

AquaBlaze the Shenandoah

Instead of hiking the SNP section on foot, paddle the South Fork of the Shenandoah River — an officially recognized AT alternate.

Route at a Glance

Put-in	Bixler Bridge Boat Landing, Luray, VA (Mile 1)
Take-out	Eastham Park Boat Landing, Front Royal, VA (Mile 44)
Total distance	44 river miles
Recommended pace	3–4 days (10–15 miles/day)

Daily Breakdown

Day	Miles	Key Stops
1	Mile 1 → ~13	National forest camps at Mile 8, 13, 15, 18 & 24
2	Mile 13 → ~24	Golden Rock Campground (Mile 17); Brenda's (Mile 24)
3	Mile 24 → ~37	Low Water Bridge (Mile 28); State Park (Mile 31); Gooney Creek (Mile 37). River Islands (Mile 38 & 39)
4	Mile 37 → 44	Short final paddle to Front Royal take-out

Camping

- Miles 8, 13, 15, 18 & 24** — Free national forest dispersed camping (left bank)
- Mile 17** — Golden Rock Campground — **included with rental**
- Mile 24** — Brenda's Campground (fee)
- Mile 28** — Low Water Bridge Campground (fee)
- Mile 31** — Shenandoah River State Park (fee)
- Mile 37** — Gooney Creek Campground (fee)
- Mile 38 & 39** — River islands (free)

Pricing

Boat	Base Price	Includes
Canoe	\$400	Up to 4 days, paddles, PFDs
Kayak	\$300	Up to 4 days, paddles, PFDs

Book Your Trip

Downriver Canoe Company | Bentonville, VA | Season: April – October

downriver.com | 540-635-5526 | somebody@downriver.com

When you reach out, include: put-in date, group size, canoe or kayak preference, and whether you're bringing a dog. We'll confirm availability and take a deposit to hold your spot.

FAQ

Can you meet us at the trail? - In Luray, we'll meet you at the Bixler Bridge put-in or at the Mechanic Street Parking Lot (corner of Mechanic St. and N Broad St.). We cannot pick up at Thornton Gap. At the Front Royal end, we meet you at Eastham Park. It's a short walk into town — catch the Front Royal Trolley back to the Rt 522 trailhead.

