

Florida Trail - Suwannee River West Section Overview

Suwannee Springs to Suwannee River State Park

37 miles (approximately)

Directions to Trailhead

From I-10 north of Live Oak, Florida, take Exit 283 and head north on U.S. Highway 129 approximately 4.0 miles to 91st Lane. Turn right and go 0.5 miles to 91st Drive. Turn right and go 0.1 miles to Suwannee Springs.

Maps

The map provided in this document was developed by Doc Livingston and is accurate enough to keep you out of trouble, especially since the trail almost always hugs the river. A great map and one you don't want to be without is published by the Florida Trail Association. They have divided the Florida Trail into numerous sections and produced detailed maps for each of them. Maps 14 and 15 cover this section. These maps can be obtained at floridatrail.org.

Shuttle Information

American Canoe Adventures
10610 Bridge St., White Springs
FL 32096
(386) 397-1309
www.aca1.com



Doc Livingston, Madhatter, Joe Caver, and the Navigator pulled up at the entrance station in the Suwannee river State Park around 2:45 pm. Since they were leaving their vehicle in the park for the next two nights, Doc had to speak with a couple of rangers to explain his plan. As he'd expected, they started shaking their heads expressing disapproval of Doc's intention to hike nearly 11 miles in the next few hours to spend the night at the Holton Creek River Camp. "Do you understand how far



Ruins of the Suwannee Springs Pool

that is? Do you realize that you're not going to even get on the trail till at least 3:30 pm? Are you prepared to hike in the dark?" "Yes, yes, and yes" Doc explained patiently. They couldn't have known that Doc, being seriously OCD when it came to planning an adventure, had spent hours examining the most minute detail of every map, trail description, Google Earth aerial image, and U Tube video that pertained to the region. It's unlikely that the invasion of Normandy had been more meticulously planned than this three-day hike.

They parked in the overnight parking area and loaded their gear into the shuttle van that was



Suwannee Springs from the Suwannee River

waiting for them. After a pleasant 40 minute drive that took them upriver for over 30 miles, they reached the small park that encompassed Suwannee Springs. Suwannee Springs is a great example of what major tourist attractions a number of springs along the Suwannee River were during the latter part of the 19th century. The group walked down from the parking lot and stood in silence looking at the spring. Unlike White Sulphur Spring, Suwannee

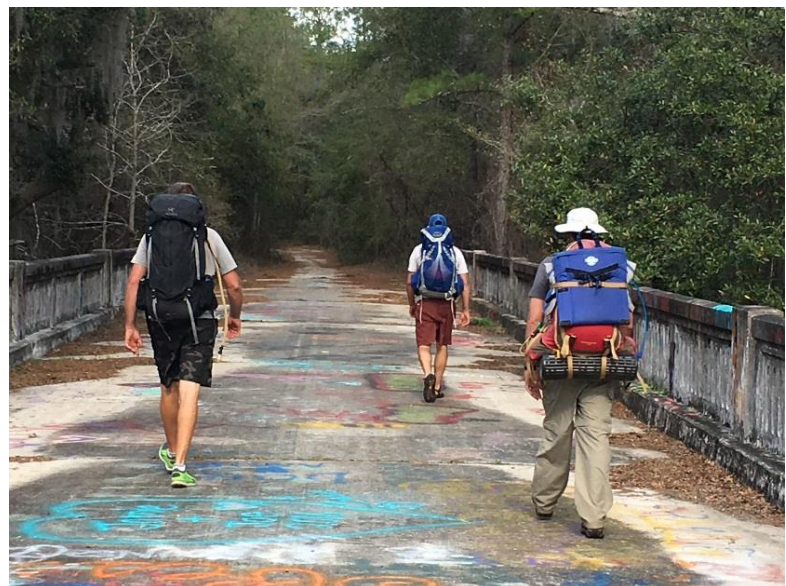
Spring still flowed vigorously, with clear water boiling up out of the ground and out of the pool through an archway in the wall. Doc tried to imagine what this place had been like a century before; the guests in their baggy swim suits rushing out of the elegant wooden hotel to join the bathers in the pool and a steam locomotive hauling cars full of excited tourists across the bridge and announcing its arrival with an ear-splitting hoot. It was difficult to believe that all that frenzied activity had once existed in this quiet and serene place.



The Old U.S. 129 Bridge, Enjoying New Life as a Canvas for Graffiti Artists

They left the spring and hiked west along the south side of the river on a blue-blazed side trail, reaching an abandoned highway bridge over the Suwannee River after a quarter of a mile. Built in 1931, the narrow bridge spanned the wide flood plain and the river for a distance of several hundred yards. The bridge was abandoned intact when a new span was built in 1971 about a quarter mile down river. Doc thought it would make a great set for a post-apocalypse movie. It had now become something of an attraction in its own right, at least for the locals who had festooned its deck with all manner of graffiti. They crossed the bridge to the north side of the river and walked off of it onto the Florida Trail which then passed under the bridge.

After leaving the bridge behind, they followed the entrenched and meandering Sugar Creek then forded it just before reaching the new U.S. 129 Bridge. They passed under the bridge and re-entered the forest. The property on the south side of the River for the next few miles was part of the famous Spirit of the Suwannee Music Park. About a quarter mile past the bridge, the trail, which previously had hugged the river, had been diverted onto a dirt road in front of a number of vacation houses, probably because one of the Homeowners had revoked permission for the



Crossing the Old U.S. 129 Bridge



High and Dry on the Suwannee River

for several hundred yards.

At 4.2 miles past U.S. 129 they forded Mill Creek, which was a small stream that dropped over rocky outcrops into the Suwannee River. Climbing out of the ravine of the creek, they came upon a large dilapidated house that was surrounded by debris that had once been the contents of the house. The structure had been built directly on the ground on a bluff well above the river. Its builders had erroneously assumed it would be safe from flood waters. About 1.6 miles beyond Mill Creek, they crossed a bridge over Mitchell Creek.

