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Megi Morishita at U Turn rapid on the Hamma Hamma River, Olympic Peninsula, WA.

Photo by Thomas O’Keefe

COLUMNS
5  The Journey Ahead by Mark Singleton
43  Safety by Charlie Walbridge
50  Remembrance by Paul McCune
51  Letters by Spencer R. Schlosnagle

STEWARDSHIP
6  Join AW for the Feather Fest! by Dave Steindorf
7  California Update: Pit River Flows by Megan Hooker
9  Montana Streams Overdue for Protection by Kevin Colburn
9  Sullivan Creek Next Among Dam Removals by Kevin Colburn
10  Protecting the Wild Olympics by Thomas O’Keefe

FEATURE ARTICLES
River Chronicles
12  The Amazing Story of How a Bunch of Boaters Became Million-dollar Developers by David Hurst

International Paddling
20  Blind Adventurer Erik Weihenmayer Kayaks Biggest River in Mexico by Rocky Contos

Wilderness Paddling
26  Solitary Boating in the Wilderness by Gary Barker

Road Trip
30  Money Well Spent: A Bus Biography by Stephen Strange

How I got Started
36  All I Ever Wanted by Don Simmon

Competition
39  Crossing the Line by Juliet V. Edmundson
RIVER STEWARDSHIP: AN INTEGRATED APPROACH

Our mission: “To conserve and restore America’s whitewater resources 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. The only national organization representing the interest of all whitewater paddlers, American Whitewater is the national voice for thousands of individual whitewater enthusiasts, as well as over 100 local paddling club affiliates. AW’s River Stewardship program adheres to the four tenets of our mission statement:

CONSERVATION: AW’s professional staff works closely with volunteers and partner organizations to protect the ecological and scenic values of all whitewater rivers. These goals are accomplished through direct participation in public decision-making processes, grassroots advocacy, coalition building, empowerment of volunteers, public outreach and education, and, when necessary, legal action.

RIVER ACCESS: To assure public access to whitewater rivers pursuant to the guidelines published in its official Access Policy, AW arranges for river access through private lands by negotiation or purchase, seeks to protect the right of public passage on all rivers and streams navigable by kayak or canoe, encourages equitable and responsible management of whitewater rivers on public lands, and works with government agencies and other river users to achieve these goals.

SAFETY: AW promotes paddling safely, publishes reports on whitewater accidents, maintains a uniform national ranking system for whitewater rivers (the International Scale of Whitewater Difficulty) and publishes and disseminates the internationally-recognized American Whitewater Safety Code.

EDUCATION: AW shares information with the general public and the paddling community regarding whitewater rivers, as well as river recreation, conservation, access, and safety. This is accomplished through our bimonthly AW Journal, a monthly e-news, americanwhitewater.org, paddling events, educational events, and through direct communication with the press.

Together, AW staff, members, volunteers, and affiliate clubs can achieve our goals of conserving, protecting and restoring Americas whitewater resources and enhancing opportunities to safely enjoy these wonderful rivers.

AW was incorporated under Missouri nonprofit corporation laws in 1961 and maintains its principal mailing address at PO Box 1540, Cullowhee, NC 28723; phone 1-866-BOAT-4-AW (1-866-262-8429). AW is tax exempt under Section 501 (c) (3) of the Internal Revenue Service.
Welcome to the September/October issue of the American Whitewater Journal. Summer has managed to fly by and the days are getting shorter as we head into the fall boating season. Over the summer American Whitewater introduced a new Regional River Stewardship Director to work on river issues unfolding in the Northeast.

American Whitewater is pleased to announce the hiring of Alan Panebaker as our new Northeast Stewardship Director. In this position, Alan will oversee American Whitewater’s regional stewardship projects including advocating for flow restoration in hydropower negotiations, state and federal policy affecting rivers, public land management, and community recreation planning. Alan comes to American Whitewater with a Juris Doctor (JD) and a Masters in Environmental Law and Policy from Vermont Law School, as well as a B.A in Journalism from the University of Montana. He has experience working in both the journalism and environmental law fields, and possesses a deep knowledge of the regional rivers and paddling community. Alan got a taste of American Whitewater’s work firsthand as a participant in the Green River Flow Study on October of 2011, not far from his home in Vermont.

Alan’s love of the outdoors stems from growing up in a National Park Service family.

He lived in or near five different parks growing up, including Glacier National Park, Yosemite, Wrangell-St. Elias and the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. Please join me in extending a heartfelt welcome to Alan Panebaker. Expect to hear more about river stewardship projects in the Northeast within the pages of the Journal in the months to come.

This new American Whitewater regional stewardship position brings our small but growing staff to 10 people strategically scattered around the country. We now conduct stewardship efforts from home offices in California, Oregon, Washington, Montana, Colorado, North Carolina, and Vermont.

Gauley Festival, September 14 – 16, 2012

Established in 1983 to celebrate the derailment of a hydroelectric project that would have disrupted the flows on West Virginia’s Gauley River, Gauley Fest has grown to become the largest river festival in the world. The festival is a showcase for American Whitewater and the top whitewater vendors in the boating community. Gauley Fest is also American Whitewater’s largest fundraising event every year. All proceeds from the festival support American Whitewater’s national stewardship work. For those who have never attended, Gauley Fest features live entertainment, a whitewater marketplace, a raffle, and a silent auction where participants can pick up some awesome outdoor gear at great prices. Come out and join us for a weekend of great paddling, exciting camaraderie, live entertainment, killer boat raffles, and the American Whitewater membership drive.

One note about Gauley Festival, the local Summersville police department take its speed limit seriously; please drive at or below the limit through Summersville and have fun on the river.

Feather River Festival, September 21 – 23, 2012

The 22nd Annual Chico Paddleheads benefit for American Whitewater, Feather River Festival, takes place in California on September 21 - 23. Event organizers are expecting whitewater paddlers from across the country to come out to support American Whitewater and celebrate one of the most iconic rivers on the west coast. With something to offer boaters of all preferences and skill sets—from flatwater and Class I/II to Class III, IV, and V—the event is a perfect way for the whole family to experience and enjoy the Feather River. Ten years ago the first recreational releases took place on the North Fork Feather as a requirement of a new hydroelectric power license that was being applied for by the utility. The staff and volunteers of American Whitewater, Chico PaddleHeads, and Shasta Paddlers spent more than five years and thousands of hours negotiating through the hydropower relicensing process to make recreational releases happen on the Feather. Now the boating community has a great river to enjoy, thanks to those releases, as well as a wonderful event to celebrate their many years of hard work.

Wherever your boating adventures take you this fall, please remember that American Whitewater’s river stewardship program is made possible through your membership support. We continue to appreciate the importance of rivers and their role in supporting the health and well being of the paddling community. At American Whitewater, we remain committed to giving back to these special places through river stewardship.

See you on the river,

Mark Singleton
Executive Director, American Whitewater
OVER THE PAST several years, the Feather River Festival has become one of the most popular river events on the West Coast. While the growth of this event is fairly recent, the event itself has been going on for quite some time. The original incarnation of the Festival dates back to the 1980s. At its core, Feather Fest was just a group of friends running the river and then getting together to have some fun after the paddling was done. It was originally called the “Belden Bash,” named for the small resort town located on the North Fork of the Feather River where the evening festivities would take place, and occurred in the spring when there were reliable flows down the East Branch of the North Fork Feather River.

That all changed in 2002 after American Whitewater successfully negotiated releases on the Rock Creek and Cresta reaches of the North Feather. As part of this agreement, PG&E releases water on the 4th weekend of July, August, and September. In wet years an additional release occurs in the month of October. While the festival has grown substantially in size over the past several years, it is still, true to its core, a chance for people to get together to go paddling, see old friends, and meet new ones.

This year, the 22nd annual Feather River Festival will be held during scheduled releases on September 21-23, 2012. The fundraiser for American Whitewater is hosted by the local paddling club, the Chico Paddleheads. The benefit event will be held at the Indian Jim School campground located two miles upstream from the small town of Tobin and one mile upstream from Tobin Vista. Free camping and ample parking are available.

The Feather Fest will once again include a film festival on Friday night. Films will include winners from the National Paddling Film Festival and the latest films from local paddling filmmakers. In the past, we have had the honor of showing new films by Rush Sturgess, Ben Stookesberry, Shasta Boys and others.

Saturday’s festivities will include a free Class II slalom course appropriate for all ages and skill levels, and available for a variety of craft: kayaks, whitewater canoes, and IKs. The slalom race will be located at the Indian Jim School Campground and will be held from noon to 3 pm. There will also be a downriver race on the Tobin stretch Saturday afternoon beginning at Tobin Vista. For both races, inquire at the campground benefit headquarters for information and signup.

