

Going With the Flow

Georgia River Network, led by three paddle-gripping gals, builds community interest in waterways. By **Joe Rada**, photography **Joseph De Sciose**



The staff of the Georgia River Network, executive director April Ingle (front) backed by Jesslyn Shields and Dana Skelton, enjoys a refreshing dip in the Flint River.

If only this were a typical day at the office. Gorgeous nature—river, rocks, woods, and hills—extends in all directions. A morning mist hovers over clear water under a squint-inducing blue sky. A few friends paddle canoes and kayaks across calm pools, into swift rapids, and around scenic bends. Their goal today: to reach the takeout point before dark.

Oh, and also, along the way, to scout an 11-mile section of the Flint River flowing south from Sprewell Bluff State Park. To map each curve, drop, and possible stop-for-lunch sandbar, noting natural or historic assets and erosion or pollution problems en route. And to plan for leading hundreds of paddlers during a weeklong, publicity-rich, 95-mile float trip called Paddle Georgia, set for later this month on the Flint.

— turn to page 4



LEFT: This scenic stretch of the Flint River near Sprewell Bluff (70 miles south of Atlanta) is included in the upcoming Paddle Georgia. ABOVE, RIGHT: Jesslyn shoots a rapid on the Flint. BELOW, RIGHT: Dana, April, and Jesslyn study the route on which they soon will lead hundreds of paddlers.



They're on a Mission

From the group's mission statement: Georgia River Network is working to ensure a clean water legacy by engaging and empowering Georgians to protect and restore our rivers from the mountains to the coast. We envision rivers that we can use for drinking, swimming, fishing, and boating; rivers that add beauty and value to our communities, and meet the needs of the ecosystems they support. Our vision for the future of Georgia's rivers is dependent on an active, effective, citizen-led watershed group in every watershed in Georgia."

River Days Are Special Days No, this is not a typical workday for the three young women who form the professional staff of Georgia River Network, a nonprofit conservation group otherwise made up of avid volunteers. Most of the time April Ingle, Jesslyn Shields, and Dana Skelton inhabit a small suite of offices in Athens.

There they work the phones, prepare pamphlets, draft grant proposals, and more, always focused on protecting Georgia's rivers and informing the public about river issues. They attend local government meetings everywhere, including at the state capitol, to advocate for rivers. They trek to gatherings large and small to talk with anyone who will listen and who, they hope, will get involved.

Once in a while though, April, Jesslyn, and Dana dress for getting wet, grab paddles, and head to one Georgia stream or another for the kind of day that reminds them just what their indoor duties are all about. They're about days like today, floating on a lovely stretch of river.

Engage, Empower, Advocate Founded in 1998, Georgia River Network strives to protect clean water resources and restore damaged flows. That includes conducting workshops and training sessions, petitioning decision makers at all levels, helping grassroots "river keeper" and "friends of" groups get started and become effective, and encouraging everyone to experience nature's wonders and witness threats to them firsthand.

"The network's goals include increasing the number of people involved in protecting Georgia's waters and raising awareness about issues that threaten the health of rivers," says executive director April. "We help parties who are determined to protect and improve rivers to learn from each other, share resources and expertise, and work toward common goals.

"Our basic strategy," she concludes, "is to engage citizens in the cause of protecting rivers, empower them with knowledge and training, and advocate for positive change."

Linking the Like-minded The network identifies 14 major Georgia river basins and their tributaries, including the Altamaha, Chattahoochee, Coosa, Oconee, Satilla, Suwannee, and Tallapoosa. It stays in contact with (and helped launch some of) 50-plus groups closely attuned to river issues. These range from localized efforts, such as the Coosawattee Watershed Alliance near Ellijay, to much broader interests, such as Georgia Adopt-A-Stream, the Georgia Conservancy, and the Center for a Sustainable Coast.

"Whenever we have a hand in creating a new group, such as the Central Georgia Rivers Partnership that got started last year, we count that as a success," says Jesslyn, the network's watershed support coordinator. "Anytime a group we've talked to or helped organize achieves something good for rivers, we feel good about it too."

Jesslyn adds: "One of the best parts of our job is Paddle Georgia, the weeklong event we do in June to spotlight one river and bring media attention to all of them. This year we'll focus on

the Flint, which flows from the airport in Atlanta all the way to Florida. We'll float the 95 scenic miles from Sprewell Bluff near Thomaston south to Montezuma, camping along the way."

That's what today's float is about. It's one of several scouting trips the staff has made on the Flint to catalog points of interest, boat ramps, danger zones, supply stops, overnight campsites, and other logistical matters. But conducting such research doesn't curtail having fun. Splash battles erupt between canoes, and the crew pauses to bodysurf in certain rapids.

"We spend a lot of time planning conferences, holding meetings, and doing office work because we love rivers," says Dana, director of administration and outreach. "Those days when we go out on a river make it all worthwhile." ●

Georgia River Network: www.garivers.org or (706) 549-4508. This year's Paddle Georgia on the Flint River takes place June 21-27.