

Lake Seminole Shuffle— Paddle Georgia 2013

June 21—Flint River

Distance: 9 miles

Starting Elevation: 121 feet **Lat:** 31.1592°N **Lon:** 84.4779°W

Ending Elevation: 108 feet **Lat:** 30.9009°N **Lon:** 84.5917°W

Restroom Facilities:
Mile 0 Private Residence
Mile 5.4 Big Slough Boat Ramp
Mile 9.3 Earle May Boat Basin

Points of Interest:

Mile 0.7—Red Bluff, Fossils and Gov. Clifford Walker—The Flint’s second “Red Bluff” is a noted site because, within the bluff, fossils dating from the Oligocene epoch (23-35 million years ago) have been found. In more modern times, timber from atop the bluff was felled, sent down river to Apalachicola and shipped to New York where it was employed in construction of the Brooklyn Bridge in 1880. Some 40 years later, the Bluff was a noted gathering place. In 1924 it hosted a large “bird dinner” to honor Gov. Clifford Walker. Walker served as Governor from 1923-1927. Among his accomplishments while in office was the creation of a state forestry commission, but his term may be most remembered for his ties with the Klu Klux Klan. Support from the organization was key in securing the governor’s seat in 1922, and while in office, he spoke before the Klan’s national convention. At that time the Klan was a powerful force in southern politics, claiming a membership of some six million.

Mile 1.7—Wastewater Discharge—A sign, partially hidden in undergrowth, notifies river users of a sewage spill that occurred here in 2012. This discharge pipe leads from the Decatur County Industrial Park. In 2011, Georgia’s Environmental Protection Division (EPD) fined the facility \$15,000 for unpermitted discharges to the river. Statewide, EPD oversees the wastewater discharge permits of more than 1,000 facilities ranging from small sewage plants for trailer parks to mammoth industrial discharges from paper plants. In recent years, the job has become increasingly difficult. Since 2008, the agency has seen its budget slashed by 44 percent and the staff has been reduced by 23 percent. With fewer government-sanctioned watchdogs, oversight by river protection groups like Flint Riverkeeper and Georgia River Network has become increasingly important.

Mile 1.9—Home & Stream Buffer Protections—On river left is a precariously perched two story home overlooking the river. Georgia’s stream buffer laws prohibit construction activity and permanent structures within 25 feet of warm-water streams and within 50 feet of those designated as trout streams. However, property owners can file for variances, allowing them to encroach on the buffer. Undisturbed vegetated stream buffers stabilize stream banks to prevent erosion, filter pollutants and provide habitat for aquatic and terrestrial wildlife.

Mile 5.4—Big Slough—A short paddle up this picturesque creek will lead you to today’s pit stop, a public boat landing nestled beneath cypress and water oak. Big Slough is one of only two Flint tributaries draining the river’s eastern flank between here and Dougherty County—a distance of some 60 river miles. This dearth of tributaries underscores the importance of the river’s numerous springs and the Floridan aquifer to maintaining adequate flows. Given appropriate water levels, a trip up Big Slough is worth the effort. Swamp-like and primeval, it’s an interesting contrast to the open water of the main channel.

Mile 5.6—Powerlines & Osprey Nest—On river right, atop one of the powerline towers, sits an osprey nest. Ospreys are abundant on Lake Seminole and it is not uncommon to see their nests on man-made structures like this. These structures can be quite impressive because nesting pairs will continue to build on the same nest for several years. Nests up to 13 feet deep and six feet in diameter have been documented. During construction, the males fetch the building material and the females arrange it to their liking. The inner ring of the nest is usually lined with mosses or grasses.

