

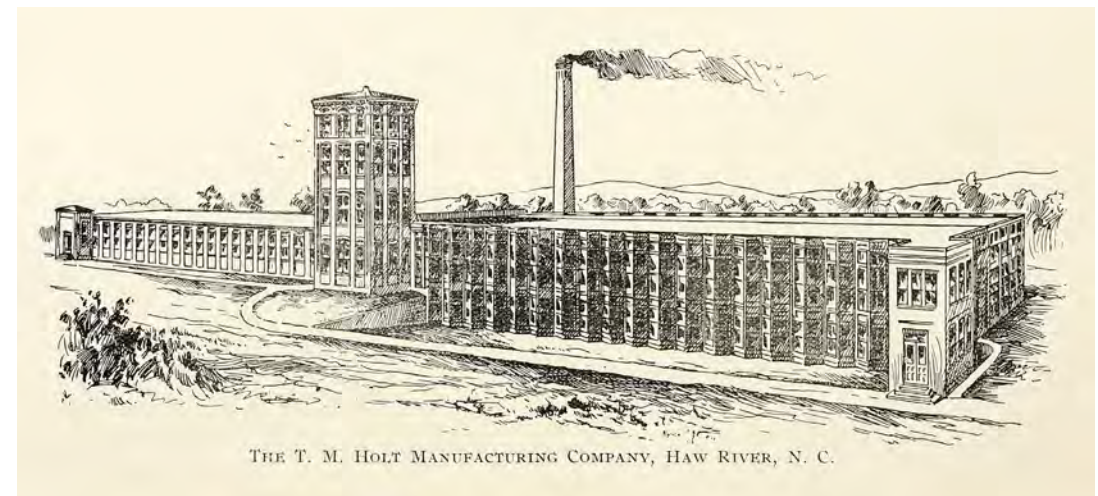
A River *on the Rise*

Once blemished by pollution, the Piedmont's Haw River is becoming a floating, fishing and birding destination

WRITTEN BY BRUCE INGRAM

CHRIS WHITTED

Several years ago, while at my wife Elaine's family reunion in Ashe County, one of her cousins remarked that since I relish floating rivers, I should come canoe the Haw. Her next comment "it's not polluted like it used to be" aroused my curiosity about a stream of which I had heard little. After researching this Piedmont waterway, I learned that the Haw is a river with an infamous past, an interesting present and an intriguing future.



The Haw River originates along the border of Forsyth and Guilford counties near Kernersville. It meanders some 110 miles through Rockingham County, back into Guilford, into Alamance County, along the border of Orange and Chatham counties, into Chatham and then enters B. Everett Jordan Lake. Eventually, the waterway unites with the Deep River to create the Cape Fear.

Like so many other rivers in the Piedmont region of Virginia and the Carolinas, the textile industry heavily polluted the Haw in the years after the Civil War and throughout the vast majority of the 20th century. Between 1832 and 1880, companies built eight textile plants along the river, and their bleaching and dyeing processes resulted in extensive water pollution. Reports of the waterway being a different color each day of the week and mountains of foam 10 feet tall were all too common.

The Haw's water quality gradually began to improve when the American textile industry started sending jobs and factories to other countries, and after the Clean Water Act began to be enforced. Today, although the river still suffers from sedimentation and runoff problems, the Haw is beginning to attract real interest as a canoeing and birding destination as well as offering some fishing opportunities.

"Most people don't give the Haw any attention," Corey Oakley, the Piedmont fishery supervisor for the N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission, said of the Haw's fishing potential. "It is a typical Piedmont North Carolina stream with lots of sunfish, predominantly redbreast, the occasional largemouth bass and catfish, especially native bullheads. I wouldn't say that fishing is the greatest in the Haw, but you can catch fish. As with a lot of Piedmont rivers,



“Once we get people to hike or paddle the Haw, they quickly realize on their own what a wonderful resource we have.”

THOMAS HARVEY/NCWRC

there is not that one species of fish that is the big drawing card. But if you are an opportunist like me, as long as I catch a fish, I really don't care what it is.”

