

# Rivers run through it

Advocates of Georgia's rivers share their messages



DICK BRYANT



QUINT ROGERS

*Above: The Flint River flows 344 miles from the region just south of Atlanta to the southwestern corner of the state.*

*Left: Gordon Rogers displays a big shad bass he caught while fly-fishing on the Flint River at the Big Lazer Creek Wildlife Management Area.*

By Amber Lanier Nagle

Some remember being baptized in the cool waters of the Ohoopee River in Southeast Georgia. Others reminisce about casting their fishing lines into Southwest Georgia's Flint alongside a father or grandfather or falling into North Georgia's Nottely River from a rickety rope swing. In Georgia, our relationship with the 70,000 miles of rivers and streams winding through our state is somewhat of a love story.

Not only home to an abundance of trout, catfish, bass and bream, our rivers showcase lanky herons, bushy-headed kingfishers, dragonflies, alligators, beavers and a web of wildlife whose existence depends on the natural flowing waters.

We, too, rely upon the health and vitality of the rivers—a message Georgia's river advocates emphasize. Here are a few things they want everyone to know.

## We've made great strides, but ...

The Chattahoochee River downstream of metro Atlanta once resembled a cesspool—a byproduct of ancient, overloaded infrastructure that sometimes discharged sewage into the city's creeks, which then empty into the river. Today, the Chattahoochee is one of the state's many river-cleanup success stories.

"The Chattahoochee and other Georgia waterways

are much cleaner than a few decades ago, since the passage of the Clean Water Act in 1972 and a major lawsuit brought and settled by Chattahoochee Riverkeeper, but we still have a lot of work ahead of

us," says Gordon Rogers, a self-described "river nerd" who grew up near the Satilla River in Southeast Georgia. He's been the executive director of Flint Riverkeeper Inc. since 2009. "Today, we have an alarming 'flow' problem, and it isn't all attributed to drought conditions. It has more to do with intentional water withdrawal."

He notes that the Flint River, which stretches from the upper Piedmont region south of Atlanta to the wetlands of the Gulf Coastal plain in the southwestern corner of the state, has been dewatered by 50 percent in recent years.

"Even in very wet years, we are experiencing flows similar to former drought flows across the state," Rogers says.

But restoration efforts are underway. Metro Atlanta and Georgia's agriculture community have made significant investments in technologies designed to put water back into the rivers, and people finally are understanding that their actions can help keep rivers healthy.

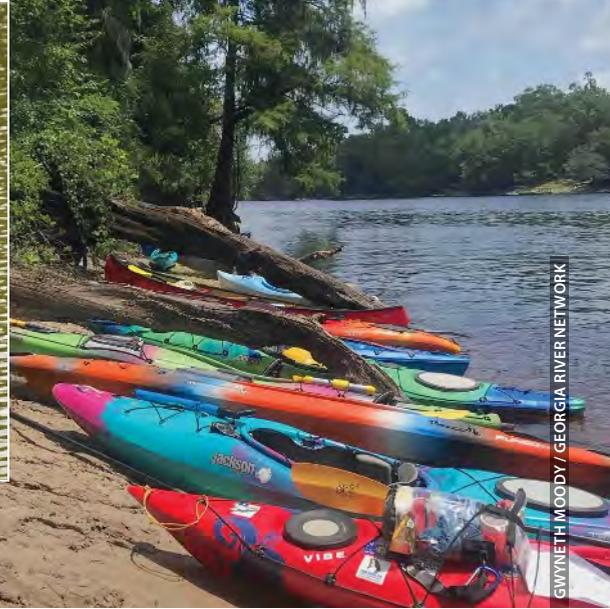
Tips include never pouring grease down drains and using minimal amounts of pesticides and herbicides per the instructions on the packages.

"And join a local riverkeeper group," he says.



JOE COOK

**Above:** Volunteers pull trash and debris from the Etowah River in North Georgia during a cleanup event. **Right:** River kayaks line the banks of the Withlacoochee River in south-central Georgia.



GWYNETH MOODY / GEORGIA RIVER NETWORK

## Everyone can get involved

Riverkeepers and watershed groups monitor, defend, protect and restore the state’s rivers, lakes and streams. Jesse Demonbreun-Chapman, the executive director and riverkeeper of the Coosa River Basin Initiative (Upper Coosa Riverkeeper), believes everyone has a vested interest in keeping rivers clean and flowing.

“Everyone can be a champion of the river,” Demonbreun-Chapman says. “Nearly everyone, regardless of age or ability, can participate in a community river cleanup.”

