June 19—Withlacoochee & Suwannee Rivers

Distance: 10 miles

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<th>Restroom Facilities:</th>
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<td>Mile 0</td>
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<td>Timber River Road</td>
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Points of Interest:

Mile 0.4 Tanner Spring—Located on river left at this sharp bend in the river opposite the sandbar with the “Withlacoochee” sign. While this spring is not a match for Madison Blue Springs, it is worth the stop. A second magnitude spring, it pumps more than 40 million gallons a day into the Withlacoochee. The spring is 10 feet deep, with a diameter of about 20 feet near the water’s surface. During the past half century, the region’s springs have been under assault as increasing water withdrawals from the Florida aquifer and increasing nutrients filtering into the groundwater have significantly altered these natural systems. Between 1950 and 2010, groundwater use from the Florida in Georgia and Florida has increased from 630 million gallons a day (MGD) to some 3.3 billion gallons a day—a 400 percent increase. Average spring flows in Florida have declined by 32 percent during that same time period, according to studies conducted by the U.S. Geological Survey. Madison Blue Spring, prior to the 1980s, typically contributed 95 million gallons a day to the Withlacoochee. Today, average flows are down to 66 MGD. The declines, coupled with more nutrient-rich water have led to algal blooms within springs, decreased water clarity, loss of native aquatic vegetation and impacts to fauna dependent on the springs. Of course, the loss of spring flows has also impacted the availability of surface water. Tanner and the Withlacoochee’s other springs contribute nearly one fourth of the river’s average flow.

Mile 4.9—Double Doors Spring—This unique spring on river left flows forth from caves in the limestone bank. Look for the two windows in the limestone at the river’s surface.

Mile 5.2—Morgan Springs—The 400-foot-long spring run for this second magnitude spring spills into the Withlacoochee on river left. It is possible to wade up the spring run to the spring pool, but the terrain is uneven and strewn with limestone. Perhaps an easier alternative is to take out at our pit stop on river left just downstream and walk to the spring on terra firma. Sitting on private property, the spring is surrounded by an extensive deck, but it is still a beauty to behold. The spring pool is about 70 feet in diameter and is some 20 feet deep. It is a popular spring for cave divers because of its extreme depth with the cave system descending some 200 feet below the water’s surface. Its current owner, Don McAlister should be on hand to answer questions about the property. Be sure to ask Don about his timber mining business on the Suwannee.

Mile 6.2—Sabal Trail Pipeline—Just to the east of this powerline crossing is the Sabal Trail natural gas pipeline, a controversial 517-mile pipeline that brings natural gas extracted through fracking to Florida-based power plants. The pipeline was originally designed to cross the Withlacoochee at this location (within a stone’s throw of three springs), but opposition led to its relocation to the east. It now crosses the Withlacoochee near U.S. 84 in Brooks and Lowndes counties in Georgia. Originally approved by the Federal Energy Regulator Commission (FERC) in 2017, the pipeline is now constructed and in use, but last year a federal court ruled that FERC failed to properly consider the pipeline’s impacts on climate change and halted its use. Since then, pipeline developers Spectra Energy Corp, NextEra, Inc. and FERC convinced the court to allow the pipeline to continue operation while FERC conducts further climate reviews. WWALS Watershed Coalition, Suwannee Riverkeeper and others fought to stop construction of the project based on the potential for catastrophic leaks and/or explosions that could harm the Florida aquifer. The karst geology of the area is prone to sink holes that could easily undermine the integrity of the underground pipeline. As natural gas has replaced coal as the fuel of choice at power plants, the demand for new gas pipelines has increased, setting off conflicts across the country between landowners, clean energy advocates and pipeline companies. While natural gas is a cleaner fuel that coal (producing 50 to 60 percent less carbon dioxide than coal), the drilling, extraction and transportation of gas in pipelines results in leakage of methane to the atmosphere—a much more harmful greenhouse gas than carbon dioxide. And, the use of fracking techniques to extract natural gas has led to localized pollution of groundwater in numerous locations.

Mile 6.2—Powerline Spring & Fairy Spring—Two springs are located along this powerline cut. Powerline Spring boils up from the river bottom along the right bank of the river. Just downstream from the powerline on river right is the mouth of Fairy Spring which flows along a delightful run of some 100 feet.

Mile 6.3—Corbett Spring—Located on river left along the river bank opposite the mouth of Fairy Spring.

Mile 6.4—Melvin Shoals & Timber Rafting—Next to State Line Rapid, this it the largest of the Withlacoochee’s shoals. Rock outcroppings on both banks of the river pinch the flow into a narrow, shoal strewn passage featuring a couple of small ledges. In his 1874 voyage down the Withlacoochee on behalf of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, E. Sherman Gould described the shoal: “Just above Ellaville…is also a formidable reef, some quarter of a mile long, on which I found some limestone at the river’s surface. Tanner and the Withlacoochee’s other springs contribute nearly one fourth of the river’s average flow.