

# The Upper James River

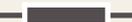
The James River originates at the confluence of the Jackson and Cowpasture rivers in Botetourt County and forms Virginia's longest and most famous river. The upper section of the James River is very scenic with stunning Blue Ridge mountain views. Dam releases on the Jackson River flow releases ensure the upper James River is typically run able all season. The first 60 miles contain

only class I or II rapids making it ideal for canoe or kayak trips at normal water levels. The white water section below Glasgow includes a class III section for those interested in more technical water.

This paddle guide covers the upper 64 miles section from the start of the James river to the Cushaw Dam, just below Snowden. It includes everything a paddler

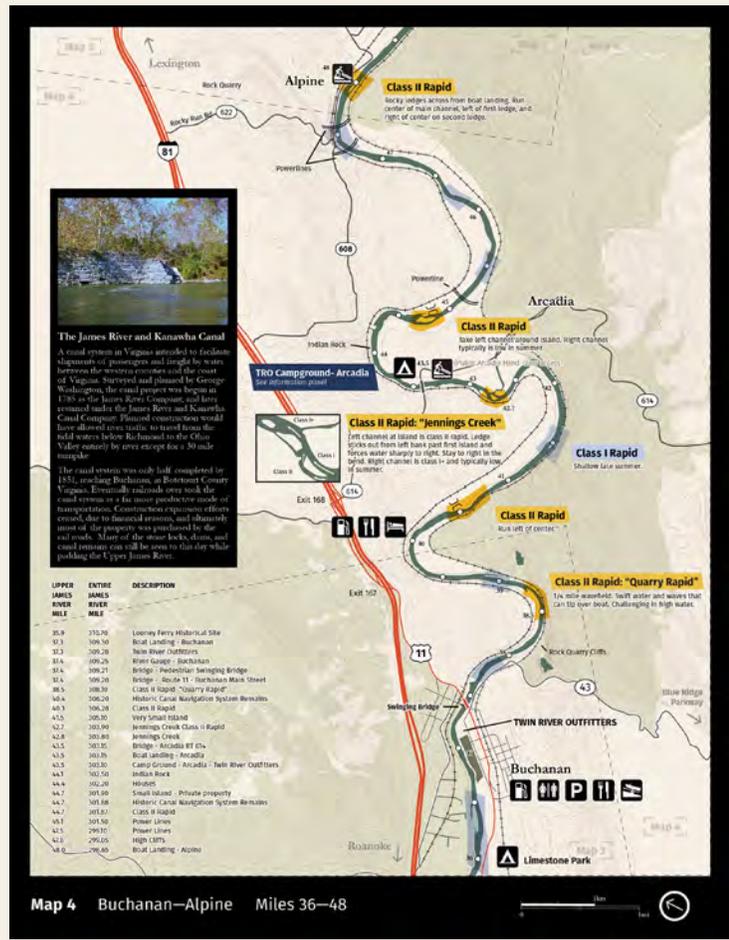
will need to plan a river trip. This guide includes locations of boat landings, campsites, major rapids, and unique historic points of interests along the way. This is a great resource for planning day trips as well as multi-day canoe camping expeditions.

## Using This Map

-  George Washington and Jefferson National Forrest\*
-  Park\*
-  Landmark
-  Bridge
-  Distance gauge
-  North indicator
-  Canal
-  Boat launch
-  Small boat launch
-  Commercial campground
-  Informal camping
-  Appalachian Trail
-  Hiking Trail

-  Rapids (See River Safety panel for class system)
-  Mile markers— numbered from start of the James River counting down stream

These maps have been orientated so that the river always flows from the bottom of the map to the top of the map. This allows paddlers to easily orient themselves in the river in terms of river right and left while paddling downstream.



**The James River and Kanawha Canal**  
A canal system at Virginia intended to facilitate shipments of passengers and freight by water between the Murray counties and the coast of Virginia. Suggested and planned by George Washington, the canal project was begun in 1785 as the James River Company and later renamed into the James River and Kanawha Canal Company. Several construction would have altered river traffic, to travel from the mid river before Richmond the Ohio Valley naturally by river except for a 30 mile stretch.

The canal system was only fully completed in 1876, reaching Buchanan in Buchanan County, Virginia. Eventually railroads over took the canal system as a far more productive mode of transportation. Construction expenses were covered, due to financial reasons, and ultimately none of the property was returned to the canal roads. Many of the major locks, dams, and canal remains can still be seen by this day while paddling the Upper James River.