The benefit party with live music, food, and beverages will begin at 6 pm Saturday night at the Indian Jim School, adjacent to the campground. You won’t want to miss the raffle prizes, race prizes, and silent auction items!

The Rock Creek/Tobin releases will occur beginning Saturday morning through noon on Sunday. The Rock Creek reach is a Class III run appropriate for rafts, IKs, and kayaks and the Indian Jim Campground is the perfect take-out. Below the campground is the Class V Tobin reach followed by the Class IV “Lowbin” reach. There are also flatwater and Class I/II sections available all weekend.

Bring the whole family to enjoy, celebrate, and support the work American Whitewater has done to ensure regular, recreational whitewater releases on this amazing, classic California river!! For more information see: www.chicopaddleheads.org
In California, American Whitewater takes a collaborative approach whenever we can. Sometimes, however, we need to use stronger tools. This summer, AW sent FERC, PG&E, and the Fish and Wildlife Service a letter giving them 60 Days Notice of Intent to Sue for violating the Endangered Species Act on the Pit 1 Hydroelectric Project.

In 2010, the number of boatable days through the Pit River Canyon on California’s Pit River went from six to zero. That year, federal agencies cancelled summer flushing flows on the Pit 1 Hydroelectric Project. They were concerned that the flows were harming the endangered Shasta crayfish, which can only be found in the Pit River drainage. Populations throughout the area have been in perilous decline for decades, and the species became a federally listed endangered species in 1988.

The Pit River, like most in Northern California, is plumbed and plugged, diverted and dammed. Between Fall River Mills and the Bridge at Highway 299, PG&E’s Pit 1 Hydroelectric Project has a heavy influence on the river. The Pit and its main tributary, the Fall River, are primarily fed by cold springs. This spring water created coldwater habitat for river dwelling species like the Shasta crayfish and gave the river the potential for 365 boatable days per year. Today, however, the Project diverts about 90% of the flow from the Fall River, and returns it to the system at the Pit 1 Powerhouse, about seven miles downstream.

The summer flushing flows were primarily designed to improve water quality, and also provided a recreation opportunity on the river.
American Whitewater was a key player in negotiating the terms of the FERC license for the project, which was issued in 2003, and agreed to its terms and conditions with the understanding that there would be at least six boatable days in the summer, with the potential for four more in the fall (fall recreation flows finally started in 2011). When talk of changing long-negotiated license conditions came up, American Whitewater wanted to be part of the process. Unfortunately, we were shut out of the discussions and denied any opportunity to meet with resource agencies.

AW works not only to provide recreation opportunities, but also to improve the health of the whole river where we can. We certainly have no interest in enjoying a river at the expense of any riparian species, but when recreation flows are blamed for the decline in any species, we look very carefully at the situation. We’ve seen the situation time and again, and usually, with some pushback and research, it often comes to light that other factors are to blame. In the case of the Pit, Shasta crayfish populations throughout the region are plummeting—the majority of which are located in areas where summer flushing flows do not take place.

The Pit 1 and Hat Creek Hydroelectric Projects have been operating for seven years without the necessary permits required by the Endangered Species Act. Additionally, resource agencies have failed to take a hard look at how the entire project impacts the endangered Shasta crayfish. American Whitewater believes it is fair to scrutinize the impacts of the flushing flows/whitewater releases as long as the rest of the project is also assessed. This approach goes beyond what’s fair—it’s required by law.

We are hopeful that the parties will agree to meet with us to come to an agreeable solution that balances hydropower, endangered species, and recreation. The 60-Day time period will likely be up around the time this issue of the Journal gets into your hands. For updates, visit http://www.americanwhitewater.org/content/Project/view/id/pit

California Stewardship Director Dave Steindorf guides a crew down the Pit during the October 2011 recreational releases. Photo by Susan Hollingsworth
Montana has four Wild and Scenic Rivers. Four. In recent years the roster of designated rivers has grown in Idaho, Wyoming, Oregon, Washington, and other nearby states, but Montana remains stuck at four. At the same time Montana is seeing new hydropower threats, oil and gas development, and new mine proposals. We have been meeting with the Forest Service to improve the agency’s roster of streams they deem eligible for Wild and Scenic designation. Paddlers have played an instrumental role in this process because we know rivers extremely well and are good at documenting their values. We have also started talking with Montanans of all stripes about how they use rivers and what they value about them. It is our hope that these conversations will gain momentum and become an authentic grassroots movement for protecting more rivers in Montana. We’ll keep you posted!

Olympian Chris Ennis exploring Montana’s upper Swan River as part of an effort to document the river’s outstanding recreational and scenic values.

Sullivan Creek is located as far north and east as you can get in Washington State, and boasts miles of cold, clear, fish habitat. It also sports one heck of a whitewater canyon. AW protested a federal decision that would have yielded federal jurisdiction over the defunct Millpond Dam—and won. Our win triggered negotiations that got really creative and exciting. The fate of the dam was secured in 2010 when we signed a settlement agreement with the power company and other stakeholders. Permits are now falling into place like clockwork and the removal of the dam is scheduled for 2015.

Kyle “Smitty” Smith between drops in the deep dark Sullivan Creek Canyon.
Over 20 years ago, American Whitewater’s Conservation Committee met to discuss river conservation opportunities, and identified Wild and Scenic designation for rivers of Washington’s Olympic Peninsula as a priority. With several feet of precipitation each year and over two dozen major river systems in a small geographic area, the region is a special place for whitewater enthusiasts.

The steep gradient of the Olympic Mountains produces challenging whitewater as the rivers cascade down to the ocean, while the towering forests contribute to exceptional water quality that defines the experience of what it means to enjoy a Wild and Scenic river. In May 2012, the vision of bringing permanent protection to these precious rivers took a major step toward becoming a reality when Representatives Norm Dicks and Senator Patty Murray introduced legislation to designate Wilderness and Wild and Scenic Rivers on the Olympic Peninsula.

As recently as the 1980s, over 50 hydropower projects were proposed on the Olympic Peninsula. Some of the “best sites” for hydropower, such as Elkhorn Canyon on the Dosewallips, were aggressively pursued through the 1990s. The Elkhorn Project was defeated through a landmark Supreme Court decision that upheld the State of Washington’s ability to impose instream flow requirements under the Clean Water Act. The Court wrote that “there is recognition in the Clean Water Act itself that reduced stream flow, i.e., diminishment of water quantity, can constitute water pollution.”

We have learned all too well that old hydroelectric projects die hard. New proposals for hydropower development in other parts of the state are popping up, including ones at Sunset Falls on the Skykomish and at Ernie’s Gorge on the North Fork Snoqualmie. It’s only a matter of time before a new generation of developers starts dusting off proposals for hydropower development on the Olympic Peninsula.

In light of the need to protect these rivers, American Whitewater welcomed the opportunity when local conservation groups invited us to participate in shaping a conservation vision for the wild rivers and their adjoining forests on the Olympic Peninsula. The Wild Olympics Campaign Coalition was guided by a founding vision that it’s more economically viable to protect what we have than to spend energy
and resources restoring what we have lost. With $350 million going toward the removal of the Elwha Dams and restoration of the Elwha River, one need not look far to realize that protecting healthy rivers and the ecosystem services they provide is a smart investment.

Over a period of three years, and with support from the Conservation Alliance, corporate partners (most notably Cascade Designs, Keen Footwear, and Patagonia), and our members, American Whitewater served in a leadership capacity to develop a proposal for Wild and Scenic River designations. Our efforts complemented the work of wilderness advocates who sought to provide long-term protection for roadless areas of Olympic National Forest.

We refined our vision as we participated in dozens of community meetings and public forums. Fortunately, these years of effort led to an announcement by Representative Dicks and Senator Murray in November 2011 of their draft Olympic Watershed Protection Proposal. The proposal represented a historic milestone for Olympic Peninsula river conservation. New Wilderness designations proposed for over 130,000 acres of Olympic National Forest aim to give permanent protection to key ancient forest watersheds and protect incredible backcountry recreation destinations. Wild and Scenic River designations on 19 of the Peninsula’s rivers and their major tributaries propose to protect them from dams and other harmful water projects, and ensure that the outstandingly remarkable values, including whitewater recreation and salmon fisheries, are protected in perpetuity.

Following more public meetings and community feedback, Representative Norm Dicks and Senator Patty Murray introduced legislation in May of 2012 that included all of the Wild and Scenic rivers we had advocated for—a total of 464 river miles. When passed into law, their watershed conservation plan will finally give our ancient forests and free-flowing rivers the permanent and durable protection they deserve. These protections are critical not only for whitewater enthusiasts, but for the long-term health and recovery of Puget Sound, Hood Canal and the wild salmon, steelhead, and other wildlife that depend on the health of these water bodies.

