

Blackshear Boogie— Paddle Georgia 2013

June 15—Flint River

Distance: 14 miles

Starting Elevation: 216 feet Lat: 31.8478°N Lon: 83.9439°W

Ending Elevation: 210 feet Lat: 31.7251°N Lon: 84.019°W

Restroom Facilities:

Mile 0	Crisp County Power Dam
Mile 6.7	Private Boat Landing
Mile 14	Ga. 32 Boat Ramp

Points of Interest:

Mile 0—Crisp County Power Dam & Lake Blackshear—From its headwaters beneath the world’s busiest airport in Atlanta, the Flint flows undammed for 214 miles—the longest stretch of free-flowing river in Georgia and one of only 40 rivers in the U.S. that can claim more than 200 free-flowing miles. That run of river ends here at the Crisp County Power Dam. The river is dammed twice more, 30 miles downstream at the Flint River Hydro Dam and again at Jim Woodruff Dam where the Flint and Chattahoochee meet to form the Apalachicola at the Georgia/Florida stateline. Crisp County Power Dam is one of 75,000 dams in the U.S. that are higher than six feet tall—that’s the equivalent of one dam built each day since 1808. All told the Flint winds some 350 miles. From this spot, it’s a 214 mile journey upstream to the headwaters and it’s 134 miles from here to the river’s confluence with the Chattahoochee. The dam was completed in 1930, bringing electricity to rural South Georgia. Getting residents to buy into the plan was more difficult than one might think. Some feared that electricity would burn down their homes, but dam proponents found their biggest allies were women, who understood that electricity would lighten the load of household chores. Within 27 years of completion of the dam, local demand for electricity outstripped the dam’s capacity and the Crisp County Power Commission built a combined coal/natural gas generation facility adjacent to the dam. Today, both the dam and coal/gas plant are still producing electricity.

Mile 5.5—Pileated Woodpeckers and Cypress Trees—On river left, here, is a cypress snag riddled with woodpecker holes. Pileated woodpeckers, the largest of our native woodpeckers, are easily identified by their bright red crest and their laughing cry. They also drill distinctive rectangular shaped nesting holes. From here to Bainbridge, the river is ripe with snags sculpted by pileated woodpeckers. Not surprisingly, the bird’s favorite food is carpenter ants, but they also feed on all manner of insects as well as fruits and nuts. The holes they leave in trees provide shelter for swifts, owls, ducks, bats and martens.

Mile 7.5—Southern Maidenhair Fern—Along the bluffs on river right you’ll find this true southern beauty. Lovers of limestone and wet, rocky river banks, this fern grows in abundance along the Flint. It is easily identified by its black stipes (stems) and its fan-shaped pinnules (leaves). Its scientific genus name, *Adiantum*, comes from the Greek word, *adiantos*, which means “unwetted” and refers to the way that the young leaves of this plant shed water. Native Americans employed the plant as a remedy for rheumatism, as a salve for bee stings and, as a smoke for curing for insanity.

Mile 8—Limestone, Springs & the Floridan Aquifer—On river right here, you’ll hear the splash of a waterfall spilling through a hole in the limestone bluff. The spring that issues forth from this bluff is one of dozens that feed the Flint from the Floridan aquifer. The Floridan is among the most productive aquifers in the world, stretching across 100,000 square miles of South Georgia, Alabama, South Carolina and Florida. These inflows of clean water make the Flint one of the clearest flowing rivers in South Georgia, but withdrawals from the Floridan aquifer for municipal, industrial and farm uses have increasingly depleted discharges from the aquifer, greatly impacting flows on the Flint and its few tributaries between here and Bainbridge

Mile 8.8—Alligators—Near this bend of the river during scouting trips, we encountered one alligator that topped 10-feet in length. Be warned: you are in habitat where there is something larger than you...and can eat you. Nevertheless, gator-on-human feeding is extremely rare in Georgia. Since 1980, Georgia’s Department of Natural Resources has recorded nine incidents in which humans were injured by alligators—and only one was fatal.

