
**CRUISING GUIDE TO
FLORIDA'S BIG BEND**



Apalachicola River Beach

CRUISING GUIDE TO FLORIDA'S BIG BEND

By Captain Rick Rhodes



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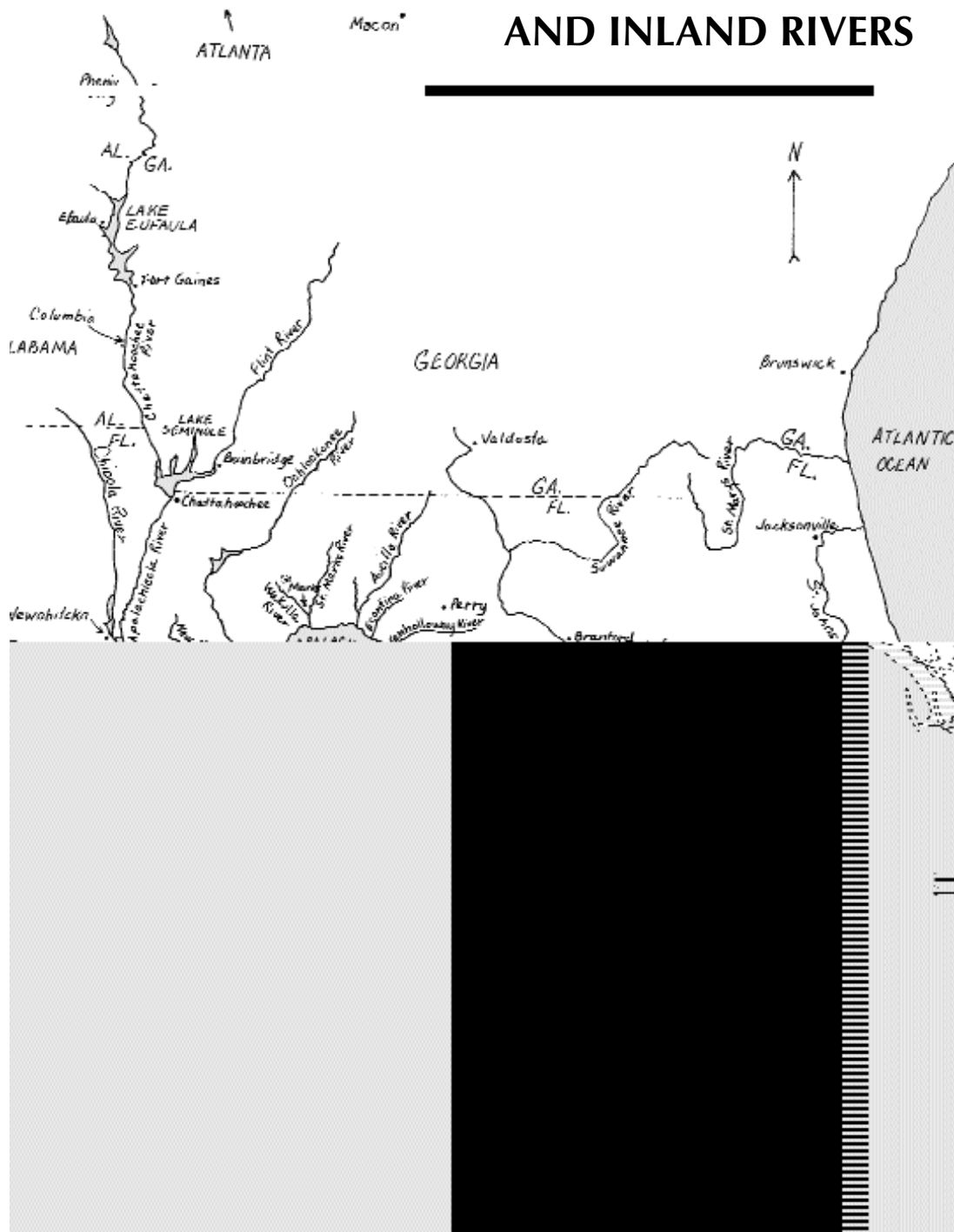
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This

FLORIDA'S BIG BEND AND INLAND RIVERS



Introduction

guide covers the west coast of Florida from Apalachicola to Anclote Key (i.e., near Port Richey) on the Gulf of Mexico. This coast, or parts of it, have been known or are known as the “Nature Coast” (from Wakulla to Pasco counties), the “Forgotten Coast” (centered around Apalachicola and Carrabelle), and the “Hidden Coast” (a section around the middle of the Big Bend) or the “Big Bend.” In this book, we’ll just call the coastal area—from Apalachicola to Port Richey—the “Big Bend of Florida,” even though we’ll be covering a slightly expanded area from what is traditionally thought of as the Big Bend. Florida’s Big Bend can also be viewed as that uncongested coastal link connecting the urban sprawl associated with the Tampa area to the strip of modern coastal developments stretching westward from Panama City, Florida. This swath of coastline is nearly 300 miles long and is a sizable chunk of Florida’s entire coastline. And this region consists of about forty percent of Florida’s entire Gulf Coast.

