call it (and Cow Hell Swamp downstream) a swamp, but these places only take on that character when the river spills out of its banks. Swamps are part of the make-up of the coastal plain just below the fall line and these swamps are incredibly productive places. The forest is dominated by oaks--including water, willow, cherrybark, swamp chestnut, and overcup. Other canopy trees are beech, sweet gum, sycamore, bald cypress, and tupelo. Beneath these trees you'll find cane and palmetto. Within them, you'll spot all manner of songbirds, waterfowl, reptiles and mammals. They are enchanting places to explore, but in most cases at summer water levels, the tributaries leading into them are too low to explore via boat.

Mile 8.5--Fish Traps—Though the Georgia Department of Natural Resources Archeological Services Unit does not officially record any fish traps on the Oconee River, 128 have been documented on other Georgia rivers and historians speculate that they did exist on the Oconee. The shoals at Mile 5.5 and those at Jaycee (Mile 8.5) suggest that these ingenious structures were utilized by earlier inhabitants. The rock dams worked simply: formed in the shape of a V, they funneled fish to a narrow opening where they would be corralled into a waiting basket. Historic documents point to the existence of weirs or traps on the Oconee. A Washington County Clerk of Court document from 1784 recorded an "Old Indian Fishery" on the Oconee and from 1805 to 1851 the City of Milledgeville rented out fisheries along the Oconee. In 1806, the city rented 11 locations for a total yearly amount of \$234.18.

Mile 17 Blackshear Ferry & Shoals—An important crossing of the Oconee, the name of the ferry is derived from David Blackshear who came to know this place during his service as a General in the War of 1812. He built his "Springfield Plantation" home on the east side of the river. He was responsible with driving the Seminole Indians out of Georgia. The shoals just upstream from the old ferry are another hotbed for "mussel watching." In the shallow pool on the upstream side of the shoals, you'll find many mussels...and their tracks. If you wait here long enough (perhaps for the day) you'll see them move...at a mussel's pace. Jason Wisniewski, a mussel specialist with the Georgia Department of Natural Resources, reports that mussels commonly move during drought conditions, seeking out deeper pools. Other Altamaha mussels have been known to leave tracks more than 100 feet long.

Mile 22 Laurens County, Boll Weevils & Boxing—At one time during the early 1900s, Laurens County—Georgia's 4th largest county (behind Ware, Burke and Clinch counties) was the state's leading cotton producing county. That changed in 1919 when the boll weevil devastated the cotton crops and the local economy. What was Laurens' loss, however, was the world of boxing's gain. A tenant farmer named Walker Smith Sr. left Laurens' cotton fields for work in Detroit. Two years later, Walker Smith Jr. was born. Junior would grow up to be arguably the best boxer of all time—Sugar Ray Robinson. The county seat of Dublin is bedecked in many shamrocks. In fact, the famed Irish author James Joyce references the New World Dublin in the opening lines of his novel, *Finnegan's Wake*: "nor had topsawyer's rocks by the stream Oconee exaggerated themselves to Laurens County's gorgios while they went doublin their mumper all the time." The line suggests that the town is the fastest growing community in Georgia: "doublin' their number all the time." "Topsawyer's" is apparently a reference to Jonathan Sawyer, a pioneer citizen of the town who is said to have chosen the name Dublin in honor of his native land.