

## Big Savannah

Length: 8.5 Miles (Ga. 136 to Ga. 9)

Class: I

Time: 3-6 hours

Minimum Level: This section of river can be run except in the most severe droughts. Levels of 60 cfs or greater at the Hwy. 136 gauge should provide sufficient flow.

River Gauge: The nearest river gauge is located at Ga. 136:

[http://waterdata.usgs.gov/ga/nwis/uv?site\\_no=02388975](http://waterdata.usgs.gov/ga/nwis/uv?site_no=02388975)

Launch Site: There is no developed boat launch at this site. A pull off on the north side of the highway just west of the river provides limited parking. Launch site is below the bridge and requires a carry of about a tenth of a mile from parking area. However, a sandbar provides easy launch.

Directions: The launch is located on Ga. 136 north of Dawsonville. From the intersection of Ga. 400 and Ga. 136 north of Dawsonville, go west on Ga. 136 and proceed 0.9 mile to the Etowah River. Pull off will be on the right after the bridge.

Take Out Site: The take out is located on river right just downstream of the Hwy. 9 bridge. This Dawson County facility includes a canoe/kayak launch, ample parking and a portable toilet. Other amenities include a covered pavilion, informational kiosk and benches and swings overlooking the river.

Directions: From the Hwy. 136 Launch Site, proceed west on Ga. 136 0.1 mile to Etowah River Road on left. Turn left and proceed 4 miles to Ga. 53. Continue across Ga. 53 on Thompson Road an additional 2.5 miles to Ga. 9. Turn left on Ga. 9 and proceed 0.7 mile to take out site on right before crossing bridge.

Description: Owing to its rich bottomlands, the Etowah's Big Savannah was among the first area's of Dawson County that was settled. As a result, as the Etowah winds through this valley, it is flanked by history at seemingly every turn. The shoals common up stream give way to slower moving water and the scenery shifts from forest to field. For all its peaceful scenery, the valley may be best known as one of the birthplaces of stock car racing.

### Outfitters:

Appalachian Outfitters (Dahlonega) is the nearest canoe/kayak outfitter.

### **Points of Interest:**

**Mile 31.4—(34°24'32.48"N 84° 1'26.53"W)—Gold Dredge**—Imagine a 90-foot long, 25-foot wide boat on the river here. Hard to imagine, but sitting on the river bottom near here are the remains of a wooden dredge barge that operated in this section of river from the 1890s through the 1920s. The barge dug sand and gravel from the river bottom in hopes of extracting gold. To move up river, the barge employed wenches tied to riverside trees. Powered by a steam engine, the wenches would pull the behemoth up river and the shovels of the dredge would deepen the river as it went. The barge met its demise when one riverfront property owner denied the barge operators use of his trees.

**Mile 32—(34°24'19.13"N 84° 1'46.23"W)—Shoal**

**Mile 32.5—(34°24'5.68"N 84° 2'3.94"W)—Shoal**

**Mile 32.8—(34°23'48.95"N 84° 2'19.99"W)—Oxbow Cutoff and Big Savannah**—On river right is a feature unusual to North Georgia rivers—an oxbow lake like those so common to coastal plain rivers of South Georgia. Though not visible from water level, the pasture beyond the bank holds the shallow lake that was cut off as the Etowah carved a straighter course through this Dawson County valley known as "Big Savannah." Some 2.5 miles long and nearly a mile wide, the Savannah is perhaps the most distinctive bottomlands in the county.

**Mile 33.4—(34°23'41.80"N 84° 2'43.50"W)—Russell Creek & Reservoir**—Located just upstream on Russell Creek at river right is Head Lake, an 11-acre flood control reservoir built by the federal government in 1963. Hundreds of similar structures are scattered across Georgia, a legacy of an era when the feds aided farmers by keeping their bottomland fields from flooding. Now some 40 years later, these aging structures are being eyed as water supply reservoirs for the region's growing population. Such is the case with Head Lake. The Etowah Water & Sewer Authority plans to expand the reservoir to 137 acres, pump water from the Etowah to fill it during periods of high flows and produce 17 million gallons of drinking water a day for Dawson County residents. The water

will be released from the dam to supplement flows on the Etowah as needed for withdrawals just downstream at the EWSA's water intake facility. Improvements and expansions of existing reservoirs usually have fewer environmental impacts than new reservoirs, and the projects have the added benefit of rehabilitating these old, and sometimes unsafe, dams.

**Mile 33.4—(34°23'41.69"N 84° 2'43.39"W)—Cow Fence**—A unique tire fence across the mouth of this creek on river right serves to keep cattle out of the river. Unfortunately, the cattle appear to have free reign within the tributary. When livestock congregate around streams, they contribute to bank erosion and—when they defecate—elevated bacteria levels. It should come as little surprise then that in 2010 Georgia's Environmental Protection Division identified the next eight miles of the Etowah as "polluted" due to high bacteria levels.