We’d like to see the Wild Olympics Wilderness and Wild and Scenic Rivers Act of 2012 (H.R. 5995 and S. 3329) signed into law soon, and paddlers are urged to contact their Congressional representatives to urge passage of the bill. To learn more about the Wild Olympics Campaign, go to www.wildolympics.org.
THE AMAZING STORY OF HOW A BUNCH OF BOATERS BECAME MILLION-DOLLAR DEVELOPERS
BY DAVID HURST

A mid-June breeze gently nudged the green-and-white banner that read, “Welcome to the Stonycreek River of the Year Celebration.” All across sunlit Greenhouse Park, in Cumemaugh Township, near Johnstown, Pennsylvania, hundreds of people were marking the event in an atmosphere more akin to a leisurely Class I float than a lively Class IV paddle.

Within one pavilion a local cover band was playing some ‘70s rock, a food vendor offered a nice assortment of food and a couple of beers on tap. A large, wall-less tent next to the pavilion contained displays from the county conservation district, a water-monitoring group called “The Stream Team,” a conservancy, a Trout Unlimited chapter, and an environmental action group.

Nearer to the adjacent Stonycreek, an outfitter in another pavilion was displaying the usual assortment of paddles, splash tops,sprayskirts, and a line of boats sharing the name of a deceased pop singer. The local river-excursion business had its old school bus parked there, and a couple of its guides were lounging in blue duckies lying nearby.

Dozens of people of all ages were seated or standing atop the large riprap that lined the near bank of the Whitewater Park. Teenagers in bathing suits stood at the water’s edge, more to be seen than to get wet. Three beginning playboaters were taking turns with the stream-wide hydraulic, surfing and spinning, washing out and rolling. A few kids were swimming in the eddy.

Overall, the 10-acre scene was one of relaxed activity and restrained joy. But the day’s significance was not lost on Charlie Walbridge, a field rep for a national boating equipment and supply company who’s been on the Stony a number of times over the years.

“He’s not exaggerating. Life from death, multi-million-dollar property transactions, perseverance in the face of setbacks, snarls of red tape, inspiring community support and creative collaborations all play important roles in the story of the Stony.

And none of it would have happened but for a 30-year commitment by a small bunch of boaters.

The Benscreek Canoe Club

“We were a drinking club with a paddling problem,” recalled Mike Burk, the current president of the Benscreek Canoe Club, who also served as president for a number of years during the early 1990s. The club had formed a couple of decades earlier, when whitewater boating was becoming established within the Alleghenies and took its name from a tributary of the Stonycreek River, just a few miles south of Johnstown.

Back in the 1970s, the club’s only organized activity was an annual race on Bens Creek in early spring, when snowmelt made the pretty little Class I-II stream runnable. But

A crowd watches participants at Whitewater Park, just a few miles south of Johnstown, PA, during the freestyle competition at the 2012 Stonycreek Rendezvous.

Photo by Clark Fisher
by the end of the 1970s, the founding members were tired. Mike Ringler remembers being one of only two people who showed up for a pre-race planning meeting—and being handed the club’s materials in a box by a member who said, “We’re done with this bullshit.”

That was Ringler’s “election” to the club presidency. Under his leadership through the early ’80s, the club got a bit more organized and grew to 40-50 members, although more were social members than paddlers.

Around that time Bruce Penrod took over as president and, as the 1980s continued, club members’ skills and equipment improved. They started exploring other tributaries of the Stony and discovered much more challenging water: the Class III waters of Clear Shade, Shade and Quemahoning creeks; the Class III-IV Dark Shade, Stony Gorge and Stony Canyon; and the Class IV-V Paint and Roaring Fork creeks.

Although they kept their “Benscreek” name, club members spent most of their time on other waters—especially in the Stonycreek Canyon, a four-mile section of the river that contained 15 rapids, which earned names such as Three Sisters, Hydro, Beast, and Dislocation. As long as river levels remained around 3 feet or higher, they could enjoy the longest continuous series of rapids in the East.

But, typical of most Appalachian mountain streams, that was the rub. Such water levels were common during the winter and early spring then largely disappeared except for brief periods following rain.

Benscreek boaters embraced colder weather paddling and opportunistically jumped on the river during wet weather. They also looked longingly upriver to a dam containing a 12 billion-gallon reservoir and dreamed of water releases for whitewater boating.

The Que

Quemahoning Dam, which sits a mile upstream from where Quemahoning Creek empties into the Stonycreek River, was built for one reason: to provide water to the Bethlehem Steel Corporation’s thirsty mills in Johnstown during the steel manufacturing heyday. Although 100 years old now, even by today’s standards the reservoir is substantial, covering 900 acres and (now) permitted to provide up to 71 million gallons a day.

“Bethlehem Steel still was a very viable operation back [in the 1970s],” recalled Ringler. “Often we said, ‘Boy, it’d be nice to get some water from the Que.’ It was a pipe dream.”

But during the 1980s, with steelmaking on the decline, the Que had plenty of water to spare, and members of the Benscreek Canoe Club began to consider ways to turn the pipedream into reality. Pointing to the booming whitewater-centered business

Whitewater Park construction work was underway in 2007. Designed by Gary Lacy, the park was developed through funding provided by Pennsylvania DCNR and private foundations. A local landfill operator, Waste Management, Inc., provided $465,000 worth of rock, equipment and in-kind labor.

Photo by Clark Fisher
in nearby Ohiopyle, Pennsylvania, the boaters started telling anyone who would listen that regular water releases from Quemahoning Dam could lead to similar activity on the Stony.

“The emphasis was paddling and the dream to get releases,” Burk said. “The one goal we had was releases.”

In a January/February 1989 issue of American Whitewater Journal (Vol. XXXIV, No. 1), then-club president Bruce Penrod wrote about the whitewater resources of the Johnstown area. (“Flood City ... or Whitewater Playground?”) Within the article he discussed the possibility of water releases from the Que:

“The Benscreek Canoe Club, Inc. from Johnstown has been working for years to make whitewater releases a reality, but talks with Bethlehem’s Manufacturers Water Company have been nonproductive,” wrote Penrod.

Shortly after that, the club tried to bluff Bethlehem by inviting the American Canoe Association to hold its Whitewater Open Canoe Nationals on the Stonycreek. Club members thought Bethlehem wouldn’t refuse a water release for such an event. They were wrong. Bethlehem did refuse, and the club had to scramble to relocate the event on the Lower Yough at Ohiopyle instead.

“We were real dumb back then,” Burk said, explaining that club members didn’t understand the size of release needed or the dam’s capability of providing it. “Even if they wanted to, they only could have given us 150 cfs.”

The 1990 ACA Nationals proved to be a demoralizing effort for the Benscreek Canoe Club. Bethlehem, clearly, wasn’t going to work with the club. The dream for water releases seemed more of a pipe dream than ever.

Yet at this low point in the Benscreek Canoe Club’s history, conditions on the Stonycreek River were looking up.

SCRIP
Boaters are interested in whitewater—even when it’s orange. But other people increasingly were trying to figure out ways to improve the water quality of the Stony. This river flows north for 46 miles from its headwaters in southern Somerset County to its confluence with the Little Conemaugh River in Johnstown. The upper reaches of the river have always been relatively clean, especially a near-wild section called the Stonycreek Gorge that not only offers Class III–IV whitewater but an excellent trout fishery.

But once the river passed U.S. Route 30, it got hammered by highly acidic discharges from abandoned coal mines. The acid (in concentrations comparable to vinegar) dissolved iron in the mines that then coated rocks and the river bottom, giving the Stony an orange color and effectively killing almost all aquatic life.

Encouraged by then-local Congressman John Murtha, a coalition of conservationists, businesspeople and representatives of county, state and federal agencies formed the Stonycreek-Conemaugh River Improvement Project (SCRIP) in 1991. And SCRIP got to work, studying ways to clean up the Stony.

Six years, several studies and $5 million later, SCRIP-led initiatives resulted in abandoned-mine discharge (AMD) treatment sites that
dramatically improved water quality and restored life to the Stonycreek for miles downstream, including the section through the Stonycreek Canyon.

Then, starting in 1998, SCRIP tackled an even-more ambitious project: arranging for the public purchase of the Que. Bethlehem Steel closed its operations in Johnstown in 1992 and, as the decade continued, let it be known that its five dams and reservoirs in the greater Johnstown area were for sale. SCRIP and the Southern Alleghenies Conservancy conducted a feasibility study, which concluded that the assets could be self-supporting.

The resulting publicity brought representatives of Cambria and Somerset counties together to discuss a cooperative purchase, and SCRIP obtained a $1.5 million grant commitment from the Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (DCNR). The result was a $6.23 million purchase agreement that would put the Que in public hands in August of 2000.

