

Florida Trail – Suwannee River East Section Overview (Copyright, Wesley Chapel Backpacking Institute, 2017)

Suwannee River from Bell Springs Trailhead to U.S. 129 (with an out and back side trip to Big Shoals).

30.9 miles (approximately)

Directions to Trail Head

From the Town of White Springs: Take U.S. 41 South out of White Springs and proceed 3.1 miles to N.W. Lassie Black Street. Turn left (east) on N.W. Lassie Black Street and proceed approximately 2.0 miles to N.W. Marcell Drive. Turn left (north) on Marcell Drive and proceed approximately 1.0 miles to the parking area at the Bell Springs Trailhead.

Maps

The map provided in this document was developed by a rank amateur cartographer (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



Suwannee River East Trip Log

Day 1 - Thursday, November 24, 2016

Bell Springs Parking Area, east on Florida Trail to Big Shoals Rapid

Return to Bell Springs Parking Area then head west to Campsite Located 0.2 Miles East of Waldron's Landing
3.4 miles

Day 1 Trail Map



Madhatter, Doc Livingston, and Joe Caver began the hike at about 3:30 pm from the remote parking area at Bell Springs where they left Doc's truck. It was the peak of the fall season, nippy with brilliant sunshine, and while the changing colors of the leaves were not exactly comparable to the gaudy explosion of color one encounters in New England, they were none-the-less lovely in their understated way.



Big Shoals when the River Goes Big

Although they would travel west for the next four days, they took a quick side trip to the east to Big Shoals, Florida's only class III whitewater rapid (approximately 1.4 miles round trip). The



Big Shoals – not so Big when the WCBI Passed through much higher level when it was a roaring, river-wide torrent.

woods were extremely dry due to a drought that had been in progress for several months and the lack of rain was especially evident when they reached Big Shoals. The flow of the river was nearing record lows and the shoal was more a rock outcrop with a few rivulets of water running across it than an actual rapid. They rock hopped across the river with little effort just to say they had done it. Doc shook his head in disbelief as he recalled a time many years earlier when he had kayaked the rapid at a

After spending a half hour exploring the shoals, they retraced their path back to Bell Springs and began heading west along the river. The sun was setting and the temperature dropped as they navigated the trail toward the campsite. Hiking through the river forest at dusk in the cool temperatures was exhilarating as they hurried to reach the campsite before dark. Fortunately they only had to cover about two miles and just as the sun dropped below the tree tops they

climbed a bluff where there was a clearing and picnic table overlooking a wide expanse of the river. "Perfect" Doc exclaimed as he surveyed the river from their elevated vantage point. They wasted no time setting up their tents and building a fire in the fading light and preparing and eating the evening meal. They were thoroughly spent after a very long day that included an early Thanksgiving with their families, the long drive up to north Florida to the trailhead and a nearly four-mile hike. Vocalizations were limited to a few grunts of acknowledgement at the feeble attempts to start a conversation. At one point Doc awoke to find that his companions had quietly retired to their tents. It took a while but he eventually worked up the energy to do the same.