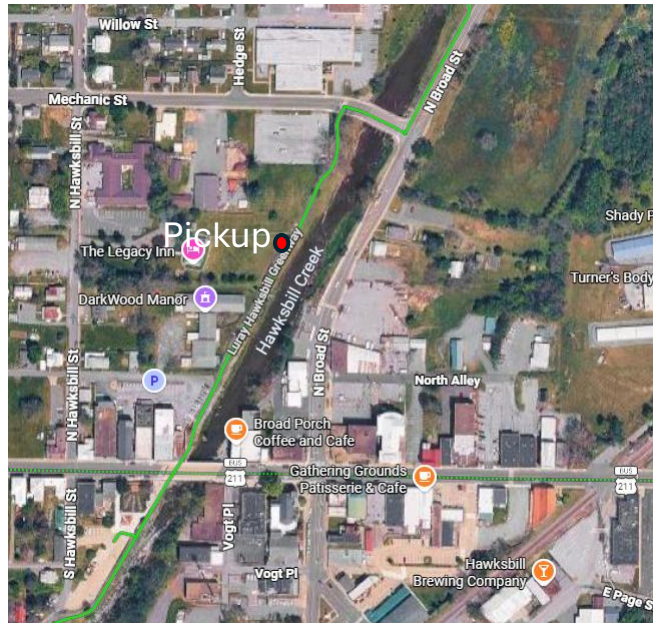
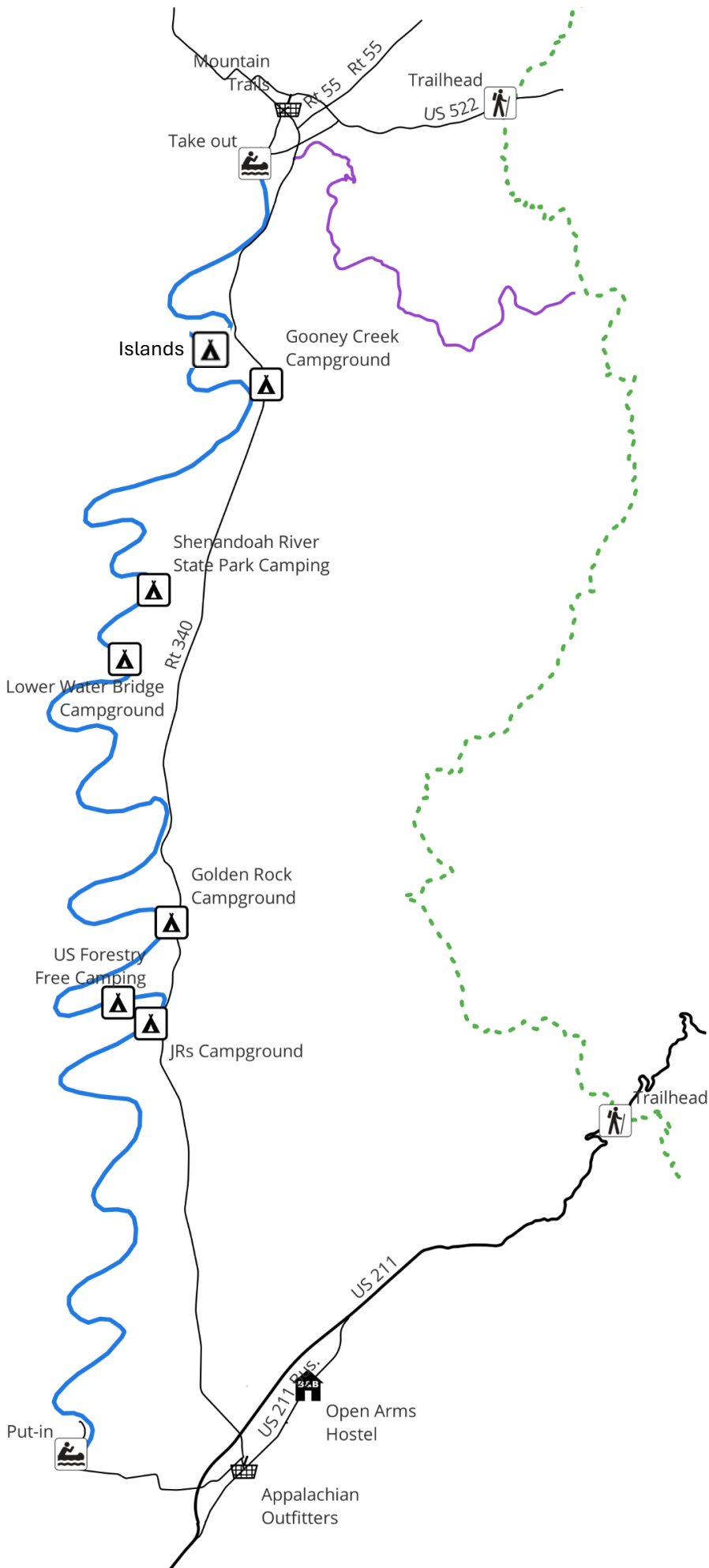
Do I need paddling experience? - Not much. The South Fork is mostly flatwater with Class I-II sections. If you've made it this far on the AT, you can handle it. We'll give you a quick orientation at drop-off.

What should I bring / waterproof?

- Dry bags for your sleeping bag, electronics, and anything that can't get wet
- Keep heavy items low and centered in the boat
- Wear your PFD — always
- Sandals or water shoes are better than trail runners on the water

What about cell service and water quality? - Cell service is spotty — download an offline map before you launch (Gaia GPS or CalTopo). The river runs through agricultural land; treat all water before drinking.





Pick up in Luray at Mechanics Street Parking lot
38.66799, -78.46061

AquaBlaze the Shenandoah – Lite version

A Paddler’s Guide for Appalachian Trail Thru-Hikers

Brought to you by Downriver Canoe Compan

What Is an AquaBlaze?