**Fresh Blood**

Members of the Benscreek Canoe Club were not only aware of SCRIP’s activities but were somewhat involved. When SCRIP launched an adopt-a-river program to monitor water quality throughout the Stonycreek-Conemaugh river basin in 1993, for example, now-former club president Bruce Penrod became the head riverkeeper. As the second half of the 1990s rolled in, cleaner water was flowing in the Stonycreek and fresh blood was reinvigorating the club. A wave of younger paddlers had washed in. Not only were they eager to use more sophisticated boats to paddle more challenging water, but they included planners, engineers, and resource developers by profession—people who had innovative ideas about how to draw the public’s attention to river recreation and the skills to accomplish the task.

Mark Antonik, a community planner for Somerset County, was one of them. While researching ways to enhance the whitewater assets of the Stony, Antonik learned of whitewater parks in the West, and a civil engineer named Gary Lacy who designed them.

“We flew him in,” Antonik said. The club gave Lacy a tour of the Stonycreek’s resources, especially adjacent to a just-developing municipal park owned by Conemaugh Township, Somerset County, then had him make a presentation to local officials that evening.
That’s where it really started,” Antonik said. From that point forward, the club was committed to developing a whitewater park at Conemaugh Township’s new Greenhouse Park.

Another who came in on that energetic wave of the mid-1990s was a physical therapist named Steve Podratsky. When he assumed the office of president around 1996, the Benscreek Canoe Club had a membership of a few dozen people and a treasury of a few hundred dollars.

(Interestingly, none of these presidents clearly remember their terms of office. Club titles were treated as only half-serious formalities, and those elected often weren’t in attendance at the meeting and, therefore, couldn’t refuse the office.)

Yet with Podratsky’s step up into leadership, the influx of energetic and multi-talented boaters, SCRAP, improving water quality in the Stonycreek River, growing political clout, and the club’s continuing dreams for water releases and a whitewater park, all of the essential pieces were now in place.

Renewed Hope
The Benscreek Canoe Club entered the new millennium with energy and hope. A newly created Cambria Somerset Authority (CSA) now owned the Que Reservoir, and because a $1.5 million DCNR grant had been critical to the purchase, the CSA was committed to public recreation on its water and land resources.

The CSA was wary of water releases, though: Water sales are critical to its operation. Could they afford to send sizable quantities of water down the Stonycreek on a repeated basis without compensation? And how would the releases be done? The 90-year-old dam’s “waste gate” was only capable of discharging 150 to 200 cfs and was for emergency drawdown purposes only. The dam operators weren’t even positive it would close properly, once opened.

Podratsky and the club got to work, arranging for a $34,000 feasibility study by obtaining half of the money through a DCNR grant and $17,000 in matching funds from a variety of regional organizations. The 2003 study confirmed that the Que contained sufficient water — and recharged quickly enough — for the CSA to provide a regular schedule of releases yet retain sufficient supplies for sale.

But a new valve would need to be fabricated and installed at a cost of about $1 million. The CSA was willing to go along with the project but said it couldn’t afford to pay for it.

“They never thought 40 kayakers could get $1.2 million,” recalled Podratsky.

Meanwhile, the whitewater park idea was generating its own complications. This was, after all, a concept for adding obstructions to a mountain river that was prone to flood during high-runoff periods.
The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers had to be consulted, and the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection would be involved. Then, there was no other park like this in the state and bureaucrats, by nature, tend to be suspicious of anything unfamiliar.

Benscreek Canoe Club members found themselves facing the need to raise millions of dollars, tackle feasibility and environmental impact studies, deal with liability issues, and cope with public concerns. Following the challenging line of a Class V rapid was one thing, but this snarl of red tape? They needed help.

So club members did what they do best: They paddled. On a crystal-blue day in June of 2003, they took five representatives of the Richard King Mellon Foundation of Pittsburgh—most of them in their 70s—on a raft trip through the Stonycreek Canyon. “Nobody swims,” Podratsky promised them. Nobody did. They had a great day.

“That was really a turning point,” Podratsky said, explaining that from that point forward, the Mellon Foundation was supportive. “But they didn’t just want to fund whitewater purposes. That was too narrow.”

In response, the Stonycreek Quemahoning Initiative was formed. Affiliated with the Conemaugh Valley Conservancy, SQI pulled a variety of interested parties together—conservationists, economic developers, and recreationists—who were committed to seeing comprehensive development of the Stonycreek River Valley. Benscreek club members became major players and sold other participants on the water release and whitewater park projects. Over the next several years, through the political clout and expertise contained within SQI—and the administrative skills of its facilitator, Michael Quinn—both projects moved forward. Pennsylvania’s DCNR granted $830,000 for studies and construction of the whitewater park and the Que release valve. Cambria and Somerset counties kicked in another $250,000 for the whitewater park.

Major regional foundations contributed more than $1 million for design and construction of the release valve. The local Community Foundation for the Alleghenies and the Greater Johnstown Regional Partnership kicked in another $80,000 for whitewater park construction, and the area’s major landfill operator contributed $465,000 worth of rock, equipment, and labor to the project.

However, most of the heavy lifting for these projects—the grunt work of running down details, finding information for grant applications, data gathering, fact-checking and trouble-shooting—was done by the boaters, who collectively kept paddling through rapids of red tape over 10 years of time.

One of the club’s members, Ben Faas, was an engineer who helped significantly with studies and flow data. Another, Clark Fisher, was a GIS specialist who could access vast amounts of information and mapping.

“The boaters in our club have a lot of professional expertise to make things happen,” said Podratsky. “These aren’t just paddlers who drink beer and tell funny stories.”

Podratsky and former president, Mike Burk, shouldered many of the tasks and performed a variety of roles including lobbying, negotiating, planning, and grant-writing—even dabbling in a bit of engineering. They participated in countless meetings with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, PA Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, PA Department of Environmental Protection, PA Division of Dam Safety, the CSA, and several Cambria and Somerset counties’ offices.
“It was an education process,” recalled Podratsky. “This was really new territory for everyone involved: ‘You guys want to do what?’”

Whitewater Park officially opened in June of 2008 as a nice little 100-yard section of Class II rapids adjacent to Greenhouse Park, ideal for beginning paddlers and playboaters who want to practice surfing, carving, spinning and squirts. Because it’s designed for low flows, the park is usable most of the year and has proven to be a popular place for the public to come, watch boaters play in hydraulics, and simply relax in the peaceful and picturesque setting.

A whitewater release valve was installed in the Quemahoning Dam and formally dedicated in May of 2011. It is capable of releasing 500 cfs of water, which is enough to provide good water levels within the Stonycreek Canyon. This year, the CSA is releasing water on scheduled weekends that are being publicized by the Benscreek Canoe Club. The dream that had been pursued so passionately by Bruce Penrod, Mike Burk, and the boaters of the 1980s and ’90s has become a reality.

Altogether, these two projects championed by a one-time “drinking club with a paddling problem,” carried a total price tag of about $2.5 million and took more than a decade to develop. Overall, SQI-related projects have generated $3.1 million worth of investments within the Stonycreek valley.

Those investments, and the coalition of groups and committed individuals that have coalesced around them, are the principal reasons why the Stonycreek was named River of the Year for 2012. As Charlie Walbridge said, it is an amazing story.

A small bunch of boaters brought major changes to the Stonycreek Valley, and they’ve put the Stony on the East’s whitewater boating map. But members of the Benscreek Canoe Club still tend to elect their officers in absentia, drink, and keep their emphasis on paddling.

Learn more about the Benscreek Canoe Club at www.benscreekcanoeclub.com and about The Stonycreek at www.thestonycreek.com.
O.K., right a little. Straight ahead. Forward. You’ve got about two seconds before the fall. Forward. Just about on it now. Now keep it straight!

Erik Weihenmayer does exactly as I suggest and plops over a six-foot falls! I am pleased to see him hit the foam pile straight on and manage to stay upright after the fall.

“Yeahh!!” We all cheer. Very cool.

I ask, “Do you want to do it again, maybe run the other line?”

“Yeah,” he replies. “That was super fun!”

I didn’t know what to think, months before, when Rob Raker contacted me about arranging a special expedition down Río Usumacinta in early 2012. He and co-guide Chris Wiegand were interested in the trip as a means to help prepare their friend, Erik Weihenmayer, for kayaking the Grand Canyon. But Erik is no ordinary paddler. He’s blind! That really caught my attention. I wondered, “How can a person kayak without being able to see?” I always believed that a kayaker has to respond constantly to what’s right in front of his eyes. I didn’t really know if it was possible.

I thought, “Maybe he’s not totally blind and can see enough to react to waves, holes, obstacles and banks?” Boy was I in for a surprise.

