

RIVERCHAT

Summer 2021

A publication of Chattahoochee Riverkeeper (CRK)

GEORGIA POWER'S DANGEROUS LEGACY ALONG THE CHATTAHOOCHEE

Coal ash is what's left behind after burning coal to produce electricity, and it's toxic. For decades, Georgia Power has allowed more than 80 million tons of this waste to accumulate at coal-fired power plants across the state. Toxic coal ash contains dangerous heavy metals and carcinogens, including some that have been linked to harmful human health impacts.

If left unaddressed, approximately 50 million tons of toxic coal ash will be left in unlined pits near Georgia rivers; 30 million tons of which will be along the Chattahoochee, threatening water supplies and aquatic life around Plant McDonough-Atkinson in Cobb County, Plant Yates in Coweta County, and Plant Wansley in Heard County.

Georgia Power has said it will remove, consolidate, and/or cap this ash in place. The latter - a less expensive approach - is the utility's preferred fix. In other words,

the company wants to leave this toxic material buried next to the Chattahoochee and put a lid on it. Unfortunately, this method still poses some risks. The coal ash would continue to leak into groundwater, a perpetual risk to wells and nearby surface waters.

The utility plans to spend approximately \$7 billion on these half-measures. We know based on Georgia Power's own data that the coal ash ponds at all three plants along the Chattahoochee are already contaminating groundwater, because the utility's monitoring has found contamination at levels above groundwater protection standards.

There is an alternative to allowing this toxic waste to endlessly threaten our waterways and the health of generations to come: the waste should be excavated and disposed of in permitted, lined landfills away from water.

The ash needs to be stored away from our

waterways because it typically contains a variety of substances harmful to human health, including arsenic, chromium, cadmium, lead, and mercury. Long-term exposure to these heavy metals can lead to liver and kidney damage along with cancer.

Despite all the known hazards, Georgia Power is still seeking permits from the Georgia Environmental Protection Division (EPD) to leave 30 million tons of coal ash in unlined pits along the Chattahoochee River. At Plant McDonough-Atkinson in Cobb County, contaminated groundwater has been detected on adjacent county-owned property, confirming that this waste stream can move beyond the power plants' property lines.

While EPD weighs approval of these inadequate and dangerous permits, neighboring states are doing more to protect their communities and waterways from this dangerous waste stream.

EPD is expected to release draft permits for public consideration and comment in late 2021 and 2022. We cannot allow the utility to spend \$7 billion - paid for by ratepayers - on these inadequate disposal plans. CRK opposes these permits that will leave the toxic waste in unlined pits by our river. We will be holding information sessions for our members and Georgians living near these power plants. We encourage you to learn more and join us by submitting letters in opposition to these permits when they are put on notice in the coming months. ■

Above: Georgia Power Plant Yates

You can learn more about this issue in Sierra Club's three-part docuseries, "Rising From the Ashes," which features a number of CRK staff.



Photo courtesy of Dan River Basin Association

Thank you for supporting our efforts to protect and preserve the Chattahoochee River.

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Our mission is to advocate and secure the protection and stewardship of the Chattahoochee River, its lakes, tributaries and watershed.

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REFLECTIONS: THE FUTURE OF THE RIVER
DEPENDS ON US ALL

A high-level view of our mission is simple – to ensure enough clean water for current and future generations. To accomplish this mission, we interact with government agencies, partner nonprofit organizations, corporations, stakeholders, and community members. But to be truly effective, I have learned that we must take a step back periodically to reevaluate our programs and to ask if we are including all community members in our goal of protecting the Chattahoochee River.

For the past 27 years, CRK has worked throughout the Chattahoochee watershed from Helen to Florida, engaging and collaborating with a variety of groups with a social justice mission. Underserved communities are impacted by pollution at much higher rates, so our programs such as Neighborhood Water Watch and our Trash-Free Chattahoochee initiative have always prioritized addressing areas of historic environmental injustice. Working in partnership with organizations like West Atlanta Watershed Alliance and Groundworks Atlanta, our work to improve water quality and reduce pollution in these areas has been successful. And with the help of many of

our donors, we have made it possible for tens of thousands of students of economic disadvantage to experience the floating classroom by scholarship.

