

# Fried Green Tomatoes Tap–Paddle Georgia 2018

June 21—Ocmulgee River

**Distance:** 14.7 miles

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

**Ending Elevation:** 334 feet **Lat:** 32.993778°N, **Lon:** -83.724753°W

**Restroom Facilities:**

<b>Mile 0</b>	<b>Ga. 83</b>
<b>Mile 4</b>	<b>Juliette</b>
<b>Mile 14.7</b>	<b>Pope’s Ferry landing</b>

## **Points of Interest:**

**Mile 1—Tyler Island & River Otters**—River otters have been spotted at this island in the past. Keep your eyes peeled. That’s not to say you won’t find these critters elsewhere. A typical otter will range over 50 miles of its home river during the year. They are most active from late evening through early morning. Otters eat mostly fish, but also dine on crayfish, mussels and amphibians, growing to a weight of up to 25 pounds. Of course, they are known for their playfulness. If you could swim 7 miles an hour and run up to 18 mph, you’d be playful too.

**Mile 2.5—Towaliga River**—Pronounced "Tow-aleega" or "Tye-lye'gee." This river begins in Henry County and flows through Spalding, Butts and Monroe counties. Historians disagree on the meaning of the Native American name. Some say it means “sumac place,” but others suggest the name comes from the Muskogean word Towelaggie which means “roasted scalps” or “scalp place,” the river being a spot where Native Americans war parties paused to dry scalps...and a word on scalping: Scalping may or may not have originated with Native American tribes. However, the practice of taking the scalp as proof of an enemy’s demise was adopted by some American colonists. In fact, colonial governments soon began offering bounties for Native American scalps. The largest known Native American villages in Butts County were located at the confluence of the Towaliga and Ocmulgee.

**Mile 4.5—Juliette**—Our take out site for our portage around Juliette Dam is on river right just downstream from the Juliette/Round Oak Road bridge. Juliette is best known as the set for the 1991 movie Fried Green Tomatoes starring Kathy Bates and Jessica Tandy, and indeed, the movie is largely responsible for the revival of the small town. In the 20th century, water from the Ocmulgee captured by the dam powered a grist mill (in Juliette) and the Glover Cotton Mills (across the river in East Juliette) but today, the economy of Juliette relies primarily on tourism. Despite the trappings of tourism, McCracken Street and the buildings surrounding it will make you feel like you’ve stepped into the early 1900s, and yes, you can get fried green tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Café. The large four-story concrete structure that looms over the river and the dam is the former Juliette Milling Company grist mill. The building was constructed in 1927, replacing a previous mill that was destroyed in a fire, and at that time it was the world’s largest water-powered grist mill. The original grist mill and dam dates to the late 1800s. The mill operated under the Martha White name until 1957. The bridge that we passed beneath to reach the river landing at Juliette was completed in 1971, replacing the original bridge which was built by the milling company in 1907. Had we been here at that time, we would have paid a five cent fee for walking the bridge and a 10 cent fee for taking a car or wagon across it. Today, the dam is still capable of generating electricity, but in 2014, the Eastern Hydroelectric Corporation lost their license to operate when they failed to install fish ladders that would allow migratory American shad to reach spawning grounds further upstream. Earlier this year, the company appealed this decision, but in April, judges with the U.S. Court of Appeals denied the appeal. Now, the future of the dam and the powerhouse is uncertain. Local boosters consider the dam an iconic part of the landscape and critical to the historic character of Juliette and the tourism economy that the community relies upon. Owners of the powerhouse want to continue generating electricity, but advocates for free-flowing rivers argue that removing the dam would restore long stretches of the historic river channel, including Glover Shoals, upon which the dam now sits, and improve habitat for migratory fish, mussels and other aquatic wildlife. Removal of the dam would also likely increase recreational use of the river.

