

Rediscovering the Chattooga Headwaters



Chattooga River, Chattooga Cliffs Section above Bull Pen Road

By Don Kinser

On January 5-6, 2007, 10 lucky whitewater boaters became the first to legally run the upper 21 miles of the Chattooga River in over 30 years. For me personally and several others on the trip, these were two of the most emotionally significant days of our paddling lives.

The Chattooga River, beginning in North Carolina and forming the border between Georgia and South Carolina, has been closed to floating use since July 1, 1976. This bizarre, and in my opinion illegal, river closure is unique among all the rivers managed by the US Forest Service. The floating ban results from a back room deal made over 30 years ago with influential local residents that opposed protecting the river under the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act.

While everyone agrees today that the Chattooga is in far better condition than it was in 1974 because of its protection as a National Wild & Scenic River, the illegal ban on floating use continues.

But now, after nearly a decade of hard work, including thousands of hours from a group of dedicated volunteers and hundreds of thousands of dollars in pro-bono legal aid, the decision to ban floating on the upper Chattooga River is finally being reviewed by the US Forest Service, albeit quite reluctantly.

Only after American Whitewater successfully appealed the Forest Service's 2004 decision to continue the floating ban, did the Chief of the Forest Service himself declare: "The Regional Forester does not provide an adequate basis for continuing the ban on boating above Highway 28." He then directed the Regional Forester to conduct a user capacity study in order to reach a new management decision regarding floating use on the upper Chattooga.

Now, as part of this user capacity analysis, a study panel of boaters was finally allowed the opportunity to legally explore the upper Chattooga River and document this extraordinary whitewater treasure.

After having worked so hard, for so long, to gain access to this truly amazing river, I was concerned that I might be let down once I actually got the chance. I had nothing to worry about. The upper Chattooga did not disappoint.

I have had some great outdoor adventures in my life. In the last six years alone, I have climbed Long's Peak via the East Face, the Grand Teton via Exum Ridge, and Mount Baker. I have paddled the Grand Canyon, the Selway, and the Middle Fork of the Salmon. These were all great adventures. However, our "expedition" to rediscover the upper Chattooga was more rewarding than any of these other adventures, at least for me, because of what it took to get the chance and because it is right in my own back yard.

Excitement and Anticipation

Milt and I were almost giddy as we pulled into the Andrew Pickens District Ranger office in Walhalla, SC on Thursday evening. Our skepticism about whether we would ever see the upper Chattooga River legally in a boat was gradually fading. It was becoming more and more apparent that this user study was really going to happen. A tremendous excitement and anticipation now replaced that skepticism.

Our excitement began to build the Monday before, after we received an email from Ben Ellis, a consultant with the Louis Berger Group, telling us that the recent storm and the predicted rainfall met their “trigger” to mobilize the study team. Consultants from as far away as Anchorage, AK; Corvallis, OR; and Jackson, WY would converge on the Chattooga during the next few days. They would be working with both anglers and boaters as part of the ongoing User Capacity Analysis of the upper Chattooga River ordered by the FS Chief in April 2005.

Those of us lucky enough to receive Ben’s call spent the next three days focused on the weather websites and USGS gauge at Highway 76. We rearranged our schedules on short notice to be part of something special, our excitement growing and waning as the forecast vacillated and the river levels fell.

Now we were *actually here* to begin the field work and legally run the upper 21 miles of the Chattooga River for the first time in over 30 years. We entered the room and joined the crowd milling about waiting for the meeting to start. Each of us knew that we were about to be a part of something historic. The excitement among the boating panelists was palpable. You could sense it.

The boaters were easy to discern from the anglers. We were the ones with the smiles on our faces, laughing and joking with each other, obviously glad to be there. This contrasted starkly with the visible dismay on the faces of several anglers, clearly disgusted with the thought of boaters on “their” river. However, this did not dampen our spirits as we looked forward to this great adventure.

The meeting began with the customary introductions of the consultants, panelists, and agency staff either present or on the phone. This was one of the few times during the next two days that we would have any interaction with the anglers, either here or on the river.

