

Almost Paradise—Paddle Georgia 2012

June 20—Altamaha River

Distance: 22 miles

Starting Elevation: 32 feet Lat: 31°40'0.88"N Lon: 81°50'40.75"W

Ending Elevation: 19 feet Lat: 31°33'15.10"N Lon: 81°42'40.95"W

Restroom Facilities: **Mile 0** Upper Wayne County Landing
 Mile 22 Paradise Park

Points of Interest:

Mile 1—Rayonier Pulp Mill—Rayonier owns, leases or manages 2.4 million acres of timber and land in the United States and New Zealand and is one of the world's leading producers of specialty cellulose fibers used in the manufacturing of oil and air filters, LCD screens, pharmaceuticals, food additives, paints, tire cords and (believe it or not) sausage casings. On a global scale it is a huge player; in Jesup and Wayne County (pop. 30,000) its importance to the community cannot be overstated. The mill employs more than 900 workers and drops more taxes in local cofers than any other business. It also generously supports the community; earlier this year it provided more than \$138,000 in grants to local schools and non-profit organizations. The plant began operation in 1954, and last year, the company announced a plan to invest \$300 million at the plant to expand output by 40 percent. Among the more interesting facts about the facility is that it generates 88 percent of the electricity needed to run the mill by burning bark and wood chips. In 2011, the company announced earnings of \$264 million and shareholders enjoyed a 32 percent return from dividends and stock price gains. For the next two miles the Altamaha winds around the plant. The Altamaha, which winds around the plant for the next two miles, makes much of these earnings possible. Though it does not supply water for the plant (the company uses groundwater), it does serve as a receptacle for the plant's wastewater, as will become evident at the plant's discharge pipe downstream.

Mile 2—Sunken Steamboat—Just upstream of the Doctortown railroad trestle lies the remains of the steamboat "Gulfmist," perhaps the last paddlewheeler to ply the Altamaha. It primarily ran lumber up and down the river, servicing the McCann Lumber Company located at Doctortown. The sternwheeler operated on the river into the 1950s and was reportedly abandoned and sunk in 1957.

Mile 2—Bridge & Doctortown—The now defunct drawbridge here marks the site of Doctortown, an early Wayne County settlement and the site of a brief skirmish during the Civil War. Before the Colonial era, this site was an important crossing of the Altamaha, and it remained so well into the 20th century, serving as the lone thoroughfare through the area. Shortly after the Revolutionary War, Ft. Defense was established here and by the time of the Civil War the community had grown into a railroad and steamboat hub centered around a sawmill. In December 1864, the Union Army tried to destroy the bridge, but failed. Interestingly, the crossing remained a location of strategic military concern even during World War II when Georgia Defense Forces and the Coast Guard defended the bridge against German sabotage. It is believed that Doctortown derived its name from a Native American by the name of "Alleck" who once lived here. "Aleлча" is a Creek word that may mean "doctor."

Mile 2.5—Rayonier Pulp Mill Discharge—At this site, the character of the Altamaha changes dramatically. Each day, the Rayonier mill discharges about 50 million gallons of treated wastewater into the river. The effluent is dark brown and filled with suspended solids; it transforms the river's green-brown flow into a dark brown, stench-filled mess. Probably no other wastewater discharge in the state so grotesquely alters its receiving waters. For this reason, the Georgia Water Coalition last year ranked the Rayonier discharge as No. 2 on its "Dirty Dozen" list, a ranking of the state's worst water pollution problems. The pollution of the river has been non-stop since 1954 when the plant began operation. A once thriving commercial shad fishery has been greatly diminished, and biologists suspect that the mill is responsible for making a long stretch of the river un-inhabitable for mussels. Anglers say fish caught from the river are not edible because the meat reeks of the mill. You'll also notice that the sandbars are discolored below the discharge. Since 2008, Rayonier has operated under a voluntary consent order with Georgia's Environmental Protection Division (EPD) that has the plant on a schedule to spend up to \$75 million over eight years to reduce the color and color-causing compounds in the discharge. These compounds include tannic acid that occurs naturally in the trees that are milled at the plant. The plant claims to have reduced color in the discharge by 30 percent, but the Altamaha Riverkeeper disputes that claim. A sulfur stench also pervades the river downstream. EPD, however, has said it does not regulate odor.

Mile 3.5—Knee Buckle Island & Dick's Swift

Mile 4.5—Navigational Dikes—These structures, encountered here as well as other locations upstream and downstream, were put in place by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in the late 1800s and early 1900s. Originally, the spaces between the pilings were filled with brush and rocks—an effort to force the river into a smaller, deeper channel to facilitate the passage of steamboats and timber rafts.

Mile 4.5—Lake Bluff & Flathead Catfish—The mouth of Lake Bluff is said to be a flathead catfish paradise. Georgia Department of Natural Resource (DNR) biologists recently caught two 60-pound fish near here—exciting news for anglers seeking mammoth catfish, but sad news for the rest of the Altamaha's fishery. Flatheads are a non-native, invasive species that was illegally introduced into the Altamaha in the 1970s. Since then, flatheads have evolved into the river's biggest predators and have pushed out other species. Populations of flatheads are four to ten times higher than would be expected in the fish's native waters. Meanwhile, native populations of redbreast, a popular panfish, have been decimated by the massive, fast-growing predators. DNR is attempting to control the populations, by using electro-fishing to gather and kill as many as possible and by placing "Wanted" signs at Altamaha boat landings. In the meantime, the flatheads continue to thrive; 70-pound specimens have been caught.

Mile 9—Little Water Oak Round

Mile 10—Big Water Oak Round

Mile 16.5—Double Yellow Bluff

Mile 17.5—Bug Bluff & Bug Suck Lake—Bug Bluff is located on river left. Stand atop Bug Bluff and look west across the river and you may catch a glimpse of Bug Suck Lake, an oxbow lake on the opposite side of the river.

Mile 19—Rag Round—Rag Round is said to have gotten its name from the timber raftsmen's tradition of tying strips of their clothing to a tree along this stretch of river. The folklore of the raftsmen's culture is hidden in the colorful names of the river's features. The first raftsmen were farmers who felled trees on their land after the harvest in the fall and then floated them down river in the winter and spring when the rivers rose. The rafts, weighing as much as 360,000 pounds, were called "sharp chutes" for their V-shaped bows formed by two large logs. The rafts "sweeps" were 40-to-50 foot oars located at both ends of the raft that serves as paddles and rudders. Each raft was manned by at least three people who worked the sweeps to safely navigate the vessel down river to the sawmills in Darien. Shouts of "bow white" and "bow Injun" could be heard as the rafts moved down river. "Bow white" meant the crew pushed the raft to the north bank of the river (those lands occupied by white settlers) while "bow injun" prompted maneuvers to the south bank, land occupied by Native Americans. A raft leaving the confluence of the Ocmulgee and Oconee rivers could make the 133 mile journey in 12 days.

Mile 21.5—Sturgeon Hole, Paradise Park & Penholloway Creek—Congratulations! You've made it 21 miles; now, for your paddling pleasure, on river right you'll find the Sturgeon Hole and Penholloway Creek which lead upstream one mile to Paradise Park and our take out. However, this slough and the creek that flows into it are real gems, flanked by gnarled cypress and tupelo and oozing South Georgia wildness. Gators and cottonmouths were spotted here on scouting trips.