



# Making Alabama the Ultimate Destination for a River Journey

## *Alabama Scenic River Trail*

Canoists and kayakers are paddling the state's waterways and do not wish to trespass, but they must stop somewhere for the night. As you, your friend, or your child embark on a waterway trip in Alabama, the Alabama Scenic River Trail (ASRT) sign provides a welcoming beacon for you. It has been placed at over 150 campsites across the state – mostly free locations where gracious landowners allow camping on their land. Some are fee-based campgrounds, some are 'bed and breakfasts,' although all are legitimate, legal camping sites for the weary paddler to spend a restful evening.

*“The Alabama Scenic River Trail is the longest river trail in a single state. It passes through the heart of Alabama from northeast to southwest and in doing so, takes boaters through a wide variety of terrain, flora, and fauna.”*

*— National Water Trails System  
of the National Park Service*

A non-profit association, the Alabama Scenic River Trail was established to maintain Alabama's trail and coordinate community, private, and public partnerships and riverside events for outdoor enthusiasts. The original 'core' trail of the ASRT is a 631-mile scenic route that begins in the mountainous terrain of the northeast corner of the state, stretching all the way to Fort Morgan on Mobile Bay in the Gulf of Mexico. Since its inception in 2008, ASRT officials have broadened the overall trail to include 3,000 miles of creeks and other water sources in Alabama, flowing through some of the state's most beautiful forests, interesting wildlife, and places of historical significance.



## How do you find these camping locations?

The Alabama Scenic River Trail website ([www.ASRT.me](http://www.ASRT.me)) lists all the sites under the Campsite icon, with latitude and longitude for each, and mileage location for many. Choose a waterway, check the list – clicking on each to see its amenities – plan your trip, and away you go!

ASRT also provides emergency personnel lists for safe travel checkups as needed. Having such information prior to a river trip not only creates happiness at home, but also good distance planning for the traveler. In many locales, ‘Trail Angels’ come in handy as well (scroll down under the Contact tab). They are volunteers who can help with arrangements, saving the novice from miserable experiences.

## How does a campsite come about?

“Alabamians have been wonderful in providing so many nice places,” says ASRT Executive Director Jim Felder. For the past several years, he – along with Trail Founder and President Fred

Couch and others – have visited county commissions and a variety of other organizations across the state, outlining the required steps to become a campsite and reasons why someone would want to do so.

The process is simple, reflecting the welcoming hospitality offered by Alabama Scenic River Trail members. According to Felder, “Alabama has the best indemnity laws protecting landowners that allow free use of their land for camping, such that 100 percent of those that have checked with their lawyers have agreed to participate.”

For waterway property to be listed as a campsite, only a few things are required. The site must have limited access by land – only the landowner can drive to it. The campsite needs only be big enough for two tents for no more than six people, with a two-night stay limit. A few landowners already welcome scout troops, thus providing larger spaces. A fire ring should be created so that campfires are confined. As a rule, travelers are very mindful of safety and the environment, thus campsites stay clean. Finally, ASRT will need the following from the landowner: (a) the property’s latitude and longitude; (b) a photo of the site; (c) permission to list it on the ASRT website; and (d) permission to place an ASRT steel-post sign.

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## River Journey

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*At this sign, you are welcome to camp for the night! The luminescent Alabama Scenic River Trail (ASRT) signs show up for hundreds of feet by mere flashlight.*

## What about other waterways in the state?

Desiring to ultimately establish a campsite every 8 to 10 miles along the trail, the goal is to have 500 listed by 2017. However, contacting every landowner individually along over 5,000 miles of 50 waterways is a monumental task, and there are not enough volunteers to cover the vast amount of remaining mileage. If you or someone you know owns land along a river or stream, landowners can easily volunteer a space.

For questions regarding Alabama's indemnity laws or any other information about campsites, contact [Jim.Felder@gmail.com](mailto:Jim.Felder@gmail.com) or [Fredcanoes@aol.com](mailto:Fredcanoes@aol.com). If you are interested in becoming a member or volunteering your time, visit the website. Additional 'Trail Angels' are always welcome.

## An Economic Development and Tourism Opportunity

"We have accomplished incredible feats of which I never dreamed," said Fred Couch. "It's a culmination of all my years of paddling experiences and civic involvement going forward. I love sharing our ideas with communities all over the state so they too can be impacted with more tourism, and people like me who love the outdoors will think of Alabama first when planning to go outdoors." 🏡

*Thanks to Fred Couch and Jim Felder for their contributions to this article.*

## From Idea to Reality

**F**red Couch, Jr., Founder and President of the Alabama Scenic River Trail, said he had dreamed of an Alabama water trail for four or five years before starting to work on it in earnest in July of 2006. By September, he persuaded the Alabama Tourism & Travel Bureau to produce 25,000 brochures at no charge. In November of that year, he convinced Alabama Power to allow portage trails (bypasses) that would provide for canoers or kayakers walking their boats around dams and continuing their river journey.

The real toil and fundraising challenges began in January of 2007, when an organizational meeting was held in the offices of the Birmingham RC&D Council. Donations started coming in. "Within 18 months, the organization went from 0 to 9,000 mph!" commented Couch. "Fortunately, a cacophony of friends around the state thought my idea had merit and they were volunteering like bees after honey and doing all sorts of tasks," he continued. "Never could I have accomplished them alone. They were meeting every month, creating portage trails, and mapping the nearly 650 miles."

Another friend designed a media blitz for the Trail, resulting in an unprecedented week-long visit to the state in the spring of 2008 by a *New York Times* senior editor and two photographers. Their experience evolved into a page and a half article in the *Times* and a video, plus a front cover on the 'Travel Section' of *USA Today*. All of this generated over \$10 million dollars of free publicity in three years.

The grand opening ceremony for the Alabama Scenic River Trail took place in Montgomery in June of 2008, along with being awarded 'National Recreational Trail' status by the US Secretary of Interior and National Park Service. In 2013, President Obama bestowed the designation of 'National Water Trail.' The honors have continued with the Trail receiving a 'Governor's Award' from the Alabama Tourism & Travel Bureau, as well as a proclamation from the Alabama Senate and House of Representatives.

Recognizing the significant achievement of bringing his idea to life in such a short time and its benefits to the citizens across the state, Couch was named a recipient of the 'W. Kelly Mosley Environmental Award' in 2015 by the Alabama Natural Resources Council. 🏡

