

Headwaters

Length: 7 Miles (Hightower Gap to Hightower Church Road)

Class: This section is accessed by foot travel only, however the section from the upper crossing of Hightower Church Road to the lower crossing of Hightower Church Road (2.2 miles) can be floated during periods of sufficient flow.

Time: 4-8 hours on foot.

Minimum Level: Levels of 200 cfs or greater at the USGS gauge at Ga. 9 west of Dahlonega are recommended for the two-mile run between the upper and lower crossings of Hightower Church Road. Rapids in this section do not exceed Class I in difficulty. A quick view of the shoals at the upper crossing of Hightower Church Road will indicate if water levels are sufficient. Sections above this road crossing include significant waterfalls and are not recommended for paddling.

River Gauge: The nearest river gauge is located at the Ga. 9 downstream from the launch site: http://waterdata.usgs.gov/ga/nwis/uv?site_no=02388900

Trail Head: The trailhead for this section is located off Forest Service Road 42 where the Appalachian Trail passes through Hightower Gap. Parking is available where FS Road 42 and FS Road 69 intersect at Hightower Gap.

Directions: The trailhead is located at the intersection of FS Road 42 and FS Road 69. From the intersection of U.S. 19 and Ga. 52 in Dahlonega, travel north on Ga. 52 (S. Chestatee St) to the Dahlonega Square. At the Square, bear right and continue straight on Main Street 0.1 mile to Ga. 60 (N. Grove St.). Turn left on Ga. 60 and proceed 2.3 miles to Camp Wahsega Road on left. Turn left and proceed 8.4 miles to intersection with Coopers Gap Road/Hightower Church Road at entrance to Camp Frank D. Merrill. Turn right on Coopers Gap Road and proceed 2.8 miles to top of ridge and intersection with FS Road 42. Turn left on FS Road 42 and proceed 3.7 miles to intersection with FS Road 69. Parking area will be on right.

Hightower Church Road Launch Site: The launch site is located where Hightower Church Road crosses the Etowah at a Forest Service campground 0.7 mile south of the Camp Wahsega 4-H Center. There is no developed boat launch at this location.

Directions: Follow the directions above to the intersection of Camp Wahsega Road and Coopers Gap Road/Hightower Church Road at the entrance to Camp Merrill. Turn left on Hightower Church Road and proceed 1.6 mile to Etowah River.

Trails End/Take Out: The take out for this section is located beneath the bridge at the lower crossing of Hightower Church Road. Chattahoochee National Forest property is located downstream of the bridge and a pull off at the intersection of Miles Berry Road and Hightower Church Road just east of the river provides vehicle access. Property upstream of Hightower Church Road is private.

Descriptions: This is the birthplace of the Etowah. In its seven-mile run from Hightower Gap to Hightower Church Road, the Etowah descends more than 1400 feet and cascades over numerous waterfalls, culminating in 60-foot Black Falls. The scenery is wild with the notable exception of the river's course through the heart of Camp Frank D. Merrill, an U.S. Army Ranger training station. After passing through the camp, the river continues its wild, twisting journey, finally becoming a navigable river at its first crossing of Hightower Church Road. Unmarked trails follow the river's course from Hightower Gap to the lower crossing of Hightower Road. Though most of the treadway is well-worn, some portions require improvisation and bushwhacking.

Outfitters:

Appalachian Outfitters in Dhlonega is the nearest outfitter.

Points of Interest:

(34°39'47.70"N 84° 7'47.76"W)—Hightower Gap & Appalachian Trail—Hightower Gap marks the Tennessee Valley Divide and a dip along the Appalachian Trail. As such, it is the launch site of many a long journey. On the northwest side of this ridge rain flows downhill to Rock Creek and from there to the Toccoa River and Lake Blue Ridge, then on to the Ocoee River in Tennessee, then the Hiwassee, Tennessee, Ohio, Mississippi and finally the Gulf of Mexico—a journey of nearly 2,000 miles. Rain falling on the Etowah side of the ridge takes a less circuitous route to the sea. It flows down the Etowah to Rome and on to the Coosa and Alabama rivers before reaching Mobile Bay—a journey of about 760 miles, yet Mobile Bay and the mouth of the Mississippi are separated by only 100 miles. From Hightower Gap, it's an 8-mile hike to the southern terminus of the Appalachian Trail at Springer Mountain and a 2,172-mile hike to the northern terminus at Mt. Katahdin in Maine.

Mile 0—(34°39'45.16"N 84° 7'44.46"W)—Etowah Spring—A trail from Hightower Gap leads down to the spring that is considered the source of the Etowah. This trail continues to parallel the river on its course from Hightower Gap to Camp Frank D. Merrill. Hikers can follow this trail or simply follow the path of the river itself. From the spring to Camp Merrill Road, the river descends over numerous cascades and passes beneath a mix of hardwood and hemlock forests.