David Hedden and Jeff Owensby were there representing the Forest Service (FS). David and Jeff were joined by Tony White and several other agency staff on the conference phone. John Cleeves, the User Capacity Study Program Manager, would join us on Saturday.

Once we were all properly introduced, Ben Ellis chaired the meeting joined by Bo Shelby, Doug Whitaker, and Karen Koslowski, the consulting team.

The boating panel included 10 lucky boaters: Shayne Day, Don Piper, Milt Aitken, Todd Corey, Brian Jacobson, Don Kinser, Wade Vagias, Ken Holmes, Ben Ellis (consultant), and Bo Shelby (consultant). We would get to know both Ben and Bo well during the next two days as they joined us on the river.



**From Left: Don K, Wade, Todd, Brian, Shayne, Milt, Don P, Ben, Bo, Ken (boys will be boys)
Photo by Jeff Owensby**

The angler's panel included Doug Adams, a longtime Chattooga angler. I had the great pleasure of spending a magical day on the upper Chattooga River fishing with Doug several years ago (and we didn't even catch any fish!). No one loves the Chattooga more than Doug. Doug was joined by Alex Watson, David Cannon, and a number of others whose names I cannot recall. It was interesting how they kept the boater and angler panel segregated, never even giving us the list of anglers' names. Doug Whitaker, the consultant from Anchorage, would accompany the anglers on the river for the study.

The plan was to meet at the Highway 28 Boater Access just below the Highway 28 Bridge at 8 AM Friday morning. The FS would shuttle us from there to Burrell's Ford and we would paddle the Rock Gorge and Nicholson Fields reaches of the upper Chattooga (aka Section 1). We were to return to the Ranger office for a debriefing with the consultants and anglers at 3 PM.

Assuming all went well and the predicted rainfall materialized, we would then do the Chattooga Cliffs (aka Section 00) and Ellicott Rock (aka Section 0) reaches on Saturday. The meeting ended and we headed to our cars. It was raining. This was going to be good!

January 5, 2007 – Rock Gorge (12.5 mi, 5:25)

Friday dawned cloudy and rainy, just as predicted. It was also unusually warm for January, perfect weather for a great day on the *Forbidden River*.

We assembled at the Highway 28 boater access just downstream of the Highway 28 Bridge at 8 AM. Even with our “alpine” start, everyone was all smiles and on time as we nursed our coffee, conversed, and joked around while getting our gear together. The excitement was thick in the air: you could feel it. This was going to be a *great* day on the river.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the parking lot, the anglers didn’t look quite as excited as we were to spend a day in the rain.

FS Rangers David Hedden and Jeff Owensby were friendly and cordial as they handed out permits for us to complete, helped us load boats, and then shuttled us to Burrell’s Ford. They seemed almost as excited as we were.

Our caravan arrived at the Burrell’s Ford Bridge, made ready, and headed down the established trail to the river bank. For the last 30 plus years what we were doing has been illegal (and still is) and here we were being graciously shuttled by the FS. I felt a great rush of personal satisfaction as I unloaded my gear on the Burrell’s Ford Bridge from that green FS truck.



Our FS "Green Truck" shuttle at Burrell's Ford Bridge Friday Morning

After a short riverside meeting with the consultants, Ben and Bo, to discuss river safety and how we would travel down the river, we shoved off at about 9:30 AM. Everyone was in high spirits. That would not change for the rest of the weekend.

Many of you may know this river reach as Section 1. However, throughout the study we were encouraged to refer to this section as the *Rock Gorge* and *Nicholson Fields* Section (the stretch down from Lick Log Creek). Quite frankly, “Rock Gorge” sounded a whole lot more fun than “Section 1” and a whole lot more descriptive. So, from now on, it will be the *Rock Gorge* Reach. Similarly Section 0 will now be the *Ellicott Rock* Section and Section 00 will be the *Chattooga Cliffs* Section.