But are these efforts enough to ensure that all members of the community are guaranteed enough clean water now and in the future? The answer is no, but we're working on it. We recently launched our Out on the Hooch project to ensure that everyone, including members of the LGBTQ community and their allies, feel welcome and valued in and around the Chattahoochee River. We are also working with Georgia Interfaith Power & Light to increase outreach efforts in faith-based communities and invite congregations to experience our floating classrooms and stewardship programs. CRK will continue to do everything we can to be responsive and inclusive of all community members that depend on the Chattahoochee River. I feel that without these efforts, the future of our river and the success of our mission is in danger. ■

JASON ULSETH, RIVERKEEPER

FACES OF THE CHATTAHOOCHEE:
KEITH SHARP OF RIVERWALK ATLANTA

Keith Sharp has long resided in Atlanta's river-adjacent Riverside community where he and his wife, "Riverside Kate," developed their love for the Chattahoochee and local advocacy. For the past six years, Keith's organization called RiverWalk Atlanta has been clearing brush and encouraging Atlanta to discover its "river-side." The group hopes to be a catalyst for paths, campsites, and boat launches along the river. "RiverWalk's vision of a five-mile trail is incorporated into the larger Chattahoochee RiverLands project, which aims to connect 100 miles of riverside through greenways and river access," said Keith. "We're poised to have a public access point to the trail network open in a year." ■



For more info and updates, follow RiverWalk Atlanta on Instagram @riverwalkATL

ON PATROL WITH CHATTAHOOCHEE RIVERKEEPER

CRK Hotline results in restoration

Using CRK's Report a Problem Hotline, a member recently reported the illegal clearing of trees on U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) property on a bank of Lake Lanier. After investigating, CRK staff reported the incident to USACE and enforcement action was taken, which will require the culprit, a neighboring landowner, to replant and restore the area. Clearing the vegetative buffers of public waterways not only results in habitat loss and degradation, erosion, and temperature regulation, but often significant penalties. Please contact CRK if you suspect illegal clearing of stream or lake buffers.

HELEN



Waterkeeper Alliance president patrols the Chattahoochee

All around the world, groups like CRK are fighting to protect local water quality. Leading this charge is Waterkeeper Alliance president Gloria Reuben, who joined CRK on a patrol of the Chattahoochee River earlier this year.

Mutilated animals continue to appear in river

In the fall of 2019, Riverkeeper Jason Ulseth made a discovery on the Chattahoochee while patrolling in South Fulton County – 10 decapitated goat bodies floating in the river. Since that time, he has discovered several hundred goat and chicken bodies in this stretch of river and the activity is not showing any signs of slowing down. We are uncertain who is responsible for this practice or why they are dumping the bodies in the river, but we have reported our findings to several law enforcement agencies and are continuing to investigate.

COLUMBUS

Lake Walter F. George



Sewage spill in Camp Creek

Neighborhood Water Watch testing for bacteria in Camp Creek led CRK pollution trackers to a roaring sewage spill behind the RaceTrac at North Commerce Drive. The pollution source was found to be a 36" sewer line that became dislodged after rains caused a bank to collapse, taking the large and very active sewer line with it. The City of East Point responded quickly to our request for repairs by deploying a temporary bypass system until permanent lines could be installed. With new lines in and repairs complete, follow-up testing indicates a return to baseline water quality conditions confirming the spill has been successfully contained.



Improper permitting at future agricultural site

CRK staff identified a 112-acre site on I-85 in LaGrange that was cleared without any best management practices (BMPs) to control erosion and sedimentation. After water quality testing and onsite visits showed that the site was not properly permitted, CRK stepped in to ensure that proper permits were obtained and BMPs were correctly installed to protect water quality in a nearby tributary, Long Cane Creek.

The site is being prepared for a new form of agriculture – controlled environmental agriculture – to the Southeast. The yet-to-be-named company plans to build a 40,000-square-foot research and development center in addition to nine 300,000-square-foot greenhouses. Food grown in the controlled environment will not require any herbicides or pesticides and will use 95% less water than traditional outdoor farming practices.

Stormwater runoff flowing from LaGrange construction site

In March 2021, Hotline reports alerted CRK to land disturbance activities occurring on Lukken Industrial Drive East in LaGrange. CRK investigations found stream buffer violations occurring on Blue John Creek, which forms the property boundary of one side of the construction site. Sediment from the construction site is making its way into the creek, which is listed for sediment impairment under section 303(d) of the Clean Water Act. CRK notified the City of LaGrange about the violations and failure of the property owners to keep the dirt on their site. Currently, CRK is working with the City and Georgia EPD to resolve this issue, and will continue to monitor closely.

For more information, visit: chattahoochee.org/our-work/enforcement.