UPPER MILES	ENTIRE RIVER MILE	DESCRIPTION
35.9	732.76	Louisa Ferry Historical Site
37.3	709.50	Boat Landing: Buchanan
37.3	709.28	Swain River Outfitters
37.4	709.28	River Landing: Buchanan
37.4	709.21	Bridge: Pooleslifer Hanging Bridge
37.4	709.20	Bridge: Route 11 - Buchanan Main Street
38.5	708.39	Class II Rapid: "Quarry Rapid"
38.6	708.20	Historic Canal Navigation System Remains
38.7	708.18	Class II Rapid
41.5	705.30	Very Small Island
42.7	703.99	Jennings Creek Class II Rapid
42.8	703.89	Jennings Creek
43.5	703.35	Bridge: Arcadia RT 674
43.5	703.35	Boat Landing: Arcadia
43.9	703.30	Camp Ground: Arcadia's Twin River Outfitters
44.1	703.00	Indian Rock
44.9	702.00	Island
44.7	701.60	Small Island - Private property
44.7	701.60	Historic Canal Navigation System Remains
44.7	701.60	Class II Rapid
44.7	701.60	Private Island
45.5	700.50	Power Lines
45.5	700.50	High 1875
46.0	700.00	Boat Landing: Alpine

\*All land along river bank is private property unless noted otherwise.

# Day Trips

## MAP 1

**Lick Run to Glen Wilton** - (Map Mile 0.8 to 4.0) This 3.2 mile (1 - 1.5 hours) float features quick current and impressive mountain views of Patterson Mountain on river right. This trip contains several easy class I rapids and one easy class II rapid.

**Glen Wilton to Gala** - (Map Mile 4.0 to 11.3) This 7.3 mile (3 - 4 hours) float features numerous class I rapids as well as one class II rapid locally called "The Squeeze" and should be carefully scouted before being paddled. Gala take out up Sinking Creek under rail road bridge.

**Gala to Craig Creek** - (Map Mile 11.3 to 15.2) This 3.9 mile (1 - 2 hours) short float has plenty of easy class I rapids to enjoy. This short trip makes for a great after work float or a good run for river tubing, take out on river right as Craig Creek enters the James River.

## MAP 2

**Craig Creek to Horseshoe Bend** - (Map Mile 15.2 to 28.9) This 13.7 mile (5 - 7 hours) float has numerous class I rapids and a few easy class II rapids along the way and is on one of the more remote parts of the river. A portion of this trip has been designated a "Virginia Scenic River" section. Named by Blue Ridge Magazine as the best class I run in the State. This trip also includes some of the most impressive remains of the historic James & Kanawha canal system.

## MAP 3

**Horseshoe Bend to Springwood** - (Map Mile 28.9 to 32.5) This 3.6 mile (1 - 2 hours) is a short and fun trip containing several class I rapids and a moderately challenging class II rapid known as Ritchie's Falls about 10 minutes into the float. This entire float also has the Virginia Scenic River designation. Take out at Springwood concrete ramp on river right just below Springwood automobile bridge.

**Springwood to Buchanan** - (Map mile 32.5 to 37.3) This 5 mile (2 hours) trip is one of the easier floats available on the Water Trail great for first time paddlers or folks fishing. This trip contains a few easy class I rapids including a 1/2 mile section of swift water with class I+ rapids.

## MAP 4

**Buchanan to Arcadia** - (Map Mile 37.3 to 43.5) This 6.16 mile (2 1/2 hours) float is a fun float with good rapids and current. The trip includes three class II rapids that can be challenging in higher water conditions. The trip is very popular with local paddlers, normally crowded on weekends.

**Arcadia to Alpine** - (Map Mile 43.5 to 48.0) This 4.49 mile (1 1/2 - 2 hours) section contains several easy Class I rapids and two fun class II rapids at normal water levels. This part of the river is remote and has some great mountain views. This stretch is also excellent for smallmouth bass fishing.

## MAP 5

**Alpine to Glasgow** - (Map Mile 48.0 to 59.0) This 11.05 mile (4-6 hour) trip features numerous class II rapids alternating between long pools of calm water and borders miles of National Forest land on the river right. It also has some great mountain views as the James River winds its way along the base of the Blue Ridge mountains. The take out at Glasgow river left on the heavy timber steps just before Maury River confluence.

