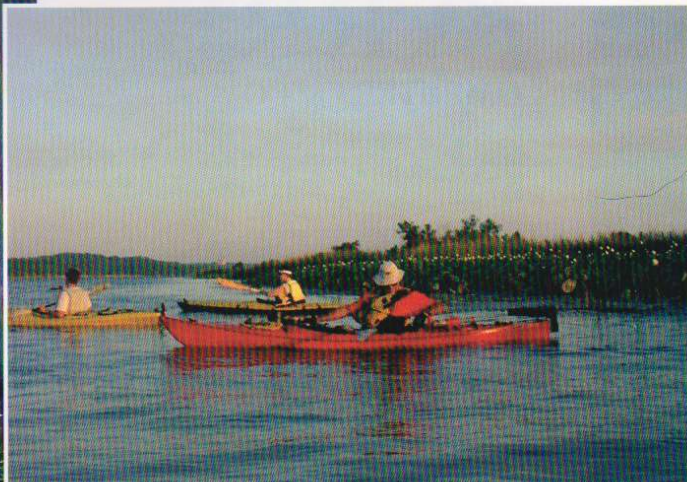


The Mobile Bay Canoe and Kayak Club frequently organizes outings in nearby waters for paddlers.

PADDLING *south* ALABAMA

Excerpted from *Paddling Alabama*
By Joe Cuhaj and Curt Burdick
Published by The Globe Pequot Press

A GUIDE TO THREE
OF THE AREA'S UNIQUE
PADDLING ADVENTURES.



PHOTOS BY ROBERT A. NYKVIST

ESCATAWPA RIVER

Trip Summary

The Escatawpa is a swift-moving blackwater river with plenty of deep pools to swim in and beautiful white sandbars. The sandbars allow for overnight camping anywhere along the entire route. The river can be paddled or can be floated with an inner tube.

Trip Description

Generically they're known as blackwater rivers. These are rivers that flow fairly deep and have a dark red or black tint to them, which comes from

tannic acid from the oak trees that line the riverbanks. The dark colors are accentuated by beautiful fine-grain white-sand beaches, which can be found around every bend. These rivers are mostly found in the lower third of the state, primarily in the Gulf Coast and southeast regions.

The Escatawpa is one such blackwater river, but what makes the river special is its location and remoteness. Other rivers of this type - such as the Styx and Perdido - pack the people in during the summer mainly because of

their easy access from Escambia County, Florida, and Baldwin County, Alabama. The Escatawpa is located in a very remote section of western Mobile County. As a matter of fact, you will pass only two houses on this trip, and they are at the very beginning. Because of this isolation, if for some reason you need help, you will need to flag down passing boaters or float to the end.

While floating the river, you will see a wide range of animals, including white-tailed deer, hawks, and wild turkey. The last quarter of the trip sees

the river widen and slow down. Here, with trees lining the low, muddy banks straight to the rivers edge, you will most likely see snakes - including king, marsh, and cottonmouth - sunning themselves on downed trees in the river. You will also encounter a few turtles, such as box and mud turtles. Some fish can be found in the river, primarily small minnows, but bass and bream are also there. Trees include pine, magnolia, and dogwood.

The great thing about blackwater rivers is that they make great "play" rivers. The sandbars - deemed the finest in the country - allow you plenty of places to pull ashore, eat lunch, and swim in the waters, which can be five plus feet deep in places. The sandbars and the remoteness also allow you to make it an overnight trip, with excellent campsites available on any sandbar. If you would like a longer overnight trip, you can make the river a 23-mile

trip by heading farther north to County Road 96 and putting in next to the bridge.

The Escatawpa is not fed by any of the surrounding rivers, which means that it is not prone to flooding like many of the other rivers in this region. But don't get us wrong. As you paddle, look for the high-water line etched into the banks from past hurricanes, such as Georges. The water rose about five feet above normal from the runoff.

For approximately 12 miles of this trip, the banks are lined with sandbars and the river has a fairly deep channel. However, the channel has a tendency to disappear at the bends in the river where the sandbars are located, making it easy to run aground on a shoal. The last three miles of the river become wide - approximately 100 feet. Here it runs straight and deep, with steep mud and sand embankments. There are plenty of small feeder creeks trickling in here. The river's speed also slows down, making it a prime area for misquotes, so bring the insect repellent.