View from a Bluff on the South Bank of the River

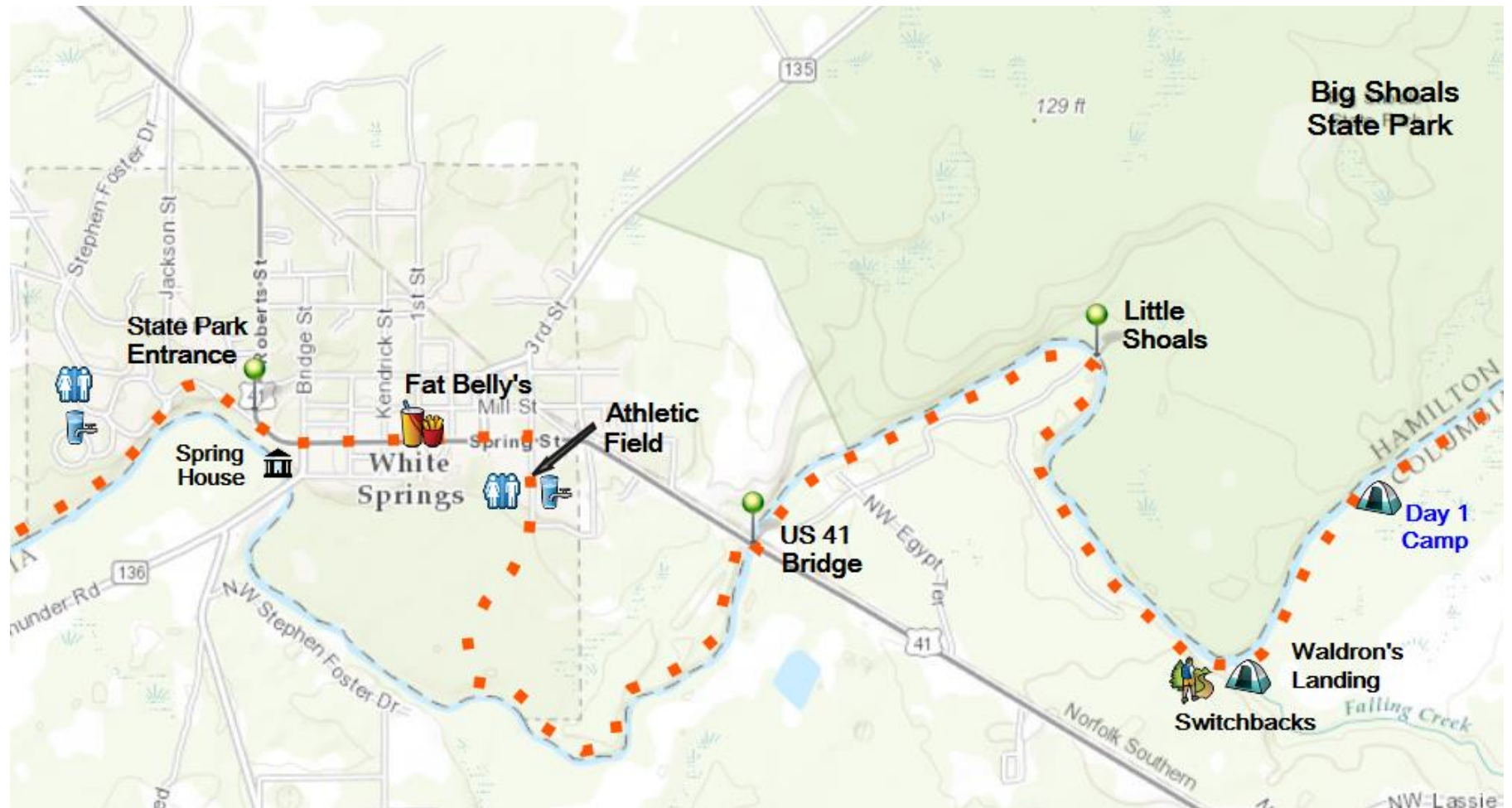


Day 1 Campsite atop a Bluff Overlooking the River

Day 2, Friday, November 25, 2016.

**Campsite 0.2 Miles East of Waldron's Landing to Swift Creek
13.6 miles**

Day 2 Trail Map – Part 1



Awaking at first light, Doc cursed his thin south Florida blood, then rushed out of his tent, crawling on hands and knees like a bug though the 37 degree chill to the side of the fire where he piled on kindling and blew on the hot coals to the point of hyperventilation. Soon the fire flared back to life and Doc luxuriated in the returning warmth.

It was only after the temperature of his brain rose several degrees that he had the presence of mind to look around from his perch on the bluff. The river steamed as it flowed lazily below and the first rays of the sun shined through the mist to highlight the subtle colors of the changing leaves. The sight was worth



First of Three Switchbacks up the Bluff beyond Waldron's Landing



Falling Creek near Waldron's Landing the

discomfort of his near sleepless night that was typical of his first day on the trail. Since they had a long challenging day ahead of them, they quickly prepared breakfast, packed up, and hit the trail. The 2.8 mile section of the trail between their campsite and the U.S. 41 Bridge proved to be particularly scenic and interesting. After 0.4 miles they reached Waldron's landing, a wide ravine carved by Falling Creek that contained a launching place for small boats. It was also a large camping spot with an in-ground metal grill.

Amazingly enough, when leaving Waldron's landing the trail ascended fairly steeply (for Florida anyway) up a series of three switchbacks to the top of a bluff that must have been 100 feet above the river. At the summit

there were good views across the floodplain on the other side of the river. As they walked along the top of the bluff they noticed a series of parallel trails that weaved their way through the hilly terrain. They weren't sure what the trails were for until they came upon a large group of resting mountain bikers.

The trail descended steeply off the bluff and followed a narrow ridge along the river through a scrub oak forest.



Neat Little Bride over a Deep Ravine

At 1.3 miles they passed another picnic table on a bluff above the river that would make a good campsite, except that space for tents was very limited.

At 2.4 miles they passed Little Shoals, which at such a low flow may have been more appropriately named Very Tiny Shoals. At 2.8 miles they reached the U.S. 41 Bridge and crossed it to the north side of the river. They passed through a small wayside park on the west side of the bridge where there was a boat ramp and picnic tables, then entered the woods and followed the trail along the river. This portion of the trail was also shared with mountain bikers. After



Little Shoals Shown Running Much Higher than when the WCBI Passed through

approximately 1.5 miles the trail turned north away from the river and after another mile passed a trail access parking area and followed a dirt road past a cemetery and a ball field where there was a bathroom and potable water. The trail then followed Adams Memorial Road for about 0.25 miles as it led them to Spring Street, the main drag of the town of White Springs.

White Springs is a pleasant and interesting little town that despite all has going for it,



Fat Belly's in White Springs

seems to be stuck in limbo between decline and prosperity. Doc has been passing through it for over 30 years and nothing ever seems to change. Maybe the townsfolk want it that way. The town's limited services include the Adams Country Store, Dollar General, Suwannee Hardware, White Springs Bed and Breakfast, and American Canoe Adventures - an outfitter for canoe and kayak river trips that provides shuttles for hikers on the Florida Trail. Most importantly there is Fat Belly's Bar and Grill, which is a friendly little barbeque and burgers place.

Some of a backpacker's most cherished memories are the almost spiritual experiences they've had while dining at

greasy spoons in quaint little trail towns. This after lengthy periods of having their palettes and digestive systems insulted by insipid freeze dried trail food that after a few days tastes the same whether it be scrambled eggs or beef stroganoff. The fact that the Hatter, Doc, and Caver Joe had been on the trail for less than 24 hours and eaten only two trail meals was of no consequence. Their lunch at Fat Belly's was as satisfying as if they'd just stepped off the Appalachian Trail in Maine after 2000 miles and five months of walking.

After feeding like hogs at a trough, they wallowed their way down Spring Street. At the edge of town they passed the Nature and Heritage Tourism Visitor Center, which was a really interesting amenity for the town that unfortunately is now closed. Another example of how the town just can't quite seem to build any forward momentum.



