

Spring on the Satilla 2020 Day 2

Mile 1—Satilla Lodge Cabin—On river left here is the river cabin associated with Satilla Lodge. Satilla, by the way, is not a name that is held over from the Native American language. The French were the first to record a name for the river, bestowing it with the moniker Somme in 1562. Later the Spanish dubbed the river Saint Illa, honoring an officer in the Spanish army. Saint Illa was corrupted to Satilla and in 1892, it was officially named Satilla by U.S. authorities. Though the name didn't last for the river, St. Illa is still used in the area; it survives in St. Illa Baptist Church in Coffee County and in the St. Illa Crisis Center, a behavioral health facility in Waycross.

Mile 1.5—Riley Creek & Prothonotary Warbler—This tributary can be explored in high water. A short distance from its mouth, it forks. The right hand fork extends a short distance before narrowing and closing, but it is possible to venture up the left hand fork nearly a mile. These narrow off-channel creeks that flow through lowland forests/swamps provide opportunities to see one of the swamp's most celebrated song birds—the Prothonotary warbler. This bright yellow warbler with gray wings and a black bill forages for insects in the bottomland forests and can often be seen jumping from limb to limb in creekside trees. Like many songbirds, its populations have declined over the past 50 years, largely due to the loss of habitat. Particular about their nesting sites, they prefer large tracts of forest and need small holes in standing dead trees to brood their young...and holes in trees above deep water are preferred for they help reduce the threat of predation by raccoons. If you encounter one, consider yourself lucky. They are elusive and beautiful.

Mile 2.4—Bullhead Bluff—Along this bluff are many residences and boat docks. More than a century ago, this bluff was also a terminal for steamboats and railroads. In the 1910s, the Satilla River Steamboat Company provided regular service on this section of river, primarily hauling lumber and naval stores. During that era, an estimated 50,000 tons of freight was shipped annually on the river. Between 1890 and 1894, the Suwannee Canal Company undertook the foolhardy endeavor of trying to drain the Okefenokee Swamp to access the swamp's timber and convert the wild watery expanse to arable land. The later was an utter failure, but the company did cut considerable timber within the swamp, shipping some of it via railroad to this point along the Satilla River during the last years of the 19th century and the early 1900s. Bullhead Bluff has a long history of human occupation, and two cemeteries can be found in the land beyond the bluff: the Manning family cemetery and a Freedman's cemetery. Following the Civil War, slaves once belonging to Robert Stafford, a planter on Cumberland Island, formed a community here and found work loading steamboats at Bullhead Bluff.

Mile 2.7—Water Hemlock (*Cicuta maculata*)—On the north bank of the river here, you may see this tall leafy plant along the water's edge. If you are so inclined, DON'T EAT IT! It's a poisonous plant. In the spring and early summer, its many white, umbrella-like blooms are arranged like a firework burst reminiscent of Queen Anne's lace. As the summer turns to fall, the umbels sport grayish-brown fruits. To confirm identity, you can break off a stem. It will smell of anise. Often called the most deadly plant in America, it is highly toxic to domestic animals and humans. It attacks the nervous system, leading to trembling, violent convulsions, paralysis and death.

Mile 3.6—Bullhead Creek & Black-Crowned Night Heron—In low water, this creek is blocked by a large tree across its mouth, but once around the tree, the creek can be extensively explored upstream. It's a great place to spy black-crowned night herons that build small nests of sticks in tree limbs overhanging the creek. A small heron about two-feet in length, it sports a black cap and back, gray wings and a white breast. They tend to spend their days perched in tree limbs concealed amongst the foliage, but as their name suggests, they become more active at night, foraging for food along the river's edge. This behavior helps it avoid competition with day-feeding water birds like great blue herons and egrets. And, unlike great blue herons and egrets, black crowned herons are slower to flee when threatened...perhaps because they are less active during the day. The creek bears the common name of six fish species found in Georgia's waters: the snail, black, yellow, brown, flat and spotted bullhead are all members of the Ictaluridae, or catfish, family

Mile 4.2—Alligators—During scouting trips of this section of river, we encountered alligators near the mouth of this unnamed tributary. In fact, alligators seem to prefer basking near mouths of tributaries and backwater sloughs so keep your eyes peeled for them especially in these areas. Generally, they are very shy, sliding into the water and disappearing beneath the surface when disturbed. Yet despite their shyness, they are, in fact, the largest predator in the state. They can grow to lengths of up to 16 feet and weigh as much as 800 pounds. Over the past several decades, the Georgia Department of Natural Resources has recorded less than a dozen alligator attacks on humans and only one involved a fatality.

Mile 4.3—Unnamed Tributary—This unnamed tributary on river left is worthy of exploration.

Mile 5—To Woodbine (12 miles)—If you are inclined to more epic journeys than our short jaunt today, consider that it's 12 miles to Woodbine from this location and 35 miles to Cumberland Island. File that information away for another day, and consider this epic canoe journey that passed the mouth of the Satilla in 1875: Nathaniel Holmes Bishop paddled a canoe across the mouth of the Satilla in March of that year on what was a 2,500-mile journey from Quebec to the Gulf of Mexico, exploring virtually the entire Atlantic Coast of the country on a mostly solo journey. Upon reaching Cumberland Island, he ascended the St. Marys River and then—by way of boat and railroad—ran through the Okefenokee Swamp to the Suwannee and descended that river, finally finishing his journey at the Gulf of Mexico. This epic journey is recorded in the book, *Voyage of the Paper Canoe*, published in 1878. Throughout his journey, he claimed he was met with much hospitality, especially in the south. In a letter to the mayor of St. Marys, he wrote: "Since my little paper canoe entered southern waters upon her geographical errand—from the capes of the Delaware to your beautiful St. Marys—I have been deeply sensible of the value of Southern hospitality."