A TRASH-FREE CHATTAHOOCHEE

Dive into Data

Since 2010

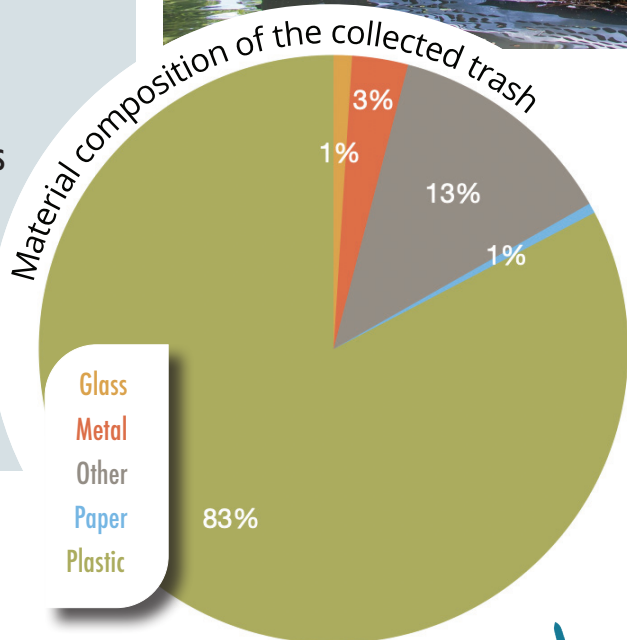
TRASH TRAPS

TOP 10 MOST FREQUENTLY FOUND TRASH ITEMS IN 2021 ANALYZED FROM 7,011 PIECES OF TRASH

1. Plastic beverage bottles
2. Polystyrene pieces (unidentifiable)
3. Plastic water bottles
4. Polystyrene cups
5. Polystyrene fast-food packaging
6. Cigarettes and tobacco packaging and accessories
7. Sports equipment
8. Metal beverage bottles
9. Plastic bags and film
10. Plastic bottle caps



299.24 POUNDS OF TRASH REMOVED BY TRASH TRAPS



1170 Water bottles counted

51 Counts of electronics

65 Counts of medical waste

17 Counts of illegal dumping

CRK employs devices called "trash traps" to remove floating litter from tributaries of the river. Trash traps are small-stream litter collection devices designed to catch floating trash from stormwater runoff.

VOLUNTEER CLEANUPS

TOTALS FROM 2010-PRESENT (10.5 YEARS)

210 CLEANUPS

A TRASH-FREE CHATTAHOOCHEE = A HEALTHY CHATTAHOOCHEE

14,115
VOLUNTEERS

336.54
TONS OF TRASH
REMOVED

37.3
TONS OF TRASH
RECYCLED

2021 THIS YEAR

1,188
pounds trash collected

68
sites cleaned up

1,644
volunteers

Special thanks

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UNIQUE AND SACRED SITE

INDUSTRIAL PLANS DERAILED

Good news came in February 2021 when Norfolk Southern announced that it was withdrawing plans to build a rail yard on the banks of the Chattahoochee River. In the years leading up to this announcement, the Chattahoochee Brick Company site, which lies along the banks of the Chattahoochee River at the confluence of Proctor Creek, had been considered for both a fuel and rail terminal.

During those years, residents, historians, elected officials, and river advocates argued that the Chattahoochee Brick Company site should instead be preserved for its ecological value and to memorialize the lives that suffered during the 19th and early 20th centuries.

In the 2008 book, “Slavery by Another Name” by Douglas Blackmon, the practice of leased convict labor of African American men was detailed at the Chattahoochee Brick Company site. After the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863, thousands of African Americans were pulled into forced labor after being arrested, often guilty of no crimes, and compelled to work in horrific conditions without pay. The laborers were beaten, often worked to death, and buried on site.

Dustin R. Hillis, Councilmember District 9 of the City of Atlanta, has been a leader in the fight to preserve this site. “[T]he ecological importance of this site is clear as it sits along the Chattahoochee River just north of the mouth of Proctor Creek,” said Councilmember Hillis. “These two waterways have



Convicts at Whittier Mill, 1895

Photo courtesy of Whittier Mill Village Association

been historically abused and neglected but are well on their way to recovery thanks to groups like Chattahoochee Riverkeeper.” The site is also a part of several river accessibility projects including the Proctor Creek Greenway, Atlanta RiverWalk, and Chattahoochee RiverLands.

