

Safely Fishing the Toccoa Tailwater

The opportunity. The lower Toccoa River between Blue Ridge and Tennessee is a unique asset because it is a *tailwater*, which is the part of a river below a dam. This creates an ideal habitat for rainbow, brown, and brook trout, which are cold water species that prefer water in the 45-70 degree range. The water of the lower Toccoa comes from the bottom of Lake Blue Ridge and the temperatures vary by season but are generally low and keep the river temperatures at trout preferred cold water levels year-round. Georgia trout regs allow year-round trout fishing in certain streams and rivers, the Toccoa River being one. The Toccoa River above and below the dam receives routine stocking of trout, predominantly rainbows but occasionally brown and brook trout as well. The fish, if released when caught, can “hold-over”, reproduce, and grow to larger sizes. Much of the river is wadeable, and it is traversable by canoe, kayak, float tube, pontoon boat, and drift boat by those familiar with those modes of transport. This can create great opportunities to fish for trout for those knowledgeable of the sport. It can also create risk for those who do not learn and protect against dangers inherent in tailwater fisheries. The difference between a trip of a lifetime and a harrowing experience can come from knowledge and preparation. However, with certain precautions, one can safely enjoy the Toccoa River.

Knowledge is power. Regardless of your abilities as a paddler or outdoors person and your conditioning, do not take on an unfamiliar trip without getting the information you need to be safe. Websites (some listed below) and books can take you only so far. Guides, outdoor and fly shops, outfitters, and local residents all can be useful sources of information on safety, equipment, characteristics of the river, how to fish it, where to get in and out, and how long it will take to get from one access point to another. The best approach is to first take a trip with someone who knows the river and to ask that person everything they know to keep you safe (and to have fun and catch fish). The local Trout Unlimited Chapter and its members (information below) are committed to educating the public about safety and about sustaining the beauty and opportunity of the local fisheries. Many of us learned from guides and other TU members, and our education process continues every day we fish. Those who make their living from the outdoors and the Georgia DNR likewise can likewise provide guidance.

Safety. As a tailwater, the Toccoa seems rather tame during minimal flows but turns into a powerful, raging current when the dam generates several times a week. The water is very cold and getting dunked into the river can disable even the strongest person. Basic safety dictates the following:

1. Always call ahead for the generation schedule (1-800-238-2264 then 4, 23) and exit the water well before the water rises.
2. Learn to swim and do not take non-swimmers into situations beyond their capabilities. Fishermen drown every year in tailwaters, even if they are strong swimmers.
3. Do not take yourself or others into situations beyond their fitness level. A long float on a tailwater is a physical challenge, and having one or more persons in the group at or beyond their physical limits is dangerous.
4. Always wear a personal flotation device. It is against the law to float or paddle the Toccoa without a PFD.
5. Waders will fill with water if you fall in the river. The strongest of swimmers may drown in shallow water if waders or fill with cold water. A wading belt worn correctly can slow the filling process and save a life. If you do not have a wader belt, do not go into the river with waders.
6. Do not wade while the dam is generating, and at all other times wade within safe limits. Carry a wading staff or pole and always have an exit plan.

7. There can be unscheduled rising water. If anything changes (water depth, water temperature, visual cues) get out immediately.
8. Fish with a buddy. When fishing alone, be sure someone knows your location and schedule.
9. If you take a dunk in the river, get out and get dry. Hypothermia can disable you or limit your skill and balance creating danger to life and limb.
10. Become familiar with your craft before taking a lengthy float on the river. Do not take a craft or tube on the river that has no means of steering or propulsion.
11. Every year, tubes and pontoon boats deflate and endanger riders by loss of control or floatability. Make sure your craft can withstand rocks, sticks, logs, and strong currents, and at the first sign of loss of air head for shore. Have a repair kit available or do not get back in the river if the craft is compromised.
12. Carry a first aid kit, water, nourishment, and a spare paddle for longer trips.
13. Know the length of your trip and leave time to fish and enjoy the trip while arriving before dark.
14. Night fishing is possible for those familiar with the river, but entering or remaining on the water at night by wading or in a craft can be very dangerous.

Respect for others and for the fishery. All Georgians and our visitors have a tremendous asset in the Toccoa. It is not an unlimited resource, and it is one to be shared by landowner and visitor alike. Great trips can be ruined by poor behavior of others, be they visitors or landowners. The safest way to have a good experience is to respect others using the river and the landowners along the way. Except for the five public access points and parks on the other side of this sheet, the land next to the river and land underwater to the center of the river are privately owned. Most landowners are willing to share the river with those who respect their rights. Climbing banks or walking on private property without permission can result in an unhappy encounter or worse, as it is against the law. Studies by DNR indicate that great fishing opportunities exist from the dam to McCaysville. If you are floating the river, do not hog a spot or crowd others who may not have a watercraft. Talk to your outfitter or fly shop personnel about fishing manners and courtesy. Many times, moving on without spoiling another person's day can be more rewarding than claiming rights over a spot to fish. TU is committed to making the fishing better. We advance the following:

1. It takes a fish 4-5 years to grow to trophy size. Killing the fish can take minutes. Catch and release is a proven way to maintain a great fishery.
2. Do not kill over the limit. It's against the law as well as poor sportsmanship.
3. Know how to safely release fish. Information on this (barbless hooks, using forceps or release devices, and properly handling the fish) is available from TU and from your local flyshop. Treble hooks are particularly dangerous.
4. Leave the river and its banks and shrubbery as you found it. Whether you fish at a public park or along private sections of the river, leaving trash, fishing line, lures, and other debris will degrade your experience and that of others in the future as well as harm wildlife.
5. Report poachers. They hurt all of us and our children's future opportunities. POACHER HOTLINE: 1-800-242-4113.
6. Teach a child to fish safely.

Join Us or Consult Us. Trout Unlimited is dedicated to the preservation and enhancement of coldwater fisheries. The Blue Ridge Chapter welcomes new members and the opportunity to help others enjoy the local waters. Visit our web page to learn more: <http://www.georgiatu.org/>