

Lake Oconee Lindy– Paddle Georgia 2011

June 20 –Oconee River

Distance: 12 miles

Starting Elevation: 449 feet

Ending Elevation: 433 feet

Launch Site GPS Coordinates: Lat: 33 43 16.2804 Lon: -83 17 38.8818

Restroom Facilities:

Mile 0	Oconee River Campground (USFS) Pit Toilet
Mile 6.5	Dyar’s Pasture (USFS) Pit Toilet
Mile 12	Redlands Boat Ramp (USFS) Pit Toilet

Points of Interest:

Mile 0—Dr. Lindsey Durham—Dr. Lindsey Durham came to the Oconee River in the early days of Scull Shoals. Trained as a physician in Philadelphia and schooled by Native American healers during his youth, Durham returned to Georgia and established a successful practice and plantation on the west side of the Oconee opposite Scull Shoals. As Durham’s reputation grew he began treating patients who traveled great distances for his consultation. At its peak, Dr. Durham’s sanatorium could treat up to 600 people each day. Included on his plantation was a 13-acre herb garden from which he derived many of the ingredients for his patented medicines. One hand-written prescription preserved by descendants and recorded in Robert Skarda’s book *Scull Shoals: The Mill Village that Vanished in Old Georgia* reads: “Take parsley, haw, winter huckleberry, yarrow, St. John’s Wort, Elder and the Hee Hazelnut bush. A handful of each and simmer them in butter without salt. Churned when the sun don’t shine and give one tablespoon of it to man or beast and it will break what is called Witchcraft. It is best to gather these ingredients between the setting of the sun and the rising of it.” Basic consultation and treatment for a visit with Dr. Durham cost \$1.50 to \$3.00 in the 1820s, but Durham’s business was diversified. Because he needed alcohol to concoct his herbal tinctures, he distilled his own whiskey and sold it at a shop in Scull Shoals. A gallon could be had for \$1 in the 1830s.

Mile 0—The Iron Horse—Technically, the Iron Horse is not on the river. You’ll pass by this odd sculpture standing above rows of corn along Ga. 15 on the way to the river, and the story behind the horse is just too good to pass up. These facts taken from an OnlineAthens story published in 1999: The horse is the work of Chicago sculptor Abbott Pattison who in the 1950s was invited as a visiting professor to the University’s school of art and was commissioned to create several sculptures for the campus. At the time, art—especially public art of welded metal—was a new phenomenon in Athens. On the evening that Pattison unveiled the Iron Horse, disgruntled students scribbled with paint on the horse, shoved hay into its mouth and scattered manure on the ground behind it. Finally, they placed a mattress under it and set it on fire. Understandably, Pattison was upset and a university official told the *Athens Banner-Herald* that it was unfortunate that students “on the college level” had minds on the level of “grammar school or nursery children” and “react violently to anything new, with which they have not had previous experience.” Nevertheless, response to the sculpture was so negative that the sculpture was taken into hiding. Then in 1958, L.C. Curtis of the University’s horticulture department petitioned the University to place it on his farm 18 miles south of Athens. Jack Curtis, the son of L.C. and a University student at the time of the controversy, remembers assisting in the transfer of the horse to the farm. He recalls completing the mission in the dead of night: “The Varsity was across from the Arch back then, and we had to wait until almost everyone had cleared out before we started.” As for the jilted artist, he remained hurt by the experience: “I was struck with the idea of ancient Athens where people lived with sculpture all around them, and even if they didn’t like it, they left it alone. I wanted Athens, Ga., to have a piece of sculpture to look at. And I think the least I could have expected, even if they didn’t like it, was a little Southern courtesy.” Today, as you make your way around Athens, you’ll notice many painted bulldog sculptures—a fundraising project of the Athens-Oconee Junior Woman’s Club started in 2003. Last year, when the Club began selling the sculptures and removing them from around downtown, students lamented the loss of this public art...in retrospect perhaps Pattison should have crafted an Iron Bulldog instead of a horse.

Mile 4—Harris Creek and the Oconee floodplain—Beyond Ga. 15, the Oconee’s banks shorten and its floodplain becomes obvious. Tributaries like Harris Creek and Fishing Creek (a mile downstream) are flanked with wetlands. As the river dies as it nears Lake Oconee, the lake’s backwaters fill these lowlands. The result is acres of swampy inland marsh teeming with waterfowl.

Mile 6—Dyar’s Pasture—A boat ramp and dock mark this spot—our pit stop for the day, complete with pit toilet in the parking area. This natural area is a joint waterfowl habitat creation project of the Georgia Dept. of Natural Resources and Ducks Unlimited. The 50-acre wetland complex is managed such that water levels are low during spring and summer to allow waterfowl food plants to grow. These same ponds are then flooded during fall and winter to provide resting sites and access to food plants and seeds for waterfowl.

Mile 6-12—Lake Oconee—The Oconee, like so many Georgia rivers, loses its life behind a dam. Wallace Dam, a Georgia Power Co. structure, creates Lake Oconee, backing up the river (along with the Apalachee River) and creating a 19,000-acre reservoir and some 374 miles of shoreline. Of the state’s reservoirs that lie completely within Georgia, it is second in size only to Lake Lanier. Local chambers of commerce and convention & visitor’s bureaus tout the area as “Georgia’s Lake Country” because in tandem with Lake Sinclair, there are more than 34,000 acres of reservoirs in Putnam, Greene, Morgan and Baldwin counties. As Georgia’s reservoirs go, Oconee is just a baby. Construction on the dam began in 1971 and was completed in 1980. It operates as a pumped-storage facility. Turbines at the dam can be reversed, pumping water from below the dam upwards (typically at night) so that it can be cycled back through the turbines, making for more “peak” time generating capacity at the Georgia Power project. But, Lake Oconee is perhaps best known for its world-class resort and golf courses at Reynolds Plantation. Ranked among the top golf courses in the state and country, the Plantation is a place for the rich and famous—country music superstar Carrie Underwood wed there in 2010. But, even Reynolds Plantation and its developer, Linger Longer Development Co., have not been immune to the recent economic downturn. Earlier this year, the company’s assets were placed in receivership and banks that have funded the multi-million dollar, 9,000-acre luxury development have scrambled for a buyer.

Mile 8--Anhingas—Keep your eyes peeled for anhingas on the islands and snags of Lake Oconee. A common resident of southern swamps, they are often called water turkeys or snake birds because of their swimming habits. Anhingas swim lower in the water than other waterfowl (usually with just the neck and head above the water line) because of denser bones and wet plumage. You’ll often spot them sunning themselves on trees with wings outstretched in an effort to dry them. For food, they dive for fish, spearing them with the beak. In addition to being proficient swimmers, they are also excellent soarers and have been spotted several thousand feet in the air. Anhingas are sometimes mistaken for cormorants, another diving bird. Cormorants have a shorter tail, a curved end to the beak and lack the slivery wing patches that distinguish anhingas.

Mile 12—Redlands Boat Ramp & The Great Oconee Portage— The Oconee River, from its headwaters in Hall County, near Gainesville, to its confluence with the Ocmulgee near Lumber City, runs some 240 miles, but about 21 percent of the Oconee’s original miles are flooded beneath lakes Oconee and Sinclair. Our take out at Redlands and portage around lakes Oconee and Sinclair will spare us an additional 45 miles of lake paddling.