

ATLANTIC Coastal Kayaker

**Welcome to Our 25th Season!
Retrace the Florida Journey of
Explorer/Botanist William Bartram
A New Series of Trips Along The Potomac
Early Season Races In The North Country
A Visit With Boat-builder Roger Crawford
and Much More!**



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ACK Vol 25 No. 1 March 2016

Feature

***The Potomac Passagemakers Tour*8**

In This Issue

***Eddy Lines*4**

***We've Got M@il!*5**

***News & Notes*6**

***2015 Delmarva Greenland Retreat* 14**

***The Gear Bag*..... 16**

***Inaugural Bartram History Paddle* 17**

***Eeyore in the Exumas*21**

***Three Early Season Inland Races*.....24**

***Interview With Roger Crawford*26**

***Calendar*29**

***Klassifieds*.....30**



The endangered piping plover (*Charadrius melodus*) is a small sand-colored, sparrow-sized shorebird that nests and feeds along coastal sand and gravel beaches in North America. The adult has yellow-orange legs, a black band across the forehead, and a black ring around the neck. The bird is difficult to see when it is standing still, as it blends well with open, sandy beach habitats. It typically runs in short spurts and stops. The bird's name is derived from its plaintive bell-like whistles which are often heard before the bird is visible. Total Atlantic population is currently estimated at fewer than 2,000 pairs

Their breeding habitat includes beaches or sand flats on the Atlantic coast, the shores of the Great Lakes, and in the Midwest. They nest on sandy or gravel beaches or shoals. Generally, piping plovers forage around the high tide wrack zone and along the water's edge. They eat mainly insects, marine worms, and crustaceans.

On The Cover

Lake George, Fla., on first day of The Inaugural Bartram History Paddle.
Photo by Doug Alderson.



Trip Report

The Inaugural Bartram History Paddle on the St. Johns River, Florida

Story and photos by Doug Alderson

Wind howled in my ears. Spray stung my face and the sea kayak rocked from waves on the massive Lake George along Florida's St. Johns River. It was an auspicious way to begin the first ever Bartram History Paddle sponsored by the non-profit group Paddle Florida in early December 2015. But since this was the 250th anniversary of John and William Bartram's first visit to Florida in 1765, perhaps it was appropriate. After all, during William Bartram's solo visit in 1774, he encountered harsh conditions while crossing Lake George.

"Now as we approach the capes, behold the little ocean of Lake George, the distant circular coast gradually rising to view, from his misty fringed horizon," he wrote in his *Travels*¹. "I cannot entirely suppress my apprehensions of danger. My vessel at once diminished to a nut-shell on the swelling seas, and at the distance of a few miles, must appear to the surprised observer as some aquatic animal, at intervals emerging from its surface."

Only eight of the 45 paddlers on the trip attempted the crossing. The rest paddled five miles up the relatively calm Salt Creek and then back to Salt Springs to shuttle to our planned campsite. Crossing the lake with 15- to 20-mph sustained headwinds coupled with stronger gusts was for expe-



Whitney Sanford at Rocky Point.

rienced paddlers with fully equipped sea kayaks. Still, I questioned the sanity of our small group as waves buffeted our crafts.

When we reached Rocky Point at the northern end of the lake, we hoped the



Sam Carr and Dean Campbell.

worst was behind us. The point is another Bartram historic site along with the large Drayton Island on the other side of the river. Signs with QR codes for further information on Smart phones marked each site along this historic paddling trail in Florida's Putnam County. The trail was conceived by two citizen volunteers, Sam Carr and Dean Campbell, who sought to highlight the rich history and also to "get people onto the St.

Johns River to make a personal connection with it." The two made a presentation to the group the previous night and they would serve as our trip's historic interpreters.

