

Montezuma Bluff Bump

June 27

Distance: 14 miles

Starting Elevation: 280 feet

Ending Elevation: 260 feet

Restroom Facilities:

Mile 0 Miona Ferry

Mile 11 Crooks Landing

Mile 14 George Hooks Landing

Points of Interest:

Mile 2—Peacock Lake—At river right there is an interesting slough that is locally referred to as Peacock Lake. If there's enough water, it provides some worthy exploration opportunities. During scouting trips here, we spotted several young wild hogs foraging along the banks of the slough.

Mile 2—Miona Springs—Located about one mile west of the river here, Miona Springs was a favored gathering place of Native Americans who believed the springs to have healing powers. Later, the springs became a popular resort. The site was along a coach road that led from Knoxville in Crawford County to Lanier, the then-seat of Macon County, and near the springs, the coach stopped to change horses. It was here that a family by the name of Wilbur built a store. But the Wilburs stay in the town of their name, Wilburville, was short, for these transplanted Northerners were driven out by locals during the Civil War era. It was then that a William Minor took the lumber from the Wilbur's store and built the Miona Springs Hotel. The springs were so popular that a steamboat on the Flint brought patrons to the springs. The Hotel burned in 1930. Today, the Springs are privately owned and according to locals, "aren't much to look at."

Mile 3—Georgia's Bread Basket & Irrigation—Due east of this spot, beyond the forested river bottoms and atop the ridge running to Montezuma are hundreds of acres of irrigated farm fields. If you drew a straight line from the Flint to anywhere beyond the river bank in Southwest Georgia, you would eventually cross an irrigated farm field. Southwest Georgia, and particularly the Flint River Basin, is considered Georgia's bread basket. Downstream from the peach farms near the fall line, farmers raise a host of crops. Historically, Georgia ranks second among states in acreage devoted to cotton and rye, and among tomato growing states, Georgia's crop ranks third. We are the leading peanut producing state, growing 41 percent of the nation's PB&J stock. Ditto for pecans. producing upwards of 90 million pounds of pie (and fruit cake) stock. Both of these leading agricultural crops are centered around the Flint River, and all of these farm products have one common need—water. Since the 1970s, farmers have increasingly relied upon irrigation to meet these needs. In 1970, Georgia had about 144,000 agricultural acres under irrigation. Today there are around 1,500,000 acres. In fact, the amount of water used to irrigate crops in Georgia is nearly equal to the water used by all the public water supply systems in the state. In the Flint River Basin, this demand places great pressure on the Flint.

The majority of irrigation comes from the underground Floridian aquifer which also charges the Flint, helping to maintain flows in the river, especially during drought. Because of this interconnection between surface water and groundwater, in 2000 state lawmakers passed legislation that pays Southwest Georgia farmers for not irrigating their crops during severe droughts. Since then, the state has paid farmers \$9.7 million to turn off their spigots. This controversial payment system (using money from Georgia's share of tobacco lawsuit settlements) does protect habitat for aquatic species of concern in the Flint and it appeases Florida to a degree since any water not used in Georgia can make its way to Apalachicola Bay to grow oysters and shrimp.

In addition to state programs, non-profit organizations are also stepping in to protect the Flint. The Nature Conservancy is working with the agricultural community to develop efficient, more cost-effective ways to irrigate their crops. Through this effort the Conservancy hopes to reduce water use by 15 to 25 percent.

For all this talk about agricultural uses of water, many are surprised to learn what sector uses the most water in Georgia: More than half the water used each day in the state (some three billion gallons) is used to produce electricity at fossil fuel and nuclear power plants.

As you can see, the water we are floating on is precious—precious enough to keep three states bickering over it for nearly two decades...with more fireworks to come.

Mile 4—Gravel Bar—One of the more impressive sand/gravel bars on our route, this one is worth exploring. Sandbars, aside from giving us a great place to play also provide important habitat for many critters. River turtles will use the bars to build their nests and lay eggs, and during our journey, you will likely see much evidence of this activity.

Mile 10—Whitewater Creek—One of four "Whitewater Creeks" in the state of Georgia. Macon County operates a 426-acre park just a few miles upstream from the creek's confluence with the Flint.

Mile 11—Montezuma Bluffs Natural Area—We can thank our friends at The Nature Conservancy for working to protect this 500-acre natural area. The Conservancy secured the land and sold it in 1993 to the state which now operates it as a Wildlife Management Area. You may be somewhat disappointed by the "bluffs." While the terrain does rise steeply from the river's east bank, the bluffs themselves are not spectacular. However, the land does hold a fascinating combination of plants. The rare mountain catchfly, a plant normally associated with North Georgia is found here among spruce pines common of the coastal plain. The Bluffs also hold a population of the relict trillium. Crooks Landing, the boat ramp leading into the Bluffs serves as our pit stop for the day.

Mile 13.5—Trash—At river left here, you'll begin noticing large amounts of trash and debris—junk tossed over the top of the bluffs on the north side of Montezuma. After some 90 miles of river travel without coming within sight of a town, you have finally reached "civilization"...and it is time to re-enter this world. During the past seven days, you have traveled through the wilderness of seven Georgia counties with a combined population of 115,681. In Atlanta, you'd drive past that many people in a mile or two. The relative unspoiled nature of the Flint (there is considerably less trash on it than other Georgia rivers) is a testament to the truism: "Population equals pollution."

Mile 14 Oglethorpe & Montezuma and the travels of Hernando de Soto—In 1540 Hernando de Soto passed through these parts, crossing the Flint somewhere in this vicinity. And, like today's residents, he and his army dealt with rain-swollen creeks and rivers. After crossing the Flint and spending some time in the vicinity of modern-day Montezuma, the conquistadors set out toward modern-day Macon only to find their path blocked by a rapidly rising creek that would come to be known as Beaver Creek. "It rained so much and a small river swelled in such a manner, that if they had not made much haste to cross, all of the army would have been endangered," noted one chronicler of de Soto's travels. In 1994, the town of Montezuma dealt with the same rain-swollen creek as Tropical Storm Alberto flooded downtown for six days in more than six feet of water. Since then Montezuma has risen from the muck and now claims to be the "Town that refused to Drown." And, yes, Montezuma does derive its name from the famed emperor of the Aztecs. It seems, veterans of the Mexican War who settled the town brought the name back with them. Oglethorpe lies on the west bank of the river and serves as the seat of government for Macon County. Oglethorpe earned county seat status in 1854, in large part because the Central of Georgia Railroad chose the town for one of its depots. The town's population quickly swelled to 16,000, but a small pox epidemic during the 1860s dealt a critical blow to the town's prosperity and prospects. Today there are only 14,000 residents in all of Macon County. The town owes its name to more local roots than does Montezuma. It is named in honor of General James Edward Oglethorpe (1696-1785), the founder of Georgia.