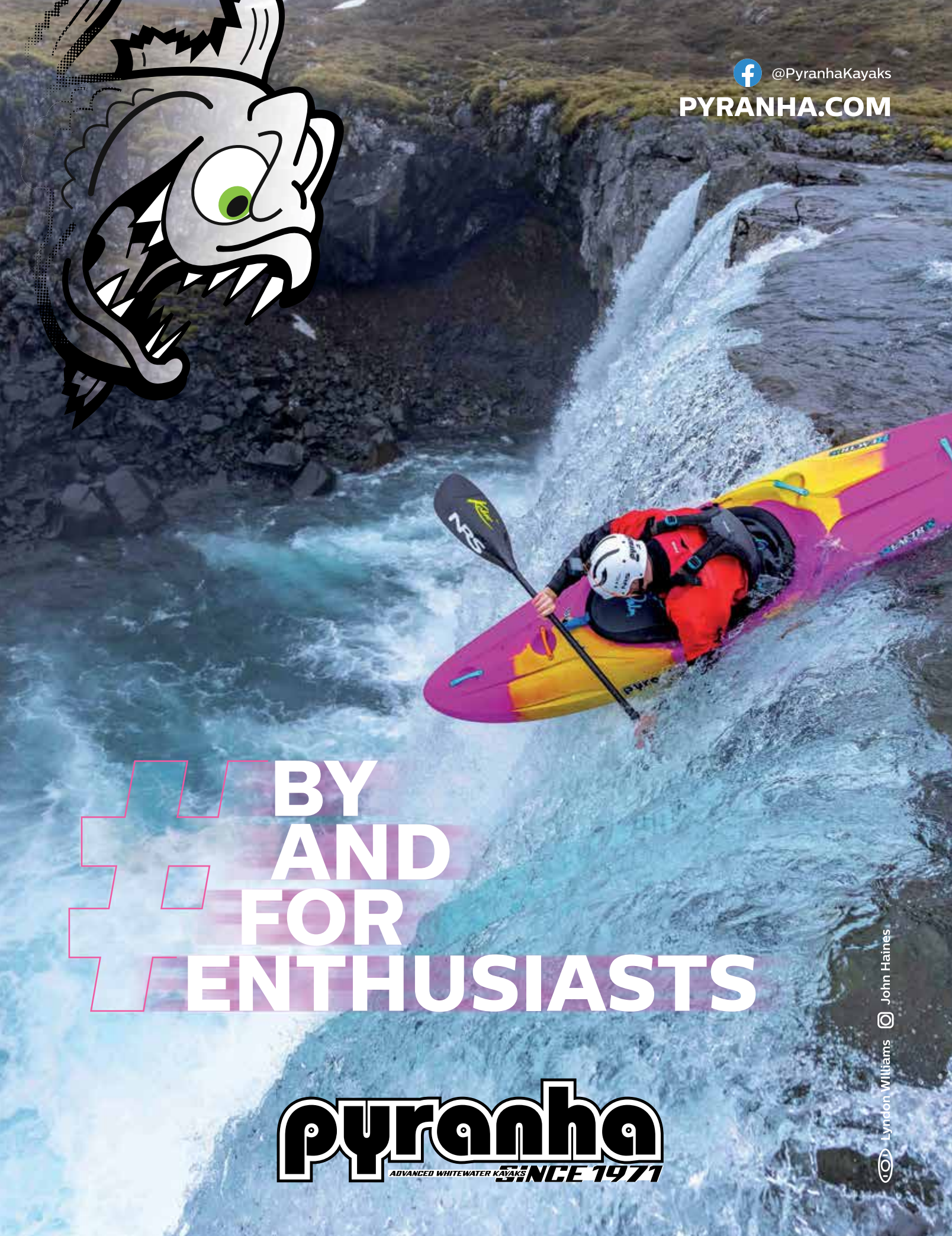
AMERICAN Whitewater

Sept/Oct 2024

Journal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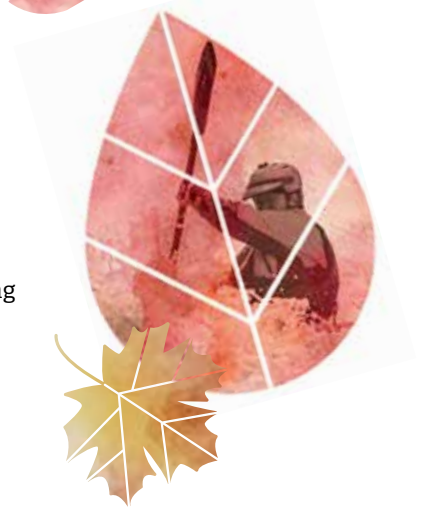

DEPARTMENTS

Cover photo: Marc Hunt. This page: Justin Harris

MEMBERSHIP DRIVEN RIVER STEWARDSHIP SINCE 1954

Our Mission, "to protect and restore America's whitewater rivers and to enhance opportunities to enjoy them safely," is actively pursued through our conservation, access, safety, and education efforts under the umbrella of River Stewardship. American Whitewater is the national voice for thousands of individual whitewater and river enthusiasts, as well as over 85 local paddling club affiliates.

JOIN US! OUR RIVERS NEED YOU!

Become a member by going to americanwhitewater.org/join. Starting at $35, our river stewardship work is only made possible through member support and being a member is the only way to receive the Journal delivered directly to your home.

Join the Enduring Rivers Circle to care for your favorite rivers in perpetuity. Created to honor and recognize people who have solidified the longevity of our river stewardship efforts through a gift to American Whitewater in their legacy planning. Contact Bethany for more information at bethany@americanwhitewater.org.

Affiliate Clubs: We have a network of over 80 Affiliate Clubs across the country that support the river stewardship work we do. Clubs are a great way to connect with other river enthusiasts. Check out our list of Affiliate Clubs to find a club near you! www.americanwhitewater.org/content/Affiliate/view/?

Industry Partners: The work that we do at American Whitewater is greatly enhanced by a number of Industry Partners who support us with financial contributions and in-kind donations. These contributions propel our mission and can give your company exposure to a robust community of whitewater enthusiasts. *Become an Industry Partner* by contacting bethany@americanwhitewater.org

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The Journal is a volunteer driven publication that relies on our community to submit photos, essays, interviews, artwork, recipes, poetry, and more. Be a part of the American Whitewater Journal, the leading voice for whitewater boaters nationwide. Reach out to our Member Content Editor Emerald Lafortune editor@americanwhitewater.org with contribution ideas or questions.

For more information visit our website: americanwhitewater.org

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AMERICAN WHITEWATER BOARD AND STAFF

Photo: Clinton Begley

Horizon Lines

Clinton Begley

IN THE SPRING OF 2020, DURING THE HEIGHT OF THE PANDEMIC, MY partner Ashley and I went on a special trip. After a two-hour drive, we arrived at the Three Pools take-out for the iconic Opal Creek section of the Little North Santiam River in Western Oregon. Since it was just us, we planned to hike upstream and put in partway down the river to get a few laps on the stunning final pitch, "Thor's Playroom." I was excited to share this section with Ashley for the first time.

I had fallen in love with Opal Creek a few years earlier, around the time Ashley and I first met. The gin-clear water, remote old-growth forest, and unique geology made it one of the most breathtaking intermediate whitewater runs in the country. In the interim, Ashley had fallen in love with boating, and I had fallen in love with her. This trip felt like it had a lot riding on it.

As we geared up, my excitement turned to dismay when I realized I'd forgotten my helmet—an oversight I'd never made before. With no other boaters around to borrow from, and my better judgment keeping me from paddling without one, we had no choice but to turn our river trip into a scenic hike. We stopped for a therapeutic milkshake on the way home. A mantra, "The river will always be there," soothed my disappointment on the long drive back.

River flows didn't align with our schedules that spring, and we missed our chance to try again before the summer dry season. Then, over Labor Day weekend, the Beachie Creek Fire tore through the North Santiam Valley. The fire, sparked partly by a downed power line and fueled by rare east winds, destroyed lives, homes, businesses, and critical ecological strongholds. Along with them, I lost my chance to share that

The future of our rivers depends upon the plans we make, just as much as the connections to them we cultivate today.

Scan to see the American Whitewater Wildfire Map

special ancient forest with the person I love. Four years later, the bridge has not been rebuilt, and the river access remains officially closed. Even when it is eventually reopened, the experience will not be the same in our lifetimes.

Despite the uniqueness of Opal Creek, this story of catastrophic change is increasingly common. A glance at the American Whitewater Wildfire Information Map reveals the relationship between fire and water. As I write, the Park Fire in California has scorched cherished watersheds like Deer and Antelope Creeks. Fires have ravaged the North Fork of the Willamette and North Umpqua in Oregon. The North Fork Feather in California has been repeatedly hit since the Camp Fire in 2018, with landslides from soil instability continuing to plague the area.

Fire is a natural process, and part of me welcomes its return to ecosystems that rely on it. But the scale of destruction from these fires is partly due to human choices made over decades, maybe a century. This is not just a story about fire—it is about complexity, change, and the long-term impact of our decisions. Just as the Beachie Creek Fire was the result of years of choices, what we decide today on everything from fire to deadbeat dams will shape the future health and access to our rivers for generations.

American Whitewater's work on systems-level issues like guiding how the Farm Bill influences forest management or challenging power utility asset transfers and influencing the role of hydroelectricity in a renewables-driven grid, involves complex issues that can be difficult to explain. Often, the results of this work won't be seen for years, but the opportunities we have now are often once-in-a-human-lifetime chances to make the right long-term choices for our rivers.

What makes American Whitewater unique is not only our commitment to long-term strategies but also the profound connection we have with the places we work to protect. As boaters, you understand this on a personal level—the deep love and bond that come from truly experiencing these rivers and wild spaces. Together this is a potent combination.

That is the duality we all inhabit as boaters. We don't just have a stoic responsibility to the future. We also have a responsibility to relate to our cherished places and each other in the fleeting present. As Thomas Merton wrote, failing to do so "destroys the fruitfulness of our work, because it kills the root of inner wisdom which makes work fruitful." In a culture focused on productivity and results, cultivating joy and connection for their own sake becomes a subversive, essential act. And, tomorrow is never guaranteed.

Leave the office early for that afternoon lap. Plan the overnight trip you've been putting off. Fulfill that promise to show a friend—or your partner—down the river. And do whatever you can today to care for these places that bring you and future generations joy and nourishment. The future of our rivers depends upon the plans we make, just as much as the connections to them we cultivate today.

Thanks for sharing your love of rivers with the people close to you today, and always. And for goodness sake, don't forget your helmet.

I hope to SYOTR soon.

Clinton Begley
Executive Director, American Whitewater

Photo: Chris Korbulic

Stepping Towards Sustainability

Scott Lewis

YOU MAY HAVE NOTICED A COUPLE OF NEW LOGOS on the preceding pages of this issue. The Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) promotes responsible forest management and has a significant role in the paper industry through its certification program. Pure Power indicates that a production facility uses renewable energy sources like wind or solar, further reducing the environmental impact of printing the Journal.

The team that produces the Journal has been eager to move towards a more sustainable production model and reduce the environmental impact of the printed version. We explored some options and we're happy to announce we're now working with Modern Litho, a Pure Power facility, to help us achieve this with FSC-certified paper, as well as vegetable-based inks used in its energy-efficient printing facility.

FSC certification ensures that the wood used for paper is sourced from forests that are responsibly managed to preserve ecological balance and support local communities. FSC certification helps paper and printing companies demonstrate their commitment to environmental sustainability and provides consumers with assurance that the paper products they purchase support responsible forest management.

Both certifications help paper and printing companies reduce their environmental impact, and meet the growing consumer demand for eco-friendly products. You can learn more about the Forest Stewardship Council at fsc.org/en.

The whitewater rivers we cherish are but one part of the larger ecosystem that includes our forests. We hope you're as excited about this step towards sustainability as we are. ■

Member Spotlight

Photo: Ben Schuberg

Lisa Ronald

Location: Missoula, Montana

Years as an AW Member: Six

Why American Whitewater? Whitewater kayaking is the retentive eddy that sucked me into my now-career working in river protection for American Rivers and chairing the National Wild and Scenic Rivers Coalition. I have the privilege of working in partnership with many of AW's staff—a scrappy bunch of savants who manifest miracles from pocket lint. AW is the most cohesive team of river lovers I've ever worked with, and the wins they continue to pull off reflect the power of this team and the hope and tenacity they inspire in us, their members.

What is your "home river"? The Clark Fork River and Lochsa River

What piece of gear will you not get on the water without? Sunglasses

What's your boating motto? Stay upright!

Terry Ewanochko Conning

Location: Bettendorf, Iowa

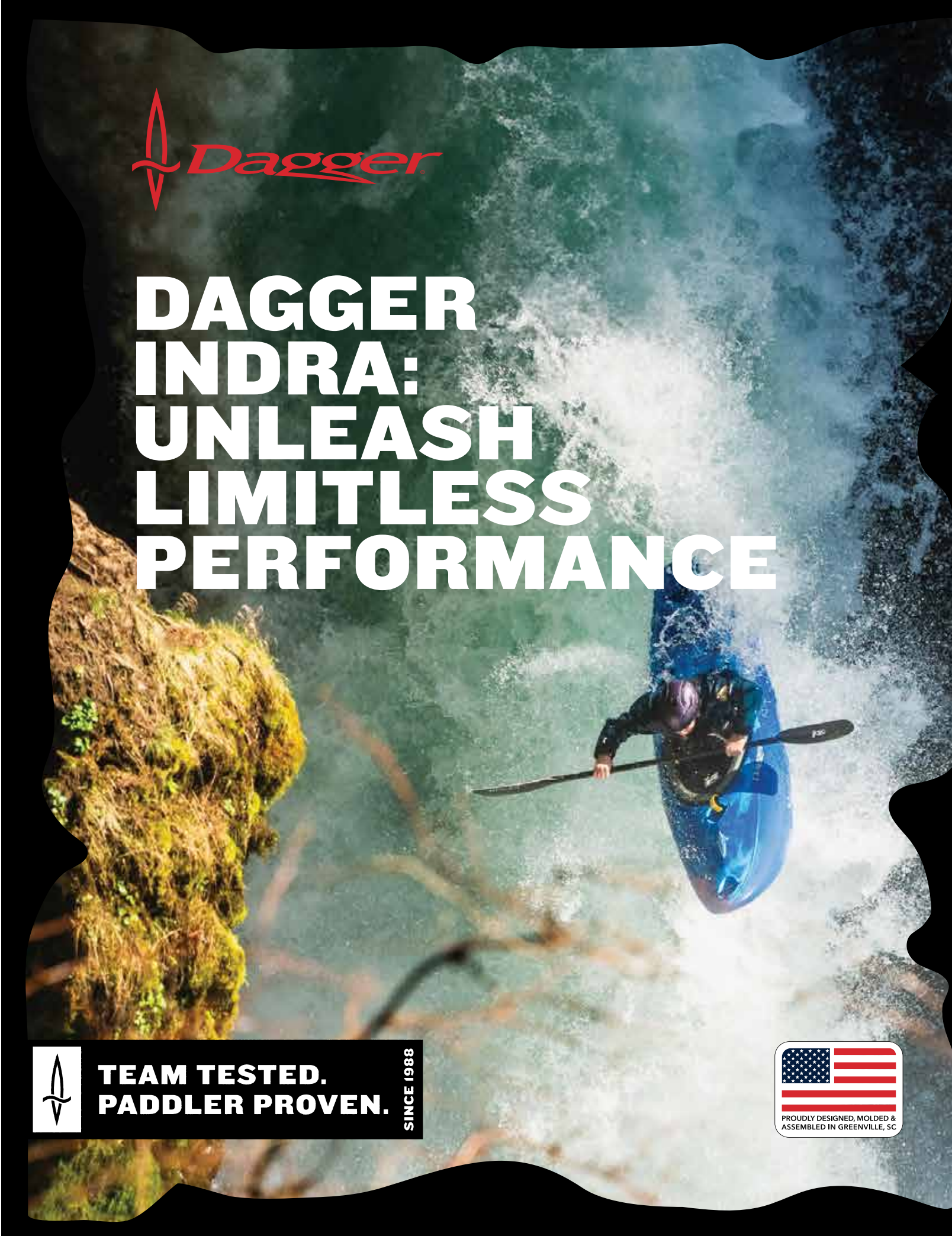
Years as an AW Member: 22 maybe?!

