

Big Bend Paddlers

By Elizabeth McLean

Over 60 miles of the Ocmulgee River flow east around the southern border of Telfair County in a winding configuration known as the Big Bend. The river meanders its way through pine forests and hardwood undergrowth, past historical landmarks, and through the natural habitats of many native Georgia animals, carving a path that ultimately marries it with the Oconee River to form the Altamaha. The Ocmulgee River has had a significant impact on the growth and history of Telfair County. Serving as the water highway of commerce for over a century, the Ocmulgee River was Telfair's connection to the coast and beyond. Today, there are no steamships on the river but you can find many different vessels of a smaller and more manual variety.

A local group of river enthusiasts has created the "Big Bend Paddlers" to celebrate and enjoy this natural resource and help preserve Telfair's portion of the river for generations to come. The group's aim is to plan organized group paddle excursions two to three times a year, social functions, and beautification projects on river landings. There are nine public landings on this 60+ mile stretch which will serve as ingress and egress points to the river. Each trip will introduce participants to new sights and experiences on the Ocmulgee River.

The group was created out of a collaboration in 2019 which led to the first local paddle on the Ocmulgee River in Telfair County and was a wonderful success. Both first-time and veteran paddlers attended the excursion from McRae's Landing to Lumber City. It was a short three-mile paddle that served as a great entry point for someone wanting to try kayaking or canoeing for the first time.

"My paddle from McRae's Landing to the Lumber City Bridge was a rewarding experience. I enjoyed being able to relax and appreciate nature. I also appreciated Mr. Guy Bland for sharing the history of the area with the group. That was my first experience with a kayak, but definitely not my last!" said Sherry Beasley, first-time paddler.

"I spent a lot of time in my childhood on the Ocmulgee River, but kayaking its twists and turns over the past few years has given me a new perspective. It allows you to slow down, disconnect, and enjoy the journey," said Elizabeth McLean, member of Big Bend Paddlers.

There is a lot to enjoy during a day kayaking on the Ocmulgee. Emma, Lily, and Bo Rogers, grandchildren of Tommy and Gail Rogers, also attended the Crossroads Paddle in 2019 and spent the day paddling the river, scouring sandbars for mussels, following animal tracks, and playing in the shallows. Others spent the relaxing three-mile trip fishing from their kayaks as the current carried them toward Lumber City Landing.

"The goal of this organization is to promote, improve, and enjoy recreation on the Ocmulgee River," said Tommy Rogers, member of Big Bend Paddlers and President of the Ocmulgee Water Trail Partnership.

There is an annual membership fee of \$10 for individuals and \$20 for a family to join. The membership fees will be used for the paddle events and beautification projects. Members will be able to join paddle excursions at a discounted price of only \$5 to cover American Canoe Association (ACA) insurance.

If a Big Bend Paddlers member additionally joins ACA for \$25 per year, the insurance cost will also be covered for every paddle for the year. Visit www.americancanoe.org for more information about the American Canoe Association and the benefits of membership.

Join us as we kickoff the Summer Solstice with the inaugural Big Bend Paddlers excursion on June 20, 2020 at 8:30 a.m. More information will be announced on the Telfair Chamber of Commerce website www.telfairco.org.

Follow Big Bend Paddlers on Facebook and Instagram (@bigbendpaddlers) to keep up with all of the events and adventures on the Big Bend of the Ocmulgee River!