

Lloyd Shoals Limbo–Paddle Georgia 2018

June 20—Ocmulgee River

Distance: 14 miles

Starting Elevation: 470 feet **Lat:** 33.315944°N, **Lon:** -83.840460°W

Ending Elevation: 364 feet **Lat:** 33.159572°N, **Lon:** -83.823662°W

Restroom Facilities:	Mile 0	Lloyd Shoals Dam Boat Ramp
	Mile 4	Popper Boat Landing
	Mile 14	Ga. 83

Points of Interest:

Mile 0.3—Butts County Water Intake—The water intake facility on river right belongs to the Butts County Water & Sewer Authority which pumps water from the Ocmulgee and the Towaliga rivers to provide about 800 million gallons of water annually to the citizens of Butts County. This intake is permitted to remove 10 MGD from the river and marks the first drinking water intake on the main stem of the South or Ocmulgee rivers downstream of Metro Atlanta.

Mile 3—Giles Ferry—You can still see the cuts in the bank for this historic ferry. A ferry first operated here in the early 1800s and continued into the 20th century. Just downstream from this location the river splits around an island and descends over a series of small shoals that in the late 1800s and early 1900s powered Smith’s Mill, a grist and woolen mill. In the late 1800s, local boosters had hoped that this and the greater falls downstream at Lamar Mill could be transformed into an industrial complex, but rail transportation was the missing link. The Jackson Argus newspaper editorialized in its March 27, 1897 issue: “on the Ocmulgee river is water power sufficient to employ two million dollars of capital and thousands of operatives.” Lamenting the destruction of Ocmulgee Mills by Union troops more than 30 years earlier, the paper continued, “Since then these magnificent waterfalls have stood almost idle for want of transportation facilities. Had the southern railway followed the course of the river when it was built there is no telling what manufacturing interest would have been put in operation near this...all efforts to build up manufactories at the river have been unsuccessful on account of the distance from railway.” While operations at Smith and Lamar Mill continued into the 1900s, the industry hoped for by locals never materialized. The best route through the shoals is around the right side of the island.

Mile 4—Marjorie Kahn Popper Boat Launch—This launch on river left serves as the take out for those not wishing to paddle the Class II shoals at Lamar Mill Rapid. If you intend use this take out, keep your eyes peeled so as not to miss it!

Mile 4.5—Seven Islands Area—This labyrinth of islands that begins here and continues to Wise Creek two miles downstream is historically known as Seven Islands. It includes Forty Acre Island and holds the largest rapid on the Ocmulgee River. Today, it seems a wild place, but humans have come to this land and water for centuries. The site is mentioned in the journals of 17th century fur traders and William Bartram described the site during his wanderings in the 1770s. In 1843, the Georgia General Assembly incorporated a wool and cotton mill at the site known as Planters Manufacturing Company. By 1849, the mill employed 75 workers and produced 800 yards of cloth daily, but by 1855, the business went belly up and was sold on the courthouse steps to investors who put \$42,000 into improving the facilities and changed the name to Ocmulgee Mills. It was this mill that was destroyed during the Civil War. In November 1864, the Union Army torched it during its “March to the Sea.” Wrote Union soldier Thomas Christie: “...we came in sight of the Ocmulgee ; a fine river; crossed on a pontoon bridge laid above the dam at the Mills. The Ocmulgee Mills were two splendid buildings, which the Rebels has used night and day for the manufacture of cloth for the army: they were destroyed as soon as the army got over the bridge.” Ocmulgee Mills never recovered, but by 1885, a saw mill and grist mill were harnessing the river and in 1907, a U.S. Geological Survey describes Lamar Mill as a “large merchant mill for grinding corn and wheat.” By the 1930s, the federal government proposed building a \$1.8 million hydropower dam here. Thankfully, that project, along with a proposal for damming the river at Dames Ferry downstream, never took hold. The stone remains of the old mills can still be seen along the banks on river right. The natural shoals create a Class III rapid on river right adjacent to the small island. To avoid this significant obstacle, stay left and work your way over a series of smaller ledges. Safety boaters will be in place to provide direction and rescue as necessary.

Mile 5.7—Wise Creek Launch-Robust Redhorse Restoration Project—On river left here, beyond the shoal at the head of Nelson Island is the mouth of Wise Creek and a currently closed boat launch within the Oconee National Forest—a closure that put a wrench in our Paddle Georgia Lamar Mill Rapid portage plan. Avoid running the shoal leading to the launch and stay to the right of the island. The launch was closed due to unsafe conditions created at the site when a streambank stabilization project built of numerous large timbers failed and spilled into the river, exposing the sharp metal spikes used to secure the timbers to one another. The stabilization project, completed in 2000 through the efforts of the Forest Service, Georgia Department of Natural Resources (DNR), Georgia Power and Georgia River Network, was intended to prevent further erosion of the river bank here and improve habitat for the robust redhorse, a fish once thought to be extinct that was rediscovered in 1991 in the Oconee River. The redhorse is often referred to as a “mystery fish” because so little is known about this member of the sucker family. The Georgia Department of Natural Resources has begun a captive breeding program and has released approximately 6,500 redhorses into the Ocmulgee. The Robust Redhorse Conservation Committee is studying the fish in hopes of restoring it to the Ocmulgee and other Georgia rivers. As the name implies it is a large fish (average length 25 inches) highlighted by a rose-colored tail fin. It feeds largely on corbicula (small invasive Asian clams) and prefers to spawn in shallow water over gravel deposits. It’s possible the fish would have remained unknown to scientists if not for federal environmental regulations; it was re-discovered in 1991 when DNR collected the fish during an environmental assessment associated with the re-licensing of Georgia Power’s Sinclair Dam on the Oconee River. The failure of the stabilization project (and its impact on our journey) is a hard lesson in the difficulty of controlling wild rivers. Inevitably, it seems, the river wins.

Mile 6.7—Goodman’s Ferry—A 1908 Geological Survey of Georgia publication notes this location and five other ferries operating between Jasper and Butts counties in the 15 miles of the Ocmulgee downstream of present-day Lloyd Shoal Dam. The concentration of ferries in this run of river speaks to the importance of the area as a transportation route during the pre-colonial era. The Upper Creek Trading Path crossed the Ocmulgee at Seven Islands, and it became a well-traveled route by early explorers and settlers. By 1823, the Georgia General Assembly recognized eight ferries across the Ocmulgee in Jasper County.

Mile 11.3—Crow Branch & Oconee National Forest—On river left is this stream that flows entirely within the 30,300 acres of the Oconee National Forest in Jasper County. The National Forest flanks the east bank of the river for some 13 miles from the Ga. 36 bridge upstream to Ga. 83 downstream. In total the Oconee National Forest encompasses 115,000 acres in Georgia. It is estimated that only 7 percent of the trees in this forest are more than 120 years old—evidence of our past and current dependence upon these forests. The Forest is also home to the federally protected red-cockaded woodpecker, a species that requires old growth pines for its survival.

Mile 12.6—Big Sandy Creek & Indian Springs—About 7 miles upstream on this creek lies Indian Springs State Park. Indian Springs, sulfur springs giving rise to Big Sandy Creek, were used for centuries by Native Americans and revered for their healing powers. In 1823, Creek Indian Chief William McIntosh established a hotel there and it was at this location that McIntosh and others signed the Treaty of Indian Springs, ceding Creek lands in Georgia to the U.S. government. Three months later, McIntosh was murdered by fellow tribesmen who felt betrayed by their leader. The springs and McIntosh’s hotel, which still stands, remained a popular resort well into the 20th century.