“Six weeks in a boot won’t keep me off the river!”

- Suzi Parron

Chattahoochee River – 1/7/12
Etowah River - 2/4/2012
Peachtree Creek – 4/7/12
Altamaha River – 4/20/12
Oconee River – 4/20/12
Ocmulgee River – 4/20/12
South River – 9/1/12
Tallapoosa River – 9/3/12
Conasauga River – 9/9/12
Coosawatee River – 9/9/12
Oostanaula River – 9/9/12
Ellijay River – 10/12/12

To view more 12 in 2012 finishers, go here.
CHATTAHOOCHEE: Our home river, though it’s about half an hour’s drive to the nearest put-in. I submitted a list with about a dozen Hooch trips whose dates I have recorded, but we visited many more times—a couple of cleanups with the River Keeper, a moonlight paddle from Azalea Park, and one of our favorite little paddles—Jones Bridge. Being a two-paddler household means that we head out often without a crowd but it also means that we try to avoid taking two cars. We found that we can drive to the Gwinnett County side of Jones Bridge, paddle upstream three or four miles, and then paddle back down through the rocks at Jones Bridge Park. Often we play with the kids who are wading in the shallows; one sweet memory is Glen giving boat rides to the little ones, pulling one after another up and back in his boat, with others singing out, “Me, me—me next!”

My most memorable Hooch paddles: January—Twenty-eight degrees at the Morgan Falls put-in. I was decked out in multiple layers, with a polar bear hat and gloves with hand-warmer packets in them, and I still froze my butt off. I have always called that paddle “The Things We Do for Love,” as I wouldn’t have been along except that Glen was the trip leader. I could claim that I have come to appreciate winter paddling, but this Florida native may never get used to it.

June—Glen’s 50th birthday paddle, from Buford Dam to Settles Bridge. I have been through the “Rescue Rock” rapid at least ten times with no mishap. This time I was in my new 14-foot boat, as I had let someone else borrow my Pungo. I thought it would be fun to sit at the top of the rapid and watch others go through. Oops—the river grabbed my boat and pulled me into the rocks sideways, and I was in the water! Next thing I knew, I heard Richard Grove paddling down the rapid shouting, “Grab my boat!” I did, and went through the rapid and wave train that follows holding onto the back of his boat, gulping for air every chance I got. Glen corralled my boat on the bank, and once I got settled, he and Richard put me back into it. I paddled no more than three strokes and over I went again! ARGH!

I switched back to my 12-foot boat for the rest of the trip and made it across the river. I was made to promise to never ever paddle that 14-footer again. What can I say? I paddle a lot and love it, but great boat control continues to elude me.

October—The Chattahoochee River Keeper’s McIntosh Reserve Paddle. This was our second year, and we really looked forward to the weekend trip. As we arrived Friday night, several who had been on the trip last year greeted me with, “Suzi, will there be a show this time?” “Hey, Suzi—don’t look!” You see, last year, the weather was unseasonably cold, and I had once again ended up in the water. I knew that I needed to get into my dry clothes quickly, so I stepped onto a clump of rocks and shouted, “OK, Y’all—don’t look!” as I proceeded to remove everything but underclothes and replace them with dry. Apparently, after someone shouts, “Don’t look,” everyone WILL look, as evidenced by the amount of good-natured teasing I endured this year.

Note: You will find that “Suzi in the river” is a reoccurring theme in my narrative. We all have to be known for something, I suppose. 😊

ETOWAH: We spend a lot of time on the Etowah; I believe that it is my favorite of Georgia’s rivers. We camped overnight twice this year—which meant loading all of our gear onto kayaks and paddling heavily-laden boats down to a site right next to a waterfall. We take it all—eight-by-ten foot tent, queen sized air mattress, folding camp chairs—It’s like car camping with a river and boat instead of vehicle and road! We have loads of fun, and I will always look forward to the overnight. We also enjoyed a couple of moonlight paddles and some beautiful day trips—I never tire of the Etowah.

Most memorable Etowah Trip: The Tunnel of Terror! John Miller, who taught many of us to paddle, has a birthday late in January, and mine is February 2nd, so we decided to have a birthday paddle. Only the infamous Tunnel of Terror would do! It’s an old tunnel that was used to divert the river for mining purposes—about ¼ mile long and pitch dark. I will admit—I was terrified. So I decided to go early in the group of 24 paddlers to get it over with. It was dark—just a pinprick of light ahead. And LOUD. I knew that the tunnel was narrow but no one had told me that if I held my paddle
normally, it would bounce off the sides of the tunnel the entire way. The impact sounded a lot like thunder and made my boat turn constantly from side to side. As the light at the end of the tunnel became larger and larger, I had some inkling that I might make it, and sure enough—I dropped out of the tunnel into the pool at the end to cheers from those who waited. I felt so accomplished!

