

# Darien Dab–Paddle Georgia 2024

June 22—Altamaha River

**Distance:** 13.8 miles Altamaha Regional Park (Mile 26.1) to Darien via Stud Horse Creek (0.7 mile), Big Buzzard Creek (2.6 miles), Rifle Cut (1.3 mile) and Darien River (1.8 mile)

**Starting Elevation: 5 feet 31.427068, -81.606026 Ending Elevation: 0 feet 31.367916, -81.437038**

**Pit Stops: Mile 26.1—Altamaha Regional Park and Darien**

## Points of Interest:

**Mile 26.0—Florida and Peninsular Railroad**—A railroad has spanned the river here since 1894 when the Florida and Peninsular Railway Company opened its 138-mile track running between Savannah and Jacksonville. In its heyday, the route carried the famed Orange Blossom Special, a luxury passenger train that ran from 1926 to until 1953, coinciding with land development and tourism booms in Florida. That train, in turn, inspired in 1938 one of bluegrass music’s most beloved tunes, Orange Blossom Special.

**Mile 25.1—Browns Lake**—On river right is the entrance to this oxbow slough that extends more than a half mile into the 8,555-acre Clayhole Swamp Wildlife Management Area (WMA). Upon entering Browns Lake, the slough almost immediately connects on river left to another off-channel slough known as Alligator Congress. Alligator Congress reconnects with the main channel about 0.8 mile downstream...about 0.3 mile shorter than the main channel.

**Mile 24.7—Pocket Lake**—On river left is this slough which extends off the main channel more than a half mile. The area immediately downstream from Altamaha Regional Park sits at the heart of the Altamaha’s American and hickory shad fishery. American and hickory are the state’s two anadromous shad species that spend most of their life in salt water but return to spawn in the winter and early spring to the coastal rivers in which they hatched. In 1950, the country’s commercial shad anglers, landed more than 11 million pounds, but in 2017, the catch had dwindled to about 350,000 pounds. Fisheries biologists blame dams, habitat degradation and overfishing for shad’s demise and have estimated that 40 percent of the fishes’ historic spawning habitat has been blocked by dams. Today in Georgia, commercial shad fishing is permitted only in the Altamaha and Savannah rivers.

**Mile 23.9—Swan Lake**—On river left is this lake, a narrow slough that extends more than a mile into the 19,000-acre Altamaha Wildlife Management Area (WMA). This WMA occupies the north bank of the river for the next 8 miles to Rifle Cut.

**Mile 23.2—Clark’s Bluff Landing**—A boat ramp and the remains of a wooden dock mark this location on river right. In 1814, William Cooke, who owned a residence and plantation here advertised it for lease in the *Savannah Advertiser* newspaper, no doubt, placing the property in the best possible light: “The plantation (has) upwards of 200 acres of land, opened, that can be made fit for cultivation with little additional labor; its soil is equal to any on the Altamaha River, its situation is pleasant...and a ten year’s experience, proves to be healthy. The situation is peculiarly favorable to raising of stock; and what may be a consideration to a planter, is, that the best Shad Fishery in the Southern States, can be established, at little expense, at the bluff.” Today, the property is part of the state-owned Clayhole Swamp Wildlife Management Area. Clayhole Creek, on river right, is worthy of exploration.

### Mile 21.2—Valentine Creek

**Mile 21.1—Stud Horse Creek**—This passage connects the mainstem of the Altamaha with Lewis Creek. Our route to Darien will take us up this creek 0.7 mile to its intersection with Big Buzzard Creek. Turn right on Big Buzzard Creek and follow 2.6 miles back to the Altamaha. Lewis Island will be on your left with stands of cypress believed to be more than 1300 years old.

**Mile 17.8—Big Buzzard Creek**—Upon reaching the mouth of this creek, bear left on the mainstem of the Altamaha.

**Mile 17.1—Cottonbox Island**—This island bears the name of some of the earliest vessels to ply the river. Cottonboxes were large wooden barges that were first poled down river and later pulled or pushed by steamboats. On one day in March 1823, four cottonboxes arrived at Darien, delivering nearly 1000 bales of cotton. One vessel carried 293 bales (about 77,000 pounds).

