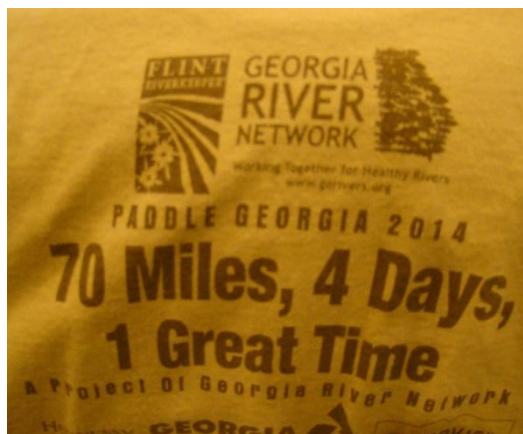


Padding Trip Report: 2014 Fall Float on the Flint

By Jean Swann



The official Fall Float on the Flint T-shirt

The T-shirt says it all: *70 miles, 4 days, 1 great time!* When I picked up my shirt at the sign-in table for the Georgia River Network's Fall Float on the Flint, I thought to myself that the organizers were showing unbounded optimism, because I have never paddled more than five or six miles in a day. That was about to change!

Mark and I were among 175 paddlers who made our way down Georgia's Flint River from just below the dam at Albany to a boat ramp just above Bainbridge over the Columbus Day long weekend. Most people, including ourselves, were in kayaks. Those vessels ranged from short and stubby sit-on-top fishing kayaks to long and sleek touring kayaks. Mark's touring boat was one of the longer ones at 14 ½ feet, but one elderly couple had a 21 ½-foot two-man job! A few people were in canoes, and one brave woman took on the river on a stand-up paddleboard!

Mark and I had heard of Paddle Georgia for several years, but the seven-day June trips seemed out of the question, time-wise. Then Mark got an email about an abbreviated trip that would take place in the fall. Paddle Georgia is so popular that over 800 paddling enthusiasts applied for the 450 available Paddle Georgia slots, which sold out quickly. With such an overwhelming demand for more paddling opportunities, Georgia River Network responded by creating and hosting the Fall Float on the Flint.

Thursday evening we dropped off our boats at the dam and set up our camp at Chehaw Park close to the entrance of the Wild Animal Park. Although we didn't see any exotic escapees while we were camping, an armadillo did invade our site at one point. After a kickoff banquet, announcements and a safety briefing, the Chehaw staff treated us to a wild animal program, complete with a king snake, gopher tortoise, baby alligator, great horned owl, red-shouldered hawk, and a cute-as-a-button screech owl.



Mark near the Flint Hydro Dam

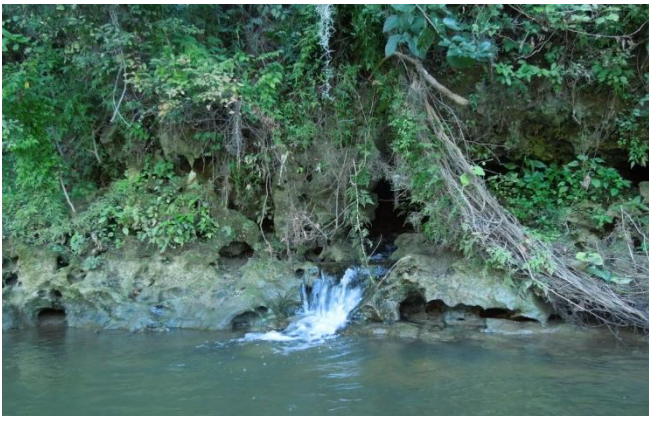
Sleep was elusive Thursday night, and the pre-dawn breakfast and shuttle to the river came way too early for comfort! Once at the river, though, adrenaline was pumping. We put in very close to the dam, and the current was strong. Within the first few minutes we came to the first and most difficult shoals of the trip. I got really anxious about paddling into the rapids, as my 13 ½-foot craft is made for flat-water touring, NOT for whitewater! The trip organizers had posted someone on the shoals to help guide us to the easiest way through. Mark went first. His cockpit took in quite a bit of water as the bow dipped into the churning froth. Lucky for me, I had our emergency gear in the back hatch of my boat, so the extra weight kept my bow tipped slightly upwards and I slid through the shoals unscathed and dry!