The river starts off meekly, gradually picking up gradient as you float down from Burrell’s Ford. After about a mile the river starts to take a long sweeping left turn and you enter a nice stretch of class 3 “steps” that are easily boat scouted and straight forward.



Steps above Big Bend Falls © 2007 Todd Corey

The scenery was outstanding at every turn, with beautiful views up and down the river. However, all of us were surprised at the dire state of the hemlocks here on the upper river. The hemlock wooly adelgid has wrought havoc on them, far worse than down lower in the watershed. It is sad.

We reached Big Bend Falls about 10:15 AM and easily eddied out to the right, just above it. The rain that had been sporadic much of the morning was now falling steadily. Big Bend Falls is a beautiful spot on the river and can be reached by foot. This was the only time during the day that I saw any other people. Joe Robles with the FS was there to

observe us at the falls and Becky Johnson from the Smoky Mountain News was there taking photos. Otherwise, we had the entire river corridor to ourselves.

The falls are clearly runnable, albeit class 5. We spent about 30 minutes scouting and picture taking. However, on this day there was a vertical log pinned in the preferred landing zone on the river right side. Some contemplated a left side line and we all portaged. This was easily accomplished down the bedrock on the river right side. I believe that most will choose to portage this drop when running this section.

Downstream of Big Bend Falls, things start to pick up with a number of class 3-4 read and run rapids as the river winds its way around Round Top Mountain. We reached the next major rapid called “Rock in the Crack in the Hole in the Wall” at about 11:20 AM. This was another of the many rapids in the watershed originally named by early Chattooga pioneer Alan Singley. We scouted this Class 4+ drop for about 10 minutes and then we all successfully ran it, some more successfully than others.



View back up river from below “Rock in the Crack in the Hole in the Wall”

After leaving “Rock in the Crack in the Hole in the Wall,” it was on to the Rock Gorge. But before entering the Rock Gorge, we had to “do the laundry” at Maytag, a stout class 4+ or 5 drop that guards the gates to the Rock Gorge about ten minutes downriver.

Most paddlers will have already guessed why this rapid is so named. It is because of the spin cycle in the large hole at the bottom of the drop. We all scouted, noting some wood in the drop. I can’t remember if anyone walked this drop or not, and most of us ran it. Most of us ran it without any issues, but not all. I got “tagged” in the hole and took a brief

and uneventful swim. All of the scouting and so forth at Maytag took our group about 30 minutes.

The rain continued to come down as we entered the Rock Gorge and met our next major challenge – Harvey Wallbanger. This is another stout class 4+ drop that we all scouted. I am not sure, but I think at least one in our group chose to portage. Most had uneventful runs; I, on the other hand, took another short and uneventful swim.



Don Piper in Harvey Wallbanger

Next was a quick lunch break, very quick, and then on to upper and lower Big Hairy Bastard. These are two fun “read and run” class 4 drops that everyone aced. We reached the end of the Rock Gorge at about 1 PM and the gradient began to ease considerably as we passed Lick Log Creek. From Lick Log Creek the Highway 28 takeout is another 5 miles.

The Rock Gorge is a magical place of awesome beauty. It is a great place to hike when the water is low, and even better when experienced from a boat with the energy of freely flowing river pulsating around you.

We now found ourselves floating lazily for the next several miles along a beautiful mountain river. Everyone was all smiles even as the thunder and lightning began to rumble and light up the river gorge. I was in the back of the group talking with Bo Shelby, one of the consultants. We did not see anyone along the river. Others in the front

of our group saw two backpackers, head down hiking in the rain, oblivious to our presence on the river.

They also saw David Cannon, one of the angler panelists. David was just leaving the river as they approached. Next they found Buzz Williams of the Chattooga Conservancy scowling at them from the Highway 28 Bridge.

We reached the Highway 28 Boater Access at about 2:45, just as the rain eased off. This allowed us to get dressed quickly. We pulled into the District Ranger office at exactly 3 PM, right on time for two more hours of debriefing with the consultants.

