
BLACKWATER

RIVER BASIN

The Blackwater River is formed as water passes from the Blackwater Bay in the Conecuh National Forest into Blackwater Creek, which is the headwaters for the river. The Blackwater River watershed is in Covington and Escambia counties in Alabama (Figure 1). The watershed continues south into Florida (Figure 2), where it drains into the Gulf of Mexico. A watershed is an area of land through which rainwater drains by flowing across, through, or under the soil surface to a common low point, typically a stream, river, lake, or ocean (Brantley, Bell, & Dictson, 2019).



Figure 1. Blackwater River and watershed in Alabama.

The river was originally named “Rio Del Almirante” (Admiral River) by the Spanish in the late 17th century. The river was also given the name “Middle River” between 1763 and 1781, due to it being between the Yellow River, to the east, and the Escambia River, to the west. However, in the 1830s the river was given its current name of the “Blackwater River.” The name Blackwater comes from the Choctaw Nation’s word “oka-lusa” which means “water black.” When seen against the white sandbars of the Florida Panhandle, the river appears golden-brown. The color derives from the tannins in the leaves and roots of shoreline vegetation as the river flows through the numerous forests in the watershed. The Blackwater River, which is considered a small river, contains approximately 184 square miles and is 56.6 miles long. It is also considered one of the cleanest rivers in the nation, and the Blackwater River is unmodified by dams and reservoirs (Florida Department of Environmental Protection, 2023).



Figure 2. Blackwater River Watershed.

The Blackwater River watershed is home to the largest contiguous longleaf pine and wiregrass ecosystem remaining in the world (Florida Department of Environmental Protection, 2023). As seen in Figure 3, the watershed is comprised mostly of forest land and pastureland. The watershed is home to 21 different species. Wildlife found here include: the gopher tortoise, great blue heron, wild turkey, white-tailed deer, opossum, bobcat, river otter, alligator, hawk, crow, and woodpecker. Plants include: the water fern, bladderwort, mountain laurel, water lily, azalea, and pitcher plant; while the forests contain tupelo, sweetgum, dogwood, wax myrtle, and Atlantic white cedar.

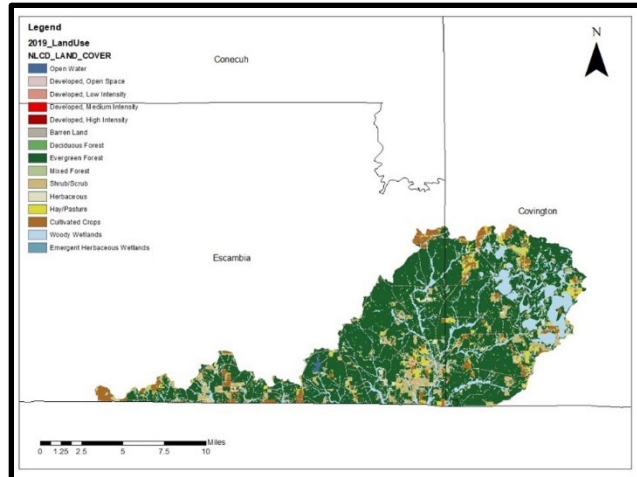


Figure 3. 2019 Land use for the Alabama portion of the Blackwater watershed.

The Blackwater River's flow heavily depends on the rainfall within the watershed for that year. Seasonal rains can cause the river to break its banks and overflow into the floodplain. This results in vital nutrients being deposited into those areas. These nutrients have supported the large and diverse ecosystems within the watershed for centuries. Early colonizers relied on these areas to provide for their communities through agricultural practices. Early colonizers also heavily depended on the river as a drinking water source and form of transportation. The river was popularly used to move felled, cut down, logs downriver into Florida to be processed and exported nationally. The same method was used for manufactured goods, textiles, and agricultural produce.



Figure 4. Open Pond Recreational Area, Conecuh National Forest.
Photo Credit: Jennifer Barker

The watershed is known for its preserved areas in the form of the [Conecuh National Forest](#) (Figure 4) in Alabama, the [Blackwater River State Park](#) and the Blackwater River Wildlife Management Area in Florida. The Conecuh National Forest provides camping, bicycling, fishing, hiking, hunting, and swimming. The forest was created in 1936 by presidential proclamation, and originally encompassed 54,117 acres. Timber operations made the area barren by cutovers and burnings. From 1939 to 1942, the Civilian Conservation Corps planted thousands of acres of tree seedlings. Currently, the Conecuh National Forest consists of over 84,000 acres and primarily focuses on the restoration of the Long Leaf Pine ecosystem, enhancement of habitat for the Red-Cockaded woodpecker, and the restoration of recreational areas.

The Blackwater River State Park is part of a Florida statewide system of greenways and trails and provides opportunities for canoeing and kayaking along the designated Florida Paddling Trail. The park also contains the fourth largest Red-cockaded woodpecker population in the world (a federally-designated endangered species). There is also a greenway system, Blackwater River State Park, and the Brewton, Alabama Gravel Ride that connects over 70 miles of trails. The pathway starts in Blackwater River State Park, north of Pensacola, Florida, and follows various gravel and dirt roads along the Blackwater River (Figure 5), ending in Brewton, Alabama (Gravel Cyclist, 2019).

Florida's Blackwater Wildlife Management Area allows visitors to experience over 200,000 acres of the Blackwater River basin. The management area provides areas for visitors to hunt, fish, view wildlife, hike, cycle, camp, horseback ride, and swim. The park allows a certain number of hunters to enter the special opportunity areas every year, to properly manage the wildlife populations and provide opportunities to visitors that would not typically have access. Visitors can experience longleaf pine ecosystems, hardwood swamps, mixed loblolly pine and hardwoods, pitcher plant bogs, and Atlantic white cedar plots. These types of habitats are known to be critical habitat for the red-cockaded woodpecker, pine barrens treefrog, and gopher tortoise (FWC, 2023).



Figure 5. Blackwater River. Photo Credit: Jennifer Barker