Chattanooga Cha Cha–Paddle Georgia 2025

June 18—South Chickamauga Creek & Tennessee River

Distance: 7 miles **Starting Elevation: 645 feet** **Ending Elevation: 640 feet**

Pit Stops: **Mile 2.2—**Riverpoint Park **Mile 6—**Coolidge Park

Points of Interest:

Mile 0—Sterchi Farm & Snail Darters—Our launch site sits on a 25-acre parcel of land that was once a dairy farm, complete with historic rock/rubble silo. As we stroke out the last two miles of South Chickamauga Creek it is worth noting the creek's role in one of the modern environmental movement's most divisive sagas. Shortly after President Richard Nixon signed the Endangered Species Act (ESA) in 1973, the strength of the law was put to the test when citizens protesting the construction of the Tennessee Valley Authority's (TVA) Tellico Dam on the Little Tennessee River learned that a fish believed to be rare inhabited shoals immediately upstream of the dam. A University of Tennessee biology professor argued that the river was the only known habitat for *Percina tanasi*, the snail darter, a tiny member of the perch family that fed exclusively on snails. A UT law student and faculty members subsequently sued TVA to stop construction (the dam was mostly completed in 1974) citing the newly-minted ESA. The case went all the way to the Supreme Court which ruled that the dam should be halted to protect the snail darter. The ruling enraged legislators. Sen. Howard Baker of Tennessee called the snail darter "an awful beast" and said on the Senate floor: "Although other residences have been found in which he can survive serenely, the snail darter stubbornly insists on keeping this particular stretch of the Little Tennessee River as his principal domicile." Under Sen. Howard's urging, in 1979 Congress passed a bill that exempted the Tellico Dam from the Endangered Species Act. President Carter signed the bill into law and Tellico Dam was completed in 1979. Before the closing of the gates at Tellico, snail darters from the Little Tennessee were relocated to other locales, and in the interim additional populations of the fish were found in other streams, including South Chickamauga Creek. For proponents of the ESA, the snail darter's saga spurred years of conservation efforts that led to the successful protection of the fish. For critics of the ESA, the name "snail darter" is still spoken in derisive tones—held out as an example of government overreach and intrusion. In 2022, the snail darter was removed from the federal protected species list and in 2025 genetic testing indicated that the controversial fish may be a subspecies of the more common stargazing darter *Percina uranidea.* Since 1973, 21 species protected under the act have been removed from protection because of new scientific information, including genetic analysis. The ESA protects more than 1,600 animals and plants. According to the Department of Interior, 99 percent of those listed have been protected from extinction.

Mile 0.8—Southern Railroad—Here the Southern Railway (now a Norfolk Southern line) passes over the creek. Beginning in 1880, this rail line carried the famed "Chattanooga Choo Choo" on its run from Cincinnati, Ohio. The railroad was financed by the City of Cincinnati beginning in the 1870s and remained owned by the city until last year, when Norfolk Southern purchased the 337-mile line for $1.6 billion. The 1941 Glenn Miller song, "Chattanooga Choo Choo," made the line a household name. When Chattanooga's train terminal faced demolition in the early 1970s, the Choo Choo's popularity inspired investors to preserve the station and transform it into a hotel and entertainment complex that now is a cornerstone of Chattanooga's robust tourism economy.

Mile 1.4—W.R Grace & Co. Stormwater—On creek left is the stormwater discharge from this chemical company. The federal Clean Water Act (CWA) requires that stormwater from municipal storm sewer systems, construction sites and industrial facilities be collected and/or treated to prevent pollutants from washing into surface waters. Since its passage in 1972, the CWA has led to the cleanup of pollution emanating from sewer treatment plants and industrial facilities, but preventing stormwater pollution—that which washes off the land after rain events—remains a conundrum, especially in urban areas where concrete and asphalt prevents rain from soaking into the ground. You'll see other stormwater discharges as you make your way into Chattanooga.