Why American Whitewater? Rivers bring me joy in the forms of peace, memories, excitement, fear, teaching, community, and the ability to explore and challenge my unknown. I want everybody who wishes to set foot in whitewater to have the opportunity to experience the happiness I feel deep in my soul. I believe in American Whitewater because no organization has done more to protect and restore river access. Every country should be so lucky to have an organization like AW.

What is your "home river"? Upper Gauley (Living in Iowa has its whitewater challenges)

What piece of gear will you not get on the water without? Easy—my Watershed bags. It doesn't matter whether I am in a kayak, canoe, inflatable kayak, or raft.

What's your boating motto? As with life, the river is always changing... forget the guidebook and use your experience and intuition to keep challenging yourself (and others) by running the tough lines.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ASK AW:
River Bathrooms

AW Staff

Dear American Whitewater,

I'm an avid backpacker turned kayaker turned—for the first time—invitee on a multi-day rafting trip! I can't wait to blend my love of whitewater and love of wilderness camping. I've been reading up on river regulations to prepare and am confused (and a little intimidated) by the bathroom setup. Does the trip really carry out all human waste? It seems like that would be hard to keep sanitary and safe but... I'm a newbie here! What should I do if I get my period? I'd love any help getting my mind wrapped around this.

Signed,
I'll-Pack-The-Toilet-Paper

Dear I'll-Pack-The-Toilet-Paper,

Great questions! The bathroom is a common concern of first-time multi-day boaters. You're correct, most land management agencies for multi-day river stretches require packing out solid waste. Many river canyons see upwards of 10,000 river users per year. You can imagine what small river camps might look like if everyone was digging holes!

Luckily, river bathroom technology has come a long way in the last few decades. While regulations may vary slightly from river to river, here are the basics of a typical setup.

Liquid waste: On most rivers, "the solution to pollution is dilution" and liquid waste should be deposited in the river. This can be as easy as, well, peeing in the river! Typically, your trip leader will request that liquid waste is not added to the solid waste toilet, as this decreases the available volume of the container and increases smell. If you have concerns about separating solid and liquid waste, however, don't worry. A few small leaks won't "ruin" the toilet.

For steep camps or places without easy river access, a five-gallon pee bucket next to the solid waste toilet can be a nice touch. For midnight peers, a small overnight pee bucket can also be stored outside your tent, then dumped (and washed!) in the river in the morning. Just be sure any pee bucket is transported far from any food or drinks and is labeled clearly.

Solid waste: Fun fact—you'll often hear the nickname "groover" for the river bathroom. This is because river toilets used to simply be metal ammunition cans and you could tell who had been using the bathroom based on the grooves on the back of their legs! Nowadays, whether a plastic container, ammo can, or stainless steel box, most river toilets luckily include a seat.

Use this bathroom like you would any other but remember it is critically important to add nothing but toilet paper to the container. Most toilets are emptied at the end of the trip at a "SCAT Machine" or RV dump, which will easily clog with the introduction of wet wipes, tampons, or other trash. A small bathroom trash can can be made of an old coffee container and is a nice way to remind everyone where their trash belongs.

Menstruation: Having your period on the river shouldn't ruin your fun! On-river menstrual care can vary depending on the products you typically use. Many people pack a period kit in their day bag or another easily accessible location. A period kit can be made of a small pencil pouch, Ziploc bags, wet wipes, pain medication, and hand sanitizer. There are pros and cons to each type of menstrual product, and we encourage you to use what you are familiar with.

A menstrual cup and shaker cup ensure you don't have to worry about disposing of trash midday. Just be sure to check river regulations regarding liquid waste and soap and be thoughtful of where you empty your cup. If using tampons or pads, remember to dispose of all trash in the camp trash system. A Ziploc bag can be helpful for this if the camp trash is only available in the morning or evening. Do NOT bury paper menstrual products nor put them in the solid waste toilet. Depending on the time of year and how much you will be swimming, period underwear may also be an option. Just remember to pack a few more sets than usual, as it can be hard to do laundry and everyone's clothes tend to get a little stinky by the end of a multi-day trip.

The good news is that although initially intimidating, most river bathrooms have the most scenic views you've ever experienced from a toilet. Enjoy the ambiance and enjoy your first trip!

Sincerely,
American Whitewater ■

River Conservation and Ozark Waters

Ron Bodinson

IN 1959 MY FATHER, LARRY BODINSON, TOOK ME AND MY BROTHER TO the Current River in the Missouri Ozarks. I was 14 and my brother 16 and we lived in Kansas City, six hours away. We rented johnboats and bounced downriver from one shore to the next. It turned out to be the beginning of 60 years of river running in canoes and rafts with each trip summarized by my father on an ever-growing list. His river log included the date, river, miles run, who participated, and the boats used. Along the way, we saved all kinds of items like maps, photos, signs, and more that a few years ago I placed in four thick scrapbooks. I then had them scanned and made into a book titled Down River. The organizing element was the record my father kept of each trip starting in 1959.

Because we were running Ozark rivers such as the Jacks Fork, Big Sugar, Eleven Point, and North Fork, we would periodically run into American Whitewater Secretary Oz Hawksley, author of "Stars Upstream," Leonard Hall, and artist Thomas Hart Benton. My father worked for Congressman Richard Bolling and ran the service office in Kansas City. Bolling went on many Ozark trips with us and became involved, with others in the Missouri congressional delegation such as Richard Ichord, in conserving the Current River and surrounding land from development. There was considerable local landowner opposition, which was clearly stated in, "MONUMENT? NO!" signs that were posted along the rivers and at times strung across the rivers on barbed wire. "Monument" was used because Congress first appropriated funds in 1960 to study the feasibility of an Ozark Rivers National Monument.

By 1964, the Ozark National Scenic Riverways (ONSR, name changed from Monument in Bolling's House Rules Committee) was created as a park by an Act of Congress to protect the Current and Jacks Fork Rivers. The fight had been over whether the Forest Service (logging permitted) or the National Park Service (recreation and preservation) was going to administer the area. The National Park Service won. The ONSR both inspired and served as a model for the National Wild and Scenic Rivers Act of 1968. One of the first rivers preserved by the National Wild and Scenic River System was the Eleven Point, whose watershed the Forest Service was to administer.

The chronology outlined in the American Whitewater Journal May/June 2024 issue leading up to the enactment of the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act in 1968 does not mention the ONSR and the first two rivers protected. A similar battle occurred a few years later in Arkansas when the iconic Buffalo River also became a National Park rather than a Wild and Scenic River. In the end, the Current, Jacks Fork, and the Buffalo never needed to become Wild and Scenic Rivers, as they were protected by the park. But the rivers, and those who advocated for them, should be remembered as forerunners to the successful river conservation movement. ■

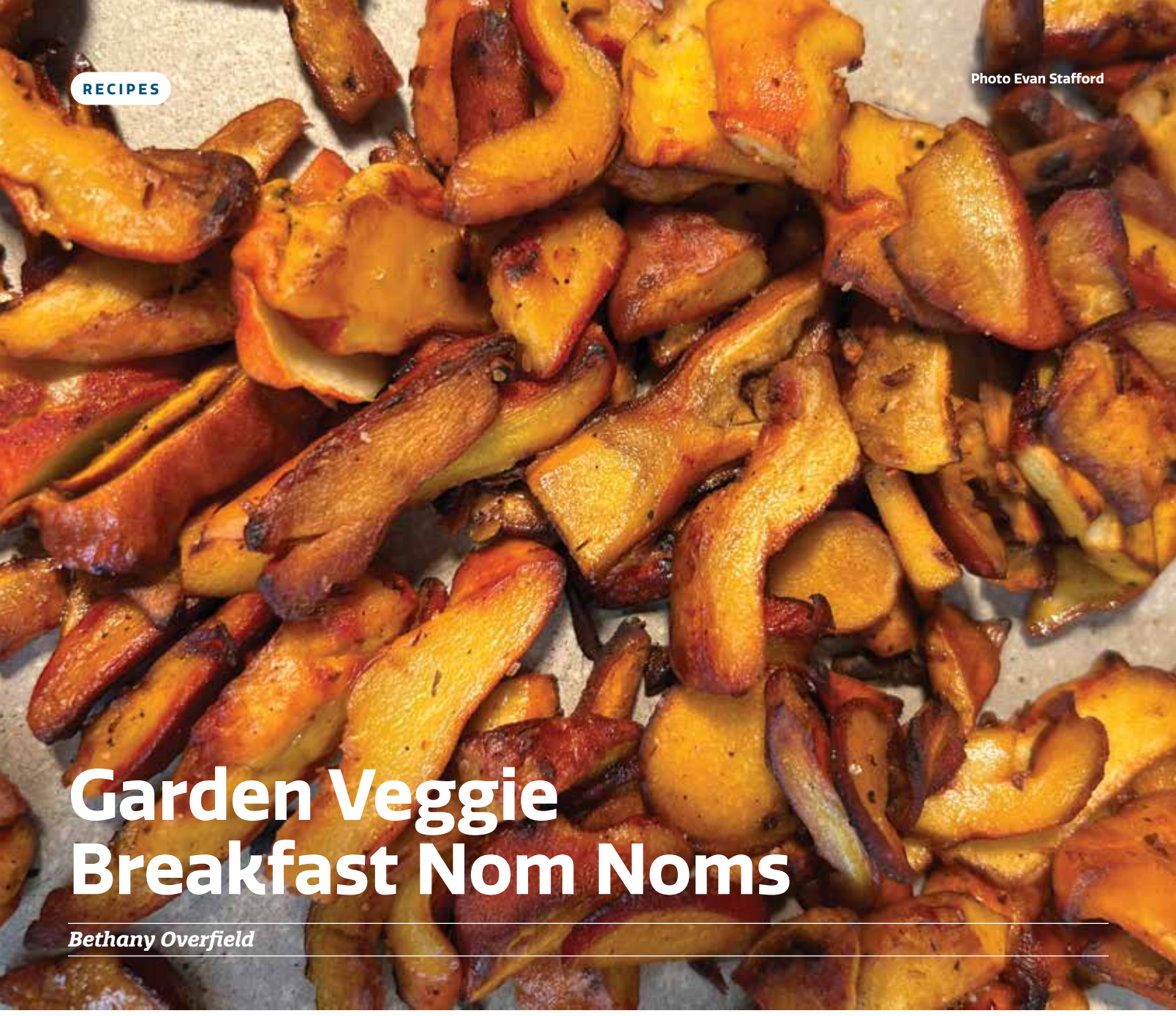


Photo Evan Stafford

Garden Veggie Breakfast Nom Noms

Bethany Overfield

THIS IS A 'RECIPE' I USE WHEN I'M LOADED WITH veggies from my garden or the farmer's market. I love focusing on what's in season at the time, so I rarely make this recipe the same way twice. Let the fresh veggie spirit move you. Most proteins will work nicely–beans, ground turkey, shredded tofu… find your protein joy. I do most of the prep work ahead of time and pull it all together for overnighters in my boat, on my bike, or when I'm on foot.

Prep Time: 30 minutes
Total Time: 60 minutes
Serves 4

Helpful Hints

Prep your veggie and protein mix the day/night before your trip. Pop your prepped bag/container veggies and protein in a cooler (a small softshell works well with an ice insert for tight spaces). When you're ready to fix breakfast in the morning, you'll just need to warm up the mixture and add eggs. You can go ahead and crack the eggs and place them in a container the night before if you don't have a little egg travel case. Pack some of your favorite sauces (mine are Chipotle Bitchin' Sauce and chili crisp) in small containers (you can reuse medicine containers here) and use them liberally.

It's super easy to cut this recipe in half if you're just cooking for two folks. Sometimes I make this in the morning and eat the second half for lunch and don't share it with anyone.

Photo Evan Stafford

Ingredients

1 tablespoon olive oil
1 tablespoon butter
1/2 - 1 tablespoon Braggs liquid amino acids (or soy sauce)
1 teaspoon toasted sesame oil
½ teaspoon of ground mushroom powder (umami blend)
Salt and pepper to taste
Fresh herbs if you have any on hand (parsley and cilantro work great)
1 large yellow onion (sliced or diced)
12 oz lobster or shiitake mushrooms (seasonal), baby portobellos will work
2 red peppers (diced)
1 large (or 2 small) zucchini(s)
4 - 6 cups of kale
1 lb ground turkey (or shredded tofu)
4 eggs
Your favorite sauce/toppings

Directions

At your house/ in your van:

For the veggies:

1. Add oil and butter to a large skillet on medium heat.
2. Add onion and mushroom blend seasoning and sauté until soft.
3. Add the mushrooms and cook down for a few minutes.
4. Add the peppers and zucchini and cook until they are al dente.
5. Add in the greatest amount of kale your pan will hold and sauté down.
6. Add the Braggs Liquid Aminos and the toasted sesame oil (you can do this to taste).

For the protein:

1. Brown your ground turkey or your tofu and season with salt and pepper and a few splashes of Braggs Liquid Aminos and toasted sesame oil.
2. Add the protein to the veggie mix above (if you are using beans, just throw those puppies in the veggie mix now).
3. Package in a stasher (silicon) bag, a ziplock bag, or any non-breakable container.

At your campsite:

1. Break out your veggie/protein mix and warm it in a skillet.
2. Make a well in the middle of your veg/protein mix and add the eggs. Scramble in the center of the pan.
3. Add your bonus sauces.

Nice additions:

Goat cheese
Bitchin' sauce (an almond based sauce found in many grocery stores)
Chile crisp
Salsa

Other veggie options based on availability (add when you add the protein):

Roasted sweet potatoes
Roasted okra
Roasted brussel sprouts
Roasted cauliflower or broccoli


Photo: © mitchm44

Rivers Reclaimed:

How I Learned to Love the Frog

Dave Steindorf

IT WASN'T LONG AFTER AMERICAN WHITEWATER SECURED WHITEWATER boating releases for the Rock Creek and Cresta reaches of California's North Fork Feather River that we lost the releases on the Cresta reach. The first release was in 2002, and by 2006, they were canceled indefinitely. The concern was that the releases were harming the foothill yellow-legged frog, a species already in steep decline due to habitat loss. Ironically, much of the habitat loss was caused by the damming of rivers.

That's right, an amphibian harmed by the damming of the rivers was thought to be harmed by restoring flows. Whitewater boating was going to be a casualty of this situation while the dam's owner got to take that water back out of the river to make more power.

With questionable data to support the idea that flows were harming frogs, it was a bitter blow. But like everyone else, we wanted to make sure the frogs were not being harmed. The real issue—dams diverting 90% of the river's flow—was overshadowed by this conflict, and our modest efforts to reclaim a few days of whitewater recreation seemed unjustly targeted.

The evolution of my perspective—from seeing the frogs as an obstacle to restoring river flows to recognizing them as an ally—is a journey worth recounting, not only for myself but for how American Whitewater is now recognized within the river conservation community as an advocate for the overall health of whitewater river systems, not just boating releases.

By 2012, I was on a brightly lit stage in Portland, Oregon, presenting at the annual River Rally conference about our successful efforts to restore flows to dammed rivers. These efforts not only protected foothill yellow-legged frogs but also created opportunities for whitewater recreation. If someone had told me six years earlier that I would be delivering this presentation alongside Amy Lind, a respected member of the US Forest Service's Regional Hydropower Assistance Team in California, I would have imagined it to be a bizarre, nerdy fantasy right out of a William Nealy cartoon.

2001: Fighting to Restore Flows to a Dewatered River

As part of the Rock Creek/Cresta hydropower license issued to the Pacific Gas and Electric Company (PG&E) in 2001 for the North Fork Feather River, we negotiated recreation releases that included an agreement to study potential impacts of summer weekend flow releases. These studies meticulously evaluated the effects on fish, bugs, water quality, and frogs, with PG&E investing over $15 million in these efforts, highlighting the high stakes and deep interest involved.