West of Apalachicola, the coast has a protected Intracoastal Waterway (ICW). This Gulf Coast intracoastal waterway extends westward through the panhandle of Florida, Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana, all the way to south Padre Island, Texas (or for more than 1,000 miles west and south of Apalachicola). At the other end of the Big Bend, the Florida coast south of Anclote Key also has an ICW extending about 150 miles south to Fort Myers, Florida. At Fort Myers, there is an adjoining waterway connecting the Gulf of Mexico to the Atlantic Ocean

through Lake Okeechobee. On Florida’s east coast, at Stuart, this “Okeechobee Waterway” connects to the Atlantic ICW. The Atlantic ICW provides protected waters for about 1,100 miles between Miami and Norfolk, Virginia. South of Miami and Fort Myers, and throughout much of the Florida Keys, there are many long stretches of ICW-like protected waters. But on this part of Florida’s coast—the Big Bend coast—there is NO protected waterway. For this section, cruisers will have to plunge into the moody Gulf of Mexico. This coastal section between Carrabelle and Anclote Key is the longest “unprotected” portion of “open water” between Newport, Rhode Island, and Port Isabel, Texas, in a coastal stretch of about 3,000 miles.

While on previous boating research, through the heartland of America (from Chicago, Illinois, to Mobile, Alabama), I heard much apprehension among fellow boaters about this forthcoming unprotected long jaunt into the looming Gulf of Mexico. Down on my luck—hurting after a fifth knee operation and recently unemployed—I aimed to turn things around with another “long, low-budget boat trip.” In early October 2001, I trailered my live-aboard 25-foot Nimble Nomad to Apalachicola, Florida. The plan was to explore along the Gulf Coast southward toward Anclote Key and to go into as many of the Gulf Coast channels and rivers that I possibly could. While researching along the Gulf, small-craft advisories (with winds forecasted over 18 knots or 20 miles per hour) were posted every single day that I was out in this big

fickle body of water. Nevertheless, no day was ever lost due to the adverse weather. (On a few of those days, the seas grew as big as five feet high on the Gulf.) It was sometimes uncomfortable, but along the way and upon learning more and more about this part of the Gulf of Mexico, my apprehension and fear ebbed. And there was another enchanting element to this research: the nearly two dozen calm and charming rivers on this part of Florida's coast.

Like the Mississippi, the Ohio, and other major inland rivers, the Apalachicola-Chattahoochee-Flint River System is maintained by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. Given overhead-clearance considerations, commercial barges and many sea-going vessels can travel over 250 miles from the Gulf of Mexico up the Apalachicola and Chattahoochee rivers to Columbus, Georgia—and within about 100 miles of Atlanta. From Lake Seminole, and near where the states of Florida, Alabama, and Georgia meet, the Flint River takes a navigable route about 30 miles to lovely Bainbridge, Georgia. The Suwannee River, like the Apalachicola-Chattahoochee-Flint River System, extends far inland, away from the Gulf. Less than a mere century ago, steamboats plied over 100 miles up the bucolic Suwannee River. Today, the river is no longer maintained as an official navigable waterway. Nevertheless, many sea-going vessels, given overhead-clearance constraints, can reach neighborly Branford, Florida, about 80 miles from the Gulf of Mexico. These four major Gulf-flowing rivers—the Suwannee, Apalachicola, Chattahoochee, and Flint—have their own devoted chapters in this guide.

Besides these four, there are another 17 rivers that were explored inland from the Gulf of Mexico to varying degrees—the Carrabelle, New, Crooked, Ochlockonee, Sopchoppy, St. Marks,

Wakulla, Aucilla, Econfinia, Fenholloway, Steinhatchee, Waccasassa, Withlacoochee, Crystal, Homosassa, Weeki Wachee, and Pithlachassee. We also explored and noted observations on Apalachicola Bay, St. George Sound, Dog Island, Alligator Harbor, Apalachee Bay, Ochlockonee Bay, Spring Creek, Shell Point, Kings Bay, and Gulf Harbors.