Entering Stephen Foster State Park



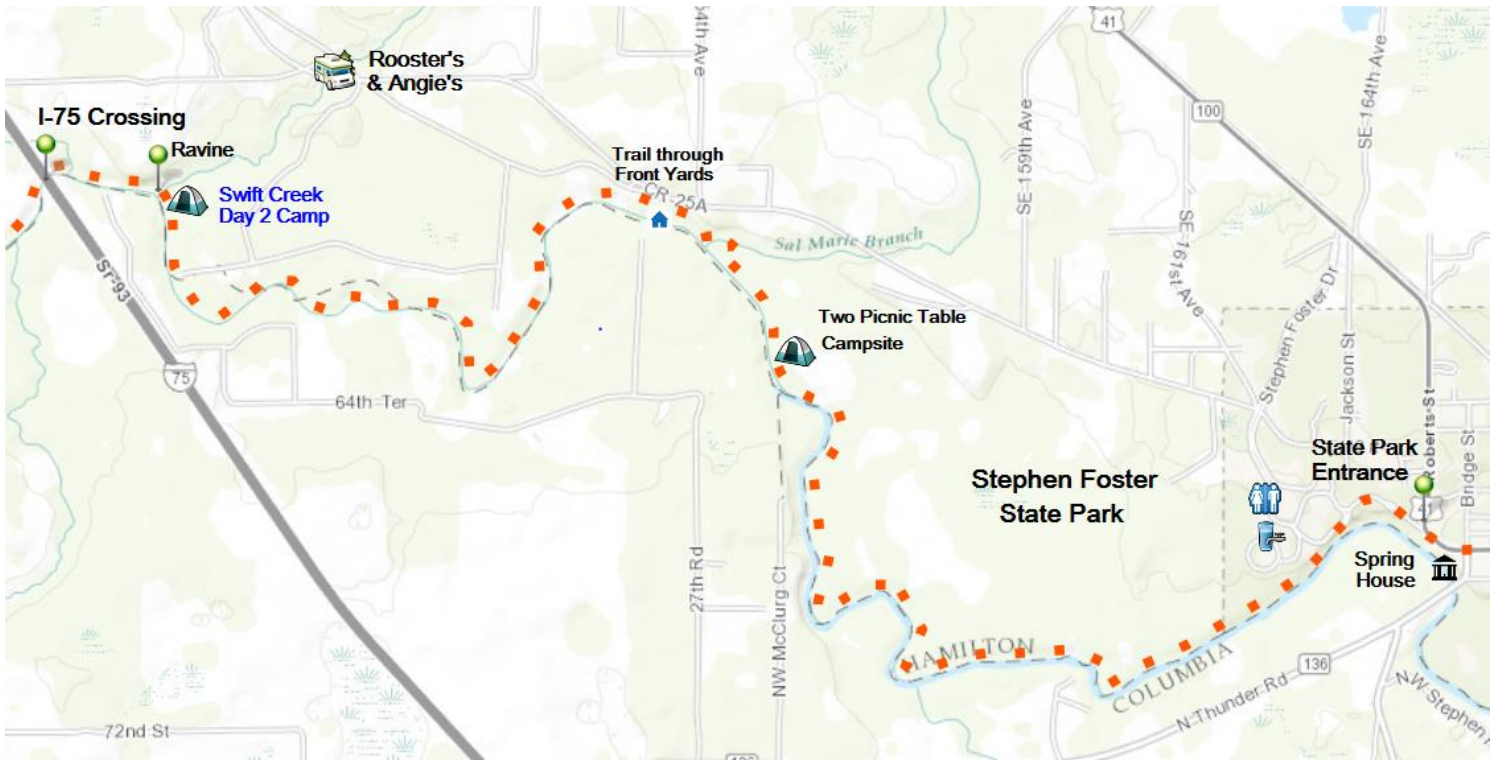
The much Diminished Suwannee River Flowing through a Small Channel

Immediately past the visitor center were the ruins of the old White Sulphur spring pool, a forlorn reminder of the town's lost glory. They briefly explored the ruins then hiked on through the gates of the Stephen Foster Folk Culture Center State Park. The park has many amenities including potable water, bathrooms with showers, campground, rental cabins, a general store, and an impressive carillon tower. The trail followed the park's main road for a time before turning back to parallel the river. For the next three miles the trail ran over and around a series of low bluffs along the river.



Hiking through the Back Country of Stephen Foster State Park

Day 2 Trail Map – Part 2



A Fellow Hiker on the Florida Trail



Just before leaving the park they reached a campsite with two picnic tables on a bluff overlooking the river. This was a great campsite they had used in the past but their stopping point for the day was still several miles distant.

Soon after leaving the park they passed an overlook where they could see the river funneling through a rocky channel that was narrow enough to be easily waded. This was another reminder of just how low the

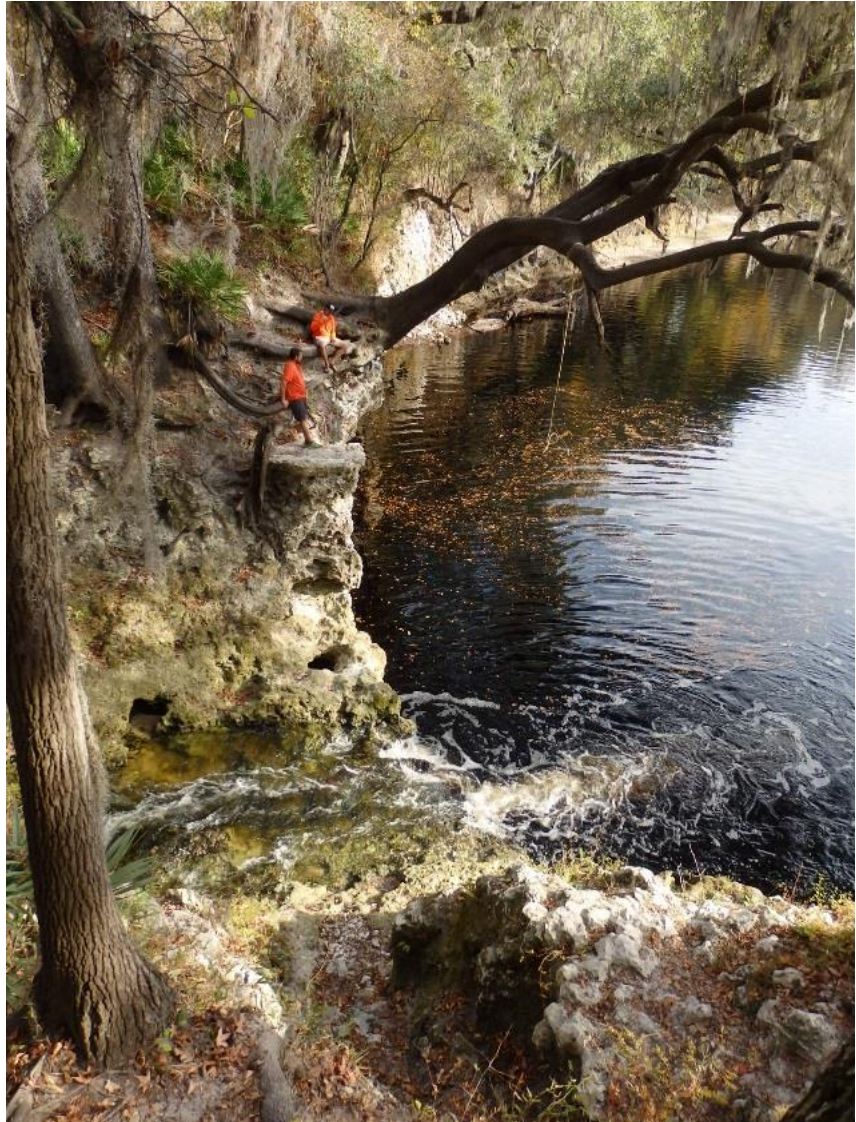
flow of the river was. Shortly beyond the channel the trail veered away from the river and followed a small flowing stream known as Sal Marie Branch for a couple of hundred yards before they crossed it on a rickety bridge. About a half mile beyond the bridge, the trail left the river and led out of the forest onto a well-tended open pasture between a couple of widely spaced houses. This was obviously private property and it was the first time on any of their hikes that they had passed through someone's front yard. They walked along a dirt road that paralleled a lightly travelled paved highway for about a half mile before the trail headed back into the forest and resumed its course along the river.

