

# Mussel Macarena—Paddle Georgia 2016

June 23—Oostanaula River

**Distance:** 13 miles

**Starting Elevation:** 619 feet **Lat:** 34.4774°N **Lon:** -84.0314°W

**Ending Elevation:** 575 feet **Lat:** 34.3794°N **Lon:** -84.1253°W

**Restroom Facilities:**

<b>Mile 0</b>	Ga. 156 Boat Ramp
<b>Mile 7.5</b>	Private Property
<b>Mile 13</b>	Ga. 140 Boat Ramp

## **Points of Interest:**

**Mile 0.8—Georgia Cumberland Academy**—Located on the east bank of the river on 510 acres, the Georgia-Cumberland Academy (GCA) is a Seventh-day Adventist Christian school that offers classes to boarding and day students and uses its campus and the Oostanaula River as a learning laboratory. GCA is part of the Seventh-day Adventist educational system which currently has more than 1 million students attending some 6,000 schools in more than 100 countries. Since its founding in 1965, the school has served more than 7,000 students. The church purchased the property in 1915 and originally used it as a facility to care for the chronically ill.

**Mile 1.9—Reeves Station**—Just below Reeves Station Road is a small rock island and shoal. Just to the east is the community of Reeves Station. In 1870 when the Selma, Rome & Dalton Railroad was constructed through the area, Osborne Reeves, a local landowner granted the railway a right-of-way through his property for the grand sum of \$25 on condition that a depot would be established there and be named “Reeves.” Unfortunately for Reeves, before the depot could be built, the railroad went belly up and was purchased by the Georgia Southern Railroad which refused to honor Reeves’ original agreement. Reeves sued the company and in 1880, the case wound up before the Georgia Supreme Court that ruled in favor of Reeves. The depot was built and still stands today...though it was moved to Rome and now houses the city’s visitors center.

**Mile 4.8—Wing Dam**—At low water, these odd rock structures jutting out from the shore at a 90-degree angle will be obvious. In high water you might float over them without even a notice. Between 1874 and 1882, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers spent \$33,155 building these structures designed to constrict the river’s flow and increase depth to allow the passage of steamboats which traveled more than 45 miles upstream to the present day site of Carters Dam on the Coosawattee River. Reports indicate that at the height of construction in 1879, 1,513 cubic yards of rock were placed on these dams. The merchants in Rome celebrated these improvements as it kept that town as the gatekeeper for farm commodities coming down river from the rich farmland along these rivers. The establishment of the Oostanaula and Coosawattee Steamboat Company by a group of local investors was an attempt to compete with railroads and maintain the city’s supremacy as the region’s market center. But, by the late 1800s, the significance of this highway of commerce had greatly diminished as more and more goods were shipped via railroads. In 1903 the Corps reported “commercial benefits derived from improvement very small.” In fact, it was a railroad bridge that hastened the demise of the Oostanaula’s steamboat era. Said the Corps 1887 report: “Further expenditures not recommended till the railroad bridge near Rome be provided with a suitable draw.” Look for more wing dams from here down river to Rome.

**Mile 6.3—Johns Creek & the Oostanaula Pearl Rush**—Around 1897, a local farmer named Jack Bennett collected a basket full of mussels from Johns Creek in search of freshwater pearls. To his delight and surprise, he found several pea-sized gems and sent them off for appraisal and sale. A short time later, he received a check in the mail for \$189 (that’s the equivalent of more than \$5,000 today). Soon there after, the rush was on. An account in the Sept. 22, 1897 issue of the *Tennessean* newspaper in Nashville reported, “This put the neighborhood in a fever of excitement, the result being that entire families are camping on the river and creek...Now that attention has been directed to them (mussels) as a source of profit it is probable that every stream will be thoroughly and systematically ‘picked’ and great results are expected.” These turn-of-the-century profiteers weren’t the first to discover the beauty of freshwater pearls in this area. In June 1540 when Hernando De Soto’s army visited the Native American village of Chiaha (believed to be the present day site of Rome), the Spanish explorer was presented with a six-foot strand of pearls. When De Soto learned the source of the pearls, he immediately dispatched his men to the river in four canoes. They returned with the boats laden with shells, tossed them on hot coals and then searched for pearls, finding numerous specimens the size of peas. Sadly, today we may still be feeling the impacts of the turn-of-the-century pearl rush as well as pollution and the construction of dams. There were once 43 species of mussels found in the upper Coosa River basin; today only 27 remain and several of those are endangered. Filter feeders, mussels are among the first aquatic creatures to feel the effects of water pollution. Dams, both on the main stem of the Coosa, and its tributaries have also destroyed much mussel habitat and disrupted fish populations. The loss of fish diversity impacts mussels because the river-bottom dwelling invertebrates disperse their fertilized young (called glochidia) into the gills of fish where over time they develop into adult mussels and then fall to the river bottom. In this manner, mussel populations are dispersed. The stories of the long ago richness of mussel diversity in the Oostanaula are a testament to how much has been lost and the significance of human impact on this river system. Today, you would be hard pressed to find mussels in great enough abundance to find quality pearls. Georgia Department of Natural Resources mussel specialist Jason Wisniewski reported that when he surveyed Johns Creek in 2015, he found only a handful of mussels in the very headwaters of the creek.

**Mile 7.7—Bluffs & Ship Island**—A scenic highlight of this run of river, limestone bluffs on river right rise precipitously from the water’s edge followed just downstream by a large island and gravel bar.

**Mile 9.3—Gravel Bar & Interrupted Rocksnail**—This federally endangered snail was thought to be extinct—like 36 other snails that once inhabited the Coosa River basin—but in 1997, one was found by a U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service biologist in this stretch of the Oostanaula. Since then, biologists have been engaged in an effort to find and propagate this aquatic snail in hopes of establishing populations elsewhere in the Coosa River basin. The rocksnail is partial to clean, mixed substrates like this gravel bar. Snails, like mussels, help keep our rivers clean, feeding off algae on rocks. They also become food for ducks, fish and turtles.

**Mile 10.3—Horton Bend & Shell Midden**—In this bend of the river at the base of the bluffs you may find a small shell midden, an exposed deposit of brittle and crumbling mussels. These middens are not uncommon along the Oostanaula and they likely mark a long-ago feeding location for river otters or muskrats that forage on freshwater mussels. One of the best ways to find mussel shells is to patrol the banks of the river and look for entrances to otter and muskrat dens. Often times these entrances will be littered with freshly-harvested mussel shells, most often the small, but heavy-shelled Alabama orb and three-horned warty back species.

**Mile 11.5—Lake Sturgeon**—Since 2002, the Georgia Department of Natural Resources has released more than 85,000 fingerling lake sturgeon into the Coosa River system, many of them along this stretch of the Oostanaula. The program aims to restore sturgeon to portions of their native range. Overfishing, dams, and declining water quality have been blamed for the extirpation of sturgeon in the upper Coosa River basin. Prior to the re-stocking program, the last known sighting of a sturgeon in the upper Coosa was in the 1960s. In those days, they were abundant...and big: one angler reported catching 1,400 pounds of sturgeon on trotlines within a two week period with the largest fish weighing 59 pounds. Recent fish surveys show that the restocking has been more successful than anticipated. In recent years, sturgeon have been caught that exceed four feet in length and some appear to be reaching sexual maturity. Males reach sexual maturity at between 8 and 19 years old, while female lake sturgeon may not spawn until their 20<sup>th</sup> year or older. Often referred to as a living fossil, they are part of a family of fish that have existed for more than 135 million years.



**Mile 12.9—Shoal**—This small shoal is notable for the unusual limestone formations on river right.