January 6, 2007 – Chattooga Cliffs (2.1 mi., 2:45) and Ellicott Rock (5.6 mi, 2:15)

Saturday morning dawned clear and somewhat cooler. The rain from the day before was replaced with sunny blue skies. The morning chill faded and warmed to nearly 60 degrees by afternoon. The gauge at Burrell’s Ford had come up a tenth of a foot overnight. We could not have asked for anything better.

Today’s adventure would turn out to be much more physically demanding than the day before. Again we convened for another “alpine” start at the Burrell’s Ford parking lot at 8:30 AM. We enjoyed another “Green Truck” shuttle, thanks to the FS. After checking the new staff gauge at Grimshawes Bridge on Whiteside Cove road, we arrived at the trail head.

Unlike yesterday, when we saw no one, today we were met at the trailhead by Norman “Buzz” Williams and several other members of the “Friends of the Upper Chattooga” (FUC for short). Buzz went about his normal grandstanding routine, telling the FS how they were doing everything wrong and how *dangerous* it was to allow boating on the river. He had also blocked the trailhead with his truck to make things more difficult for us. One of our group made the mistake of leaning his paddle against the tailgate of Buzz’ truck and learned first hand about Buzz’ southern hospitality.



Buzz off to make sure Bo doesn't hurt the truck as Dave Hedden looks on

Rather than put in at Grimshawes Bridge the FS basically dodged the private landowner issue with a 1.8 mile “forced march” down to the confluence with Norton Mill Creek. The trail was good and we arrived at the river about 45 minutes later. After a group photo we put on and started downriver at 10:40 AM.

Norton Mill Creek joins the Chattooga about 2 miles downstream from Grimshawes Bridge and about 0.6 miles above a massive logjam. Here the river is narrow with steep banks, thick with lush rhododendron.

We arrived at the logjam about 10 minutes later and took about 10-15 minutes to climb up and over with our boats. After this, the bottom drops out and the real fun begins. Once past the logjam, it took us nearly an hour and a half to travel the next 0.7 miles. This stretch is full of numerous class 4 rapids, and at least one class 5 drop.

Immediately after the logjam, we encountered a cool grotto and then a nice class 4 ledge. Things were starting to get very interesting.