After another 2.7 miles they reached their campsite for the evening, which was a large clearing just before an elaborate bridge over Swift Creek. The creek, which was about 30 feet below the bridge at the bottom of a narrow limestone ravine, rushed toward the Suwannee River several hundred feet around a bend beyond the bridge. The place where the



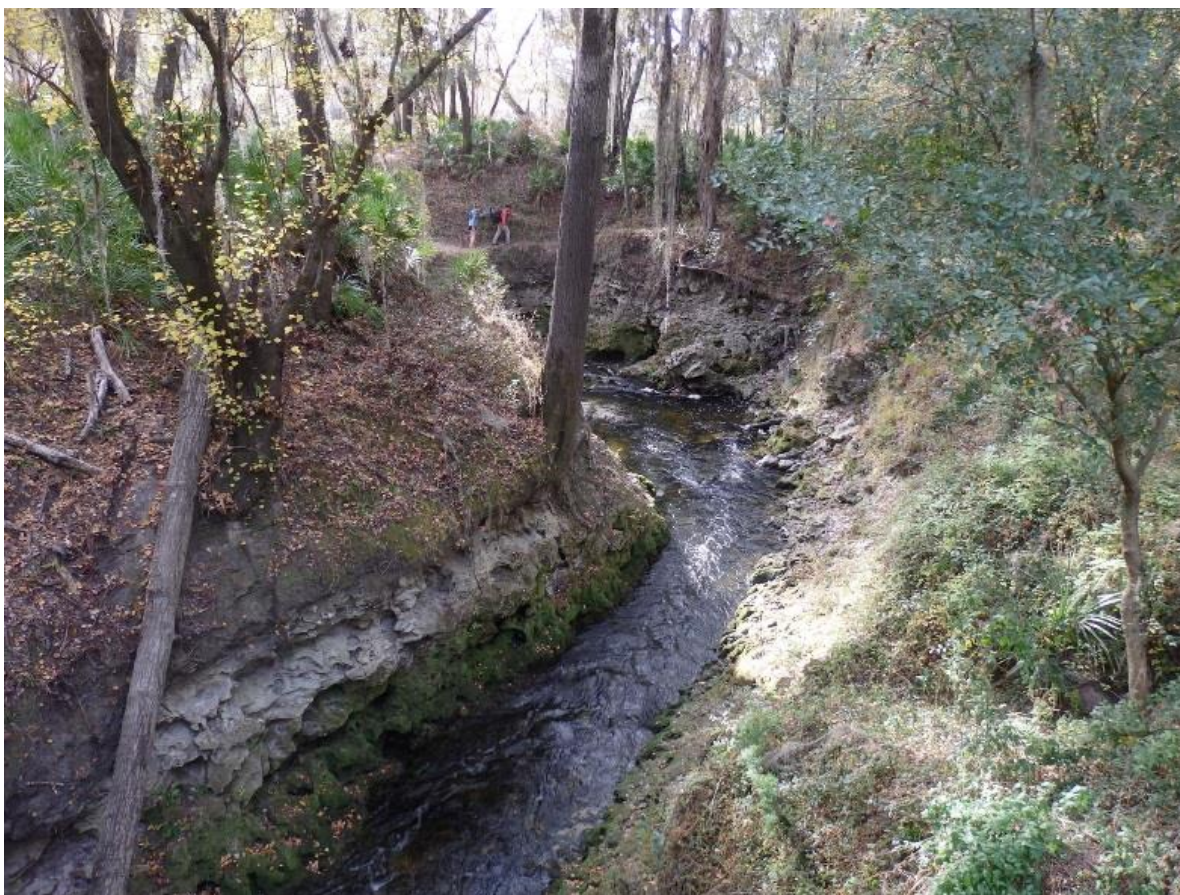
The Elaborate Bridge over Swift Creek

rushing creek exited the ravine and poured into the Suwannee River was one of the most interesting sites they had seen during all their hikes on the Florida Trail. There was a rope swing tied to a tree and even though the river seemed deep, the dark water and the cooler temperatures that were coming with the waning afternoon made them decide not to attempt the swing. Doc wanted to wash off the grime of their 13 mile day, so he climbed down to the bottom of the ravine and executed a very shallow dive into river. The water was much colder than he expected and he let out an involuntary whoop when he reached the surface. He quickly made for shore and pulled himself out. Feeling much refreshed, he dried off, changed clothes, and joined the Hatter and Caver Joe in setting up camp.