Initially, the concept of restoring flows to dammed rivers for boating was controversial among river advocates and some resource agencies. A vocal opposition emerged, led by the Anglers Committee Against Artificial Weekend Whitewater Flows, spearheaded by Bob Baiocchi. Once an ally, Bob had turned antagonist and fought us with the same energy he had once used to fight PG&E. He wasn't alone. Other conservation groups viewed recreational releases as potentially harmful to rivers.

From our perspective, the true harm to dammed rivers came from limiting their flows. Providing occasional summer water pulses, even for recreation, seemed more beneficial than detrimental. As a leading researcher working on the macroinvertebrate study put it, "This is like worrying about the dust speck in one eye when you have a plank stuck in the other."

Nearly all the survey data showed that recreational releases had no significant impact on the frogs; in fact, more tadpoles often appeared after flow events. However, one mass of frog eggs was documented as having been dislodged during the initial June whitewater flow release. To protect the aquatic ecosystem, we agreed to cancel June boating flows, demonstrating our commitment to protecting the frogs.

2006: Shifting Currents and Forging Alliances

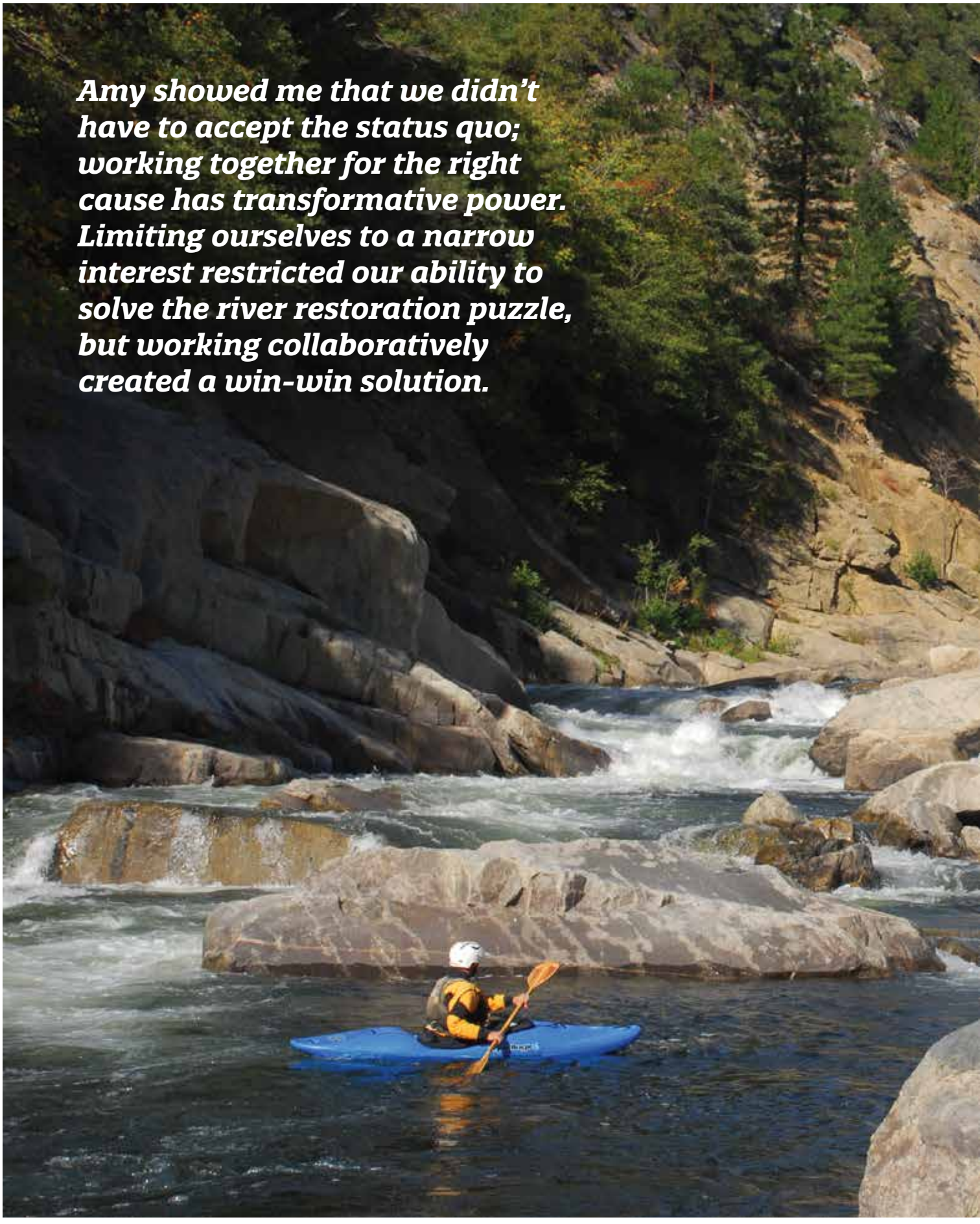
In 2006, while returning home from a Grand Canyon trip, I was alarmed by a message from Kevin Lewis, an American Whitewater volunteer who helped negotiate the North Fork Feather River releases. Surveys found only three frog egg masses that spring, a precipitous 80% drop from the previous year. As a result, the Ecological Resources Committee, for the project along with the Forest Service, promptly canceled all Cresta run boating flow releases.

Upon investigation, I learned that abundant snowmelt had caused the dams to spill water from March until June, followed by a very rapid drop in flows. I wondered if more egg masses existed but were then left high and dry when flows were cut off when the reservoir stopped spilling. This was an idea that the survey team seemed to have not considered.

An 80% decline in the adult frog population within one year seemed unlikely to be caused by washing away tadpoles during summer boating flow releases. That would have caused a more gradual decline in breeding in adult frog populations. So, while there was no debate that the adult frog population declined significantly, the true cause appeared to not fully have been investigated.

This mystery sparked in me a newfound, deep interest in frog biology. Despite my efforts to better understand the causes of the frogs' decline, and to persuade the Forest Service and other agencies to take a closer look, my arguments were ignored. The simple narrative that recreation releases hurt frogs prevailed.

The issue gained attention beyond the Feather River. The California Energy Commission funded studies and hosted a University of California, Davis conference on pulse flows' impacts on river ecosystems. One study measured tadpole swimming speed using



Amy showed me that we didn't have to accept the status quo; working together for the right cause has transformative power. Limiting ourselves to a narrow interest restricted our ability to solve the river restoration puzzle, but working collaboratively created a win-win solution.

Photo: Thomas O'Keefe

Photo: Thomas O'Keefe

a clear cylinder to observe while increasing the flow. Watching a tadpole struggle and eventually get swept away, I felt a kinship with it, swimming against the current in vain. My colleague, Chris Shutes, humorously remarked, "See what you did, Dave," pointing out the general sentiment in the room.

It became clear that recreational releases on the Feather River, as well as any other frog-inhabited rivers, were doomed. Changing the North Fork Feather River hydropower license to eliminate weekend releases seemed inevitable. But I wasn't willing to relinquish our hard-won release water just to keep sending it through PG&E's hydropower turbines. If releases were to be foregone, I wanted the assurance that the frogs would actually be protected.

I learned a lot about foothill yellow-legged frogs, and it was obvious to me that to truly protect these frogs, they needed more water, not less. For millennia, they had lived in a pre-dam river system with abundant water. Their decline didn't begin until the dams were built and the river dewatered. Yet, my thoughts on the frogs' welfare were as weightless as a helium balloon. Frog biologists generally prioritized river health over whitewater boater interests and they weren't looking at the bigger picture to try to understand why the frogs were in serious decline.

Enter Amy Lind, a mild-mannered Forest Service research biologist resolute in her devotion to protecting rivers. Amy had both a wealth of technical expertise and the ear of the agency for which she worked. She proposed something simple yet radical: instituting a more natural river flow regime that would benefit both frogs and boaters. Rather than pulse-flow releases to provide boating opportunities, we proposed flows that would better approximate natural conditions with a slow rise in levels, a sustained peak, and a leisurely drop back down to base levels.

Photo: Thomas O'Keefe

At that moment, we both realized our shared goal—a healthy, functioning river for fish, frogs, boaters, and anglers. The true issue was that 90% of the water was diverted for power generation. Utilities favored pond-like river conditions, assuming pond-dwelling frogs, while river-dwelling frogs, like the rest of the ecosystem, needed a natural snowmelt hydrograph for survival. If flows dropped too quickly, eggs dried out. If flows were low, dam spills washed away eggs.

In river management, visible harm, like dewatered frog eggs, prompts action. Foothill yellow-legged frogs typically lay eggs in one to two feet of water during spring snowmelt. The eggs hatch into tadpoles in 14-21 days. We realized that protecting frogs meant preventing flow drops greater than a foot over three weeks, a radical departure from typical dam operations allowing drops of a foot per hour.

I also realized the lack of existing science on this crucial aspect of California river hydrology. So, together with our technical expert Bob Center, we partnered with UC Davis researchers to study these critical flows, eventually coining the term "snowmelt recession." This is a critical period on snow-driven free-flowing rivers, when flows gradually decrease from peak springtime levels to low summer levels.

The spring snowmelt is often compared to the rain on the Serengeti plains: It brings life. This is when fish and frogs are breeding, riparian plants are setting their roots, and spring-run Chinook salmon are swimming upstream into the upper watershed where they will spend the summer. How the water levels drop into summertime lows means everything to the species in the river.

Collaborating with Amy, the Forest Service, the California Department of Fish and Wildlife, and others, we advocated for license-mandated dam releases that would mimic snowmelt recession flows on the American Feather, Yuba, and San Joaquin rivers. Many watched and doubted our chances of success, believing that sustaining more natural flows for three weeks would require utilities to give up too much water and certainly more than needed to provide a weekend boating release.

Photo: Thomas O'Keefe

An advantage was that no one asked to study recession flows' ecosystem impacts: It is simply mimicking the way these rivers would naturally flow absent hydropower development. In the end, research was conducted, papers were published,* models were developed, and rivers got more water. The frogs are happy with the additional water and so are the boaters. Agencies supported whitewater boating, and we supported the frogs. This brings us back to the 2012 River Rally presentation, where, "Snowmelt recession: good for boaters and biota" was our presentation's tagline.

2012 and Beyond: A New Vision for River Advocacy

This journey taught me several lessons. Defending recreation releases on the Feather felt isolating, pitting me against others who also wanted to protect rivers. Amy showed me that we didn't have to accept the status quo; working together for the right cause has transformative power. Limiting ourselves to a narrow interest restricted our ability to solve the river restoration puzzle, but working collaboratively created a win-win solution.

Moving beyond recreation to holistic river restoration yields better outcomes, period. While summertime boating on every river is enjoyable, restoring flows to benefit entire ecosystems is a superior goal. I also found that our partners value boaters' unique knowledge. We see more rivers, top to bottom every year, than any other group. That's why the shift from recreational advocacy to river restoration is vital. I'm proud that American Whitewater leads in restoring rivers as dynamic, natural wonders—wild and wonderful. ■

Defining Home

Finding Stability in the Transience of River Guiding

Kami Bakken

I'VE HAD THIS DAY MARKED ON MY CALENDAR FOR months. It comes every season, and today it falls on a Wednesday in May. Outside, snow is accumulating in Colorado, while I'm inside with Fleetwood Mac playing in the background, organizing my life into totes and boxes. This spring routine is a ritual so ingrained that I can pack up my entire existence in a single day. Opening the lid to my first box, a sense of dreariness settles over me, weighted with stress and dread as I face another round of goodbyes and reconfigurations. I feel my energy shift as I pack my river gear into my second box. Memories of being connected to the river and disconnected from the chaos of the world swirl in my mind. As I reach my final box, I move a bit slower, filled with contemplation and curiosity. Disassembling my library and packing up my last art piece symbolizes the ending of a settled home.

I load my boxes into the car, take a deep breath, and set off on my drive across state lines. The drive is my final cue that my river guiding season is starting.

In a world where the only constant is change, I'm attracted to the nomadic act. Amid the complexities of family, relationship, and career pressures, change often feels like the one thing I can control. This has led me to make a habit of transience, at times even a craving for it. It's not that I don't want groundedness. Rather, I've wrestled with the societal expectations of what stability *should* feel like. Multi-day river guiding has reshaped what stability *could* feel like—what home might really mean.

My affinity for sleeping on a river's edge is much stronger than for sleeping underneath a roof. Each night on the river unveils a new sense of home, where the present moment takes precedence, shaped by the people and landscape around me. The hustle of to-do lists, Zoom meetings, and life maintenance fade away, leaving behind a simplified existence. Here, home doesn't exist in boxes or on spreadsheets.

"Home" is a universally recognized concept, extending its essence to all living and even to inanimate entities. We use this word to symbolize comfort, safety, belonging, and sometimes even longing. This idea of home carries inherent stability, but within a transient existence, I often find myself with a recurring question: What does home mean in a life of perpetual movement and change?

When you look up *home* in the dictionary, it offers multiple definitions based on whether you're using home as a noun, verb, adverb, or adjective.

Home (noun): the social unit formed by a family living together
Home (verb): to go or return to one's place of residence or origin
Home (adverb): to or at an ultimate objective (such as a goal or finish line)
Home (adjective): of, relating to, or being a place of residence, place of origin, or base of operations

I consider if Merriam Webster accounted for multi-day river guides. For me, these definitions take on different shapes and meanings that don't often fit the mold of "home."

Home (verb): to go or return to one's place of residence or origin

Since graduating college, I've followed a nomadic rhythm, a continual dance across state lines every six to eight months. These multi-day road trips leave ample space and time for reflection. Often, they involve making calls to friends and family for whom I haven't provided life updates in a long time, prompting reactions like, "You're moving again?! Where to now?"

I'll laugh and reply, "Off to my river season and then wherever the wind takes me after that."

Glancing at my packed gear in the rearview mirror—stuffed drybags, an organized rig bag, and my daily wear of a drysuit and PFD—I hang up the phone and release a big sigh. It's challenging to convey the appeal of this lifestyle, sometimes even to myself.

After ten hours on the road, I arrive at the boathouse—a small and comforting basecamp where all of us transient river guides come together. Returning to this space and feeling its familiarity invites a warm embrace, a sense of home.

Once I settle into my river guiding season, setting up my home for the night becomes a sacred river ritual. I lay down my sandmat, unroll my paco pad, fluff up my sleeping bag, and blow up my little inflatable pillow—a sign of completion that prompts me to take off my shoes and wiggle out my toes. I strategically place my dry bag parallel to my sleeping pad. My ammo can sits off to the side, accessible for night readings and salve application. When the night falls and I'm finally able to rest my head on the pillow, I slip into my sleeping bag and sink into my perfectly placed set up. Before I let my eyes shutter closed, I gaze up at the blanket of bright stars above me. It reminds me how small I am in this world, yet it feels as if I'm the only one experiencing how magnificent it is.

There's an inherent rhythm to this routine, a cadence that can take time to synchronize. This transition can be uncomfortable after nesting and settling into a fixed space throughout the winter, one that you return to night after night. But after only a few days, this routine becomes second nature. My home is now a constant state of transience.

As the season flows, my systems become refined, and my routine is always the same. Routines ground me in a space of perpetual change, offering consistency where flux is the constant. These systems become my roots—a symbol of home.

Home (noun): the social unit formed by a family living together

Yet, there comes a specific point in the season where this routine starts to ebb more than flow.

As the season progresses, I can feel a shift. The chill in the air settles earlier, the sun says goodbye sooner and the river's energy wanes. It's not the energetic rush I felt only a few months ago. It's as if the landscape around me settles into reflection and introspection.

Inevitably at this point in the season, I am asked by a guest, "What's next? What else do you do? What do you want to do after you're done guiding?" In this contemplative season, those questions sink in a little deeper. I wonder, *What IS next? What DO I want to do? Can I do this forever?* Of course, this then spirals into the looming question of WHO AM I?

As I row to our next camp, these questions continuously swirl around in my brain. For the inquirer, their mind is already onto, "What's for dinner?" knowing little of the spiral they have sent me into.

I start to sink into my feelings as I derig our boat, handing out belongings to be set up in our chosen home for the night. I step off my boat and head to the next guide task that awaits. I know these thoughts will have to live on the backburner of my mind—until many hours later when I'm finally allowed to rest my head on my inflatable pillow. I dream of retreating to a room where these thoughts can melt into the comforter wrapped around me. This isn't found on the river though. There is no escape to four walls where you can shut the door behind you—where you don't have to be "on" all the time.