While it is not yet clear what will become of the site, Norfolk Southern committed to cleaning up soil contamination. And the community activists and leaders who are envisioning a higher and better use of this land are not done advocating to memorialize the persons buried long ago and preserving the land to make the most of the environmentally valuable property. ■

PRIDE FOR THE RIVER, PRIDE FOR EACH OTHER

OUT ON THE HOOCH AIMS TO ACHIEVE INCLUSIVITY ON THE CHATTAHOOCHEE RIVER

Chattahoochee Riverkeeper wants to re-establish the South’s greatest outdoor space as one that is inclusive and welcoming of everyone. The organization’s new Out on the Hooch initiative was created to welcome members of the LGBTQ community and establish opportunities to connect in celebration of the waterway we all share.

“Out on the Hooch will bring together our LGBTQ friends and allies with personal stories about our connection to the Chattahoochee River through recreation,” said CRK Technical Programs Specialist Ashley Desensi, a member of the LGBTQ community and one of the creators of Out on the Hooch. “We want to show that the Chattahoochee River watershed has room for all people to enjoy, and ensure that the LGBTQ community feels safe and included in nature.”

Out on the Hooch launched in June 2021 in honor of Pride Month. It was unveiled both on social media and at the annual ColGayPride festival in Columbus, Ga. CRK partnered with Columbus Gay Pride, a local nonprofit organization, to host a booth at the event and introduce the program to festival-goers on-stage.

CRK is working to partner with other LGBTQ nonprofit organizations in our watershed to further this initiative - sharing testimonials, hosting a booth at Atlanta Pride and other local events, and promoting inclusivity within the Chattahoochee River basin.

As part of the campaign, which runs June through October, CRK will host cleanups and paddle trips, provide educational opportunities, and create a place to have a conversation about what it means to connect to nature and the river as an LGBTQ person. CRK is also asking social media followers to share their connection to the river using #OutOnTheHooch, as part of an effort to highlight this community’s personal and meaningful stories. ■

To learn more about this campaign and to get involved, visit www.chattahoochee.org/outonthehooch.





CRITTER CORNER: BALD EAGLES

While patrolling the river in Fulton County south of Atlanta on a sunny August morning, a CRK team spotted a giant brownish-grey bird emerging from the trees. We did a double take. It wasn't a hawk, osprey, or heron. Later it dawned on us – it was a juvenile bald eagle.

Juvenile eagles don't get their signature white head and brown feathers until they are three years old and young eagles typically return to the nest in the fall. Our sighting indicates that nesting bald eagles have made a home just downstream of Atlanta.

Recently-fledged juveniles stay near their parents for a few months as they learn to fly and hunt. Many of these young birds leave by early summer, travelling north. If they survive the summer, they tend to return to the South by early fall to where they hatched.

“The reports of eagle sightings I receive from Fulton County are uncommon, probably because suitable, relatively-undisturbed habitat for the birds - for both foraging and nesting - is primarily found in the county's southwestern corner where far fewer people live and work,” said Bob Sargent of the Georgia Department of Natural Resources (Georgia DNR).

Eagles were a common site in Georgia in the early 20th century along coastal areas, rivers, and wetlands. In the middle of the 20th century however, populations declined rapidly, mostly due to the use of the pesticide DDT and habitat loss. By 1981, there were only two known nests in Georgia.

The presence of bald eagles in metro Atlanta is another indicator of the water quality improvements in the river in recent decades. Because of a ban on the use of DDT and state and federal protections on the majestic birds, eagle populations all over Georgia are rebounding. In 2004, the Georgia DNR estimated there were 100 bald eagle nests in Georgia – by 2017, the estimate more than doubled to 218. ■



Photo credit Frank Cone from pexels.com

KEEPING THE RIVER FLOWING FOREVER PLANNED GIVING INITIATIVE AIMS TO INSPIRE FUTURE DONATIONS

Chattahoochee Riverkeeper envisions a future where there is always enough clean water for everyone - water that is affordable, accessible, and healthy. We envision a future where neighborhood streams and lakes are no longer polluted; where all the waters in the Chattahoochee River Basin are fishable, swimmable, and drinkable; where nature thrives.

Planned giving is a way for today's supporters of Chattahoochee Riverkeeper to be remembered by future generations, and for investments in the health of this waterway to be protected in the long term.

Since 1994, CRK has worked tirelessly to protect and restore the most heavily-used river in the state of Georgia: the lifeblood of more than five million people who depend on it for drinking water, irrigation, recreation, power, wastewater assimilation, commerce and more.

