

Radioactive Rumba—Paddle Georgia 2017

June 17—Etowah River

Distance: 15 miles

Starting Elevation: 1053 feet **Lat:** 34.35753°N **Lon:** -84.11374°W

Ending Elevation: 958 feet **Lat:** 34.31372°N, **Lon:** -84.22874°W

Restroom Facilities:

Mile 0	Etowah River Park
Mile 9	Kelly Bridge Road
Mile 15	Eagles Beak Park

Points of Interest:

Mile 0—Mountain Stewards Launch Site—Built in 2009, this Dawson County maintained launch site is another feather in the cap of a community that promotes itself as an outdoor recreation Mecca. Like many of the launches along the Etowah, its development was a cooperative effort between a local government, a private landowner and a non-profit organization like the Mountain Stewards, an organization dedicated to restoring and building recreational trails in North Georgia. The Stewards have designed and constructed numerous boat launches and between 2005 and 2010 opened up some 34 miles of canoe trails in North Georgia, including this site. The launch cost approximately \$10,000 to construct.

Mile 1.2—Etowah Water & Sewer Authority— On river right is the Etowah Water & Sewer Authority’s wastewater treatment facility which treats about a half million gallons of sewage each day through a land application system. After sewage is given primary treatment, the effluent is then sprayed on the land surrounding the facility. The advantage of this system is that wastewater is not discharged directly to the river. The disadvantage is that less water is returned immediately to the river—an increasing concern as more and more people depend upon the river for drinking water. EWSA’s future plans call for the development of a new facility that will treat up to 10 million gallons a day and return treated water directly to the river.

Mile 2—Shoal Creek Road and the Georgia Nuclear Aircraft Laboratory—This spot marks the river’s entry into the Dawson Forest Wildlife Management Area, a 10,000-acre tract of land that flanks the river on both sides for the next five miles. You’d hardly guess it from the looks of things today, but from 1956 until 1971, engineers with Lockheed Aircraft Corp. tried to build a nuclear-powered airplane at this site for the US Air Force and conducted rather frightening tests on the effects of radiation. You’ll see signs of Georgia Nuclear Aircraft Laboratory (GNAL), including the water intake structure just downstream of the bridge here. Abandoned bridge piers at several sites on the river mark the locations of roads and a railroad system that linked the lab’s facilities that included a nuclear reactor, a cooling site and a hot-cell building. The compound even held an underground “shielded site”, where employees sheltered when the reactor was operational, and an underground parking facility. Although the plane was a bust, other radioactive material related research was performed at GNAL. In these tests a 10 mega-watt radiation effects reactor was used to expose various materials to radiation to study the effects. This reactor was housed in a large metal building with no protection for the surrounding area. In fact, low levels of radiation can still be found in three acres of the Forest. This area is restricted. When not in use, the reactor was submerged in a swimming pool-like structure filled with water from the Etowah. The land is now owned by the City of Atlanta which purchased it with intentions of building a second Atlanta airport. The Georgia Forestry Commission has managed the forest, which includes 27 miles of hiking, biking and equestrian trails, since 1975.

Mile 4—Shoal Creek: Reservoirs and Water Transfers—On river right here, Shoal Creek spills into the Etowah. Shoal Creek has been called the “epicenter” of the biodiversity in the Upper Etowah River basin because of its healthy fish populations, including the federally protected Etowah and Cherokee darters. About a quarter mile upstream is the proposed site of a dam that if built will inundate 1200 acres of the forest for a water supply reservoir. The project, which has been considered since the early 1990s, is designed to meet regional water needs, including those of Metro Atlanta. One proposal would have water pumped from the Etowah to fill the reservoir and then piped some 40 miles to metro Atlanta through a process known as an “interbasin transfer.” Such transfers involve moving water from one river basin to another without returning that water to the river of its origin. Water transfers have become one of the most controversial water management practices in Georgia because they deprive downstream communities of the use of the water and can threaten healthy flows.

Mile 5.6—Waterfall—A short walk up the small tributary on river left here will lead you to a beautiful waterfall.

Mile 6.1—Radioactive Rapid—The one shoal of significance on this section of river, it is marked by an island that splits the river’s current. The preferred route is on far river left where you will descend over a pair of short shelves. High water makes a path around either side of the island possible. Those not wishing to paddle the rapid can portage, beginning at the head of the island.

Mile 7—Amicalola Creek—Sometimes referred to as the Amicalola River, this stream has its beginnings above Amicalola Falls. At 729-feet, Amicalola Falls is the tallest cascading waterfall east of the Mississippi. The river itself is a whitewater destination, best known for the aptly named “Edge of the World” rapid.

Mile 7.6—Rock Face—The impressive rock bluff on river right provides a glimpse of the region’s geologic history. On its course from the mountains to Rome, the river cuts through three distinct geological areas—Eastern Blue Ridge, Western Blue Ridge and Ridge and Valley. The Eastern Blue Ridge represents a 500-550 million year old intraoceanic volcanic arc similar to the present-day Philippines. The Western Blue Ridge comprises North American sedimentary rocks that were deeply buried and metamorphosed during accretion of the Eastern Blue Ridge and formation of the Appalachian Mountain system. The Ridge & Valley is underlain by North American sedimentary rocks that were folded during Appalachian mountain building.

Mile 11.8—Ledbetter Bridge—The stone pier here is what remains of this bridge that spanned the river as late as 1890. Johnson Ledbetter and his family moved to the area in 1838. In tow was his aging father, Revolutionary War veteran Richard Ledbetter III, who died three years after arriving and is buried along with his descendants in a cemetery overlooking the river nearby.

Mile 12.1—Yellow Creek/Lathem Reservoir—About two miles upstream on Yellow Creek sits the Cherokee County Water & Sewer Authority’s (CCWSA) 411-acre Hollis Lathem Reservoir. The project is considered a “drought contingency” reservoir and was built when CCWSA needed to increase its water withdrawal downstream on the Etowah in the early 1990s. Water from the reservoir is released downstream when the Etowah dips below a certain level, allowing the CCWSA to keep the water flowing to homes and businesses in Cherokee County. It is one of two water supply reservoirs built since 1990 to supply water for Cherokee County residents. Increased water demands and the proliferation of water supply projects like Lathem are among the biggest threats to the health and biodiversity of the Etowah. Lathem, and Hickory Log Reservoir downstream, both destroyed critical habitat for the federally protected Cherokee darter, a fish found in the Etowah River basin and no where else in the world.

Mile 12.4—Riverbend Gun Club—This private shooting range on river right caters to some 1600 gun enthusiasts who pay annual membership dues of \$300 for the privilege of using the Club’s ten firing ranges. Originally located on the Chattahoochee River in North Fulton County, the history of the club tells the story of Atlanta’s sprawl since the 1980s. In Fulton County, upscale neighbors pushed their noisy neighbors north to Forsyth County. As that county grew, the Club sought out more secluded surroundings, bringing them to this location in Dawson County. As you paddle past this facility, you will undoubtedly hear gun shots. Don’t fret; you’ll have no bullets flying overhead. All the shooting is on controlled ranges.

Mile 13.8 Eagles Point Landfill—That smell you smell isn’t your fellow paddler; it’s a regional landfill situated along the western bank of the river. The facility spans nearly two miles of riverfront and currently uses some 160 acres to dispose of waste from Forsyth and many surrounding counties. Advanced Disposal has applied for state permits to expand the landfill by some 70 acres and build a methane collection plant on site, but local activists are calling on the state to require more oversight to protect ground and surface water and limit the expansion’s impacts on surrounding neighbors over the next 30 years of the landfill’s expected lifespan.