

# Penholloway Polka—Paddle Georgia 2012

June 21—Altamaha River

**Distance:** 16 miles

**Starting Elevation:** 19 feet **Lat:** 31°33'15.10"N **Lon:** 81°42'40.95"W

**Ending Elevation:** 3 feet **Lat:** 31°25'37.04"N **Lon:** 81°36'20.64"W

**Restroom Facilities:**

<b>Mile 0</b>	Paradise Park
<b>Mile 7.5</b>	Sansavilla Landing
<b>Mile 16</b>	Altamaha Regional Park

## Points of Interest:

**Mile 0—Floathouses**—Nestled along the banks of Penholloway Creek are the last remaining floathouses in Georgia. Floathouses, or shantyboats, were once part of the fabric of rivers across the South. Through the 1950s, shantyboats, serving as full-time dwellings, were common. During the Great Depression, the numbers of “river gypsies” swelled as families sought out new ways to eke out a living. The tradition persisted on the Altamaha into the 1990s when the state estimated that there were more than 200 floathouses on the river—most without marine toilets. Thus in 1992, the Georgia General Assembly passed laws outlawing the structures—an effort to prevent raw sewage discharges and remove those that impeded navigation. The homes were concentrated at places like Paradise Park, Jaycees Landing in Jesup and Altamaha Regional Park (our destination for the evening). Owners of the floathouses at Paradise Park successfully argued that the law did not apply to their structures because Penholloway was not a navigable stream. Paddle past these structure reverently; they represent a rich part of river culture that has faded into history.

**Mile 1—Sturgeon Hole & Atlantic & Shortnose Sturgeon**—Biologists know that the Altamaha’s Atlantic and shortnose sturgeon congregate around freshwater springs in the Altamaha delta during the summer and suspect that creeks and sloughs, like this one, are so named because at one time they served as coldwater refuges for these unique fish. Sturgeon look prehistoric—and with good reason—they have existed on the planet for 120 million years, and in size, are rather dinosaur-esque. Atlantic sturgeons typically weigh in at 100 to 300 pounds, although specimens have been recorded at 14 feet, weighing 800 pounds. Prized for their roe (arriving on our plates as caviar), both the federally endangered shortnose sturgeon and the state-protected Atlantic sturgeon were fished nearly to extinction in the Altamaha. The fishery was closed in 1995, but Altamaha old-timers will show you photos of six-foot fish and tell stories of shipping sturgeon steaks to New York City at 50 cents a pound. Recent studies suggest that populations of the fish are stronger than expected, but it will take a long time for the fish to recover. It takes years for them to reach spawning age; in fact, females achieve only 50 percent of their lifetime egg production by age 29.



**Mile 1.5—Old Hell Bight**

**Mile 2—Sister Pine Round**

**Mile 3—Sister Pine Drift**

**Mile 4.5—Miller Lake & Old Cypress**—On river left here is the narrow slough known as Miller Lake. Hidden, still further up a stream feeding the lake, is believed to be the largest bald cypress tree in Georgia. The tree measures 43 feet 5 inches in circumference at its base, sports eight-foot tall knees and plays an important role in the life of Rufinesque big-eared bats. The bats have adapted to colonizing the hollows in cypress trees. As southeastern wetlands have been cleared and filled, the bat has slowly lost its habitat. Though widespread, the bats are now considered rare.

**Mile 7.5—Sansavilla Landing & Mary Musgrove**—This landing on river right serves as the day’s pit stop, but the bluff overlooking the river here is famous as the site of a trading post established around 1740 by Mary Musgrove—the Pocohontas of Georgia. The daughter of an English trader and a Creek Indian mother, Musgrove used her bi-racial background to its fullest advantage. Fluent in Creek and English, and knowledgeable of the customs and trading practices of both cultures, she became an interpreter for both James Oglethorpe and Yamacraw Indian chief Tomochichi and was instrumental in the peaceful establishment of Savannah and the Georgia colony. Her trading post on the Altamaha was short-lived as her second husband, Jacob Matthews, died, and she quickly took her third husband, Reverend Thomas Bosomworth. She traveled with him and interpreted for him as he did his missionary work amongst the young colony’s native population. Later the Yamacraw Indians would give Ossabaw, Sapelo and St. Catherine’s islands to the Bosomworths—a deal that was protested by the colony. Ultimately, Georgia ceded Mary and Thomas only St. Catherine’s Island, where the woman that played a pivotal role in Georgia’s early history died sometime after 1763.

**Mile 8.5—Navigational Dikes**—More signs of our attempts to tame the Altamaha. Placed here in the late 1800s and early 1900s these dikes were intended to force the river to a prescribed channel, but while implementing these “river improvements” the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers’ acknowledged the futility of their work. In a report to Congress in 1894 Capt. O.M. Carter wrote, “No permanent improvement can be effected as new obstructions, caused by logs and snags, form during every freshet stage. They should, however, diminish in number from year to year. From \$3,000 to \$5,000 will be required for the annual maintenance of the completed work.” That year, the Corps steamer, *Toccoa*, removed from the river 324 snags, 18 stumps, 4,533 overhanging trees and one sunken steamer, the *Tar Heel*. At the time, the work was today’s equivalent of repairing bridges and repaving of our interstates. The Corps reported that half the counties bordering the Altamaha were wholly dependent upon the river for transportation because no railroads served those counties.

**Mile 11—Ft. Barrington & John & William Bartram**—The private landing on river left here is named Ft. Barrington, an acknowledgement of the site, somewhere in the vicinity, of a frontier fort built around 1760. It was a 70-square foot stockade with four bastions and a two-story wooden blockhouse. In 1776, Patriots from Georgia took control of the fort, but in 1777, British Loyalists recaptured and renamed it Ft. Howe. A year later, the Patriots again captured the fort. The site was also occupied by the Confederate army during the Civil War. For all its military history, Ft. Barrington is best known as the site at which John and William Bartram discovered, in 1765, *Franklinia alatamaha*, a beautiful flowering shrub similar to camellias. Serving as the Royal Botanist in North America to King George, John Bartram’s job was to roam about North America collecting seeds, cultivating them and sending specimens back to England. On this encounter, the Bartrams do not record collecting seeds from the plant, but when William, the son, returned in 1773, he collected seeds and shuttled them back to Philadelphia. From there, Bartram cultivated the plant and to this day, *Franklinia alatamaha* blooms annually at the John Bartram’s Gardens in Philadelphia. It does not, however, bloom anywhere in the wild. The plant was last seen in the wild in 1803, and no one is certain what happened to this mysterious plant that the Bartram’s saved from extinction.

**Mile 15—Gamecock Lake**

**Mile 15—Gamecock Reach**

**Mile 16.5—Altamaha Regional Park**—Our take out and campsite for the night, Altamaha Regional Park boasts of a newly constructed bathhouses, a campstore stocked with cold drinks and ice cream, a coin laundry, a playground and a quarter-mile nature trail. The park is leased from Glynn County and operated by the Altamaha Park Association of Glynn County. In addition to a campground catering to tent campers and RVs, the Park also includes a “vacation village” occupied by year-round residents. The bridge that bisects the park is the Seaboard Coastline Railroad which was abandoned in the 1980s. In the heyday of passenger rail, the tracks carried the famous “Orange Blossom Special” which capitalized on the rapid growth and development in Florida during the mid-1900s. Of course, the train also inspired the equally famous bluegrass tune of the same name.