Instead, I find my way to our kitchen, which is set up in the same formation no matter the camp we find ourselves at. I sit with my fellow guides and we take a moment to settle into our home for the evening. We discuss the day—our lows, highs, struggles, and appreciations. This is often followed by bouts of laughter, shared sighs, or emotional releases. Regardless of the day's happenings, we find ourselves wholly embracing each other's company.

Together, we begin cooking dinner for the night. In the comfort of our familiar kitchen, preparing a meal evolves into a space where conversations and stories flow like wine. I share my thoughts of feeling lost, of sometimes not knowing what is next or even if I do know, not being ready to end this routine I've created and found comfort in. Shortly after, I feel a hug wrap around me, a head rest on my shoulder, and a quiet reminder that everything will be okay. My body relaxes and my spiral stops.

There's an even deeper beauty in having your seasonality of life be accompanied by a guide team that becomes your chosen family. Home can be when someone sees you and celebrates you, sharing experiences that push vulnerability and trust, sometimes receiving doses of tough love in the process. They embody the grounding elements of my dynamic life.

They become home.

Home (adverb): to or at an ultimate objective (such as a goal or finish line)

Before long, I'm launching on my last river trip of the season. As I'm rowing down this familiar heartbeat flowing beneath me, my movements are rhythmic and meditative. I'm making moves without even registering. I am on auto-pilot.

It's comforting and melodic to move with a river space in a way where it feels like you both know each other. This landscape, over the course of just one season, has both challenged and celebrated me, embraced and supported me as it too undergoes its own journey. It has seen me through many phases of my being. Every time I place my oars in the water, I return to a familiar place.

While the canyon undergoes its autumnal transformation, it mirrors the inevitable transition out of my river season. Nostalgia seeps into the air, reminding me of the memories this landscape has fostered. I pause to notice more intently, admiring the play of the light on the canyon walls, and savoring the connections I've created with the people I shared this river with.

As we reach the take-out ramp, we celebrate the end of another season. While a sense of relief washes over me, it's quickly followed by the familiar overwhelm of deciding my next steps, moving my temporary home to a new temporary home, and leaving my guide family I've shared every moment with.

The timeline surrounding me is shifting, urging me to adapt. I'm confronted with the reminder of instability and deciding if stability is something I'll ever want. After a final derig, I clean my gear and pack my bags. My car is packed to the brim as I make my way across state lines—again.

These transition periods continue to be the hardest part of the year for me, but as I drive away from my river home, I'm reminded of what "home" has become for me.

Home: a new definition

Home is found in the landscapes that I've fallen in love with. It's found in the river, where each day introduces me to a new version of its ever-changing character. It peeks from the hidden nooks I fluff my sleeping bag in. It exists in the fading sunrises and sunsets that prompt me to savor moments of stillness. These places have made me feel seen, held me close, and pushed me along. They have been witnesses to countless moments of happiness and acceptance of sorrow and grief. They've guided me in letting go, finding forgiveness, and allowing spaces to scream out in frustration. They gently offer continuous reminders of both my importance and my insignificance in the grand scheme of existence. Moreover, they've introduced me to an extraordinary community that shares a deep love for these magical places.

The guides I get to work alongside have become my chosen family. They know me better than I know myself. They're tuned into my flow state and the guide tasks that I dread. They know what excites me and what frustrates me. They can tell when I'm not myself and when I'm in my full essence. They remember my nightly routine and gently wake me up with my morning coffee—black with a splash of cream. In moments when life seems unbearable, they hold me closely. They bring laughter that shakes my core and a sense of comfort that fosters a deep sense of belonging.

They are my home.

So, I'm offering up an additional definition of home to our friend Merriam Webster.

Home (sensation): a feeling found in people or places that evokes comfort and ease; contentment in experiencing the life you've found. ■

Photo: Evan Stafford

Tiger Wall, Yampa River

Kelly Cunningham

The Yampa River was one of my first multiday river trips and it left an indelible sense of respect for the incredible geologic features we witnessed and the need for stewardship for river wilderness. The group I paddled with had years of collective experience and I had the privilege of learning from them as we floated downstream. The group paddled rafts and kayaks, and I was the only white-water stand-up paddle board rider on the trip. This poem is inspired by that adventure in late spring 2021.

How do you pass
in a short series of days
through millennia?

In the Yampa River canyon
the water carried us.
Current dictated pace,
we surrendered to flow,
used oars and paddles,
lines and eddies
and traveled along the bloodlines
of high, towering heavy walls.

Deviations in sediment
carved arterial stories
offered to the geologists among us
who spoke this language.
They translated chatter, into verse,
long chapters, ancient tomes.
They were reverent.
Sometimes, they translated
for those of us
who didn't learn that lexicon.
Mostly, we listened on our own.

On one afternoon,
I received lyrics through birdsong
echoing in sandstone
and the low rush of water wrapping
around the edge of an
immense and immersed boulder.
They are the bones
of this story and verse.
On the afternoon of the fifth day,
we passed the Tiger Wall.
Our humble floating fleet
entered the wild cathedral
where stone walls loomed at
at impossible angles
touching sky two thousand feet
above the surface of the river.

While others leaned in for a kiss,
I reached out from my paddleboard
to run my hand
over dark striations of
manganese and iron oxide,
guided by fluid from
storm split skies which
spilled rain over the cliff edges
painting into patterns
tiger stripes, reverberations of beasts,
scribed and varnished
into rock over centuries.

How do you pass
in a short series of days
through millennia?
Intentionally adrift, humble pilots
through the rumble and rush
of waves into pools and back again.
We moved with some sentiment.

I felt reverence each morning
as we prepared to enter the flow
and gently pushed sand
and the remnants of the stars
from the corners of my eyes,
welcomed the daylight
cascading over the top
of the desert canyon wall
consigning to memory
the cool nightfall and cicadas
that chimed lullabies as I nestled
in a tent-shaped swale.

We traveled with exhausted peace
that we didn't have to rise
to be anything other
than kind to each other
and carry this crew
and our small stories
back to naysayers
that do not believe in wilderness magic
and be sure to erase
all traces of our passage
to make it easier for geologic time
to do what it would have done, anyway.

Evy Liebfarth

Brings Slalom Glory Back to the US with Olympic Bronze in C–1

Word and photos by Marc Hunt

THE US HAD ITS BEST SHOWING IN 20 YEARS in the sport of whitewater slalom when Evy Liebfarth laid down a great finals performance to win the bronze medal in the women's C-1 event at the recent Paris Olympics. Evy had a solid performance in women's K-1, advancing into the semifinal round where she finished fifteenth. And in an event new to the Olympics, kayak cross, Evy advanced through three rounds from a field of 37 into the quarterfinal round of 16 where she was nudged out. All in all, a fabulous performance for the 20-year-old Bryson City, North Carolina native who is establishing herself as a real up-and-comer in the world slalom scene.

Casey Eichfeld was the other athlete for the US to qualify for an Olympic slalom berth—men's C-1 in his case. Competing in his fourth Olympics dating back to 2008, Casey had a fine preliminary round performance that qualified him tenth going into the semifinals where an unfortunate bobble led to a missed gate and the end of his competition.

A highlight for slalom fans worldwide was watching Australian Jessica Fox cement her place as the greatest slalom paddler of all time with wins in both the women's K-1 and C-1 events. To top it off, Fox's sister Noemie won gold in women's kayak cross. They are daughters of former slalom world champions Richard Fox and Miriam Jerusalmi.

Just making it into the Olympics in slalom is a feat. Fields are extremely limited, with only nations that show strong performances in World Cup events over time being awarded a maximum of one precious entry into the primary slalom events. Evy and Casey provided many of those World Cup performances that earned the US spots, and they confirmed their roles in heavily contested US Team Trials events this past spring.

Many who spectated agree that the new kayak cross event is a big plus for the sport. In an event inspired by BMX, a preliminary round of timed individual runs seed racers into progressive "knockout" rounds in head-to-head groups of three or four. Establishing and maintaining position is key and limited contact and jostling is allowed over a simplified course of a few gates. While it may not mimic what the rest of us do on natural rivers, kayak cross makes for great competition and exciting spectating.

In some ways, the Evy Liebfarth story is a throwback to the earlier days of slalom in the US. In a sport dominated by specialists whose primary youth paddling experiences are in slalom on artificial courses, Evy grew up in the outdoor adventure and river-running culture around the Nantahala Outdoor Center. NOC was a mecca of American slalom from the 70s through the early 90s where legends of the sport like Angus Morrison, Scott Shipley, Scott Strausbaugh, and Joe Jacobi lived and trained. Like them, Evy started out as a river runner, learning from her paddling parents Lee Liebfarth and Jean Folger. At the age of seven, she fell in love with paddling in the training gates that perpetually hang at NOC's campus and began entering races that same year. Evy's mom describes her as entirely self-motivated from the start—focused and disciplined. Lee, a former international slalom competitor, found himself dragged to the NOC practice course by Evy many days after school, leading to his long-term and successful role as her primary coach.

Through the middle of the last century, slalom was the centerpiece of whitewater technique and athleticism in the US; if you wanted to become a good paddler in those days, you'd hang out with the slalom crowd and enter a few races. With the growth of artificial courses starting in the 1980s, the permanent inclusion of slalom in the Olympics in the 90s, and the specialization of boat design and construction for different aspects of the sport, there has been a decreasing overlap between slalom and the rest of whitewater sport. Those who have tread in both worlds will argue—often fiercely—that slalom remains the best way to refine boat-handling skills for whitewater river running. Spending an afternoon playboating on a river like the Ocoee with Evy certainly would tend to confirm that.

With the rich legacy surrounding paddling and slalom in the NOC and larger Swain County communities, there was a massive turnout for the parade and welcome-home celebration in downtown Bryson City on June 14th honoring Evy and her spectacular accomplishments. To the crowd's delight, Evy announced that she is "all in" for the next four years. Stay tuned.

Marc Hunt is an Asheville, NC, based paddler and advocate for whitewater sport. He competed occasionally in slalom through the 1980s and spent several years on staff at NOC. He is a lifetime member of American Whitewater. ■

2024 PARIS OLYMPICS

Seven Foot Falls
Danielle Sartori
Watercolor, Gel Pen, Marker, and Micron Pen on Paper
5" by 7"

Dani is an artist, designer, and river dweller based in the river town of Long Creek, South Carolina, where she has guided on the Chattooga River for the last five summers. In spring 2024, she started and coordinated The Long Creek Market which fosters community and brings local creators together. Dani spends the winters as an artist and designer, focusing on community outreach and nature-related work.

The art featured is a collection of multimedia plein air watercolor paintings, which Dani does at the river in one sitting using river water. The paintings arise playfully using layers of watercolor, gel pen, micron pen, and marker which emulate the feeling of being immersed in the river's environment.

Find more of Dani's work at: daniellemaayanart.myportfolio.com or on Instagram, @danielle.maayan.art. ■

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For more information about making a bequest to American Whitewater contact Bethany Overfield bethany@americanwhitewater.org

Photo by Evan Stafford

The "Progress" Dilemma:

The Pigeon River and Hartford, Tennessee

B.J. Phillips

THE PIGEON RIVER AND THE SMALL river community of Hartford, Tennessee are experiencing a progress dilemma. The balance between retaining the natural aspects of a free-flowing whitewater river and the need of some to introduce "improvement" or "progress" via potential land development are in conflict and are creating the dilemma. Balancing these sometimes opposing desires is required to address it and come to some kind of resolution.

No matter how much we as boaters love our rivers and want to keep them intact and our own little secrets, the truth is that land development can sometimes be inevitable and that progress will eventually come into the equation and become part of that river. Raft companies will slowly evolve into the scene, restaurants and gas stations will emerge, and constructive progress will, hopefully, become part of the norm. Yes, we as boaters like gas for our shuttles, a place to enjoy good food after a day of paddling, and sometimes a comfortable place to stay and rest before and after getting on or off the river.

I, as a boater, a commercial river guide, and a resident of the area, am not anti-progress. I would like to see improvements to Hartford. For example, Hartford has some of the worst roads in the county and they need resurfacing. While the county collects about $500,000 a year as "river fees" from raft companies (not including property taxes), very little of that is reinvested back into Hartford or its road infrastructure. Another investment that would be a win-win is the development of a whitewater park and surf wave in Hartford. How awesome would that be!

The history of turbulence seems to be ongoing for the Big Pigeon River!

In the present case of the Pigeon River and the community of Hartford, how much progress is inevitable? How or where will the lines be drawn? And what is too much or too little progress? Some current developers created a transparency issue by not disclosing their plans for the Pigeon River and Hartford while buying up land in the area and along the river. Among the present community residents and boating community of Hartford, this fueled various rumors about the grandiose ideas of the developers.

Government officials located in Newport and Cocke County are not helping to explain to the citizens, the news media, or the existing small businesses the development plans either. Some of the community residents do not want any improvements and want to keep their community as a small, quaint rural community, regardless of the impoverished conditions and the lack of year-round employment possibilities. Neither approach is good for the future of the river or the Hartford community and it's these two seemingly opposing visions for Hartford that are creating the dilemma.

To begin to explore this situation, it is probably best to look at the turbulent history of the Pigeon River. The town of Hartford has not always been a small, quaint community. The town was considered a fairly large logging town in the late 1800s-1930s. Hartford was spread out and had a population that supported two and maybe three-story buildings and even a "picture show" building. To transport logs and boards, railroads came down from the Waterville, near the present upper put-in, and ran both sides of the Pigeon River with a bridge that brought the two tracks together near the

As boaters, we can protect what is now a navigable river and keep public access to the Big Pigeon River through the small, but mighty staff at American Whitewater.

small logging camp of Brown (now considered the bottom of Lost Guide Rapid).

The railroad continued through Hartford along what is now Hartford Road next to the Lower Pigeon and onto Old Town Newport. The boards from those logs were processed at sawmills in Big Creek, Hartford, and Newport and eventually made their way to places like Knoxville to build cities. Logging diminished in the 1930s with the beginnings of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. The loggers practiced clear-cutting and had depleted old-growth forests by that time, causing unnatural siltation in the Pigeon River. The town's population dwindled after, and in the 1960s, Interstate 40 was constructed taking out most of the houses and downtown Hartford.

Then came the devastating effects of the paper mill from Canton, North Carolina. The Pigeon River bled out in a slow death from years of careless pollution and so-called progress. The Pigeon had become a lifeless river and the waters were, according to the local lifelong residents, almost blackish. Thus, the nickname, "Dirty Bird."

Up to that point, progress had not been good to the locals of Hartford or the Pigeon River.

However, in the 1990s, the river had been re-invigorated with more oversight from the Environmental Protection Agency, serving as a needed government check on the community and environmental functions of the river. Along with that came at least somewhat better water conditions. Aquatic life began to return to the Pigeon and raft companies began to emerge. Since then, up to eleven raft companies have worked tirelessly to build a rafting industry that has become one of the leading areas for raft businesses by number of participants in the United States. Private boaters arrive to enjoy the friendly rapids of the great Class III+ whitewater, and sometimes hundreds paddle the Pigeon in a week.

About a year or so ago, the infamous paper mill closed, perhaps marking the end of a generation of polluting the Pigeon. But, before the dust could settle from the celebration among Hartford and the boating community, this new dilemma began to emerge. The history of turbulence seems to be ongoing for the Big Pigeon River!

This now leads us back to the present, with a group of investors apparently wanting to buy all of Hartford and all the raft companies (they have bought two already). Critics say they intend to change the face of this small community and perhaps even the Pigeon River along with it. Where this is going is still up in the air, because the investors and the local government are not explaining their full intentions. The local community is still very leery of progress and rumors run rampant. Any kind of balance seems to be lost in both opposing stances. The future of the Pigeon as a dam-controlled but free navigable river with decent public access is seldom, or never, mentioned.

It should be noted that a form of progress was a planned bike trail system near Hartford on Cherokee National Forest land. Introduced by former Senator Lamar Alexander several years ago, this initiative was highly touted initially by the local, state, and federal governments. Grant money poured in and went to multiple studies and the construction of mountain bike trails. Presumably, construction has been ongoing for at least a year, but the first trail has yet to open. The project seems to have come to a standstill. Many visiting whitewater boaters like to bicycle and mountain bike, and possibly would have extended stays in Hartford, increasing tax revenue for the county and state.