Once one of the nation's "most endangered" rivers, the Chattahoochee is making a dramatic recovery - thanks to the support of CRK and its programs over the past 27 years. Sections of the river that were not safe for recreation are now viewed as valuable assets for communities, and wildlife is thriving. To maintain this progress and meet new challenges, we hope that you will consider a legacy gift.

Gift planning is for everyone regardless of age or assets. It is simply a plan for what you leave behind in the future. With your dedicated support, we will continue to expand our geographic reach and enhance the quality of life for millions of people and all communities. ■

For more information on planned giving opportunities or to inform CRK that you have included a gift in your will or estate plans, please contact CRK Development Director Becca K. Powell at rpowell@chattahoochee.org.

PRESSING FOR IMPROVEMENTS IN COLUMBUS COMBINED SEWER TREATMENT



Chattahoochee River in downtown Columbus, Ga.

The Chattahoochee River has experienced remarkable change since the turn of the century. Because of significant improvements in water quality as cities like Atlanta invested billions to upgrade sewer collection and treatment systems in the river upstream, downstream communities including Columbus enjoy this reinvigorated resource.

The improved water quality, dam removals, and a highly successful whitewater course and RiverWalk promenade have all changed the way people use and enjoy the Chattahoochee River in Columbus. Each month, there are thousands of people fishing, rafting, and kayaking in the river in downtown Columbus.

But an aging wastewater treatment system poses a potential threat to recreators. When it rains, the combined sewer system in downtown Columbus discharges from approximately one dozen pipes into the Chattahoochee. When the Columbus Water Works’ combined sewer system permit came up for routine reissuance a few years ago, the Georgia Environmental Protection Division proposed new permit conditions intended to protect river users. CRK has been advocating for a more protective permit since then.

Data shows that during rain events, the combined sewer system can contribute excessive bacteria loads into the river where people are recreating. CRK supports the new permit, which was issued in November 2020.

Yet, in December 2020 Columbus filed a petition seeking to repeal the new permit, and in January 2021, CRK intervened alongside the Georgia Environmental Protection Division to defend permit.

The permit challenge should result in a decision before the end of this year. CRK is confident that the new permit conditions are necessary to protect river users and will be upheld.

We are proud of the remarkable changes that have occurred in the Chattahoochee River, but we cannot just look backward. CRK is committed to preserving our great progress and advocating for further improvements in wastewater treatment so that all river users of this vital resource can swim, fish, and paddle knowing they are safe and welcome in the Chattahoochee River. ■



GEORGIA’S “OBLIGATION” IN THE WATER WARS

On April 1, 2021, another chapter in the long running “water wars” concluded after eight years and tens of millions of dollars spent. The U.S. Supreme Court ruled in a 9-0 opinion that Florida failed to make a compelling legal argument or provide sufficient evidence that Georgia uses too much of the Chattahoochee and Flint rivers’ water. The Court did not agree that any harm to the Sunshine State’s oyster population could be traced to the Peach State’s water use.



Atlanta’s drinking and waste water treatment plants on the Chattahoochee River with the city’s skyline in the background.

Georgia’s “win” in this legal round comes with two important lessons from the Florida v. Georgia opinion.

First, the Court explicitly reminded Georgia of the state’s “obligation to make reasonable use of Basin waters in order to help conserve that increasingly scarce resource.” Throughout the case, Georgia argued that the state’s water use was reasonable. All of the water conservation and efficiency work Georgia cited in the case was deemed legally reasonable. The Justices’ opinion also means those laws, policies, and tools are here to stay.

Second, the most progressive acknowledgment in the Court’s opinion was the role of “climatic changes” and their effects on our rivers. Georgia’s central argument was that reduced river flows in Florida were not Georgia’s fault. It

was drought, said Georgia, which has become more frequent and damaging. The Court accepted this argument.

CRK’s advocacy and the Court’s concluding statement align closely. Georgians have a responsibility to conserve water. The state cannot keep growing and not implement new methods to save water in our cities and towns, businesses, industries, or on our farms.

If a robust culture of conservation does not take hold and advance in metro Atlanta, the Flint and Chattahoochee river basins, and across all economic sectors, we’ll be back in court again.