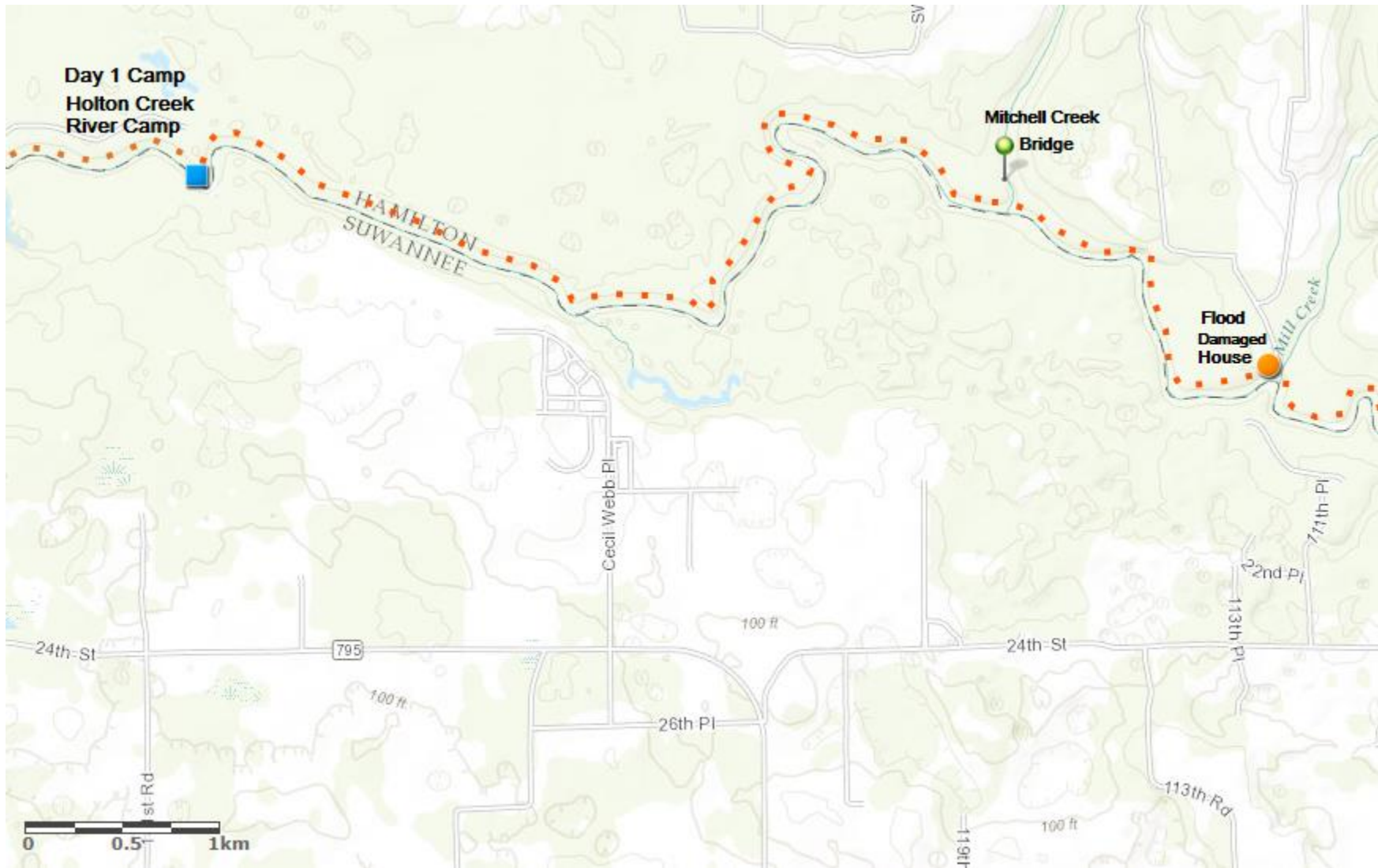
For the last couple of miles, Doc had dropped progressively further behind the others as a result of his frequent stops to take photos. He enjoyed walking through the woods alone, not having to worry about keeping up. But as the sun dropped below the trees he was relieved to come upon the Navigator who was

trail to cross their property. Each of the houses was elevated at least 30 feet above the ground to avoid relatively frequent floods. After nearly a mile, the dirt road ended and they re-entered the forest. At 1.6 miles past U.S. 129, they passed a series of concrete bridge abutments that bisected the river and indicated the path of the abandoned Seaboard Coast Line Railroad. Soon after, they reached a dry tributary of the river, incised into the limestone, and crossed it after paralleling it



Dry Tributary Incised into the Limestone

Day 1 Trail Map – Part 2



sitting on a log by the trail. He said that Joe Caver and the Hatter were hiking together and were probably far ahead by now. Doc said that staying on the trail in daylight with all its chaotic twists and turns was difficult enough so he was glad he wouldn't have to find his way alone in the dark. They set off with the Navigator in the lead, picking up the pace a bit as they walked through the gathering dusk. At around 6:30 pm, it became so dark



Mill Creek Dropping into the Suwannee River



Hiking Along a Fence Line at Sunset

that they were frequently losing the trail so they stopped to put their headlamps on. Within a half hour the darkness was nearly complete. Fortunately, the Navigator proved worthy of his trail name as he somehow managed to locate the orange blazes on the trees that were much harder to spot at night. Even so, they sometimes found themselves having to back track and hunt for the blazes when they realized they were off the trail.

Hiking through the darkness was an interesting and exhilarating experience. Instead of the broad vistas they enjoyed during the day, their world was reduced to the relatively small space that was illuminated by their headlamps. Also, the night time silence in the woods, other than the sound of their footsteps, was total. So when there was an explosion of cackling and a

frenzied flapping of wings above them, Doc rose about a foot in the air and felt his heart skip a few beats before he came back to earth. They speculated that the racket may have been from surprised wild turkeys roosting in the trees. Much more subtle was the haunting “who cooks for you” call of a Barred Owl that rang out every few minutes. It was likely that the curious bird was following the strange bubbles of light that were moving on the ground below it.