The Hatter and Caver Joe high above where Swift Creek Meets the Suwannee River

The one downside to the campsite was that it was only about a half mile from where the Florida Trail passes under Interstate 75. Earlier in the day, as they covered the last few miles to the campsite, they noticed the steady increase in the volume of traffic noise and now it had become so loud that they half expected to see an 18 wheeler pull in as if this was a truck stop. They contemplated continuing on past the interstate to find a quieter campsite but after consulting the map, they saw that the road and trail ran more-or-less parallel for several miles before reaching a comfortable separation. Oh well Doc thought, at least the noise would drown out the drone of Hatter's snoring.



Looking down the Mini Canyon of Swift Creek to the Suwannee River – Note the two Hikers at Top Center for Scale

Since it was a bit early for dinner they idly poked about the site and wandered through the woods collecting firewood. On one of Doc's forays he noticed a sign tacked to a tree. The arrow pointed up a dirt road that led away from the river. Doc alerted his companions and for a time they discussed the sign, convincing themselves of the near certainty that a campground store would carry cold beer and decadent, unhealthy snacks. The only unknown was how far they would have to walk to get there, a not so unimportant factor given the long distance they had traveled and the fact that night was falling. Apparently the proprietors felt that the renown of their establishments was such that anyone hiking the Florida Trail would know exactly how far Rooster's and Angie's was from the campsite. Whipping out his phone, which had a strong signal



The Message to Backpacker's is Beer and Junk Food



The Wood Whittler and the Trail Maintenance Man at Rooster's Store

due to the proximity of the interstate, the Hatter punched in the relevant information and was soon rewarded with a location relative to his current position. "Only a half mile away," he exclaimed enthusiastically. "Let's go."

They weren't walking long when they reached a cluster of ramshackle buildings that turned out to be Rooster's and Angie's. As they approached the store, a long-haired disheveled individual was sitting on a bench whittling on a piece of wood. He looked at

them suspiciously and asked what they wanted. Doc thought this a bit odd because in his experience, whenever one walks up to the front of a store, it's pretty clear that their intent is to enter it and buy something, or at least use the bathroom.

"You must be Rooster," Doc asserted. "Nope." said the odd man without making any attempt to identify himself. Doc was about to say, well then you must be Angie, but thought better of it. We thought we'd buy some beer and snacks if that wouldn't be too much trouble" Doc said, with just a hint of sarcasm in his voice. "Don't have none of that" he replied. Doc looked at the sign 15 feet behind the man that advertised Cold Beer, Ice, and Camping Supplies. "The sign says you do" Doc persisted. "Sign's old, we don't." "Why don't you take the sign down?" Doc countered. "I 'spect we will someday" he said.



The Hatter Writing His Memoirs at the Camp at Swift Creek

Caver Joe ignored the verbal sparring between Doc and the wood whittler because he was



Swift Creek Mini Canyon with the Suwannee River in the Background

busy poking around the dusty displays in the outfitters store. He was a hunter and a fisherman and here was a veritable museum of lures, rods, nets, knives, guns and ammunition, all looking like they had been placed there in the 1970s and not touched since.

Another, somewhat more amiable man came walking up and started chatting with them about the Florida

Trail. He wasn't Rooster either but he said he was in charge of the maintenance of the trail in this region. He told them that the bridge over Swift Creek had been destroyed when a large tree had fallen on it the previous year and the impressive new one had just been completed at a cost of \$64,000. He chuckled about the lack of beverages and food in the store and said that Rooster just stopped carrying it one day. "Got some Diet Pepsi in my fridge. Want some of that?" he inquired. Later that evening back at the campsite sitting around the fire, Doc reflected that the walk to Rooster's hadn't been a complete bust. Luke-warm Diet Pepsi didn't taste half bad mixed with the Jack Daniels he'd brought along. All would be right with the world if they'd just thought to ask for a few ice cubes.



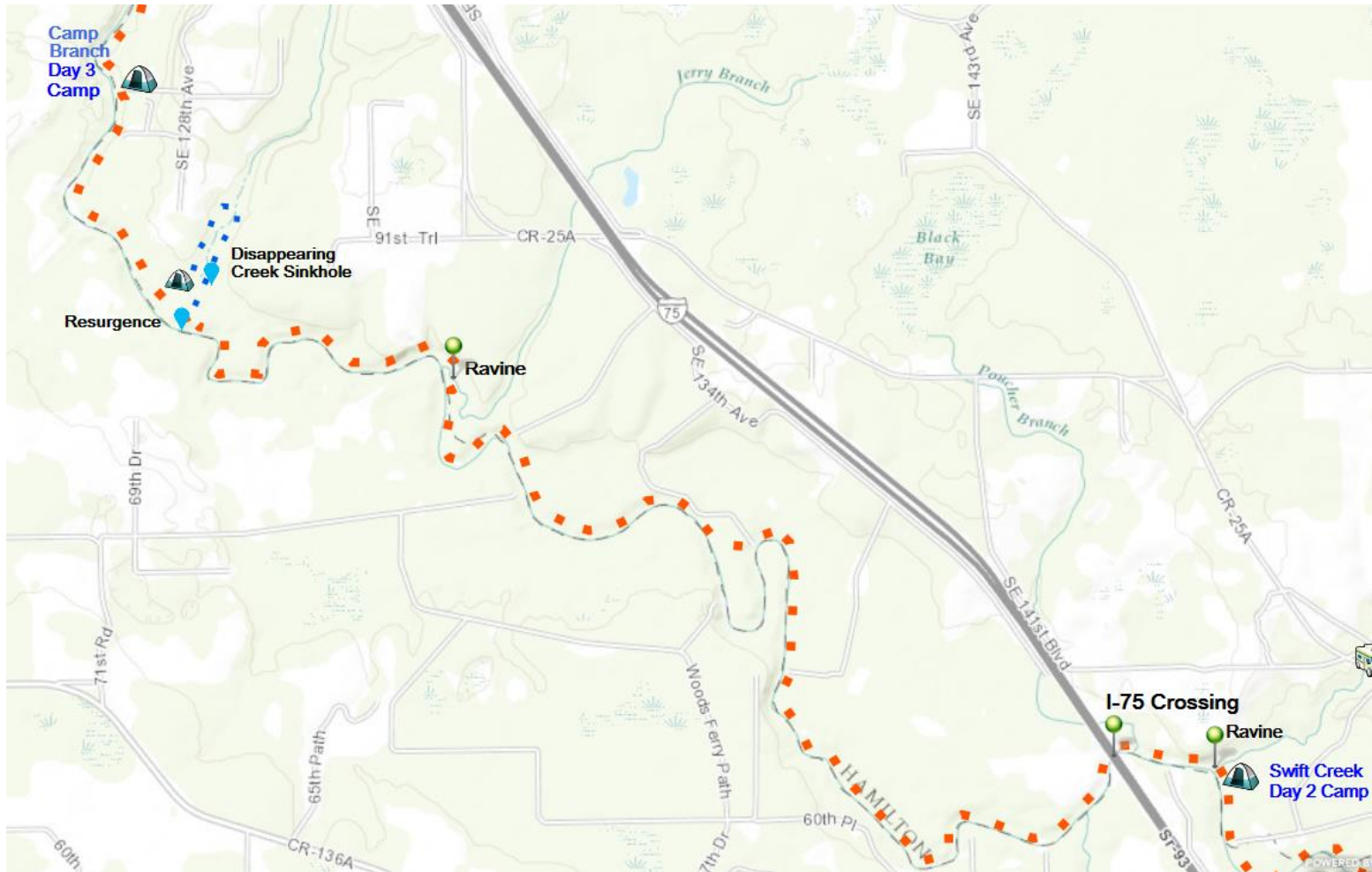
Returning to the Campsite from Rooster's

