Ringgold Griddy–Paddle Georgia 2024

June 16—South Chickamauga Creek

Distance: 10 miles **Starting Elevation: 725 feet Ending Elevation: 670 feet**

Pit Stops: Mile 5.4—Private Property **Mile 10—**Graysville Mill

Points of Interest:

Mile 0--Ringgold & Tennessee River Basin—Our launch site is a place for beginnings, dreamers and adventurers. In the 20-year history of Paddle Georgia, no other launch site has offered the chance at grander adventures. Creeks (Lookout, South Chickamauga, Brasstown and others) and rivers (Little Tennessee, Hiawasssee, Nottely, and Toccoa) in Georgia all flow to the Tennessee which spills into the Ohio River which spills into the Mississippi River which spills into the Gulf of Mexico. Standing at this launch site, you could, if you were inclined, embark on a voyage of some 1300 miles. Among Georgia streams, only the headwaters of the Tennessee in far North Georgia offer the potential for such long-distance journeys. Meanwhile, the town in which we begin the journey is known for "beginnings" as well. Ringgold is known as the "Marriage Capitol of the South." Historically, Ringgold attracted couples because blood tests and marriage licenses could be obtained in an hour as opposed to days in other locales. Indeed, one business catering to the love-struck offered blood tests in front and wedding ceremonies in back. During World War II when the Army had a training camp in nearby Fort Oglethorpe, Catoosa County, with a population of 12,199, issued up to 4,800 marriage licenses annually. Word spread from there, and Ringgold soon became a destination for exchanging rings of gold. In 1966 when Dolly Parton wanted to surreptitiously tie the knot with Carl Dean, they traveled to town and were married in the First Baptist Church. George Jones and Tammy Wynette also wed in Ringgold.

Mile 0.6—Strainer—Look for current to push you into strainer (partially submerged tree) on river left. You can use the gravel bar on river right to drag your boat to the bottom side of the strainer and completely avoid the hazard.

Mile 1.7—House Shoal—Named (for this Paddle Georgia trip) after the house that overlooks this shoal. Imagine if the homeowner here asserted that you had no right to float down this stream and used the power of local law enforcement to prohibit passage. If this took place, the homeowner could undo millions in public water trail development investments and effectively shut down a thriving small business, Kayak Ringgold, that provides boat rentals on South Chickamauga Creek. Some Georgia legislators believe this is OK; Georgia Rivers does not. We're working with a coalition of groups including Georgia Canoeing Association and Tennessee Valley Canoe Club, to convince legislators that recreational use of the state's streams is critical to Georgia's record-setting tourism industry and should be protected. Furthermore, Georgia's common law history allows its citizens (and visitors) to float down any stream that is capable of supporting passage by recreational watercraft regardless of whether a stream meets the state's inherently vague definition of "navigability." Learn more at: https://garivers.org/protect-our-freedom-to-float-georgia-rivers/

Mile 1.9—Bluff—On creek right is a soaring bluff with cave-like recesses. These bluffs are indicative of the Ridge and Valley region of Northwest Georgia, a geological zone characterized by long north-northeasterly trending ridges separated by fertile valleys. This geology is the result of alternating layers of hard and soft sedimentary rock that were folded and faulted during the rise of the Appalachian Mountains. The long ridges consist primarily of resistant sandstone and chert while the valleys sit on beds of erodible shale and limestone. Just beyond this high bluff to the northwest is the MidSouth Aggregates Quarry, which produces crushed limestone. In agriculture, limestone is used to regulate soil ph; in construction, it's an ingredient cement and concrete; and in pharmaceuticals, it's used in antacids like TUMS. But, in its natural state, its primary purpose is aesthetics…and it does it well.

Mile 2.3—Bluff Shoal—Small shoal. Follow directions of safety boaters.

Mile 2.6—Bluffs & Cedars—The high bluffs on creek left host a number of eastern red cedar trees that thrive in shallow calcareous soils. Where there's limestone, there's usually cedars. And where there are cedars, there are often cedar waxwings. The beautifully-plumaged bird with a noble brown crest and yellow-tipped tail feathers has an appetite for cedar berries.