At the end of the day, meeting the challenges of climate change - not legal challenges - will drive our future water decisions. ■

BACTERIALERT PROGRAM CELEBRATES 20 YEARS

BacteriALERT is a one-of-a-kind, real-time bacteria monitoring program operated as a partnership between CRK, U.S. Geological Survey (USGS), and the National Parks Service (NPS). Together, we have been collecting data from the Chattahoochee River for past 20 years. In that time, researchers have noticed a dependable pattern in the data - when it rains, stormwater washes pollutants into the river and bacteria levels rise. These spikes of bacteria can put people that recreate in the river at risk of getting sick.

Traditional tests for the bacteria levels have a turnaround time of 18-24 hours – meaning that the tests can only be processed in enough time to indicate that you should not have been swimming in the water yesterday if the results were high. Within the Chattahoochee River National Recreation Area (CRNRA), day old results were not sufficient to protect the 1.3 million people participating in water-based recreation every year. That’s why the BacteriALERT program was created to provide real-time public advisories within 15 minutes whenever conditions indicate that the water is unsafe for swimming.

Meters are installed in three locations within the 48-mile long CRNRA – at Medlock Bridge, Paces Mill, and Powers Ferry. When one of these meters detects water that is turbid (or clouded with sediment), it is presumed that bacteria levels are elevated and a real-time advisory is sent to the publicly available database at <https://www2.usgs.gov/water/southatlantic/ga/bacteria/>.



“I get calls from members asking if the Chattahoochee River is safe for recreation. And my answer is always ‘It depends,’” says CRK Riverkeeper Jason Ulseth. “The Chattahoochee River generally has good water quality and meets the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency standards for recreation except during periods following heavy rains. The good news is that you do not have to guess. Just bookmark the BacteriALERT website on your phone and you will always know when the bacteria levels are unsafe.” ■

HARMFUL ALGAL BLOOMS PRESENT IN ISOLATED AREAS OF CHATTAHOOCHEE CRK ADVISES PET OWNERS TO USE CAUTION

In January, CRK was notified of a suspected harmful algal bloom (HAB) on the Chattahoochee River, after it was reported that a dog named Chewy became paralyzed and then died one day after swimming in the river along Gold Branch Trail within the Chattahoochee River National Recreation Area (CRNRA). HABs are caused when naturally occurring microscopic organisms called cyanobacteria (or blue-green algae) produce toxins that are harmful to humans and animals.

To understand the problem, CRK teamed up with the National Parks Service (NPS) and University of Georgia (UGA) scientist Dr. Susan Wilde to collect cyanobacteria samples and test the water and sediment for toxins along the Gold Branch trail and two other popular swimming areas in the CRNRA.

“The nutrient rich sediments and slow moving water in this part of the Chattahoochee River provide ideal conditions for the growth of toxin producing cyanobacteria,” said Dr. Wilde.

Results so far suggest that cyanobacteria are present on the bottom of the river along the Gold Branch Trail, but not at the other locations. While our testing did not detect levels of toxins that could sicken an animal,

CRK and partners will continue to monitor for HABs along the Gold Branch trail and other locations throughout this summer and fall in attempt to understand when and where we might find cyanobacteria and toxins in the river.

Chewy’s death is the first incident of suspected health effects associated with HABs in the

main stem of the Chattahoochee River. The NPS has posted signs warning of the risks of pets swimming on the river at the Gold Branch trailhead. CRK recommends that pet owners always exercise caution when exploring natural waterways and avoid stagnant or greenish pools of water. ■



Photo by Annie Couch



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CHATTAHOOCHEE
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RETURN TO THE RIVER ON SEPTEMBER 16

This fall, Chattahoochee Riverkeeper friends will come together for a celebration of the Chattahoochee River and the work being done to protect it. This year's event will celebrate our Return to the River, paying homage to the millions of people who flocked to the great outdoors to alleviate challenges of a global pandemic.

CRK's River Guardian Award will go to The Orvis Company, who, for nearly a decade, has encouraged customers and the angling community to support CRK's water quality programs and keep the south's most thriving trout fishery clean and sustainable. The Newnan Paddlers will be awarded the River Steward Award in recognition of their efforts to encourage and facilitate river recreation as well as their support of our Neighborhood Water Watch and Trash-Free Chattahoochee initiative.

The event will also celebrate the 20th anniversary of BacteriALERT, and will honor CRK Development Director Becca K. Powell with a commitment to hosting the annual All Girls Fish. Return to the River will take place on September 16 in the Stave Room in Atlanta, Ga. It will also be livestreamed.

For more information on how to participate in this year's event, visit www.chattahoochee.org/patronginner.

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