



Paddling to protect

RiverTrek paddlers on the Apalachicola River in 2020. PHOTOS BY DOUG ALDERSON

107-mile Apalachicola RiverTrek is more than just a kayak trip



Doug Alderson

Guest columnist

Anticipation is building as 14 kayak paddlers and their volunteer support crew prepare for Apalachicola Riverkeeper's annual RiverTrek. They will launch from Chattahoochee's River Landing Park Oct. 6 and complete their 107-mile journey at Apalachicola's Battery Park five days later.

On RiverTrek, participants kayak more than 20 miles a day, braving heat and possibly rain, camping on sandbars and sharing group meals and stories. They swim, laugh, and enjoy first-hand one of Florida's most diverse and inspiring rivers.

The paddlers experience the Apalachicola River's diverse scenery. Large bluffs — the tallest in Florida — can be seen along the up-

per reaches, and most of the shorelines throughout the journey are forested and undeveloped.

Learning along the way

At low to moderate water levels, long sandbars are ideal for rest stops and camping, and for studying tracks left by deer, bear, turkey and other wildlife. Bald eagles are commonly seen, either fishing, soaring or perched on tall shoreline trees.

But RiverTrek is more than a kayak trip. From guest speakers, paddlers learn about the incredible number of plants, animals and fish the river supports, including tupelo trees that contribute to sweet tupelo honey.

The Gulf sturgeon, Apalachicola dusky salamander, Florida yew, Florida torreya tree, and fat three ridge mussel are just some of the rare and endangered species found in and along the river.

And the river is vital to the in-



RiverTrek paddlers camping at Bristol Bluff in 2020.

credible marine nursery of Apalachicola Bay. Information about current threats and restoration projects is part of the education process.

Sponsoring paddlers

Another part of RiverTrek's purpose is to raise necessary funds for Apalachicola Riverkeeper, a nonprofit organization that has advocated for the river and bay since 1998. Individuals and businesses

sponsor the paddlers in a "walk-a-thon" fashion, and all proceeds are donated to Apalachicola Riverkeeper.

There is often a friendly competition between the volunteer paddlers as to who can raise the most funds. This year's group goal is \$65,000. The money supports the essential work of advocacy, outreach and education within the Apalachicola River Basin.

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RiverTrek

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RiverTrek was begun by paddler Earl Morrogh in 2009 and volunteer coordinators have expanded its size and scope each year. Many former RiverTrek participants have become closely involved with Apalachicola Riverkeeper, including current board president Kim Sash and Secretary Katie McCormick along with Riverkeeper and Executive Director Georgia Ackerman and yours truly.

That's because there is no better way to get to know the river and bay than to paddle its waters and camp along its shores, experiencing the river's many moods first-hand.

"Fumbling from a tent in the pitch dark on a cold morning, I was rewarded with the eventual break of sunlight and a view of undulating mist rising from tea-stained tannic water," Georgia wrote of her first RiverTrek experience in for The Marjorie online journal. "The river's restorative powers offer peace and tranquility."

Outdoor adventure

RiverTrek paddlers are selected each spring after a two-month application process. Participants this year hail from Apalachicola, Port St. Joe, Tallahassee, Pensacola, Gainesville, Bradenton, Punta Gorda and Asheville, North Carolina. Six have participated in RiverTrek in the past, while eight others are new to the 107-mile journey.

Martha Haynes of Wakulla County echoed feelings shared by many of this year's RiverTrek participants: "I can't think of a better way to combine my love of camping, paddling, and learning than to be a part of the RiverTrek 2021 team. A five-day, 106-mile paddle, with informational talks along the way, accompanied by like-minded outdoor adventurers is a dream come true, especially after a year-and-a-half of being mostly at home!"

Lee Rigby of Woodville, participating in his second RiverTrek, added, "I was surprised and pleased with the response to my request for support by my friends and business contacts when I went on the 2019 RiverTrek — raising much needed funds for this important organization. The Apalachicola River is a vital ecological resource, and I am hoping that in celebrating my 70th birthday by participating in the 2021 RiverTrek, I can bring more awareness to the river's needs and raise more funds to help address those needs."

Raising awareness

Despite living in Gainesville, Whitney Sanford, Professor Emerita at the University of Florida, was moved to join this year's RiverTrek. "After two days of paddling the Apalachicola last fall, I was hooked by the river's beauty along with its natural and human history.



Herpetologist Pearson Hill shows a scarlet kingsnake to the RiverTrek group in 2019. DOUG ALDERSON

What better legacy than to help Apalachicola Riverkeeper protect this amazing river that is critical to Florida in so many ways."

Rob Diaz de Villegas, no stranger to RiverTrek, will cover the entire trip for WFSU-TV. "On my first RiverTrek, we learned that the Apalachicola River is merely a thin blue line at the center of a vast watershed full of diverse landscapes," he said. "The experience got me hooked, and I've spent years exploring those landscapes and the river itself. This will be my first full RiverTrek since 2012, and I look forward to sharing the appreciation I've gained with a new team of paddlers."

Other RiverTrek participants this year include Bob Ackerman, Cameron Barton, Dodie Alber, James Kimbrel, Joe Webb, Kim Miller, Mary Allgire, Ray Jones, and Wayne Douchkoff.

Thus far, this year's group is on track to set a RiverTrek fundraising record thanks to the generosity of hundreds of supporters. Learn more at www.apalachicolariverkeeper.org/rivertrek/.

Doug Alderson, author of several outdoor books, is the Outreach & Advocacy Director for Apalachicola Riverkeeper. He has participated in the annual RiverTrek for more than a decade either as a participant, co-coordinator, or both. He can be reached at doug@apalachicolariverkeeper.org.