However, my focus is more on keeping the Pigeon River a free navigable river and securing public access. It would be nice to have take-outs, put-ins, and restrooms comparable to the Tuckaseegee (which generates much less commercial river fee money than Cocke County), the Nantahala, or the Ocoee Rivers. That is the kind of progress that we know would directly benefit our river and the average boater!

There is probably little we as individual boaters can do to prevent the inevitable wheels of progress, no matter how grandiose or even absurd the rumors or actual plans may be. As boaters, we can protect what is now a navigable river and keep public access to the Big Pigeon River through the small, but mighty staff at American Whitewater. I urge you to join and renew your membership, be an active member whether through donations, advocacy, or volunteering to be an American Whitewater Steward to your local river. American Whitewater is our best and perhaps only shot to maintain and protect our rivers! ■

The Green Narrows Race

Words by Sara Baker.
Photos by Oren B. Helbok.

ON NOVEMBER 4, 2023, MY FAMILY and I attended the Green Narrows Race near Asheville, North Carolina. My 23-year-old son, Jem Baker, raced for the first time, and his family all made the trek to witness this milestone in Jem's paddling life. My husband, Oren, and I drove down from Pennsylvania and my daughter, Maia, and her husband, Chiso, flew in from Boston. Clearly, we all understood the importance of this moment to Jem. And it was an incredible day, a wonderful day for him and this family. We were not alone: many friends and families of racers, as well as kayakers from all over—at least a thousand people—came to sit along Gorilla Rapid, not to mention upstream and downstream of this iconic spot. As one of the most dramatic and photogenic drops on this section of the river, kayakers consider this rapid very significant. Every person on the banks of the river cheered every racer—all 200 or so of them—with as much enthusiasm at the end of the day as they had at the beginning of the day. The excitement and energy lasted all day, creating an atmosphere of joy and overwhelming community spirit.

Jem and I started kayaking together in 2008 when Jem was eight and I was in my 40s. By the time he was 13, he had far outstripped my abilities as a boater and was looking to up his game. I found people and trips that would challenge him and help him develop his skills. Thankfully, there were many willing to take him on even at such a young age. Jem has never approached kayaking recklessly; he has always had a realistic view of his capabilities so I have trusted him to hold his own with more experienced boaters on difficult rivers. In 2016, we made our first trip to North Carolina for boating when we attended the North Carolina Canoe Club's Week of Rivers. On his first day, Jem went off with mostly strangers to Section Four of the Chattooga in a borrowed creek boat he had never paddled before. Of course, he had a great time despite the two-mile flat water paddle out. These strangers showed him lines, encouraged him, and also ensured his safety.

When Jem didn't show up, I started to worry. Where was he? Did something happen upstream? Why wasn't he here yet?

Jem had his Green Narrows PFD (Personal First Descent) at age 18, also through the Week of Rivers event, after a trip leader on the Cheoah recognized his passion and ability and invited him to reach higher. Only a couple of years later, Jem guided a few of our Pennsylvania friends down the Narrows. At age 22, he ran Gorilla for the first time. He had graduated college and was determined to find a job in Asheville and kayak amazing rivers. That is exactly what he did. In his first week living in North Carolina, he ran the Green, the West Fork of the Tuck, and the Cascades. He texted, "I can't believe this is real life!" He quickly found people to kayak with and his community has only grown as he has joined trips on incredible rivers and met more and more people happy to include him.

The Green Race is not the only place to experience the wonderful support of the kayaking community and my day as a spectator seemed like the culmination of so much of my experience as a boater. While I will never kayak the Narrows, I have received overwhelming support

from many people on the Class III - IV rivers where I boat. Information about rivers, tips on managing a new boat, encouragement and guidance when stepping up...The willingness among paddlers to teach, to help, to support, whether or not there is beer or brownies (my specialty) on offer at the take-out, seems unbelievably huge.

On the Saturday morning of 2023's Green Race, Jem went to the pre-race meeting and collected his start time, bib, and timing device. As a first-time racer, he had a late time: 2:54 p.m.—the 171st racer. The rest of us found the trailhead and hiked down to the river. Many people were hiking in, hours before the start of the race, and we were all glad for the ropes to help us get down the steepest parts of the trail. We took it slow, and no one hurried us; everyone was unfailingly friendly and polite.

We made it to the river just before the release water arrived and staked out a spot right next to Nies' Pieces. We could see Gorilla's flume clearly as well as Scream Machine. Maia and Chiso had never kayaked and had no real context to understand what they saw. A few kayakers came down before the race and were hanging around in the eddies. Maia and Chiso's mouths opened in astonishment as they watched these first boaters come through. By the end of the afternoon, however, Maia and Chiso knowingly critiqued passing boaters with comments such as, "So smooth" or "That wasn't a very clean line." Eventually, Jem showed up to visit with us before his race. He explained the lines and his goal for the day.

Finally, he appeared over the lip of the flume. All these strangers cheered for my boy! That atmosphere of welcome and support overflowed all day.

He hoped to finish the six-tenths mile race in under five and a half minutes—the course record set in 2022 by Dane Jackson is just under four minutes.

As the race began, the first racers came down the flume, blew through Speed Trap and Scream Machine, lined up to hit Nies' in the right place, and continued through Power Slide in just the right spot for maximum speed. There is very little room for recovery between drops and the racers had to manage the rapids carefully to stay on line. Safety people tethered to the shore looked out for any racer having difficulties. These safety people stood in the river for hours, helping when necessary, clapping and encouraging, removing debris—whatever was necessary to ensure a smooth day. All day!

Yes, there were swimmers; yes a few flipped and rolled up. A few broke their paddles and at least one racer was offered a paddle from someone on shore so he could continue. One racer lost his paddle but continued HAND paddling! He was determined to finish, despite the safety guy trying to help. The racer shook off the safety, hand paddled until he saw his floating paddle, hand paddled over to his actual paddle, plucked it out of the river, and kept right on going. I am confident that that racer would have continued racing with just his hands for propulsion had that been necessary. He received one of the biggest cheers of the day from the crowd who recognized the determination and skill required to manage such a feat.

Meanwhile, in my family, tension was starting to rise. It was getting close to Jem's start time. We had sat by the side of the river for close to six hours by this time, barely eating or drinking because of nerves. Finally, racers in the 160s were going by. Somehow, racers 168, 169, and 170 got all tangled up in Scream Machine! I was screaming in my head, "GET OUT OF THE WAY! Don't you know my person is coming down next?" Miraculously, they did somehow get out of the way and the river was clear. We knew Jem was next to come down the flume. After watching 170 racers, we had a pretty good sense of the timing between racers, so when Jem didn't show up, I started to worry. *Where was he? Did something happen upstream? Why wasn't he here yet?* It seemed to be taking forever! Jem later said that the minute before his start time was the longest of his life.

Finally, he appeared over the lip of the flume. I could tell by his posture that he was completely focused on the task: racing down Gorilla, through Speed Trap, Scream Machine, and lining up for Nies'. We were all screaming and yelling and whooping and making a ton of noise—and so was everyone else all around us! All these strangers cheered for my boy! As if he was the star of the show! After three hours of racers!

Later, after walking up the river bank to take a closer look at Gorilla (even more terrifying close up), chatting with other racers, and making the steep hike out, we all went to dinner. Jem went to the post-race festival while Oren and I went to Jem's apartment and Maia and Chiso went to their hotel. We were all exhausted.

I woke up around 12:30 a.m. Despite Jem's living on his own as a full-fledged adult for a year and a half, I knew I wouldn't sleep until he got home. On my phone, I checked the race results to find his time. "OH MY GOD," I yelled. Oren who was fast asleep sat up. "Jem's time was 5 minutes, point 2 seconds!" He had run the race much faster than he'd hoped or anticipated. He finished as the third-fastest short boat: not bad for his first time out!

Jem said that when he looked for his time when the results were posted at the festival, he started looking at around 5 minutes and 15 seconds and continuing down the sheet to slower and slower times. He didn't find his name. His first thought was that his time hadn't been recorded and he was so disappointed...until he went back to 5:15 and started reading up. Then he found his time: 5.00.2! He was elated! Jem is usually very low-key—rarely showing his feelings but even some of his friends noticed that he was beaming.

The next morning, I received congratulations from friends around the country who had watched the live stream and a few even sent screenshots that they had made of Jem on the live stream feed. They told me that a big cheer went up among them when Jem appeared on the screen. Maia and Chiso, fully staying with the spirit of the day, had looked up the race results overnight and knew just how well Jem had done.

The race day stands out as a golden day in my family's history. Jem's fabulous experience had started with building his boating community in Asheville and training for the race with several new friends. I got to meet many of them along the Green as they compared notes on their respective races. Oren took tons of pictures and didn't fall in the river even once despite his eagerness to get just the right shot. Most importantly, we all got to see Jem in his element—in his world where he has made a home for himself and where so many have welcomed and encouraged him.

That atmosphere of welcome and support overflowed all day. The spectators, the families, the safety people, and the live-stream commentators all understand the huge accomplishment of showing up to race. Some racers did well; others may have been disappointed in their performances. Seeing people do what they excel at and aspire to inspires all of us to reach. The appreciation that I saw all day, the understanding of the courage and perseverance of the participants, and the openness of the community—kayakers and non-boaters alike—make this event awesome, in the true sense of that word. ■

A Timeline, Part II: 1995–Present

70 YEARS OF RIVER STEWARDSHIP

Part I appeared in the May/June 2024 Journal issue.

Timeline Compiled by Evan Stafford

1995

A Whitewater Website

The American Whitewater website launched, providing an online place for all things whitewater rivers, including offering space for affiliate clubs to host their own page. It was announced this way in the 1995 July/August Journal: "We opened the first World Wide Web site on the Internet exclusively devoted to whitewater boating ...a cornucopia of whitewater information. Boaters surfing cyberspace (when it is too dark to be out on the river) can find everything and anything they want on our amazing, new Homey Page."

Before the website, if you wanted to find a river to boat, you had to do some offline research. You could mail $15 to American Whitewater and receive a spiral-bound notebook, known as "The Nationwide Whitewater Inventory, that included a table of rivers organized by state. The inventory was put together in 1988 and exhaustively checked by local experts in each state. By 1990, $7 got you the entire Inventory on a 5.25-inch floppy disk. The floppy disk included extra beta not available in the spiral-bound format. Digitizing the inventory was a truly innovative way to share river information. It helped open a new age of river exploration for boaters looking to paddle beyond their home river, then the website took this one step further and was part of the beginning of an internet-based landscape that almost all boaters now use to find information about rivers.

1997

Beaver River Relicensing (NY)

The Beaver offers some of the most challenging and dramatic rapids in New York, as well as some great intermediate whitewater. Before 1997, the river was dewatered by several dams and diversions. American Whitewater began working on the relicensing of the Beaver in the late eighties and now a 1997 relicensing agreement provides 11 days of releases on three different reaches, the Moshier, Eagle, and Taylorville runs.

Canyon Creek Saved, Hydropower Proposal "Dead in the Water" (WA)

For several years, Canyon Creek was targeted for damming, but American Whitewater and its affiliates – including The Mountaineers, Rivers Council of Washington, Oregon Kayak & Canoe Club, and Washington Kayak Club – succeeded in a legal fight to cancel the dam's Preliminary Permit and keep Canyon Creek free-flowing.

First Tallulah Releases Kick Off Flow Restoration Success in Southeast (GA)

In 1995, the first release on the Tallulah River in Georgia took place, thanks to American Whitewater efforts. This was the first of many successful flow restoration stories for American Whitewater in the southeast, including the Cheoah, West Fork Tuckasegee, and Nantahala.

2000


AMERICAN WHITEWATER COLLECTS LIABILITY LAWS AND RECREATIONAL USE STATUTES ON NEW WEBSITE

First Edition of the American Whitewater Navigability Toolkit Published

American Whitewater seeks to improve citizens' knowledge of the rights Americans have to access our nation's rivers and streams, with an aim to reduce conflicts and support their responsible recreational enjoyment. In the late 90s, a team of legal volunteers researched the navigability statutes for all 50 states, as well as case law in state courts, to define the scope of the public's rights and privileges on our nation's waterways. The result was the groundbreaking

American Whitewater Navigability Toolkit, first published in 2000. The current third edition was updated and edited thanks to pro bono assistance from Morgan, Lewis & Bockius LLP.

American Whitewater Acquires Take-out on Elkhorn Creek (KY)
In 2000, American Whitewater successfully purchased land for a take-out on Elkhorn Creek. This Class II-III creek is located in central Kentucky and provides some of the closest and most dependable whitewater for boaters in Kentucky, Ohio, and Indiana.


Whitewater Access Site Secured on Elkhorn Creek (KY)
By Jason Robertson

As we are headed to press, American Whitewater has successfully acquired land for a take-out on Kentucky's Elkhorn Creek. This Class II-III creek is located in central Kentucky and provides some of the closest and most dependable whitewater for whitewater boaters in Kentucky, Ohio, and Indiana. Confronted with a surprise auction of a 6-acre of land including both creek [illegible] road frontage at Knight's Bridge on Peaks Mill Road near Frankfort, WV, paddlers from around the region dug deep in their pockets, quickly spread the word, and raised over $32,000 (summary of

American Whitewater January / February 2000

2001

White Salmon BZ Access Area Secured (WA)
Access to the Green Truss and BZ section of the White Salmon at one time was privately owned. When the landowner was ready to sell, American Whitewater worked to bring this access point into public ownership utilizing the Land and Water Conservation Fund. In the fall of 2000, the Trust for Public Land acquired the primary access point at BZ Corners and transferred it to public ownership during the summer of 2001. The Forest Service now manages the 11-acre parcel as part of the Lower White Salmon Wild and Scenic River.

Helped Secure Major Funding Increase For USGS Streamflow Gages
American Whiterwater has played an instrumental role in identifying and funding the installation for streamflow gages across the country. An early victory came when we helped increase the USGS stream gaging operations fund by 9.9 million in FY 2001. We received an official thank you letter from the USGS Director for our assistance.


AMERICAN WHITEWATER HELPS USGS RECEIVE $9.9 MILLION INCREASE FOR STREAMGAGING!
By Jason Robertson

On November 8, the Director of the USGS, Charles Groat, announced a $9.9 million increase for their streamgaging operations in FY 2001. Director Groat sent a letter to American Whitewater saying, "The increase in the USGS budget comes as a result of hard work by many players including key constituents like you."
American Whitewater and several other conservation oriented recreation groups including the American Canoe Association, American Hiking Society, ORCA, and Access Fund strive to increase the USGS

American Whitewater January • February 2001

2002

California's First Restored Flow Release
A 2000 agreement, initiated in 2022, more than doubled the base flows of the North Fork Feather River, set standards for water temperature, required habitat improvements for fish spawning, and required recreational releases starting at one weekend per month during the summer. Since initiation, AW has seen a dramatic improvement in the fishery, an increase in shore-based recreation, and thousands of paddlers visiting the year-round boatable flows.

2005

American Whitewater Regional Stewardship Model Begins
California, Pacific Northwest, Southeast, and Mid-Atlantic programs were established, leading to programs across the country including the Southern and Northern Rockies, Northeast, and Midwest. This geographic focus was a big shift from operating with conservation and access departments working separately on river issues across the country. The new approach helped American Whitewater create deeper local roots in the communities we work in and establish valuable relationships with members, volunteers, funders, and decision-makers.

2006

Colorado / Southern Rockies Program Begins
In 2006, a group of stakeholders met along the banks of the Arkansas River to discuss where American Whitewater might fit into the region's river stewardship work. From that meeting, AW expanded its regional model to include the Southern Rockies. Among other work, American Whitewater began an initiative to protect and improve flows in the Colorado River Basin by defining and analyzing recreational flow levels. In 2013, our Boatable Days Tool was adopted into the Colorado Water Plan as the authoritative mechanism for defining recreational flow needs on state rivers.

2008

First Bear River Releases (ID)
In southeastern Idaho, a region somewhat lacking in river recreation opportunities, scheduled releases on the Bear River have provided whitewater boating opportunities since 2008. Thanks to advocacy from American Whitewater and its partners, a relicensing agreement with dam owners provides nine days of restored flow spread over four weekends.