## MAP 6

**Glasgow to Snowden** - (Map Mile 59.0 to 63.7) This 4.7 mile (2-3 hour) trip features the most scenic section of the entire Upper James River. This section is also the most technical and not recommended for beginner paddlers. A rock garden starts about a mile into the float marks the beginning the white water section with a gradient of 17 feet per mile and contains dozens of class I,II,III rapids. Generally speaking, the easier route in the gorge is to take the right side of river before the balcony falls rapid and then go down the left side of the river the remaining white water section. Not recommended to be paddled above 4.5 Ft on the James River Buchanan Gauge. Becomes class VI section at higher water levels. Use caution.

# Overnight Trips

MILE MARKER	BOAT LANDINGS	CAMPGROUNDS									
		2 DAY / 1 NIGHT		3 DAY / 2 NIGHT		4 DAY / 3 NIGHT		5 DAY / 4 NIGHT			
0.8	IRON GATE										
4.0	GLEN WILTON										
11.3	GALA										
11.8		TWIN RIVER - GALA									
15.2	CRAIG CREEK										
28.8	HORSESHOE BEND										
29.1		TWIN RIVER - NARROW PASSAGE									
32.5	SPRINGWOOD										
37.3	BUCHANAN										
43.5	ARCADIA										
43.6		TWIN RIVER - ARCADIA									
48.0	ALPINE										
56.3		JELLY STONE OR WILDERNESS CANOE									
59.0	GLASGOW										
60.2		NATIONAL FOREST									
63.7	SNOWDEN										
<b>TOTAL TRIP DISTANCE</b>		28.0	22.1	21.7	15.7	36.5	32.8	26.4	58.2	48.5	62.9
<b>RIVER MAP REFERENCE NUMBERS</b>		1&2	2&3	4&5	5&6	1-3	2-4	4-6	1-5	2-6	1-6

## TWIN RIVER OUTFITTERS

tro@canoevirginia.net · 540-254-8012 · 640 Lowe Street, Buchanan, VA 24066 · canoevirginia.net

# River Safety

## General Safety

**1) ALWAYS WEAR A LIFE JACKET.** Wear a properly fitting U.S. Coast Guard-approved life jacket at all times on the water.

**2) ALCOHOL AND PADDLING DON'T MIX.** Save the alcohol consumption for after your day on the river. Unfortunately, a huge percentage of river accidents and death involve alcohol in some form.

**3) KNOW THE RIVER WATER LEVELS. – DON'T PADDLE WHEN RIVER IS TOO HIGH.** Check the water levels online before you float. High water causes faster currents, larger waves, and increases risks of encountering strainers or boat pinning tree limbs. The Upper James River Water trail closes at 6 feet on the Buchanan James River Gauge due to high water and safety issues .

**4) KNOW THE WEATHER & WATER TEMPERATURES.** Check the forecast before you go and dress appropriately for expected conditions.

**5) KNOW HOW TO CONTROL YOUR BOAT.** Be in command of your paddle craft and know how to move your boat forward,

back, and sideways, and how to stop using paddle strokes. Watch ahead for hazards. Stay low. Learn how to enter and exit your boat safely and stay low in your boat when possible. Consider taking a canoe or kayak safety paddling skills class to learn more about handling your boat.

**6) NEVER PADDLE ALONE.** Companions can come to your aid if you get in trouble. New paddlers should paddle with someone more experienced— it's a great way to learn and remain safe if there's a mishap. Additionally, it's a good idea to tell someone your "Float Plan" for accountability and safety.

**7) KNOW YOUR ROUTE.** Know the route you are paddling including the put in, take out, and any major rapids, or hazards expected to encounter along the way. Consult maps, books, outfitters, or other paddlers for trip advice when paddling a new section of water.

## RAPID CLASSIFICATION

**Class I (easy):** Fast moving water with riffles and small waves. The river has few obstructions which are all obvious and easily missed with little training.

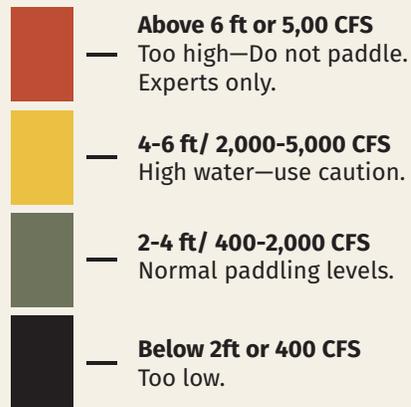
**Class II (novice):** Straightforward rapids with wide, clear channels which are typically evident without scouting. Occasional maneuvering may be required. Swimmers are seldom injured and group assistance. Rapids that are at the upper end of this difficulty range are designated "Class II+."

