

Sansavilla Salsa–Paddle Georgia 2024

June 21—Altamaha River

Distance: 16.4 miles Paradise Park (Mile 41.5, plus 1 mile on Penholoway Creek) to Altamaha Regional Park (ARP) (Mile 26.1)

Starting Elevation: 20 feet 31.553960, -81.711440 **Ending Elevation: 5 feet 31.427068, -81.606026**

Pit Stops: Mile 41.4—Paradise Park Mile 34.8—Williamsburg Landing Mile 30.4—Barrington County Park Mile 26.1—ARP

Points of Interest:

Mile 40.9—Old Hell Bight—This bend earned its name in the early days of boating on the Altamaha. Just downstream on river left is a slough known as Old Hell Lake. The moniker “hell” was used by early boatmen to distinguish dangerous locations.

Mile 37.9—Miller Lake—On river left is a slough that ascends 0.3 mile through open water before narrowing into a maze of cypress and tupelo forest. Accessible well upstream in high water this slough provides access to some scenic river swamp and some of the largest bald cypress and tupelo trees in the state. The largest of the bald cypresses on the state-owned property (part of the 20,000-plus-acre Townsend Wildlife Management Area) measure 45 feet in circumference and up to 15 feet in diameter at breast height. The knees are eight to 12 feet tall.

Mile 37.4—Dicks Island—On river right is an oxbow that in high water extends 0.7 mile upstream, reconnecting with the main channel opposite Miller Lake, creating this 40-acre island. In 2011, the Georgia Supreme Court ruled that the state of Georgia, not local residents, the Rozier family, who had paid property taxes on the island in McIntosh County since 1972, owned the island. Georgia law states that islands in navigable rivers that were not deeded to an individual by a crown grant (from the King of England prior to the Revolutionary War) or through a grant from the state, are considered property of the state. Today, Dicks Island—or if you prefer, Rozier Island—is part of the larger Townsend Wildlife Management Area.

Mile 36.9—Bryan’s Woodyard Round—An 1890 U.S. Army Corps of Engineers map notes this bend, the name of which may trace its origins back to Jonathan Bryan, one of early Georgia’s largest landholders. In 1760 he laid claim to 2,100 acres on the Altamaha River “just above Fort Barrington.” Originally from South Carolina, Bryan accompanied James Oglethorpe on his first visit to Yamacraw Bluff in 1733, and he would later use his political connections to land a post on the colonial government’s Executive Council which made important decisions about the distribution of public land. That post enabled him to acquire prized lands from Savannah to the Altamaha which he used to spread the rice plantation culture of his native South Carolina into Georgia—a culture that demanded slave labor and eventually brought an end to Colonial Georgia’s prohibition on slavery. Bryan also brought a notorious invasive plant to the colony. In the early 1770s, Bryan received from Benjamin Franklin seeds of the Chinese tallow tree. Bryan (and many others) dutifully planted the seeds and today, Chinese tallow is arguably one of the most damaging invasive tree species in the Southeast. Bryan County and a city street in Savannah are now named in his honor.

Mile 34.8—Williamsburg Landing—On river right is this boat ramp along Upper Sansavilla Bluff, where, based on archaeological records, European occupation dates to the early 1600s, some 130 years before the founding of the Georgia colony. The bluff which stretches a mile and a half downstream to Lower Sansavilla Bluff, is believed to have been the location of a Spanish mission—perhaps Santa Ysavela—between 1615 and 1650. The place name is believed to be a derivation of that original Spanish name and shards of majolica pottery found during an archaeological dig are believed to have been of Spanish origin dating from that period. In 1741, the Georgia colony established Fort Mount Venture on the bluff, at the same location where Mary Musgrove, the famed translator for Gen. James Oglethorpe, and her second husband, Jacob Matthews, operated a trading post. Following the Revolutionary War, Sansavilla Bluff became the site of one of the first settlements in Wayne County: Williamsburg, which was incorporated in 1792. Today, it is part of the 19,500-acre Sansavilla WMA that stretches to Altamaha Regional Park.

Mile 34.1—Navigational Dikes—In 1911, a Corps dredge boat pumped more than 8,000 cubic yards of sand here and as late as 1940, the Corps installed “pile dikes” here in an effort to narrow and deepen the channel. The rows of posts that are visible during low water are likely those driven in the summer of 1940.