Along the Gulf of Mexico, we spent time in, and will present highlights of the towns of, Apalachicola, Carrabelle, Panacea, St. Marks, Keaton Beach, Steinhatchee, Horseshoe Beach, Cedar Key, Yankeetown, Crystal River, Homosassa, Hernando Beach, Hudson, Port Richey, and New Port Richey.

While on the haunting Apalachicola River, we visited Fort Gadsden, Blountstown, and Chattahoochee. We went as far as attractive Bainbridge, Georgia, on the Flint River. Upon circuiting the Chattahoochee River, we visited Eufaula, Alabama, and Florence and Columbus in Georgia. We spent time on Lake Seminole and Lake Eufaula. From our tour on the Suwannee River, we can tell you about Suwannee, Manatee Springs, Fanning Springs, Old Town, Branford, and the Santa Fe River. The map in the introduction depicts some of the important rivers and highlights in this region.

In the past, many cruising boats have looked at the Big Bend of Florida on their charts and then “waited for the weather” (and sometimes waited and waited) to make “that crossing in the Gulf of Mexico.” Instead of waiting, and then rushing across the Big Bend, why not slow down, “smell the tupelo blossoms” in this part of Florida, and poke your bow into some great Florida rivers? At the very worst, and depending on your timing, you may have to wait for a short time for that low tide to rise before entering a few of the more

shallow rivers. Here is just one of many possible southbound itineraries for requiring either five and a half or three and a half feet of draft at mean low water (MLW) beneath the keel. And generally, there are no overhead obstacles along this itinerary. Actually, in many of these channels, we discovered significantly more water depth, even factoring at lower water than what NOAA or the *U.S. Coast Pilot* has stated. We have noted some of these disparities. If you are heading north from Clearwater, reverse this table and read from the bottom up. And transient rates between Carrabelle and the Suwannee River are often most reasonable (usually anywhere between four dollars for the entire boat to 50 cents per foot, per night).

Book Organization

The first four chapters of this book are catch-the-flavor and how-to chapters designed to give you an appreciation of the area and offer you some helpful and region-specific boating suggestions. The next eight chapters cover the coast along the Gulf of Mexico and up the smaller Gulf Coastal rivers. These eight chapters are organized from points northwest to points southeast. If you are traveling in the reverse direction (from the Tampa Bay area to the northwest), these eight regional chapters are short and easy to follow. The last chapters (chapters 13-17) cover the four major boating rivers flowing into the Gulf of Mexico from the Big Bend area. The Apalachicola-Chattahoochee-Flint River System is covered in chapters 13-16. Lastly, but by far from the least, we end with a trip up the idyllic Suwannee River in chapter 17.

Mileage throughout this guide is stated two ways. Along the coast and in the Gulf of Mexico, we use nautical miles. Once inside the coastal

rivers, we switch to river or statute miles. Eight statute miles is equivalent to about seven nautical miles. Once in a river (and sometimes even in a channel), the location of a facility is described using the common river convention of LDB or RDB. The LDB is the LEFT descending bank and RDB is the RIGHT descending bank.

GPS way points are often used along the coast in the Gulf of Mexico. Often, but not always, if you plug in one of our GPS way points, you would have about a 180-degree “safe-semicircle of approach” from the seaward direction before arriving at that way point. Nonetheless, when approaching one of our GPS way points, do not neglect other common-sense cues (shoally areas, obstructions in the water, and other waterborne traffic).

Barbara Edler, one of our book reviewers, suggested highlighting or flagging the more dangerous navigational nuances. I thought this was a great idea, but I didn’t want to overdo it or make it too complicated. So, when warning readers of potential overhead-clearance obstacles, or cautioning them that they’ve arrived at the lowest obstacle in a series of overhead clearances, the word HAZARD was used; so take note. The same goes for instances where readers are being forewarned of potentially dangerous situations beneath or on the surface of the water. And just because we may note the hazard by use of small caps in a certain section does not mean that there couldn’t still be dangers lurking nearby. This notation is meant to be a supplement—a red flag—to better assist you in safe navigation.