About half a dozen paddlers weren’t as lucky. As those of us who had finished sat around the edges of the pool at the end, we spied a paddle floating out of the tunnel. “Uh-oh, who do you think it is?” We waited a moment until an unmanned black and purple boat shot out, confirming that Linda Wiant had gone swimming somewhere inside. It seems that the tunnel is just wide enough for small boats, such as Linda’s XP-9, to rotate inside, making it much easier for them to lose control. We all shared a good laugh and continued to watch as some boats came though intact and some one piece of gear at a time with the paddler last.

After we had all had a bite to eat, we set back out. I was rather proud that I—with my less than stellar skills—had remained upright in the tunnel. SIGH. Thirty seconds after pushing away from the bank, there I was in the water—having survived the Tunnel of Terror but not the 1-foot drop that led back into the main river!

**SOUTH PEACHTREE CREEK:** Glen and I had been on many cleanups in the past, but I wasn’t prepared for what was in store for us on South Peachtree Creek! The first section is fairly deep, so at least we able to paddle most of the time. But the trash—ugh. Not the usual Hooch trash of beer cans and golf balls. Here we found large children’s toys (think playground slides), lawn furniture, shopping carts, pieces of fence—just an unbelievable array of trash that someone thought would disappear if shoved into the water.

I worked three of the six sections of the creek, but the first was most gratifying. About a week after our cleanup, a friend who lives near the creek and walks her dog on the path along the bank remarked that some club at Emory must have had a huge crew out cleaning up the creek. Having lived there twelve years, she had never seen it look better! “Nope,” I said, “Not a bunch of Emory kids--just a handful of crazy paddlers.”

**OCONEE/OCMULGEE/ALTAMAHA:** This was a “three rivers” paddle with the GA Conservancy. We camped overnight then paddled the Ocmulgee the next day to where it meets the Oconee to form the Altamaha. There is something very inviting about paddling at the actual spot where a great river originates! Most folks paddled through the confluence—which looks very much like a highway intersection, with three clearly delineated paths—and straight onto the Altamaha. But we wanted to have a true “three rivers” experience. So off we went, upstream on the Oconee. It was only half a mile or so, but since we spent a week on the Oconee last year on Paddle GA, we figured our old friend wouldn’t mind a brief visit.

**SOUTH:** This event was a cleanup followed by a paddle; I was happy to have some after-work fun planned. Glen had already spent a lot of time on the South River and had told me that there were a couple thousand tires easily seen from the banks. Our goal was to remove at least a hundred. We got into our boats, paddled around the first curve and wow—tire graveyard. All but a couple of our group were women—yes, I am being sexist here—so I had my doubts about our chances of success. But this crew was amazing! I am still in awe of Faye, who at age 74 worked away digging up tires from the riverbed and rolling them to the bank. We had plenty of other work—lots of beer cans, most of which were full of mud—but the tire crew that conquered that small stretch of the South River was awesome. The paddle that followed took us past all of those tires that Glen had mentioned—truly thousands. I couldn’t help wondering how long they had been there but more importantly—how long it would take to get them all.

**CONASAUGA/COOSAWATTEE/OOSTANAULA:** Kayaking is one of the few areas in which I am a follower rather than a leader; we always let the guys plan the trips. In September, I thought maybe I would take a bit of initiative this time. Also, I had the Twelve Rivers Challenge in mind and realized that we needed to get away from the Hooch and the Etowah! I looked through the trusty paddling book and saw something interesting—we could put in at a bridge over the
Conasauga and paddle to its confluence with the Coosawattee, where the Oostanaula forms. I had never paddled the first two and hadn’t been on the Oostanaula this year. Perfect!

There were just four of us on the trip, and we dreaded the long drive with two cars. We talked about getting a cab for a shuttle or some other plan. Then Glen looked more closely at the map and noticed that if we put into the Conasauga at the bridge I had indicated and paddled to Resaca on the Oostanaula, the river would actually have curved back to within a mile of the spot where we put in! So we set off in a single truck with a “walking shuttle” planned.