Day 3, November 26, 2016.

Swift Creek to Camp Branch Campsite

6.0 Miles

Day 3 Trail Map



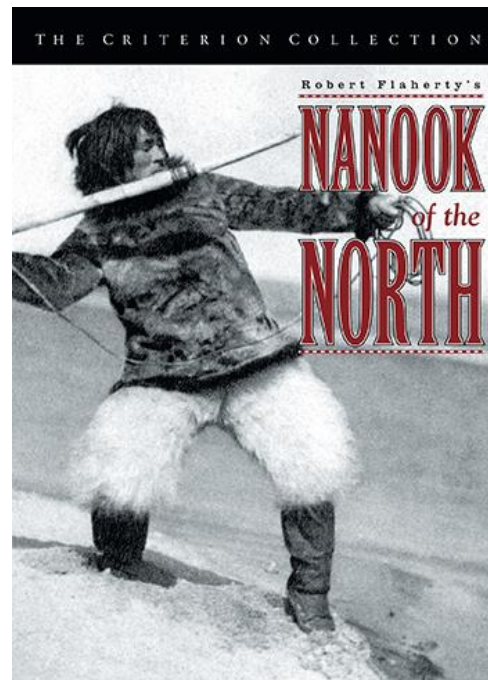


The Hatter bundled up in his Sleeping Bag and Winter Sleeping Gear and Caver Joe (aka Nanook of the North) in Shorts

Doc woke in the pre-dawn light and checked the time and temperature. It was 5:30 am and 39 degrees. He tried to understand how he could be so cold that his shivering was practically chipping his teeth, even though he was wearing heavy socks, long underwear, a down jacket, and a wool cap and wrapped in a sleeping bag that was supposed to keep him warm down to 30 degrees. It was obvious, he thought, that the test subjects used to rate the bags were Eskimos that could be toasty warm sleeping naked on an ice flow. They certainly didn't use thin-blooded

Floridians who rushed to turn on the heat when the inside temperature dropped below 70 degrees. Being so uncomfortably cold he knew he wasn't going to go back to sleep so like the morning before, he repeated his desperate dash to the fire and quickly stoked it back to life. This time, however, he brought his sleeping pad and bag from the tent, laid them next to the fire, and finally warm, went back to sleep.

Doc awoke to full daylight and inched the sleeping bag off his face and as he did so, was perplexed to see a rain of tiny white particles falling all around him. Whoa, he thought, if that's snow, then it got a lot colder than I thought last night. But then the higher centers of his brain began functioning and he realized that the source of the "snow" was Joe Caver, who was grinning sheepishly at him while he vigorously stirred the fire. "Sorry," he said. "Didn't mean for that to happen." "It's ok," Doc said insincerely as he quickly brushed off some tiny embers that were starting to burn holes in his \$350 sleeping bag. Doc then noticed that Caver was wearing nothing but a light pair of shorts and a tee shirt. "Good god man!" he said as he stared at Caver in amazement "Who are you, Nanook of the north? It's in the 30s and you're practically naked!" The hatter, in his down jacket, wool hat, and fleece pants said "yeah, he moved down from northern Missouri last year so this is like a mild summer morning to him."



Joe Caver's Alter Ego - the Guy they Use to Test Sleeping Bag Warmth

Doc pulled himself up out of his sleeping bag, took a seat by the fire, and fired up the Jetboil stove to boil water. It was a fine sunny morning and since they only had six miles to cover, they were content to lounge around the fire drinking coffee while they waited for the temperature to rise to a respectable level. Eventually they figured enough time had been wasted and they began breaking camp and packing up.



The First of Many Deep Ravines Crossed on the Third Day

Soon after they left camp they dropped into a deep ravine, the first of many they would cross that day, made by small tributaries flowing into the Suwannee River. Not far past the ravine they climbed a ladder over a barbed wire fence (known as a stile), which put them on the right-of-way of Interstate 75. The interstate is crossed at another point on the Trail nearly 600 trail miles to the south near its southern terminus. They crossed under double bridges, exited the right-of-way on another stile, and were soon walking back along the river.

For a mile beyond the interstate, they crossed a series of broad channels where water marks ringed the trees several feet above the ground. It was clear that these areas frequently flooded when the nearby Suwannee River got restless and climbed up out of its banks to see what was going on in the surrounding countryside. Obviously this section of trail would be completely impassable during times of high water.