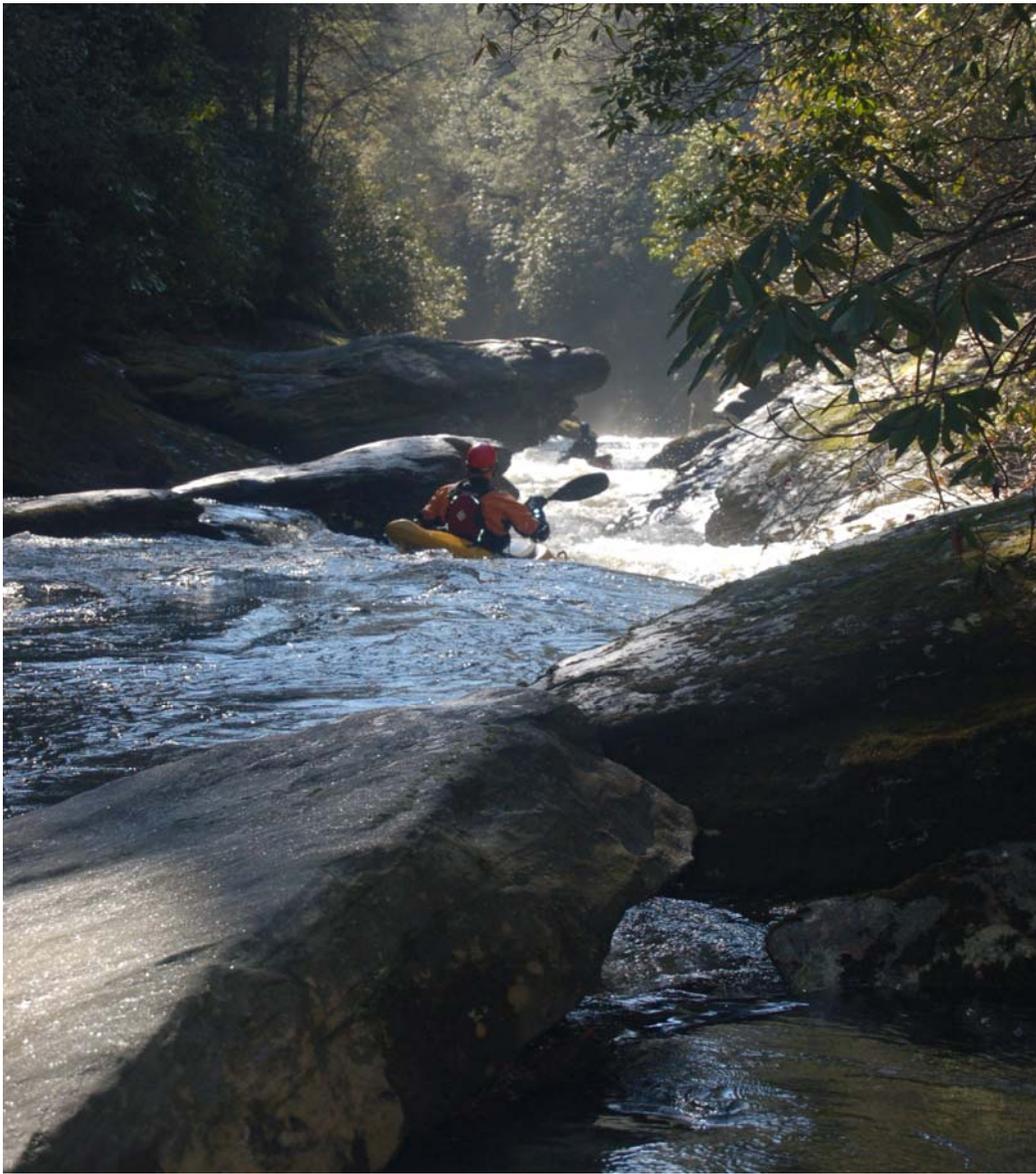


Wade Vagias and Bo Shelby immediately below logjam, Chattooga Cliffs Section

Next was a stout class 5 drop that several of us portaged. After Milt (in his canoe) shamed the kayakers into running the drop, everyone that ran it made it look easy. We then entered the first of three narrow cliff-lined “alleys” that give this stretch of river its name – *Chattooga Cliffs*.