Bridge Over Mitchell Creek

It was now about 7:30 pm and Doc estimated they had traveled nearly 10 miles in three and a half hours without having taken much of a break or eaten anything more substantial than a power bar. To make things worse, they were also out of water. While they could have replenished their supplies from the river, trying to find a way down the steep banks in the dark would probably have resulted in an involuntary swim.

As they rounded a bend, they heard voices and saw what looked like a street light shining out over the river. They were convinced that this was the Holton Creek River Camp and felt renewed energy in their certainty that the hike was just about over. However, after a few hundred yards, the voices and light faded away and they began to become concerned they had missed a turn. They back tracked and looked for a side trail but as best they could tell, the light was on the opposite side of the river. Doc studied the map and concluded



Just about Time to Break Out the Headlamps

they probably still had about a mile to go. To take his mind off his weariness, Doc let his mind wander to other night expeditions he'd experienced. He had once been part of all-day mapping marathons in remote corners of the Mammoth Cave system. He and his companions would exit the cave late at night, then hike through the darkness on



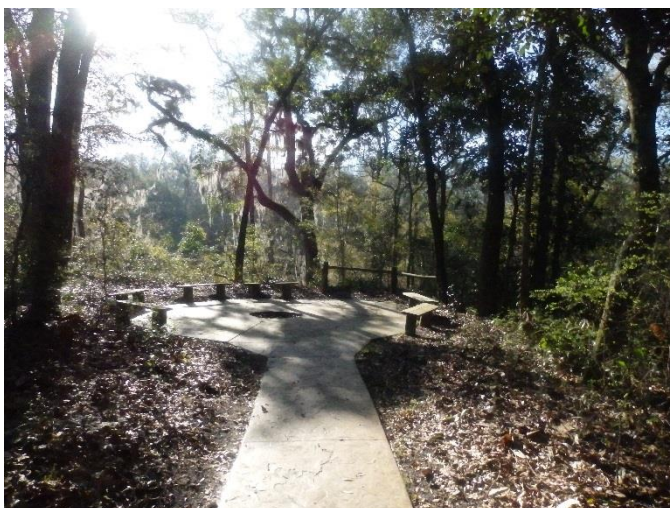
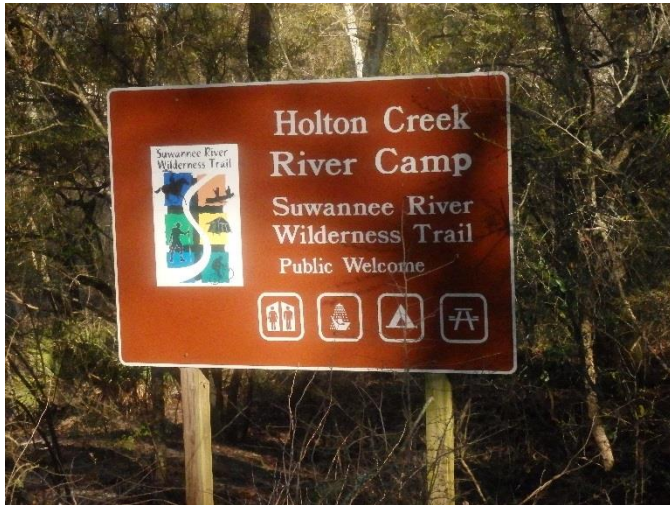
The Curious Barred Owl that followed us in the Tree Tops

remote trails for miles till they reached their vehicle. Then there was the time he had risen at midnight at Camp Muir on Mt. Rainier to prepare for their summit attempt. Roped together with his companions, they watched the sunrise from a glacier high on the flank of the peak. It was one of the most spectacular sights he'd ever seen. His mind came back to the present when the Navigator announced he saw lights in the distance that had to be the river camp. But nothing was going to be easy for them on this night because a huge downed tree blocked the trail. They were in no mood to search for an easy way through so they stumbled straight ahead through the thick boughs with backpacks and clothing snagging on every limb and branches slapping them in their faces. They finally bulldozed through into the campsite. Directly in front of them were their companions lounging on picnic table and watching them with bemused looks on their faces. Trying to salvage a few shreds of dignity, Doc said "a real friend would have come back along the trail to carry an old man's pack." It's every man for himself out here brother" replied the Hatter with a big grin on his face.

The Holton Creek River Camp is one of five camps on the Suwannee River that are designed to accommodate canoeists and kayakers on multi-day trips. Calling them camps is about as accurate as calling a four-seat Ferrari a type of sedan. They are quite luxurious with hot showers, flush toilets, screened cabins, electricity, and firewood and ice for sale from the campground host. Strangely enough, Holton Creek is the only river camp accessible to backpackers on the Suwannee River portion of the Florida Trail. The others are located on the opposite side of the river from the trail or downstream from where the trail leaves the river.

After the stress of the long day, they recuperated by lounging around their cabin, eating dinner and talking about the events of the day. They all agreed that as hard as the day had been, it was worth it to have made it to the river camp. One by one they went to the bathrooms and showered while the others straightened up the cabin. Once everyone was back from the showers, the talking died down quickly as the worn out crew fell asleep.