Getting There: Put-in and Takeout Information

To shuttle point/takeout: From Mobile take I-65 north to exit 5B. Head west on U.S. Highway 98 (Moffett Road). Stay in the center lane as you come off the interstate. Travel west exactly 22 miles. The campground and canoe rentals are to the left (there is a big obvious sign there). You are less than a mile from Mississippi. If you pass the state line, you've gone too far.

The takeout is located at the Escatawpa Hollow Campground about 300 yards pass the US 98 bridge. This is the only bridge you cross under on this trip. There is a sandbar to the left as you round a bend to take out. If you pass under a railroad trestle, you've overshot the takeout. Head into the woods from the sandbar, and follow the dirt road back to your vehicle.



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Trip Information

Contact

Escatawpa Hollow Campground and Canoe Rental, 15551 Moffett Road, Wilmer, AL 36587, (251) 649-4233. Camping and RV sites are available. Also available are air-conditioned cabins, each with a kitchen, microwave, TV, and telephone.



Season

Year-round. The water may get shallow at certain times of the year, depending on rainfall, but it is still floatable.

Fees/Permits

No permit is required for paddling the river. Escatawpa Hollow Campground rents canoes. Canoe rentals for the 7- and 15-mile trips are \$30, and for the 23-mile overnight trip are \$50. If you own a canoe, the campground will provide a shuttle: \$18 for overnight trip (\$15.00 for shuttle, \$3.00 parking).

River Specs

County: Mobile. Start Ferry Road. End: Escatawpa Hollow Campground. Length: 12.1 miles. Approximate float time: 5 hours. Difficulty rating: Easy. Rapids: None. River type: Float. Mainly

narrow river, averaging about 50 feet in width. Current: Moderate. Environment: Sandy beaches; a wide variety of flora and fauna. Elevation drop: 1.7 feet per mile. Land status: Unincorporated. Nearest town (or city): Wilmer. Other users: A few fishermen in small boats toward the end of the trip as the river deepens.

MAGNOLIA RIVER

Trip Summary

The distinguishing features of this lazy float trip down the deep, wide Magnolia are not necessarily flora and fauna; however, the area does have more than its fair share. The first part of this trip is marked by something not usually encountered on other trips in this book: houses, beautiful and ornate, lining the banks; houses that reflect old southern style and charm. The river and its surrounding beauty still shine through.

Trip Description

Alabama is a large state with diverse forms of plants and wildlife species. The Magnolia River is located south of

Baldwin County, east of Weeks Bay, which is a small estuarine embayment off Mobile Bay containing approximately three square miles of open shallow water averaging 4.5 feet in depth. Weeks Bay is fringed with *Spartina* and *Juncus* marsh and swamp (with pine, oak, maple, and cyprus trees, among others). Weeks Bay receives salt water from the Gulf of Mexico through Mobile Bay and fresh water from the Magnolia and Fish Rivers. It is a critical nursery for fish, crustaceans, and shellfish. Like the Mobile-Tensaw River Delta, the combination of salt water and fresh water makes Weeks Bay a diverse and fragile habitat for plants and wildlife.

At the put-in the river is deep and more than 100 feet wide. The current is nominal the entire length, leaving the option of an out-and-back trip. You'll head west for one-third a mile, then bend hard toward the south. At this tight bend are some very nice houses and docks on the river. The width narrows to about 40 feet. Soon the course changes again, bending right to place you on a north-northwest bearing. Here the river widens to more than 200 feet, and houses become more sparse on the right and nonexistent on the left. You'll bend slowly left toward the west and likely begin to encounter some powerboat traffic. Stay on the right side of the river. You are just past the 1-mile mark when you travel past a small cove on the right.