The AquaBlaze is one of the AT’s best-kept secrets. Instead of following the white blazes through the Shenandoah National Park section on foot, you swap boots for a paddle and float the South Fork of the Shenandoah River instead. It’s an officially recognized alternate route — the “blue blaze” of the water world — and thru-hikers have been doing it for decades.

It’s not a shortcut in spirit. The river will work you, reward you, and give you a completely different perspective on this stretch of Virginia. You’ll wake up on sandbars, watch osprey dive for breakfast, and drift past farmland and forest with the Blue Ridge on the horizon. For many hikers, it becomes one of the most memorable stretches of the entire trail.

Downriver Canoe Company has been outfitting paddlers on this river for over 50 years. We know this stretch of water intimately — the good camps, the tricky spots, the best swimming holes. This guide will tell you everything you need to know to make your AquaBlaze a great one.

Route Overview

Put-in: Bixler Bridge Boat Landing, Luray, VA (Mile 1) **Take-out:** Eastham Park Boat Landing, Front Royal, VA (Mile 44) **Total distance:** 44 river miles **Typical pace:** 10–15 miles per day (relaxed paddling, with time to swim and explore) **Recommended days:** 3–4 days

Estimated Daily Breakdown

Day	Miles	Notes
Day 1	Luray (Mile 1) to ~Mile 13	Settle into paddling rhythm; good national forest camps at Mile 8 and Mile 13
Day 2	Mile 13 to ~Mile 24	Downriver’s private campground at Mile 17; Brenda’s at Mile 24, National forest at 15, 18 & 24
Day 3	Mile 24 to ~Mile 37	Low Water Bridge Campground (Mile 28), Shenandoah River State Park (Mile 31), Gooney Creek (Mile 37), river islands (Mile 38 & 39)

Day	Miles	Notes
Day 4	Mile 37 to Front Royal (Mile 44)	Short final paddle; take-out at Eastham Park

Key Landmarks Along the Way

- **Mile 8, 13, 15, 17,18 & 24** — Established national forest campsites along the left bank
- **Mile 17** — Downriver’s private Goldenrock campground (your rental includes camping here)
- **Mile 24** — Brenda’s Campground (private, fee-based)
- **Mile 28** — Low Water Bridge Campground (private, fee-based)
- **Mile 31** — Shenandoah River State Park (fee-based, facilities available)
- **Mile 37** — Gooney Creek Campground (private, fee-based)
- **Mile 38 & 39** – River islands
- **Mile 44** — Eastham Park Boat Landing, Front Royal — end of the line

The Appalachian Trail passes near both the Luray and Front Royal ends of this route, making the connection straightforward.

Frequently Asked Questions

Q: What’s the furthest put-in upstream that we could get a boat brought to?

A: We operate from Luray, at Bixler Bridge Boat Landing, to the Eastham Park Boat Landing, in Front Royal. That is mile 1 at Luray down to mile 44 in Front Royal.

Q: How much does it cost?

A: For a canoe rental it is \$400 and for a kayak rental is \$300. This rental covers you for up to 4 days of paddling. If you take longer than 4 days, it will be an additional \$50 per day. All boat rentals come with appropriate paddles and PFDs.

Q: Where can I camp?

A: If you’re looking for free camping in the national forest, the first 24 miles have national forest stretching along the left side of the river. There are some good, more established, national forest sites at mile 8, 13, 15, 17, and 24. We have a private campground at mile 17 that you are more than welcome to stay at. Your boat rental includes camping so feel free to camp there, or just stop by on your way down to use the bathroom or hang out for a bit.

Other private campgrounds we recommend are Brenda's at mile 24, Low Water Bridge campground at mile 28, Shenandoah River State Park at mile 31, and Gooney Creek Campground at mile 37. There is free island camping at mile 38 & 39.

Q: Can we get picked up or dropped off at the trail?

A: We will meet you in Luray at either the put in at Bixler Bridge with the boat(s) or we can pick up at Mechanic Street Parking lot at the corner of Mechanic Street and N Broad Street. We cannot pick you up at the Thornton Gap trailhead. Once you finish your paddle, we will meet you again at Eastham Park to pick the boat(s). It is a short walk into town and then you can catch the Front Royal Trolley back to the route 522 trail head.