The Hatter Crossing a Stile onto the I-75 Right-of-Way

The morning turned into afternoon as they leisurely walked through patches of woods alternating with fallow farm fields sprouting up into forest. Everywhere there were the subtle colors of a north Florida fall. Doc thought about people he'd met from the north who were surprised when he talked about changes of seasons in Florida. Some actually believed that the temperature from Key West to the Georgia Border, a distance of nearly 600 miles, stays at a torrid 90 degrees year round. Of course there are changes of seasons and though they're obvious in the northern part of the state, Doc had learned that one had to be a keen observer of climate to accurately discern their boundaries in the far south where he grew up.



Fall Colors along the Trail

The trail descended for several hundred feet as it paralleled the side of a small stream at the bottom of a particularly deep ravine. They reached the bottom, crossed a bridge over the stream, then went straight up the side for a hundred feet or so on a very nicely constructed series of stairs.

After about a half mile of hiking across flat terrain, they reached Camp Branch, a.k.a. Disappearing Creek. Camp Branch and Swift Creek (where they camped the night before), are similar in that as both creeks pick up speed as they approach the Suwannee River, they have eroded deep ravines into the limestone.



Hiking Down Stairs into a Deep Ravine



Cave at the Bottom of a Sinkhole above Disappearing Creek



Disappearing Creek Emerging onto the Bank of the Suwannee River after a Short Journey through the Underworld



Where Disappearing Creek Disappears into the Limestone

However, whereas Swift Creek created a narrow canyon for itself, Disappearing Creek found a weakness in the limestone and eventually created a cave through it for several hundred feet. The cave ends in a small ravine on the bank of the Suwannee River where the creek emerges none the worse for wear from its short journey underground.

They dropped their packs at a campsite on a bluff that overlooked a sinkhole with a cave entrance at the bottom. The cave is actually a window into Disappearing Creek as it passes through the limestone, about 100 feet from where it first goes underground. True to his name, Caver Joe was drawn to the grotto like a moth to a flame. He and the Hatter climbed down and



waded into water just inside the entrance before deciding that a swim in the cold dark water was not all that appealing. They climbed out of the sinkhole then walked with Doc to the depression where Disappearing Creek goes underground. They followed a blue-blazed side trail upstream along the creek and watched as it followed its tortuous course over rocks and between Cypress Knees. They reached a bridge that had been damaged by flood waters

The Warning about an Unsafe Bridge

and crossed over it in spite of a sign warning that it was unsafe. The trail led down the other side of the branch, back to the campsite. They walked to the Suwannee River and explored the ravine where the creek emerged. As they climbed down the nearly vertical bank of the river, Doc lost his grip on a tree root and fell backward down the slope. Fortunately, he stopped abruptly before falling very far when his back rammed into a tree stump.



The Incautious Hatter Ignoring the Warning



Day Three Campsite

Beyond the gazebo, the river and the trail made a sharp turn to the north and after about a half mile they reached their camp for the night, which consisted of a small shelter containing two picnic tables.

As the Hatter and Joe Caver set up camp, Doc walked down a short trail to explore the river. The opposite bank was a vertical wall of limestone and as Doc examined it, he imagined he could see what looked to be a fossil of a dinosaur complete with a long spine and big teeth. However, as a geologist, he knew that the timing wasn't right. This rock formation, appropriately named the Suwannee Limestone, had been formed during the Oligocene epoch between 23 and 34 million years ago, roughly 30 million years



Doc's "Dinosaur Fossil" Discovery

after an asteroid the size of a mountain crashed and ended the dinosaur's party. Although there were a lot of fossils in the formation, they were only the hard parts of undramatic little critters that you'd expect to stub your toe on at the beach today; corals, mollusks, sea urchins, and sand dollars. But sadly, no Velociraptors or T Rex's. They spent the next hour preparing dinner and eating around the fire while the Hatter's music played over his portable sound system in the background. Once dinner was finished and the dishes were cleaned, they walked up a dirt road

Although scraped and bruised and gasping like a fish out of water from having the wind knocked out of him, he was otherwise undamaged and the Hatter even gave him a minute to catch his breath before he started to make fun of him. When they finished their exploration of the area, they retrieved their packs and continued on the trail. They soon passed a pleasant looking little gazebo with a picnic table over-looking the river. It was a perfect camping spot except for a no camping sign.

to a clearing where they could do some serious star gazing. Once their eyes were completely accustomed to the darkness, Doc pronounced his traditional rating of the stargazing quality of the night sky. "It's about a 7.5 tonight" he said with not much enthusiasm in his voice. "I thought it would have been better since we're a long way from any urban areas." Doc's personal stargazing scale ranged from zero to ten, with ten being the sky he'd experienced while on a kayaking trip in the Grand Canyon, where the milky way blazed across the heavens like a roman candle and satellites were constantly visible moving rapidly between the canyon rims, while zero was the sky in an urban area where even the brightest stars and planets were barely visible. Doc tended not to get overly excited about the sky unless it was at least an 8.5.

It wasn't long before the evening chill began to seep through Doc and the Hatter's cold weather gear. Caver Joe, still in his shorts and tee shirt, continued to be impervious to the cold. Doc suggested they change Caver Joe's trail name to Iceman. They wrapped up their stargazing, walked back to camp and warmed up around the fire before retiring to their tents.