Doing a bit more research on Erik, I was impressed at how accomplished he was. His main sport for two decades had been rock climbing and mountaineering, something he took to the top—literally! He successfully climbed Denali, Aconcagua, Kilamanjaro, Everest, and eventually the remaining Seven Summits. He authored several books, including “Touch the Top of the World,” an inspiring autobiography about his background, blindness, and climbing expeditions. After reading it, I realized that he indeed was completely blind—in fact, both his eyeballs are prosthetics. Erik has been featured in several documentary films, as well as a movie in which he is portrayed by an actor. Erik is also a motivational speaker who delivers a message that everyone should strive to be the best they can and overcome adversity.

Erik’s passion for adventure and desire to live to the fullest fueled his desire to take up kayaking. Two years ago his climbing friend Rob—who is also a kayaker—offered to teach him a bit. Since then, Erik has gotten a roll down, paddled a few rivers in the Colorado area, and built skills to a Class II-III level. Last year Erik and Rob brought onto their team Chris Wiegand, an ex-Olympic runner and paddler who is a superb instructor and guide. The team set the goal for Erik to successfully kayak through the Grand Canyon. In preparation for the Grand, Rob and Chris were looking for big, warm-water rivers to paddle in the winter.

The Usumacinta is one such river. Rob was intrigued by the info about the river that I had put up on the SierraRios website [www.SierraRios.org], and especially by how I described the river as “a classic not to be missed.” Indeed, the main Usumacinta was probably the most popular raft trip in all of Mexico and Central America in the 1970s through early 1990s. Eighty-eight miles long and passing through sparsely inhabited jungle along the border between
Chiapas and Guatemala, the Usumacinta invited large raft expeditions to spend a week plying its warm waters, camping on huge beaches, enjoying amazing wildlife, visiting major Mayan ruins, and navigating a handful of rapids. The river lost popularity by the mid-1990s after a string of armed robberies took place, perpetrated by unscrupulous individuals taking refuge in the jungles along the border. Only a few trips had reportedly occurred in the decade leading up to 2009, when I solo-paddled the river to determine the security situation. I learned that all the bandidos had been routed years before and the Guatemalan military was stationed midway downstream to keep the area secure. I was anxious to return to the river again with others, so I had been planning a raft-support trip in December 2011 and was looking for participants.

Rob was particularly curious about the difficulty and suitability of the river for preparing Erik to kayak the Grand Canyon. Although the Usumacinta only has at most half a dozen solid Class III rapids, the innumerable places with shifting eddy lines and whirlpools make the river one of the best places to get comfortable with big water features. Because of this, the river was actually the perfect level of challenge for Erik. Rob was also glad to hear about the flexibility that I would allow on the trip. He, Chris, and Erik had done a typical commercial trip through Desolation Canyon in spring, but felt inhibited by raft guides who placed too many restrictions on where and when they could paddle. Rob wrote, “To be honest, we are much less interested in a polished commercial trip and much more interested in a unique and interesting adventure.”

Soon trip plans materialized. We would have three rafts to support a group of up to 14 paddlers. I had told Erik and Rob, “You can invite others along too. The river is easy enough that even novice paddlers can join the trip and paddle most of the river in kayak or inflatable kayak. In the tougher parts, they can hop on the raft.” Erik was

Despite being completely blind, Erik Weihenmayer has climbed the seven summits and now is turning to kayaking – here on Río Usumacinta in southern Mexico.
quick to find half a dozen friends and family members to join us. They included Skyler Williams, right-hand man for Erik in most of his business dealings, Erik’s brother Eddie Weihenmayer, Erik’s friend from college Joe Glynn, and the three “Modern Gypsies,” budding kayakers eager for more adventure [John Post, Eric Bach, and Taylor Filasky: www.TheModernGypsies.com].

The Gypsies were an interesting bunch. Their name was coined on the adventure TV show “Expedition Impossible” that took place in Morocco the previous spring, in which they had competed against 12 other three-person teams, including Erik’s team, “No Limits.” For the television competition, participants trekked through dune-covered deserts, rode camels and horses, climbed snow-capped mountains, and rappelled cliffs. Each week, they could be seen canyoneering gorges, exploring caves, rafting rivers, and solving puzzles. By the final stage, only three teams remained, including No Limits and the Gypsies. The Gypsies ended up edging out No Limits by a bit, and took home the ultimate prize—three Ford Explorers and $150,000 cash. As an incredible testament to the personalities on the two teams, despite being in neck-and-neck competition near the end, they came out of it all as friends ready to work together in tackling future adventures. [Each of the episodes can be streamed for free at www.hulu.com]

I watched at the put-in as Rob and Chris shouted directions to Erik on where to steer his kayak. The system seemed to work well. Erik pulled up into an eddy behind a rock and was stable. Chris continued to give him and others kayak instructions throughout the day as we paddled the 20 kilometers of flatwater to Yaxchilán. This nice warm-up section gave everyone a chance to adjust to their kayaks, practice rolls, and get a little workout. The following morning, my Chiapanecan co-guide Alejandro Quiroga led our group through the classic Maya ruins of a city that reached its zenith in the 8th century. We walked among impressive temples and stelae while hearing about the former kings such as Escudo Jaguar. Yaxchilán is a popular tourist destination, but almost all visitors arrive by motorized lancha from Frontera. An advantage we enjoyed was being at the ruins early enough to have them mostly to ourselves before the typical tourist crowds arrived.

The Usumacinta was running unusually high. Even though we were on the river during the dry season, just before our trip...
atypical storms had sent the flow up to about 200,000 cfs. By the time Erik and his crew arrived and we got on the river at Frontera, the flow had come down to about 100,000 cfs and would slowly drop over the next 7 days to about 60,000 cfs. This still was two to three times the typical January flows and would make for some extra excitement downstream. Although in many ways the river is nicer at the lower levels—more beaches are exposed, the water turns an aqua marine clear color, and additional wave features appear in some of the rapids—the higher water can be fun too, and make the group’s progress downstream a bit faster. I particularly appreciated this last point, as this group was so relaxed and social that the added boost in speed would help us keep our schedule throughout the trip.

As we drifted downstream, we heard loud, raspy, breathy metallic screams in the jungle, which conjured up visions of scary monsters or prehistoric dinosaurs. Actually, the sounds emanated from howler monkeys, small primates with one of the loudest and most unusual calls of any animal in the world. Erik, who has a heightened sense of hearing due to his blindness, was particularly intrigued with this auditory delight. We would continue to hear howlers periodically throughout the trip. In fact, the name “Usumacinta” literally means “Sacred Monkey River,” referring to the howler monkey’s sacred status in Mayan culture and to the river corridor traversing a jungle area with the greatest density of the primates in all of Central America. Howlers weren’t the only interesting wildlife we spotted. We also encountered spider monkeys, coatis, agoutis, toucans, crested guans, white hawks, giant Bufo marinus toads, and American crocodiles on the trip. Eddie even caught some tilapia fishing at one of our camps.

At Chicozapote, the first Class II-III rapid, I waited below in the raft to see how the kayakers fared. The whirlpools and eddy lines were particularly tough at the high flows and would grab kayaks in unpredictable ways, causing flips. I watched and cheered as Chris and Rob guided Erik through without flipping. Then came the Gypsies, two of whom flipped, but fortunately self-rescued by executing beautiful Eskimo rolls. It was getting late and we hadn’t made the intended progress for the day, so I stopped the group at a small beach to discuss. “We can press on into dusk and make it 15 kilometers to the huge amazing beach camp by El Cayo, or we can make do here. There aren’t any more rapids in this next section, so I think we’d all be OK if we continue.” Erik was a little dubious about pushing on, but everyone else in the group wanted to, so Erik acquiesced. Someone said, “Erik, it won’t make a difference to you—you’re always paddling in the dark!” He retorted, “Yeah, but this will be like the blind leading the blind!” We all laughed, then continued on as a brilliant full moon rose to light our way. After some beers, a meal of tamales, and a short time by the campfire, we all turned in.

Two days downstream, after we had stopped briefly at the Arroyo Jerusalén village, explored the unrestored ruins of Piedras Negras, and run the Cola del Diablo rapids, we came up to the amazing site of Cascada Busiljá, where a small tributary river enters the Usumacinta in a spectacular travertine 30-foot waterfall. I mentioned to Chris, “I don’t think anyone has ever kayaked over the falls here.” He looked longingly at running the upper falls, and I spotted a potential line over the lower one as well, made safer due to the higher water level in the main river. Even though we didn’t kayak the falls, several of the guys did a 30 ft. jump into the grotto below the upper falls. Unfortunately, Rob twisted his back in the process, reigniting an injury he sustained recently climbing in Cuba. He stretched out on the raft for the rest of the afternoon, and fortunately after some muscle relaxants and ibuprofen his condition improved and he was kayaking again the following day.
The climax whitewater action is packed into the last three days of the trip. We paddled up the Río Chocoljá, a tributary river running with about 2000 cfs of turquoise-colored water, and did a short hike up along the bank to kayak down the final five rapids, including one six-foot travertine waterfall. Hopping in a kayak, it was my turn to guide Erik for a while. First I took him over the falls in the tandem IK so he could get a feel for what a small drop was like. The next three times I guided him over the falls with each of us in hard shell kayaks. He didn’t flip at all, and returned to the bank smiling to the cheers of onlookers. In fact, everyone in kayaks had a great time there, though Taylor took an aggressive line on the far left and pitoned hard enough to push his kayak nose in. The other Chocoljá rapids offered more typical Class III challenges with some maneuvering required, which was great practice for everyone.