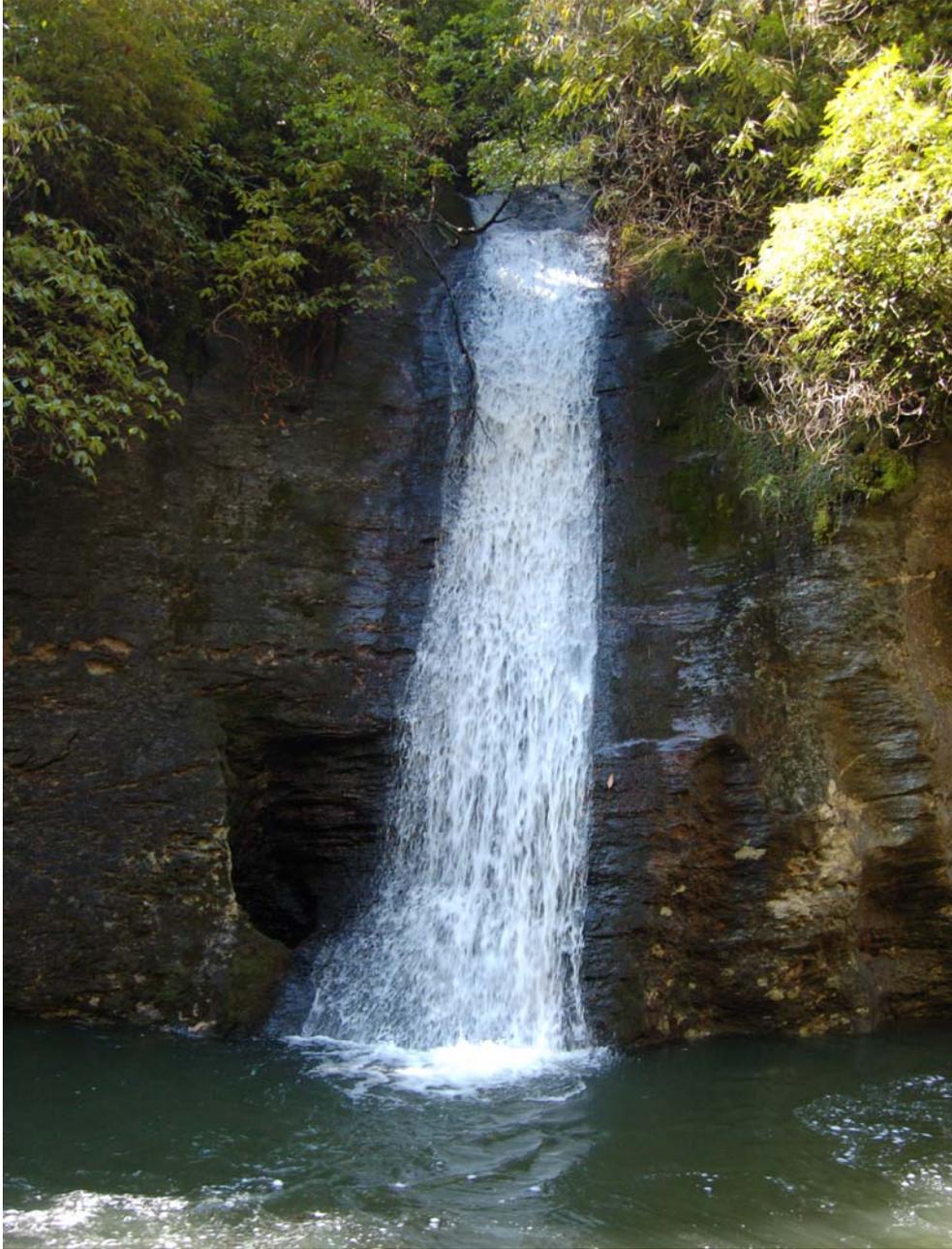
The river opens up somewhat after this alley before reaching another class 4+ drop where you want to make sure you don’t go left. However, after looking at the wood in the right side of this drop, several of us again chose to portage on the right.

We now found ourselves in the *Alleyway*, a spectacular narrow sluice with vertical bedrock walls. We portaged around a large root ball that plugged the river and ran several significant rapids, including one with a large boulder bisecting the riverbed.



Ken Holmes at the Entrance to "The Alleyway"

Somewhere down in the Alleyway there is a stunning waterfall on river right that pours into the river from high up on the cliff. I have visited and explored the Chattooga for nearly 30 years and this was unlike any other place I have seen exploring the river. This is also a place nearly impossible to see on foot.



Waterfall on River Right in "The Alleyway"

We reached the sieve shortly after noon. The sieve rapid is a difficult obstacle and everyone portaged. The logistics of this portage were made more difficult by our large group (this was really one of the few places our group size was much of a liability). It is

very difficult to stage the group down into the “eddy” above the sieve and exit your boat. I say “eddy” because it is more like a slow spot in the current up against a steep, slippery, vertical rock wall. Milt was able to jump out of his canoe here more easily and helped us exit our kayaks.

It took a long time to portage. It was slippery and crowded. Someone wisely set a safety rope and we worked together to ferry our boats across a difficult spot. Once across, we had to put in immediately above a challenging 6 foot, class 4 ledge. From the log jam to here the river had been unrelenting.



Ken Holmes running the put in ledge immediately below the sieve (top of photo), the sieve may go with more water but will be a very difficult portage at higher flows. Photo © 2007 Todd Corey

Once back on the water we found it an easy 20 minute cruise with a number of fun class 3 ledges and drops for the remaining mile down to the Iron Bridge at Bull Pen Road.

