

Coastal Plain Conga

June 28

Distance: 17 miles

Starting Elevation/Coordinates: 230 ft./N32 41.315 W83 36.602

Ending Elevation/Coordinates: 220 ft./N32 32.538 W83 32.235

Obstacles/Rapids: None

Restroom Facilities: **Mile 0** Hwy 96 Knowles Landing
Mile 8.5 Westlake Site
Mile 17 James Dykes Park

Points of Interest:

Mile 1.5—Blackwater & Strainers—In this bend you'll find the outlet of a blackwater creek draining swamps to the west, and a little further downstream, you'll find the channel narrowing and you may need to maneuver through some strainers. As we move further south, blackwater tributaries will become more abundant. Blackwater streams originate in swamps and the tannic acid from the trees and their leaves stain the water. This also causes the water to be more acidic—a state that complicates life for fish and anglers in South Georgia. When airborne mercury falls to these blackwater creeks, the high acid levels convert it to methyl mercury—a toxin that readily works its way into the blackwater food chain, making fish caught from these streams unhealthy to eat.

Mile 4-17—Oak Woods & Ocmulgee Wildlife Management Area—For much of the remainder of today's paddle, Oak Woods WMA will flank you on river right while the Ocmulgee WMA holds fast on river left. The Oak Woods and Ocmulgee Wildlife Management areas encompass some 54,000 acres in Houston, Twiggs and Bleckley Counties and appear to have been historic hunting lands since pioneer settlement and before. Oak Woods was once partially farmed in the early 1900s until the 1940s when the pulp/paper company, Georgia Kraft, took over its management. In the 1970s Georgia Kraft sold Oak Woods to Weyerhaeuser Timber Company, who agreed to allow the Georgia Department of Natural Resources to manage the land for public hunting and fishing. Weyerhaeuser sold portions of these Wildlife Management Areas in 2004 to multiple buyers, some of whom are developers with designs for turning portions of Oak Woods into large residential developments. For the time being, most of the property remains leased to DNR, but Weyerhaeuser's Oak Woods sale created a firestorm of controversy during the 2006 gubernatorial election. Prior to Weyerhaeuser's sale to the developers, the state, with assistance from The Nature Conservancy, could have purchased the property, permanently preserving it in its natural state, but Gov. Sonny Perdue passed on the purchase. It was later revealed that Gov. Perdue, who lives in nearby Bonaire, owned property adjacent to the Oak Woods tract.

Today, the future of Oak Woods remains in question. During the 2007 legislative session, Gov. Perdue proposed and the legislature approved \$42.3 million in funding for land conservation in the 2008 budget. Some of these funds could be used to save Oak Woods, but the asking price for the property in question is now at least \$31 million. In 2004, the state could have purchased the property for \$26 million.

This is not the first, nor will it be the last, sale of large forested land tracts in Georgia. The largest landowners in the state are timber companies like Weyerhaeuser. As development pressures push land values, timber companies are finding their large tracts more lucrative as development property rather than timber land.

Mile 6.5—Black Bears and a Beautiful Bend—If you were a black bear in Oak Woods WMA (and thought like a human), this is where you would hang out. This spot on the river provides panoramic views upstream and downstream from a nice sandbar on the outside edge of this hairpin bend. This is one of three locations in Georgia where you can see a bear in its natural habitat for there are few places in Georgia wild enough to sustain bear populations. The other two sites are the Chattahoochee National Forest in the mountains and Okefenokee Swamp. Scientists estimate the Middle Georgia black bear population at approximately 66 individuals or one bear for every 1.2 square miles.

Mile 9.5—Cypress Trees & Knees—“If I were a tree, I'd grow all gnarly. My roots would be knobby and limbs all snarly. I'd have moss on my back and squirrels on my knees. I'd be old and wise, if I were a tree.”—Walkin' Jim Stolz from his CD *Kid for the Wild*. When you come upon this impressive grove of knees and trees, you'll know you've officially entered the moss-draped land of the cypress. A deciduous tree, the cypress is unique among conifers in that its leaves turn orangish-brown before being shed in the fall. The knees so commonly associated with cypress trees are part of the root structure, but their function is unknown. One popular view is that the knees provide oxygen to the roots that grow in the low dissolved oxygen waters typical of a swamp, but there is little evidence to support this theory. In fact, swamp-dwelling specimens whose knees are removed continue to thrive. Another possibility is that the knees provide structural support in the soft soils of flood-prone areas.

The trees themselves have been the center of some controversy as of late. Environmental organizations, including members of the Waterkeeper Alliance, have in recent months begun a campaign to stop the sale of cypress mulch at large home improvement stores. The demand for landscaping mulch has increased dramatically in recent years and while cypress mulch was once created from “waste wood” today whole cypress trees are being harvested and turned into mulch for home landscaping, decimating the swamps of the Southeast. The “Why Kill a Tree to Grow a Flower” campaign hopes to end this destruction.

Mile 14—Big Grocery Creek—The Oak Woods WMA contains the headwaters of Big Grocery Creek. This Creek is almost pristine, bordered by a wide swath of bottomland hardwood forest (one of the largest patches of bottomland hardwoods remaining in Houston County). Big Grocery Creek lies in a unique and rare clay soil type and contains the federally endangered Relict Trillium and Lanceleaf Trillium flowers. The creek also contains unique and fragile freshwater mussels and crayfish. If the owners of the Oak Woods tract follow through with their original development plans, the creek will also be the site of a new wastewater treatment facility to serve the residential development.

Mile 14.5—Gulf Coast Spiny Softshell Turtle—The rock islands here might be a hang out for turtles including the softshell. The Hare raced a tortoise for good reason—had he raced the soft-shell turtle the feel of the race might have been very different. The soft-shelled turtle is exceptionally fast on land and in water. If you happen upon one on the river bank, you'll see it for only a split second as it dashes for cover in the river. The shell is soft and leathery and bends freely at the sides, and is completely devoid of scales or scutes. It has an exceptionally long neck, and one of its frequent habits is to bury itself in mud or sand in shallow water with only its eyes and snout exposed. With its neck extended, it can reach the surface of the water for a breath. Some have referred to these flat creatures as “animated pancakes.”

Mile 16—Fish Trap—Look for a fish trap at this site extending from the east bank of the river. There is potentially another trap to be viewed just before reaching James Dykes Park. Traps were built by Native Americans as well as early settlers. Most are in the shape of a V and were used to trap fish in baskets or wooden boxes. Bill Frazier, a historian from Decatur, has documented more than 150 fish trap locations in Georgia, ranging from a cypress-slat floored and walled trap on the Savannah to the rock Vs of the Etowah. Fish traps were an important part of early Georgia history, but in the late 1800s laws were enacted that prohibited the use of these traps. These laws were not widely enforced until the 1930s when law enforcement made concentrated efforts to destroy them to prevent overfishing.

