

Hawkinsville Hustle

June 29

Distance: 14 miles

Starting Elevation/Coordinates: 220 ft./N32 24.884 W83 28.964

Ending Elevation/Coordinates: 200 ft./N32 16.462 W83 27.901

Obstacles/Rapids: None

Restroom Facilities: **Mile 0** James Dykes Park
Mile 8.5 Private Boat Landing
Mile 14 Hawkinsville Boat Landing

Points of Interest:

Mile 1—Fish Trap—Reportedly, just upstream from Alligator Creek, there's a fish trap. Keep your eyes peeled for an odd linear pile of rocks jutting out from the river bank.

Mile 1.5—Alligator Creek—With any luck, by now, you have seen an alligator. On a scouting trip during a warm spell in December, we spotted an alligator basking on a sandbar just downstream of Alligator Creek. During the middle of the summer, you should expect to see more than one. They are most active during the warmest months.

We'll be paddling through their habitat during the nesting season (late June/early July) during which time the females build nests out of marsh grass and other vegetation and lay between 20 and 60 eggs. The mother then defends the nest against predators throughout the 65-day incubation period. Thus, should you happen upon something that looks like a nest, do not disturb it. You don't want to be caught on the wrong end of an angry mama gator.

These additional words of warning will help you avoid unpleasant alligator encounters: 1. Keep your distance—at least 60 feet from an adult alligator. They are extremely powerful and can move with a startling burst of speed on land over short distances. 2. Do not attempt to capture baby alligators. Mama may be watching you and decide to take action to protect her baby. 3. Keep children away from alligators. When they are hungry, alligators act on their hunting instinct. 4. Don't swim in areas that are known alligator habitats. Always be careful around water. Splashing can attract alligators that think a prey animal is injured...and last but not least, 5. Don't feed alligators...because it's just a stupid idea.

That said, the likelihood of an unpleasant encounter with an alligator is unlikely. From 1980-2001, there were only eight reported cases of alligator attacks on humans in Georgia and none of these resulted in fatalities. Six of these incidents happened as a result of the human stepping on or otherwise contacting a submerged alligator. The remaining two incidents were a result of the alligator mistaking the human for prey. From 2001-2007 there were 7,000 incidents...just kidding!

In defense of the alligator, this prehistoric reptile is one of our keystone species. They help maintain the population balance of certain prey species and they help shape and modify habitats. During times of severe drought, alligators are known to dig holes (gator holes) to concentrate water. This helps the alligator survive, and helps many other species of plants and animals in the area.

Mile 8—Oxbow & Cypress Stump—Here, you'll see more evidence of the ever-changing nature of the Ocmulgee. In mid-stream is an enormous cypress stump; on river left is the former river channel. Over time, the Ocmulgee cut off this oxbow, carving a straighter path to the sea. Standing within the new path was terra firma and this old cypress, and now all that remains of the former land mass separating what once was a long loop of the river, is this ancient cypress. Give it a nod as you pass by. It has withstood the test of time.

Mile 9—Timber Raftmen—This long, gentle straightaway must have been a welcome sight to the men who floated timber rafts down the Ocmulgee and Altamaha to Darien during the 1800s. These early river rats were farmers who, after harvesting field crops in the fall, selected and felled their tallest longleaf pines. Several months later, the cured timbers were ready for "squaring up" with a broad ax. When the rivers rose in winter and spring, men gathered the timbers into rafts as long as basketball courts and weighing in at about 360,000 pounds. The men then used 50-foot-long oars to maneuver these barges down river. The long journey to Darien could take several weeks. Upon the journey's end, the river rats would then walk back to their middle Georgia homes. Following custom on the return trip, the pilot would order the novice rafter to carry a heavy wooden maul used in building the raft. On the third day of the walk, to the young man's chagrin, the pilot would then instruct him to discard the cumbersome maul because he could easily make a new one back home. Lumber City, further downstream on the Ocmulgee, is so named because of this timbering tradition.

Mile 10—Swamps & Beavers—On river right here is a high bluff, on river left is a vast swamp. The swamp is worth checking out. If you walk up the small tributary spilling into the river, through a maze of cypress knees, you'll ultimately come to a beaver dam that appears to be holding back the entire swamp. Though considered a nuisance by many, beavers, like alligators, are another keystone species. Without the beaver, water quality in our rivers and streams would be greatly diminished. In fact, many believe that declining water quality can be directly correlated with a decline in beaver populations. Though the beaver has made a comeback since the early 1900s when it was nearly extirpated from North America due to trapping and draining of lands for agriculture, estimates of the current population are still as low as five percent of those present prior to European settlement.

Those beavers that do remain reliably and economically maintain wetlands that can sponge up and slow floodwaters, prevent erosion, raise the water table and filter out pollutants. While doing all this, the beaver creates habitat essential for the survival of many species of plants and animals. In fact, almost half of the endangered and threatened species in North America rely upon wetlands. It is no wonder then that Native Americans referred to the beaver as the "sacred center" of the land and that the Canadians adopted the rodent as their national animal.

Mile 11—High Bluff—After miles of paddling through lowlands, this high bluff topped by homes is a welcomed change of scenery. It signals a southward bend of the river and the final homestretch into Hawkinsville

Mile 12.5—Hollingsworth & Vose Discharge—Among the uglier wastewater discharges you're likely to come upon on Georgia rivers. This effluent is from Hollingsworth & Vose, a manufacturing facility that makes "fiber nonwovens" for radar cloaking, thermal insulation, sporting goods and other products. The effluent here is often milky white as a result of the latex-based system used to make the company's paper products. Altamaha Riverkeeper James Holland has filed several complaints with EPD about this pipe, but EPD and the company claim the effluent is within the limits of its discharge permit.

Mile 13.5—US 341 & Hawkinsville—Hawkinsville is best known as the Harness Racing Capitol of Georgia. Each winter since the 1920s, harness racing teams from the north and midwest have worked their horses at the city's track where the right soil makes the town prime training grounds. The city is named in honor of Benjamin Hawkins, a Revolutionary War hero who became the federal Indian Agent for Southeast and lived in nearby Crawford County. At one time, Hawkinsville was in the running to become the state capital. As the story is told, the city came up one vote shy, and disgruntled residents claimed that the town's loss was due to one man going fishing when he should have been voting. Could it be that the lure of a catfish on the Ocmulgee altered the course of Georgia history? Today, the people of Hawkinsville know about southern hospitality. There are rumors that 70 pounds of boiled peanuts will be awaiting us at the boat ramp.

Mile 14—Hawkinsville WWTP—Just upstream from the boat ramp is one of Hawkinsville's two wastewater treatment plants—a fitting send off, for no matter where you swim or play, you are always downstream from someone else's waste...and someone is always downstream from yours.