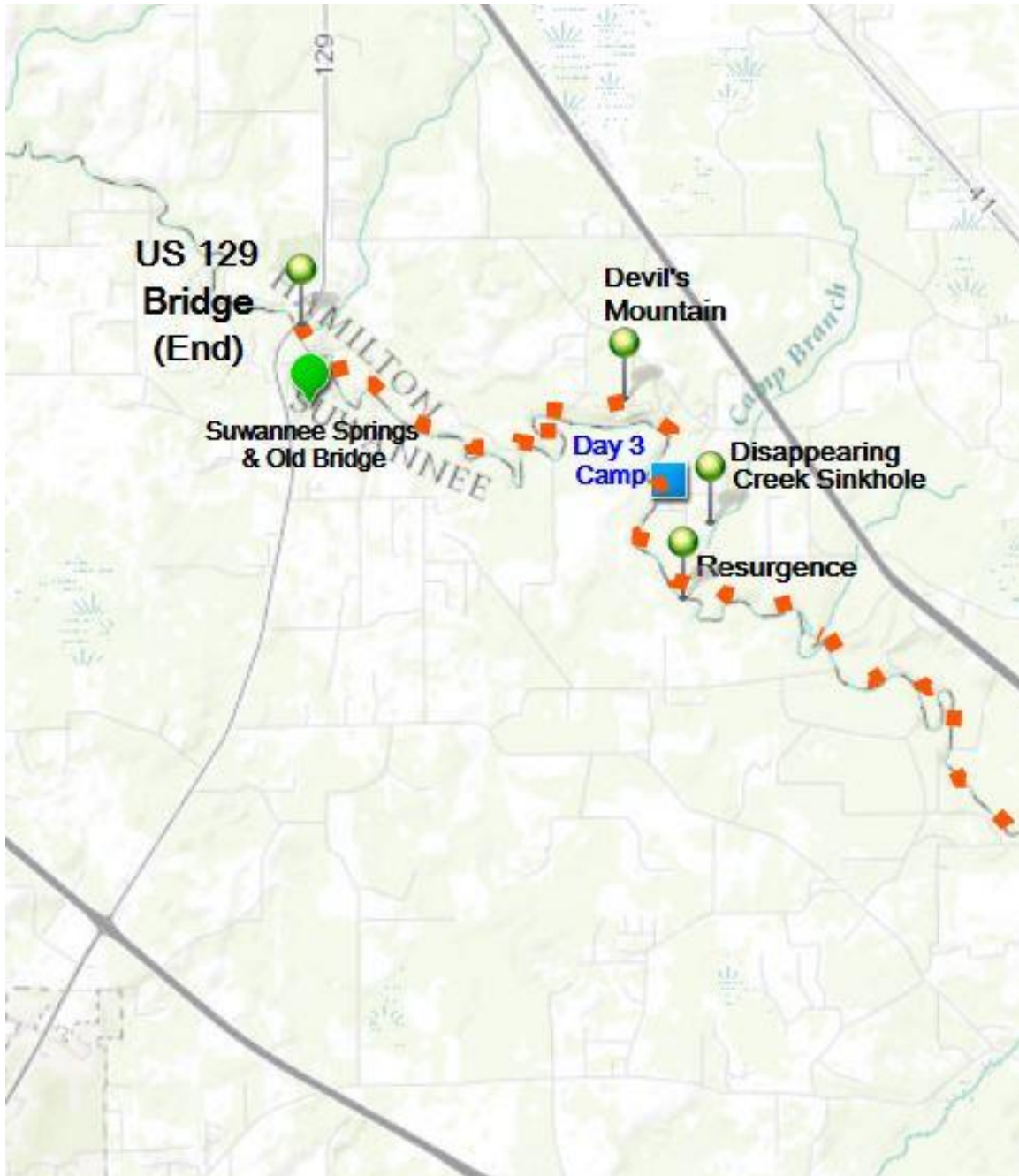
Picnic Table Shelter at the Day 3 Campsite

Day 4, November 27, 2016.

Camp Branch Campsite to Highway 129

6.0 Miles

Day 4 Trail Map



They departed camp at around 9:30 the next morning, and soon passed behind a couple of very impressive houses elevated high above the ground to avoid flooding. The Suwannee River was well known for frequent floods that rose far above its channel and as they looked at the elevation of the houses, they were startled to think the water level could get so high.



House up High to Avoid Flood Waters

About a mile beyond the houses, the trail steadily rose above the river as they began to ascend Devil's Mountain. It's not a mountain of course, this is Florida after all, but it is the highest bluff on the Florida Trail section of the Suwannee River. They passed below a rustic house and noticed that the trail was becoming more obscure as they continued to climb. It soon became so overgrown that they lost it altogether. They poked around in various directions looking for an orange blaze and finally spotted one well beyond where they'd lost the trail. They bulled their way through vines and bushes and soon emerged on to the grassy summit of the "mountain." Air's pretty thin up here in the death zone" the Hatter quipped, referring to the elevation above 26,000 feet on Mt. Everest where the air is too thin to breath. All kidding aside, they must have been about 150 feet above the river and while largely obscured by trees, they had a view into the distance over the surrounding forest. The grassy summit of



View from the Summit of Devil's "Mountain"

Devil's Mountain continued for several hundred feet before they descended back to the river.

After another 2.5 miles they passed under the old U.S. 129 Bridge. Built in 1931, the narrow bridge spanned the wide flood plain and the river itself for a distance of several hundred yards. The bridge was abandoned intact when a new span was built in 1971 about a quarter mile to the west. The river can be crossed on the old

bridge and on the opposite side, a side trail leads a few hundred yards to the east to Suwannee Springs (see description in the Suwannee River West trip overview).

After passing the bridge, they followed the entrenched Sugar Creek for a while then forded it just before they reached the new U.S. 129 Bridge. When they arrived, Doc called the Shuttle Service in White Springs and within 20 minutes a van pulled up to take them back to where they'd parked their truck at Bell

Springs. Once again they'd had a perfect trip full of interesting encounters with caves, canyons, disappearing creeks, springs, deep ravines, a mini mountain, faux stone dinosaurs, weird locals, a singing tower, and a charming small town – and always the river, mysterious with its dark water, swirling rapids, and rich history; omnipresent and reassuring, almost like the fourth member of their little expedition. In the coming weeks they would day dream about the hike as they went through their daily rituals, always anticipating the next backpacking trip to the Suwannee.



Crossing Under the Old U.S. Highway 129 Bridge



Last Act of the Trip: Fording Sugar Creek



Journey's End - U.S. Highway 129 Bridge