Penholoway Polka–Paddle Georgia 2024

June 20—Altamaha River

Distance: 22.7 miles Jaycee Landing (Mile 63.2) to Paradise Park Landing (Mile 41.5, plus 1 mile on Penholoway Creek)

Starting Elevation: 31 feet 31.667092, -81.845233 Ending Elevation: 20 feet 31.553960, -81.711440

Pit Stops: Mile 63.2—Jaycee Landing **Mile 41.4**—Paradise Park

Points of Interest:

Mile 62.8—J. Alvin Leaphart Sr. Bridge—A bridge has spanned the river here since 1931. In 1964, the original bridge was replaced and renamed the J. Alvin Leaphart Sr. Memorial Bridge in honor of a Jesup physician who served on the city council and as mayor. The current bridge was completed in 1994.

Mile 62.5—RYAM—On river right is the RYAM cellulose specialties plant. Behind the bulkhead fronting the river is part of the facility's wastewater treatment system. The plant converts the pines and hardwoods of the region's forests into cellulose used in TV, computer and cell phone screens, sponges, air and oil filters, diapers, run-flat automobile tires and even sausage casings.

Mile 61.5 RYAM Discharge—On river right is the first of two treated wastewater discharges operated by RYAM. Typically, this discharge releases about 2 million gallons daily.

Mile 61.3 –The Gulf Mist—At low water the rusted remains of The Gulf Mist, the last of the Altamaha's paddlewheelers, can be seen here. The McCann Lumber Company employed the sternwheeler, using it to haul lumber to and from its mill at Doctortown. It was abandoned and sunk in 1957, shortly after the sawmill closed.

Mile 61.1—Doctortown—The CSX railroad bridge marks the location of Doctortown, a cultural and economic center of the region for centuries. The Native American Alachua Path crossed the river here and in the late 1700s a Native American named Alleck lived on the bluff at river right. His presence gave rise to the name Doctortown because the Muskogee word Aleche translates to "doctor." Conflicts with Native Americans gave rise to the construction of Fort Defense at Doctortown in the 1790s and by the 1830s steamboats were stopping at the bluff. In 1857, the Savannah, Albany and Gulf Railroad trestle was completed, solidifying Doctortown's importance as a transportation hub.

Mile 60.7—RYAM Discharge—On river right, RYAM discharges about 53 million gallons of treated wastewater daily. When the facility opened in 1954, the hundreds of jobs and tax revenue it brought to the area were hailed as progress. Jesup leaders honored the plant's opening ceremonies by declaring the day a civic holiday and more than 1000 people celebrated with a barbecue feast. But, within months, the consequences of unchecked pollution became clear. By September 1954, the *Atlanta Constitution* reported of massive fish kills on the Altamaha in which dead fish lined the river's banks from the mill to Darien. During the 1960s, the state became more forceful in mandating cleanups and by 1966, the Jesup mill installed a primary wastewater treatment system. Secondary treatment was completed in the early 1970s, but still the pollution persisted. Shad fisherman still complained of a crude slime that coated their nets and made them useless. By 1976, Rayonier leadership touted its $250 million investment in environmental controls at its many facilities, but questioned whether the 1972 Clean Water Act could be realistically implemented. By 2000, however, non-profit citizen-based river protection groups began holding polluters and environmental regulators accountable. Pressure from Altamaha Riverkeeper (ARK) and others has led to more improvements in the RYAM discharge, but the quality of the effluent still remains below industry standards, according to ARK.

Mile 60.1—Dicks Swift/Morgan Lake—Here the river narrows through this cut off. Just downstream on river left is the old channel—an oxbow lake created by the cut off sometime in the 1900s that extends away from the river for more than a mile.

Mile 57.9—Training Dike—At the head of the island here is a series of wooden posts embedded in the river bottom. These are the remains of a navigational weir or training dike likely constructed in the early 1900s by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

Mile 57.5—Lake Bluff—On river left here is this oxbow slough that leads to this high sandy bluff. In November 1862, Confederate Gen. G.T. Beauregard put some 300 slaves to work obstructing the river near here to prevent Union forces operating on the coast from steaming up river and attacking the important railroad bridge at Doctortown. On the high ground at Lake Bluff overlooking the river, he placed a battery of cannons to further protect the bridge.