Soon the river bends left again to the south, with a marshy area off to the left. You are likely to see egrets and herons around here, perched on trees and wading on the banks. At the bottom of the bend is a Y, where Weeks Creek splits to the left and Magnolia cuts back to the west. Follow the Magnolia west. More marsh is on the right side, and off to the left is a small, flat, open area where you may stop and take a breather. The next 2 miles are generally a straight shot to the west-

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southwest, after which you'll enter Weeks Bay if you decide to finish up at the US 98 Fish River bridge.

Just a tenth of a mile after Weeks Creek, there is a small island on the left. There are some old pilings on both sides of the island that used to be two small piers. Many times anglers will tuck their boats in at a great fishing spot on the other side of the island. Just about another tenth of a mile past the island, you'll pass Eslava Branch off to the right, with marshy land and reeds on either side. At this point you are exactly 2 miles from the put-in. This may be a good place to turn around and head back if you don't care to finish up by paddling the open water of Weeks bay. (It also depends on where you had left your shuttle vehicle!)

If you do choose to paddle from the put-in to the takeout, you are in for some open-water paddling for about 2 miles along the Weeks Bay shoreline on the final stretch of the trip. Anyone who has done open-water paddling knows that conditions may be quite different than a river trip. Wind is a factor when paddling on open water. It can kick up waves, and, depending on the wind's direction versus the intended course of the boat, it may greatly help or hinder forward progress.

The Weeks Bay National Estuarine Research Reserve encompasses 3,028 acres of land and water in and around Weeks Bay, Mobile Bay, and Fish River. It presently includes an interpretive center housing four offices, a laboratory, a conference room, a small classroom, and a lobby/exhibit area as well as a 2,500-foot handicapped accessible boardwalk with observation deck overlooking the bay and a raised catwalk over a wetlands habitat. The reserve offers presentations to teachers, school groups, and the general public. Many other environmental education programs are also available.

Paddling the Magnolia River and

Weeks Bay is a relaxing, inspiring trip. It's just one more example of Alabama's extensive natural beauty.

Getting There: Put-in and Takeout Information

To shuttle point/takeout: From the intersection of Alabama 59 and U.S. Highway 98 in Foley, take US 98 west 8.8 miles. Just before the bridge over Fish River, turn right onto Grounds Lane. Follow Grounds Lane west 0.1 mile to the parking area.

This is a nice gravel parking lot directly on the riverbank with room for fifteen to twenty cars. The put-in is 10 feet from the parking lot at the base of a T fishing pier. The bank is a low, sloping dirt bank that is easy to walk.

Trip Information

Contact

Weeks Bay National Estuarine, Research Reserve, Alabama Department of Economic and Community Affairs, 11300 U.S. Highway 98, Fairhope, AL 36532, (251) 928-9792

Season

Year-round. Watch for powerboat traffic in the warm months.

Fees/Permits

There is no fee for putting in, paddling, or taking out.

River Specs

County: Baldwin. Start County Road 49. End: U.S. Highway 98 or loop back to CR 49. Length: 5.9 miles point to point or 11.8 miles out and back. Approximate float time: Three-and-one-half-hours point to point. Difficulty rating: Easy. Rapids: None. River type: River float, with some open-bay paddling, depending on course. Current: Slow on river, tidal current on bay. Environment: Wide, flat river flowing into open bay with marsh grass bayous; various wildflowers and wildlife. Elevation drop: None. Land status: Private along river, Weeks Bay National Estuary along Weeks Bay. Nearest town (or city): Foley. Other users: Motorboats, anglers.

40 | AUGUST - Mobile Bay Monthly

NAVY COVE

Trip Summary

The Navy Cove trip floats along the banks of Mobile Bay just on the north side of the peninsula from the Gulf of Mexico. It takes you through the salty water of the bay through the Bon Secour Wildlife Refuge, which is home to many beautiful and endangered species of wildlife and has plenty of bayous for exploring.



Trip Description

In the middle of the peninsula that forms the lower mouth of Mobile Bay, where the bay meets the Gulf of Mexico, lies the extraordinary Bon Secour National Wildlife Refuge. This is where you will find the Navy Cove run.

The refuge covers 6,500 acres of land and is the home to hundreds of species of animals, including numerous endangered species. For example, along the 4-mile-long Pine Beach Trail, you can hike to the pristine white beaches of the Gulf of Mexico and visit the habitat of the endangered beach mouse or see the nesting areas of the loggerhead sea turtle and gopher tortoise.

