

From the CPA Coordinator**More tips for paddling getaways in Florida**

This is a continuation of the last column of places to paddle in Florida. The Ocklawaha River as described below shares the same launch as the Silver River, [Ray's Wayside Park](#). This park is located along Route 40 east of Ocala Florida.



Bill Smith

The Ocklawaha River is also an interesting paddle but quite a bit different from Silver River. You may encounter monkeys along the river, but it is rare. When you first enter the Ocklawaha from Ray's Wayside Park, the river is divided with gin-clear water along the south bank (coming out of the Silver River) and tannic brown along the north bank, but it soon turns all tannic as the Ocklawaha enters the Silver River.

This river is wide and continues through the [Ocala National Forest](#). About halfway down you will encounter [Gores Landing campground](#) along river left. We camped at this campground on many occasions and it is one of my favorites in the forest. The campground is primitive

except for flush toilets and a camper for the duty ranger.

Many years ago, we camped at this campground with members of our kayak club. My wife Vickie and I were the first to arrive followed soon after by our friend Richard. After setting up camp, we sat around the site drinking a beer and engaged in small talk.

The forest ranger showed up in a foul mood who soon pointed out the 'no alcoholic beverages' signs and proceeded to read us the riot act. We explained to him that we were not troublemakers and would be asleep by 9:00PM. He didn't seem to buy this explanation, so Richard pointed out the camper across the way and asked if that was his home.

The conversation went like this: ranger 'yes I live in the camper.' Richard, 'Are you off work now?' Ranger, 'As soon as I am done with you.' Richard, 'Don't you like having a beer when you get off work?' Ranger, 'Yes.' Richard, 'well we just got off work and like having a beer after, why don't you finish with us and join us for a beer?' Ranger, awkward silence followed by 'ok.'

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A group of paddlers launch from a National Forest campground along the Ocklawaha River in Florida.

*The area provides a unique getaway for numerous winter paddling trips.
(Photo: Bill Smith)*



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About the time Mr. Ranger was 4 or 5 beers in, the rest of our group showed up and by then he was getting drunk and a little obnoxious.

Most of our group thought this was hilarious but a few did not so we had to endure the stink eye from them the rest of the night. The following day after a great day of paddling we returned to the campsite followed shortly by the ranger with 'I will be right over'.

He was soon pounding beers and well on his way to being obnoxious when an argument broke out across the almost empty campground. The ranger jumped up and was charging over to talk to them when someone pointed out he still had a beer in his hand, well he replied, "I am the ranger, I can do any GD thing I want."

Two other springs in the national forest I highly recommend are Juniper Springs and Alexander springs. Juniper Springs is just down route 40 from Rays Wayside landing. The water is extremely fast for a Florida River with many twists and turns to test your maneuvering skills or learn to swim. As typical of a Florida spring, the water is gin-clear with a white sand bottom. The scenery is excellent, and the wildlife is plentiful.

Alexander Springs is more commercial with a swimming beach at the head spring but is also worth the time to paddle. I once encountered two black bears up a tree hanging over the river at Alexander Springs.

There is also a secondary launch on the Alexander that is unmarked and remote but surprisingly has a parking lot after driving a few miles on a two-track road.

We often talked about paddling that section to the St. Johns, but it may turn out to be a great way to get lost since you will spend some time meandering through a swamp with no obvious channel.



Paddling bliss on the Ocklawaha River in Florida. (Photo: Bill Smith)

Any time you paddle in Florida you can expect to see alligators. Alligators are really nothing to fear because they usually are not interested in you, I have paddled within arm's reach of them, and they ignored me. The most dangerous gators are 5-6 feet long and female usually with young so keep your distance especially when you see young alligators.

I have paddled through groups of baby alligators without seeing the momma, but I always kept moving because I assume she is watching and ready to pounce if you do something stupid. An aggressive alligator is easy to spot because they will usually swim with their entire body exposed, normally they swim with their head and tail exposed.

If anyone is planning a Florida trip and wants some pointers on paddles then give me a call. I would be happy to make some suggestions.

Think happy thoughts! Spring will be here soon.

Bill Smith