Holton Creek River Camp

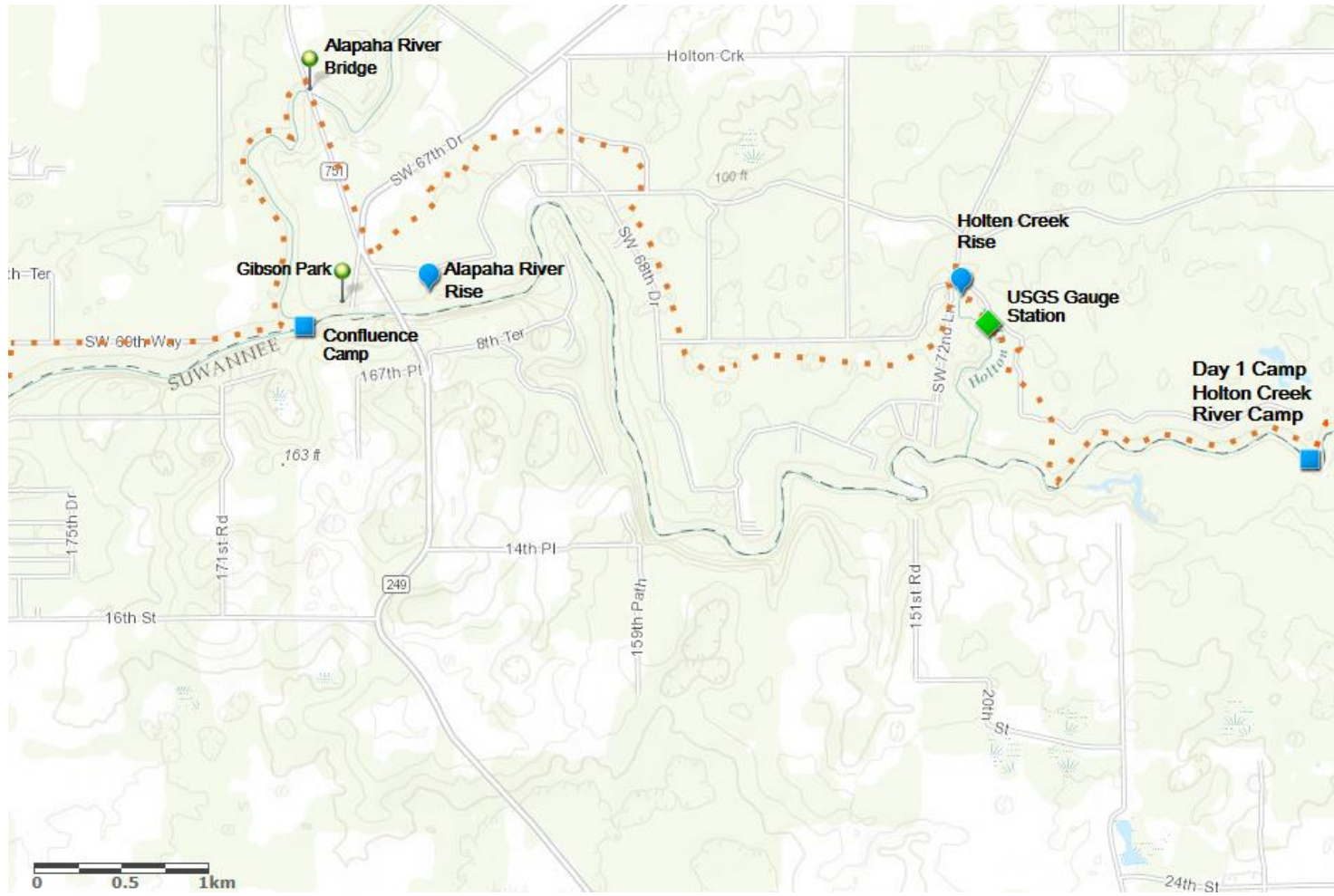


Day 2, Saturday, February 25, 2017.

Holton Creek River Camp to Campsite on Withlacoochee River

14 miles (approximately).

Day 2 Trail Map - Part 1



Doc woke shortly before sunrise and went outside to build a fire in the ring by the cabin. It was about 50 degrees, which was his ideal temperature, not too cold for a thin-blooded Florida boy and not too warm. He had purchased wood the night before and had it ready to go so in no time he was sitting by the fire drinking coffee and enjoying the sunrise. He was soon joined by his companions and as they prepared breakfast they talked about the plan for the day's hike. The goal was to find a campsite that was no



Early Start on the Trail

more than two or three miles from where the truck was parked. This was necessary because a couple of them had commitments and needed to get home by early afternoon the next day.

The down side of this was that they would have to make anywhere from 14 to 18 miles depending on what route they took through the state park. No one was



The Chaotic Karst Terrain Typical of North Florida

thrilled with that distance because they all had the typical first-day aches and pains from muscles that were not used to weighty backpacks carried long distances. Once that discussion was completed, they packed up quickly and got on the trail.

It was a beautiful cool morning and unlike the hike of the night before when they had no idea what the surrounding terrain looked like, now they could see they were passing through the



First Sight of Holton Creek



Checking Out the USGS Flow Gauging Station on Holton Creek
and downed trees, all twisted into an impassable jumble.

After about a mile and a half from the river camp, the trail turned north, away from the river, where it soon intersected and paralleled Holton Creek. The rapidly flowing creek travels about a mile through a rocky ravine from its source at Holton Creek Rise on its way to the Suwannee River. As they walked along the creek, they came upon an elaborate platform extending out into the swirling water. A sign on the structure said that it was a station installed by the U.S. Geological Survey to measure the flow of the creek. Other interesting features of this part of the trail were large, grassy glades covered by a carpet of Rain Lilies. These flowers, which sprout and bloom profusely after a large rain, gave the area a sort of Alice in Wonderland fairy-tale quality where you wouldn't be surprised to find the March Hare and Dormouse bustling about the garden. After another quarter mile they reached Holton Creek Rise



Garden of Rain Lilies

chaotic karst terrain that this part of Florida is famous for. For most of the day they would be walking directly adjacent to the river on what was known as an alluvial ridge. These ridges are formed during flood events when sediments carried by the river drop out as water flows over the banks. On the other side of the ridge from the river, was the river's wide floodplain and it was filled with large sinkholes, abandoned river channels, rocky outcrops, thickets of vegetation,



Holton Creek Rise – the Source of Holton Creek



Part of the Alapaha River going into a sink (not Accessible from the Florida Trail)



Alapaha River Rise (not Accessible from the Florida Trail)



Alapaha River Rise looking Toward the Suwannee River

The Rise is known as a first magnitude spring because it spews water at the rate of over 100 cubic feet per second (62 million gallons per day) from the Floridan aquifer. The pool is circular and measures 225 ft across. It has been reported by divers that along the north shore, a vertical limestone ledge drops off quickly to a depth of 100 feet.

Beyond Holton Creek Rise, the trail paralleled the river but at a distance of a quarter to a half mile. This was because all the land along the river for over three miles was a privately owned community of vacation homes. The trail meandered for a couple of miles through open woods that appeared as if they had been farmed in the not too distant past.