Once the current calmed a bit, I began to notice the lush ferns, vines, and wildflowers growing on the beautifully pocked and sculpted limestone on the banks. The topography here is known for its ledges and caves. The downside of this rugged beauty is that the edges of the rocks are as sharp as knives, and if you hit one lurking midstream, your boat will be the worse for it.

We paddled under several bridges and passed downtown Albany, but the feeling was one of being in the wilderness since the city planners had wisely left a wide band of natural growth along the banks. We got out briefly at the Albany Riverquarium, but in the interest of time, we didn't join the other paddlers to go inside for a tour.



Viewing grotto-like overhanging rocks

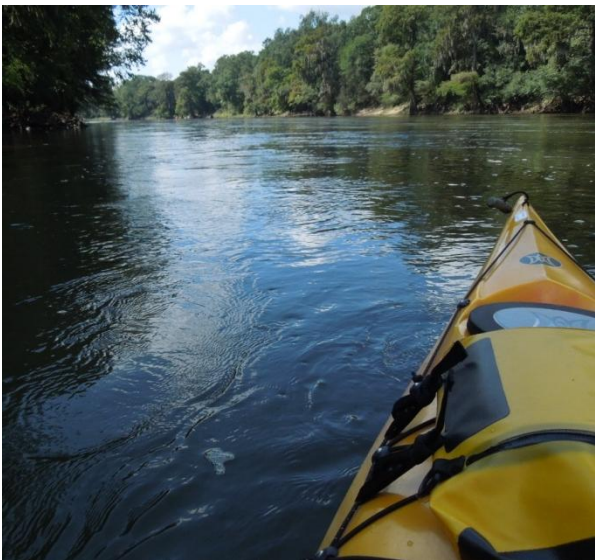


Small spring flowing from the rocks along the bank

Along the banks we saw numerous springs flowing from the rocks, and some boiled up mid-river. Interestingly, in the 80 river miles from Albany to Bainbridge, there are only six small tributaries that add water to the Flint. All the other water that enlarges the river comes from 20 or more springs along the river. They issue from the Floridan Aquifer, which lies underneath the entire state of Florida as well as southern portions of Georgia, Alabama, and South Carolina and covers an area of 100,000 square miles. It is one of the world's most productive aquifers. I really did not know much about aquifers or the Flint – or even rivers in general – prior to this trip. Fortunately, the trip organizers provided everyone with daily maps, on the backs of which were points of interest, educational tidbits, and the history of the area.

We passed close to Radium Springs, Georgia's largest spring and one of the state's "Seven Natural Wonders." Some 70,000 gallons per minute of the spring's blue waters enter the river by a creek-like channel inaccessible to boats.

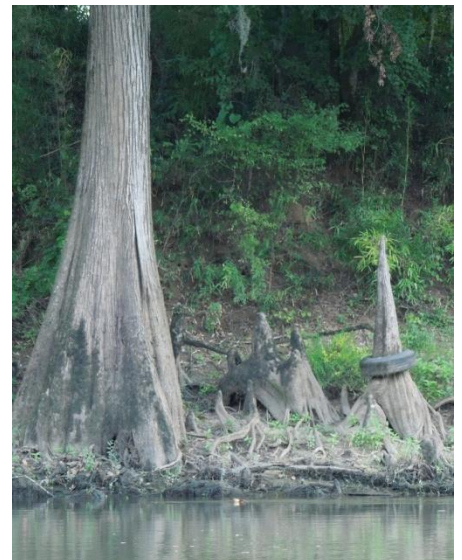
From our put-in to the takeout 14 miles (and some seven hours) later at Mitchell County Boat Ramp, we were pretty much on our own. Even though there were 175 paddlers on the river with us, much of the time Mark and I were not within sight of other boats. It was like having the river to ourselves. We saw many majestic and stately cypress trees, banks covered with beautiful purple, yellow, orange, and white fall wildflowers, and the ever-present gnarly limestone bluffs. Twice we came upon teams of ichthyologists (fish scientists) who were seining for and recording data about aquatic creatures. They were happy to share information about what they had found. Overall, the river was clean and surprisingly clear, but we did see a few unusual pieces of trash.