Soon we were back on the Usumacinta and tackling the biggest rapids in the Gran Cañon de San José. First up was La Linea, a Grand Canyon-like rapid of Class III to III+ difficulty, with huge waves, haystacks, whirlpools and shifting eddylines. Although there were some flipped kayaks, no one swam here. Suzy Garren, a friend of mine riding along on my raft, commented, “Awww. It that all? I was expecting more action!” She spoke too soon, as we were about to face quite a bit more action in the main gorge, where limestone walls tower thousands of feet straight up from the river and swirling Class II-III water continues for a few kilometers.

This section is particularly dangerous for swimmers at high flows because it’s difficult to stop on the side and the whirlpools often suck swimmers down. Although all the newbie kayakers successfully rolled after flipping in this section, there were some swims. From the rafts, we could help by righting an IK or pulling a swimmer out of the water, but Rob and Chris did the most rescuing. John ended up having the worst swim. Starting at the bottom of La Linea, he swam a long portion of the gorge, in which he was sucked underwater many times despite wearing a PFD. Chris towed his boat to shore while Rob towed John, but it took many attempts to get him there. At one point, when Rob asked John to let go as they approached a whirlpool, John said, “Don’t leave me Rob… I don’t have much left.” John later was very grateful and gave Rob a hug. Rob also rescued Gypsie near the end of the gorge, towing him over to our sandy beach campsite. Three cheers for Rob!

First thing on our final day we tackled “Whirlpool” rapid, another Class III that is named for the enormous whirlpools that form downstream on the right. Erik received instructions via a headset radio system that was also worn by Chris and Rob. They took him over on the right side but didn’t cut quickly enough to get into the safety of the eddy, so I watched with dismay as they all drifted down to the big whirlpools. Fortunately, none of the ephemeral whirlpools emerged to suck
Erik down, and he managed to make it over to the calm eddy fine. More cheers to Erik! Joe and Eddie in the IK, however, went round and round several times in the big swirlies, but also managed to make it through without a swim.

The next gorge section of the Gran Cañon featured two back-to-back huge rapids: San José and San Josecito. Erik opted to try catarafting through instead of kayaking. With Lacey Anderson—one of my co-guides—sitting behind him and directing him on how to row her small cat, they managed to make it through, though they did get caught up on the bottom right by swirlies. After the final “White Wall” rapid and its associated whirlpools, we were all enjoying the calm moving final kilometers of river. Suzy made us sandwiches for lunch on the water, and we arrived at the Boca del Cerro take-out that afternoon. Soon we were back in Palenque enjoying a hearty Mexican meal at the restaurant Las Tinajas.

On the following two days, we visited the ruins of Palenque and then did one more day-trip down Río Shumuljá, which passes by the most spectacular part of the Cascadas Agua Azul. Erik kayaked admirably through the Class III-IV rapids there, though unfortunately he did swim. Although he still has a lot of learning to do with more on-the-water experience before he will be able to comfortably kayak all of the rapids in the Grand Canyon, I am confident he will be able to complete his goal and I look forward to helping out in the endeavor as another member of Team Weihenmayer.

Rocky Contos, Ph.D., is director of the non-profit conservation organization SierraRios, has paddled nearly every river in Mexico, is author of the guidebook Mexican Whitewater: Norte, holds first descents on over half of all whitewater rivers in Mexico, and arranges raft support and kayak trips in Mexico and Peru. For more photos and information on future trips down Rio Usumacinta, please see the website www.SierraRios.org or contact Rocky [rocky@sierrarios.org]. For more info on Erik, see his website www.touchthetop.com.
SOLITARY BOATING IN THE WILDERNESS
BY GARY BARKER

It’s probably happened to you. You plan a great trip, but it tries to fall apart at the last minute. My close paddling buddies and other hopefuls for this trip into the Idaho back country had called to say they could not go for various reasons. This left me with the option to cancel the trip or to go by myself. I prefer not to paddle solo for safety reasons, but every now and then you just have to do something if it feels right. If I was going to do the Little North Fork Clearwater (LNFC) alone, now was the time, with perfect weather forecast and low water. I called my Kellogg, Idaho friends to arrange for the horribly complicated shuttle.

I met them at the mouth of Bluff Creek in the St. Joe River drainage, and we drove up the gravel road to Mammoth Campground with both vehicles, then down to Montana Creek. For the last ten miles, we were the only vehicle that had been there this year. We had to move rocks and cut trees out of the road. The LNFC is very remote, even by North Idaho standards.

It was about 10 in the morning when we got to the end of the old logging road high above the river. It was already over 90 degrees, too hot to stand around talking. I drank a beer, said goodbye to Doug and Steve, and headed over the bank with my loaded kayak and paddle. If I listened carefully, I could hear the river below, running cool and clear, beckoning me on. I would have to drop about 1000 feet of elevation on what might loosely be called a trail.

I immediately broke out into a full-scale sweat. It must have been well over 100 degrees on that south facing clear-cut, with no wind. I swear it was so hot I could smell it and hear it. There was nothing to do but keep drinking water and moving down the trail. My highest priority was to avoid any kind of injury. To become immobile here was a death sentence. No one else was likely to follow my path for months. At the very least, I would have to walk seven miles to get to a road with any possibility of traffic.

When I got down to the last road in the clear-cut, I made the first in a series of errors, which I now attribute to mild heat stroke. Rather than going left to make sure I was on the right trail, I spotted an elk trail diving off into the brush. I assumed it would lead to the main trail to Montana Creek. Mistake number one. When I realized that the trail had ended, it was too late. I couldn’t pull my loaded kayak back up the hill, not in that heat. Nothing I could do except go straight down the hill through the heavy brush and downfall. God, it was hot.

After a few minutes, the brush got thicker, and the grade got steeper. The only consolation was that I was now out of the clear-cut, and getting a little shade from the merciless sun. Several times, the kayak dropped down under logs, and I had to pull it back up the hill, using my throw rope. Once, when I was sliding on my butt, lining the kayak out ahead, it dropped over a vertical drop. I watched the rope slide through my gloves until there was only five feet left. In a desperate attempt to stop the kayak, I wrapped the rope around my right hand, only to watch the neoprene be burned off my glove, and the skin come loose from three fingers. Fortunately, the boat smacked into a log and stopped. As I sat there hurting and sweating, I realized that I no longer had my paddle. I had left it somewhere up the hill. Mistake number two.

I got out my duct tape, and taped my fingers up so they wouldn’t get any worse. I had a small amount of engineering flagging. I headed up the hill, leaving a trail of flagging behind me so I could relocate the kayak. About 600 feet up the brushy hillside, I ran out of flagging. I wanted that paddle, but I didn’t want to lose the boat. I still had my funky breakdown paddle in the boat, so I gave up my good paddle to the brush gods. Now I would have to be extra cautious, especially with only my emergency paddle. Only so many errors are allowed before disaster starts screaming in your face. I could smell its breath.

Following the flagging line, I made my way back down to the kayak. Within 30 minutes, I was lying on my back in the Little North Fork, filtering water and eating a grapefruit.

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The author loaded up and dragging.
Photo by Peter Dayton
The grueling part of my trip behind me (I hoped), I made my way down the river. At only 1200 cfs on the Main NF, the Little was running about 300 cfs, and bony. Still, it was way better than the hill. I met four people on the river fishing, which was unusual, as I have only met a handful of people in many years in this drainage. They were all very surprised to see a kayaker. I decided to make my way to Fhoel Creek to spend the night.

I could smell the smoke of a campfire a mile from Fhoel Creek. As I rounded the bend, I observed wooden poles standing in the river, with cans hanging on them. This was really getting strange. As I got closer, I could see there were six guys camped there. I decided to camp downstream of them, near a good fishing hole, but I thought it would be polite to stop and say hello. As I caught the eddy near their camp, I also caught their attention. As they stood up to check me out, I noticed six or eight AK-47s leaned against a cedar tree in their camp. A guy dressed in camo gear leaned over to pick up one of the guns.

“Hello,” I said in the friendliest voice I could muster.

“What’s up?” barked the guy, who appeared to be the leader.