Cautionary Note

In researching this guide, we expended great effort to ensure accuracy and provide you with

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Day	FROM (At Start of Day)	TO (At End of Day)	Naut. Miles (Along Coast)	Control Depth in Chn-Rvr (MLW)	Marina Facilities (At end of day)	Restaurants (At end of day)	Comments (At end of day)
—	Gulf ICW	Apalachicola	—	12 feet	four	eight	Soon leaving the ICW
1	Apalachicola	Carrabelle	28	12 feet	five	four	A real boater's town
2	Carrabelle	St. Marks	36 ^a	6 feet	three	four	Loaded with Florida history and local color
3	St. Marks	Steinhatchee	46	5½ feet	three	three	Great fishing, scalloping
4	Steinhatchee	Cedar Key	46 ^b	6+ feet	none ^c	dozen+	The night at anchor
5	Cedar Key	Withlacoochee River	28	5½ feet ^d	three	one	A unique mix of Old and New Florida
6a	Withlacoochee	Crystal River ^e	30	5½ feet ^{fs}	two	three	The clearest spring-fed water around
OR							
6b	Withlacoochee River	Homosassa ^e River	46	3½ feet ^{gh}	five	six	The last bastion of Old Florida before Tampa
7	Crystal or	Port Richey	39 or 23	5½ + feet ⁱ	two	four	Try to visit New Port Richey—upriver
8	Port Richey	Clearwater	22	9 feet	many	many	Back on the ICW

Note: On day six, there are overhead powerlines over the Homosassa River and over a possible spur route on the Crystal River.

^aThis does not include about seven to eight miles from Carrabelle to the Gulf of Mexico and another estimated eight miles up the St. Marks River channel and the St. Marks River before reaching the town of St. Marks.

^b**McGriff Pass Channel**, leading to the town of Suwannee and the Suwannee River, starts about 20 nautical miles north of the Cedar Key Channel. In 2001, the McGriff Pass Channel was only three to four feet deep, MLW. However, by the fall of 2002, work should have begun on dredging this channel to six feet deep, MLW, making Suwannee another enticing stopover for deeper-draft vessels.

^cThere are no real marinas for transients in Cedar Key. There is a nice semiprotected anchorage off Atsena Otie Key and a protected dinghy dock close to dozens of restaurants, all of Cedar Key. Willis Marina (inaccessible to traveling boats) can run fuel out to the city docks for transient boats.

^d Despite only a five-and-a-half-foot stated depth, we encountered much deeper controlling depths at about ten to thirteen feet, MLW.

^e We think there are two quite different, and equally good, options at the end of day six. Crystal River is a shorter run from the north (by about 16 miles) and has a slightly deeper channel. Crystal River is New Florida—with all its conveniences and trappings—and a good “auto destination.”

On the other hand, the Homosassa River is quite different. More varied and economical haunts can be found along the Homosassa. We got the impression that the Homosassa River was a bit more boater friendly and more accommodating than the “car touristy” Crystal River area. There may also be more bargains for boaters on the Homosassa. Both rivers are well known for manatees. Maybe the best thing to do is visit both rivers.

^f The NOAA controlling depth is stated at five and a half feet, MLW. We thought there was more water, but the *U.S. Coast Pilot* indicated that there was even less water.

^g One branch of the Crystal River (leading to one of the marinas) has an overhead power line. The Homosassa River also has an overhead power line. There are anomalies with both of these power lines. The 47-foot line over the Crystal River spur was knocked down and replaced with a “temporarily lower” line in early 2002. The *U.S. Coast Pilot* and NOAA can’t agree on the height clearance of that Homosassa River power line—55 feet versus 45 feet. Before negotiating beneath either of these lines, if you’re not comfortable, use your VHF radio and ask for some local knowledge.

^h As it is on the Crystal River, you must navigate a long channel on the Homosassa River—more than 10 miles long—before reaching an area of a half-dozen marinas and a few restaurants. Although reasonably deep through most of its length, there is a shallow spot in the Homosassa Channel, near the entrance to the river, that is about four feet deep, MLW, and about a foot shallower than the Crystal River Channel at MLW.

ⁱ The controlling depth is stated at five and a half feet. We found it deeper, at six to ten feet, MLW.

