

Hightower

Length: 11 Miles (Hightower Church Road to Ga. 9)

Class: I-II

Time: 5-8 hours

Minimum Level: This section includes numerous shoals that require sufficient flows to navigate. Levels of 200 cfs or greater at the USGS gauge at Ga. 9 west of Dahlonega are recommended for the run from Hightower Church Road to Jay Bridge. The section can be run at lower levels—just be prepared to portage around several shoals and ledges for lack of water. Below Jay Bridge, flows as low as 70 cfs are adequate for the run to Ga. 9.

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

Launch Site: There is no developed launch at this site. However, a pull off on the left side of Hightower Church Road prior to its intersection with Miles Berry Road provides access to the river from Chattahoochee National Forest property. Property on the upstream side of the bridge is private. A steep slide leads to the river beneath the bridge.

Directions: The launch is located at the intersection of Hightower Church Road and Miles Berry Road north of Ga. 52 west of Dahlonega. From the intersection of U.S. 19 and Ga. 52 in Dahlonega, travel west on Ga. 52 3.9 miles to Siloam Church Road on the right. Turn right and proceed 2.9 miles to the intersection with Jay Bridge Road. Continue straight on Hightower Church Road three miles to Miles Berry Road. A gravel turn off just before reaching Miles Berry Road provides access to the river just downstream of the Hightower Church Road Bridge.

Take Out Site: The take out is located on river right just upstream of Ga. 9. There is no developed launch here and the take out requires a steep haul. A parking area is located beneath the bridge.

Directions: From the launch site, return to Ga. 52 via Hightower Church Road and Siloam Church Road. At Ga. 52, turn right and proceed 0.5 mile to the intersection of Ga. 9 and Ga. 52. Bear left on Ga. 9 and proceed 1.6 miles to Etowah River. Cross bridge and turn right into gravel drive leading to parking area beneath the bridge.

Descriptions: Mountain streams don't get much more intimate. For the first five miles the tiny Etowah winds through tunnels of rhododendron as it makes its way around Campbell Mountain, flowing over two Class II shoals before slowing and opening up below Jay Bridge and winding through bottomlands where evidence of hundreds of years of human habitation reveals itself in the uppermost fish weirs on the Etowah.

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 7.2—(34°35'24.34"N 84° 4'56.70"W)—Rhododendron—Below Hightower Church Road and around the flanks of Campbell Mountain, rhododendron arches over the river, in places forming enchanting tunnels. The species here is Rhododendron maximum, commonly called Great Laurel. A lover of streambanks throughout the Southern Appalachians, Great Laurel blooms during the mid-summer and keeps its glossy leaves year round. The name comes from the greek rhodo, meaning "rose," and dendron, meaning "tree."

Mile 7.6—(34°35'11.76"N 84° 5'9.73"W)—Shoal

Mile 7.7—(34°35'7.55"N 84° 5'6.34"W)—Bridge—This low bridge will require a limbo in high water and should be approached with caution. Strainers also often clog the river as the bridge and pilings catch logs and other debris.

Mile 7.9—(34°34'58.15"N 84° 5'4.55"W)—Shoal & Campbell Mountain—At this bend, the Etowah slams against the north flank of Campbell Mountain. From here to the 2053-foot summit, it's a 1000-foot climb. The Etowah loops around the base of the mountain for the next four miles.

Mile 8.1—(34°35'0.59"N 84° 5'17.48"W)—Bridge

Mile 8.6—(34°34'56.98"N 84° 5'43.03"W)—Doc's Rapid—A short series of small shoals leads to this cross river ledge that creates a borderline Class II rapid with a two-foot drop. A pool below the ledge provides easy recovery.

Mile 8.9—(34°34'39.14"N 84° 5'55.46"W)—Shoal & Galax—The ground cover along the river banks here with deep green, round, heart-shaped leaves with toothed edges is known as galax. A perennial evergreen, during the winter some leaves will turn bronze or dull crimson. In the spring it sends up long thin stalks and later in the summer these stalks will sport a cluster of tiny white flowers. Because of the leaves' beauty—and the fact that it holds its color for so long—galax has traditionally been harvested for use by commercial florists. Overharvesting led the U.S. Forest Service in 2005 to restrict collections to May and June when new leaves emerge.