“Oh, I guess I’ll camp just down river across the creek if it won’t bother you guys,” I said. The guy in camo outfit said “If you don’t mind loud noises.” The others all laughed in agreement, and the camo guy fired off

AW STEWARDSHIP

PROTECTING THE LITTLE NORTH FORK
BY KEVIN COLBURN

The Little North Fork of the Clearwater River is a special place that is currently at the heart of several river conservation issues. While it flows through a huge block of un-roaded land, it is one of the relatively few multi-day paddling destinations that is not permanently protected as Wilderness or as a Wild and Scenic River. However, a good bit of the river does flow through inventoried roadless areas that are protected from new roads by the Clinton-era Roadless Rule and the subsequent Idaho Roadless Rule. The Little North Fork has also been found “eligible” for Wild and Scenic designation by the US Forest Service, which conveys interim protection from new dams and other impacts.

American Whitewater has been a leader in supporting the ongoing implementation of both the Federal and the state Roadless Rules, emphasizing roadless areas’ outstanding recreational values. We are also actively working with regional paddlers to encourage continued interim protection for the Little North Fork and other northern Idaho streams as “eligible” for Wild and Scenic designation. The Clearwater National Forest, which manages part of the Little North Fork, will be among the first of a handful of National Forests to use a new planning process that AW and our partners in Outdoor Alliance advocated for. We’ll be working with paddlers to advocate for protection of the Little North Fork through that process. Lastly, the Little North Fork is in a region being considered for various forms of protection, restoration, and perhaps development. Wild and Scenic designation is a potential outcome of this process—an outcome AW would actively support.

Little North Fork Snow Peak.
Photo by Gary Barker
a few rounds at one of the cans hanging
out in the river. By then, I had my hand on
the grip of the 44 Magnum I keep stuffed
in the front pillar of my kayak. Time to take
action, I figured.

Before they could say anything else, I pulled
out the 44 and blasted at one of those
cans. Any gun buff knows a 44 Magnum
with iron sights is accurate out to say, ten
yards. It is definitely not a target gun, but
in an amazing stroke of luck, I blew that can
right off into the water. That shot changed
everything. The guys all grinned, and
motioned me into camp. It was as though
I had passed some sort of test, or rite
of passage.

The camo guy handed me his assault rifle
and said, “Here, give this baby a try.” I
emptied several 30 round clips from a
foxhole they had dug in the sand, taking out
a few more cans. That was the end of the
shooting, however, because that was the
last of the 2000 rounds they had carried in
down the four-mile-long Fhoel Creek trail.

They invited me to spend the night. They
fed me a great fish and bacon dinner, and
prepared for an all-night party. As the
night wore on, we did rousing renditions
of all the dirty songs I could think of, all
captured on video camera. Turns out they just
wanted seclusion from the pressures of the
everyday grind. Having someone just drop
in when you are this far from civilization
is definitely a surprise. Once they realized
I was just another lover of adventure I
was made as welcome as an old friend. I
enjoyed partying with them, and slept very
well that night.

The hung-over hikers were up at 6 am,
packing up their things to go, hoping to
avoid the heat of the day. I waved good-
bye to my newfound friends while I cooked
a dehydrated breakfast.

I headed out, fishing my way down the
river. It was a great day to be on the water. I
captured lots of fish, keeping several small
ones for dinner. It was very enjoyable to
have the river all to myself, just plugging
along, fishing and relaxing. Solitude can
sometimes be just incredibly joyous. There
were people with horses camped
at the Bear Creek camp, but I didn’t stop.
I had lunch at the rapid about a mile
below, where a creek comes in on the
left. A bull elk charged across the river just
downstream, throwing water into the air.
The sun refracting off the water droplets made a kind of rainbow, the whole scene just absolutely surreal.

I paddled on down to the “lake” above the rapid called Bodybag. This rapid was formed by a rockslide in the early 1900s that dammed the river. The Little North Fork Clearwater then catches grade again through the pile of shale rock, making a serious Class IV or V rapid, depending on the water level. At this low level, the rapid would not be so dangerous, but I was alone and had to continue being very careful. There would be no rescue from a problem here.

I camped for the night, a peaceful, warm evening with a view. I cooked my fish and drank some of the Drambuie I had brought. Sometime in the night a herd of elk tromped through my camp area. I was thinking grizzly, and was glad to see elk eyeballs in my flashlight beam.

I got up early, about 7:30, and had a breakfast of oatmeal and bagels. I cleaned up my mess and loaded my boat. At this level, it was easiest to portage Bodybag along the rocks on river left, putting in below the last big drop. A mama Harlequin duck and her three chicks were swimming up and down the rapid, as if to mock my portage.

There are two or three big rapids below Bodybag that I was able to boat scout. The first rapid called Eenie Meanie is a jumble of large boulders with several possible routes. I would pull into an eddy behind one of the boulders, and then proceed to the next safe eddy. At one point, I got rear ended in hole and bashed my paddle on a rock. It made a horrifying crack, but did not break. This section of river is about as much fun as kayaking can get, and despite the weak paddle, I was having a ball. After the last big rapid, called Minie Mo, I knew that I was home free. I could walk out from here, even if my paddle failed. I was still babying it though, because I didn’t want to keep the shuttle drivers waiting while I dragged my boat for several miles. The first sign of civilization was the washed out log bridge at Cedar Creek. The next two miles would be Class III, with one Class IV rapid. A primitive, undriveable road parallels the river from here to the take-out. I kayaked out to the take-out bridge by noon, my funky paddle holding together all the way.

My shuttle drivers were there to meet me. They had come down the night before and camped near the bridge. It was hot, so we loaded right up and headed out.

We drove out over road 301 which follows the ridge top between the LNFC and Marble Creek in the St Joe. This has to be one of the most scenic drives in Idaho, but if you plan to go there have a four wheel drive vehicle and several hours to spend, as walking speed is all you can manage at times.

Paddling solo in wilderness has a special set of risks and rewards. You have to be ready to deal with whatever comes your way, and pay a price if you screw up. I usually prefer sharing the experience with my paddling buddies and the extra safety margin that we provide for each other. But now and then....

If you are interested in running the LNFC, the American Whitewater website, americanwhitewater.org, has a full description of this run and shuttle details.
MONEY WELL SPENT: A BUS BIOGRAPHY
BY STEPHEN STRANGE

My bus cost one dollar, with 7 cents going to New Jersey for sales tax.

In 1997, after about two years of whitewater paddling, I was planning my first big paddling trip and it seemed like a great price. Adopting a 24-seat bus that was going into retirement would be a lot cheaper than renting a van for two weeks. Once the rows of seats were replaced with two long plywood benches, there would be a lot of room. Plus, it seemed “cool” somehow.

I painted it white with a gallon of Rustoleum and a roller, added two racks with 2x4s on top, disabled the flashing lights and took off for a tour of the Southeast with a handful of other paddlers. It was wonderful having a vehicle in which we could walk around, talk, look out any window or lie down and take a nap. With the big external mirrors, we could even hang Bob’s stinky booties outside while we drove. Every day we paddled something new, and each evening added a new river to the growing list on the left side of the bus.

As we ticked rivers off of our list, my paddling improved, but the bus’s performance didn’t. Somewhere in Western Pennsylvania I noticed I was having to put a lot of oil into the engine. After our day on the Ocoee I switched to 20 weight “racing” oil. But even that couldn’t help on the Nolichucky shuttle a few days later. As we crept up and over the mountain and into Erwin, Tennessee at 10 mph, coughing and sputtering all the way, it was clear that the bus was worth the dollar I’d paid for it, and not much more.

I cleaned up everything, packed my gear and left for the 1997 Gauley Fest two days later. Other than a scary fuel leak producing puddles of gas on the engine block (fixed at a rest stop in Pennsylvania), I got to Summersville, West Virginia without a hitch. That weekend the bus proved its worth by easily carrying a dozen people and boats on the shuttle for the Upper Gauley, and serving double duty on Saturday night delivering a rowdy pile of festival goers back to the campground. I was glad I’d decided to keep it.

My Whitewater Assault Vehicle began to visit a lot of rivers. With the work I’d done, it ran well, but, for a period of time in the winter of 98-99, it developed an annoying habit. Sometimes it would stall if I took my foot off of the gas pedal. It generally only did this when I stopped at an intersection. When the bus did this, I would just start it back up and drive away. This “quirk” got moved to the top of the priority list for diagnosis and repair one cold day in January as I was driving around with Bob Hughes and Cody, his husky. That winter, Bob and I were both basically unemployed. I was coaching high school track, but that still left most of my days open. We were once again looking for a creek with enough snow melt trickling through it for us to scrape down. From one country road to another, I turned right and found myself at the top of 100 yards of gently sloping ice. The road

All the way to the Moose in NY from NC. Photo by Stephen Strange
had clearly been plowed, but had thawed partially, and had then refrozen. As I looked down this long slick straightaway, I thought about the three tight bends at the bottom of it. Then I contemplated the one lane bridge which followed the third turn. I was very worried about controlling my speed and so I must have unconsciously taken my foot off the gas. As Murphy might have predicted, the engine died. This caused the rear wheels to begin sliding rather than rolling. It also took away the power steering and power brakes. Cody the dog didn’t seem too concerned, but my mind was racing. I shifted the bus to neutral and tried to think of ways to slow down. Pushing down on the brake pedal with all of my might seemed to help a little. So, while my legs pressed the pedal to the floor, I began to contemplate the upcoming bends in the road, approaching faster and faster.

