

Oxbow Buck – Paddle Georgia 2011

June 23—Oconee River

Distance: 21 miles

Starting Elevation: 206 feet

Ending Elevation: 177 feet

GPS Coordinates: Lat: 32 55 58.7064 Lon -83 4 0.8286

Obstacles/Rapids: Mile 17.5 Strainer & Snags—Much woody debris creates multiple strainers and snags here. Navigate with care.

Restroom Facilities: Mile 0 Avant Mine
Mile 14.5 Central of Georgia Railroad
Mile 20 Balls Ferry Bridge

Points of Interest:

Mile 0.5 Kaolin Pipeline—Rip rap on river left marks the site of a kaolin pipeline that crosses beneath the river here. The pipeline carries kaolin slurry from operations near Sandersville, 14 miles to the east, to processing facilities in Wilkinson County on the west side of the river.

Mile 1 Plant Washington Discharge—Near here would be the discharge pipe for process water from Plant Washington, a proposed coal-fired power plant to be located in Washington County. One of the environmental impacts of power plants is the temperature of the process water sent back to the river. While the discharge does not contain any contaminants, because the water is used to cool the generating system at the plant, it is returned at an elevated temperature. These warm water discharges can significantly alter the river's temperature, reducing oxygen levels and meddling with the river's fish and other wildlife for whom water temperature signals critical processes like the reproductive cycle.

Mile 4.5 Oxbow—Relatively new, this oxbow lake is visible from the main channel and if water levels permit, you can paddle into the old river channel from its downstream side. Between Avant Mine and this site there are three additional oxbows hidden by the river's existing banks. Between here and Balls Ferry Bridge, you'll pass five more oxbows. The river doesn't stay the same long.

Mile 6.5—Washed Out Boat Ramp—Evidence here that the river always wins. During a 2003 flood, the peak flow on the river here topped 7.2 billion gallons per day. Recent summer flows here are only five percent of that peak. What looks like a gentle flowing river, neatly contained within its banks, is at certain times a rampaging boat ramp-eating torrent.

Mile 12—Mississippi Kites—Arguably one of the most graceful birds of prey, Mississippi Kites are identified by their slender pointed wings and long black tails. You'll see them soaring above the floodplain forest seeking their prey—mostly flying insects which they snag from the air. Kites will often eat their catch in flight—a feat larger birds of prey can't duplicate. Georgia's Mississippi Kites tend to be year-round residents, but those in other portions of North America migrate as far south as Argentina each winter. June is the nesting season for them so be careful out there. They are known to dive bomb humans who get too close to their nests. A Colorado state wildlife biologist posted this curious note on the Center for Wildlife Damage Management website: "Although kites may swoop within inches of an individual, only 3% of 903 dives recorded at one golf course resulted in the birds actually hitting humans. These attacks, however, can be serious if elderly individuals or children riding bicycles are frightened and fall." No word yet on the dangers of kites dive bombing canoes and kayaks.

Mile 14.25—Bank Armoring—In an effort to save the Central of Georgia railroad which runs parallel to the river here, this timber wall has been constructed, keeping the water flowing in its "original" channel and preventing it from cutting a new course. For now, the wall holds and the river is tamed, but over the long haul, it's likely the river will outflank the wall and win...not unlike the Union army at the Battle of Balls Ferry (see below).

Mile 14.5—Central of Georgia Railroad and the Battle of Balls Ferry—The site of a Paddle Georgia Pit Stop in 2011, but in November 1864 the site of a minor skirmish of the Civil War. After capturing Atlanta, Union General William T. Sherman's troops cut a swath of destruction through middle Georgia en route to Savannah. The Confederates, in desperate attempts to stop the juggernaut, used the state's rivers to set up lines of defense, and (in the case of the Oconee) protect the Central of Georgia railroad, running through the town of Oconee just east of this bridge. The force protecting the railroad and the town of Oconee was a mix of Georgia Military Institute cadets, state prisoners and local guards. On the evening of Nov. 25, Union forces crossed the river upstream using pontoon bridges and flanked the Confederate defenders, forcing their retreat to the next natural obstacle to the east—the Ogeechee River. Union troops destroyed the railroad here, but it was rebuilt. The large cylindrical pylon dates back to the early 1900s and once held a pivoting bridge that allowed the passage of river steamers. During the later half of the 1800s, the railroad bridge was an impediment to navigation on the river, but that worked to the advantage of the railroad. During the 1890s most of the traffic on the Oconee was between Dublin and the Central of Georgia railroad station at this river crossing. Passengers and goods were off loaded from steamboats on to the railcars. Of course, the railroads would ultimately put the steamboats out of business. In fact, about the time the pivoting bridge was installed, a railway was built from Dublin to the Central of Georgia, rendering the Oconee's steamboats all but obsolete.

Mile 20—Cypress Trees & Knees—While you've likely seen a sprinkling of cypress trees upstream, the start of the straight-of-way at Balls Ferry Bridge marks a true entry into cypress country. From here to Dublin they are common. A deciduous tree, the cypress is unique among conifers in that its leaves turn orangish-brown before being shed in the fall. The knees so commonly associated with cypress trees are part of the root structure, but their function is unknown. One popular view is that the knees provide oxygen to the roots that grow in the low dissolved oxygen waters typical of a swamp, but there is little evidence to support this theory. In fact, swamp-dwelling specimens whose knees are removed continue to thrive. Another possibility is that the knees provide structural support in the soft soils of flood-prone areas.

Mile 20.5—Balls Ferry State Park—Our take out for the day is part of a 538-acre tract of public land that is slated to become a state park. The land is rich in history and includes Indian mounds and the site of the Balls Ferry Civil War skirmish. The Ferry was originally founded in the early 1800s by Revolutionary War veteran John Ball. A ferry operated here until 1939 when a bridge was finally constructed at the site. The property lies within Wilkinson County which has a population of some 10,000 residents. Like many communities in the area, the county leans heavily on the kaolin industry. The largest employers in the area are those associated with the extraction, processing and transport of kaolin.

Mile ?—Oconee Burrowing Crayfish—Somewhere along the streams of the Laurens and Wilkinson counties hides the elusive Oconee Burrowing Crayfish, a critter found nowhere else in the world except in these two Middle Georgia counties and the butt of our jokes all week. This pinkish, orange crayfish grows to about two and half inches long. You may see their "chimneys" (mounds of sand or mud placed around openings above ground), but you are not likely to see this shy creature. The chimneys mark their complex burrows dug in sandy-clay soils along streambanks. Occasionally it leaves the safety of its burrow to search for food or a mate at night. Crayfish are generally omnivorous scavengers, feeding upon any food source available within their habitat. Food for this species may include plant material, insects and perhaps other crayfish. They are listed as a rare species.

