

Okapilco Polka–Paddle Georgia 2019

June 16—Withlacoochee River

Distance: 14.7 miles

Starting Elevation: 92 feet

30.78965,-83.45163

Ending Elevation: 87 feet

30.67456,-83.39437

Restroom Facilities:

Mile 0	Spook Bridge
Mile 7.2	Knight's Ferry
Mile 14.7	Clyattville Road

Points of Interest:

Mile 0—Giant Turtles & River Pollution—As the main route between Valdosta and Quitman during the first half of the 20th century, this location naturally attracted anglers and other river users, and as a result, it is notable as a place where newsworthy harvests of nature's bounty has occurred. In 1933, the *Atlanta Constitution* reported the capture of a "loggerhead turtle weighing 78 pounds and measuring four and a half feet from tip to tip." In 1946 under the headline "Turtle Steak—South Georgia Style," the *Constitution* reported the capture of a 73-pound turtle. It was during this same decade when pollution from upstream industrial facilities created another kind of commotion here. In August 1941, the *Constitution* reported: "Big crowds recently flocked to the Withlacoochee River, where the water was thick with dead and disabled fish. The big fish edged to the banks seeking freshwater and people waded in and caught them." Fish kills over the next two decades, including many on the Withlacoochee, alarmed sportsmen who were among the first to call for laws to stop wanton pollution of the state's streams. By 1942, the Georgia Wildlife Federation, formed just six years earlier to address the loss of deer, wild turkey and other game species, took a stand on water pollution, calling on the state to "adopt laws controlling pollution of streams regardless of the inconveniences it might cause manufacturing firms and canneries." Despite the outcry from sportsmen and other river users, Georgia would not adopt its first water pollution control laws for another two decades. In 1964 when the General Assembly adopted the Water Quality Control Act, 97 percent of the liquid waste from industrial facilities was discharged to Georgia's rivers and streams without treatment and 70 percent of municipal sewage was discharged without treatment. Since the passage of the federal Clean Water Act in 1972, industrial facilities and municipal sewage treatment plants have been required to treat and limit the discharge of harmful pollutants. Today, EPD estimates that 99 percent of all municipal and industrial waste receives adequate treatment. As a result, the health of Georgia's rivers is dramatically better and fish kills are extremely rare.

Mile 4.4—Okapilco Creek—This significant tributary winds some 60 miles through Worth, Colquitt and Brooks counties. The Native American name is believed to come from the Hitchitee word "oke," meaning water, and "puthko," meaning grape. Certainly, there is an abundance of wild grapes or muscadines in this area and among their favorite habitats are the margins along rivers and streams. Look for the heart-shaped leaves with deeply-toothed edges hanging from riverside trees with the leaves often extending to the river's surface. Return in August and September to reap the rewards of the vine's sweet, purple-colored, tough-skinned fruits.

Mile 5.4—Spain's Ferry & Voyage of E. Sherman Gould—From the site of this former ferry, which operated during the 1800s through the early 1900s, E. Sherman Gould, an assistant engineer with the U.S. Army, in 1874 embarked on a 90-mile journey in a "small rowboat" for the purposes of surveying the river to determine its suitability for commercial navigation. His description of the next several miles of river still holds true today: "The banks, though for the first 15 miles mostly of sand, assume after that a rocky character and a great deal of limestone occurs in them." Indeed, for the next several miles, the river is reminiscent of other Coastal Plain rivers with many willow-lined sandy banks and numerous sharp bends and stretches where the river narrows. Gould was impressed by the scenery, but he was less inspired by the river's commercial prospects. He did, after all, descend the river at low water. He wrote: "It would be useless, I think, to attempt to render the river practicable at all stages." The ferry takes its name from the Spain family of Brooks County who settled in the area in the mid-1840s and once owned some 25,000 acres. The Spain family home known as Forest Hills Plantation and dating to the 1840s still stands about a mile west of the river near here.

Mile 8.1—Knight's Ferry—This public boat ramp occupies the site of a circa-1800s river ferry and later in the early 1900s, a bridge. It serves as our pit stop for the day. Downstream from Knight's Ferry, the river begins to narrow in places and run between willow-flanked banks. Islands, woody debris and strainers become more common.

Mile 10.3—Willow—Here you will find much of this deciduous tree with long narrow, spear-shaped leaves crowding the river banks. Aside from providing habitat favored by American alligators, willow plays an important role in stabilizing river banks and providing services to both animal and man. Birds like the yellow-bellied sapsucker feed on its sap; likewise, it provides nectar to bees and its leaves are often eaten by deer. Wood from the tree was traditionally used for creating artificial limbs because of its light weight, and the basic ingredient of aspirin, salicin, can be derived from its bark and leaves.

Mile 12.5—Cut Through—Here the river narrows as it cuts through a former bend in the river. On river right are sandbars that mark the former route of the river, now a 500-foot looping and mostly dry oxbow. Due to the presence of much limestone, the Withlacoochee is less prone to cut new paths as are other rivers flowing through the Coastal Plain.

Mile 12.8—Godwin Bluff—This high bluff on river right takes its name from the Godwin family who were among the original landowners here in the 1800s. The current landowners of the old Godwin place manage 300-plus acres beyond the bluff as a private quail hunting plantation. Along the Withlacoochee's banks and bottoms, it is not uncommon to find relicts from well beyond the time of the Godwin family—fossils. The limestone that underlies much of South Georgia and North Florida is made up largely of shells of animals that lived in the ocean that once covered this area. Thus, it is not unusual to find fossilized shells, bones and teeth in the rocks in and along the river. In fact, the Withlacoochee and Suwannee are a hot bed for Florida's official state stone—agatized coral. This fossilized coral is formed when agate, a form of chalcedony, replaces the minerals in the coral—a process that takes 20-30 million years. On the outside the fossilized coral looks like a banded rock, but break open the rock (or saw it in two as some rock hounds do) and you reveal the beautiful agate inside, consisting of quartz and silica. The region's agatized coral exhibits a full spectrum of colors from black to white and virtually every color in between. The fight to recognize agatized coral as an official state symbol created a humorous diversion for Florida legislators in 1979. The problem was legislators in 1970 had already designated moonstone as the state gem—a symbolic gesture to promote the state's contribution to the Apollo missions to the moon launched from Cape Canaveral (despite the fact that moonstone cannot be found in Florida). Push back from powerful Cape Canaveral legislators prompted the agatized coral bill's sponsor to keep moonstone as the state "gem" and add agatized coral as the state "stone." The ensuing debate brought about suggestions to make kidney stones or gall stones the state stone.

Mile 14.6—Shoal—The largest of the shoals along our route thus far. This river crossing was formerly known as Rocky Ford, very likely because of this shoal. In 1874, E. Sherman Gould made note of the numerous shoals on the Withlacoochee: "In many places where these ledges are most formidable, fish-traps have been constructed, which entirely dam up the river." Fish traps, or rock dams, were used by Native Americans and early settlers to capture finned quarry. V-shaped rock dams were built in shallow areas. To capture the fish, teams of fishers would wade in the water, spooking fish downstream to the dam where a basket waited to collect the fish at the funnel of the "V." There are 128 documented fish weirs on Georgia's rivers, according to a 2003 Georgia Department of Natural Resources report.

Mile 14.7—Clyattville—Clyattville Road runs five miles east to the town of Clyattville which takes its name from James M. Clyatt (1821-1890) who operated a mill on a Withlacoochee tributary that also bears his name. Clyatt was a store owner and also served as the town postmaster in the mid 1800s.