We reached the bridge over the Conasauga and pulled to the roadside. Hmm—nothing but huge chunks of granite on one corner of the bridge, a fence on another, and two steep drop offs—one through woods and one through kudzu—on the other two. I felt so stupid—I had just assumed that there would be a decent put in. We each took a corner and surveyed more carefully, none wanting to be the one to say, “No—this won’t work.” The woods won, with a sand bar about twenty yards downriver our goal. Crashing, dragging, pulling, and pushing, we managed to break a path through the trees and brush and reach the sandbar where we would begin the trip. Note to self—wear long sleeves when dubious put-ins are involved. I was pretty scratched up!

Richard and Glen drove to Resaca, parked the car near the river, and walked back to where Linda and I waited. This was a lovely paddle—unspoiled land with almost no development, very peaceful. We stopped at a few sandbars along the way to photograph the incredible wildflowers and wild mushrooms on the banks. When we reached the Oostanaula, we turned upriver on the Coosawattee for about a mile and found it equally inviting—a river we would definitely want to visit again.

A few miles down the Oostanaula, we reached two bridges in Resaca. On Google Earth, Glen has seen what looked like a boat ramp nearby. Oops—it was a huge outcropping of granite! We were far, far below the road, with no apparent means to get out of the river. Undaunted, Richard soon chose a patch of gravel along the bank for our takeout, and he and Glen made the almost vertical climb to the top, dragging two boats. Linda and I climbed as far as we could and waited for the guys to return. It turned out to be a longer wait than anticipated. One of the bridges was a railroad bridge, and just as the men began to walk back to us, a freight train went by, separating the party. That was definitely a first—taking out across a railroad! When it was time for Linda’s boat to cross the tracks, she posed right in the middle for a photo—one of a kind, I am sure!

I had just about decided that I would never again plan a trip; after all, both access and exit were pretty tough. Just then, Linda said, “Gosh, that was fun,” and the others agreed. Sometimes the unexpected is what makes a river trip worthwhile!

**TALLAPOOSA:** Glen Smith and I thought it would be fun to find a river that neither of us had paddled so that we could share in the discovery. We decided on the Tallapoosa, made arrangements with an outfitter for a shuttle, and set out on a dreary Saturday. This is a pretty little river, and it was such a treat to have it all to ourselves! The water was a bit shallow, but for the most part we were able to find enough water to stay afloat. It was tricky, and we did walk two or three times, but we were too busy enjoying traveling unknown waters for that to make much of a difference. The slow paddle allowed us to enjoy the surroundings—yellow and red wildflowers, stalks of purple berries, and incredible gray rock formations. About midway, it started to drizzle; our hair and clothing were dampened, but our spirits weren’t. The secluded surroundings provided just the getaway we needed.

**ELLIJAY:** Glen and I decided to make last year’s Thanksgiving cabin getaway a tradition. As we searched the rental listings, I spotted a cabin on the Ellijay River. Hmm—I need one more river—it’s getting cold—this might do the trick! Sure enough, the cabin sat right on the bank, with a deck over the river. A perfect place for our first “Thanksgivingversary.”
When we got to the cabin the weekend before Thanksgiving, we realized what we should have known— that the river was a bit shallower than it had been when the online photo had been taken. Still, we couldn’t resist. We drove to a covered bridge over what we thought was a small branch of the river (it turned out to be Briar Creek) and had a quick paddle down to our cabin! It was awesome coming around that last bend and seeing the deck of our temporary home coming up. We stored the boats under the deck and hit the hot tub—AHH.

**CARTECAY:** This is actually river # 13, paddled on November 19. We had a couple of days to spend in our cabin above Ellijay. The weather was beautiful—sunny and mid-sixties, so we ought to check out the Cartecay. We arranged a shuttle and set off late in the afternoon. The paddle was only 3 ½ miles, but the river was a bit shallow, so we didn’t want to waste time. Sure enough, about ten minutes into the paddle, I missed the line that Glen had taken, turned sideways against a rock, and SPLASH—in I went! One of the great things about paddling a Pungo is the large cockpit. But filled with water, that cockpit is heavy. Luckily Glen is strong—I won’t lie and say that I had my wits about me enough to help him—and my boat was emptied with me back in it fairly quickly. This wasn’t the most scenic paddle—lots of industrial buildings lined the river. But we did paddle to the end of the Cartecay, where it meets the Ellijay and turns into the Coosawattee. This was our third passage through a “Three Rivers” spot! Just a salutary turn up the Ellijay and then we continued the trip on the Coosawattee.

We reached our takeout at dusk, still wet and plenty cold. But the addition of a new river to both of our lists—and the prospect of a warm fireplace—brightened the evening.