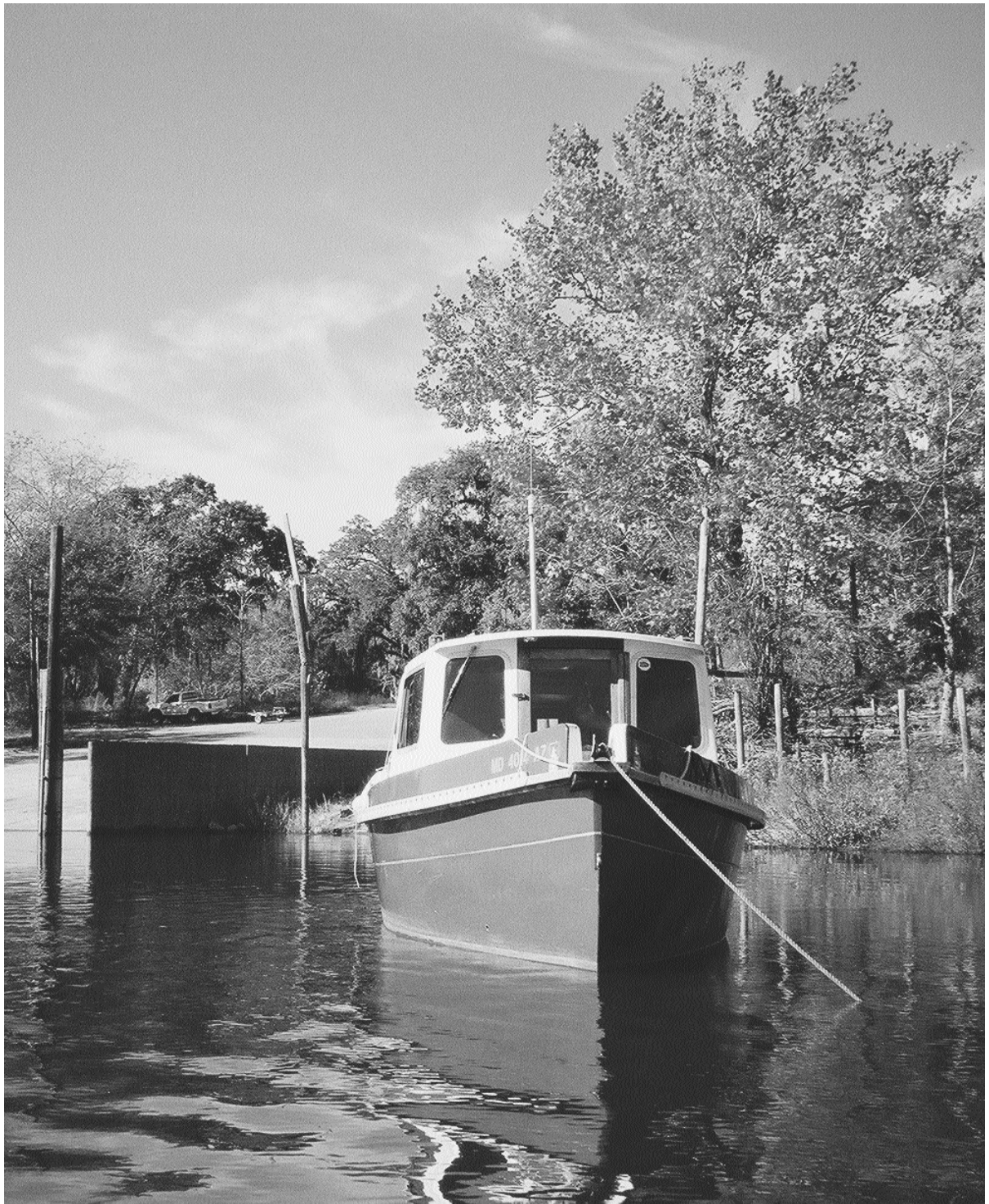
the most up-to-date information. However, it is not possible to guarantee total accuracy. Nothing ever remains the same. Marinas, restaurants, other shoreside facilities, and the level of accommodation at marinas and restaurants change. On-the-water navigational information—such as shoals, the location of a river channel, aids to navigation, and water depths—is also subject to change.

For navigating in the Gulf of Mexico, NOAA charts are the present standard. For navigating on the Apalachicola-Chattahoochee-Flint River System, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers’ aerial photograph book is the best resource. The Mobile, Alabama, Corps of Engineers District

publishes this aerial photograph book. There is no official public information for navigating on the Suwannee River.

This guidebook is intended to be a supplement to official U.S. government publications. Failure to follow the current navigation realities, even when it differs from the situation presented in this guide, could result in an accident. We have worked hard to help minimize your risks and offer you options, but there are many potential hazards in any boating situation. Safe boating is ultimately in the hands of the captain and crew. The author disclaims liability for loss or damage to persons or property that may occur as a result of interpreting information in this guidebook.

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Our boat at anchor on the Apalachicola River