2010

Ausable Chasm Opened to Public Access (NY)

After years of advocacy, numerous decisions, appeals, and even intimidation tactics from the Ausable Chasm Company, the Ausable River was finally opened to public access on June 18, 2010. Paddlers found a spectacular and truly unique Class IV river set in a deep, narrow chasm. Portaging and scouting at river level is easy, and most paddlers do laps. A wide range of flows provides boating opportunities, including levels frequently and naturally present in the summer and fall.

2011

White Salmon River Restoration (WA)

In 1992, American Whitewater made its original request for a study on the removal of the Condit Dam on the lower White Salmon River. In the request, AW wrote that a study was needed to "determine the recreation, fishery, flood damage mitigation, power production and other impacts associated with the removal of impoundments and in returning the White Salmon River to its truest sense of 'run-of-river.'" With the dam breached in October 2011, the deconstruction of Condit Dam stands as a benchmark for national river restoration. The removal opened 33 miles of critical cold spawning habitat for steelhead and 15 miles for salmon, both endangered species. In addition, five miles of restored river has provided new opportunities for whitewater recreation.

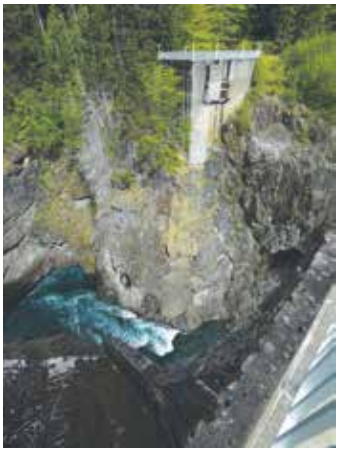
Boatable Days Tool incorporated into Bureau of Reclamation's Colorado River Basin Study

American Whitewater met with Secretary of Interior Ken Salazar and Bureau of Reclamation (BOR) staff to demonstrate the value of and methodology for developing quantitative metrics for whitewater boating. This simple approach measured current boating opportunities and changes to opportunities under future scenarios. AW's experience in describing the effects of flow on recreation opportunities and negotiating "boatable days" in over 100 FERC licenses, Resource Management Plans, and local watershed initiatives convinced the BOR to develop and utilize a "boatable days' metric for managing whitewater rivers in the Colorado River Basin.

2012

Upper Chattooga Access (NC/GA/SC)

The Chattooga River, which starts in Western North Carolina and flows south to form the border between Georgia and South Carolina, was designated a Wild and Scenic River in 1974. Two years later, the U.S. Forest Service decided, without cause, to prevent boating on the uppermost 21 miles of the river. From 1995 to 2012, American Whitewater worked to have the prohibition lifted through administrative appeals and federal court challenges. The efforts culminated in a 2012 U.S. Forest Service decision to ease the restrictions and allow some boating. Since then, the remaining boating restrictions have proven unnecessary, but remain in place, despite continued advocacy by American Whitewater and its partners.



2014

Elwha River Restoration (WA)

After three decades of advocacy and two decades of planning, what was then the largest dam removal in U.S. history began in 2011 with the removal of the Elwha Dam, followed by the removal of the Glines Canyon Dam in 2014. American Whitewater has actively supported this restoration effort since becoming directly engaged in 1992, with strong local member advocacy prior to that. Built in the early 1900s, the 108-foot Elwha Dam and 210-foot Glines Canyon Dam blocked the river's once-legendary salmon runs for nearly a century. Removing the dams has freed the Elwha River and now allows all five species of Pacific salmon, along with steelhead, sea-run cutthroat, and bull trout, to return to more than 70 miles of high-quality habitat.

Wild and Scenic Eligibility Success in Northern Rockies Forest Plans

After finding success influencing the regional U.S. Forest Service planning processes in other regions, in 2014, American Whitewater secured protections for two streams on the Kootenai National Forest (MT) by successfully advocating for their status as eligible for Wild and Scenic designation. AW replicated this strategy over the next decade to protect 83 more rivers (and

counting) in Idaho, Montana, and Wyoming and continues to work across the country to identify and protect Wild and Scenic-eligible streams during forest planning.

2015

Browns Canyon National Monument Designated

Colorado's Browns Canyon is a spectacular landscape for outdoor recreation, and among the nation's most popular whitewater destination. Designated under the U.S. Antiquities Act, the monument protects over 21,000 acres of public lands surrounding the Arkansas River near Salida, Colorado. American Whitewater played a key role in advocating for the designation of Browns Canyon National Monument, working closely with state representatives including former Senator Mark Udall, who introduced a monument proposal that followed a multi-year process of input from residents, boaters, ranchers, and businesses. AW was proud to see the president's proclamation honor the spirit of Udall's legislation.

Merced and Tuolumne Rivers in Yosemite National Park Reopened to Recreation (CA)

The Merced River in Yosemite National Park was officially reopened to river recreation after seven years of sustained engagement by American Whitewater with the National Park Service and other stakeholders. Allowing boating was a small, yet important component of the grander plan to preserve the outstandingly remarkable values of the Wild and Scenic Merced River. The Tuolumne River was also reopened to legal boating in the Grand Canyon of the Tuolumne; however, AW was disappointed that the National Park Service continued to prohibit boating on the rest of the river. AW advocates for the National Park's management to put river recreation on equal footing with other similar activities.

2016

"Right to Paddle" Successful Legal Challenge in South Carolina

Boaters successfully helped defend the public right to float rivers and streams in South Carolina when American Whitewater and co-defendants decisively won a legal challenge on the South Fork of the Saluda River. When landowners acquired an affidavit claiming the river was impossible to navigate in a canoe, AW produced a video of a canoe descent. Submitting boating videos as evidence proved to be an effective strategy. The court found that "the standard for navigability rests on the potential for any public use, be it commercial or recreational," citing the video as definitive proof of navigability.

2018

50th Anniversary of the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act, East Rosebud Designated

Marking the exciting finale of nearly a decade of efforts to protect Montana's East Rosebud Creek from hydropower development and other impacts, this designation came on the 50th anniversary of the beloved Wild and Scenic Rivers Act. The Wild and Scenic Rivers Act prevents dams in perpetuity and local citizens alongside American Whitewater and our partners continue to work towards future designations in Montana and across the nation.

2019

John D. Dingell, Jr. Conservation, Management, and Recreation Act

On March 12, the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) was permanently reauthorized as part of the John D. Dingell, Jr. Conservation, Management, and Recreation Act—a long-fought and significant victory secured with bipartisan support in Congress. Passage of the Dingell Act ensured that the LWCF no longer faces the uncertainty of potential expiration and that its unique structure and flow of funds are permanently protected. The Dingell Act also designated the Farmington & Salmon Brook Rivers in Connecticut and the Green River in Utah as Wild and Scenic.

2020

Great American Outdoors Act

The Great American Outdoors Act, once signed into law, provided $9.5 billion to temporarily address years inadequate funding by Congress for federally managed lands, and permanently funds the Land and Water Conservation Fund at $900 million per year.

2021

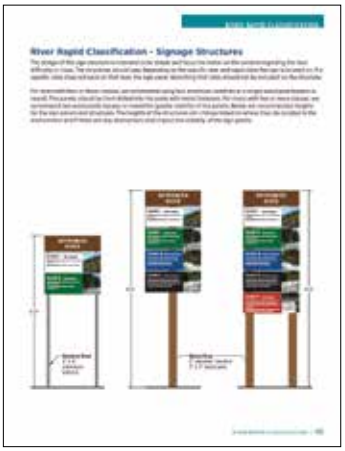
New Customer Relations Management System Launched

After decades of working with membership, volunteer, and partner data manually, American Whitewater took a big step into the 21st century by fully integrating our outreach and communications for both membership and stewardship work. This shift made AW's outreach overall more efficient, opened up new and different opportunities to engage AW supporters, and has led to better systems for sharing information on on opportunities for river running, volunteering, and engaging with your representatives.

2022

New Mexico Public Stream Access Secured

The New Mexico Supreme Court reaffirmed the the longstanding right of the public to recreate on all streams in the state, including walking or wading on the streambeds. The written opinion followed previous court action when it unanimously threw out a New Mexico State Game Commission rule that purported to allow landowners to block access to public waters. In the unanimous opinion, the New Mexico Supreme Court made explicit what the state constitution and prior case law implied–that the public has the right to access and recreate on all rivers and streams in the state, regardless of navigability.



River Signage Toolbox Released

With the support of the Coast Guard Boating Safety Program and in partnership with environmental design firm Tangram, American Whitewater developed an open-source toolbox supplying graphics, messaging, sign templates, sign placement criteria, and other content guidelines for safety and wayfinding signs at river access sites. This tool was built to help site managers develop effective, customizable signage that conveys critical information. Safety signage plays a crucial role in educating and creating awareness about recreating responsibly, as well as hazards or potentially dangerous situations.

2023

Klamath River Dam Removals (CA/OR)

After over two decades of Tribal advocacy, the removal of four hydroelectric dams, Iron Gate, Copco 1 and 2, and JC Boyle finally got underway, reopening over 400 miles of the river and tributaries to the legendary salmon runs stifled by impoundments for over a century. The final regulatory step for the removal, a license surrender order by the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission, was issued, and dam removal began with the deconstruction of Copco 2 in 2023. With all four dams removed, restoration work is now underway. American Whitewater took a leadership role in developing a vision for how the public will interact with and enjoy a restored river. The results of these efforts have been incorporated into the Recreation Management Plan and AW continues its work to ensure implementation of that plan.

Great Falls Catawba River Restoration (NC/SC)

Nearly 20 years ago American Whitewater started working on new licenses for the chain of hydropower dams on the Catawba River, which spans North and South Carolina, with a special emphasis on restoring flows to the dewatered Great Falls of the Catawba. Hundreds of hours of negotiations and studies with many partners led to a settlement agreement in 2006, and, finally, a federal license in 2015 after being stalled by litigation and other factors. In 2023, releases began and the restored river now has boatable flows almost every day, alongside numerous weekends of high-quality recreational release flow days spread throughout the year.

2024

Big Sandy Conservation Land Purchase (WV)

Early in 2024, American Whitewater completed the purchase of a large portion of the classic Lower Big Sandy landscape, protecting 4.25 miles of river frontage, the remainder of which is already under conservation ownership. This purchase safeguards access and portage routes, and an irreplaceable piece of West Virginia's ecology, economy, and quality of life. The effort was led by longtime American Whitewater board member Charlie Walbridge and retired Cheat River outfitter Dave Hough and made possible by major gifts from over two dozen paddlers. ■

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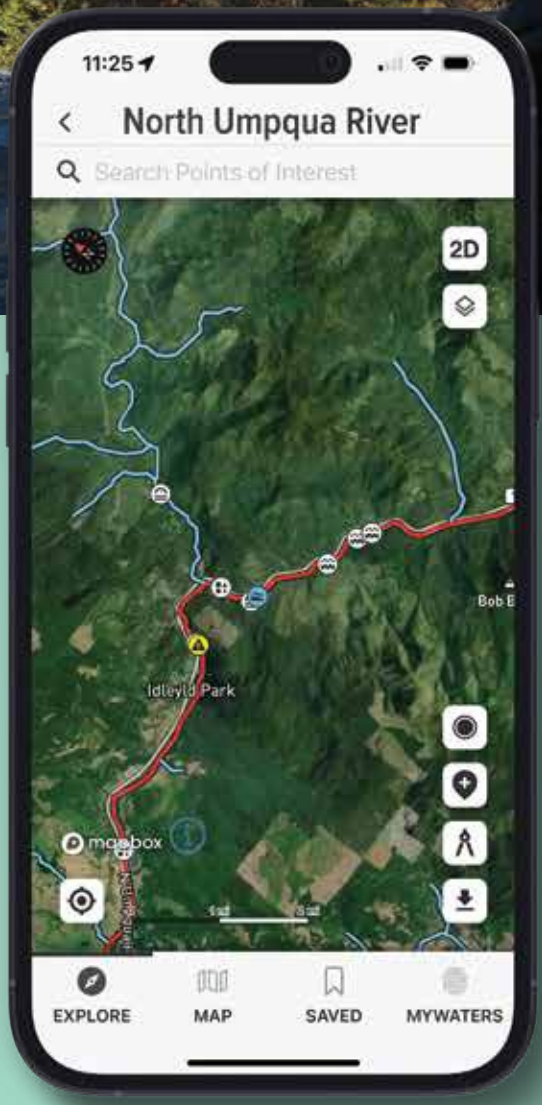

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SAFETY

Whitewater Accident Summary

January – June 2024

Charlie Walbridge

THE FIRST SIX MONTHS OF 2024 SAW MANY FATAL whitewater accidents and one disturbing trend. There were 29 reported incidents in the U.S., with 16 kayaks (14 were recreational kayaks), a canoe, 11 rafts (three were commercial), a drift boat, and a stand-up paddleboard. In almost 50% of these incidents (16), no life vests were worn. This is a much higher percentage than usual. Other reports include eight flush drownings and five low-head dam deaths. Twelve accidents involved solo boaters or small groups in one boat. Paddlers in these situations have no safety backup, and routine swims may suddenly become life-threatening. Colorado, which has experienced a very big water year, led the count with nine; Pennsylvania and Arkansas tied for second with three. My thanks to everyone who sent accident reports, and especially to Charlie Duffy for his careful data checking and the useful tables that accompany this article.

Kayaking Accidents

Colorado rivers have seen very high flows which create added risks for even the most experienced paddlers. On June 4th, a group of three expert kayakers launched on Pine Creek Canyon of Colorado's Arkansas River. This short but intense Class V stretch was running quite high at 2000 cfs. Halfway down the rapid, Dylan Wallace, 27, missed a right-to-left move above the main Pine Creek Hole. He dropped into it, tail-standed, and flipped. He tried two rolls and was upright for a second, without his paddle, before going over again. He made no further attempts to roll or pull his spray skirt. Friends got him ashore in about 500 yards, an outstanding job in a fast-moving Class IV runout with few available eddies. They started CPR and called 911. Remembering that an AED was stashed on the other side of the river, at the "Stealth" Numbers put-in, one paddler ferried over and brought the device back while the other continued resuscitation. CPR and the AED were used for over an hour before first responders took over. Despite these heroic efforts, he was pronounced dead at the scene.

Dylan's parents, David Wallace and Betsy Frick told American Whitewater that their son was a strong, capable big water paddler who had recently returned from a one-day, top-to-bottom run of the Class V North Fork of the Payette in Idaho followed by a one-day run of the South Fork of the Salmon at six feet. He had run Pine Creek at least 100 times over the last eight years. A big man weighing about 210 pounds, he was paddling a 75-gallon half-slice design. There is a powerful seam in the current just above the hole and Mr. Wallace thinks that this could have pulled the low-volume stern under and caused a brief loss of control. Even though the autopsy showed no head injury, Mr. Wallace suspects that his son might have hit his head or face hard enough to stun him, and this explains why he didn't bail out. His helmet was not damaged. This accident testifies to the relentless nature of Class V runs which can turn small problems into something a lot more serious.

The Middle Fork of the Feather River is one of California's best-known whitewater overnights despite the need for several difficult portages. On May 26th Jason Stingl, 43, was making the final carry in Devil's Canyon when he slipped and fell over 50 feet into a huge drop. Despite an extensive search, his body has not been found. I remember this portage vividly from a trip taken over 40 years ago. The potential for injury is quite clear, and this death reminds us that these carries cannot be taken lightly.

We received word that Bren Orton, a much-loved British professional kayaker, died on the Melezza River in Switzerland on May 16th. Mr. Orton, 29, became trapped in a "recirculating feature" and did not resurface. No additional details were shared. His body was recovered two weeks later.

Recreational Kayaks

This year has seen an unusual number of moving water accidents in recreational kayaks. In half of the cases, a life vest was not used, and a large percentage of the accidents occurred on solo trips. On February 1st, a man fell off a sit-on-top kayak at Discovery Park at the confluence of California's Sacramento and American Rivers. There's a strong current and a few riffles there. He had a life jacket attached to his boat but he was not wearing it. A bystander saw him struggling, threw him a life ring, and when that failed, launched a boat and got him ashore. Sadly, he died in the hospital a few days later.