**Mile 34.6—(34°22'57.09"N 84° 3'22.37"W)—Shoal**

**Mile 35—(34°23'2.89"N 84° 3'41.31"W)—Corn Maze**—On river left is Uncle Shuck's Corn Maze, a local attraction established in 2002. The maze boasts of 12 acres of corn with some four miles of winding paths. It can take as little as 30 minutes or as long as two hours to complete the challenge. Humankind has built mazes and labyrinths for centuries—most notably during the European Renaissance when puzzle hedges were designed in estate gardens to amuse the aristocracy. Since the 1980s this art form has experienced a second renaissance. The first corn maze in the U.S. was cut in 1993 and since then their popularity has grown at an amazing rate. In 2008, those that keep track of such things estimated that there were more than 800 in the U.S. The brains behind the first American corn maze was Don Frantz, a Broadway producer with Disney's *The Lion King* and *Beauty & The Beast* among his credits. He came upon the idea while flying cross country. Staring down at the miles of corn fields, it dawned on him that there was no need to spend years growing hedgerows. In 1993, his first attempt was visited by 10,000 people and raised more than \$55,000 for farmers who had been victimized by flooding.

**Mile 35.1—(34°23'0.96"N 84° 3'42.93"W)—Bridge Pilings/Dougherty Community**—The stone pilings here mark the site of a former bridge that crossed the Etowah into the community of Dougherty, one of several circa 1800s towns that grew up in this fertile valley. The community centerpiece was a grist mill at the mouth of Palmour Creek on river right (shown as Palmer Creek on current maps). The mill operated until the 1930s.

**Mile 35.4—(34°22'48.43"N 84° 3'50.52"W)—Hightower State Forest**— On river left below the Ga. 53 bridge is the Georgia Forestry Commission's 142-acre Hightower Forest. The site was originally used as a nursery and seed orchard by the commission. Today it houses the Commission's Dawson County Fire Control unit.

**Mile 35.5—(34°22'45.62"N 84° 3'53.46"W)—Etowah Water & Sewer Authority**—On river right here is the raw water intake structure for the Etowah Water & Sewer Authority. The Authority is permitted to withdraw up to 5.5 million gallons a day, but only after it designed its intake structure to better protect federally threatened and endangered Etowah and amber darters that live in this run of the river. The intake is built to withdraw water from a broader area to reduce the force of the suction and includes a fine screen that further prevents the fish from getting pumped into the pipes—a problem that is common with intakes pumping large amounts of water. Just downstream from the intake is a wastewater discharge. This wastewater is from EWSA's drinking water treatment plant and is created when filters at the plant are backwashed.

**Mile 36.3—(34°22'37.73"N 84° 4'27.63"W)—Satellite Dish Pavilions**—What's to be done with all those obsolete satellite dishes that litter backyards across North Georgia? Riverside landowners here have found a use—flip them over, attach legs and convert them into simple pavilions.

**Mile 37.4—(34°22'27.56"N 84° 5'4.50"W)—Powerlines**

**Mile 38.5—(34°22'0.94"N 84° 5'53.34"W)—Irrigation Pipe**—Riverfront landowners can pump up to 100,000 gallons a day from the Etowah without obtaining a permit from Georgia's Environmental Protection Division. Georgia operates under a regulated riparian rights law, meaning that landowners have the right to the reasonable use of water flowing by their land, but that right must be balanced with the rights of other users. Thus, the state regulates water withdrawals to protect the rights of all landowners.

**Mile 39.6—( 34°21'27.13"N 84° 6'48.89"W)—Moonshine and the Roots of Auto Racing**—Somewhere in the bottomlands of Big Savannah during the 1930s, Dawson County's fastest moonshine runners would gather on Sunday afternoon for races, placing bets on who had the fastest cars. Among the men at these gatherings were Raymond Parks, Lloyd Seay and Roy Hall. The trio would go on to be legends in stock car racing. Parks, the car owner for both Seay and Hall, became one of the founders of NASCAR racing and his car won the first NASCAR championship in 1949. Hall dominated the racing circuit in the late 30s and 40s and was a multiple winner at the Daytona track. Seay won numerous races driving Park's cars from 1938 to 1941. All three men did time in prison—Parks and Seay for running moonshine, Hall for spinning "donuts" on Main Street in Daytona Beach. After his arrest and night in jail, Hall claimed he planned the incident, saying, "The motel rates are too high in this town." Seay's career was cut short in 1941 when he was shot by a family member in a dispute over debt involving moonshine. Of course, Dawson County's racing history didn't end there—the county's most famous native son and resident is Bill Elliott, a winner of 44 NASCAR races who has amassed some \$73 million in race winnings since 1976. The area's racing history is immortalized at the nearby Georgia Racing Hall of Fame in Dawsonville, and it all started in these bottomlands.