Q: Do I need paddling experience?

A: Not much. The South Fork is a gentle, wide river — it's not Class V whitewater. Most of it is flatwater or very mild riffles and Class I-II ledges. If you've made it this far on the AT, you've got the fitness and outdoor sense to handle it. We'll give you a quick orientation when we drop off the boat, and the river will teach you the rest within the first mile. Canoes are a bit more technical to steer than kayaks, especially loaded with a pack, so first-timers often find a kayak easier to manage solo. See the "What to Expect on the Water" section below for more detail.

Q: How do I book, and how much notice do you need?

A: Give us a call at 540-635-5526 or shoot us an email at somebody@downriver.com and we'll get you set up. We recommend booking at least a week in advance during peak season (May through September), though we'll always try to accommodate last-minute requests when we can. We'll confirm your put-in date and time, go over the logistics, and make sure everything is ready for you when you arrive. See the Booking section at the end of this document for contact information.

Q: What about resupply? Is there anywhere to get food along the route?

A: The river itself passes through rural farmland — there are no trailside stores or convenience shops on the water. Your best options are to carry enough food for the full trip from the start, or to plan a short detour. Front Royal (at the take-out) has full resupply options. Along the route, Luray at the put-in is your last chance to top off before launching. Some hikers cache a resupply box at our campground at Mile 17 — contact us in advance if you want to arrange that. A few of the private campgrounds along the way occasionally sell snacks or basic supplies, but don't count on it.

Q: What is the water quality like — is it safe to drink?

A: The Shenandoah is a beautiful river, but it does run through agricultural land and has elevated bacteria levels at times, particularly after rainfall. We do not recommend drinking the river water untreated. Bring a reliable water filter or purification tablets (which you likely already have from the trail), and treat all water before drinking. Conditions vary by season and rainfall, so it's worth checking current water quality advisories from the Virginia Department of Health or the Shenandoah Riverkeeper before your trip.

Q: What's cell service like on the river?

A: Spotty. Some stretches have decent coverage and others have none at all. Don't count on reliable service for navigation or emergencies. Download an offline map of the river before you launch (apps like Gaia GPS or CalTopo work well with the river marked). Our put-in and take-out locations, campgrounds, and key landmarks are easy to identify once you're on the water — the river is straightforward to follow and you can't really get lost — but having a downloaded map is good practice. Let someone reliable know your float plan before you go.

Q: Can I bring my dog?

A: Yes — we're a dog-friendly operation and dogs have been paddling with us for decades. Most dogs take to the river immediately and love it. A few practical notes: your dog should be comfortable around water and ideally a decent swimmer. We recommend a canine PFD (life jacket) for your pup, especially on river sections with stronger current. Dogs add some extra weight and movement to the boat, so bear that in mind when loading up. Let us know when you book so we can talk through any specifics.

What to Expect on the Water

River Character

The South Fork of the Shenandoah is a classic Appalachian paddling river — wide, relatively shallow, and clear. The current does most of the work for you. You'll encounter long, flat pools perfect for drifting and enjoying the scenery, broken up by gravel bars, riffles, and a handful of small ledge drops.

The river gradient is gentle. Most of the 44 miles is flatwater or Class I (easy, moving water with small ripples). There are a few Class II ledge drops — short drops of 1–3 feet — where

the water picks up speed and runs through a defined channel. These are entirely manageable, but you'll want to stay alert when you hear the sound of faster water ahead.

What to Watch For

- **Strainers** — downed trees or debris in the water that current can push you into. Always paddle away from them early; they don't give you much warning.
- **Ledges** — paddle toward the center of ledge drops where the water is deepest. Scout from shore if you're uncertain about any drop.
- **River levels** — water level affects the character of the river significantly. Higher water means faster current, fewer exposed rocks, and stronger hydraulics at ledges. Lower water means slower paddling and occasional dragging over shallow gravel bars. We can tell you current conditions when you book.
- **Wind** — headwinds on long flat stretches can slow you down considerably. Mornings are typically calmer.

