

Marsh Mambo—Paddle Georgia 2012

June 22—Altamaha River

Distance: 13 miles

Starting Elevation: 3 feet Lat: 31°25'37.04"N Lon: 81°36'20.64"W

Ending Elevation: 1 foot Lat: 31°22'4.00"N Lon: 81°26'11.59"W

Restroom Facilities: **Mile 0** Altamaha Regional Park
 Mile 13 Darien

Points of Interest:

Mile 1—Alligator Congress—This slough on river right can be accessed via Browns Lake, a slough that leaves the main channel upstream of Pocket Lake, or directly from the main channel downstream of Pocket Lake. The name implies that alligators congregate here; no word yet on whether or not there is partisan bickering amongst residents. *Alligator* is, in fact, the scientific genus name for these creatures and is derived from the Spanish *el lagarto*, meaning “the lizard.”

Mile 2—Old Woman’s Pocket Lake & Altamaha State Waterfowl Wildlife Management Area—At river left here, Old Woman’s Pocket Lake extends far into the Altamaha State Waterfowl Wildlife Management Area, a 27,000 acre parcel of bottomland hardwood forests and cypress-tupelo swamps. This WMA stretches from Gamecock Lake upriver all the way to the mouth of the Altamaha. It is an important wintering area and stopover point for migratory birds and hosts several rare species, including black and yellow rails, white pelicans, and black-bellied whistling ducks. Banding studies conducted on waterfowl found in Georgia show that 41 percent arrive from the Prairie Pothole Region that extends from Iowa and Nebraska northward into Canada. Another 28 percent make the trip to Georgia from Canada, north of the Great Lakes

Mile 5.2—Stud Horse Creek—Don’t miss this turn! It’s the gateway to intimate paddling off the main channel of the Altamaha and the first turn in our winding route to the town of Darien. As the Altamaha nears the coast it splits into numerous channels, each bearing a different name—Darien, Butler, Champney—and to reach our final take out we’ll wind through creeks taking us to the Darien River.

Mile 6—Lewis Creek, Lewis Island & The Nature Conservancy—Upon reaching the confluence of Stud Horse and Lewis creeks, Lewis Island will be on your right. This 5,000-acre island, bounded by Lewis Creek on the north and east, the Altamaha River on the south, and Big Buzzard Creek on the west, is home to the last groves of old growth cypress on Altamaha. The island was logged in the early 1900s and remnants of logging equipment remain, but thankfully, the wild and wet terrain prevented equipment from reaching the trees in the center of the island. Some Cypress trees in these stands have been measured at 20-feet in circumference and are estimated to be up to 1,300 years old. The Nature Conservancy played a key role in preserving this site during Jimmy Carter’s term as Georgia governor. Since then, the Conservancy has named the Altamaha River Basin one of its “Last Great Places” and has worked to protect 100,000 acres in the basin. That effort can be traced, in large part, to one rather remarkable woman—Jane Hurt Yarn. In the late 1960s, she took up the cause of preserving Georgia’s coast, and in 1969, she and her husband, Dr. Charles Yarn, purchased Egg Island at the mouth of the Altamaha which would eventually become part of the Wolf Island National Wildlife Reserve. That same year, Yarn became vice-chairman of the board the Nature Conservancy and went on to found, in 1970, Georgia’s first, full-time environmental lobbying organization, Save Our Vital Environment, which played an instrumental role in the passage of the state’s Coastal Marshlands Protection Act.

Mile 7—Oyster Midden—A close inspection of the high sandy bluff on river left here will reveal oyster middens, the likely site of a Native American encampment. Be respectful of this place and observe only with your eyes.

Mile 8.5—Duck Wallow—This oxbow slough spreads off the main channel of Lewis Creek to the north.

Mile 10—Rifle Cut—After turning from Lewis Creek back into the Altamaha, a short paddle will bring you to the mouth of Rifle Cut, a unique and historic feature of the Altamaha’s labyrinthine delta. This mile-long cut through cypress swamps and marsh was dug in the 1800s by slaves in an effort to shorten the river route for boat traffic bringing timber, tobacco and turpentine to the warehouses of Darien. Abandoned for more than 100 years, it now provides an intimate journey through the coastal landscape, not to mention a short cut to the Darien River and the town of the same name.