Mile 9.4—(34°34'24.58"N 84° 5'57.66"W)—Shoals

Mile 9.9 —(34°33'59.22"N 84° 5'53.16"W)—Ange Hole Rapid—This wide sliding drop of about six feet creates a Class II rapid. A large pool at the base of this fall provides easy recovery.

Mile 10.7—(34°33'42.00"N 84° 5'13.19"W)—Nimblewill Creek—On river right is Nimblewill Creek, a tributary with a unique name that flowed through a hardscrabble mountain, circa 1800s community of the same name. Descendents of the area's first settlers recount that the community got its name because residents wanted it to symbolize the community's common "will" that the place be growing and active--or nimble, as you will. Of course, Nimblewill is also the name of native turf grass common to the southeast. Life in the 1800s in Nimblewill was tough, in fact, too tough for many. The wife of one early settler left her husband who had brought her to the place. In divorce papers she claimed that Nimblewill was "not a place fit to live" and that the roads were so bad that she often couldn't make it to church. She returned to more civilized Gainesville. But Nimblewill's greatest contribution to the area is probably a 33-mile-long "ditch" or aqueduct that carried water from this mountain stream to the Kin Mori gold mine south of Dawsonville. Mining engineers needed water sources from higher elevations to maintain enough pressure to blast away top soil in the hydraulic mining process—thus the ambitious undertaking.

Mile 11.4—(34°34'1.10"N 84° 4'39.51"W)—Shoals

Mile 11.7—(34°33'54.75"N 84° 4'31.00"W)—Shoals—This marks the beginning a tenth of a mile series of small shoals that culminates in a three-foot slide.

Mile 11.9—(34°33'48.13"N 84° 4'22.44"W)—Shoals—Another tenth of a mile stretch of continuous swift water.

Mile 12.2—(34°33'36.81"N 84° 4'27.32"W)—Jay Bridge—In the mid-1870s an emigrant from Vermont, Frank W. Hall, harnessed the power of the Etowah here to establish a saw mill and grist mill. He added a tannery to his business portfolio along with a store and a post office. The village that grew up around the mill became known as Jay. It was a thriving town through the 1880s and 90s, but by 1923, the Dahlonega Nugget reported that "there is nothing there to mark the once very busy place." Hall went on to become mayor of Dahlonega and represented the area in the Georgia legislature. A story is told that when he built his home near the Dahlonega square, he found a vein of gold while digging the foundation. City leaders denied him the opportunity to mine the vein for they didn't want a mining mess on the town square. Hall, who had other properties on the square, agreed and proceeded to build his house atop the gold. He died in 1901.

Mile 13.3—(34°32'51.38"N 84° 4'4.73"W)—Etowah River Campground—This private campground of 28 acres hugs the east bank of the river for some 1800 feet. The Campground offers RV and tent camping, bath house with hot showers and laundry facilities. During trout season, the river banks will be busy with fishermen.

Mile 14.2—(34°32'32.19"N 84° 4'4.52"W)—Fish Weirs—Along this straightaway are two v-shaped rock dams that are likely the uppermost Native American fish weirs on the Etowah. From here to Rome, dozens of these rock structures cross the river. Built by Native Americans 500 to 1000 years ago (and in many cases maintained and improved by subsequent residents) the weirs or traps were used to catch fish by corralling them to the point of the V where they could be scuttled into a basket.

Mile 15.5—(34°31'46.38"N 84° 4'15.56"W)—Old Bridge Pilings

Mile 16.7—(34°31'15.62"N 84° 3'51.78"W)—Former Island—On river left here, the Etowah once split its flow around a large island. Now, the full flow stays in the main channel, but dated maps will show a distinctive island here.

Mile 16.8—(34°31'11.83"N 84° 3'51.95"W)—Bank Erosion—Here the Etowah does what rivers do best—carve new courses through the process of erosion and deposition. And, they tend to take anything perched on those threatened banks downstream with them. Beneath this eroded bank and downstream you'll find farm debris that at one time was high and dry.

Mile 17.2—(34°30'53.36"N 84° 3'47.66"W)—Shoal