**Class III (intermediate):** Rapids with moderate, irregular waves which may be difficult to avoid and which can swamp an open canoe. Complex maneuvers in fast current and good boat control in tight passages or around ledges are often required. Scouting is advisable. Large waves or strainers may be present. Strong eddies and powerful current effects can be found, particularly on larger volume rivers.

## Water Levels

The river levels on the upper James River are constantly changing and are ultimately determined by amount of rain upstream in the watershed and releases from the Gathright Dam from Lake Moomaw. The National Weather Service maintains a forecast river gauge of the James River – Buchanan River Gauge. Local outfitters and paddlers have generally adopted this graph to interpret the water levels for the Upper James River. River forecast can be found at [canoevirginia.net/Riverlevels](http://canoevirginia.net/Riverlevels)

Generally speaking the Upper section of the James River is able to be paddled the entire season due to releases from the Gathright Dam through out the summer. That being said, it can have low water levels, normally August and September and you may have to step out of your boat once every 4 - 5 miles due to low water issues. So even when the river is 2.3 ft or lower 99% of the paddle is very good conditions and fun and its one of the few rivers in the western part of Virginia that can be paddled all season long.



Scan QR Code to get up-to-date river levels.



**Cowpasture River**

Paddlers taking a break on the Cowpasture river, a major contributor to the James river.

Upper JAMES RIVER MILE	ENTIRE JAMES RIVER MILE	DESCRIPTION
0.0	346.60	Start of the James River
0.6	346.00	Class II Rapid
0.8	345.81	Bridge - Route 220
0.8	345.80	Boat landing - Lick Run
0.9	345.70	River Gauge - Lick Run
2.0	344.60	Rapid - Class II- "Surprise"
4.0	342.60	Bridge - Route 622
4.0	342.58	Boat Landing - Glen Wilton
4.8	341.80	Small Island
6.4	340.20	Class II Rapid "The Squeeze"
6.9	339.75	Bridge - Rail Road
8.5	338.10	Small Island
9.9	336.70	Prices Bluff
11.3	335.30	Sinking Creek - Under Rail Road Bridge River Left
11.3	335.30	Boat Landing - Gala
11.3	335.30	Kelly's Market
11.4	335.20	20 ft cliffs
11.7	334.90	Mill Creek
11.8	334.80	Camp Ground - Gala - Twin River Outfitters
13.9	332.75	Bridge - US 220
15.1	331.50	Bridge - Rail Road Bridge
15.2	331.40	Craig Creek
15.2	331.41	Boat Landing - Eagle Rock



**Class II Rapid: "The Squeeze"**

River turns to the left and narrows down. Caution in high water. Scouting is recommended!

**Class II Rapid: "Surprise"**

Easy class II rapid, can be tricky in lower water levels. Run left

**Class I Rapids**

Class I+ Wave-field. After the bend, Class I rapids. Run first two left, and last one right.

**TR0 Campground - Gala**  
See information panel

**TRO Campground- Narrow Passage**  
See information panel

Buchanan

**Class II Rapid: "Richie's Falls"**

River-wide 1.5 ft. ledge. Run far left. Use caution. Scouting recommended.



Map 3

Map 2

**Horseshoe Bend**

**Class I Rapid**

Shallow in late summer.

**Class I Rapid**

Take either side of island. Shallow in late summer.

**Class II Rapid**

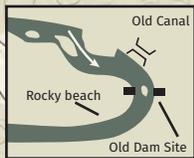
Long wave field. Large waves develop at higher water levels. Take the largest channels. Watch for debris.

**Class I+ Rapid: "CATAWBA CREEK ISLANDS"**

Take largest channel. Smaller channels may be too low and/or clogged with debris. Most water is right of first two islands. All channels can get shallow at low water levels.

**Class II Rapid: "Gwynn Lock"**

Old dam site. Run either channel; left in low water.



**Buttons Bluff Railroad Bridge**

View from Buttons Bluff overlook of Rail Road bridge near mile 27.

