

## Etowah Falls

Length: 6 Miles (Ga. 9 to Castleberry Bridge Road)

Class: I-IV

Time: 3-6 hours

Minimum Level: This section includes numerous shoals that require sufficient flows to navigate. Levels of 100 cfs or greater at the USGS gauge at Ga. 9 west of Dahlonega should provide sufficient flow. Below 100 cfs, it is still runnable, but be prepared to do some walking. In flows above 300 cfs, paddlers should use caution when approaching Etowah Falls.

River Gauge: The nearest river gauge is located at the Ga. 9 launch site:

[http://waterdata.usgs.gov/ga/nwis/uv?site\\_no=02388900](http://waterdata.usgs.gov/ga/nwis/uv?site_no=02388900)

Launch Site: There is no developed boat launch at this site and the descent to the river is steep. However, there is ample parking beneath the Ga. 9 bridge. A gravel drive on the south side of the river and west side of the road leads to the parking area and launch site beneath the bridge.

Directions: The launch is located on Ga. 9 north of Dawsonville. From the intersection of Ga. 400 and Ga. 136 north of Dawsonville, go west on Ga. 136 and proceed six miles to Ga. 9. Turn right and proceed seven miles to gravel road on left prior to crossing the river. Parking is beneath bridge and in open area adjacent to bridge.

Take Out Site: The take out is located on river right just above Castleberry Bridge (and just below Castleberry Rapid). There is no developed boat launch at this site, but rock outcroppings provide a suitable take out with a moderate descent to the river. Parking areas are located on both sides of Castleberry Bridge Road on the west side of the river.

Directions: From Ga. 9 parking area, return to Ga. 9. Turn right and proceed 4.8 miles to Castleberry Bridge Road. Turn left on Castleberry Bridge Road and proceed three miles to parking areas on either side of the road before reaching the bridge.

Descriptions: The most popular whitewater run on the Etowah and the birthplace of North America's first gold rush, this eight mile section provides three Class II rapids and one Class IV rapid (if you're inclined to run Etowah Falls). It also provides breathtaking scenery, interrupted occasionally by riverfront homes, some of which crowd the river banks. Based on today's scenery, it's hard to believe the river here was literally crawling with gold prospectors in the 1830s.

### Outfitters:

Water levels permitting, Appalachian Outfitters in Dahlonega runs canoe and kayak rentals and shuttle service on this section of river.

### Points of Interest:

**Mile 17.7—(34°30'45.43"N 84° 3'23.27"W)—North Georgia College & State University Pine Valley Recreation Area**

**Footbridge**—From Ga. 9 the Etowah winds about three quarters of a mile around this outdoor recreation facility operated by the state college in nearby Dahlonega. The complex includes a recreation field, pavilion, sand volleyball court and ropes course that can be rented by the public. It was originally used as an Army training camp.

**Mile 18.1—(34°30'41.96"N 84° 3'38.43"W)—Riverfront Home**—This home is one of several that crowd the banks through this six-mile run. Structures like this one would be prohibited under current state law. Since 1989, Georgia law requires that a 25-foot vegetative buffer be maintained along all streams and rivers. On trout streams like this section of the Etowah, a 50-foot buffer is required. These buffers help prevent pollutants from entering streams, provide wildlife habitat and, of course, protect the viewshed along rivers. However, regulating land use is not without controversy—Georgia's law governing erosion, sedimentation and stream buffers has been amended more than a dozen times since its adoption in 1975. In many cases, these amendments have weakened the law, including a 2003 change that reduced the trout stream buffer from 100 feet.

**Mile 18.3—(34°30'39.94"N 84° 3'45.28"W)—Chuck Shoals**—A Class II rapid, the best route starts on the left and ends in descent through the center chute. The rapid can be portaged but be considerate of private property.

**Mile 18.5—(34°30'36.90"N 84° 3'58.65"W)—Shoals**—The next two-tenths of a mile provides a steady diet of swift moving water over shallow shoals.

**Mile 19.7—(34°30'8.76"N 84° 4'14.91"W)—Mooney Branch Rapid**—This ledge marks the beginning of the shoals leading up to Etowah Falls. The best routes through the ledge are down the middle or on the far river left, with a sharp turn to the middle of the

river. A long pool allows for recovery before the main shoals above Etowah Falls. Mooney Branch enters the river at the base of the rapid on river right.

**Mile 19.8—(34°30'5.39"N 84° 4'19.85"W)—Etowah Falls Rapid**—A pair of ledges that add up to a Class II rapid lead to the main falls. A course down the middle will take you over these ledges to a small pool above the falls. After navigating the upper ledges, experienced boaters can find a line over the falls given adequate flows (above 80 cfs at the Ga. 9 gauge). Scouting is recommended! Boaters unable to navigate an eddy turn at the base of the second ledge directly above the falls should opt to portage on river right before entering the ledges. Otherwise, an unplanned journey over the falls may be the result. This is truly one of the breathtaking spots on the Etowah. Rocks at the top of the falls make a nice respite. Below the main falls, the river descends over two smaller ledges. Portaging to the base of the falls provides access to these additional challenges.

