

IN BARTRAM'S WAKE

Cataloging the Etowah River - An Exploration and Journey

Sunday 27 July

I'm walking down a jagged spar of bedrock into the river, walking carefully in my sandals. I test the water with my toes. Today is our first day on the Etowah, and our mission is to record the river as best we can, in all of its living beauty, and some of its blemishes. But however it looks, and however we see it, our record will at least be what the Etowah is today, because no one can step into the same river twice.

We put in off the highway, past Auraria, and below the Etowah falls. My companions, Ben, Bryan, and Rick, have packed the canoes to bursting with supplies, clothes, and scientific gadgets. Ben's folks wave goodbye—we won't see them again, at least until they pass over the bridge we put in above. My life is now one of many that depend on the River Etowah for energy and direction.

Part-time Adventurer

I came onto the project as it was already moving along. Others had floated the Satilla and the Flint. The more expensive of the water-quality equipment was damaged, so the Etowah's survey was destined to be less fruitful in terms of scientific data. We hoped to compensate by describing our trip furiously into our notebooks, as if our watercrafts were the floating heads of tape recorders pressed to a moving strip of liquid tape, our hands scribbling the signal we read from the river.

This is our group's first Mountain river, and the rocky banks covered in the deep green of eastern hemlocks; rhododendrons are a refreshing change from the south Georgia Coastal Plain. Our GPS unit tells us that our first survey point lies just beyond a group of Atlantans dressed in wetsuits, sifting the river bottom for gold with the help of floating machines with deafening engines. The cicadas are also singing, silencing any hope of hearing the birds we want to count. But, oblivious to the noise, Christmas ferns, mosses, and Georgia river cane grow in the floodplain; a buckeye bears fruit still green. The seeds are pearl pink inside, only partially covered with the glossy wood-grain lacquer that will cover them later. Overhead, butterflies, blues and swallowtails float among the branches of a large tulip poplar that towers above a white-barked sycamore.

There is a mushroom whose dark

brown cap has split to reveal a white body. Its gills, the spore-bearing structures underneath the cap, are not slits as most mushrooms bear, but polygonal hollows. It's a Bolete, and I know this one from the brown bits flaking off the top of the cap, to reveal white. It's a *Strobilomyces*.

There's a dark green herb with a lightning flash down the middle, and I make a drawing of its shape and color. I don't know what the name of this plant is, but I imagine its characters will stand out in our reference books.

Natural History Comes Naturally

Though we took different courses in school, that led us down different tributaries to different degrees, we shared an uncertainty about our future projects that led us down this river. Did we really know what we were getting into? All of us had worked or were working on different ecological studies and writing projects. One encouraging answer we had heard from one of our bosses was to 'take the initiative'. So here we were, initiating. The value of our project is at once manifold and idealistic. So when we told our mentors we were set to catalog all the types of everything that lived with the Etowah, to tell its story, we were encouraged and warned. Becoming a natural historian is a lifelong project, and though some of us were trained in the fishes, the birds, and the insects in and around Georgia's freshwaters, our book-

knowledge always lagged behind our curiosity, and our ability to describe.

We pass an old tunnel cut into the rock, where a diverted flow hisses and curses at us from its misty depths. There's no light at the end of this tunnel, so we decide to save our adventuresome spirit for a trip without so much of a burden to carry.

As bowman of the Little Mermaid, my duty was to call out the way ahead; I can only blame my hesitation for the accident. I swear that lance of a fallen tree didn't look threatening. Not until we were just about to hit it, and my "Right! Right!...Aaah!" came just late enough for the tip of our bow to strike the point of the tree—head on. I'm nothing if not precise. Good thing we'd strapped all our food and equipment in, but I know Ben is heart-broken to lose one of his handkerchiefs to the current.

We quickly dry out, though, passing through the small Ridge-and-Valley called the Big Savannah. As we flow past pastureland, the hot wind off open fields blows across our faces from either bank, now right, now left. There is still bedrock to adorn the banks, but the river meanders for a while in this short section of flatland, before the Etowah becomes a proper Piedmont river again. There's a splash as my first turtle of the river drops from a log. It's warmer here, where the trees have been cut for pasture and farmland. We set up camp for the night on a sandbar across from an open field.

Monday 28 July

Today we pass through Dawson Forest Wildlife Management Area, under several old rail and logging bridges, along a mountain-forest river that is serene and sub-



lime. But even here, people can disagree about what makes a place a place, and the 'character of the watercourse'. At the top of one of the pilings was the graffito 'This is HELL' with an arrow pointing to a spot on the granite pillar a foot underneath the script. I don't think that author had a view from a canoe, but if this is so, may I be the devil's child.

I've been crankily adjusting to fourteen hours of examining, writing, and canoeing a day, but a dip in the river has worked wonders. This is a good thing to know; now that the river is wide enough that much more sunlight shines on us. More birches have appeared; and rhododendron, once spread evenly, now cling to the riverbanks in spots.

There have been a couple of great blue herons on the way, three kayakers, and a barred owl (with an outside chance of having been a really fat hawk).

Tuesday 29 July

Our first site today is an old pasture changing into a subdivision, a common enough pattern of succession along the Etowah. I look up from plant description to see a man, presumably a developer, walking toward us. A young, native Fraser magnolia is hiding from the man, behind a water oak close by, while a grandiflora, that cherished symbol of the South, imported from below the fall line, begins its suburban life beyond, alone in the mowed grass.



All photos courtesy of author.

These magnolia-cousins are accidentally reunited in the man's landscaping.

The man comes to speak to us about our permission to be standing there, with notebooks. Ben tells him about our floating the river, and seeing what's around. You know.

The man's small lapdog yips at us from the back of a flatbed truck.