When we rounded Rocky Point, it soon became apparent that the worst was ahead of us on the very wide north-flowing St. Johns River. We had to work hard just to make any progress forward. "It could be worse, it could be raining!" I yelled to a companion over the wind, quoting from the classic comedy film "Young Frankenstein." Within minutes, a squall raced towards us and we were soon pelted with a stinging, though light, rain. The St. Johns, with help from celestial forces, was showing us her power. This was not a river for the squeamish, or for short watercraft.

After a few more miles, we finally reached our destination—Renegades on the River—a modern style fish camp with tiki bar, live band, and restaurant. John and William Bartram—father and son—used the river to access trading posts and Seminole Indian villages, but they failed to mention tiki bars.

The entire group attempted to tackle

¹ *Travels Through North & South Carolina, Georgia, East & West Florida, the Cherokee Country, the Extensive Territories of the Muscogulges, or Creek Confederacy, and the Country of the Chactaws; Containing An Account of the Soil and Natural Productions of Those Regions, Together with Observations on the Manners of the Indians.* Philadelphia: Printed by James & Johnson, 1791



The group climbing Mount Royal, an ancient Indian temple mound.



The magical Satsuma Springs was why many of us came on the trip.

the headwinds the next morning, but a few had to be assisted by a Sheriff's safety boat. We took welcome breaks to view important Bartram historic sites. The first was Mount Royal, an ancient Indian temple mound described by Bartram as one that could

be seen several miles away. The other site was Satsuma Springs just past the town of Welaka. The private landowner, Perry Taylor, graciously allowed our visit. She had recently placed her 56 acres of rolling hardwood forest in a conservation easement to

protect the site from future development. The clear sulfur spring has changed little over time and John Bartram accurately described the spring in 1765: "We came down a steep hill 20 foot high and about four or five hundred yards from the river, under the foot of which issued out a large fountain (big enough to turn a mill) of warm clear water of a very offensive taste, and smell like bilge-water, or the washings of a gun-barrel; the sediment that adhered to the trees fallen therein looked of a pale white or bluish cast, like milk and water mixed..."

Whether smelling like bilge water or not, mineral springs in Florida have long been used for healing. Indeed, after a dip in Satsuma Springs, my sore arms and shoulders felt substantially improved. A large live oak near the spring was bent over to the ground, forming an arch over the access trail. Perry Taylor said an historian believed the Indians had bent the tree when it was very young to mark the spring site to make it more visible from the water. To ponder such things, to swim at a sacred place of native people, to stand where Florida's first botanist described the beauty of this special spot, to appreciate what the place is today, still beautiful and inspiring, was a highlight of the trip. It made the miles of headwinds worth it. A test, perhaps, of our worthiness. The magical Satsuma Springs was why many of us came on this first ever Bartram History Paddle.

In cruising north of the spring in slightly calmer waters, it was interesting to note that the eastern shoreline in this section was largely developed with riverfront homes, cabins, and fish camps while the western shore was undeveloped, being part of the Ocala National Forest (See *ACK* March, 2015 Vol. 24, No. 1 for "The Juniper Run, Ocala National Forest"). In the Bartrams' day, the western shore was where Seminoles lived and roamed while Spanish and English settlers occupied the eastern shore.

Our campsite was the Rodeheaver Boys Ranch just below the historic site of Spalding's Lower Store, an Indian trading post Bartram used. Today, it is private property with no access allowed. William Bartram wrote several passages about the Spalding's



Dawn mists and kayaks at Dunn's Creek State Park.

Lower Store with the most poignant concerning the effect on some Seminoles who had been given 20 kegs of rum. "They were soon prevailed on to broach their beloved nectar; which in the end caused some disturbance, and the consumption of most of their liquor; for after they had once got a smack of it, they never were sober for ten days, and by that time there was but little left."

Day three of our trip was fabulous: Several parallel side creeks sheltered us from the winds; Florida maples were blazing red since it was still fall; Flocks of white ibis perched on branches like bright cotton bolls; Sleek black alligators took advantage of sunny weather to lay on exposed logs.