Not another soul in sight!



Ichthyologists gathering data



Tire captured by a cypress knee

At the Mitchell County Boat Ramp, we pulled our kayaks up on the sand, where security workers would watch them overnight. We returned to Chehaw on buses, replenished our energy with a huge barbecue meal, listened to a program about how politics affect rivers and aquifers, and then got a few hours of sleep.

Saturday morning arrived early, but not bright! The river was socked in with fog. We soon passed a nice spring gushing from the karst ledge above the water. I appreciated that cool, sunless morning, as later in the day the temperatures climbed into the upper 80s, and on Sunday into the 90s. In the afternoons, I pulled out my trekking umbrella and wedged it between my lifejacket and my back so I could paddle and be shaded at the same time.



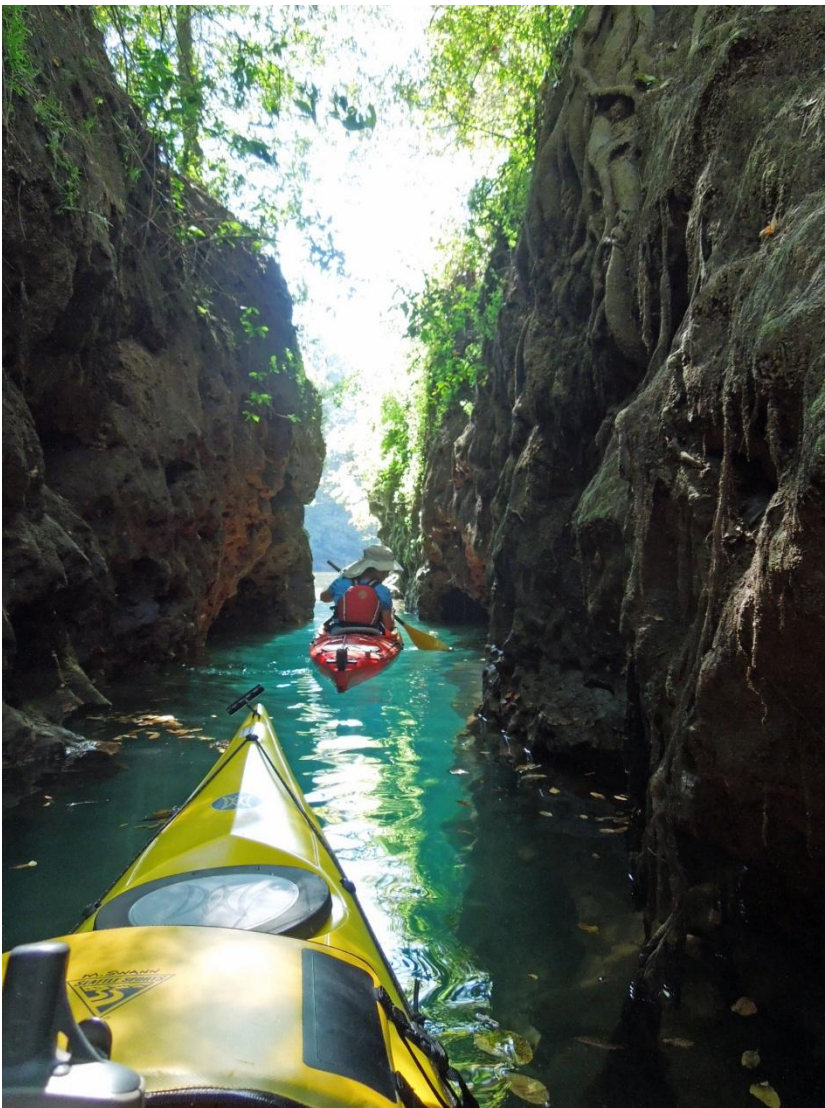
At left, a foggy morning on the Flint River. Above, welcome shade from my trekking umbrella

Early Saturday we passed a lovely house that I would never want to live in – it was perched on the bitter edge of a dirt bluff that was in the process of eroding away beneath it. It made me wonder how much thought was put into the practicality of placing a house in a position that affords a magnificent view but almost guarantees that the forces of nature will one day claim it.

Saturday's paddle was a whopping 22 miles! It was also a slow section of the river, dropping only 14 feet in those 22 miles. The paddling was often slow and arduous.