Mile 11—Oyster Midden—At low tide an oyster midden is visible in the marsh bank near the western mouth of Rifle Cut, marking another gathering and feasting site of the area’s earlier inhabitants.

Mile 12—Blue Crabs—Just downstream of the I-95, you will begin encountering buoys curiously marked with numbers. These buoys mark crab traps. If you were to pull one up (and you shouldn’t because it is illegal to disturb crab traps) you would find at the end a trap filled with beautiful (and tasty) blue crabs, but all is not well with Georgia’s crabbers. The once-thriving fishery has declined at least 60 percent since 1970. The cause of the decline has not been definitively determined, but one of the leading suspects is alterations to the land that drains into this estuary. Since 1970, more than 200,000 acres of wetlands throughout South Georgia have been ditched and dried up for development and agriculture. The destruction of these natural sponges, which store water and slowly discharge it to our rivers, has altered flows into the Altamaha delta, increasing the impacts of droughts and thus the salinity of the water in the estuary. In 2000, catches plummeted during an extended drought as the crabs succumbed to a parasite that thrives in salty water. Such evidence points to a very real link between upstream land use and the health of the Altamaha’s estuary.

Mile 12.5—Cathead Creek, Coastal Marshes and Fiddler Crabs—At the junction of Cathead Creek and Darien River, you will be surrounded by expansive marshes, literally crawling with fiddler crabs. These salt-tolerant grasses form a band of vegetation four to six miles wide between Georgia’s mainland and its barrier islands. They are considered one of the most productive ecosystems in the world, producing nearly twenty tons of biomass to the acre—four times more productive than the most carefully cultivated cornfields. As such, they are the primary nurseries for blue crabs, oysters, shrimp, and other commercially important seafood. What’s more, they filter pollutants from the water and buffer inland property from hurricanes and other storms. While the marshes are our friends, the thousands of crabs scurrying about are the marshes’ friends. They play a critical role in the ecosystem. Their feeding keeps the marshes clean while their burrowing helps aerate the marsh sediment facilitating plant growth.

Mile 12.5—Dolphins—Sightings of bottle-nosed dolphins in the Darien River are not uncommon and with any luck, you’ll catch a glimpse of one or more as you near our final destination. Bottlenose dolphins are Georgia’s only year-round resident marine mammals and inhabit estuaries and near-shore ocean waters where they feed on fish, shrimp, crabs and squid.

Mile 13—Darien—Darien dates back to 1736, just three years after the founding of the Georgia colony. After the American Revolution, Darien became an increasingly important port, shipping out cotton rafted down river from the uplands and rice cultivated on the Altamaha delta’s numerous islands. By the late 1800s, logs rafted down river became the dominant commodity, making the town the leading exporter of timber on the South Atlantic coast. The timber boom, however, was short-lived. As the forests along the Altamaha, Ocmulgee and Oconee rivers were exhausted, Darien’s sawmills shut down; the last one closing its doors in 1916. In 1900, Darien’s population was 1,739 residents, but by 1930, the town claimed only 937 residents. Today, the town’s population has rebounded to timber boom levels while the city’s economy depends largely on the seafood industry and tourism.

Mile 13—Shrimp Boats—Our final take out is a boat ramp nestled between Darien’s shrimp boat fleet. Shrimp are Georgia’s most valuable seafood crop, accounting for more than 80 percent of the state’s seafood landings, but like the crabbers, shrimpers are facing hard times as they compete against farm-raised and imported shrimp. In 1979, there were 1,471 licensed trawlers in Georgia, by 2000 that number had plummeted to 534. Last year, the state issued only 233 licenses. In response to increased competition from imported shrimp and declining profit margins, Georgia shrimpers have banded together to promote “Georgia Wild Caught” shrimp.