Paddling Tips for First-Timers

- **Canoes:** Kneel or sit low. Keep your weight centered. The boat is most stable when you stop wiggling. To turn, use a forward sweep on one side (paddle arcing away from the boat) or a reverse sweep on the other. In current, point the bow toward where you want to go and let the river assist.
- **Kayaks:** Your knees brace against the inside of the hull — use that contact to lean and stabilize. For solo paddlers, a kayak is generally easier to control than a loaded canoe.
- **General rule:** Look where you want to go. The boat follows your eyes more than you'd think.
- **With a pack:** Keep heavy weight low and centered in the boat. Waterproof or dry-bag everything that matters. See the gear section below.
- **Portaging:** If you ever feel uncomfortable at a drop, get out and walk around it. It takes five minutes and there's no shame in it — we'd rather you do that than swim.

Weather and Timing

Afternoon thunderstorms are common in Virginia from June through August. If you see lightning approaching, get off the water and wait it out under tree cover away from the tallest trees. Morning paddling is typically the best — calmer conditions, cooler temperatures, and the river almost entirely to yourself.

Gear and Packing Tips for AT Hikers

The Core Challenge

Your pack was designed for walking, not paddling. The challenge is keeping your gear dry while making the load manageable in a boat. The good news: you've already got most of what you need.

Waterproofing Your Gear

- **Dry bags** are your best friend. If you don't have them, pick some up before your AquaBlaze. Pack your sleeping bag, down layers, electronics, and anything else that can't get wet into a dry bag first, then into your pack.
- **Pack liners** — a heavy-duty garbage bag or dedicated pack liner inside your pack provides a solid second layer of protection.
- **Your food bag** — use a dry bag or a heavy zip-lock system. Wet food is miserable.
- **Assume you'll get wet.** The river is generally calm, but rain happens and boats do swamp. Anything that isn't in a dry bag or waterproof container should be something you can afford to lose.

Loading the Boat

- Place your heaviest items (bear canister, food, water) low and centered in the boat, as close to the middle as possible.
- Keep your rain gear and a snack accessible — not buried at the bottom of the pack.
- Do not tie your pack to the boat with a knot you can't release quickly. If the boat flips, you want to be able to separate from your gear. Use a quick-release clip or just wedge the pack in firmly.
- Avoid loading the bow or stern heavily — a boat that's bow-heavy or stern-heavy is harder to steer.

What to Wear

- **Footwear:** Sandals or water shoes beat trail runners in the boat. Your feet will get wet. If you want to keep your trail shoes dry for when you get back on the AT, put them in a dry bag.
- **Layers:** Mornings on the river can be cool and evenings can get chilly, especially if you got wet during the day. Pack a warm base layer accessible in the boat.
- **Sun protection:** The river reflects sun aggressively. Sunscreen, a hat, and sun sleeves make a real difference over four days. You're exposed in a way that the trail rarely demands.
- **PFD:** Wear it. Every time you're in the boat. We provide appropriate PFDs with your rental, and they're not optional — this isn't a rule we enforce for liability reasons, it's just common sense on a river.

Leave the Heavy Stuff

This is a great opportunity to send your pack ahead to your next mail drop if you're carrying anything particularly bulky. Four days on a river with a lighter load makes the whole thing more enjoyable. The canoe handles the weight, but your back doesn't have to.

Booking and Contact

Getting started is easy. Give us a call or drop us a line and we'll take care of the rest.

Downriver Canoe Company Bentonville, VA — on the South Fork of the Shenandoah River
downriver.com