Salisbury

Catawba Cr.

Fincastle

DESCRIPTION	UPPER JAMES RIVER MILE	ENTIRE JAMES RIVER MILE
Bridge - Rail Road Bridge	15.1	331.50
Craig Creek	15.2	331.40
Boat Landing - Eagle Rock	15.2	331.41
Last Lock Park	15.3	331.30
Bridge - James Street	15.7	330.90
Old Bridge Remains	15.9	330.75
Historic canal system remains	18.3	328.35
Class II Rapid "Gwynn Lock"	18.3	328.34
Catawba Creek Islands	19.5	327.10
Catawba Creek	20.6	326.00
Historic Canal Navigation System Remains	20.7	325.90
Rail Road Tunnel	20.9	325.70
Historic Canal Navigation System Remains	21.8	324.80
Class II Rapid at higher water levels	21.9	324.70
Rocky Cliffs	22.9	323.70
Chimney Rock	23.4	323.20
Salt Peter Cave Creek	23.9	322.70
Two Stone Piers Remains	25.7	320.90
Bridge - Rail Road	27.1	319.50
Gravel Shallows	26.8	319.85
Oxbow Bend Islands	27.8	318.80
White Farm House	28.6	318.00
Power Lines	28.9	317.70
Horseshoe Bend Boat Landing	28.9	317.70
Camp Ground - Narrow Passage - Twin River Outfitters	29.1	317.50
Class II Rapid "Richie's Falls"	29.8	316.80
Bridge - Rail Road	30.2	316.45

DESCRIPTION	UPPER JAMES RIVER MILE	ENTIRE JAMES RIVER MILE
Bridge - Rail Road Bridge	15.1	331.50
Craig Creek	15.2	331.40
Boat Landing - Eagle Rock	15.2	331.41
Last Lock Park	15.3	331.30
Bridge - James Street	15.7	330.90
Old Bridge Remains	15.9	330.75
Historic canal system remains	18.3	328.35
Class II Rapid "Gwynn Lock"	18.3	328.34
Catawba Creek Islands	19.5	327.10
Catawba Creek	20.6	326.00
Historic Canal Navigation System Remains	20.7	325.90
Rail Road Tunnel	20.9	325.70
Historic Canal Navigation System Remains	21.8	324.80
Class II Rapid at higher water levels	21.9	324.70
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Two Stone Piers Remains	25.7	320.90
Bridge - Rail Road	27.1	319.50
Gravel Shallows	26.8	319.85
Oxbow Bend Islands	27.8	318.80
White Farm House	28.6	318.00
Power Lines	28.9	317.70
Horseshoe Bend Boat Landing	28.9	317.70
Camp Ground - Narrow Passage - Twin River Outfitters	29.1	317.50
Class II Rapid "Richie's Falls"	29.8	316.80
Bridge - Rail Road	30.2	316.45