They passed near another very interesting karst feature known as the Alapaha River Rise, but because it was on the private river-front property, they were unable to reach it. The Alapaha River empties into the Suwannee River about a half mile downstream of the river rise. Some of the flow of the Alapaha River is captured by sinkholes in and near its channel and funneled underground where it travels south to discharge out of the Alapaha River Rise. During dry periods when the flow in the river is low, it's all diverted underground and the river channel dries up completely. The river rise pool is circular and approximately 100 feet across and 70 feet deep. The water is dark and flows rapidly out of the rise down a narrow 900 foot run to the Suwannee River. The rise has deeply scalloped limestone walls that rise vertically to a height of about 30 feet above the water level.

Shortly after passing near the rise they emerged from the



Leaving Gibson Park Heading North to the Bridge over the Alapaha River



The Alapaha River from the Highway Bridge

woods onto busy County Road 249. Although they were supposed to head north on the road to cross the bridge over the Alapaha River, they took a 1,000 foot detour to the south to Gibson Park, a small county park located on the north bank of the Suwannee River. Park amenities include potable water, flush toilets, picnic tables, and camping. They took over a picnic pavilion and settled down for a leisurely lunch and watched the “campers” bustle about their



Campsite at the Confluence of the Alapaha and Suwannee Rivers

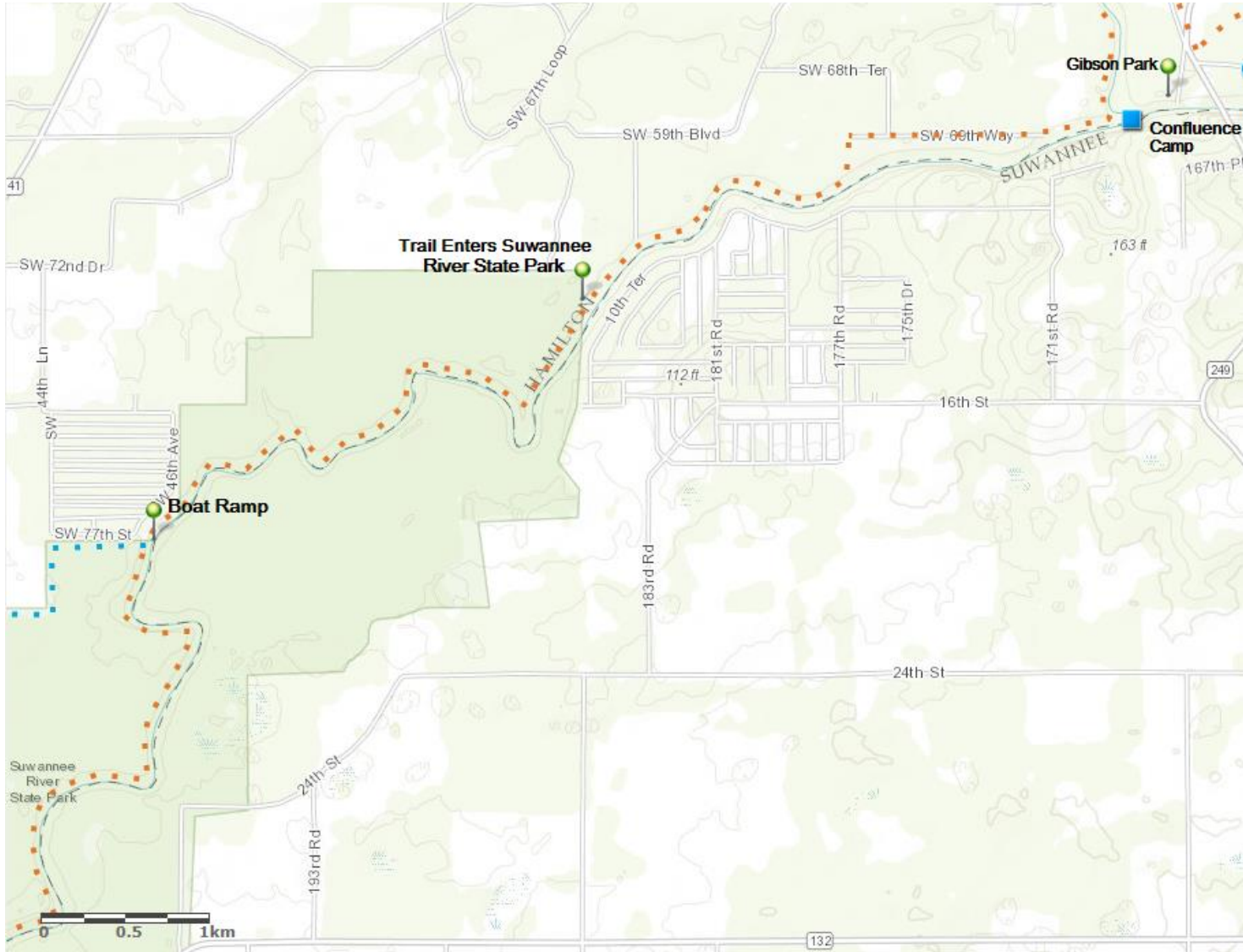
giant RVs doing things that real campers do like adjusting their satellite TV antennas and polishing chrome bumpers. After about a half hour of RV camper watching, they packed up and headed up the highway. They hiked for about two thirds of a mile up the road, crossed the bridge over the Alapaha River, then walked down the west side of the embankment and reentered the woods. Because rainfall had been abundant, the sinkholes upriver in the channel could not take all of the flow so the Alapaha River was moving vigorously as they followed it for a half mile down to its confluence with the Suwannee River. On a bluff overlooking the confluence, there was a great campsite complete with benches circling a fire pit. They took a



The Confluence of the Alapaha and Suwannee Rivers; the Alapaha comes in from the Left

short break to explore the area, made a mental note to camp there if they ever had the chance, then resumed hiking. After a few hundred yards the trail shunted them out to a dirt road, which they followed for about two thirds of a mile before it turned back into the woods and led them for another half mile to the river where it resumed its southwestward course. The trail crossed into Suwannee River State Park and hugged the river for the next few miles offering spectacular sweeping vistas far down the river at nearly every turn.