Mile 0.9—(34°39'5.52"N 84° 7'13.65"W)—Camp Merrill Road—A dirt road leads from this spot downstream to Camp Merrill, providing vehicle access through the Ranger camp into the Etowah's headwaters.

Mile 2.4—(34°38'4.02"N 84° 6'29.93"W)—Camp Frank D. Merrill—Signs of the Ranger camp can be seen well before reaching the main base as the Army uses the Etowah's headwaters for many training exercises, but at 2.5 miles from Hightower Gap, a large clearing on river right marks the beginning of the base's facilities that straddle the Etowah for the next mile. The Army allows the public access to the camp, but be considerate of the soldiers engaged in training exercises. Just downstream from the clearing is an intake structure that supplies the base with its drinking water (the first human utilization of the river). Ranger training in the area dates back to the early 1950s, with the Army moving to this location in 1960. At this facility Army Rangers, endure a training course to prepare them for combat in mountainous terrain. The schooling includes a requirement to complete a 200-foot night-time rappel. Camp Merrill is named in honor of Gen. Dow Merrill, leader of the legendary "Merrill's Marauders" who fought against the Japanese in World War II in Burma. The Marauders began their 1944 Burma campaign 3,000 strong, but after five months of battle in the jungle, the group was reduced by casualties, combat injuries and illness to a fighting force of 130. Nevertheless, the Marauders marched some 1,000 miles and captured a key Japanese airfield—a feat unsurpassed by any other U.S. fighting force in World War II.

Mile 2.9—(34°37'38.55"N 84° 6'21.16"W)—Ranger Memorial—Adjacent to the Mosby Heliport at the Camp is a small kiosk paying tribute to Army Rangers that have fallen in service to their country. In this area, you'll also find structures simulating helicopters and transport planes for use in training.

Mile 3.2—(34°37'24.36"N 84° 6'21.70"W)—Black Falls—This 60-foot falls sits in the heart of the Ranger training area. At the base of the falls is a former rock quarry that is now used by the Rangers for climbing/rapelling exercises. A rugged trail leads along the bank on river right.

Mile 3.5—(34°37'12.05"N 84° 6'20.72"W)—Lower Black Falls—Located just downstream of a small "dam" used to flood bottomlands for Ranger training, this cascade spills about 20-feet into a beautiful swimming hole.

Mile 4.7—(34°36'30.15"N 84° 5'48.50"W)—Hightower Church Road & Camp Wahsega (Upper Crossing)—A primitive forest service campground is located along the river upstream from the road here. Following Hightower Road to the north will bring you to Camp Wahsega, a 4-H Camp with a storied history. In 1933, a Civilian Conservation Corps camp was established at the site to provide employment for local men, including many out-of-work and disabled World War I veterans. Crews from Camp C-11 crushed rock from the quarry (visible just below Black Falls) built and improved roads, fought forest fires and built some of the nearby recreational reservoirs including Lake Winfield Scott near Suches and Lake Trahlyta in Vogel State Park. The men worked for \$30 per month, \$25 of which was sent back to their families. In the late 1930s, the facility became a 4-H Camp and remains so today. The University of Georgia's Cooperative Extension Service conducts environmental and outdoor education for youth from across the state.

Mile 6.2—(34°35'56.71"N 84° 4'52.94"W)—River Cane—Growing in dense stands bordering the river as it winds through pastureland here, river cane is among the Etowah's most common riparian plants, yet this large stand would pale in comparison to the canebrakes you might have seen here in the 1700s. Botanist William Bartram described canebrakes "rolling to the horizon like an ocean." In fact, scientists estimate that canebrake has been eliminated from 95 percent of its original habitat. Canebrakes like this one provide habitat and food for wildlife and help stabilize river banks. Their destruction has likely contributed to the pollution of our streams as they also play a critical role in slowing stormwater and filtering pollutants. For Native Americans, river cane was a critical raw material. They used it for nearly everything, fashioning it into spears, arrows, baskets, homes, mats, knives, torches, rafts, tubes and drills. It propagates primarily through rhizomes, with these spreading roots leading to dense clusters of plants like this. However, it's not so effective propagating through its seeds. River cane flowers sporadically (every 30 to 40 years) and its seeds have a low germination rate. The canebrakes also lend their name to the canebrake rattlesnake because this venomous snake is

commonly found along the borders of swamps and wetlands—also the preferred habitat of river cane.

Mile 6.9—(34°35'35.69"N 84° 4'40.55"W)—Hightower Church Road (Lower Crossing)