**St. Mary’s River Trip:**

(May 17th- May 23rd 2016)

*Marty Thompson (Jackson Kracken 15.5’)*

*Jimmy Thompson (Jackson Cuda 14’)*

*Preston Lewis (Jackson Cuda 14’)*

*Kevin McDonald (Jackson Cuda 14’)*

*Ryan Murphy (Jackson Cuda 14’)*

*Jack Millet (Native Ultimate 15.5)*

***I would like to start this report with an introduction… This is my fourth paddle report in two years. In such time I, with the help of many people, have established a paddle club “Blackwater Paddle Club”. We are a group that enjoys nature and the interaction within it. We can be found on YouTube, Facebook, and Instagram with frequent videos, photos, and updates. I’ve made every effort to link them all so that the videos can be found embedded in this report as well as this report’s URL listed at the end of the videos. I’d greatly appreciate your following and support. You’re welcome to contact my with more questions too include your interest in joining us on our upcoming adventures… Stay tuned!***

**St. Mary’s Cove – Macclenny, FL 🡺 Traders Hill – Folkston, GA (53 miles)**

Day 1: (*Tuesday*) 9.61 miles

Awoke: 0600hrs

Breakfast: 0645hrs

Embarked: 0945hrs

Break: None

Lunch: None

Break: None

Ending Time: 1900hrs

Dinner: 2045hrs

Sleep Time: 2200hrs

* Murphy & I stayed at my Mother’s home in Brunswick overnight. Marty, Kevin, and Jack met us there early Tuesday morning. Both my Mother and her husband Bill piled into my truck and we all left for the starting point. Murphy and I stopped at McDonalds on the way for breakfast. Preston and his girlfriend drove separately and met us at St. Mary’s Cove Landing.
* Mom & Bill were very gracious in agreeing to shuttle us to the river and for the eventual pick-up as well.
* The day was perfect for paddling, nice breeze, clear skies, and enthusiasm. Little did we know of the adventure that lay ahead.
* The river flowed tremendously slower than any of the rivers we’ve paddled. I’ve linked the paddle reports for each in order of flow-rate from fastest to slowest below:
  + Savannah River (<http://www.paddling.net/places/showReport.html?3741>)
  + Altamaha River (<http://www.paddling.net/places/showReport.html?3827>)
  + Satilla River (<http://www.paddling.net/places/showReport.html?3823>)
* We found the St. Mary’s River on par with the Satilla River in regards to scenery. Another similarity is the intimate feel which was attributed to the narrow width. Just like other trips, the wildlife was sparse. We did see a bald eagle and an alligator as the week went on.
* Shortly after beginning our adventure we all had to drag our kayaks over sandbars that were just under the water. We all knew it would occur and each of us had 6’ tow ropes to reduce fatigue. However, none of us knew the frequency of the dragging!
* At mile marker 4.5 we passed under Stokes Road Bridge. There we found two guys living under the bridge. One of them seemed pretty adamant in his requests for fishing hooks. I carried no tackle but suggested he ask the three paddlers lagging behind for some gear. I even mentioned one may have an extra rod & reel he could spare. I later found out the bridge dweller’s advances weren’t easily discouraged.
* About mile marker 8 we began to see immense tree fall which, caused by an oxbow, covered the entire river. Words can’t express the misery that lay ahead of us as we all had to duck under, lift over, and even unload and portage around many of these obstructions. We reached a fork in the river where the oxbow “cut” the current was flowing opposite of what all of our GPS’s told us to go. Experience says follow the flow as that it where the river is. Given the delay of the portaging and sawing through tree fall I was able to walk upriver where the GPS suggested and see where the river was. Several of us walked back to triple check. You’ll have to watch the video to appreciate it.
* After several hours of abuse we finally made it to open water. We paddled 100 years and made camp. As fate would have it, it began to rain 30 minutes after making landfall so we had the luxury of setting up our campsite in the rain which eventually turned into a downpour. We didn’t even attempt to start a fire with all the liquid sunshine. Joy!

