

Lafayette Blue Springs Limbo–Paddle Georgia 2019

June 21—Suwannee River

Distance: 15 miles

Starting Elevation: 65 feet

30.24496,-83.24954

Ending Elevation: 55 feet

30.09973,-83.16963

Restroom Facilities:

Mile 0	Dowling Park Boat Ramp
Mile 7.2	Charles Spring Boat Ramp
Mile 9.8	Lafayette Blue Springs State Park
Mile 15	Hal Adams Bridge Boat Ramp

Points of Interest:

Mile 0.2 The Loping Gopher Railroad—This now abandoned bridge once carried the locomotives of this colorfully-named railway. It's official name was the Live Oak, Perry and Gulf Railroad and the crossing of the river here was established around the turn of the century. A shortline, it was primarily used to haul lumber to sawmills and to connections with longer rail lines leading to urban markets. Locals dubbed the line the “Loping Gopher” because the uneven tracks caused the trains to jerk and sway. It looked to them similar to the local gopher tortoise's gate...and perhaps moved as slow. The rail line operated from 1898 until 1977.

Mile 2.4—Timber Rafts and Log Mining—On this long straight-a-way in the late 1800s, travelers may well have encountered numerous log rafts or any number of loose logs floating to sawmills downstream. It was during this time period when much of the region's virgin pines were harvested. For the river, and its prospects as an avenue of commerce, these logs were both an important commodity and serious liability. In an 1889 report to Congress, the Corps of Engineers wrote: “The improvement of this river is greatly hampered by the carelessness of the saw mill owners. Sawdust and slabs are allowed to find their way into the stream. Logs are run to the mills without being rafted. Many lodge on the rock ledges and form obstructions to navigation very difficult to remove. There seems to be no adequate protection afforded the United States against the misuse of the river.” Fast forward 130 years and those logs are pure gold for a small and hardy group of entrepreneurs who pay hefty licenses to the state of Florida to search for and raise these ancient logs from the river bottom. Log mining, or deadhead logging, is practiced on both the Suwannee and Withlacoochee rivers. Log miners first must find the old logs buried on the river bottom; they do so most often by scuba diving. Once identified, the arduous process of extracting the logs from the river bottom begins. When recovered, the highly prized pine and cypress logs bring top dollar—as much as 10 times the price of conventional lumber.

Mile 4.5--Gulf Sturgeon—It is highly likely you will see one of these prehistoric fish leap from the river. There's also a slim possibility that you will be hit by one of these mammoth jumpers. Strange as it may sound, sturgeon-to-boater collisions on the Suwannee are common enough that state wildlife officials post “Danger Jumping Sturgeon” signs at river access points. And, a state-sponsored media campaign encourages boaters to slow down, keep off the bow of boats and wear life jackets. In 2015, a five-year-old child riding in a motorboat was killed in a collision with a jumping sturgeon, and each year four or five injuries are reported. A 2011 survivor of a collision that left her with a broken jaw and orbital fracture told a local paper: “It's almost like they're out of a science fiction horror story. They're bone, all bone, rivets of bone.” Far from science fiction, they are actually ancient creatures, having evolved little in some 200 million years, but they do grow quite large. The Suwannee's gulf sturgeon average about five feet in length and weigh about 40 pounds, though some exceed 170 pounds. No one is certain why they leap from the river so often, though scientists speculate that it could be a means of communicating or a way to fill their swim bladders with air. A federally threatened species, much of their habitat along the Gulf Coast has been damaged by the construction of dams. Anadromous fish, they spend about half the year along the coast feeding on shrimp, crustaceans, worms and other bottom dwelling organisms with their tube-like mouth, but swim up Gulf Coast rivers to spawn. They have whiskers like a catfish and five rows of thorny plates called “scutes” running along the length of their bodies. Interestingly, during their six to eight month residency in Gulf Coast rivers, they eat very little.



Mile 6.5—Charles Spring—On river left, this 250-foot long spring run spills forth over a rock dam and around a stately cypress tree at the run's mouth. There's a boat ramp adjacent to the mouth, making this an easy place to get out and walk on terra firma to the spring pool...though the walk up the spring run is also very pleasant. Local histories suggest that the Spanish explorer Hernando de Soto and his army of men and animals crossed the Suwannee here in route to points north in 1539, though his exact route is the subject of much speculation. What is known is that the conquistador wandered through Florida with some 600 men and 500 animals, including horses, cows and pigs. After leaving Florida he weaved through modern-day Alabama, Georgia and Tennessee before heading west. Three years after arriving in Florida, DeSoto perished near the Mississippi River. The surviving members of the expedition—about 300—fled down the Mississippi River and eventually arrived at a Spanish colony in modern-day Mexico, ending some four years of wandering through the New World. Some 300 years later in 1824, Ruben Charles established a trading post and ferry across the Suwannee here, living in relative peace with the Native Americans. Local history recounts the following story: “Ruben and Rebecca Charles, still friends of the Indians, were allowed to live in peace under the legendary stipulation that they wear a red scarf to signify who they were; otherwise, the Indians would attack them. Although many communities in the area were attacked and burned by Indians in those early years, not once was the Charles' little community attacked.” Yet, Charles still reportedly met his demise at the hands of Native Americans around 1840. In 1852, Rebecca met a similar fate, though legend suggests that she was murdered by white settlers angered by her cozy relationship with the native people. Descendants of the Charles operated the ferry until about 1875, when it was abandoned. The Charles and some of their children are buried in a cemetery nearby the spring

Mile 7.9—Freshwater Mussels—On river left along this sandbar, you may find the shells of freshwater mussels. A favorite food of otters and raccoons, the opened shells are easy to spot and evidence of a recent feast by one of the predators. The live mussels are more difficult to find, but can usually be traced by the indented paths they leave in the sand as they use their muscular foot to move along the river bottom. At most, you'll see just the top half of the shells extending above the sand and silt. These creatures play an important role in river ecology, filtering bacteria, algae and organic matter from the water. The Suwannee River basin is home to 16 species of freshwater mussels, including the federally endangered Oval Pigtoe and federally threatened Suwannee moccasinshell.

Mile 9.8—Lafayette Blue Springs State Park—The scenic blue hole spring pumps up to 168 million gallons of 72-degree water into the Suwannee River each day. The main pool, some 20-feet deep, is separated from the spring run by a natural limestone bridge. At the bottom of the spring, the cave system extends some 12,000 feet underground and opens into caverns some 100 feet wide. It has been protected as a Florida State Park since 2005.

Mile 13.5—Perry Spring—On river right is this 2nd magnitude spring. The spring pool measures about 50 feet in diameter and is only deep at the vent (located beneath a wooden platform...don't dive from the platform; you'll hit bottom!) The 32-acre property with 1600 square-foot house and barn—along with the spring—is currently available at the asking price of \$849,000.

Mile 14.7—Hal Adams Bridge—The picturesque blue suspension bridge carrying FL 51 across the Suwannee dates to 1947 when it became the state of Florida's first suspension bridge. Built for \$500,000, it was named for an attorney and judge from nearby Mayo. Mayo serves as the seat of government for Lafayette County. The city was named in honor of Col. James Mayo, who served the Confederacy during the Civil War. Last year, in a publicity stunt staged by Kraft-Heinz, the company paid the city some \$25,000 to temporarily change its name to Miracle Whip, the brand name for Kraft's imitation mayonnaise. The festivities included a picnic featuring the condiment, an unveiling of the new name on the town water tank, the distribution of Miracle Whip, Florida t-shirts and hats and a social media campaign with the hashtag #nomoremayo.