Day 2 Trail Map - Part 2



On the other side of the trail was the same tortuous floodplain, impassible in many places because of the sinkholes, abandoned river channels, and thick forest. They passed an unnamed spring where clear water boiled up out of a small indentation in the river bank. According to the map they had passed many springs but this was the first they'd noticed.

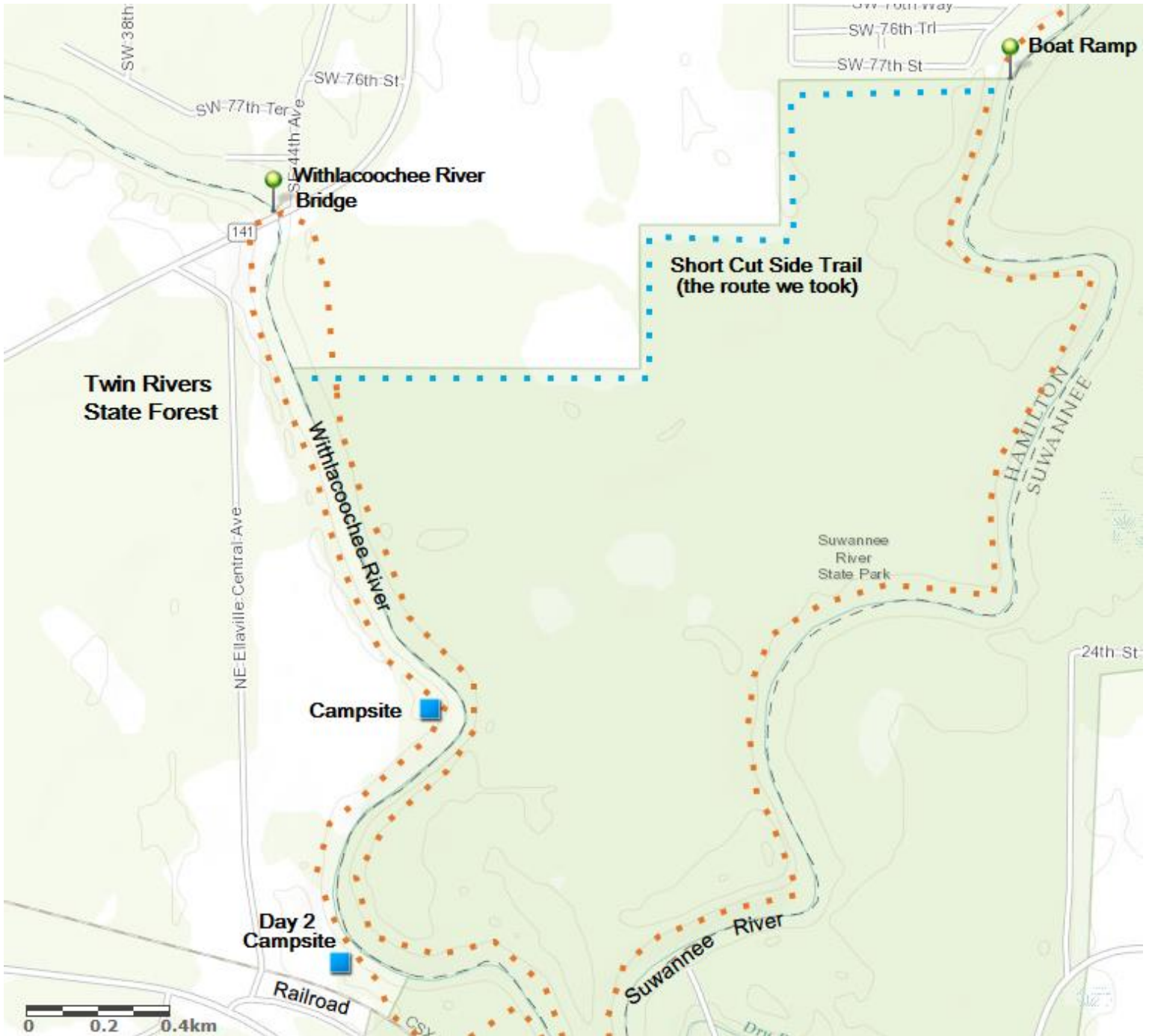
Shortly after they passed the spring they came to a community of mostly dilapidated houses spread haphazardly near the river. The map showed that the state park property thinned to encompass just the bank of the river so some of the houses were very close. Many of the owners had not sufficiently elevated their houses because damage from flood waters was very obvious. In some cases there wasn't much left and the properties appeared to have been abandoned. It was one more reminder of just how high the water could get during floods.

A bit further on they came to a boat ramp and it was here they needed to make a decision about what route they would take. They could continue on the Florida Trail which followed the river a couple of miles south into the state park, where they would eventually reach a campsite at the confluence of the Withlacoochee and Suwannee Rivers.



The Suwannee River near where the Trail Enters Suwannee River State Park

Day 2 Trail Map - Part 3





Unnamed Spring on the Bank of the Suwannee River

The next morning they would have to head north along the east bank of the Withlacoochee River for roughly 2 miles till they crossed the river on County Road 141, then hike back south along the west bank of the Withlacoochee River for roughly another 2 miles to the west side of the confluence of the Suwannee and Withlacoochee Rivers. So at the confluence, to get to the other side of the Withlacoochee River, a

distance of a few hundred feet, one had to hike roughly 4 miles via the Florida Trail. Had Winston Churchill hiked this section of the trail, he surely would dusted off and modified his famous World War II comment and said “never have so many, hiked so far, to cover so little ground.” They decided to avoid this trek by taking a side trail that stair stepped mostly west across the northern boundary of the park to the Florida Trail almost where it crossed the Withlacoochee River on the highway bridge. Doc and the Hatter had hiked all of the longer Florida Trail route the year before as part of a day hike so they didn’t feel they were going to miss anything by taking the shortcut.