He mentions that the Georgia Environmental Protection Division’s Rivers Alive program hosts fall weekend cleanups throughout the state. More than 464,000 volunteers have plucked 111 million pounds of garbage from 32,000 miles of waterways since 1999.

But there are other ways to get involved as well.

In 2016, after folks became concerned that fracking (the process of using pressurized liquid to force open subterranean fissures to extract oil or gas) could possibly contaminate the water of Northwest Georgia, Demonbreun-Chapman worked with landowners, state lawmakers, the Southern Environmental Law Center and others to shape state regulations ensuring that private landowners have some say on how and where gas and oil can be extracted in the future. Gov. Nathan Deal signed the bill into law in May 2018.

“People began paying attention. They showed up to town hall meetings, listened and voiced their own opinions,” Demonbreun-Chapman says. “They wanted to make sure that the rivers, streams and their private well water would be safe if their neighbors decided to drill one day.”



*A family cools off in the Withlacoochee River during Fall Float.*

GWYNETH MOODY / GEORGIA RIVER NETWORK



*A snorkeler enjoys Fall Float in the Flint River.*

GWYNETH MOODY / GEORGIA RIVER NETWORK

He's an active member of the leadership team for the Georgia Water Coalition, a group of organizations, companies, faith-based groups and others who are committed to clean-water policy in Georgia. He notes that people can sign up to receive water legislative updates at [protectgeorgia.org/sign-up.html](http://protectgeorgia.org/sign-up.html).

"It is so important for everyone to let their voices be heard on matters that affect them, especially matters as important as protecting our water resources," he says. "Know your elected officials and let them know how you feel. Be part of the process."

## Explore Georgia's waters

"If you spend a day or two on the river, you'll fall in love," says Gwyneth Moody, who grew up paddling Northeast Georgia's Broad River with her family. Today, she's the director of water trails and outreach at the Georgia River Network, an Athens-based organization that helps people enjoy, connect with and advocate for economically vital and clean flowing rivers.

"Water trails, or blue ways, are like hiking trails in our rivers," Moody says. "We have 18 established water trails in Georgia and 18 developing water trails."

She says that her organization is working with stakeholders to develop water trails, including the Tugaloo River Water Trail near Toccoa.

"Its crystal-blue waters are beautiful," she says. "And it also

has a lot of Cherokee history associated with it."

All water trails are listed at [gawatertrails.org](http://gawatertrails.org), along with maps, lengths, access points, classifications and points of interest along the routes.

"The water trails draw people into the rivers to see spectacular sunrises and sunsets and hear the flap of a beaver's tail on the water," she says. "They experience the wonder of nature up close and personal."

Paddling a stretch of water has transformed people into engaged citizens who want to help with river protection efforts, and that's not all. Water trails boost tourism and an outdoor recreation industry that boasts significant economic benefits for Georgia communities.

"Recreating on rivers helps us realize that they are the lifeblood of our communities," Moody says. "When you paddle on a river and pass pumps withdrawing and returning [treated wastewater] for agricultural irrigation, industry and municipal drinking water, you see and better understand how rivers are utilized for so many aspects of our lives."

"Rivers are here for our enjoyment, but we need to ensure they are protected so they're here for future generations to enjoy as well." 🍷

*Amber Lanier Nagle is a freelance writer who lives in Adairsville.*

## For more information

### **Rivers Alive**, [riversalive.georgia.gov](http://riversalive.georgia.gov)

Get involved with a waterway cleanup event this fall.

### **Georgia River Network**, [garivers.org](http://garivers.org)

Connect with and advocate for economically vital and clean flowing rivers. Browse the established and developing water trails across Georgia.

### **Georgia Water Coalition**, [gawater.org](http://gawater.org)

Browse the annual Clean 13 and Dirty Dozen lists. Join other groups and clubs statewide that are committed to protecting and caring for Georgia's surface water and groundwater resources.

### **National Park Service**, [nps.gov/subjects/rivers/georgia.htm](http://nps.gov/subjects/rivers/georgia.htm)

Browse the listing of Georgia's rivers with locations and descriptions.

### **Georgia Adopt-A-Stream**, [adoptastream.georgia.gov](http://adoptastream.georgia.gov)

The site provides manuals, training and technical support so that individuals and communities can monitor and/or improve sections of streams, wetlands, lakes or estuaries.

*Paddlers find serenity on the Etowah River in Dawson County, downstream of the Dawson Forest and Kelly Bridge.*

