

Blackwater Bump (and Reel)– Paddle Georgia 2015

June 21—Ogeechee River

Distance: 17 miles

Starting Elevation: 105 feet **Lat:** 32.5643°N **Lon:** -81.7149°W

Ending Elevation: 95 feet **Lat:** 32.4944°N **Lon:** -81.5553°W

Restroom Facilities:
Mile 0 U.S. 301
Mile 7.5 Williams Landing
Mile 17 Ga. 24

Point of Interest:

Mile 0—Dover Street Bridge—Before the modern-day US 301 bridge was built, this was what the crossing of the Ogeechee between Statesboro and Dover looked like, a rickety wooden one-lane bridge with room for passage of two vehicles in the middle. Note the length of the bridge. Ogeechee River bridge builders not only had to span the river, they also had to cross the floodplain. Here the floodplain stretches for about a half mile on either side of the river. Another historic photo in the Georgia Southern Library collection dated 1925 shows a steam engine in Dover nearly a mile northeast of the river sitting in more than a foot of water. The engine remained stuck in the floodwaters for three days.



Mile 0.5—Alligators—Near this bend of the river during scouting trips, we encountered an alligator—one of many that visited us during those journeys. Be warned: you are in habitat where there is something larger than you...and can eat you. Nevertheless, gator-on-human feeding is extremely rare in Georgia. Since 1980, Georgia's Department of Natural Resources has recorded nine incidents in which humans were injured by alligators—and only one was fatal. We will paddle through their habitat during the nesting season (late June/early July) during which time the females build nests out of vegetation and lay between 20 and 60 eggs. The mother defends the nest against predators throughout the 65-day incubation period. Thus, should you happen upon something that looks like a nest, do not disturb it. These additional words of warning will help you avoid unpleasant alligator encounters: 1. Keep your distance—at least 60 feet from an adult alligator. They are extremely powerful and can move with a startling burst of speed on land. 2. Do not attempt to capture baby alligators. 3. Keep children away from alligators. 4. Don't swim in areas that are known alligator habitats. Always be careful around water. Splashing can attract alligators that think a prey animal is injured...and last but not least, 5. Don't feed alligators. In defense of alligators, this prehistoric reptile is one of our keystone species. They help maintain the population balance of certain prey species and they help shape and modify habitats. Once nearly extinct in Georgia, they were protected in 1967. In 1987 they were delisted and today, Georgia holds an annual hunting season.

Mile 2.9—Hardens Landing & Flood Insurance—On river right are a series of homes crowding the river bank. Like most homes along the Ogeechee they are built to weather the river's regular floods. In 2012, after hurricanes Katrina and Sandy busted the bank of the federal flood insurance program, Congress enacted reforms to the program that ended federally subsidized flood insurance premiums. In many cases, these subsidies made it easier for property owners to build within flood-prone areas. The change sent insurance premiums skyrocketing for many homeowners enlisted in the federal program, and constituents flooded lawmakers with angry protests. Congress responded in 2014 by amending the 2012 legislation to soften the blow of increased premiums. One provision provides reduced rates for homeowners who elevate their property above the expected flood zone. On the Ogeechee, however, the expansive floodplain creates other problems. While a riverfront home may be elevated above the river's floods, the roads leading to that home often are not. In Bulloch, Bryan, Screven, Effingham and Chatham County, nine percent (1,961) of 21,461 property owners with flood insurance receive federally subsidized premiums.

Mile 4.8—Trees and Lightning—On river left here is a hollowed out and burned cypress tree which appears to have been struck by lightning. Researchers estimate that 20 million lightning strikes occur in the U.S. each year, and they often strike trees. They do not, however, always kill the trees, nor do they always create fires. The most common evidence of a tree struck by lightning is the loss of strips of bark—the result of the moist cells of the tree literally exploding as they are superheated by the bolts. Tall trees in open fields and along water are more susceptible to lightning strikes. Georgia ranks 13th in number of cloud-to-ground strikes with 13.5 strikes per square mile annually. Florida tops the list at 24.1 strikes per square mile followed by Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama.

Mile 6.1—Dows Landing & the “Great Ogeechee”—The boat ramp and shack on river left mark the site of Dows Landing, one of many river landings that bear the names of families who settled the area when the Ogeechee was referred to as the “Great Ogeechee River.” Early maps refer to the lower Ogeechee as the Great Ogeechee, and the upper Ogeechee as the “Little Ogeechee” though they are the same river. Sometime during the 1900s, the river apparently became not so great and the adjective was dropped from the proper name. That the early people of Georgia called it “Great” seems odd when this diminutive river is sandwiched between two of the state's largest rivers—the Savannah on the north and the Altamaha on the south. Ogeechee is said to be derived from the Muskogean name “Okechee,” which means “River of the Uchees,” a sub-tribe of the Creek Indians.

Mile 7.1—Spatterdock Slough—The mouth of the clear-flowing creek on river right is filled with spatterdock (*Nuphar polysepala*) The plant has large, heart-shaped leaves that float on the surface of the water and bright yellow, ball-like flowers. A native species, it provides important habitat for aquatic insects (and the fish that feed on them). Its seeds are eaten by waterfowl and its roots are eaten by beaver and muskrats. Humans have also put the plant to good use. Native Americans ate the roots in stews or dried and ground into flour. The seeds were also gathered and popped like popcorn.

Mile 7.5—Williams Landing—The bridge pilings just up river from this boat ramp (our pit stop for the day) mark the site of an incident in 1882 in which four drowning men were saved by a Civil War veteran. At that time, it was common for residents to gather to maintain public roads. On this particular day, a group of men worked along the road leading to Williams Landing, and after building up a sweat, one crew member jumped in the river, only to find the water too deep. He went under and then three others went under trying to rescue him. Finally Capt. W.N. Hall pulled the drowning men to safety. One of the survivors of that scare, Andrew Lanier, told the *Bulloch Times* in a 1939 story about the incident: “Yes, I was dead, but Capt. Hall brought me back to life. And, I thank him for that.” Capt. Hall led a cavalry unit from Bulloch County in the later part of the Civil War.

Mile 8.9—Cut Through—The right channel here cuts off a quarter-mile oxbow (the left channel).

Mile 11.5—Shoals—Yes, shoals on the sandy Ogeechee! Though visible only in low water, portions of the Ogeechee's bed are “rock solid.” Given appropriate water levels, an extensive shoal can be found in this bend of the river and over the next mile, you may encounter additional shoals and rock outcroppings. However, the fall on the Ogeechee was not sufficient to justify the construction of water-powered mills along its banks. It was perhaps this lack of naturally-provided power that led William Hagins to establish the area's first steam-powered grist mill near here in 1876. When droughts struck, hampering the operation of water-powered mills, Hagins' steam mill kept running...and attracting farmers from all over the region.

Mile 14—Hagins Bridge—This location marks the site of an antebellum ferry and later, Hagins Bridge, which operated in the late 1800s. The bridge was built using a pile driver loaned from the Central of Georgia Railroad (on the north side of the river) which saw the new bridge as a means to capture and ship farm goods produced in Bulloch County (where no railroad connections yet existed). The Hagins family operated it as a toll bridge, but in 1893 a suspicious fire destroyed the span. The fire was ultimately blamed on the bridge's former toll collector, Henry Archer, who reportedly confessed to the arson shortly before he was hanged for murder in Screven County in 1895. The bridge was later rebuilt, but 1930s road maps show no bridge here. As Statesboro gained rail connections, the need to move goods cross river diminished and the numerous bridges spanning the Ogeechee fell into disuse.

