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The Dragon Canoe Cruising Trail

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DRAGON RUN is a fairly swift body of water averaging 25 feet in width and six or more feet in depth. Its bottom is irregular, varying from mud in shallow places to sand where the current is swift. This stream stretches from near Miller's Tavern, Virginia, (not far from Tappahannock) for nearly 50 miles into the Piankatank River. It is situated in a great swamp through which it winds and "snakes" its way, dividing Essex and Middlesex Counties to the north and King and Queen and Gloucester Counties to the south. Dragon swamp, the third largest swamp in Virginia, was well-known back in colonial days since it was necessary to cross the Dragon as one travelled the historic Tidewater Trail from Williamsburg to Fredericksburg. George Washington is known to have used this route and spent the night at Dragon Ordinary, an inn for travellers, which was located near the present Glenns Post Office on Route 17.

There is no authentic record of how Dragon Run was named, but the legend is that after several slaves had escaped and taken refuge in the swamp, plantation owners, in order to discourage this practice, told their slaves, who were very superstitious, that there were dragons down in the swamp. Another tale recounts a dragon actually having been seen, supposedly by reliable witnesses. Of course it is logical to assume that its serpentine shape may have had something to do with its name.

This uninhabited wilderness, abounding with wild animals and plants, provides real adventure for any explorer. The beaver, by far the most interesting creature encountered on the trail, causes one to gape in awe at his feats of forest engineering, and his dams and lodges are proof of his ability and intelligence. On the lower part of the trail, as the stream widens into the marshy flats at the headwaters of the Piankatank River, it is the muskrat that commands the visitor's attention with the huge piles of marsh reeds made into ledges with networks of entrances from underground.

In this area the fishing is known to be excellent, for many salt-water species, including rockfish, weakfish and croaker, migrate upstream for spawning. The fishing in the upper freshwater areas is also good. Pickerel, yellow perch and bream are abundant in the stream, particularly around the Route 17 Bridge area. Bass are found mostly farther downstream.

Of the plant life to be seen in the great swamp, most impressive are the massive bald cypress trees with their spreading "knees," which take many odd and grotesque shapes. Wood ducks, mallards, herons and many other birds that shy away from populated areas are abundant here.

Explorer Post 111 of Gloucester has been working to clear obstructions from the upper portion of the run between New Dragon Bridge and Route 17 Bridge. Assistance was given this post by Sam R. Stanford, game warden, and Carter Harrison, Jr., photographer, who accompanied the Post on its initial trip. It is not the Post's intention to completely remove all obstructions since this would possibly cause the runoff of impounded waters and reduce the depth of the stream as well as allow navigation by motorboats which would disturb the serenity of the trail.

A register box has been erected on the trail in order to determine the volume and the type of traffic over the trail. The box contains the following notice:

The Dragon Canoe Cruising Trail

"The Dragon Canoe Cruising Trail was brought into being when, after having made several trips on portions of this stream, Explorer Post 111, Boy Scouts of America, in Gloucester, Va., took as a project the clearing of major obstacles and the marking of the trail showing campsites, etc. It was felt that this wilderness, with its wildlife and flora, particularly the beaver and the massive cypress, both of which are relatively rare in Tidewater Virginia, would be appreciated by other scout units, sportsmen and outdoorsmen everywhere. Much encouragement has been received from many sources, including *Virginia Wildlife Magazine* and the Commission of Game and Inland Fisheries, The Peninsula Council of the Boy Scouts of America, The American Red Cross Small Crafts Division, members of canoe cruising clubs and others interested in nature and wildlife. Starting at New Dragon Bridge near Mascot in King and Queen County, this unit has tried to begin the trail by making passage possible all the way to the Piankatank River. It is hoped that other units and organizations might become interested and help continue the work so that the entire Dragon Run, starting near Miller's Tavern, Va., might be cleared and marked thus providing a 50 mile trail for the enjoyment of everyone interested. You are urged to take part in the maintenance of this trail by removing newly fallen branches and other obstructions encountered during the course of your trip. PLEASE take every precaution to protect the beauty and conserve the wonders of nature by making careful and only necessary use of fire, axe and firearms. For additional information about the Dragon Canoe Cruising Trail, contact Explorer Post 111, Gloucester, Va."

There are three types of markers on the trail, all painted yellow so that they might readily be seen. A dragon's head marks the trail, while arrowheads point the way at forks in the stream. A number of campsites



Photos by Carter Harrison, Jr.

Dragon Run stretches from Miller's Tavern, near Tappahannock, for 50 miles into the Piankatank River. Explorer Post 111 of Gloucester has been working to clear obstructions from the upper portion of the run. Beaver cuttings (right) are very much in evidence along the run.

are marked with tent shapes similar to the Camping Merit Badge.

At the present time, the trail from New Dragon Bridge to the Piankatank is navigable and could be enjoyed by any group wishing to cruise it. Post 111 is planning more work in this area, including the preparation of legend boards to be erected at the bridges, and the further clearing of obstructions in the upper part. This scout unit has also offered to be of help with such problems as "dead heading" vehicles from starting point to finish point, providing directions for reaching the stream at starting, finish, and intermediate points, and perhaps supplying a guide if one should be requested.

If time is limited, trips can be made over either of the two portions of the stream which are navigable. The upper part, which is the more remote area of the two, is entirely on fresh water, stretching for nine miles on the map between New Dragon Bridge near Mascot to Route 17 Bridge near Saluda. It requires more effort than the lower portion since canoes must be evacuated and lifted over logs which cross the stream in a number of places. This is easily done by standing on the log, one person on either side of the canoe, and does not necessitate getting into the water. This stretch has been cruised in five hours by one canoe since the clearing operation, and this is less than half the time previously required.

The lower part, which begins at Route 17 Bridge and extends into the Piankatank, can be navigated with practically no effort since only several minor obstructions have to be contended with. This portion affords more variety since there is a gradual change of scenery as the stream widens and meanders through the marshes between the high banks of the Piankatank River. This trip can be terminated at Freeport, which is 9¾ miles on the map from the Route 17 Bridge, or it can be extended 5½ miles more down the Piankatank to the Twigg Bridge

where exit can be made at the old ferry landing near the bridge.

Either of the two portions would make an ideal trip for a group planning to start late in the day, spend one night, and be back home the next afternoon. Either portion would also make a good one-day trip for a group not expecting to camp out. For a group planning to make the whole trip, it would be advisable to leave early in the day, spend one night out, and finish the trip the next afternoon. A very late start would probably require two nights out if the trip is to be made in leisure.

Drinking water should be included with provisions since reliable drinking water is not easily available on the trail. One-gallon jugs make good water containers. Axes and crosscut saws should be included with equipment if plans are made to help improve the trail while enroute. Topographic maps, while not necessary, add much interest to the trip. They are invaluable in that they show adjacent secondary roads and farms and would prove to be very helpful in the event that an emergency exit had to be made. They are available at Everett-Waddey Company, 1105 East Main Street, Richmond, Virginia, or from the U. S. Department of Interior, Geological Survey, Washington 25, D. C. Ask for the following in scale 1:24,000:

UPPER PORTION—New Dragon Bridge to Rt. 17 Bridge (3 maps)

Samos Quadrangle, Virginia
Shackelfords Quadrangle, Virginia
Saluda Quadrangle, Virginia

LOWER PORTION—Rt. 17 Bridge to Freeport (1 map)

Saluda Quadrangle, Virginia

LOWER PORTION—Freeport to Twigg Bridge (1 map)

Wilton Quadrangle, Virginia

See "Dragon Swamp is Well Named" in the June 1954 number of *Virginia Wildlife*.