They side trail was mostly a pleasant double track dirt road along the boundary of the park with the forest of the park to the south and open farmland to the north. After covering roughly 1.3 miles from the boat ramp,



Heading West toward the Withlacoochee River on a Side Trail



Exposed Limestone Boulders along the Banks of the Withlacoochee River

they again reached the Florida Trail and took it north roughly a half mile to the highway bridge over the Withlacoochee River. After crossing the river, they walked down the embankment and entered the Twin Rivers State Forest. They took a break when the trail took them to the west bank of the Withlacoochee River. At this point they had covered nearly 13 miles from the Holton Creek River Camp

and after the 11 miles from the previous day, they were more than ready to stop for the night. The map showed a campsite on the river about a mile further along their route so they hefted their packs to make one last push to the campsite. The trail hugged the river and as they walked they kept their eyes open for campsites but saw not so much as a small clearing. After about 20 minutes they reached the campsite, which was a pleasant grassy clearing on a bluff over the river. Unfortunately, it was already occupied. There was a small picnic table that was covered with gear and two tents on the small site. There was definitely not room for another four tents. They talked with the two occupants of the site and learned they'd come from the parking area at the state park about two and a half miles away. They left the campsite and as soon as they were around the bend, the Hatter said they should go back and toss them and their gear into the river, then take the site for themselves. His reasoning was that the two backpackers had come two and a half miles while the four of them had come about 14 miles so it was clear which group deserved it the most. Although he wasn't really serious, the group was so worn out and desperate to



The Cozy Camp on the Withlacoochee River

find a good campsite that the Hatter's plan seemed almost reasonable. Instead they continued walking and looking for a campsite but could find nothing suitable. Finally, Doc noticed a little used dirt road paralleling the trail and decided it was wide enough to accommodate all of them. Although it was anything but an ideal campsite, they were so tired that they embraced it with the same enthusiasm they would have displayed if they had just stumbled upon Yosemite Valley. They set up camp, gathered wood for a fire, and began preparing the evening meal. Getting water was a bit challenging since they had to navigate an obstacle course of vegetation and a jumble of giant limestone boulders to make it down the steep bank of the river. Darkness



Native Florida Azealeas on the Bank of the Suwannee River

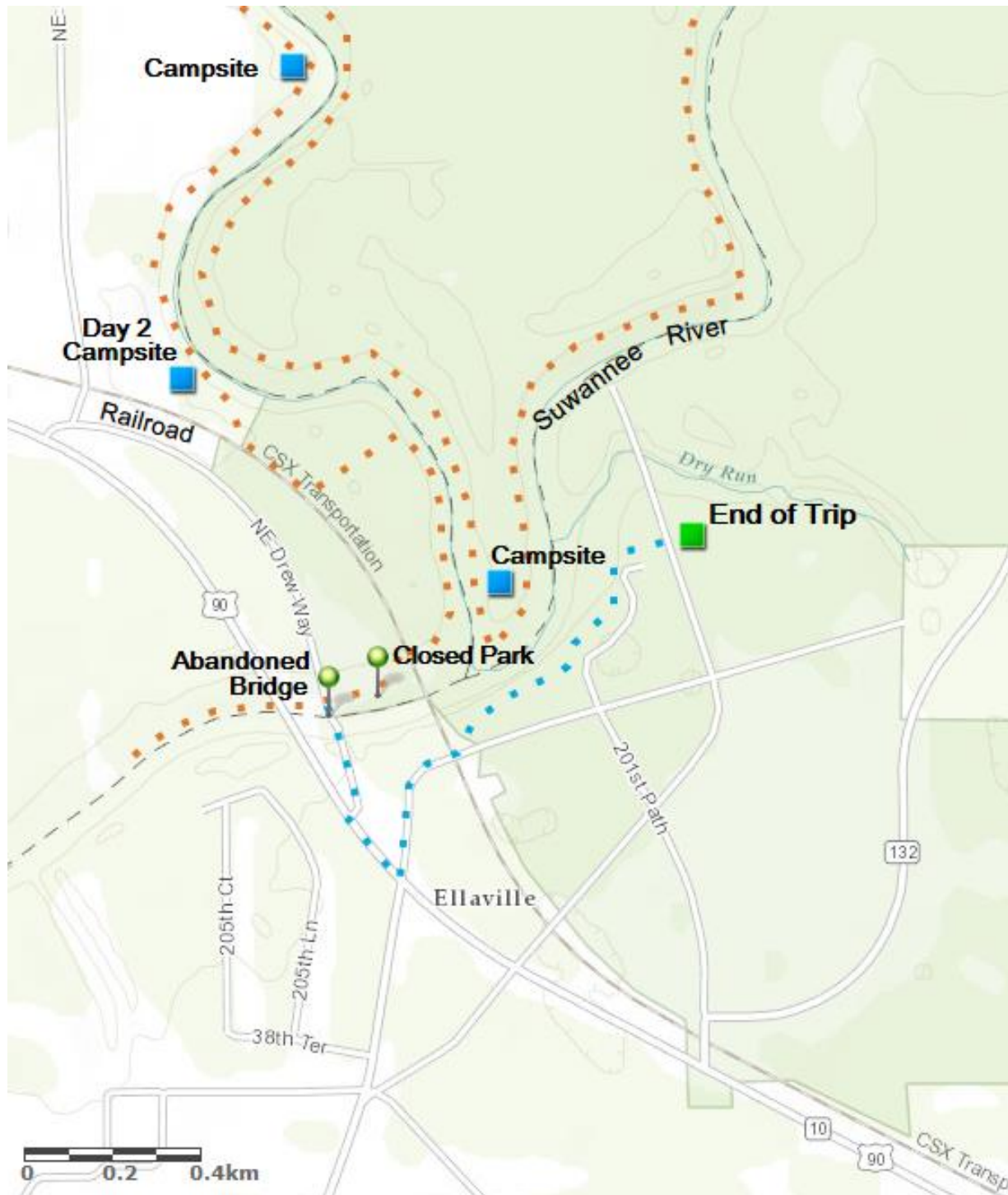
fell and they sat around the fire eating and talking. They all agreed the site wasn't bad at all. They were surrounded by thick forest, water was nearby, and the way their tents were packed together made it rather cozy. Just as this conversation was waning, they felt a distant rumbling that increased in intensity until the very ground seemed to shake. When a loud horn and a bright light pierced the darkness, they realized with increasing alarm that a train was coming and it was going to pass very close. Just before it reached their site it began to curve away and passed about 250 feet to the south. It rumbled by for several minutes then faded away in the distance. Once the silence had returned, Doc said, "Well, it seemed like a good idea to camp here at the time. Hope you can sleep through trains running through the back door of your tents tonight."