On the opposite side of this narrow

peninsula lies Mobile Bay. It is here where the salt water of the Gulf mixes with the fresh water from the Mobile River to form a brackish environment for even more wildlife that is rarely found anywhere else in the world. This is where our trip begins. It will take us around the banks of Navy Cove and St. Andrew's Bay, and then to Little Point Clear, before returning to our original put-in, known as Pirate's Cove.

We call this trip Navy Cove because that's the name of the area you will first paddle through once you arrive at the put-in. The beauty of this trip is the many bayous you will pass that will invite you to explore them. Feel free to do so, but you should not travel down the very narrow (3- to 5-foot-wide) bayous off to the side of the main inlets. Within the beautifully swaying marsh grass is a formerly endangered species of animal that calls the refuge home: the American alligator. The alligators that live in the refuge average 4 to 6 feet in length and can often be seen looking like a log with two eyes floating in the water. Although alligators are naturally afraid of humans, don't test the odds - stay clear of them!

While on the water, there is a good chance you will meet area fishermen checking their net for mullet and crabs. If you like to fish, purchase a fishing license and bring along your rod. The mullet in the bayous will be jumping all around your boat.

Before you get under way, a few words of warning: First, this trip can include some open-water bay paddling. Tides can be strong at times, so be prepared for heavy paddling. Keep this in mind, and leave ample time for the return trip. Life jackets are essential on a paddle of this nature! The water can become very deep, and there are waves.

Second, keep an eye on the weather. The weather in south Alabama is unpredictable, especially in the summer, when late-afternoon thunderstorms pop up frequently with very heavy rainfall. In these situations you will face rough seas and the possibility of flooding your canoe. If you are faced with an impending storm and cannot make it to the takeout, pull to the nearest beach, and wait it out.

This is a fun trip with plenty of exploration possibilities. The route we have outlined is only an example, and the time of the trip will vary, depending on how much you explore. One note about the paddle itself: On the return trip, from the southern finger that forms the mouth of St. Andrews Bay, you may want to shave some time off of the trip. You do not have to follow the shore back around to the put-in. With a compass, from the tip of the finger, head on a bearing of 250 degrees, and you should arrive back at Pirate's Cove (refer to the map).

As you visit the refuge, remember that this is a fragile habitat. Fires are not allowed anywhere in the refuge. Take your trash out with you, and leave the area as you found it.

Getting There: Put-in and Takeout Information

Put-in/takeout: From the intersec-

tion of State Road 59 and State Road 180 in Gulf Shores, take SR 180 west. Travel 6.3 miles; the Bon Secour Wildlife Refuge office will be on the right. Continue west on SR 180 for 12.7 miles. Turn right onto the sand road (the sand can be deep to the right side of this road, so stay to the left when you turn). The put-in is only about 100 feet down the road.

The put-in/takeout is a natural sand ramp into the bay. Parking is very limited, and you will have to share space with other vehicles and boat trailers. Park up on the obvious higher ground to make sure you don't find your car in high-tide water.

Trip Information

Contact

Bon Secour National Wildlife Refuge, 12295 State Highway 180, Gulf Shores, AL 35603, (251) 540-7720, bonsecour.fws.gov. The refuge office is open Monday through Friday, 7:30

a.m. to 5:00 p.m. Brochures are available in an information box outside of the office any day.

Season


Year-round.

Fees/Permits

No fee to launch or paddle this trip.

River Specs

County: Baldwin. Start From Pirate Cove/State Road 180. End: Pirate's Cove/SR 180. Length: 7.7 miles. Approximate float time: Various, depending on time to explore. Short trip is four hours. Difficulty rating: Easy. Rapids: None. River type: Open water/bayou canoeing. Current: Moderate because of tides. Environment: Wide-open bay with marsh grass bayous, white-sand beaches, and various wildflowers and wildlife. Elevation drop: None. Land status: National wildlife refuge. Nearest town (or city): Gulf Shores. Other users: Motorboats, anglers. ■



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