*Sunrise: 0633hrs*

*Air Temp: 78/66°*

*Water Temp: 74°*

*Barometer: 1017*

*Wind Speed: 3-5mph (West Southwest)*

*Water Gauge: 1.9’*

*Drift Speed: .25mph*

*Water Clarity: 1’*

*Cloud Cover: Overcast*

*Sunset: 2017hrs*

Day 2: (*Wednesday*) 12.42 miles, 22.03 miles overall

Awoke: 0630hrs

Breakfast: 0700hrs

Embarked: 0945hrs

Break: None

Lunch: 1115-1130hrs (on sandbar)

Break: 1245

Ending Time: 1600hrs

Dinner: 2030hrs

Sleep Time: 2230hrs

* We heard the calls of owls throughout the night. I enjoyed them especially more now that my 14 months daughter points to her pillow with an owl on it and hoots.
* We woke up to everything being either damp or soaked from the rain and humidity. This only added to the splendor of being covered with sand, sweat, and blood from the occasional scrape from yesterday’s adventure.
* There was a concerned look on everyone’s face as we didn’t know what laid ahead of us. Jack said if it was anything like the day before he was going to tap-out at St. George which was about 10 miles away. Fortunately we only encountered minimal tree fall but the sandbars were still frequent. I’d take 100 sandbars to 1 fallen tree at this point.
* We paddled on and on until we neared the point of no return in regards to the Highway-94 Bridge in just east of St. George, GA. We don’t care for camping within earshot of the roads. We decided to push onward as we had made good time thus far and every mile made at this point put us in an even better position for a full day of camping.
* I heard loud music as we approached the bridge. I found a couple of trucks on the dirt road landing a half a mile away from the bridge. The music seemed good and the people seemed welcoming to I asked if they’d mind making a beer run! They were more than happy to do so and the $20 tip seemed to make the guy’s day. Cold beer tastes so good after a long couple of days on the river. Come to think of it, I don’t know when a cold beer doesn’t taste good!
* We saw a small alligator just past the bridge, I’d guesstimate maybe 3-4’ in length.
* We paddled another mile and a half where we made our campsite at 22 miles overall. As we budgeted seven miles per day this put us a full day ahead of the game. We could press on but we all agreed to rest up a full day since we could afford it mileage wise.
* We all took baths in the river that afternoon. It was very nice to put on a fresh set of clothes and smell better than we did. Did I mention we had cold beer too?!!?
* Other than an evening shower which cooled everything off, the night was uneventful.

*Sunrise: 0632hrs*

*Air Temp: 80/66°*

*Water Temp: 74°*

*Barometer: 1014*

*Wind Speed: 5-7mph (Southwest)*

*Water Gauge: 2’*

*Drift Speed: .25mph*

*Water Clarity: 1’*

*Cloud Cover: Partially*

*Sunset: 2018hrs*

Day 3: (*Thursday*) 0 miles, 22.03 miles overall

Awoke: 0730hrs

Breakfast: 0800hrs

Embarked: None

Break: All Day

Lunch: 1200

Break: All Day

Ending Time: None

Dinner: 1800hrs

Sleep Time: 2100hrs

* We all took our time getting up this morning. Murphy & Marty went down to the river to fish. Murphy nabbed a bowfin. Marty explained it was some kind of “primitive fish”. Shortly thereafter Murphy caught a couple of redbreast. I’m not sure if Marty caught any fish. Regardless the fish weren’t fried up as mentioned earlier.
* We saw a man in a Jon boat head down river and then return minutes later saying he couldn’t get very far beyond our campsite. This raised a few eyebrows as we may very well see day number one all over again!
* While in camp one of the guys played a prank on me. They all know I’m deathly afraid of snakes. So one of them, I later found out it was Preston, put a 6” plastic snake on the armrest of my chair and covered it with a towel. I discovered it once I lifted the towel and then let out an expletive rant that would make a sailor blush. They all had a good laugh at my expense. I guess it was my turn!
* While in camp I saw a 2” horsefly. I couldn’t imagine getting stung by that monster. The yellow horse flies were certainly doing a good job of biting us as it was.
* While eating dinner Jack spilled fish juice from one of his vacuum sealed bags onto Marty’s sun hat. I’m sure Marty was glad to get most of it washed out. I wouldn’t want to smell that for 4 more days.
* Marty went down to his kayak and returned with something in his hand that he concealed behind him as he walked back to the communal tarp. I caught a glimpse of it and it appears to hang from both sides of his hands and had a creamy/yellowish appearance. Based on the look on his face I figured it was a snake. I leaped from my chair and hurdled over his table adorned with his stove, beer bottle, cigar case, etc. They all got another good laugh.
* Preston & Murphy decided to move their personal camp areas to a better location and get out of a trough as rain was ominous.