Mile 2.7—Zig Zag Shoal—Prepare to change directions as you navigate this small shoal. Follow directions of safety boaters.

Mile 3.4—Island Shoal—Stay to the right of the island on creek left and chart a course to the shoal at the center of the creek.

Mile 4—Diagonal Shoal—This shallow stretch features a series three, long, low ledges that stretch diagonally across the creek from the west to the east bank. Stay left until you reach the end of the first ledge and then find the best chute to descend through the ledges…prepare to get stuck. Follow directions of safety boaters.

Mile 4.4—Sink Ledge—Short ledge. Follow directions of safety boaters. Just beyond this ledge on creek left, you'll hear the rush of water as if over a large shoal. Careful inspection of the rocky bluff on that side of the creek will reveal a sink through which a portion of South Chickamauga's flow descends underground. About two miles downstream, the flow returns to the creek, gushing from fissures and clefts in the karst limestone (marked Sink Resurgence on your map). The geology of the area gives rise to many caves, sinks and unpredictable underground flow patterns. Here, the creek, flows underground for a quarter mile through what's known as Lost Creek Cave.

Mile 4.6—Water Willow Ledge—Short ledge. Follow directions of safety boaters.

Mile 5.2—Rock Garden—Pick your way through a jumble of boulders here. Mid-stream is best route.

Mile 5.3—Willow Weave—Here a shallow, impassable ledge on creek right requires you weave through islands of water willow in the middle of the channel. Avoid far left as the current pushes you into possible strainers. Water willow, an aquatic plant, grows in large colonies in shallow riffles throughout South Chickamauga Creek. Its slender leaves resemble those of the willow tree. It sports white/purple blooms during the summer. On creek right here is Catoosa County's Elsie Holmes Nature Park. Created in 1997 with the donation of land by Ben Holmes in memory of his wife Elsie, the 66-acre park features more than two miles of hiking trails.

Mile 5.5—Big Ledge—The largest of South Chickamauga Creek's shoals, this is a single ledge that drops abruptly about two feet. The only course through it at normal-to-low water levels is a narrow chute to the right of a large boulder at mid-stream. Follow the directions of safety boaters. The cage-like structure on the bluff overlooking this ledge was put in place in 2009 to protect a colony of federally-endangered gray bats that live in what's known as Chickamauga Cave.

Mile 6.5—Powerlines

Mile 7.7—Western and Atlantic Railroad—A railroad has passed over the creek here since the mid 1840s when this road was built between Chattanooga and what would grow into Atlanta. The road passes over the creek again 1.3 miles downstream.

Mile 9.0—Graysville Spring—On creek right just above the railroad bridge is the mouth of this spring run which issues clear, cold water into the creek. The spring, located on private land, was historically a gathering place for the Graysville community.

Mile 9.6—Graysville Boat Ramp—On creek right is a public access for the South Chickamauga Creek Water Trail, but we will continue to the dam to end the day with a short portage over the dam. Follow the directions of safety boaters and land your boat on the small island at midstream. From there, walk down a rugged, but passable, path to the bottom of the dam to retrieve your boat (which will be slid down a chute over the dam). Then paddle or walk your boat to the shore below the mill. In the late 1840s, John D. Gray purchased several hundred acres of land here. Water from the creek serviced the steam locomotives on the railroad and Graysville soon became a stop. Meanwhile, Gray's dam on the creek became the cornerstone of his Graysville Mining and Manufacturing Company which mined and processed lime, built barrels and furniture, distilled spirits, and ground wheat and corn. During the Civil War, he transitioned to manufacturing weapons for the Confederacy and later had his Graysville operations destroyed by the Union Army. After the war, he rebuilt Graysville, including the mill building that still stands. Gray was a leading railroad builder during the antebellum period and is responsible for most of the Western and Atlantic Railroad between Dalton and Chattanooga, including the tunnel through Chattoogata Mountain, completed in 1850 and now commonly known as Tunnel Hill. The quarter-mile-long tunnel was the first major railroad tunnel constructed in the South. The W & A parallels and crosses South Chickamauga Creek often on the way to Chattanooga so we'll see much of Mr. Gray's handiwork over the remainder of our journey.