

# Carters Lake Cakewalk – Paddle Georgia 2009

June 21—Coosawattee & Oostanaula Rivers

**Distance:** 7.5 miles

**Starting Elevation:** 1090

**Ending Elevation:** 1090

**Obstacles/Rapids:** There are no major threats on this lake paddle...with the exception of ski boats, jet skis, bass boats lightning, sunburn, man-eating beavers, plagues of locusts and...well, there aren't any rapids. Seriously, motorboat traffic can be heavy on Sundays, so be careful to avoid collisions. The wakes they create rock your vessel gently, but to play it safe, turn the bow (front) of the boat into the waves rather than taking them broadside and be careful not to get slapped into the shore by the waves. At the same time, you are safest hugging the shore as it can be difficult to re-enter your boat if you capsize in open water. If you are along the shore, you can easily swim your boat to land and right yourself. In the event that a thunderstorm approaches, get off the water, spread out and crouch down in a stand of dense short trees. If caught in open water in a thunderstorm and your hair begins standing on end with static electricity that's a sign that reads: "God, strike here first!" Take evasive action immediately! Lather up with sunscreen. There's no escaping the sun out there. We're just kidding about the man eating beavers and the locusts...really! Wear your life jacket, don't leave your buddy boat and be done before 5 p.m.

**Restroom Facilities:**

- Mile 0** Corps of Engineers Pit Toilets at Ridgeway Boat Ramp
- Mile 5** Woodring Branch Recreation Area—facilities are in campground and require a walk.
- Mile 5** Harris Branch Recreation Area—porta toilets at the beach and flush toilets on top of hill overlooking the beach
- Mile 7** Marina and Resort with snack bar, lake supplies and flush toilets

**Points of Interest:**

**Mile 0—Tails Creek & Tumbling Waters Trail**—Accessible by both land and “sea,” Tails Creek Falls can be found via a 1.5 mile round trip walking trail that leads out of the Ridgeway Boat Ramp parking area. The trail parallels the cove and empties on to an impressive footbridge spanning the creek that offers a bird's eye views of the falls. Additional observation areas on each side of the creek provide beautiful views of these falls. Upon crossing the bridge you will come to the site of a former mill which utilized the power of Tails Creek to turn saws that converted local trees into lumber. The trail follows the sluice that channeled the creek to the mill. An early 20th century logging road that bisects the sluice is also clearly visible. You can also access the falls via boat by paddling from the boat ramp upstream on Tails Creek. The flat water ends at the base of the falls below the footbridge. This is a swell place to sooth your aching muscles from Saturday's whitewater paddle.

**Mile 4—Great Blue Heron Rookery**—At the point of land known as the Doll Mountain Recreation Area is a tiny island of pine trees upon which great blue herons have constructed several nests. Look high into the pine tops and you'll see the heron homes and likely some herons. Herons usually nest in colonies such as this. It is the largest of North American herons, but despite its size (six-foot wing span) we often overlook it simply because it is so ubiquitous on our rivers, lakes and streams. It is common; but it is also remarkable: it flies at speeds up to 35 mph; its special neck vertebrae allow it to use its s-curved neck like a spring to catch prey; and perhaps most interesting, it uses special feathers called “powder down” in eating its food. The feathers break down to a powder when raked with a foot. The powder falls on the heron's catch, causing the fish slime and oil to clump up so that the heron then can simply brush it off with a foot. *We thought we had fish cleaning down to a science with our Ginsu knives?!* The heron also rubs the powder on the underside of its body to repel swamp slime and oils. In the nineteenth century, herons were hunted for their plumes. The beautiful feathers were popular decorations for women's hats and some heron species were severely depleted until the hunting of these birds was outlawed in the early twentieth century. Should you ever chance upon a wounded or exhausted heron, approach it with great, great care, if at all. Their bills are sharp and powerful weapons and naturalists will tell you that they tend to go for the eyes. Other birds you are likely to see along your way are ospreys and perhaps some bald eagles. During a scouting trip of the Upper Coosawattee, we spotted a bald eagle, and the bird likely patrols both the river and the lake.

**Mile 5—Homes**—Because of a 1974 Corps of Engineers regulation aimed at preserving public reservoirs for public use, Carters Lake has no waterfront development or private docks. Instead, the lake boasts of more than 60 miles of wild shoreline and is surrounded by the Coosawattee Wildlife Management Area which includes 3,600 acres of forests, streams, hiking and biking trails and hunting lands. Unlike other Corps projects in Georgia (like Allatoona and Lanier completed in the 1950s), Carters didn't fill completely until 1975 after this regulation was in place. Nevertheless, high ridges surround the lake and along the north shore, homes and rental cabins perch along these ridges with views, but no access to the lake.

**Mile 5—Woodring Branch Recreation Area**—You can't miss this long peninsula dotted with picnic pavilions and managed by the Corps of Engineers. Feel free to stop and make use of them by pulling up to the rip rap shore or paddling around the peninsula to the nearby boat ramp. This is the day use area; a campground spreads over other portions of the larger peninsula.

**Mile 5—Harris Branch Recreation Area**—On the opposite side of the lake from Woodring is Harris Branch, complete with beach, flush toilets, soda machines and a shaved ice vendor...hmm is a cold soda or a snow cone worth the cross-lake paddle?

**Mile 6.5—Amadahy Hiking/Biking Trail**—Need to stretch your legs a bit? Take a jaunt around this 3.5 mile loop trail. The trail can be found by hugging the Woodring Branch Peninsula and paddling into the cove with the west facing boat ramp. Continue north beyond the boat ramp and then cross the cove. The trail winds along the shore so you can access it from several locations. The trail is also used by mountain bikers.

**Mile 7-8—Carters Reservoir & Dam**—You'll see the rock dam from far across the lake and as you paddle toward it bear in mind that you are floating atop more than 450 feet of water. Carters is the tallest earthen dam east of the Mississippi and the engineers weren't arbitrary in picking this site for the dam. It sits at a transition point between geographic regions. This is the spot where the Coosawattee once burst forth out of the Blue Ridge into the Ridge and Valley region. It still bursts...it just bursts through four 18-foot diameter tubes that feed the water through turbines that produce 542 megawatts of electricity. The powerhouse supplies electricity during peak demand periods (during the hottest part of summer afternoons) and then during the morning hours (off-peak), water is pumped from the re-regulation reservoir back to the main lake where it can be sent down the penstocks again.

A worthy side excursion is to paddle into the inlet leading to the powerhouse structure on the north bank of the dam. Here, you can see how the Corps blasted out the mountain to re-route the river and harness it. Much of the mountain was blasted to create the fill needed for the dam. Today, the dam stretches 2,053 feet across the pass where the Coosawattee once flowed out of its gorge and into its valley. Rock and earth is stacked 452 feet high.

Reece Turrentine published a marvelous account of the lost Coosawattee River Gorge in a 1995 edition of North Georgia Journal magazine in which he interviewed those that paddled this section prior to the dam. Witnesses to the gorge described 15-foot waterfalls and intense whitewater. Said former GCA president Jack Weems who paddled the river in April 1974: “It was beautiful, but obviously dangerous. I had heard of people who were accidentally swept over and drowned.”

Indeed, several trips to see the river before it was dammed nearly ended in disaster. This interest in the Coosawattee was prompted largely by James Dickey's novel *Deliverance* and the movie by the same name. Dickey told Turrentine that the novel was based on events that he experienced on the Coosawattee as well as other North Georgia rivers. “I will probably never get in another canoe,” the author told Turrentine in a 1995 interview, “but I remember those days when I paddled the Coosawattee with great favor. Progress—so called—is a dreadful thing.”