*Sunrise: 0632hrs*

*Air Temp: 87/68°*

*Water Temp: 74°*

*Barometer: 1012*

*Wind Speed: 3-7mph (West Southwest)*

*Water Gauge: 1.9’*

*Drift Speed: .25mph*

*Water Clarity: 1’*

*Cloud Cover: Partial*

*Sunset: 2018hrs*

Day 4: (*Friday*) 14.6 miles, 36.63 miles overall

Awoke: 0530hrs

Breakfast: 0630hrs

Embarked: 0845hrs

Break: None

Lunch: 1130hrs

Break: None

Ending Time: 1530hrs

Dinner: 2000hrs

Sleep Time: 2230hrs

* I didn’t sleep well last night, lots of tossing and turning. Thankfully I was in my tent and I was able to do so. It was very warm and humid and then a wet-cold moved into camp.
* A couple of owls went bonkers at 0500hrs. I figured why not start my day since I was already awake.
* As fate would have it everyone started their day early with the exception of Marty. He seemed annoyed that everyone was mostly packed up as they prepared their breakfast, with the exception of Jack.
* Murphy’s rudder was jammed as the cable was pinched at the foot pedal we fixed it before getting underway.
* The group split up by about 400-500 yards. As the day grew longer the four of us up front (Preston, Kevin, Murphy, and I) found a suitable campsite to make camp and began to make arrangements to camp there. Marty paddled up in a tirade as he felt disrespected because he wasn’t given a vote. Despite his individual value of 1/6 i.e. 16.67% we acquiesced to his displeasure of the campsite and we saddled back up and paddled down the river. I made it very clear that the burden of tonight’s campsite rested solely on his shoulders.
* We paddled an additional six miles to not only drive home the point but to also allow the decision to make sense. I mean why would we not camp *here* only to paddle 100 yards to camp *there*? Fortunately we found a great campsite that we all agreed on. Given the miles banked today we earned another day of just camping!
* We all took another bath today!

*Sunrise: 0631hrs*

*Air Temp: 85/68°*

*Water Temp: 74°*

*Barometer: 1016*

*Wind Speed: 5-7mph (Southwest)*

*Water Gauge: 2*

*Drift Speed: .25-.5mph*

*Water Clarity: 1’*

*Cloud Cover: Overcast*

*Sunset: 2019hrs*

Day 5: (*Saturday*) 0 miles, 36.63 miles overall

Awoke: 0700hrs

Breakfast: 0745hrs

Embarked: None

Break: All Day

Lunch: 1200hrs (in camp)