Mile 57.1—Cole Eddy—A narrow passage on river right leads to this calm backwater slough.

Mile 56.0—Big Pod Sesbania—On river right during the growing season (and at many other locations), you may encounter this conspicuous native plant (*Sesbania herbacea*). It grows in large, dense colonies to heights of up to nine feet, sporting leaves that are up to 12 inches long and composed of as many as 70 narrow leaflets. In the late summer, it produces large yellow flowers. The fruit is a 4-to-8-inch seed pod that can contain up to 40 seeds. Many species within the Sesbania genus are used as a substitute for hemp and have been used to produce paper, fishing nets and fishing line, leading to another common name: river hemp.

Mile 54.7—Hanner Island—On river left is Hanner Island. An island in name only now (it was once distinguished by a cut through to the north now a remnant oxbow known as Johnson Lake) this may be the Hannah's Island of raftsman's lore that held that the island was haunted by the ghost of a young woman named Hannah who was brutally raped and murdered by a gang of rafthands.

Mile 52.6—Little Water Oak Round—At the southern tip of this round, a "suck" known as Old River siphons off a portion of the Altamaha's flow into Penholoway Swamp, the vast river bottom swamp forest between here and Penholoway Creek. Protected as a state wildlife management area, this 10,000-acre tract is a maze of remnant oxbow lakes, islands, and narrow channels

Mile 51.0—Cut Off

Mile 47.7—Steamboat Cut Sandbar & Mussels—A sandbar appears here at low water and with it, on occasion, (as with all of the river's sandbars) freshwater mussel shells. Careful examination of the river bottom along the river's shallow banks or in shallow sloughs behind sandbars, will reveal "mussel tracks" in the silt. The tracks look as if someone drug a stick along the river bottom, leaving a small irregular line. Follow these lines and you can find the live mussels mostly buried in the silt. The Altamaha basin is home to 20 species of freshwater mussels. Among the more common are the Altamaha spike, easily identified by long, thin, black shell shaped like a lance; Altamaha pocketbook, with a thick yellow-to-brown, round shell that is occasionally streaked with dark bands; and the Altamaha slabshell, with heavy, black-to-brown, oval-shaped shells.

Mile 46.6—Steamboat Eddy—On river right is this narrow slough near the mouth of which is a small floathouse.

Mile 45.7—Double Yellow Bluff. On river left is this appropriately-named bluff.

Mile 43.5—Rag Point—During the Altamaha's rafting era the vegetation on river left here would likely have been decorated with pieces of fabric. Tradition held that when the current pushed the rafts to this point, first-time rafthands were to tie a piece of clothing or a strip of cloth to the trees here. Failure to make this sacrifice was considered bad luck.

Mile 41.5–Sturgeon Hole—The mouth of Penholoway Creek is known by this name. It may have served as a thermal refuge for Atlantic and shortnose sturgeon during their annual spawning runs. Once abundant along the Eastern Seaboard and prized for their meat and roe, these species live in coastal estuaries and the Atlantic Ocean, but travel up rivers in the late winter and early spring to spawn, seeking out rock cobble and gravel river bottoms near the fall line. Largely due to over-fishing and dams that prevent them from reaching traditional spawning grounds, populations of these species have declined steadily over the past century.

Mile 41.5—Paradise Park—Located 1 mile up Penholoway Creek, Paradise Park is a privately-owned landing and creekside community. Upon nearing the park, there are a number of floathouses, among the last hold outs of an Altamaha River sub-culture that was lost when Georgia enacted laws prohibiting non-motorized house boats on Georgia's navigable rivers in 1992. In response to the ban, some floathouse owners moved their floathouses to Penholoway Creek and took the state to court, arguing that since the structures were no longer on a navigable stream, they could remain. Georgia's Supreme Court agreed. Among those who migrated to Penholoway was one of Jesup's most famous native sons, Len Hauss. A fullback and all-American on Jesup High's 1959 state championship football team, the hometown hero went on to play center at the University of Georgia and then 14 years with the Washington Redskins where he was a five-time pro-bowler. He notably introduced himself during televised games this way: "I'm Len