On February 16th, police in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania were notified that Brenton King, 44, had not returned from a kayak fishing trip on the Susquehanna River. This area has fast current and some Class I rapids. His kayak was found that evening. The next day a friend with a drone spotted his body washed up on an island. Although he was wearing an inflatable life vest, it had not inflated, and he had no cold-weather gear.

On March 9th a family of five in four kayaks got into trouble on Flat Shoals Creek, north of Columbus, Georgia. According to local paddlers, this small creek was running high and full of downed trees. Of the family, the mom and the children wore life vests, but their dad did not. All the boats flipped. The father, Timothy Davis, 34, was carrying their two-year-old in his kayak. They both drowned. The mom and her two oldest children made it to safety.

On May 19th, two kayakers were found dead on the Class I North Fork of the Shenandoah in Virginia. Firefighters responding to reports of an "overturned kayak" found them in the river below Cootes Store. Both were dead, no life jackets were in use, and no one saw what happened. On June 26th Jessica Prado disappeared after her double kayak flipped on a Class I section of the Kootenai River near Libby, Montana. Her partner last saw Ms. Prado, 40, struggling on an eddyline before she slipped underwater. Her body was found two days later.

Five other recreational kayaking deaths occurred at low-head dams. Only one of these accidents was witnessed; four involved solo paddlers. On January 14th, Andrew Locash ran the Patriot Hydropower Dam on the Black River in Leyden, NY. The weather was awful and it's not clear why he was on the water in these harsh conditions. Then, on April 16th, Solomon Shirley, 22, and Marcus Robinson, 30, ran the Emrichville Dam on the White River in Indianapolis, Indiana. Their kayaks were found downstream; their bodies turned up several days later.

On April 29th, Tony Luongo, 69, set out on the Schulkill River near his home in Bridgeport, Pennsylvania. His boat and gear were later found at the base of a downstream dam. A social media post showed him wearing a life jacket that was later picked up downstream. His body was recovered three days later. On May 4th, a 17-year-old man was fishing from his kayak when he flipped at Kenter's Mill Dam on Tennessee's Sequachie River. It's not clear from the news articles whether he washed over the dam or was pulled into the hydraulic from downstream. Bystanders saw him tumbling in the backwash but were unable to assist. Lastly, a kayak owned by Justin Linkeman was found on the Upper Iowa River below a low-head dam on May 18th. There were no witnesses to the accident. His body was found ten days later.

In other incidents, Shawn McWhorter, 44, died on January 28th after his kayak capsized in Seeley Creek near Southport, NY. He was unresponsive when pulled from the icy water. On May 19th, Judy Henderson-Bailey, 69, died on Arkansas' Buffalo River a mile above the Carver access. She hit a strainer, flipped, and was pinned underwater. Local paddlers said that the low water made the tree harder to avoid. On May 21st, when Sugar Creek in Arkansas rose suddenly from 3.8 to 13.6 feet, Christopher Jaglin was seen launching a kayak with fishing gear. Mr. Jaglin, 59, was alone, so no one saw what happened. He was almost certainly caught by the rising water. His body was found three days later. Lastly, Jacob Jackson, 50, was killed after he and his kayak washed into a ferry on Oregon's Willamette River. There are no rapids here, just moving water, but Mr. Jackson was unable to maneuver his boat in the current.

Canoeing Accident

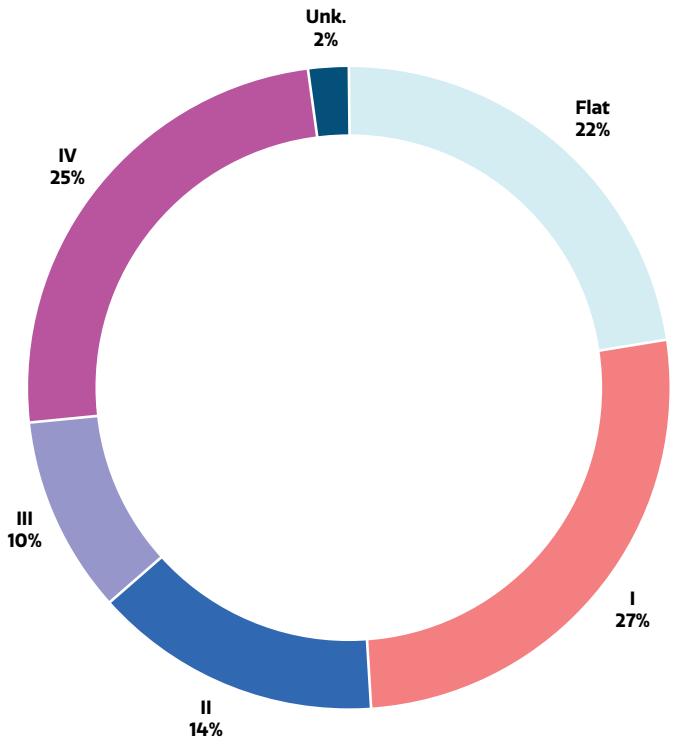
Curtain Falls is a steep, 20-foot cascade between Iron Lake and Crooked Lake in the Boundary Waters Canoe Area (BCWA) of northern Minnesota. Since the BWCA contains mostly flatwater lakes, many who paddle there aren't prepared for fast water. Four people in two canoes were fishing above the drop when one boat broached and capsized in the current. The second canoe moved in to help and flipped. Everyone washed over the falls. Jesse Haugen, 41, and Reis Grams, 40, drowned; another paddler sustained serious injuries. Life vests were not in use; one canoe was recovered with life jackets strapped inside.

Rafting Accidents

Four rafting accidents involved paddlers who were not wearing life vests. On May 16th, a 24-year-old man in a "homemade pontoon raft" capsized in the Snake River south of Idaho Falls. News video shows fast water and Class I-II, big water rapids. Two friends who were with him got ashore and called 911. California's Lower American River near Rancho Cordova is a popular Class I float trip. On June 15th Zongchar Moua, 34, was part of a large group when he fell out of his raft here and did not resurface. They found his body the next day.

One boat trips carry similar risks to solo paddling. On June 1st, a Class II section of the Colorado River below Gore Canyon was running high at 4500 cfs. At this level, the hole at Yarmony Rapids becomes quite large and powerful. Brent Boulter, 56, Thomas Russel, 61, and a third person were in a raft that flipped in the hole. No one was wearing a life vest. Mr. Boulter was recovered by others, but CPR was not successful. Mr. Russell is still missing. A similar scenario played out again on Oregon's Rogue River below the Wild and Scenic Stretch. On June 22nd, Mary Kohn, 68, was rafting with three other people and a dog. Again, no life jackets were worn. They flipped in Two Mile Rapids (Class II). The others managed to right the boat, but Ms. Kohn drowned.

Properly fitted life vests save lives. Always wear your own and when you see people on the river without them it's ok to let them know that they should also be wearing one! There were two pinning incidents in rafts. John Brewer, a well-known journalist, died after his raft capsized on a log jam in Montana's Bitterroot River on April 19th. Three men were fishing from a raft; two swam to safety, but Mr. Brewer, 76, was pinned under-



water. On June 27th, a pinning on Utah's Green River in Lodore Canyon claimed the life of a 54-year-old Salt Lake City firefighter. Michael Harp was pinned underneath his raft in Hell's Half Mile (Class IV). When the group unpinned the raft, Mr. Harp's life vest was pulled off. He floated free and disappeared. His body was found by a commercial outfitter the next day.

Vilis J. "Butch" Zigurs, 74, died after his boat capsized at the Basalt Whitewater Park (CO) on the Roaring Fork River on June 8. He was in a small cataraft with rotomolded pontoons. The water level was high and flush drowning was the likely cause of death. A local paddler had these comments: "At high water, it becomes a terrifying hole. There have been many problems resulting from unprepared rafters floating into the feature. The rest of the river is Class II-III so people often do not expect to encounter a giant hole."

There were four commercial rafting fatalities in the first six months of this year. On April 4th, the New River Gorge was running at 15,000 cfs, a high level, but well below the commercial cutoff. A 14' raft with a family of four dump-trucked at the Mouth Wave in Middle Keaney. The guide and one guest stayed in the boat, but the others swam. As the guide worked to recover his swimming guests they washed into the right side of Lower Keaney, hit a large hole, and flipped. Two safety boaters and a second raft recovered the swimmers, but by the time they reached the father at the top of Dudley's Dip, he was unresponsive. They held onto him through this short rapid and brought him ashore, but CPR was not successful.

On May 30th a commercial raft pinned on a bridge abutment on Colorado's Cache la Poudre River. Ciara Byrne, 20, died after she was pinned between a bridge pylon and her raft. Her guide attempted to cut through the boat to get to her, could not hold on, and flushed downstream. It took some time to get her free. June 24th saw another bridge pier collision, this time in a Class I section of Montana's Bitterroot River. This was a guided fishing trip. Three people were thrown into the water after the collision. Roger Booth, 76, was unconscious when brought ashore by the two survivors. Resuscitation efforts began at once but ultimately failed.

There was a guided rafting accident on Alaska's Nenana River on June 24th. Four people fell out of a raft in Class IV Cable Car Rapid. Three swimmers were recovered quickly, but the fourth, a 67-year-old woman, was unresponsive. She was chased down and recovered within 90 seconds and pulled aboard just above the next rapid. CPR began quickly and continued as the rafters paddled hard for the takeout. First responders met them 45 minutes later and pronounced the woman dead.

Paddleboard and Driftboat Deaths

A 17-year-old woman died after falling from her paddleboard on the Colorado River near Grand Junction on June 1st. She was using a paddleboard leash attached to her ankle. Photos of the area show fast current, but no rapids. She was attached to the board with an ankle tether that snagged; when she could

not release it, she was held underwater. The force of the current tore her life vest off. This accident shows, once again, the dangers posed by ankle tethers in fast water. If you can't get to a tether to release in an emergency, you could die.

On June 22nd a Class II section of the Upper Colorado was running at 13,000 cfs. Dino Hole turns into a monster at these high levels. Matt Clemente was paddling a drift boat with his brother, wife, three children, and a dog. He saw the hole and tried to avoid it, but could not. He wasn't wearing a life vest when his boat violently capsized. His family made it to safety, but Mr. Clemente could not be found.

Miscellaneous Fatal Mishaps

A man and his dog went missing after attempting to take a crude wooden raft down Arizona's Grand Canyon. Thomas Robinson, 56, left his vehicle at Lee's Ferry on April 26th. A photo of the "raft" that Mr. Robinson used in his attempt shows just a few long planks assembled together, along with a paddle and life vest. His body was discovered several weeks later near river mile six. There is no information about the dog.

A man drowned on May 28th while attempting to recover a pinned boat in Class III Deschenes rapids on Canada's Ottawa River. Deschenes Rapid is famous for the spring season Ruins Wave. The boat was pinned several days earlier, and the paddlers made it safely ashore. The man who was trying to retrieve the craft tied one end of a rope around his waist and the other to a tree. When he waded out into the fast, waist-deep water he lost his footing and the rope pulled him underwater. The man was wearing a life jacket, but sadly, there was no one nearby to release the rope. A fire rescue team recovered his body.

A pontoon boat of a type popular on lakes and reservoirs washed over the spillway of a reservoir, carrying 46-year-old Jerry Whaley to his death. At 10,200 feet, Stillwater Reservoir on the Bear River is in the upper part of Colorado's Yampa River watershed. The spillway drop is substantial; the creek below the spillway is small and steep with lots of downed trees. Witnesses say that wind gusts pushed Mr. Whaley towards the spillway, and then a strong current pulled him over the lip.

Close Calls and Injuries

A very experienced boater who was driving along the Upper Nantahala River on January 26th saw a kayaker, one of a group of four, flip and fail to roll or bail out. Seeing that the rest of the group was way ahead, he parked his car, unloaded his boat, and ran the rapid. He found the kayaker recirculating in an eddy upside down. He quickly pulled the man from his boat and got him ashore. He checked for a pulse, removed the victim's life jacket, and started CPR. Members of the man's group arrived to help. After about 20 seconds the victim started expelling water and coughing. The rescuer told the group that the man needed to be transported to a hospital and evaluated. He asked if the party needed help getting him to the road, and when they said they could manage it, he retreated to his car to warm up. No names were exchanged.

On May 3rd, veteran guide Phil Coleman had a very close call at Tombstone Rock on Maryland's Upper Youghiogheny River. His words describe what happened: "Tombstone Rock is a clamshell-shaped rock on river left in F*** Up Falls Rapid. The clamshell faces upstream. It has been the scene of a previous fatality on the Upper Yough. My shredder went up against the tombstone…I was reaching across the boat for the chicken line when the boat pitched up and I rolled out of the upstream side…I landed in the undercut. It was a hard hit. Very hard. The hardest hit I have ever taken in my life. I was underwater. I could not move… I could see that my feet were breaking the surface but my head was totally underwater. I brought my legs up in the air and somersaulted in slow motion. Maybe better said, a cartwheel. At this time my head dropped deeper into the undercut and found a head-sized hole in the river bottom. It was terrifying. I followed through with the cartwheel and slowly came free of the clutches of the tombstone. I washed out and stood up in chest-deep water. I gasped for air. My back was in pain. But it didn't matter. I was alive."

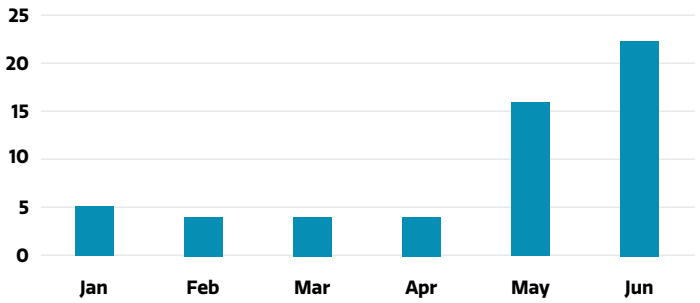
On May 16th two 19-year-old recreational kayakers with no life jackets or helmets miraculously survived a run of Great Falls on the Potomac. They ran the Maryland side of the falls. The river was at four feet; the Maryland lines are usually run at lower levels. They went over Pummel, a Class V+, and came out of their boat. Video shows a recreation kayak being recirculated in the top drop of Pummel. One of the boys got himself to a rock near the Maryland shore; he was later evacuated with a serious head injury. The other washed through the entire rapid unscathed.

A man narrowly escaped death this past May after he was thrown from his raft at Dagger Falls on Idaho's Middle Fork of the Salmon River. Thomas Gray, 73, was running solo. After a close call with a strainer on Marsh Creek, he decided to make up for lost time by running, rather than portaging, Dagger Falls. Bad idea! Mr. Gray got to shore safely but lost his boat, food, and gear. Since the road to the falls was closed due to snow there was no one to help nearby. After waiting a few days by the river to connect with a passing trip, he started to hike out Bear Valley Road. After four days without food and hiking 21 miles he could go no further, and he collapsed. Fortunately, an outfitter driving along the road spotted him and provided help.

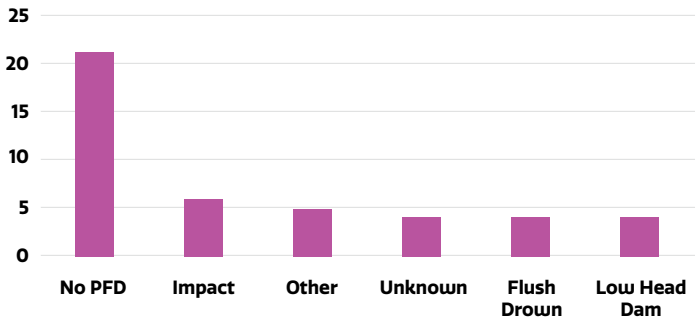
On June 2nd, a very experienced Alaskan kayaker had a close call on Tincan Creek, a small Class III-IV stream on the Kenai Peninsula. Here's his account:

"My friend goes down to an eddy and I can't see the next drop. He waits and I peel out. We had scouted the entire gorge and expected it to be clean. Turning the corner I quickly realize that the entire river routes into a river-wide snow dam. I cannot stop. There are no eddies and I become horribly pinned. I've been in caves, hydraulics, and a lot of horrible close calls, but this is unreal. I can't move. I'm pressed against ice, I have an air bubble, and the water begins to push against me hard. I try to move but can't. I'm shoved ten feet under a snow dam,

2024 Incidents/Month



2024 Top Five Accident Causes



my partner doesn't know, he can't hear me, and there is no hope for rescue. I literally cannot move a single muscle. At this point, it really hits home that I'm going to die here. The water has risen above my mouth and I take a final breath…then some ice shifts. I flush out in my boat and see light. I pull my skirt and immediately pin against a rock sideways. I grapple myself up, and I'm standing in a collapsed section of the snow dam, pushing against the entrance to another snow dam. I hold on, blow my whistle a million times, and start shouting. My partner came through the snow dam, he spent 30 seconds in there and was punching the ice trying to get out. I think I cleared the way for him. There's a part of Class V kayaking that doesn't get the spotlight. You can be doing everything right and have everything go wrong."

