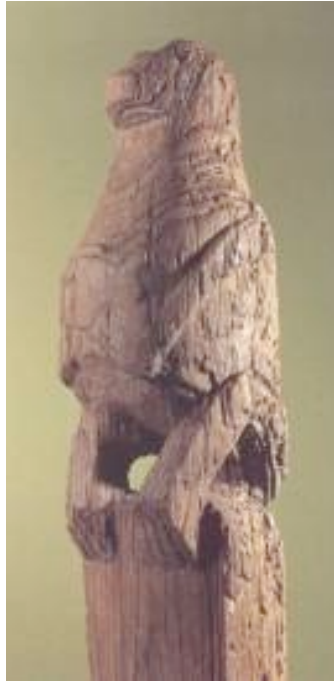


IV

Wildlife and Spirit

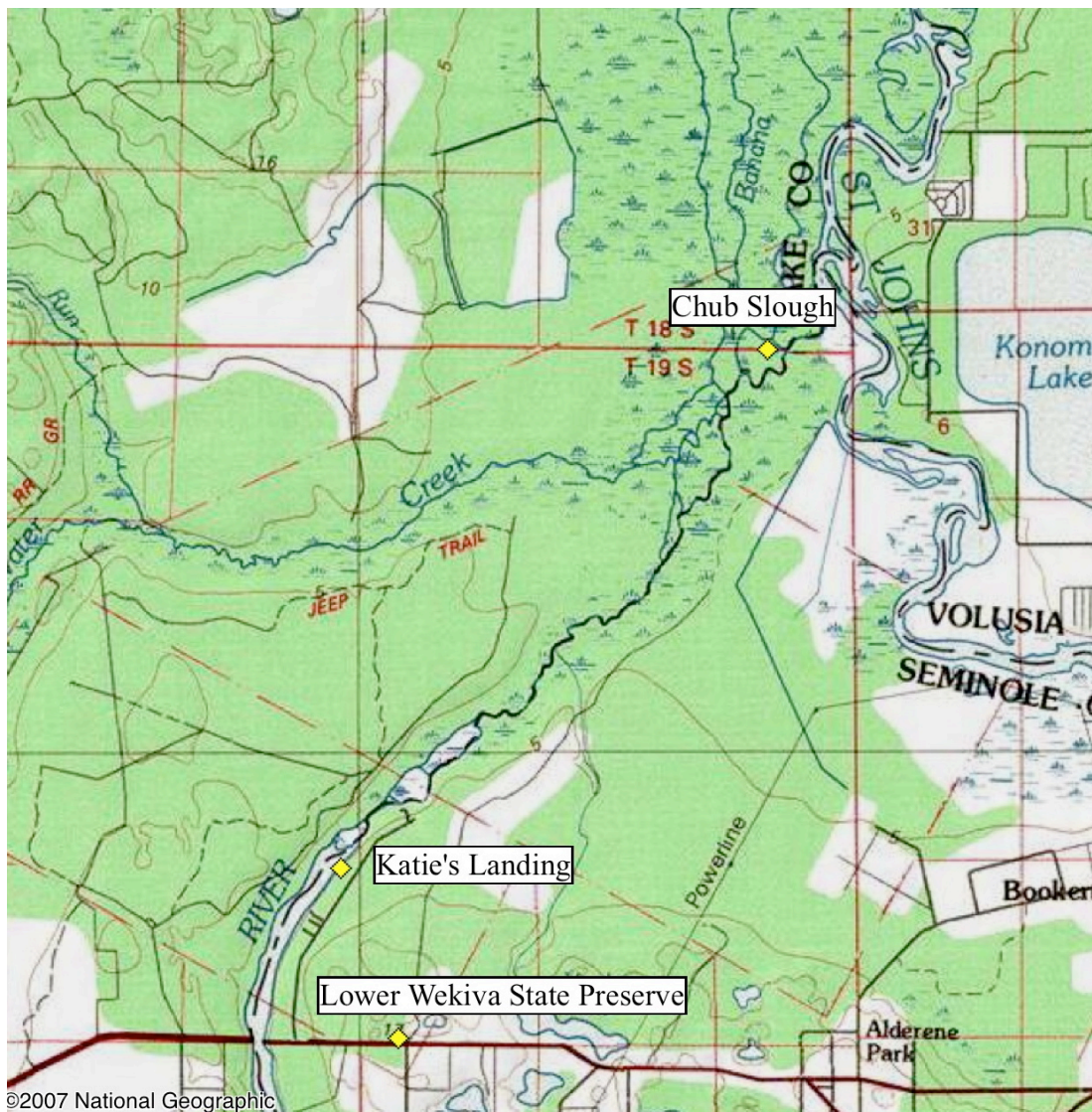


Timucuan Otter: wood carving

**From *Indian Art of Ancient Florida*,
by permission of Barbara A. Purdy
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photograph by Roy A. Craven**

