River Boardwalk Trail

A few hundred years ago, lush forests lined a rocky, rolling river. During the mid-1800s, this land was converted for European-style farming. In the early 20th century, Morgan Falls Dam was constructed roughly three miles downstream, and later Buford Dam was built about 30 miles upstream, creating Lake Lanier. These two dams not only decreased the temperature and flow of the water but also caused the river to flood its banks, creating a productive wetland habitat.

Some seasonal plants and migratory wildlife mentioned in this self-guided brochure may be scarce from December through February.

1. The Smell of the Wild
You are now standing between two different wetland habitats. Beside Willeo Road stands the marsh. Marshes are shallow bodies of water with lots of grasses and herbs. Look for plants like cattails, reeds, rushes, and sedges— but notice there are no trees!
On the other side of the boardwalk, you find the swamp. How is this area different? Did you notice the birches, ashes, tag alders, and willows that live here? These trees are adapted to live in soggy, or hydric, soil. Unlike marshes, the amount of water in a swamp may change a lot throughout the year which is why the trees can live here. You might also notice a strong odor coming from the swamp. This is the smell of decomposing vegetation common to swamps when water gets low.

2. Who lives here?
Keep your eyes open for a variety of species that call this area home. Plants and animals you may find here include:

- Osprey (Pandion haliaetus)
- Green Heron (Butorides virescens)
- Green-headed Coneflower (Rudbeckia laciniata)
- Virginia Dayflower (Commelina communis)
3. Box Sweet Box
Early evening brings out native bats such as the little brown myotis and the big brown bat. These insect eating mammals take shelter in cavities during the day but such places are becoming harder to find. As more people move into rural areas, good hiding places are being lost. To supplement the loss of housing, people put out bat boxes. This way, we can benefit from the bats as they eat thousands of insects, including mosquitoes, every night.

4. Marsh on a Mission
The marsh here is slowly filling in to become a swamp. How can you tell? As the soil changes, woody shrubs such as button bush can begin to move in. These successional marshes are important habitats for migrating animals and are more populated in the spring and fall. Look closely and you may see a wood duck. Wood ducks inhabit wooded ponds and marshes. They nest in tree cavities or in boxes like the one here.

5. Marsh Platform
This platform is a wonderful spot to observe Canada geese, mallards, wood ducks, great blue herons and red-winged blackbirds. Stand near the edge of the platform—look down and look closely. You might see a graceful fishing spider or two-inch-long mosquitofish searching for dinner.

5. Marsh Platform, cont’d
The water below you is probably murky and covered by a thin coating of oil. This naturally occurring oil is released from detritus (organic matter) as it decays. Natural oils, silt, and pollutants are filtered by the roots of cattails and scented water lilies.

Cattails are important to wetland wildlife. Cattail roots provide food for geese, ducks, and muskrats. The seed pods of cattails provide shelter for insects. In the summer, the stems become a feast for muskrats and beavers and a home for red-winged blackbirds.

6. Take the High Ground
Did you notice that you walked up a hill? This is a natural levee. It is the result of periodic flooding of the Chattahoochee River. As flood waters flow over the river’s banks, heavier soils drop out, forming long dikes along the river. This well-drained “high” ground is a perfect home for plants that cannot survive in the swamp. The trees here, such as catalpas, water oaks, and black walnuts, only tolerate a little flooding. Can you think of other ways that flooding is helpful?

7. Native Peoples
Take a moment and image the river before roads, buildings or even boardwalks dotted the shores. What would you see?
Long ago, this river once marked a boundary of the Creek and Cherokee Nations. The river provided food, transportation and building materials. The black walnut tree here was particularly useful. Native people made a black stain from the walnut shell. This stain could then be used to dye clothing and baskets. What other things would you imagine these people could use?

8. Bull Sluice Lake
Notice how wide the Chattahoochee River is at this point. You are actually looking at Bull Sluice Lake. Prior to the construction of Morgan Falls Dam in 1904, the river flowed at a very rapid pace. The dam slows the river and allows the water to back and spread out. The slower water aids in the creation of this new wetland habitat. However, slower water also changes the river habitat. Sediments that once washed downstream collect here and settle to the bottom of the river. The natural stream bed that was once very rocky is now covered in squishy soil. This new substrate is unsuitable for many aquatic organisms that traditionally are found here.
9. Invaders
Privet (a bush with small, semi-evergreen leaves) and Japanese honeysuckle (a vine with small, deciduous leaves) are both non-native plants brought to the U.S. for ornamental purposes. These plants flourished here and escaped to wild areas. Even beavers, who often feed on privet, cannot control its spread. Once out in the wild, these invasive species out-compete native shrubs, trees, and other plants, robbing many animals of traditional food and homes.

10. Beaver Lodge
Did you know that you are standing right in front of a beaver’s residence? Look for a dome of tree limbs; the limbs will have their bark stripped off. This is a beaver lodge. There have been other signs of beaver activity along the boardwalk trail. Look for beaver-chewed trees, beaver trails, and beaver tracks.

If you do not see a beaver today, the reason may be that beavers are active at dawn or dusk. Animals active at this time are called crepuscular. Although they may escape your sight, you might smell the musky odor of a beaver near its lodge.

11. Osprey Platform
The green platform was constructed to encourage osprey nesting. Although mostly found near the coast, osprey are being found more and more in freshwater ecosystems. Osprey are migratory birds that nest along the Chattahoochee River. Osprey are raptors that usually prey on fish. Unlike other raptors, they have an adaptation to catch fish: the pads of their feet are covered with spicules. These hooked bumps help osprey pull slippery, slimy fish from the water.

12. Marshland Medicines
The river birch was one of many plants used for medicinal purposes by the Native Americans living along the River. The Cherokee people chewed the leaves as an anti-diarrhea treatment. Also, an infusion of the leaves was taken to treat colds. The bark of the tree, if infused, will ease stomach pain.

We hope that you enjoyed your tour of our River Boardwalk. We look forward to your next visit!

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