Mile 7.4—Water Hyacinth & Hydrilla—At this bend in the river, a slough on river right leads to a Lake Seminole backwater carpeted in water hyacinth. Though it sports showy, purple blooms and lends a primordial feel to these stagnant shallow waters, it is, in fact, the bane of lake managers. First introduced to the U.S. at the Cotton State Exposition in New Orleans in 1884, it is now a menace on lakes throughout the Southeast, blocking sunlight from other aquatic plants and invertebrates and depleting oxygen levels. Even more problematic for Lake Seminole is hydrilla, an aquatic invasive that in 1992 covered 70 percent of the lake. Since then the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers has used herbicides, grass-eating carp and hydrilla leaf mining flies in its ongoing battle with the Asian invader. The leaf-mining flies have earned quite a reputation because when boaters have the misfortune of sliding into mining-fly-infested hydrilla, they become engulfed in a cloud of the “hydrilla gnats.” The insects have become so legendary that a local BASS fishing club calls itself the Hydrilla Gnats.

Mile 8—Elberta Crate & Box Company—The ruckus on the west bank of the river is a mill that creates wire-bound wooden crates for the transport of vegetables—from tomatoes to green peppers. It has been in operation since 1915. The company had its roots, 10 years earlier, building crates for the burgeoning peach industry. In fact, the company name is borrowed from the hybridized peach perfected by Samuel H. Rumph, who named his peach in honor of his wife, Clara Elberta Moore. Today, the company is one of the largest wirebound box manufacturers in the world, with more than 400 employees. Those workers are linked to the Flint (and the Floridan aquifer), for without water from these sources, the market for vegetable crates would “dry up.”

Mile 8.5—Bainbridge & Lake Seminole—Known as Georgia’s first inland port, Bainbridge grew up around the river, first as an English trading post, then as the site of Ft. Hughes from 1817-1818 during the First Seminole War and finally as a steamboat landing and cotton trade center. Though there is no longer a port at Bainbridge, the creation of Lake Seminole in 1957 added tourism and recreation to the community’s water-based portfolio. From the boat landing here, it’s a 0.4 mile walk to the town square with historic monuments *and* an ice cream/sandwich shop.

From this landing to Jim Woodruff Lock and Dam where the Chattahoochee and Flint meet to form the Apalachicola in Florida, it is another 26 miles. The lock and dam stretches 7,000 feet across the Apalachicola River just below the confluence of Georgia’s two rivers and was named for the man who formed the Chattahoochee Valley Chamber of Commerce in 1935 to promote river improvements. It was the first of the lower Chattahoochee’s dams completed and was to turn the region into a thriving industrial complex. Like so many of the Corps of Engineers’ efforts on this river system, it failed to create the development that was envisioned.

The dam also devastated the river system’s fishery. When the gates at the dam, anglers in Columbus on the Chattahoochee saw an immediate reduction in the historic runs of striped bass as the dam blocked passage of the anadromous fishes. In 2005, The Nature Conservancy began working with the Corps of Engineers to open the lock at Woodruff during fish spawning periods, thus allowing fish passage through the dam. The result: a nearly five-fold increase in Alabama shad in the Chattahoochee. The hope is to restore some spawning grounds for not only shad and striped bass, but also the federally threatened Gulf sturgeon.

Meanwhile, Seminole is known as a bass fishing hot spot and many businesses have grown up along its shores, catering to the anglers that flood the lake in hopes of catching a trophy large mouth bass. In 2008, B.A.S.S. Magazine ranked Seminole among its 35 most historically significant lakes because of its importance in promoting the sport of bass fishing. The lake’s stature is due, in large part, to the work of the legendary Jack Wingate, known as the Sage of Seminole, who operated a fish camp and lodge on the Flint River arm of the lake. He was instrumental in bringing the first ever B.A.S.S. tournament to the lake in 1968. In 2011, he died at the age of 82, but Wingate’s “Lunker Lodge” is still synonymous with Lake Seminole. The boat basin park around the bend where we will finish our trip is a testament to the popularity of bass fishing on the lake. The “mega-ramp” facility was completed in 2010 with \$400,000 in state funds through Gov. Sonny Perdue’s “Go Fish” Georgia program. The facility includes six boat ramps and parking for 120 vehicles and boat trailers.