

Madison Blue Springs Salsa–Paddle Georgia 2019

June 18—Withlacoochee River

Distance: 12 miles

Starting Elevation: 80 feet

30.59644,-83.25973

Ending Elevation: 75 feet

30.46517,-83.22333

Restroom Facilities:

Mile 0	Bellville Road
Mile 7.2	N.W. 47 th Street
Mile 12	Timber River Road

Points of Interest:

Mile 0.5—State Forest—On river right here, you may see a state forest sign nailed to a tree. This is the first of multiple parcels of land between here and Madison Blue Springs State Park that are owned by the Suwannee River Water Management District. Since the late 1980s, the District has worked to preserve and protect land along important water bodies, springs and aquifer recharge areas. At the close of 2018, the District owned 160,222 acres of conservation lands and had another 127,721 acres of private land protected through conservation easements. Between Bellville Road and Madison Blue Springs, the District owns nearly 2,000 acres of riverfront property. Funds for these land acquisitions come from the state’s robust \$3 billion land conservation program known as Florida Forever. Additional programs adopted in 2014 provide up to \$300 million annually for land conservation in Florida. By contrast, Georgia voters last year approved the state’s first-ever dedicated funding source for land protection. The Georgia Outdoor Stewardship Act (GOSA) will create \$20 million annually to be used for land conservation as well as development of recreational trails, (including water trails), improving parks and improving access to wildlife management areas. The funds will come from taxes already collected on the sale of outdoor recreation equipment. Georgia River Network is actively working to secure GOSA funds for water trail development.

Mile 1.3—Coffee Spring—On river right here in a limestone cleft along the river bank is this 3rd magnitude spring. The spring is said to have acquired its name because a stagecoach road once passed close by and the stagecoach would stop here to allow passengers to rest and have a drink of coffee. Interestingly, when local cave diver Guy Bryant explored this spring in 1984, he found a coffee pot at the bottom of the cave. Among the other items Bryant discovered in exploring more than 900 feet of passageways in this spring were piles of sea shells—evidence of Florida’s prehistory when it was completely submerged by the sea.

Mile 3.7—Limestone Bluffs—On river right, note the high limestone bluffs, which, by now, have become common place. They will continue to dominate the river banks down to the Suwannee. The Swiss-cheese-like limestone formations have been created over millions of years through a process known as “dissolution.” Rainwater reacts with carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, making the water acidic enough to slowly erode portions of the limestone. In addition to creating the Swiss-cheese bluffs, this same process is responsible for creating the area’s caves, sinkholes, springs and sinking streams.

Mile 4.6—Hardee Spring—Also known as Rosseter Spring, this second magnitude fount pushes 9.6 million gallons a day into the Withlacoochee River. You’ll find it on river left. A rock dam at the mouth of the 120-foot-long spring run backs the water up for swimming. The circular pool at the start of the spring run is about 15 feet in diameter and about five feet deep, flanked by 25-foot high limestone and sand banks. A large spring opening leads to some 4,000-feet of mapped underwater caverns that range from 10 to 20 feet wide and four to 15 feet tall. In February, the state of Florida acquired the spring and 316 surrounding acres for \$2 million through the state’s Florida Forever program. The purchase connects two adjoining state-owned parcels and protects another 1.5 mile of riverfront.

Mile 6.9—Sinking Stream—On river left in this vicinity look for the mouth of a slough that marks the site of a “sinking stream.” During a Paddle Georgia scouting trip last August at high water levels, we explored this slough to discover it was a dead end at which the river’s volume flowing into the slough simply disappeared underground. This is not uncommon in Florida’s karst geology. Depending on the hydrological conditions, surface water can flow into the aquifer. The Alapaha River, located some 12 miles to the east, famously disappears, spilling into a sink some 10 miles upstream from its confluence with the Suwannee. The river reemerges in the “Alapaha Rise” about a half mile upstream from the actual confluence of the two rivers. During low water, the river bed between the sink and the Suwannee can be completely dry. This intimate interplay between surface water and the Floridan aquifer has raised concerns about pollution stemming from failures at the City of Valdosta’s sewage system. Some homeowners have found high bacteria levels in their private wells and suspect that inflows from the polluted river is the culprit.

Mile 10.2—FL 6 & Hamilton County—The bridge here connects Madison County to the west with Hamilton County to the east. Established in 1827 and named after the 10-dollar founding father and first treasury secretary, Alexander Hamilton, the county was home to one of Florida’s first tourist destinations. White Springs on the Suwannee River has attracted bathers since the mid-1800s, and in its heyday around the turn of the century, it hosted Presidents Theodore Roosevelt and William Taft as well as Henry Ford. When fire ravaged the city of White Springs in the early 1900s, 15 hotels were damaged. Today, it is among Florida’s least populated and poorest counties (62nd out of 67 in both categories). Each Memorial Day, the county hosts the Florida Folk Festival, a three-day celebration of music, dance, stories, crafts and food held at Stephen Foster Folk Culture Center State Park.

Mile 10.4—Madison Blue Springs State Park—On river right just beyond the FL 6 bridge, you’ll spot the “blue” water of this first magnitude spring pushing out into the Withlacoochee’s blackwater. The 100-foot spring run leads to a breathtakingly beautiful 80-foot diameter spring pool that is 24 feet deep. The spring produces some 60 million gallons of water daily. Madison Blue Springs State Park is an internationally known cave diving destination with almost six miles of underground passages explored. These dark caves are actually home to an interesting array of animals, including the pallid cave crayfish, the Florida cave isopod and the Florida cave and Hobb’s cave amphipod. Due to the secluded and relatively lightly explored habitats in which these creatures reside, little is known about them, but all four species are considered imperiled largely because of their unique ecosystem. The spring was at the heart of controversy surrounding the development of a Nestle water bottling plant adjacent to the park in 2004. The project raised numerous questions: would a 1.47 million gallon a day withdrawal from the Floridan aquifer harm the spring? Is it appropriate for a private company to bottle and sell what is a public resource? Should water bottlers pay the state royalties as do companies that extract oil and gas? In the end, over the objections of the local water management district, Florida officials agreed to allow Nestle to pump 1.47 million gallons a day. The other questions remain topics of much debate. Water bottlers contend that they use much less water than other beverage producers and singling them out for a tax or royalty is unfair. For instance, it takes far more water to produce a gallon of beer (42 gallons) or soda (3 gallons) than it does a gallon of spring water. Bottlers also contend they are similar to water utilities in that they are merely providing a water delivery service—in a bottle rather than in pipes. If utilities do not pay taxes or royalties on their water, why should private bottling companies? Nevertheless, many state legislatures across the country are moving to implement taxes on bottled water producers. To access the spring, tie off your boat at the mouth of the spring run and swim into the spring pool (the current pushing out of the spring is strong). You can also walk on a trail from the mouth of the spring run. All visitors to the park must pay a \$2 entry fee. Restrooms and picnic areas are located beyond the spring.

Mile 11.6—Pot Spring—On river left, this spring boils from the river bottom in a shallow cove. Cave divers have been exploring the underground cave connected to the spring since the 1970s, mapping out hundreds of feet of underground passages that run far to the west below the river and into Madison County. The land surrounding the springs is protected as state property. Picnic tables are located at the top of the bank overlooking the spring.