**Mile 5.1—Zellner Island**—Our re-entry into the Ocmulgee below Juliette Dam is on the property over Old Mill Riverfront Cabins and the western arm of the Ocmulgee as it courses around Zellner Island which stretches 0.4 mile downstream from the dam. Just downstream from the island are power lines that are part of Georgia’s network of some 17,500 miles of electric transmission lines. This particular trunk runs 154 miles from Georgia Power’s Vogtle Nuclear Power Plant on the Savannah River to Plant Scherer just west of the Ocmulgee here.

**Mile 6.4—Plant Camellia Intake**—No longer in use, this intake structure on river right once pumped water to a dye and garment manufacturing company located just off river in Monroe County. Earlier this year, Erosion Control Products, a company that manufactures material to control soil erosion at construction and other land-clearing sites began operating in the facility. On river left, opposite the intake structure, is a dwelling whose river view deck has succumbed to the power of the river.

**Mile 10.2—Georgia Power Plant Scherer Intake**—Here Georgia Power withdraws water from the Ocmulgee River and pumps it to Lake Juliette, a reservoir formed by a dam on Rum Creek built to serve Plant Scherer. One of the largest coal-fired power plants in the country, Scherer burns about 11 million tons of coal each year, turning water into steam to turn electric turbines. Of course, water from the Ocmulgee is essential in this effort. Its primary job is cooling the steam and turning it back to water to repeat the electric generating process. Each of the plant’s 540-foot-tall cooling towers can circulate 268,000 gallons of water a minute, losing about 8,000 gallons through evaporation. The plumes of white clouds you see emanating from these towers is actually vapor that once ran as water in the Ocmulgee River and Rum Creek. The importance of water to our state’s supply of electricity cannot be understated. It is why Georgia Power is the largest user of water in the state, and why aggressive energy efficiency and conservation measures coupled with renewable energy sources like wind and solar can help reduce our impacts on our rivers.

**Mile 11.9—Falling Creek/Hitchiti Research Forest**—This picturesque creek drains much of the Oconee National Forest to the northeast of the Ocmulgee. The Hitchiti Research Forest is a portion of the Oconee National Forest that is managed to improve habitat for the federally endangered red-cockaded woodpecker—so named because of the red-spot that crowns its black head. Like most of us, the red-cockaded is particular about where it raises its young, preferring to build its nesting cavities in aging pines infected with a wood-decaying fungus. Few southern pines get this fungus before they reach 80 to 90 years old. As the old growth pines of the Georgia woods were systematically harvested in the late 1800s and early 1900s, populations of the red-cockaded woodpecker declined precipitously. The bird was among the first animals placed on the endangered species list in 1970. Since then, habitat management like that undertaken in the Hitchiti forest has helped steadily expand the specie’s numbers. In 1993, there were 4,400 known locations where the birds survived; now that number has grown to 7,800 locations. Falling Creek is also home the Altamaha shiner, a state-threatened species of minnow found only in the Piedmont region of the Oconee and Ocmulgee rivers, and no where else in the world. Like the woodpecker, it depends on specific habitat to survive: free-flowing, sediment-free streams with rocky to sandy substrates.

**Mile 12.8—Dame’s Ferry & Rapid**—This is the site of one of the earliest river ferries in Middle Georgia. In 1810, George and John Dame built the first ferry here, connecting Creek Indian lands west of the Ocmulgee to the Georgia coast. A ferry operated on this site until 1962 when the construction of a bridge made it obsolete. In 1964, the ferry was moved to the Flint River in Macon County and there, it became famous as the last operating ferry in Georgia. In the rock above Dame’s Ferry rapid, you’ll see rebar extending above the water’s surface marking the site of a circa-1800s mill dam. Parts of the wooden structure can still be seen at low water levels. The best route through this Class II shoal is over a pair of precipitous ledges on river right (to the left of the farthest west island), however, at higher water levels, it is possible to navigate the more gradually descending shoals on river left. Watch for safety boaters to provide direction.