**Mile 16.0—Lewis Creek**—On river left, Lewis Creek leads upstream 8 miles into the Altamaha Wildlife Management Area connecting with Big Buzzard and other creeks. In 1765, John and William Bartram wandered near Lewis Creek, discovering *Franklinia alataamaha*, a flowering tree that sports showy white camellia-like blooms in the late summer and early fall when the large leaves turn yellow to scarlet. The father and son botanists were among the last to see the tree in the wild. The last definitive sighting was in 1803. No modern sightings have been recorded. The Bartrams collected seeds, propagated them, and saved the species. Today the rare tree grows domestically, including at the Atlanta History Center.

**Mile 15.4—Rifle Cut**—Located on river left, this narrow, straight channel will carry you one mile to the Darien River. This route eliminates 3 miles on the Altamaha, Butler and Darien rivers. The cut was dug sometime before 1819 and was intended not only to create a shortcut that would avoid a troublesome sandbar (Couper’s Bar) on the Butler River, but also divert the Altamaha’s flow to Darien. It was believed that the cut would divert enough of the river to eventually establish it as one of the river’s main channels. In 1827, river commissioners were soliciting slave owners in Savannah newspapers for “25 to 30 prime negro fellows not over 30 years of age” for clearing Rifle Cut of snags. That same year, Georgia’s state engineer, Hamilton Fulton, determined that the dense, deeply-rooted vegetation made it “hopeless” that the river’s current would deepen and widen the cut as originally hoped.

**Mile 15.0—Cambers Island**—Opposite the entry to Rifle Cut is this 1,100-acre island. Cambers was among the westernmost Altamaha islands to be cultivated for rice in the 1700s and 1800s. These plantations utilized the rise and fall of the tidal river and an elaborate system of canals and floodgates to inundate the rice fields. It was brutal work in a malaria-infested environment that depended upon slave labor. In the 1840s, the island was owned by Thomas Spalding, a leading antebellum planter and politician, who despite enslaving hundreds at his Sapelo Island plantation, held misgivings about the institution. Urged by a son to expand rice cultivation on Cambers, Spalding told him that he would not subject any slaves of his to the rigors of the island, saying, “If you cannot get men of their own choice to undertake the danger of sickness and malaria, I will have nothing to do with it.” Spalding died in 1851. His offspring and others did produce rice on the island. By 1859, virtually the entire island was under cultivation at the hands of some 200 enslaved persons. At the right water levels, you can boat the remnant rice canals into the island.

**1.8 Miles Downstream from Entrance to Rifle Cut—I-95 & Potosi Island**—Here, the Darien River passes beneath the country’s most used and longest north-south highway. On river left, the highway spans over Potosi Island which at the dawn of the Civil War in 1859 was home to a rice plantation of some 650 acres, worked by some 120 enslaved persons.

**2.4 Miles Downstream from Entrance to Rifle Cut—Cathead Creek**—During the timber rafting days of the late 1800s and early 1900s, the public booms in Darien stretched from here to Darien. After the journey down river, many raftsmen enjoyed the pleasures of the city to a fault. Local historian Bessie Smith said some were as “wild as the river itself.” Darien, being a port city surely attracted a wild crowd, but most raftsmen were, in fact, upland farmers who floated timber to supplement farm income. Most were anxious to get home. The *Darien Gazette* in 1902 described them as “about as orderly a set of laborers as we ever saw.”

**3.2 Mile from Entrance to Rifle Cut—Darien**—Don’t miss the small boat ramp tucked in behind the boardwalk at Skipper’s Fish Camp. The outgoing tide can take you quickly past it! Darien was established in 1736, just three years after the founding of Georgia, and was initially intended as an outpost to defend the Georgia colony against the Spanish to the south. The Civil War generated one of the town’s defining moments when on June 11, 1863, the city was destroyed by all-African American Union troops stationed at camps on St. Simons Island. A Union soldier described the scene: “Soon the men began to come in, in twos and threes and dozens... We had sofas, tables, pianos, chairs, mirrors, carpets, beds, bedstands... A private would come along with a slate, yardstick and a brace of chickens in one hand and in the other hand a rope with a cow attached.” The largesse was loaded on the ships and carried back to camp while the town was torched. Darien residents described the event differently: “Darien is now one plain of ashes and blackened chimneys. The accursed Yankee negro vandals came up yesterday...and laid the city in ruins.” Tabby ruins near the boat ramp attest to this history. Not surprisingly, the destruction of an undefended town was controversial, both in the South and the North. After the Civil War, Darien rebounded quickly to become the leading exporter of timber on the South Atlantic coast. The boom was short lived, however. In 1900, Darien’s population was 1,739 residents, but by 1930, the town claimed only 937 residents.