Day 3, Sunday, February 26, 2017.

Withlacoochee River Day 2 Campsite to Suwannee River State Park Parking Area

1.7 miles (approximately)

Day 3 Trail Map



They awoke to bright sunshine and temperatures in the high 40s. As they sat around the fire eating breakfast they laughed that no one had noticed the nearby tracks the previous evening while they were collecting firewood. They also were surprised and relieved that another train had not come through during the night.

They broke camp and continued south between the river and the railroad tracks. After about a half mile they reached a kiosk that explained that they were standing in

what once was the bustling little town of Ellaville (see write up in the introduction section). The sign explained that Ellaville had once been quite a substantial town but looking around them they saw no trace whatsoever of human habitation. The group continued along the trail, passed beneath the railroad tracks, and soon emerged from the forest onto a park with picnic tables, a highway, and a bridge over the Suwannee River. They soon realized as they passed through the area that all of it was abandoned. The road had been rerouted over a new bridge a few hundred yards downstream and the old bridge, highway and roadside park were abandoned in



Early Morning along the Withlacoochee River



Information Kiosk at what was Once Downtown Ellaville

place, something that seemed to be a common practice as evidenced by the old bridge they crossed the day before at U.S. Highway 129.

As the Hatter looked at the roadside park with its picnic tables and overgrown fields, he looked at Doc accusingly and said “we could have camped here last night instead of that swampy railroad siding you picked last night.” “Two problems with that” Doc replied. “First, my body hurt so bad I would

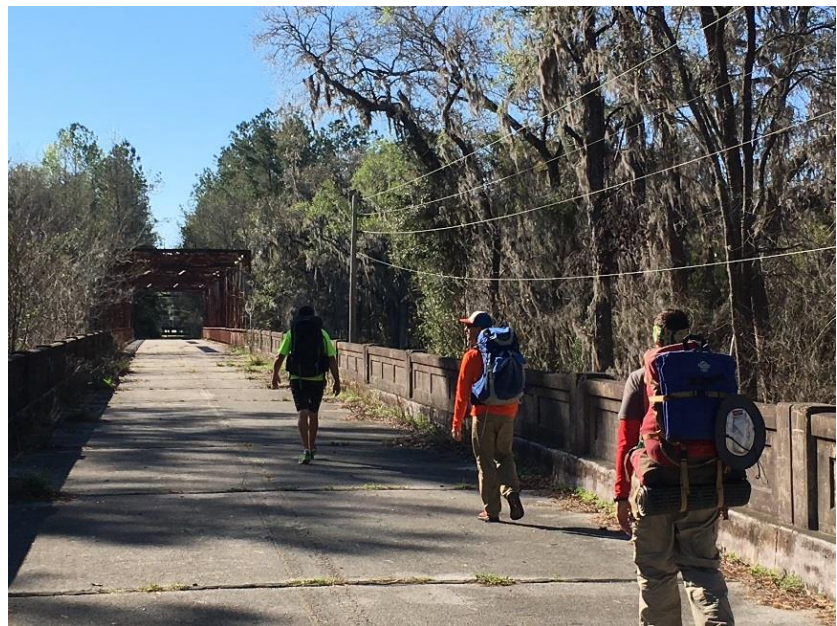


Crossing under the Railroad

have been crawling well before we made it here and second, the park is ringed by no trespassing signs.” Always the rebel, the Hatter said “we should have set up camp and if a ranger came, we could claim that we got here after dark and didn’t see any signs.” “What if he made us pack up and leave? Where would we have gone then?” Doc countered. “Slept in the truck” the Hatter replied. Doc knew that it was not possible to win an argument with the Hatter

because he was very nimble at throwing out counter arguments whether they made sense of not. So Doc related a story of the time he and some friends, desperate to find a place to camp after dark in Great Smokey Mountains National Park, pulled off at a nature trail where Doc knew there was a great campsite about a half mile back in the woods. When they arrived, it was clearly marked with no camping signs but they set up camp anyway. They were awakened by a very irate ranger at 2:00 am who had seen their car and decided to investigate. He made them

break camp, pack up, and hike out, then gave them a ticket and a \$50 fine as a parting gift. They spent the rest of the night trying unsuccessfully to sleep in a cramped car at a closed gas station in Gatlinburg. “Moral of the story is bad things happen when you break the rules” said Doc. For the Hatter, who was all about breaking rules, this was like waving a red cape in front of a bull. So before he could think up a reply, Doc walked quickly down the trail.



Crossing the Abandoned U.S. 90 Bridge over the Suwannee River

The trail crossed the old bridge over the river, turned into the state park, and crossed the railroad tracks again. After they'd gone a hundred yards they were startled by blasts of a horn and soon another freight train rolled by and crossed the river. They walked past the confluence of the Suwannee and Withlacoochee Rivers and within a few minutes were back at the truck.



Looking Upriver from the Abandoned U.S. 90 Bridge

This marked the end of their two trips on the Florida Trail along the Suwannee River. Together these hikes covered nearly 70 miles, a few thousand years of human habitation, and 50 million years of geologic history. Doc thought of all those who had been drawn to the river and passed this way before them from Native Americans who left little trace of their civilizations to settlers, tourists, and businessmen who had tried to alter the region with their determination and industriousness. Yet all of their endeavors; the resorts, mills, railroads, and towns were gone, swept away by a restless and powerful river that does not easily tolerate the intrusions of man.

Doc put those musings behind him and helped load the truck. They drove out of the park, and as always on the long drive home, discussed the details of their next backpacking adventure.