On June 2nd, three men from Texas bought a cheap raft and decided to run Wyoming's Class IV Shoshone River below Buffalo Bill Reservoir. The water level was very high, 4500 cfs. Their boat flipped in Class IV+ Iron Curtain Rapid. Two of the rafters made it to shore, but a third man was missing. He was later located downstream, stranded in a small cave. His life jacket had been torn off! Local kayakers Kevin Kennedy and Scott Stingley, working with the rescue squad, brought him with a life vest and warm clothing and got him to safety.

On June 7th, there was an epic rescue and resuscitation on Oh Be Joyful Creek, in Colorado. There are three falls on this run. The put-in drop is 15 feet, then there is an eight-foot drop, then a 23-foot drop. In between the eight-foot drop and 23-foot drop, there is a slide that ends in a hole called the "Speed Trap." Mr. Bruner was caught in that hole. He flipped, hit his head, and recirculated before floating free. Downstream kayakers grabbed him at the brink of the big 23-foot waterfall. CPR was administered, 911 was called, and first responders arrived quickly. He was flown to Grand Junction by helicopter and has since made a full recovery."

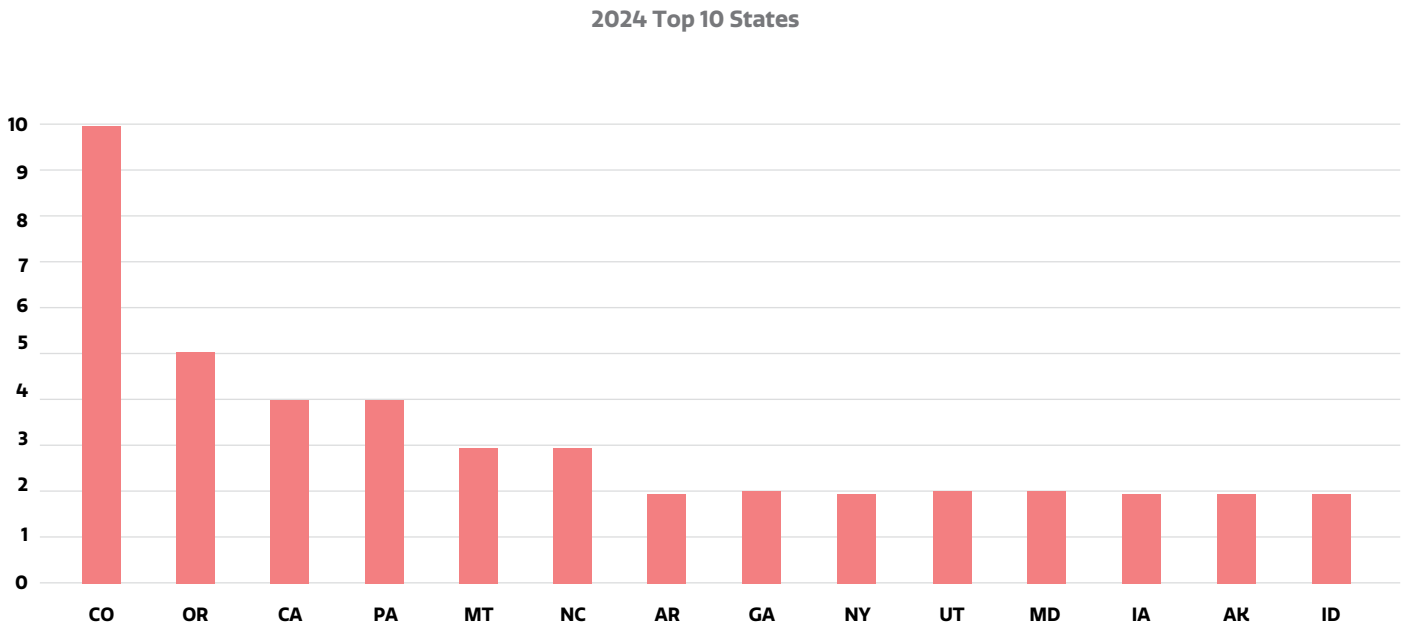
There was a tough evacuation in North Carolina's Green River Gorge. On June 16th, Sam Taylor ran Pencil Sharpener, flipped in the flume, and hit his neck. He rolled up and ran Scream Machine and Niece's Pieces before eddying out. When his friends got to him he reported bad neck pain and tingling in his fingers. He felt like he was going to pass out. The group took a very cautious approach. Stabilizing his head and neck, they got him out of his boat and onto a stretcher that was stashed nearby. EMS was contacted, and together they made the very difficult carry out of the gorge. Doctors found no broken bones, and he was doing much better the next day.

There was a flash flood in Utah's San Juan River on June 21st. The river rose ten feet, from 1100 cfs to 20,700 cfs, after heavy rains. Lime Creek went from three feet deep to 30 feet deep in minutes. A group of 23 was caught at the Lime Creek Camp during the flood. They got out safely but lost everything. People at several other camps (Oljeto, Steer Gulch, and Grand Gulch) lost boats and gear. The Park Service evacuated everyone.

On June 23rd, a group of lake kayakers got a nasty surprise when they paddled above the Foster Reservoir into the gorge of Washington's Middle Santiam River. The water level was very low until Green Peters Dam released 1000 cfs, creating Class III+ whitewater that the group was unprepared to handle. They lost boats and were stranded in the gorge. They did not have shoes, and several people lacked life jackets. Fortunately, they were able to contact EMS, which sent a team to extract them.

Why We Collect Accident Reports

While almost all of the comments we get about AW's accident reporting are positive, there are a few people who feel it's



unhealthy to talk about death on the river. One recent correspondent told me not to ask for accident information online to avoid "triggering" family, friends, and others who have experienced a tragedy.

To that I plead guilty. I want these reports to "trigger" in paddlers a thoughtful evaluation of what they are doing. River running is such a joyful experience that it's easy to forget about the risks until something bad happens. Preplanning and vigilance help us lower the risks, avoid problems, and keep the good times coming.

When I read accounts of accidents, I ask myself if it should affect my paddling. Is my gear good? Is my judgment sound? Am I taking the right precautions? Am I prepared for rescue? As I got older, I needed to reevaluate. I hope that honest self-evaluation will help me avoid a serious mishap.

Not everyone benefits from reading these reports. If you are naturally cautious and sensitive, they may be too upsetting to be helpful. If a friend or family member has been involved in an accident, it may be painful to recount what occurred. At the other extreme, some paddlers have a very high risk tolerance. Some might call them reckless. Use your knowledge to find a personal comfort level. ■

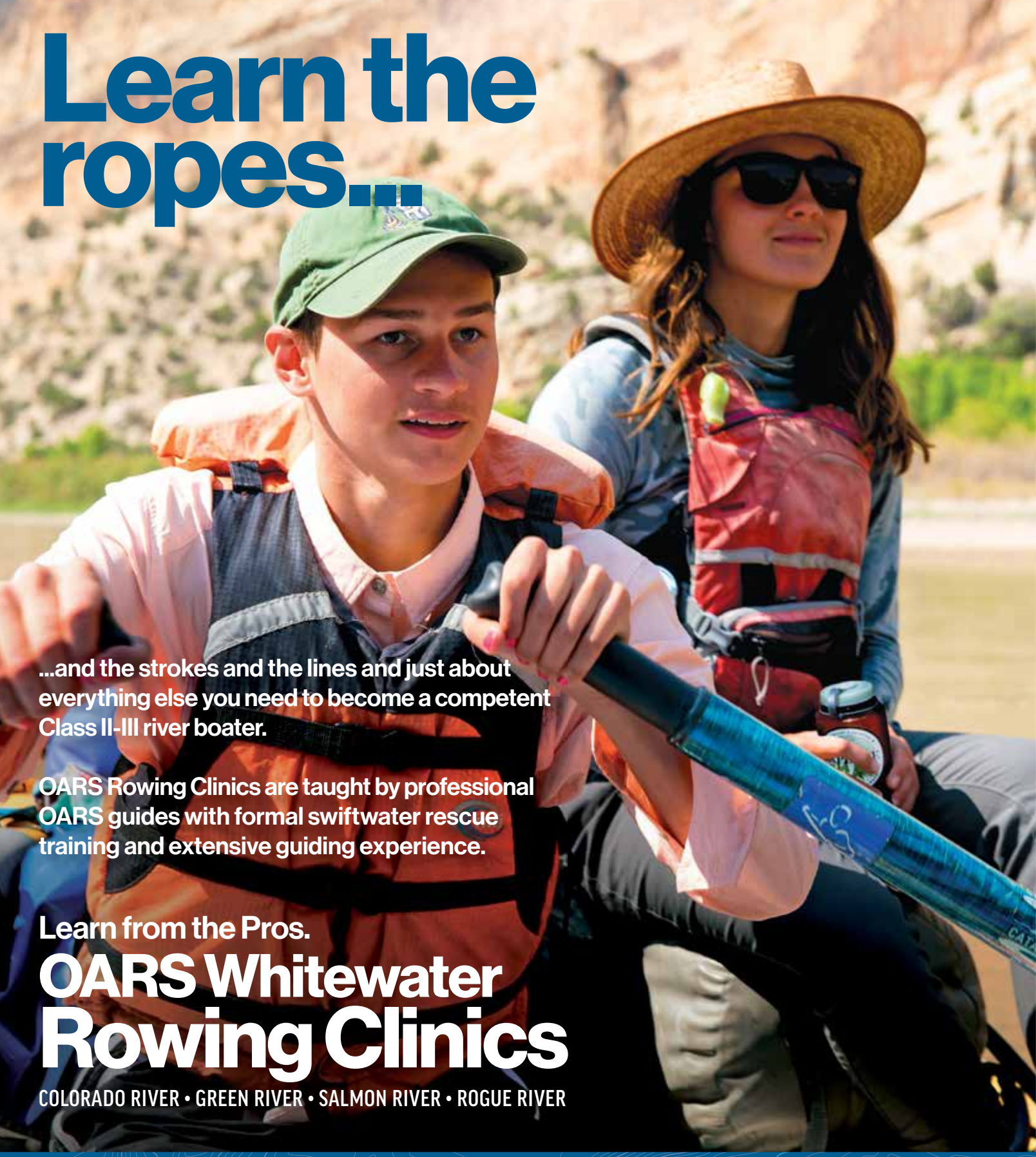
YOU CAN HELP!

American Whitewater needs your help to gather accident reports to share with other boaters. First-person accounts from experienced paddlers, newspaper articles, and online posts are all useful. Since media accounts are often inaccurate or incomplete, clarifying comments from paddlers familiar with the area are super helpful. And while serious incidents among skilled whitewater paddlers are quite rare, they help us learn how to avoid trouble and better manage emergencies. Accurate accounts of accidents also help keep malicious rumors at bay, something to consider in this age of irresponsible internet gossip.

Your report will also be entered into the AW Accident Database, the largest collection of moving water accidents in the world, Over 2300 entries spanning 48 years have been sent in by whitewater paddlers. While not complete, it provides AW with an excellent snapshot of river problems nationwide. This helps refine AW's safety message and gives them credibility when interacting with government agencies on your behalf. Your story helps strengthen the paddling community and keep us safer.

To report a whitewater accident, near miss, or serious injury, go to the Safety Page on americanwhitewater.org, click "report an accident", and enter the information. Or you can email me at ccwalbridge@cs.com or message "Charlie Walbridge" on Facebook.

Feel free to share newspaper articles, chat room posts, or even rumors! Although I'm not an "investigator" I can often use sketchy reports as a lead to find out what happened. Everything I receive is posted on the American Whitewater Accident Database Facebook Page. I can also help you prepare or edit an accident report if needed.



Put in at **oars.com/rowing-clinics**

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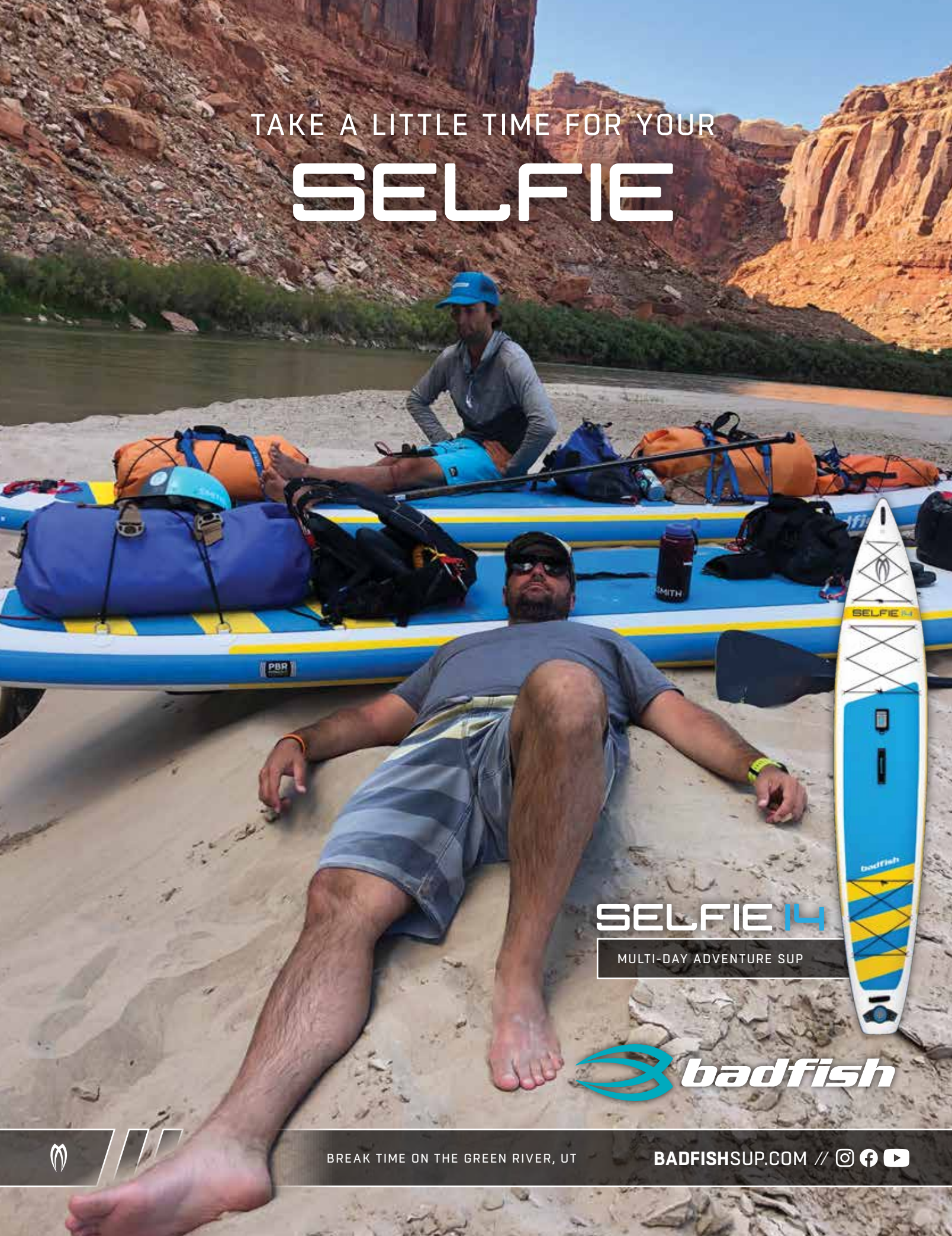
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