To book your AquaBlaze, contact us at: somebody@downriver.com

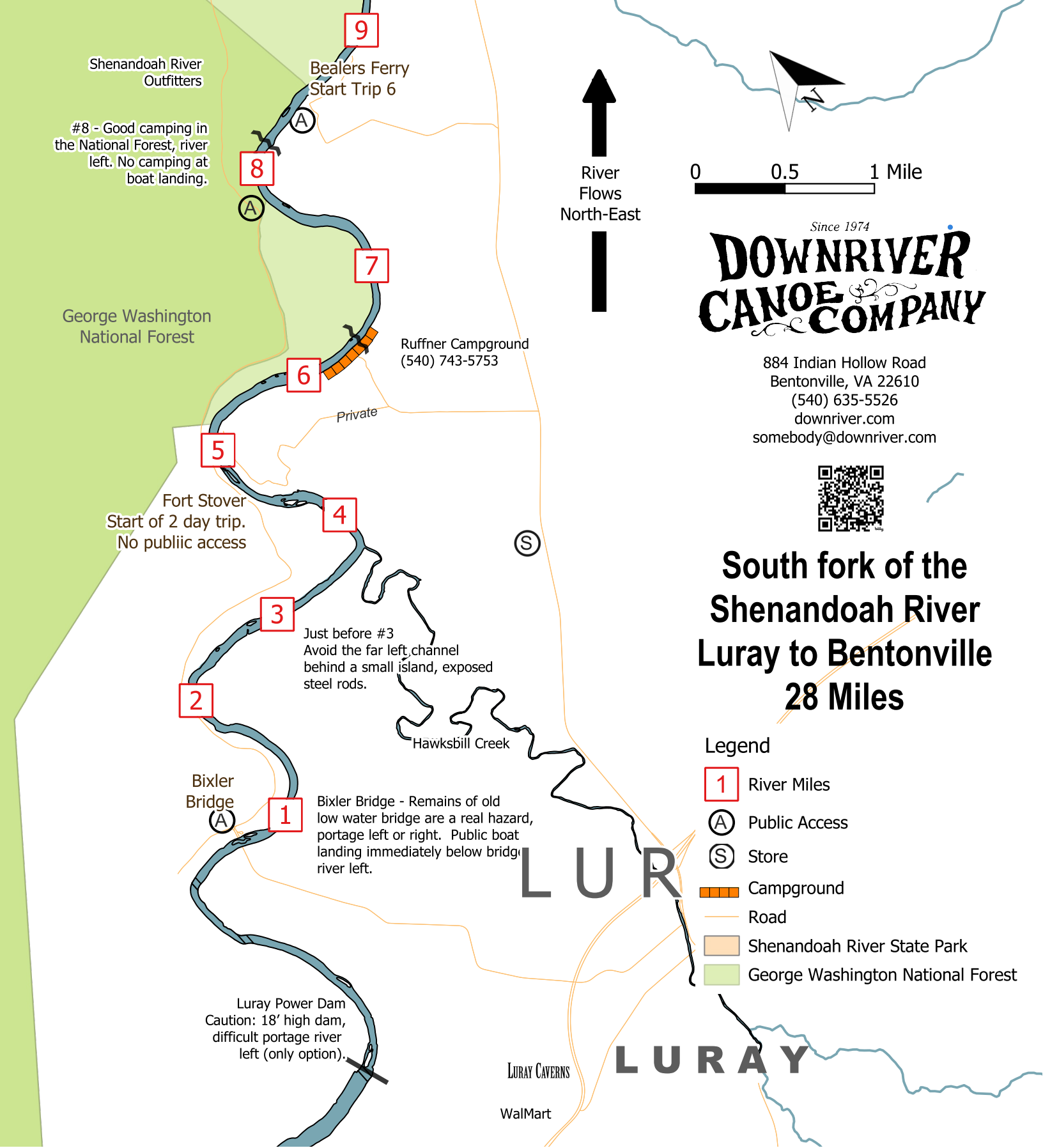
When you reach out, let us know:

- Your planned put-in date and how many in your group
- Whether you want a canoe or kayak (or both)
- If you're bringing a dog
- Any questions about current river conditions or logistics

We'll confirm availability, take a deposit to hold your reservation, and make sure you have everything you need before you hit the water. We've been doing this for a long time, and we love helping hikers make the most of this stretch of the river. Don't hesitate to ask questions — no question is too basic.

Season: April through October

Downriver Canoe Company has been outfitting paddlers on the South Fork of the Shenandoah River since 1974. Family-owned and operated, we're here to make sure your time on the water is safe, memorable, and worth every stroke.



Shenandoah River Outfitters

#8 - Good camping in the National Forest, river left. No camping at boat landing.

George Washington National Forest

Bealers Ferry Start Trip 6

Ruffner Campground (540) 743-5753

Private

Fort Stover Start of 2 day trip. No public access

Just before #3 Avoid the far left channel behind a small island, exposed steel rods.