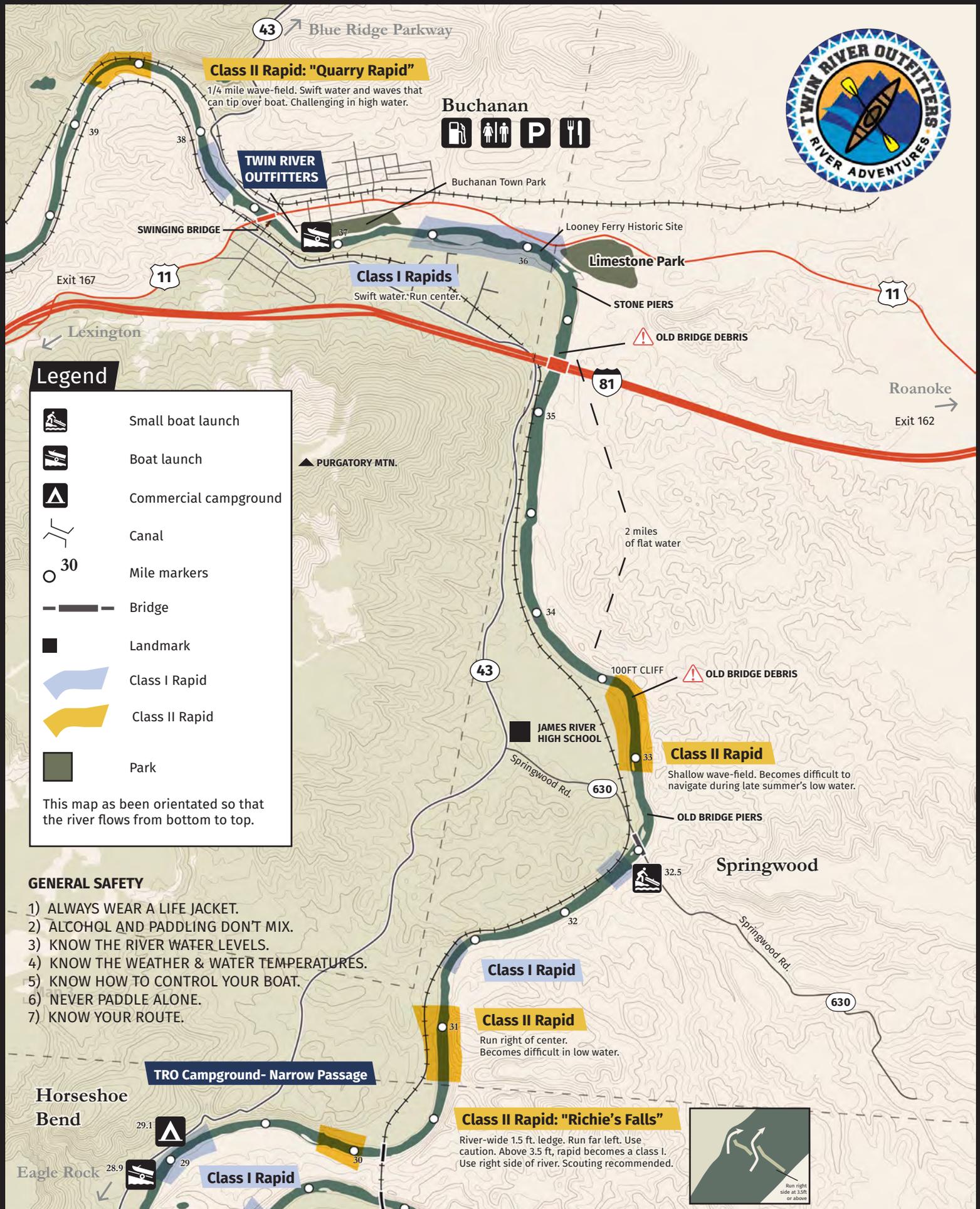


Eagle Rock

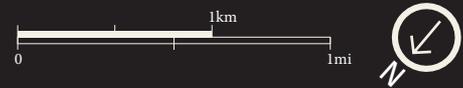
Last lock park

Gala



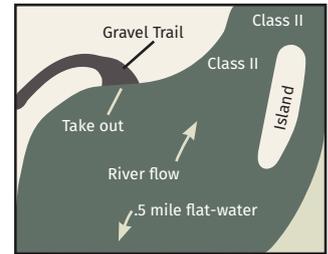


Map 3 Horseshoe Bend—Buchanan Miles 29—39





### Alpine take-out



Call 540-254-8012 at Arcadia Bridge. Take out at gravel trail on river left, across from small island. **Last pick-up 5:30pm. No exceptions!**

### Arcadia take-out

Call 540-254-8012, at Arcadia Bridge. Take out 150yds past bridge on river right. Gravel road with Breeden Bottom Campground sign. **Last pick-up 5:30pm. No exceptions!**

### Legend

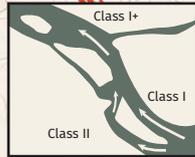
- Small boat launch
- Boat launch
- Commercial campground
- Canal
- Mile markers
- Bridge
- Landmark
- Class I Rapid
- Class II Rapid
- Park

This map as been orientated so that the river flows from bottom to top.

### GENERAL SAFETY

- 1) ALWAYS WEAR A LIFE JACKET.
- 2) ALCOHOL AND PADDLING DON'T MIX.
- 3) KNOW THE RIVER WATER LEVELS.
- 4) KNOW THE WEATHER & WATER TEMPERATURES.
- 5) KNOW HOW TO CONTROL YOUR BOAT.
- 6) NEVER PADDLE ALONE.
- 7) KNOW YOUR ROUTE.

### TRO Campground- Arcadia



### Class II Rapid: "Jennings Creek"

Left channel at island is class II rapid. Ledge sticks out from left bank past first island and forces water sharply to right. Stay to right in the bend. Right channel is class I+ and typically low in summer.