Break: All Day

Ending Time: None

Dinner: 1830hrs

Sleep Time: 2200hrs

* Not only was this a very relaxing day but we also all did laundry! I had some *Blackwater Paddle Club* shirts made and we all tried to wear them as we could. But we had to wash them given the amount of sweat and tears they absorbed.
* Jack brought some liquid dish detergent and a plastic container the size of a small trash can. This guy brought EVERYTHING! We washed, rinsed, and hung our dirty clothes on some 550 paracord in the sun to dry. As a joke I put my dirty underwear in the back of Jack’s kayak.
* We had a great day in camp. Murphy caught several more redbreasts and Preston occupied his time making a fire. Kevin and I swapped storied and recommendations about gear.
* During the absolute hottest part of the day Jack walks to the communal tarp from the river holding my disgusting underwear on the end of a stick and asks “Who left their underwear at my boat”. Marty, thinking they were his quickly responded “They’re mine”. I saw that they were mine and figured we’d get a chuckle once he learned they weren’t his after all. None of us were prepared for what ensued! Marty took the underwear off the end of the stick and immediately placed them into his face and took a deeeeeeeep sniff. I mean it was a lungful! I stared in disbelief as though I witnessed a 100 car accident, as much as I didn’t want to watch I also couldn’t look away. He made a few strange faces and removed them from his face and then realized the now three day old underwear that sat in the heat baking in the sun were in fact *not* his! We collectively erupted into laughter. The tarp we were sitting under must have risen a foot in the air from the sheer volume of air released from 5 grown men laughing uncontrollably. Sometimes the best pranks are the ones you never even play! Given some of the friction along the way it seems karma was definitely an active paddler as well.
* We were finally able to use the portable grill to cook a good solid meal since the rain passed us by. We still have a couple of beers. Life is good.
* We decided to push tomorrow and reach Traders Hill Landing where we planned to extract. Preston left his truck there so the thought of junk food, blizzards, more beer, and an actual shower at the campground appealed to us all!
* We walked to the river’s edge tonight and saw mars to the left of a brilliant full moon. The reflection off the river was very pretty too.
* A discussion started about the average speed we could likely make tomorrow on the river. The naysayer said 3.0mph couldn’t be done despite some of us having already reached a maximum speed of over 5mph and that we wouldn’t reach Traders hill until about 1500-1600hrs.

*Sunrise: 0631hrs*

*Air Temp: 95/68°*

*Water Temp: 74°*

*Barometer: 1016*

*Wind Speed: 5-7mph (West Southwest)*

*Water Gauge: 2.1’*

*Drift Speed: .25mph*

*Water Clarity: 1’*

*Cloud Cover: Clear*

*Sunset: 2020hrs*

Day 6: (*Sunday*) 16.46 miles, 53.09 miles overall

Awoke: 0600hrs

Breakfast: 0700hrs

Embarked: 0815hrs

Break: None

Lunch: 1400hrs

Break: None

Ending Time: 1245hrs

Dinner: 1900hrs

Sleep Time: 2400hrs

* We woke up well rested and ready to tackle the day.
* Last night’s discussion about paddling speed fueled a fire inside of a couple of us. Murphy, Kevin, and I decided to see just what we could do as we decided to make it to Traders Hill today and then camp overnight there. Preston was with us for an hour or so until he snagged a sandbar and fell back. The three of us rounded numerous bends and bypassed several sandbars making great time.
* We rounded one bend and saw what appeared to be a single family fishing camp. Kevin heard one of the guys ask “Are y’all the kayakers that haven’t called your wives?”!!! Kevin told us what he said and we began to wonder what all occurred for the next two hours until we reached Traders Hill. We reached Traders Hill at 1245hrs
* Preston made it to Traders Hill at 1345hrs
* Marty & Jack made it here at 1445hrs.
* Upon reaching the landing we did a review of how our coolers help up over the week. Our coolers kept ice as such:

Preston 0 days (he didn’t bring one)

Murphy 4 days (Engel 25qt)

Jack 4 days (Igloo 64qt)

Kevin 5 days (Orca 20qt)

Marty 6 days (Canyon 35qt)

Jimmy 7 days (Nash Sub-Z 23qt)

* We went into Folkston and got some cigars for Marty and then into Florida as Charlton County, GA is a dry country and doesn’t sell beer on Sunday’s. While in Florida we stopped at a wing place and ate. On the way back we got Jack & Marty a blizzard from Dairy Queen.
* Mom & Bill came to pick us up the next morning at 0745hrs!