William Bartram wrote of huge, aggressive alligators along the St. Johns: "Two very large ones attacked me closely, at the same instant, rushing up with their heads and part of their bodies above the water, roaring terribly and belching floods of water over me. They struck their jaws together so close to my ears, as almost to stun me, and I expected every moment to be dragged out of the boat and instantly devoured."

Fortunately, on our trip, we only encountered docile reptilian creatures.

At Georgia Boys Fish Camp on Dunn's Creek, one of the oldest in the state, a couple of hundred humorous hand-made signs hung from the rafters and were nailed to posts and walls. Some words of wisdom were worth repeating: "No wife has shot her husband while he was washing dishes." An-



Group paddling past Buzzard's Island on last day.

other read, "The difference between genius and stupidity is genius has its limits."

Dunn's Creek State Park, our camp for the night, is a scenic gem perched on the water's edge. We were serenaded that evening by a local folk singer, Magda Hiller. The previous evening, a government scientist spoke about the natural history and environmental threats associated with the St. Johns River Basin. Paddle Florida often alternates evening programs between education and entertainment, their main purpose being to promote awareness about water issues while offering a chance to explore wild



Georgia Boys Fish Camp on Dunn's Creek.



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Riverside park in Palatka with bass statue.

Florida in a fun group setting. Many people participate in several or all of its six guided trips a year in different regions of the state. Plus the meals, provided by local caterers, are usually outstanding.

Our fourth and final day was blissfully calm as we paddled 13 miles to the town of Palatka, once a thriving Seminole village and later a steamboat town. Now, it is an emerging “trail town,” since it sits at the crossroads of several notable paddling and bike paths. The local rotary club held a fish fry for the paddlers to end the trip in style. They were welcoming just as early Seminole inhabitants were for William Bartram: “There were eight or ten habitations, in a row, or street, fronting the water, and about fifty yards distance from it. Some of the youth were naked, up to their hips in the water, fishing with rods and lines; whilst others, younger, were diverting themselves in shooting frogs with bows and arrows. On my near approach, their little children took to their heels, and ran to some women who were hoeing corn; but the stouter youth stood their ground, and, smiling, called to me.”

The first ever Bartram History paddling trip was over, but many of us vowed, tongue-in-cheek, to participate in the next 250th Bartram reunion, headwinds and all.

For more information:

Bartram Trail in Putnam County:

bartram.putnam-fl.com/

Bartram Trail Conference: <https://bartram-trailconference.wildapricot.org/>

Paddle Florida: paddleflorida.org/

Doug Alderson is the author of several award-winning Florida outdoor books, including Waters Less Traveled, Wild Florida Waters, New Dawn for the Kissimmee River, The Great Florida Seminole Trail and several others. To learn more, log onto his website: www.dougalderson.net.

About John Bartram

John Bartram (March 23, 1699 – September 22, 1777), born in colonial Pennsylvania, was an early American botanist, horticulturist, and explorer. Carl Linnaeus said he was the “greatest natural botanist in the world.”

Bartram had no formal education beyond the local school. He had a lifelong interest in medicine and medicinal plants, and read widely. His botanical career started with a small area of his farm devoted to growing plants he found interesting; later he made contact with European botanists and gardeners interested in North American plants, and developed his hobby into a thriving business, traveling extensively in the east, often far beyond the areas settled by Europeans, collecting plants for export.

In the winter of 1765-66 Bartram, accompanied by his son William Bartram, traveled in a dugout canoe to explore East Florida’s most important waterway, the St. Johns River.

East and West Florida had become British colonies only two years before, after Spain ceded Florida to Britain in the Treaty of Paris at the end of the Seven Years War. In April, 1765, King George III had appointed Bartram as royal botanist to explore East and West Florida and report back to London.

William Bartram revisited the St. Johns River on his own for eight months in 1774 and wrote about his observations and adventures in his acclaimed book *Travels*, published in 1791. He was widely considered Florida’s first naturalist.

Sources:

<http://www.unf.edu/floridahistoryonline/Bartram/intro/intro.htm>

Wikipedia.