### Class II Rapid

Take left channel around island. Right channel typically is low in summer.

### Class I Rapid

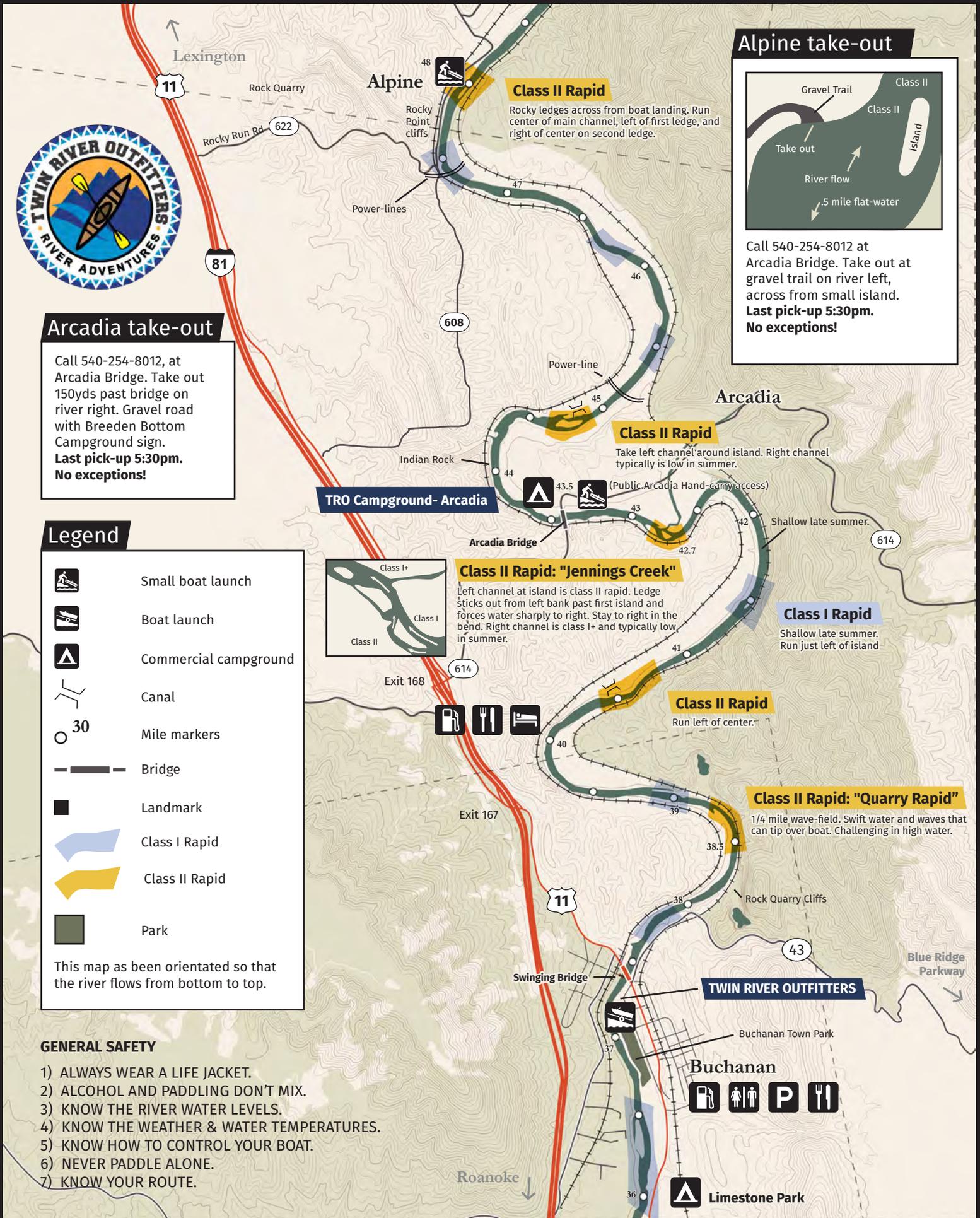
Shallow late summer. Run just left of island

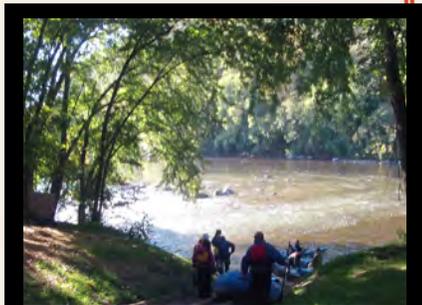
### Class II Rapid

Run left of center.

