



Ecotourism guide, Georgia Ackeman, leads her group down North Florida's pristine Wacissa River.

# WACISSA WONDER

*By Jason Callaghan*

**A**s we slid through the lily pads in our kayaks, our guide, Georgia, in excited but hushed tones, pointed out a bird hidden in the vegetation on the edge of the river. The limpkin, as we were told, was busy dining on a breakfast of apple snails and seemed hardly as

impressed with us as we were with it. By birdwatcher's standards, we were getting a rare treat by observing a once near-extinct species in an even more endangered habitat. We were near the headwaters of the Wacissa River in the Florida panhandle and less than 15 miles from the Gulf of Mexico.



Sunning alligators are a common sight along the jungle-like banks of the Wacissa River.

On this day, Georgia led a group of eight kayakers through the stunningly beautiful array of open springs and lush flora of a truly unique river system.

There are at least 12 known springs along the upper 1.5 miles

of the river. The smallest, Cassidy Spring, is neatly tucked away in a half bowl of cypress and sweet gum trees. The spring's opening, which is a mere eight feet in diameter, is clearly visible from the water's surface. The sand-lined

banks around this natural swimming pool seem to beckon a few hours of picnicking and swimming on a hot summer day.

About a half-mile farther down river is the first access water trail to Wacissa's largest, first-magnitude



Blue Spring, the largest spring feeding the Wacissa, is more than 50 feet wide and 30 feet deep.



Brad Kirn tries his luck with a fly.

spring. The shallow, tree-lined trail suddenly opens up to an awe-inspiring site - Blue Spring, a bright, emerald-blue pool more than 50 feet in diameter and at least 30 feet deep. Though, on this day we were to turn around at Blue Spring, the

entire length of the Wacissa is easily paddled in a full day.

The Wacissa River starts in the town of Wacissa, Florida, and is about 12 miles long. There is parking and a small boat ramp at the river's start. At over 100 feet wide

for most of its length, the water flow is slow and conducive for paddle craft. It ends in a broken flow of cypress swamps and near unnavigable wetland, before eventually pairing with the Aucilla River. This lower stretch was painstakingly



The author, along with several paddling visitors, meanders up a canopied, spring-fed tributary.



The river's gentle current means paddlers of all ages can join in the adventure.

excavated in the mid 1800's in an effort to provide passage for cotton barges from the Gulf to the upper Wacissa. The Slave Canal, as it is now called, was never fully completed and was abandoned over 100 years ago. It remains passable only

by canoe or kayak. This stretch of the river offers a remoteness and pristine natural beauty that can be found in few other areas in Florida. From the Aucilla it is another few miles downriver to complete this unique estuary.

Wildlife on the Wacissa is truly spectacular. Alligators, turtles, otter, and a host of smaller reptiles and water mammals can be observed on its banks. There are few places in Florida that offer the diversity of the Wacissa's bird popula-



The Wacissa's headwaters offer a spacious and shallow launch site..

tion. Many large birds such as herons, red tailed hawks, bald eagles and egrets thrive on the river.

The fish population contains many freshwater species such as largemouth and Suwannee bass, blue gill and catfish. Further downriver into the lower reaches of the Aucilla River, saltwater species such as mullet, seatrout, and redfish can be found. On this day, Brad Kirn, a fellow paddler and avid freshwater angler, was able to coax a few hungry bream and small bass into eating the flies he offered. Fishing is very popular and productive along the entire stretch of river.

Kayaking on rivers such as the Wacissa offers a unique way to discover and experience Florida's interior wetlands. Though most of our rivers have been clear cut for timber in the last century, with our help, their recovery is well on its way. Aside from the lack of a true mature forest and the introduction of some exotic species, it is still possible to quietly slip down these spring-fed rivers and imagine life here when the plants and animals were their own caretakers. 🇺🇸

Georgia Ackerman is the owner and ecotourism guide for the kayak based The Wilderness Way just south of Tallahassee. She and her highly qualified staff have been offering guided kayak tours on many of north Florida's rivers for over five years. These trips range from short and sweet beginner-friendly trips, to all day excursions. Georgia's technical knowledge of both kayak touring and the wildlife she visits is impressive. Though our morning spent with her on the Wacissa River consisted of a group of kayakers with various degrees of experience, from veteran to novice, she managed to give attention to the entire group. Tour locations offered by The Wilderness Way include multiple sections of the Wacissa, St. Marks, and the Wakulla River, as well as coastal marine tours in the Florida panhandle. The Wilderness Way can be contacted at (850) 570-4089 or visited by web at [www.thewildernessway.net](http://www.thewildernessway.net).

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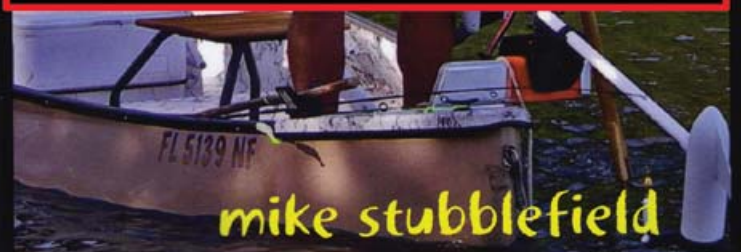
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