**Mile 20.1—(34°29'57.52"N 84° 4'23.61"W)—Rock Garden**—Around the bend from Etowah Falls is a rock garden that provides a swift water obstacle course.

**Mile 20.5—(34°29'51.74"N 84° 4'2.74"W)—Shoal**

**Mile 21.1—(34°29'24.53"N 84° 3'50.44"W)—Rocks & Dobson Flies**—The impressive rock outcropping on river right is also a breeding ground for Dobsonflies, a common aquatic insect. The white splotches you might see on these rocks are their egg casings. After mating the adult female lays her eggs (100 to 1000) on rocks or leaves overhanging the river and covers them with a white film that effectively disguises them as bird droppings. Young Dobsonflies emerge in their larval state known as hellgrammites and crawl or fall to the river. For the next two to three years, the young hellgrammites will live under rocks in the stream eating other aquatic insects and trying not to get eaten themselves. As the name suggests, these aquatic macro invertebrates look rather hellish, with long, flat--but meaty--bodies and a scary set of jaws. Upon reaching maturity, hellgrammites crawl out of the water, form a cocoon on a rock or log, overwinter as a pupa, emerge the following summer as adults, fly about for a few days, mate, lay their eggs and then die.

**Mile 21.2—(34°29'23.96"N 84° 3'43.73"W)—Waterfall**—On river right here is an un-named tributary that spills into the river over a short shoal. The splash of the falls is amplified by the grotto-like bowl formed by the creek's high banks and the wide pool beneath the falls.

**Mile 21.5—(34°29'15.71"N 84° 3'20.14"W)—Shoal**

**Mile 22.4—(34°28'45.24"N 84° 2'42.90"W)—Shoal**

**Mile 22.5—(34°28'45.50"N 84° 2'37.53"W)—Rock Garden, Island, Mining Ruins**—After passing the large house on river left, the river descends into a dense rock garden with numerous shoals and rapids over the next tenth of a mile. On river right near the island are the remains of a gold mining operation. The intensity of mining operations along the Etowah from 1828 until after the turn of the century is hard to fathom. Within two years after the first discovery of gold, Auraria (derived from the latin word for gold—aurum) just to the east of this spot was a thriving town of 1,000 residents. The first prospectors used only shovel and pan, but the impacts on the local landscape were extreme. A traveler in the area during the 1850s noted: "The beds of the creeks and brooks have been dug up, and the water now runs among unsightly heaps of gravel or through irregular pits." As the gold became harder to find, more advanced techniques were employed, culminating in "hydraulic mining" in the late 1800s in which pressurized water was used to literally blast away the sides of hills and ridges, washing away vast amounts of soil to retrieve the gold.

**Mile 22.6 —(34°28'42.29"N 84° 2'32.08"W)—Island & Rapid**—This island marks the beginning of a quarter-mile-long series of shoals and ledges that creates a challenging run. The best route is river right around the island then angling back towards the middle of the river to ride the main flow over a series of ledges.

**Mile 23.1—(34°28'26.22"N 84° 2'16.65"W)—Castleberry Rapid & Battle Branch Mine**—In low to normal flows, the best course through this Class II rapid is middle and then left of the large boulder on river left at the base of the run. On river right above Castleberry Rapid are the remains of the Battle Branch Mine. The mine earned its name when miners from Tennessee and Georgia in 1831 began arguing over possession of the claim. The fight that ensued left several of them seriously injured. Later, operations at the site were expanded by other gold seekers. At the height of excavation in 1878, the miners employed the hydraulic method, stripping the land bare with pressurized water and sending the ore to a stamp mill located on the river. Stamp mills were used to crush the ore into fine grains that could be sluiced and the gold separated. Remains of the operation can still be seen.

**Mile 23.2—(34°28'21.71"N 84° 2'12.75"W)—Castleberry Bridge & Auraria**—Castleberry Road is named for Elisha Castleberry who drew a lot here during Georgia's land lotteries of the 1830s to distribute former Cherokee lands. Castleberry was one of the early settlers of Auraria located just a mile east from the bridge. A town with a colorful mining history, Auraria actually gave birth to an entire state thanks to the Russell family, early settlers of the town. When the gold played out in Georgia the Russells headed west, first to California and later to present day Colorado where in 1858 the eldest of the Russell men, Green Russell, discovered gold in Cherry Creek. Word quickly spread and soon there after the town of Auraria (named in honor of the Georgia homeplace) sprung up. By 1860, the town of Auraria merged with nearby Denver and thus Colorado became settled during the country's third gold rush—following Georgia in 1828 and California in 1849.