### Class II Rapid: "Quarry Rapid"

1/4 mile wave-field. Swift water and waves that can tip over boat. Challenging in high water.



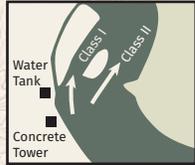


Glasgow Timber Steps (Boat Ramp)  
mile marker 59.



Arnold's Valley Bridge

UPPER JAMES RIVER MILE	ENTIRE JAMES RIVER MILE	DESCRIPTION
48.0	298.65	Boat Landing - Alpine
47.8	298.80	Small Island - class II Rapid
49.3	297.30	Historic Canal Navigation System Remains
48.3	298.30	Rapid - Class II
52.4	294.20	Cedar Creek - enters river left under rail road bridge
52.7	293.90	Smith Tract- National forest site
53.4	293.25	Back Run enters James River under Rail Road Culvert
55.2	291.40	Bridge - Rail Road
55.7	290.90	Bridge - Arnold's Valley
56.0	290.65	Arnold's Creek
56.3	290.35	Campground - Jelly stone
56.4	290.20	Residential Houses
56.6	290.05	Historic Canal Navigation System Remains
56.9	289.70	Campground - Wilderness Canoe
57.3	289.30	Locher Tract
58.3	288.30	Class II Rapid "Cement Tower Rapid"
59.0	287.60	Boat Landing - Glasgow
59.1	287.50	Maury River confluence
59.4	287.25	Enter James River Gorge



**Class II Rapid: "Cement Tower"**

Start in left third and angle back to right side for best ride. Sneak is extreme left. Becomes class II+ in high water.

**Class II Rapid: "Old Dam"**

Old dam site. Run in center.

**Class I+ Rapid**

Double ledge run left to right between ledges.

**Class I+ Rapid**

Foot and a half drop. Run left of center

**Class I Rapid**

**Class I Rapid**

**Class II- Rapid**

Two foot drop. Run far left over ledge and then right.

**Class II Rapid**

Rocky ledges across from boat landing. Run center of main channel, left of first ledge, and right of center on second ledge.





DESCRIPTION	UPPER JAMES RIVER MILE	ENTIRE JAMES RIVER MILE
Bridge -Arnold's Valley	55.7	290.90
Arnold's Creek	56.0	290.65
Campground - Jelly stone	56.3	290.35
Residential Houses	56.4	290.20
Historic Canal Navigation System Remains	56.6	290.05
Campground - Wildernes Canoe	56.9	289.70
Locher Tract	57.3	289.30
Class II* Rapid "Cement Tower Rapid"	58.3	288.30
Boat Landing - Glasgow	59.0	287.60
Maury River confluence	59.1	287.50
Enter James River Gorge	59.4	287.25
Start Rock Garden	59.7	286.90
Informal Camping Spot - National Forest Land	60.2	286.40
Balcony Falls Rapid	60.5	286.15
Class II+ Rapid "Little Balcony"	60.8	285.80
Lunch Rock	60.9	285.70
Large Island	61.9	284.70
Large Vegetated Island	62.1	284.55
Dam impoundment area (Flat water till dam)	62.2	284.40
Appalachian Trail Foot Bridge	63.6	283.00
Rail Road Bridge	63.7	282.92
Rocky Row Run Creek	63.7	282.90
Boat landing - Snowden	63.7	282.90
Cushaw Dam	64.1	282.50



Balcony Falls

**Class III Rapid: "Little Balcony"**  
 Long "rock garden". Stay far left.

**Class III Rapid: "Balcony Falls"**  
 Largest rapid on the upper James River. Begins just after a large retaining wall on the left bank. Scout from rock island in middle of the river. Best route is right of center in main channel. Sneak route is against extreme far right bank.



Stone Retaining Wall

**Class III Rapid**  
 Confluence of the Maury River and the James River. High water volume.

**Class I Rapid**

**Class II Rapid: "Cement Tower"**  
 Start in left third and angle back to right side for best ride. Easier route, left side of river. Becomes class II+ in high water.



**Wilderness Canoe Company Campground**  
 See Information panel

**Jellystone Campground**  
 See Information panel

**Class II Rapid: "Old Dam"**  
 Old dam site. Run in center.