Oakley lists several other recent developments along the watershed as being real positives. The state park system has purchased land, creating Haw River State Park along the Rockingham and Guilford county line. He also adds that a sizable canoeing contingent has come into existence as well as an important conservation group, the Haw River Trail Partnership (HRTTP).

“Our biggest challenge has been turning around the negative public perception of the Haw,” Alamance Parks Director Brian Baker said. “This perception was forged by decades of pollution and neglect and is very difficult to change. That said, the headway we have made in changing that perception has been our biggest accomplishment.

“Our theory has always been that we can't sell people on the river nearly as well as the river sells itself. That is why we focus almost exclusively on creating public access to the river. Once we get people to hike or paddle the Haw, they quickly realize on their own what a wonderful resource we have.”

A PLACE TO FLOAT

Another accomplishment has been the establishment of an outstanding lineup of excursions. Baker said that enough access points now exist that paddlers can essentially create their own outings.

“One of the more popular sections is Red Slide Park in [the town of] Haw River to Swepsonville River Park,” Baker said. “This is a great section for beginners. There is a neat guide book we put together for this section that highlights all the historical and other relevant highlights along the trip.”

Among his other favorites, Baker lists Glencoe Paddle Access to Red Slide Park (“a bit more challenging with rock gardens”) and Altamahaw Paddle Access above the dam (“a great flat water paddle with beautiful fauna”).

The heart of the paddling lies in Alamance County, where no rapid greater than Class II exists. U.S. 64 to Robeson Creek in Chatham County is the only Class II–III trip.

Barbara Massey, a retired vice president for the Alamance County Area Chamber of Commerce, is a native to the area who has “crossed the river nearly every day of my life.” Massey and her husband, Greg, have paddled across much of the state.

The mills that once polluted the Haw River now provide a unique backdrop for the Piedmont waterway. Opposite top: Paddle access locations lining the Haw River make for easy day excursions. Opposite bottom: A typical scene along the Haw includes riffles, mid-river boulders and heavily wooded shorelines.

“The Haw is a great resource on many levels,” she said. “First, obviously, as a place to paddle, but also as a testament on how local governments can work together to create something positive. Nine local governments across county lines came together to sign a memorandum of understanding to develop a paddle trail. That kind of cooperation is just unprecedented. Access points were developed, brochures giving the history of each section were created and mile markers were posted and coordinate with the brochures.”

The result, continues Massey, is that visitors to the Haw can have a safe, enjoyable float down the waterway.