We will paddle through their habitat during the nesting season (late June/early July) during which time the females build nests out of vegetation and lay between 20 and 60 eggs. The mother defends the nest against predators throughout the 65-day incubation period. Thus, should you happen upon something that looks like a nest, do not disturb it.

These additional words of warning will help you avoid unpleasant alligator encounters: 1. Keep your distance—at least 60 feet from an adult alligator. They are extremely powerful and can move with a startling burst of speed on land over short distances. 2. Do not attempt to capture baby alligators. Mama may be watching you, and if mama ain’t happy, ain’t nobody happy. 3. Keep children away from alligators. When they are hungry, alligators act on hunting instinct. 4. Don’t swim in areas that are known alligator habitats. Always be careful around water. Splashing can attract alligators that think a prey animal is injured...and last but not least, 5. Don’t feed alligators...because its’ just a stupid idea.

In defense of alligators, this prehistoric reptile is one of our keystone species. They help maintain the population balance of certain prey species and they help shape and modify habitats. Once nearly extinct in Georgia, they were listed as an endangered species in 1967, but in 1987 were removed from the list, and today Georgia holds an annual hunting season. The largest gator ever harvested in Georgia was captured in 2010 downstream on Lake Seminole and measured 13-feet 9-inches. The previous state record, killed in 2008, was pulled from just upstream on Lake Blackshear.

Mile 9.8—Albany, Florida & Northern Railway—The abandoned railroad bridge here once carried A, F & N steam locomotives. Completed in 1891, this 35-mile railroad connected Albany with Cordele. In 1895, a one-way trip on the line took one hour and 45 minutes with stops in Philema, Oakfield, Warwick and Taylors.

Mile 11.6—Chokee Plantation—From Robert Woodruff of Coca-Cola fame to media mogul Ted Turner, the Flint is the retreat of many famous and influential Georgians. Since the 1920s, when Woodruff established a quail hunting reserve along Ichauway Creek, the rich and powerful have come to relax and recreate along the banks of the Flint. From here to Bainbridge, there are numerous large “plantations” encompassing tens of thousands of acres that are managed for timber, farmed and utilized as hunting preserves. Chokee, a 3,300-acre spread that stretches along the Flint’s west bank from here to Ga. 32 is owned by the Taylor family of Albany—well known in Georgia politics since the 1960s. Fred Taylor, who earned a tidy living selling and leasing Mack trucks and leasing warehouse space, served in Gov. George Busbee’s successful campaigns in 1974 and 1978. He was rewarded by serving as the Governor’s chief of staff for eight years. Though Taylor, who died in 2011, never held elected office, his son Mark, served as Senator from Albany for 11 years before winning the office of Lt. Governor in 1998, a post he held through 2006 when he was defeated in a run for governor by Republican Sonny Perdue. Given the changing landscape of Georgia politics, he may be remembered as the last Democrat to hold the Lt. Governor’s seat.

Mile 13.2—Philema Branch—The creek entering here on river right was originally called Beaver Dam Creek, but later took on the name of a Chehaw Indian Chief known as “Fullemy” (or Philema). Philema was known among white settlers as a cattle rustler and troublemaker, but John Goff, author of *Place Names of Georgia*, suggests that his reputation had more to do with his unwillingness to cede Indian lands to those same settlers.

Mile 14—Worth County & Georgia Peanut Festival—Hugging the east bank of the river for the length of today’s paddle is Worth County. Formed in 1853, it is home to some 22,000 people, lots of peanuts and the Georgia Peanut Festival which will celebrate its 50th anniversary in October. At the 1987 festival, celebrants created the world’s largest peanut butter sandwich—a behemoth covering 144 square-feet. The county seat of Sylvester is home to ConAgra Food’s Peter Pan Peanut Butter Plant.