The highlight of the whole trip, as far as I was concerned, was in the afternoon when we reached Double Springs, where water entering the river from springs had eroded a slot into the limestone bluff, allowing enough space for a kayak to enter the crevice but not to turn around.

We backed in about 75 feet and got a beautiful backlit view of the clear, aquamarine spring water. Looking straight down we could easily peer about 40 to 50 feet into the abyss below us. Divers have described the descent into the spring cave here as about 250 feet long, dropping to 90 feet deep. Then, at the bottom, it turns and goes beneath the river, continuing into Mitchell County. There, they have found catfish more than three feet long, Georgia blind cave salamanders, and Dougherty Plain cave crayfish. The salamanders have no eyes, and the crayfish have a set of pigment-less eyes and antennae twice as long as their bodies.



Beautiful aquamarine spring water surrounded by limestone cliffs

The spring waters were amazingly cold, but several paddlers braved the chill and swam into the crevice to

peer down at the rocky boundaries of the spring cave. Mark and I were satisfied to stay afloat and just inspect it visually.



Looking down into the spring cave

Next in the series of educational opportunities was, on a sandbar, a chance to talk with a malacologist (scientist who studies mollusks) and then, in a forest farther up the bank, a question-and-answer session with an expert on longleaf pine trees.

Not a moment too soon for my tired arm muscles, we rounded a bend and pulled up to our takeout at Rocky Bend Flint River Retreat, a beautiful retreat center right on the riverbank, complete with a rope swing, bankside camping, and an air-conditioned chow hall! While we were paddling, the Georgia River Network people had transported all our camping gear to the retreat center, so we simply stored our boats on the grass for overnight, retrieved our gear, set up camp, enjoyed an outstanding dinner of chicken fajitas and beef burritos, and then fell asleep listening to the calls of owls and the sounds of the river.

Sunday was easier since the current picked up slightly and we only covered 18 miles.



Our orange tent on the river bank

About halfway down the route, bobwhite quail management experts were answering questions at Covey Rise Plantation. Quail are the state's official game birds, and there are numerous hunting "plantations" in South Georgia. Not long later we were passing the Joseph W. Jones Ecological Research Center, a 29,000-acre outdoor laboratory that was once the quail hunting reserve of the chairman of the Coca-Cola Company. It went on and on for miles! We came to one of the few tributaries I mentioned earlier, this one charmingly named Ichawaynochaway Creek. The beautiful stream flows through the heart of the Jones Center property and was the subject of a landmark legal decision in the 1990s that addressed stream and river access for recreational boaters in Georgia. Since the Jones Center owns the land on both sides of the stream and the stream is not considered "navigable" for freight-bearing boats, the owners were allowed to fence it off and keep paddlers out. We paddled up the swiftly-moving waters just short of the cable that marks the extent of allowable passage. Despite the history of contention regarding the area, you've got to love the name of the creek, which, in the Muskogee Indian language, means "the place where deer sleep."

Once we reached the Hoggard Mill Road boat ramp, we beached our vessels and rode a bus back to the retreat center for a cook-out and our second night of camping there. Mark and I opted to take a late-evening seminar on water quality testing, courtesy of representatives from Adopt-A-Stream. We learned the objectives and the methods used by the organization, and the next day we would actually practice taking samples and performing the tests while on the river.



Mark doing chemical testing

Soon after putting in on Monday morning, our water quality instructors and the five students pulled up to a bank and prepared to test the water. The testing locations had been pre-selected and marked by GPS. We collected data such as air and water temperature and made visual observations about the weather and the water. Then we did chemical testing to determine levels of dissolved oxygen, pH, and electrical conductivity. Since the testing was time-consuming, we should not have been surprised when the trip's "sweep" paddled up to our group, announced that we were at the very tail end of the 175 paddlers, and proceeded to pull out a paperback book to read while we finished our testing. We knew we would have to paddle hard to catch up with the others and to make it to the final takeout by 4:45 p.m., the supposed time for everyone to be off the river.