PUTTING PADDLE TO WATER

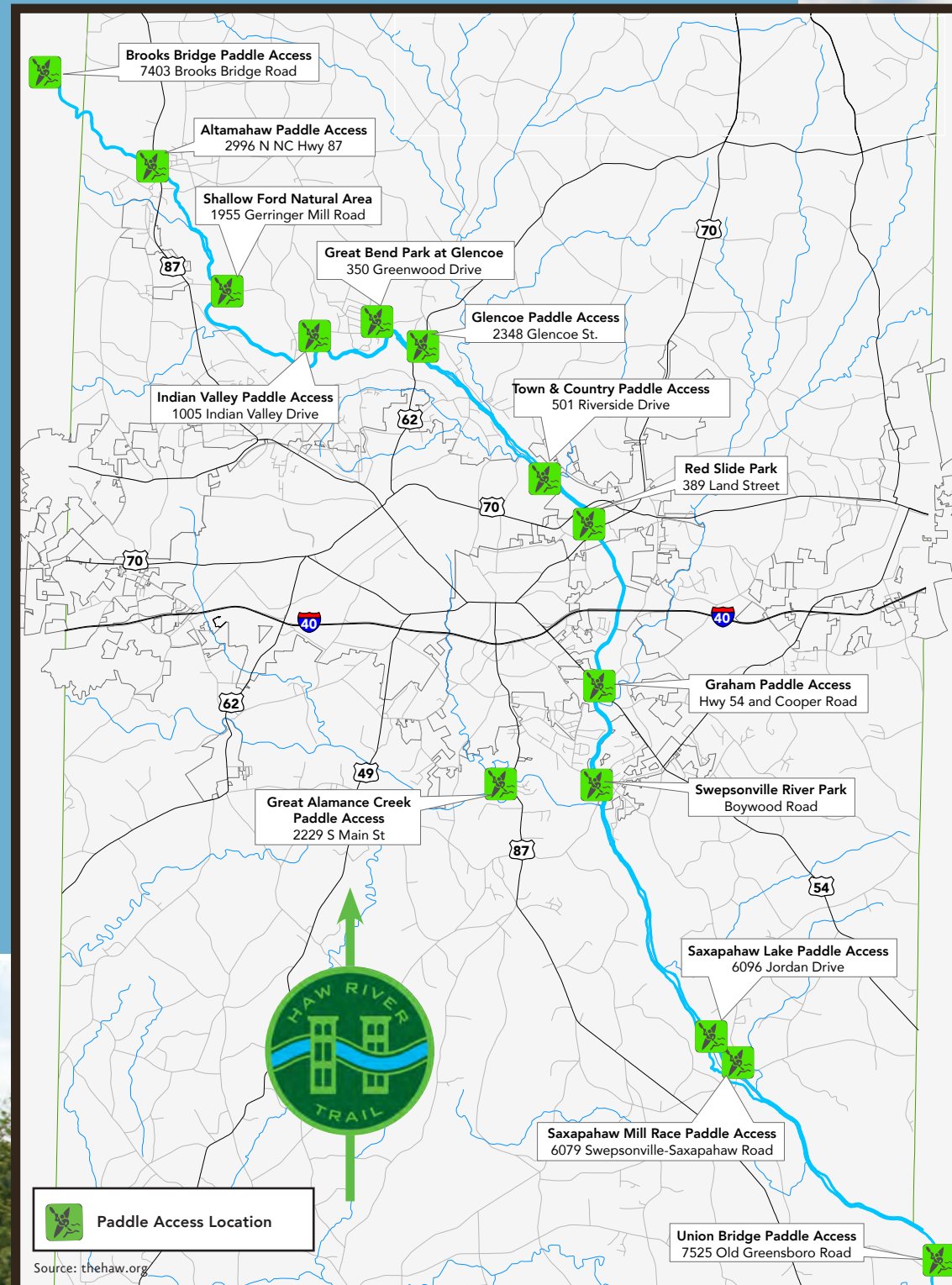
Eager to explore the fishing, paddling, birding and scenic photography potential of the Haw, I arrive at the River Landing Inn, which lies on the river outside of Graham in Alamance County, on a Friday evening in June. Innkeeper Matt Diehl invites me to stroll with him on a roughly 300-yard trail that leads from the B&B to and along the river.

“I've lived in places as far away as Phoenix and the Hudson River Valley [in New York],” Diehl says. “I was looking for a place that offered solitude and the opportunity to run a B&B. When I came here and walked the property, I found what I wanted. I spent a year transforming an old barn into the inn, but I finally made it happen.”

I can understand why Diehl chose this parcel. In our 30-minute hike, we record 31 species of birds, among them Acadian and great-crowned flycatchers, and such warblers as black-and-white, hooded and parula, plus a very vocal Louisiana waterthrush. I also note gray tree frogs and painted turtles.

Saturday morning, Robert Cox, a former vice president of the Visit Alamance Convention & Visitors Bureau, and Barbara and Greg Massey pick me up for a day on the Haw. We decide to combine two excursions: Red Slide

Haw River Paddle Trail – Alamance County Section



BRUCE INGRAM



BRUCE INGRAM



TOM BENSON/FICKR



THOMAS HARVEY/NCWRC



MELISSA MCGAW/NCWRC



BRUCE INGRAM



CHRIS WHITTED

Trails along the Haw shoreline provide plenty of opportunities for birding, including seeing and hearing species like the Acadian flycatcher (inset above). Sunfish, like this redbreast (inset bottom right), are most frequently caught by anglers. Gray treefrogs can be spotted, if you look closely enough.