Proof-of-Concept

The man told us that the 30-meter strip of weeds we're standing in is a 'conservation area'. I hope so. I hope it keeps that name long enough to live up to my idea what of a 'conservation area' looks like. In writing this journal I've been thinking about what words mean in the landscape. I've decided that I must dare to outlive my own words - leaving behind me not only a pretty trail of sentences but also a living river system that the next person can write about. If that Fraser survives, I suppose it will be a small proof-of-concept for our 'conservation area'. Good luck to us all.

Wednesday 30 July

The hum of Cessnas cuts through the air, along with the stench of rotting flesh. "Ah, The chicken plant" Ben muses.

We pass an intake, the path the river takes through the plant in order to clean each of the tens of thousands of chicken. We pass an output, where the river has returned from its work. This is one of the longest periods I've gone without breathing.

At site sixteen, I take the compass and pace a transect 200 meters into the forest. There are many logs fallen atop the Poa grass, and walking atop them stirs up moths

that scatter before my advancing legs. I interrupt Brian's story of Wilbur Duncan, the 'Man-Who-Knows-Every-Plant-In-Georgia', to show him a Passalid beetle burrowing through the rotten log that we walk on.

The river is forced to bend around the surrounding ridges on our way into Canton. River birch are definitely more popular around here — even two large sycamores ape the river birch shape, but with sycamore height and sycamore weight. These are my favorite trees yet.

Portaging and Self-Portaging

The Etowah, soon after Canton, is covered by Lake Allatoona. We wanted to follow the river deeply, but not that deeply. So we lifted our boats from the water and portaged around the lake, and came back to the Etowah just as it passes under Highway



41. But choosing Highway 41 turned out to be a mistake —just a mile downstream, we heard the roar of a second un-negotiable dam. This one was small and had fallen into misuse, but the nine feet of cascading water was enough to prevent us from trying to surf over it. We lost more than half a day. After cursing about it and self-portaging a quarter-mile around it, we decided to go into Cartersville for a beer. And though it was miles away from where any of us grew up, our walking the back streets into town, from the rail yard onto the strip, spurred stories of childhood, when we all had to walk back streets to get anywhere. The trip made Cartersville seem like a place that I had grown up, more like home than when I've passed though on the concrete thoroughfare.

Thursday 31 July

The Etowah mounds rise to our right.

I spotted a fish —a hogsucker? —about as big as my forearm. Perhaps it's an escapee, a descendant of the fish who managed to escape the forty or more fishing weirs on the Etowah. As the highway seems to be the main channel of our civilization's energy, so was the river for people making

a living trapping fish in these stone corrals.

Jumped in the river to escape the heat, but since the sun's been covered I've only felt cold. We float past the coal plant, the long clouds from the cooling towers like dead rivers ascending into heaven. A storm is coming, and many leaves are blowing down onto the water.

The surface of the water is ghostly white with raindrops heavy and dense. It rains in sheets, curtains, bedspreads — the waves in the air are reflected in the waves on the water's surface. The water is moving vertically between earth and sky rather than across land; the refracted white of the river's surface makes it the same color as the sky above. I'm worried about water filling the boat — I'm going to start bailing.

A Muscle of Water

Out of the sky and into the river, a great muscle of water has flexed and shot us downstream. We travelled faster than ever before. I went overboard for a quick dip, and found myself floating ahead of the canoe. I don't think all of the water came from the rain. It's probable that water had been released from the dam at Lake Allatoona. There was a sharp brown-green line down both banks — the high water mark, below which everything was covered in mud. The water line was further up the bank. Despite growing much wider, wide enough to accommodate occasional islands — up to 80 meters at some of the shoals — the river was swift here, but with a calm surface. There was more waterfowl — wood ducks, great herons, kingfishers, and Canada geese -on the banks and in the shoals.

It was a difficult day, but we made 22

miles to the last point, which was a joyous old ridge and then nearly flew to Highway 411. We camped in a fishing spot under the highway. I am exhausted — the roaring traffic overhead will not keep me from sleeping.

Friday 1 August

About forty cliff swallows circle the two bridges of Highway 411, venturing wide then returning to a home holding pattern. Some dart about the water erratically, catching mosquitoes — but too few to keep the bloodsuckers off me! Rick has taken over as the off-river motor vehicle support, and Jesslyn and her mother, Annie, have joined our flotilla. Today we will float into Rome, Georgia, and tomorrow the Etowah will become the Coosa River when it converges with the Oostanaula in the center of town.

The river is flat, wide, and hot today, but numerous dips off the side of the canoe have kept our spirits from wilting. Apparently, the ranchers along both sides of the river have the same idea about how their cows should beat the heat. 'Cow landings' the width of a large pickup truck have been cut into the bank to let these bovines bathe.

Our last site on the Etowah is a pasture, where crickets chirp in a tractor trail at the edge of an older riparian buffer. After scaling a bank with smilax vines and poison ivy, we stand in Poa grass up to our ankles, moths fluttering before our feet, and gaze out on the wiregrass that extends far across the open field. I stand like Ferdinand in the shade of a Tulip Poplar, admiring blue and yellow flowers. And Ben stands amazed at a good three meters in circumference, debating whether it's slippery or American. Brian and

Jesslyn have befriended a snail that dances across the large leaf of a riparian weed, twisting its shell back and forth.

Whither our Intrepid Crew?

I'm unsure how people will read our record, as it fits in no box. It may be too personal to be *scientific* in a world demanding every hypothesis be tested statistically, and too regimented and planned, along routes so well-traveled to be a *genuine* adventure narrative. Perhaps the adventure we take is the simple one of finding our homes in a fragmented landscape. Luckily for us, Georgia is blessed with many a river. Our adventure is far from over.



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