There we encountered a large audience waiting for us when we arrived just after 1 PM. The class 5 drop immediately below the bridge is quite impressive and was in full sunlight. I am sure many of the onlookers were expecting (and secretly hoping for) a great deal of death and destruction. There was even a troll under the bridge with a camera. We disappointed them as all but two of our group ran the drop in a dazzling display of the state of the sport. Just for the record, I walked. I probably should also mention the consultant's swim at the bottom of the rapid after he had admonished us at the top not to do anything stupid for the crowd.

With barely a moment to eat a quick bite of lunch, we were herded off at 1:30 to find our way down to Ellicott Rock and ultimately Burrell's Ford. This reach was rumored to be the most enjoyable and the most popular of the three sections. We would not be disappointed.



Wade Vagias under the Iron Bridge at Bull Pen Road

The two or so miles immediately below the bridge to Ellicott Rock is a wonderful read and run, class 4 boulder dance roughly bisected by the biggest rapid on the Chattooga – Class 5 Super Corkscrew.

Super Corkscrew is long and scary. It starts with a hard 4+ entrance and just keeps getting nastier from there. I think four of us walked the rapid along the rock shelf on river right. Several of the group, including Wade and Ken ran the rapid and made it look easy, others maybe not so much. Todd discovered just how shallow it was at the bottom part of the rapid. Shayne took all the style points for his great ender in the middle hole.

Once below Super Corkscrew, the pace quickened and we found a rhythm as we danced down one boulder drop to the next all the way to Ellicott Rock, arriving there at about 3 PM. Once below Ellicott Rock, the gradient began to ease for the next 3.5 miles or so down to Burrell's Ford.

The trail rejoins the river at Ellicott Rock and it is an easy hike up from Burrell's Ford. Not until we were below Ellicott Rock did we encounter any other people (except the spectators at Iron Bridge). We first saw a group of anglers at the confluence with the East Fork. Further downstream we passed the angler panel and a bit further on we passed a few other users as we approached the bridge.



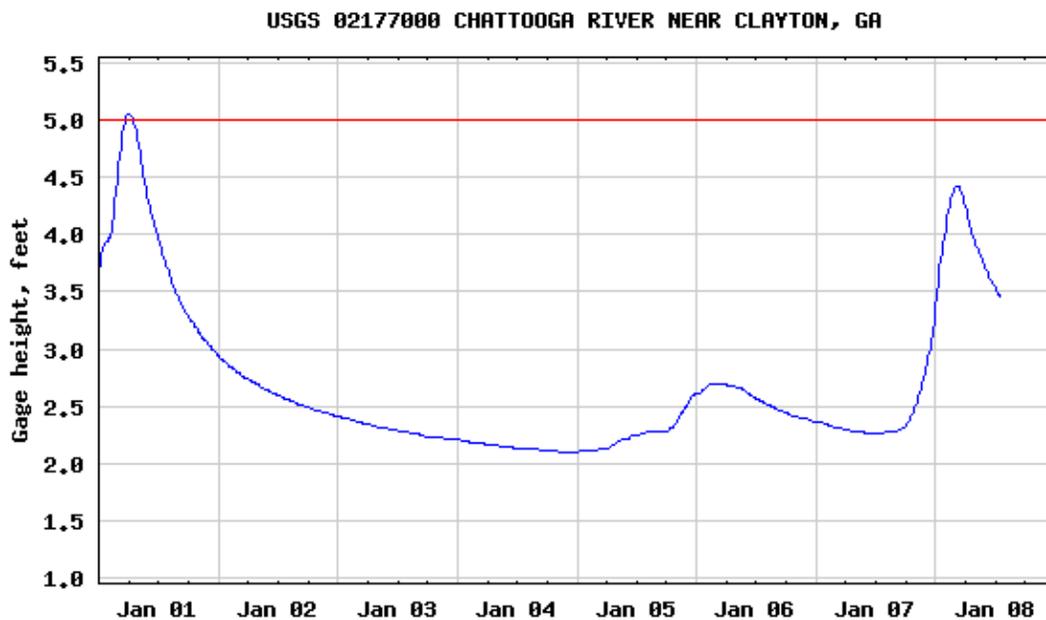
Shayne Day going big in Super Corkscrew

We reached the bridge shortly before 4 PM. Our team was tired and hungry, but we were all smiles as we packed up and headed once again to the Ranger office to debrief.