*Sunrise: 0630hrs*

*Air Temp: 90/60°*

*Water Temp: 74°*

*Barometer: 1012*

*Wind Speed: 8mph (Southwest)*

*Water Gauge: 2.25’*

*Drift Speed: .25-.5mph*

*Water Clarity: 1’*

*Cloud Cover: Clear*

*Sunset: 2020hrs*

Conclusion:

**\*\*\*WORD OF CAUTION\*\*\* This river tested experienced paddlers. We were extremely lucky to not injure ourselves while traversing the many obstacles in this river. We did NOT have cell coverage the entire trip in the event we needed assistance or rescue. Plan accordingly.**

Marty & Preston did a fantastic job a scouting the river prior to our expedition. They made numerous trips up and down the river as they knew the depth of the river as tree fall could be burdensome. Close attention was paid to the weather as well. We originally planned to launch in Moniac, GA and paddle all the way to the Highway-17 Bridge just west of Kingsland, GA totaling 105 miles. However, we made two adjustments which reduced the overall trip to 50 miles. The river in Moniac was a record lows. The river was reduced to a ditch. As a result, our launching point was pushed to the next available location which was 20 miles downriver at St. Mary’s Cove Landing. The second adjustment was at the tail end of the trip, apparently the river becomes brackish at Traders Hill. As none of us have a de-salinator we decided to extract at Traders Hill thus cutting 35 miles off the end of the trip.

Due to the remoteness of the St. Mary’s River nobody on our trip had cellular service. Additionally, I had a waterproof portable HAM radio (Yaesu vx-8dr) with the Macclenny, Callahan, and Hilliard two meter repeaters programmed into it. It didn’t work either. Aside from giving our friends and families some form of warm and fuzzy feeling with daily check-ins, we had no way to contact emergency personnel in the event one of us got injured. The biggest thing to take away from this trip is having a way to contact family, friends, and most importantly emergency assistance. As such, I have purchased a SPOT GPS messenger (this seemed to fit my needs, mileage may vary) to have the ability to contact my loved ones.

While water depth played a large part in overall fatigue, physical obstructions superseded water level(s). Its one thing to drag your loaded kayak along 4-6” of water versus under, over, or around trees. If you aren’t familiar with the multitude of strokes needed to maneuver your kayak around obstructions you’d be better off launching at the Highway 94 Bridge (mile marker 20) in St. George, GA.

I experienced some frustration with my Garmin Montana 650t GPS. While parked on a sandbar overnight the unit was still logging miles. I spoke to Garmin and they said that the most updated version software may prevent this (free/automatic prompts when connected to Garmin.com) this from occurring. For good measure Garmin replaced the entire unit with another one at no cost to me. That is great customer service.

The upgraded battery box, 500lbs chair, and MRE entrée for lunch was a great success. I also brought along some Gatorade powder. This allowed me to mix the energy drink on-the-fly and replace essential vitamins and minerals.

Things to do differently…

1. I decided to “tech-up” on some of my gear. Murphy is an avid backpacker and blew my mind with the ultralight options on the market. I purchased a 40° sleeping bag with a sleeping bag liner rated at an additional 25° of warmth. This breaks up bulk and allows me to customize my load even more given seasonal temperatures. This combined with getting a Kelty Noah Tarp (20’x20’) not only cut 7lbs off of “the communal tarp” but also increased its size and usability by tie points on the tarp.
2. I upgraded my kayak chair to the Jackson Elite 3.0 chair. Each time I got out of the kayak I would get sand and water in my chair. While not normally a major issue, a week of waterlogged kibbles-n-bits will wear even the toughest of men down.
3. I plan to upgrade my GoPro batteries exclusively to Brunton All Day batteries. By not having to swap out batteries every couple of hours made it more enjoyable to film. I also am going to get more Sandisk 64gb Extreme Plus cards so I can film extended footage in 1080p 60fps!
4. I plan to FINALLY get a camp table.

Do understand we all like to get the best of one another. I’ll also caveat that by saying at no point would we jeopardize each other’s safety for the sake of a laugh. Bad things can happen instantly when you take Mother Nature for granted. Thank you for your interest and paddle on!