Mile 33.4—Lower Sansavilla Bluff—Powerlines mark the lower extent of Sansavilla Bluff on river right.

Mile 31.8—Smith Lake & The Altamaha-ha—On river left here, this large slough ascends nearly a half-mile northward parallel to the river before running up against chains across the waterway holding no trespassing signs. The properties surrounding the lake are owned by the Fort Barrington Club, a private hunting club that controls nearly 1800 acres along the river. In 1981, two fisherman, Larry Gwin and Steve Wilson of Brunswick, told the *Weekly World News* that they saw the legendary river monster, the Altamaha-ha in Smith Lake. “All the sudden a large wave—like one made by a large boat—almost tipped our boat. I looked around and saw these two humps about five feet apart like what would be on a serpent. They were as thick around as a man’s body.” This was not the first, or last, reported sighting of what’s described as a snake-like monster some 15-20-feet long with slick, greenish-brown skin, a pushed in face and large eyes. Reports of such a creature in and around the Altamaha have surfaced periodically since the 1830s. In fact, drawings of artist Jacques le Moyne who accompanied French expeditions to the Southeast (and possibly the Altamaha River in 1564) depict similar monsters.

Mile 31.2—Fort Barrington—On river left is a floating dock and boat ramp that marks this site of this colonial fort. This is private property and has been since 1910 when a group of outdoor enthusiasts from the Atlanta area purchased the property and established the Fort Barrington Club, a private hunting preserve. The fort that gives the club its name was built in 1761 as a defense for the Georgia colony against the Spanish and allied Native Americans. The site was chosen because of its location along the Augustine Trail, a Native American path that ran from present day Savannah to St. Augustine. For more than a century after its founding, the site served as a major river crossing because it avoided the multiple braided channels of the Altamaha closer to the coast. During the Revolutionary War, the fort was alternately occupied by Patriot and British forces with the Patriots renaming it Fort Howe, in honor of their general in command of troops in Georgia. In 1808, the General Assembly passed a measure to establish a ferry across the river at the fort, and that ferry operated into the 20th century. The ferry would remain important until the first bridges were built across the river in the 1920s. At the onset of the Civil War, citizens from Darien recovered from Fort Barrington what newspaper accounts described as an “old Continental cannon” which had been exposed on the river bank after a severe flood in 1840. Wrote a correspondent to the *Savannah Morning News* in March 1861: “We are justly proud of our rusty, time-honored relic of Oglethorpe...It was brought to Darien on a raft of timber and is now planted on the wharf, our only defense, should the invader come.” In 1972, the property was placed on the National Register of Historic Places. At that time, according to the application, evidence of “sand breastworks and two bastions” were still visible. In 2008, the Fort Barrington Club permanently protected a large portion of the property from future development through a conservation easement.

Mile 30.4—Barrington County Park—This eight-acre McIntosh County Park features a boat ramp and dock located 0.2 mile up the slough on river left known as Harper Lake. Restrooms are available at this park currently under renovation.

Mile 29.2—Creel Lake—This narrow slough extends more than a mile into the river bottom forest on river right.

Mile 28.8—Brickyard Bluff—The low bluff on river right was given this name on 1890 Corps of Engineers survey maps.

Mile 27.9—Old Man’s Shot Bag—On 1890 U.S. Army Corps of Engineers survey maps the point on river right here is designated by this name. Today, a powerline spans the river here. Gamecock Lake, opposite Old Man’s Shot Bag, extends off river 0.3 mile. It is home to significant colonies of floating spatterdock and stately cypress and swamp tupelo trees.

Mile 26.7—Muscadines—On river right here, and at many other locations, look for this wild grape vine. The dark green, spade-like leaves, with deeply serrated margins, are not terribly conspicuous, but in the late summer and early fall, the sweet aroma of the ripening fruits give this plant away. Look for the round, purple grapes in clusters beneath the leaves. The naturalist William Bartram, who traveled through Georgia in the 1700s, noted that Native Americans dried the grapes as raisins over fires and stored them for the winter.

Mile 26.1—Altamaha Regional Park—On river right is our campsite for the final night of our journey. The park is leased