Hawksbill Creek

Bixler Bridge (A)

Bixler Bridge - Remains of old low water bridge are a real hazard, portage left or right. Public boat landing immediately below bridge, river left.

Luray Power Dam Caution: 18' high dam, difficult portage river left (only option).

LURAY CAVERNS

WalMart



0 0.5 1 Mile

Since 1974
DOWNRIVER CANOE COMPANY

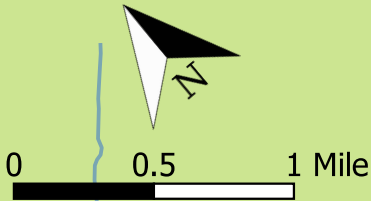
884 Indian Hollow Road
Bentonville, VA 22610
(540) 635-5526
downriver.com
somebody@downriver.com



South fork of the Shenandoah River Luray to Bentonville 28 Miles

Legend

- 1 River Miles
- (A) Public Access
- (S) Store
- Campground
- Road
- Shenandoah River State Park
- George Washington National Forest



Map drawn to scale. Numbers represent mile markers physically present along the river. Green, shaded areas represent National Forest, everything else is private property (please stay off). Canoes and kayaks usually make about 3 miles per hour with steady paddling, rafts about half that, and tubes less than 1 mile per hour. Be considerate. Be safe. Have fun.

Map created by Adventure Enablers. Copyright Adventure Enablers and Downriver Canoe Company 2025.

HEALTH ADVISORY ON EATING FISH - Fish caught in these waters may contain Mercury. Mercury may be hazardous to your health. No more than two meals (1/2 pound each) of fish per month should be eaten from these waters. Women who are pregnant or may become pregnant, nursing mothers, and young children should not eat any fish from these waters.

#27 - Shallow water, best route left of center. Great fishing.

#25 - Lower Mill Race - Entrance river left. A fun, twisty half mile side channel. Caution: occasional blockages, cannot be run in low water below 2.8'.

Between #24 & #25 Private Property

#23 to #24 river right. Massanutten Canoe Campground. By reservation, call Brenda (540) 636-4724.

#22 - Overall Pool - Slow and deep here, a good spot to tie together, share lunch, and drown some worms.

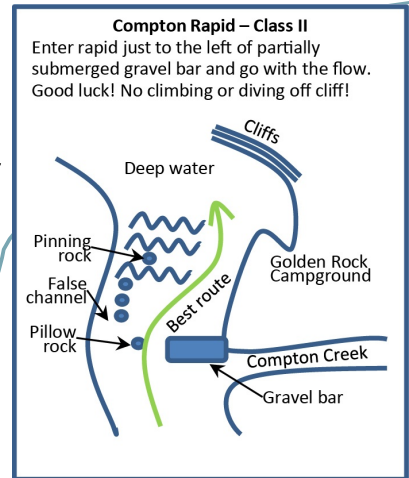
Just past #23 - The Sudden Ledge - natural, river wide 2' ledge that will sneak up on you. Best route in low water, far left.

Just Before #21 - Rock Garden maneuvering required. Easiest way through, hang right (but more interesting on left).

George Washington National Forest
#19 to #20 - Shallow section with numerous ledges. Hug the right bank in low water.

#16 to #19 - river left, National Forest land open to the public. Toilets at #19.

Compton Rapid - Caution: WEAR YOUR PFD. This is a strong class II rapid with 3' standing waves and terminating in very deep water next to the cliff. See diagram.



#15 - Interesting islands with several routes. Avoid the channel on the right which is often blocked with trees & debris.

#14 - Good camp spot in the National Forest, river left.

#13 - Public boat landing, river left, toilets, but no camping at landing.

Start Trip 5
JR's Campground, river right (540) 743-3298 Start trip #5, no public river access.

Rt. 684 no public river access

#11 - Foster's public boat landing, river left, but no camping.

Between #10 & #12 - river is wide and shallow, hang in the center and then hang left at #12. In low water step in and out of your canoe.



Shenandoah River Outfitters

Bealers Ferry

