

Mambo to Macon

June 25

Distance: 14 miles

Starting Elevation/Coordinates: 320 ft/N32 59.625 W83 43.505

Ending Elevation/Coordinates: 280 ft/N32 50.743 W83 37.611

Obstacles/Rapids: There are numerous small shoals throughout this section of river, but they are easily navigated and do not present major obstacles or hazards.

Restroom Facilities:
Mile 0 Popes Ferry
Mile 8.5 Macon Waterworks
Mile 14 Spring Street Park

Points of Interest:

Mile 1—River Cooters—The most common of Georgia's river turtles and the most ubiquitous of all the river's creatures. River cooters are readily recognized by their yellow to cream markings on their shells, heads and necks and a somewhat serrated shell edge in the rear. They can reach lengths of almost 17 inches and are commonly seen basking themselves in the sun on the tops of rocks and riverside strainers. They dine on aquatic vegetation and have been used to control invasive water hyacinth. The word "cooter" was introduced to the American South by slaves. In Africa "kuta" is the word for turtle in some languages.

Miles 2-4—Homes—From here to Macon, the west bank of the river is crowded with homes, many of which violate state stream buffer laws. State law prohibits the building of any structure or removal of vegetation within 25 feet of the river without a stream buffer variance. These laws are in place to protect rivers and property owners. Natural buffers filter out pollutants, absorb flood waters and provide habitat for terrestrial and aquatic wildlife. Property owners who build too close to the rivers often find their structures endangered by natural bank erosion which leads to efforts aimed at protecting their property. You will see ample evidence of these efforts today. These efforts spoil the view from the river, and result in a loss of wildlife habitat and diminished water quality.

Mile 4—Norfolk-Southern Railroad—This is one of the many spots at which you will be able to hear or see this railroad from the river. The Norfolk & Southern parallels the Ocmulgee from Ga. 83 (Day 1) all the way to Cochran (Day 5) and crosses the river just south of Macon. The first railroad in these parts ran 26 miles from Macon to Forsyth. On Dec. 10, 1838, the line opened, and the first steam locomotive to run the tracks was named the "Ocmulgee." To get the locomotive to the tracks, it was first unloaded from a sea-going vessel in Darien on the Georgia coast, and then shipped up the Altamaha and Ocmulgee rivers via steamboat to Macon. Of course, the steam locomotive would ultimately hasten the end of steamboat navigation on the Ocmulgee.

Mile 6—Awkright Power Plant & the Fall Line—Georgia Power's Awkright Power Plant located on the west bank of the river here was decommissioned in 2002. The 50-year-old coal-fired plant gave way to the larger and more efficient Plant Scherer. It was named for the first president of the Georgia Power Company, Preston Awkright, who in 1906 bought the Atlanta Crackers baseball team and located the team's playing field along one of Atlanta's street car lines in an effort to boost ridership—a ploy that would increase the demand of electricity. Almost 70 years later, Atlanta entrepreneur Ted Turner would buy the Atlanta Braves for similar purposes—to increase viewership on his satellite TV channel. Seventy years from now, will the Atlanta Braves and coal-fired power plants like Scherer still exist or will they go the way of the Crackers and Awkright?

Mile 8.5—Macon Waterworks—In 1994 when Hurricane Alberto stalled over Central Georgia, it changed the history of Macon. Massive flooding submerged Macon's Riverside Water Treatment Plant, destroyed over half of the buildings on the site and wrecked the new pumping station which was under construction at the time. Around 50,000 people were left without water for three weeks. The upshot was that federal disaster aid funds led to the construction of Macon's new Amerson Water Treatment Plant and Town Creek Reservoir. Water is drawn from the Ocmulgee during periods of high flows (up to 65 million gallons a day) and stored in the 650-acre, 6.5 billion gallon reservoir where it is then pumped to Macon. The facility is an example of a new-breed of water supply projects called "off-stream" reservoirs. "Off-stream" because a tributary rather than the mainstem of a river is dammed. These projects allow water suppliers to vary the amount of water they withdraw from the river, providing greater protection of river flows. However, they also require the damming and destruction of smaller streams, and cost millions to build. The Amerson Plant checked out at some \$125 million. The people of Macon who suffered for three weeks without water in 1994 will tell you it was money well spent, but water conservation remains the least expensive means of extending our water supplies and protecting habitat for aquatic wildlife.

Mile 11.5—Former Macon Waterworks—At this spot you will pass beneath the former intake facility for Macon's Riverside Water Treatment Plant destroyed by Hurricane Alberto flooding. Believe it or not, the towering intake structure was under water during the flood. If you keep your eyes trained to the treetops along the river, you will see debris still remaining in the highest branches from the great flood.

Mile 12—I-75—At mile 12, you will hear the roar of I-75 as it briefly parallels the river. This highway runs from Hialeah, Florida (below Miami) to Sault St. Marie, Michigan at the Canadian border—a distance of 1,786 miles. The "river" of modern day commerce, it has surpassed river barges and railroads as a mover of goods and people. Drive Georgia 2008, anyone?

Mile 13.5—Rose Hill Cemetery—After passing beneath I-16, you'll notice on your right, rising from the banks of the river, Rose Hill Cemetery. Perhaps thinking that the dead would enjoy a resting place by the river as much as the living, Simri Rose laid out the cemetery along the river in the 1830s. Interestingly, this is the second major riverside cemetery Paddle Georgia has visited in two years (Myrtle Hill Cemetery on the Etowah), bringing new meaning to the old gospel tune "Shall We Gather at the River."

Mile 14—Spring Street Park and the Ocmulgee River Heritage Trail—Our take out site is part of Macon's riverside trail system known as the Ocmulgee River Heritage Trail. The trail includes nine miles of recreational trails, and upon completion will ultimately traverse 22 miles along the riverfront. An estimated 75,000 people use the Trail each year. Friends of the Trail volunteers are providing drinks and snacks at Paddle Georgia campsites this year in an effort to generate funds for various trail projects. The Trail is a public-private partnership managed by Newtown Macon in cooperation with the Macon-Bibb County Parks & Recreation department. Newtown Macon has been a tremendous host, helping to facilitate much of our two-night stay in Macon!

Miles 1-14—Asian Clams—These small round freshwater mussels most commonly called Corbicula are found in nearly every freshwater system in the U.S. and can be found in abundance on the Ocmulgee. They are an invasive species native to southeast Asia where they are called prosperity or good luck clams. The first specimens were found on this continent on Vancouver Island, B.C. in 1924, and they quickly spread east. It took just 50 years for them to conquer a continent—an impressive feat for an immobile invertebrate. One of the reasons Corbicula are so successful is because they can self fertilize, if necessary, producing eggs and sperm at the same time. Unlike native freshwater mussels that need to find another mussel of the opposite sex, as well as a host fish to keep their babies safe and carry them up or downstream, Corbicula just put all the ingredients out there, and babies are made. Corbicula are also very tolerant of silt, low dissolved oxygen, high water temperatures, and reservoirs, giving them a distinct advantage over most natives, who need clean substrate, cool, flowing water, the right kind of host fish, and high oxygen levels. Nevertheless, Corbicula are not believed to have displaced native mussels of the Southeast. Reservoirs, poor water quality and overharvesting did that. And, Corbicula have played an important role in the aquatic ecosystem in the absence of native species, providing a reliable food source for fish, raccoons, bears, birds, otters and others.