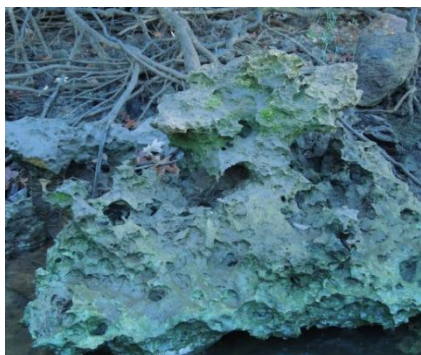
Earlier that morning the sky had been clear and beautiful, but it didn't stay that way for long. As we set off to catch the group, headwinds picked up significantly, and mare's tails swept quickly across the sky, foretelling of storms to come. Paddling became



difficult. Whitecaps formed on the water, blowing *UP* the river, whipped by the winds channeling between the tree-lined banks. Once, I quit paddling and was actually blown back up the river against the now-sluggish current. After the mare's tails blew past, the wind diminished somewhat, but it was still strong enough to be annoying. A bank of dark clouds menaced on the southern horizon. We paddled hard, determined to complete our 18 miles to the takeout before the rains came.

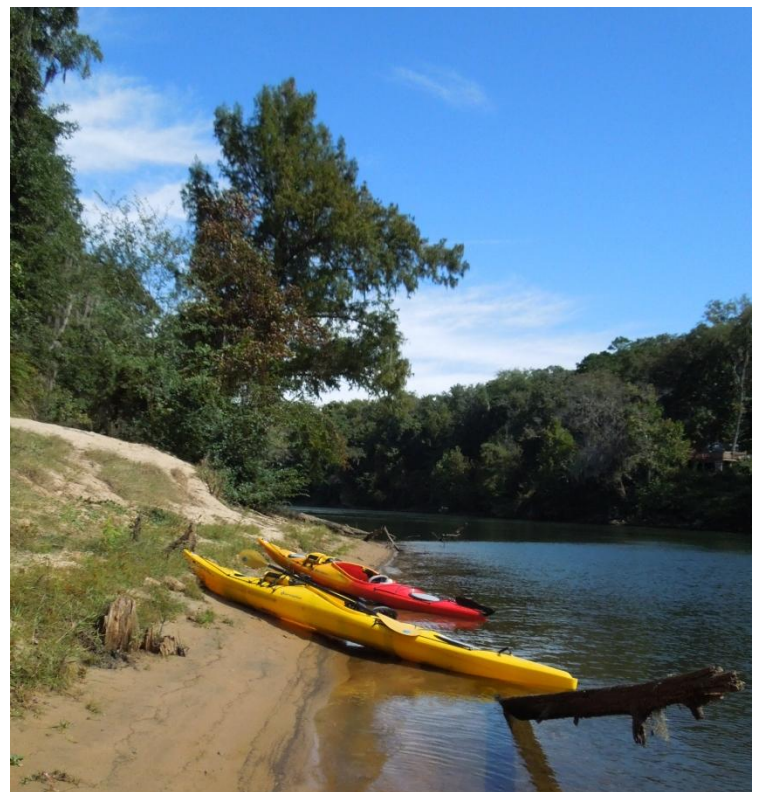
Ominous skies, but safe passage before evening storms

We passed huge tracts of farmland – some with pastures full of cattle and many with cropland watered by center-point irrigation. Our maps told us that the state has issued more than 10,000 permits for farmers to draw water for irrigation in the Flint River Valley, at the height of the growing season drawing *two billion* (!) gallons of water *a day* from the river and the Floridan Aquifer. That's nearly four times the amount of water that the 15-county metro Atlanta area uses daily.



Jagged piece of Ocala limestone

About six miles north of the terminus of our trip, the nature of the banks changed drastically as we paddled past the last hurrah of the Ocala limestone formations and into an area of low, sandy shorelines that reportedly contain the occasional world-class fossil.



Lunch break near a cow pasture



We passed a sign that indicated a 600,000-gallon sewage spill had occurred there two years ago. Better not get out to swim!

Still eyeing the clouds, we quickly paddled to the final takeout. Ecstatic that we had made it the whole 70 miles and were still alive and well, we quickly placed our

Yikes! Sewage spill!

boats near the 18-wheeler that would carry them back to Chehaw Park, boarded the bus, and called it a weekend!



Our boats waiting to be loaded onto the 18-wheeler



Yipee! We made it!