The Lower Wekiva River, the Preserve

No one seems to know where the Lower Wekiva River officially begins. It certainly has to include all of the Lower Wekiva State Preserve, and beyond that one can only ask how much of the Flats that would include. For 4.5 miles, starting south of the State Road 46 bridge, the river is wider than a turnpike, 500-600 feet in places, going under the bridge all the way to Katie's Landing. Along the flats north of the bridge on the east side are a few small springs and the remains of some Indian mounds.



Down the highway you can find the entrance to the Lower Wekiva River State Preserve and some great hiking trails that parallel the river and arc across the northwest corner of Seminole County toward the St. Johns. At the end of the trail you can look out over long stretches of sawgrass and cattails, knowing that beyond them out of sight lies the St. Johns. Some nineteenth-century home sites were built in this area over toward Sanford, but now there's not much of a trace left of the folks who first settled the area on carved up pieces of Spanish land grants.

The Preserve is also home to the offices of the Aquatic Preserve where for years Deborah Shelley and her staff have monitored the quality of river life, plants, insects, fish, birds, bears, and especially exotics so as to keep the river healthy. On the west side of the lower river is the Seminole State Forest which extends far north into the territory of the Blackwater Creek. The Florida Trail runs across the SR46 bridge and up through the state forest into the Ocala National forest and beyond that to the panhandle.

State Road 46 is now a two or three lane road carrying too much traffic for the past few years and slated for expansion to four lanes. The road kill of bears and other animals on this highway is staggering, and even though a million dollar underpass with two miles of fences to funnel the critters to the undercross has helped, four lanes will be very treacherous, esp. at night, for two and four legged animals alike. ¹

After years of fighting to prevent the outerbelt from crossing the Wekiva basin, advocates of the river are now working with the expressway authority to build an ecologically sound superhighway that is largely elevated. In addition, we want the legislature to make a law that will limit the number of exits on the toll road and restrict the densities of growth in the vital recharge areas which are farther west of here. This means trying to get a new law to expand further the protections for the quantity and quality of the water flowing out of the springs.

Paddling north from the SR 46 bridge we come to a small island that marks the place of the only substantial spring in the Lower Wekiva basin. Island Spring is not on the island, but south of it, in the middle of the main channel, completely underwater and invisible to all, except the fully initiated cave divers. There are a few small boils along the east bank above and below Island Spring, but this is the last known place on the Wekiva where the river below meets the river above in a passable cavern.

The last stop on this tour of the fourth segment of the Wekiva is Katie's Landing, the premiere campground with kayak and canoe rental. Even though it is closed, now, and purchased by the state, it stands for an era of great good sense on the part of the people of Florida and especially the three counties in the basin charged with the responsibility to provide growth with good

¹ In a study of roadkill along 30 kilometers of SR46 and SR46A, 381 carcasses were found during a 20 month period (Nov. 2001-Aug. 2003). Raccoons and possum topped the list of 242 mammals, including 9 black bear. Of the 100 reptiles and amphibians found dead, 20 were gopher tortoises and 4 eastern diamondback rattlers. 28 birds were counted: 1 sandhill crane, 4 barred owls, 2 osprey, and 7 chickens. These numbers were much higher before the underpass was built.

measure. In the past thirty years, Katie and Russ Moncrief have been the mediators of the river to the community and have hosted especially all the major river events of the Friends of the Wekiva.

In many ways, the least glamorous part of the river, the stretch from Katie's down to the Blackwater and Chub Slough is my favorite. My heart clings to the cypress tree between the launching strip and the canteen at Katie's, the two wooden chairs underneath, facing downstream across the broad flats where tall grasses full of grackles and red-wings show all the people of central Florida the good life. "Good Lord," they say, "what did we do to deserve this?"