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 runable 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

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

Rapids (See River Safety panel for class system)

30

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.
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 railroad 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 ½ 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 ½ 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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MILE MARKER</th>
<th>BOAT LANDINGS</th>
<th>CAMPGROUNDS</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
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<td>2 DAY / 1 NIGHT</td>
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<tr>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>IRON GATE</td>
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<tr>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>GLEN WILTON</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.3</td>
<td>GALA</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.8</td>
<td>CRAIG CREEK</td>
<td>TWIN RIVER - GALA</td>
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<tr>
<td>15.2</td>
<td>SPRINGWOOD</td>
<td>TWIN RIVER - NARROW PASSAGE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28.8</td>
<td>HORSESHOE BEND</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32.5</td>
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<tr>
<td>37.3</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
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<td>43.5</td>
<td>ARCADIA</td>
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<td>48.0</td>
<td>ALPINE</td>
<td>JELLY STONE OR WILDERNESS CANOE</td>
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<td>56.3</td>
<td>GLASGOW</td>
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<td>TOTAL TRIP DISTANCE</td>
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<td>RIVER MAP REFERENCE NUMBERS</td>
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<td>26.3</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

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.

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

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 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.

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.

Twin River Outfitters

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### Map 1: Iron Gate—Eagle Rock  Miles 0—16

#### Upper James River Mile

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>MILLENNIAL</th>
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<td>Class II Rapid</td>
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<td>Bridge - Route 220</td>
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<tr>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>Boat Landing - Lick Run</td>
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<tr>
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<td>River Gauge - Lick Run</td>
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<td>Bridge - Route 622</td>
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<td>Boat Landing - Glen Wilton</td>
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<tr>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>Small Island</td>
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<tr>
<td>6.4</td>
<td>Class II Rapid &quot;The Squeeze&quot;</td>
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<tr>
<td>6.9</td>
<td>Bridge - US 220</td>
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<tr>
<td>8.5</td>
<td>Small Island</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.9</td>
<td>Prices Bluff</td>
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<tr>
<td>11.3</td>
<td>Sinking Creek - Under Rail Road Bridge River Left</td>
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<tr>
<td>11.3</td>
<td>Boat Landing - Gala</td>
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<tr>
<td>11.3</td>
<td>Kelly's Market</td>
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<td>11.4</td>
<td>20 ft cliffs</td>
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<td>11.7</td>
<td>Mill Creek</td>
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<td>11.8</td>
<td>Camp Ground - Gala - Twin River Outfitters</td>
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<td>13.9</td>
<td>Bridge - US 220</td>
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<tr>
<td>15.1</td>
<td>Bridge - Rail Road Bridge</td>
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<tr>
<td>15.2</td>
<td>Craig Creek</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15.2</td>
<td>Boat Landing - Eagle Rock</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

#### Map 2

- **Class II Rapid:** "Surprise"  
  - Easy class II rapid, can be tricky in lower water levels. Run left

- **Class II Rapid:** "The Squeeze"  
  - River turns to the left and narrows down. Caution in high water. Scouting is recommended.

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**Note:**

- Paddlers taking a break on the Cowpasture river, a major contributory to the James river.
Class II Rapid: “Richie’s Falls”
River-wide 1.5 ft. ledge. Run far left. Use caution. Scouting recommended.

Class II Rapid: “Gwynn Lock”
Old dam site. Run either channel; left in low water.

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

Class I Rapid
Shallow in late summer.

Class I Rapid
Take either side of island. Shallow in late summer.

Class I Rapid
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.

Map 2
Eagle Rock—Horseshoe Bend
Miles 14–30
**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.**

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**Map 3**  
**Horseshoe Bend—Buchanan**  
**Miles 29—39**
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: "Quarry Rapid"
- 1/4 mile wave-field. Swift water and waves that can tip over boat. Challenging in high water.

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

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.
**Map 5** Alpine—Glasgow Miles 48—60

**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**
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.

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**UPPER JAMES RIVER**

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<th>MILE</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>48.0</td>
<td>Boat Landing - Alpine</td>
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<tr>
<td>48.3</td>
<td>Historic Canal Navigation System Remains</td>
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<tr>
<td>52.4</td>
<td>Cedar Creek - enters river left under rail road bridge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>52.7</td>
<td>Smith Tract - National forest site</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>53.4</td>
<td>Back Run enters James River under Rail Road Culvert</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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**ENTIRE JAMES RIVER**

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<tr>
<th>MILE</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>49.3</td>
<td>Small Island - class II Rapid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>52.7</td>
<td>Smith Tract - National forest site</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>53.4</td>
<td>Back Run enters James River under Rail Road Culvert</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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**DESCRIPTION**

- Boat Landing - Alpine
- Small Island - class II Rapid
- Historic Canal Navigation System Remains
- Cedar Creek - enters river left under rail road bridge
- Smith Tract - National forest site
- Back Run enters James River under Rail Road Culvert

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**NATIONAL FOREST CAMPING**

- Camping: Near Arnold Valley Bridge
- Camping: Near Locher Tract
- Camping: Near Glasgow

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**OTHERS**

- Rosemont Rd.
- Gilmore Mills Rd.
- Maury Rd.
- Smith Tract Rd.

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Glasgow Timber Steps (Boat Ramp) mile marker 59.

Arnold’s Valley Bridge

Natural Bridge Station

Natural Bridge Station
Class III Rapid: "Little Balcony"
- Long "rock garden". Stay far left.
- Cushaw Dam. NO PORTAGE OPTION!! Must takeout at boat landing 0.5 miles above dam.

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.

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.

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

Map 6
Glasgow—Snowden
Miles 56—64