Water Flow Levels

This study was primarily framed as a “flow study” to attempt to gather data about “boatability” and “fishability” at different flow levels. Last summer the FS installed new staff gauges at Grimshawes Bridge, Iron Bridge, and Burrell’s Ford Bridge, complete with data loggers, as part of the study. The FS hydrologists have established a flow curve for the Burrell’s Ford gauge to correlate the staff gauge to cfs.

The previous week’s storm surged the river to nearly 6,000 cfs, primed the pump and made the user trials possible. A modest amount of rain fell Thursday night onto already saturated ground, and continued rain during the day Friday started the river rising slowly, during the day and overnight. The result was an extraordinarily stable hydrograph for our study.



Hydrograph at US 76 Bridge during Study

Friday – Rock Gorge Section

The new staff gauge at Burrell’s Ford read 1.5 feet when we put on. With the rain during the day the level rose to 1.6 feet while we were on the river. This was reported to be 340 cfs based upon the newly established flow curves for Burrell’s Ford.

The Chattooga was 1150 cfs (2.29 feet) at US 76 at about 1 PM.

I must admit I expected a rocky, bony, difficult day on a river that didn’t have enough water in it. I was wrong. What we discovered was a river with an enjoyable flow and plenty of water. Later that day during the debriefing, the panel considered it to be the low end of the optimal flow range. I agree.

The water quality was outstanding as well. While maybe it was not exactly clear, the river was certainly not muddy and was quite beautiful.



New Gauge at Burrell's Ford Bridge on Friday Morning

Saturday – Chattooga Cliffs and Ellicott Rock Sections

Friday's steady rain had subsided by the evening. The river rose slightly and then fell overnight. The new Burrell's Ford staff gauge read 1.6 feet when we headed up to the put in at Norton Mill Creek Saturday morning. The new staff gauge at Grimshaws Bridge read 1.25 feet when we drove over the bridge. It was heavily guarded by the local landowners' militia.

When we passed the new staff gauge at the Iron Bridge (Bull Pen Rd) it read 3 feet and the Burrell's Ford gauge read 1.55 feet when we arrived Saturday afternoon.

Both the Chattooga Cliffs and Ellicott Rock reaches had enough water at these levels. This is particularly true of the upper reach – the Chattooga Cliffs reach. The Ellicott Rock reach was good but a little more juice would have helped - not much more juice, however, because some of the holes could become big and hungry fast. Once again, the water quality was outstanding.

Epilogue

We were very, very lucky. The need to mobilize the necessary Forest Service staff, the expert boater panel, and consultants from across the country, all on short notice, clearly stacked the deck against the user trial portion of the capacity study ever actually occurring. However, the “perfect storm” had come together and allowed these unlikely user trials to happen so successfully – the storm Dec 31 that surged the river to 6,000 cfs, warm weather, stable flows, a skilled team with a cooperative spirit, more rain and great support from everyone involved, especially the FS.

I just hope these two days of user trials are not the last opportunity I have to legally enjoy this magnificent place. Legal or not, I am sure to return. Maybe, just maybe, you too will be able to share this adventure and experience the upper Chattooga for yourself sometime soon.

I also hope you have enjoyed reading about our expedition to rediscover the upper Chattooga River and that you stay tuned into the ongoing user capacity study. Better yet, if you would like to have the chance to explore this wonderful place from your boat, let the FS know *right now*. Visit <http://www.fs.fed.us/r8/fms/> and share your thoughts with John Cleeves, the Project Coordinator.

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