THOMAS HARVEY/NCWRC

Park to Graham (3.5 miles) and Graham to Swepsonville (2 miles).

Massey and I depart in a canoe, and Robert and Barbara set forth in kayaks. Immediately below the access lies a Class I-II rapid, created by dam remains. I remark to Greg that this appears to be ideal smallmouth bass habitat. But shortly afterward, a foot-long largemouth or so savages a Cordell Big O. A few minutes later, I hook and then proceed to lose a largemouth that may have weighed 3 pounds.

I blame losing both keeper-size bass on the muddy water, which perhaps caused the fish to lightly hit the crankbait. My incompetence is more likely the reason the fish were not landed. We come to more riffles and

Class I rapids, and I again remark that this would be marvelous smallmouth water.

“The Haw has a lot of riffles and Class I to II rapids, some caused by dam remains, some natural,” Greg says. “But I don’t hear of people catching smallmouths.”

We are hearing plenty of birds. Barbara calls out that she has harked to the “yewk, yewk,” sounds of an osprey, Greg is the first to espy a soaring red-shouldered hawk, and in quick succession I identify Baltimore orioles, phoebes, indigo buntings, red-bellied and pileated woodpeckers, and a green heron. Two hours into our trip, we have heard or seen 40 species.

The birds understandably find the river to their liking. Sycamores, sweet gums, box elders and especially ashes dominate the riparian zone with the odd elderberry shrub in bloom standing out. I remember my conversation with Oakley, the Commission biologist, about the numerous red-breasted sunfish present, and I decide to put away the

spinning rod and switch to a fly rod with a Sneaky Pete Popper attached.

Soon afterward, a hand-sized redbreast slams the popper, and for the rest of the day I rarely go more than a few casts without one of these sunfish attacking the topwater lure. The redbreasts are seemingly lined up next to every downed tree (of which there are many) in the water and below every riffle area. I have never been on a North Carolina river populated with so many redbreasts.

Around 3:30, we arrive at the Swepsonville River Park right take-out and head for our next destination: the Haw River Trail’s Glencoe Access, which is part of the North Carolina Birding Trail. During my visit, I have tallied 45 species of birds and am hopeful that I can reach 50. A yellow-breasted chat ends up being the species that lets me attain my goal, but it is a pair of common nighthawks courting aerially that brings the biggest birding thrill of the day. Stopping on the trail, which runs along

the river and offers easy walking, we watch spellbound for several minutes as the “peents” from the nighthawks reverberate.

We end our day in Saxapahaw. I remark to Cox that the town is alive on a Saturday evening: five teenage boys and girls are carrying fishing rods, the streets are filled with people and folks are congregating in the town park for a local farmers market and music series, held every Saturday evening during the summer.

“Alamance County is recovering very nicely from the loss of much of its textile industry,” Cox said. “And I think the Haw River’s recovery has a lot to do with that. Having a clean, fishable river is a real quality of life issue for many people and a reason for someone to want to live or start a business here.”

After dinner at a local restaurant, we tour the farmers market. A musician is belting out “King of the Road.” Fresh vegetables, cheese, eggs and strawberries are for sale. Tempted by those fresh strawberries, I order homemade strawberry ice cream from a vendor. The ice cream, like everything else during my sojourn, is wonderful.

“I see the Haw being appreciated on many levels and becoming an even more important part of our economy,” Barbara Massey says. “The river bisects Alamance County north to south, and I foresee more opportunities for people who want to combine river floats with visits, for example, to our wine trail or birding trail.

“One day, if plans go as hoped, people will be able to stand at the river’s banks and access the Mountain-to-Sea Trail traveling west to Clingmans Dome in the mountains or east to Jockey’s Ridge on the coast. That’s a lot to look forward to.” ♦

Bruce Ingram is a contributor to Wildlife in North Carolina and the author of eight books, including “The New River Guide” and “Living the Locavore Lifestyle.” Contact him at bruceingramoutdoors@gmail.com