Mile 1.7—South Chickamauga Creek Greenway Trail Bridge

Mile 1.9—Nouryon Chemistry Discharge—On creek left is a "point-source" discharge from this chemical manufacturing company for "non-contact cooling water." The National Pollution Discharge Elimination System (NPDES) permit, administered by the State of Tennessee under the federal Clean Water Act, requires that the company monitor and report the volume and chemical makeup of the discharge and further mandates that the discharge not produce "visible floating solids, scum, foam, oily slick, or the formation of slimes, bottom deposits or sludge banks of such size or character that may be detrimental to fish and aquatic life."

Mile 2.1—Amnicola Highway—The highway carried by this bridge sports a name that seems distinctly Native American. In fact, it is Latin, meaning "dwelling by the river." When Thomas Crutchfield, Sr. arrived in the Chattanooga area in the 1830s, he settled on nearly three miles of riverfront from South Chickamauga Creek to Citico Creek, establishing a brick kiln and a home that the family called "Amnicola" where he enslaved dozens of people at his brick-making operation and a downtown hotel.

Mile 2.2—Tennessee Riverwalk Bridge & Riverpoint Park—A dock and pathway beneath this bridge leads to this park with restroom facilities. Archaeological evidence suggests that indigenous people occupied this spot at the mouth of South Chickamauga Creek from 8000 B.C. until their removal in 1838. A Woodland period mound, located near the park and dating from 350 to 900 AD, remains as testament to this occupation. It is the sole remaining mound of several that were once found here, but were destroyed during the construction of a textile mill in the early 1970s. It's considered the oldest manmade structure in Chattanooga.

Mile 2.5—Tennessee River—From this point onward our journey will be upon this big river. How big? Here's some perspective: Georgia's largest river is the Altamaha. Big in its own right, it is the third largest river on the Atlantic seaboard, draining nearly a quarter of Georgia—some 14,000 square miles. The Tennessee collects water from a land mass spanning across seven states (Tennessee, Georgia, Alabama, North Carolina, Virginia, Mississippi and Kentucky)—40,890 square miles—three times the size of the Altamaha basin. From where the French Broad and Holston rivers join to form it in Knoxville, the Tennessee supports commercial barge traffic 651 miles to its confluence with the Ohio River in Paducah, Kentucky. By comparison, no river in Georgia is large enough to support modern-day commercial navigation. As such, be mindful that you may encounter tows consisting of multiple 195-foot-long, 35-foot wide barges being moved upstream and downstream by boats known as "pushers." When moving downstream, keep out of the navigational channel by staying close to shore--to the left of red buoys or to the right of green buoys.

Mile 4—Parker Towing Dock—On river left is the hulking dock and crane of this company that provides barge, truck and rail transport for goods ranging from steel coils and beams to fertilizer and sand.

Mile 4.2—Chattanooga Golf & Country Club—On river right sitting high on a bluff and surrounded by rolling greens and fairways is the clubhouse for this golf course and country club that was established in 1896, the oldest course at its original site in Tennessee. During the 1800s, it was home to the Beck family which operated a sawmill (reportedly near hole 17); a quarry (where the clubhouse now sits); and a river ferry (reportedly near the tee for hole 7). Stone from the quarry was used in construction of the Walnut Street Bridge immediately downstream of Maclellan Island. At the outbreak of the Civil War, Joshua Beck was an ardent Unionist, so much so that he named two of his sons after Union generals Sherman and Grant.

Mile 5.5—Chattanooga Water Supply—On river left is the intake for Tennessee American Water, the company that provides some 40 million gallons of drinking water daily to Chattanooga and surrounding communities.

Mile 6—Maclellan Island—Here the river splits around this island with soaring bluffs to the left atop which sits the Hunter Museum of Art. The 18-acre island known by the name of the man who donated it to the Audubon Society in 1954 is a thickly wooded wildlife refuge, but during the 1800s and most of the 1900s, locals raised crops and cows on it. In 1867, legend reports that one of the island's farmers escaped death in high water only by holding on to the horns of his cow as it swam him to shore. Pink ribbons tied to wooden shoots along the bank are willow, elderberry and other plants that are part of a bank restoration project.

Mile 6.6—Walnut Street Bridge—Built in 1890, this bridge was a main artery across the river until the late 1970s when it was replaced. It sat unused for nearly a decade until citizens raised more than $10 million to restore it and convert it into a pedestrian bridge. It is currently closed for renovations. Those wanting to walk to the south shore should use the Market St. Bridge.