In 1999, when Mary Beth and I got married, we looked for unique, fun and inexpensive alternatives to the standard wedding choices. We decided to use our bus, rather than a limo, to transport our wedding party from the church to the reception. To dress it up, we first cleaned it, then added a carpet, and blankets on the benches with matching pillows. Finally, I painted the ceiling a nice sky blue and added some puffy clouds. Drinking champagne in the “back of the bus” on the way around the Morristown Green was a great way to start the party, and our life together. After the reception and some other minor obligations, Mary Beth and I got back in our bus and headed up to Laconia, New Hampshire for our honeymoon. We were unaware that our honeymoon was to coincide with a major annual event that didn’t involve buses.

At the 76th annual Laconia Motorcycle Rally, we got a lot of attention. In the middle of 250,000 motorcycles (and motorcycle riders), our little white bus with “JUST MARRIED” on the back would have stood out already. On the long drive from NJ to New Hampshire, however, the exhaust pipe cracked. Despite the rumble of a quarter of a million Harley-Davidsons, we were still the loudest. We found an auto-parts store and I patched the hole with muffler tape about halfway through our honeymoon.
A few months later, on July 5th, we moved down to North Carolina. It was the hottest day of that year so far. As we sat in traffic on the beltway, with the new Mrs. Strange in my Neon, and me in the bus, I’m sure she was having second thoughts about the name change. As different as the two vehicles were, they shared a few characteristics. Both had good racks on top and some peeling paint, and neither had air conditioning. We got to Durham, sweaty and tired, about 11 hours after leaving New Jersey.

The school year began early in August and we enjoyed the new adventures of marriage. There wasn’t a whole lot of time for kayaking and wasn’t a whole lot of water to kayak on. But having a big white bus with kayaks on top (and a Strange last name) certainly made me easy to spot and remember. By the time hurricane Floyd arrived that September, I’d been noticed around town. I met and paddled with Lisa Birskovich, Joe Griener, Richard Mann and a bunch of others that day on the hurricane swollen waters of the Little and the Flat.

Gauley Fest was a few weeks later. I was excited to have only 4½ hours to drive instead of the 9 it took from New Jersey. But I had been very focused on my new job and hadn’t made any plans with anybody for camping or paddling. I was hoping to find a group I had paddled with before at their usual site. Mary Beth and I arrived in the campground on Friday night and the expected group wasn’t there. I was a little frustrated with myself, but we drove off into the campground. We found a site with a nice little group of tents and some friendly looking people sitting around a fire (with boats on all of the cars) and set up on the site next to them. In the morning, I got up early, waited until our neighbors were having breakfast and introduced myself. I explained my situation and asked if I could join them. I offered that my wife could shuttle our entire party and pointed to the bus. That turned out to be a great day. The group was Canadian and included Ralph Mischlich, Ray Sweetzir, and Jeff Totten. They were a fun bunch, eh? We had a nice day on the river and when we got to the top of the Panther Mountain trail, Mary Beth was there with the bus. She also had chips, salsa and beer. She approached Jeff and told him that she had purchased too much ice. She hadn’t been able to fit it all in our cooler, and so had put the rest in his cooler with his beer. “Was that OK?” she asked. Needless to say, he was far from upset, and this led to Mary Beth’s title, “Shuttle

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Goddess.” This wasn’t the first, or last time that Mary Beth and/or the Bus helped to increase my reputation in the paddling community. Despite Ralph’s tendency to moon people out the back windows of the bus, Ralph, Ray, and Jeff became three friends that I paddled with occasionally for many years.

One of the things about living down South, in Durham, North Carolina, was that work on old American cars was a lot more affordable than in New Jersey, a very good thing when you own a 1984 Chevy bus. Charlie Thompson at C & C Automotive became a family friend and Linwood Allen welded a custom dual exhaust (with glasspack mufflers) for the bus when my honeymoon repair finally failed. It wasn’t just Durham, though. In 2000 we were once again driving up to the Gauley for the festival when BLAM! Just outside of King, North Carolina one of our right rear tires exploded. Luckily the bus has 4 tires in the back, so instead of careening off into the trees like a Ford Explorer, we just rolled to a stop. Our trusty bus was able to limp to the next exit where a tire shop stayed open for five extra minutes to sell us their only tire of that size. Then we rolled slowly up the street to a service station and a very kind man changed the now shredded tire for the new one (which he mounted and balanced) for free. We got to our campsite late and found that my parents and the Canadians were all there and getting along well. After hearing why we were late, my dad enjoyed showing me the four new bus tires that they had brought from NJ for us. It was annoying, but at least now we had a spare.

Our bus carried paddlers on trips to every Gauley Fest from 1998 to 2002, and in 2004; to Moose Fest in 1998; to Tallulah in 1999, 2000, 2001; and to the Moose River from Durham, North Carolina in 2000 and 2002 for the Team V trip (the V is for vanity), along with countless other day trips. In October of 2001, our bus even got to participate in a second wedding. When Bob Zarzecki and Tina Rickwalt decided to tie the knot, a cleaned and spruced-up bus carried them honking and yelling through the streets of Blowing Rock, North Carolina from the church to the reception. Even school kids benefited from the bus. At George Watts Elementary School, I ran a boat-building club as part of our enrichment program. From 2002-04 bunches of 1st to 3rd graders and I made six stitch-and-glue plywood rowboats. Every boat rode in the little white bus with its young builders for the test launch at a pool. For a long time, I even commuted in the bus. I always felt a little silly, and I had to fight the nearly overwhelming urge to stop at corners and let people on, but gas was a lot cheaper then. Over the years I owned the bus, a whole lot of people rode on those six wheels.

The last time the bus visited the Gauley was 2004. We had been back in New Jersey for two months and I was desperate to catch up with the North Carolina paddling crowd. Lizzy was approaching two years old and Ricky was a cuddly little five-month old (you do the math). Alexei Vishniakov rode along with us for that trip and I’m sure he wished he hadn’t. The bus was a noisy vehicle at its best and never won any speed records. But on that trip, Ricky cried nearly the entire way, and we foolishly tried a new route. In a car it might not have been so bad, but it had a lot more hills and our bus didn’t like them. Alexei rode in the bus with our screaming bundle of joy for about 11 hours. After that trip, I didn’t see him again until April of 2012. In retrospect, I wish I’d known that would be our last trip in the bus. I would have taken more photos. I would have savored it more carefully. I would have taken my hands off of my ears.

Soon we bought a house and the bus got left behind in my parents driveway. Though it was started monthly for a while to keep the battery charged, and it got moved occasionally, it never really traveled again. My paddling began to revolve around day trips rather than weekend adventures.
There were soccer games to attend, a lawn to mow, an old house to maintain, and climbing gas prices. But The Bus was never lonely for long. I may not have driven it again, but Lizzy, then Ricky and Michael all discovered the joy of being the Bus Driver. Sitting in that special seat, opening the doors and letting their siblings on and off, they traveled all over the world. It continued to be loved.

For a time I hung on to dreams of reviving my Whitewater Assault Vehicle back to its—and my—former glory, but they faded. My dad wanted his driveway back. He voiced concerns about obscure local ordinances regarding dilapidated vehicles. Finally, after more years than I could have asked for, he found a junkyard that would pay $400 for the bus. While at my parents’ house for dinner one evening, I broke the news to my kids. Each handled it a little differently. Lizzy, the only one who really remembers riding in the bus, cried. Ricky, who spent the most time playing in the bus, went out that night and played bus driver for one last hour, in the dark. Michael, my youngest, born in New Jersey, is the only one who never rode on the bus. He expressed frustration about that fact, but otherwise was non-plussed. A few weeks later, on a Wednesday, a flatbed truck carried my bus away. My dad emailed me a short video and some photos of the event. For the first time in 14 years, The Bus was headed off on an adventure without me.

Considering how long I had it, how much time I spent in it and how far it carried me, I have surprisingly few photos of The Bus. In it I traveled from river to river, state to state, from bachelor to husband to father. I’m not sure how much further I’ll go, but it will have to be in something different; my bus carried me as far as it could.

Thank you Bus.

We didn’t lose any boats, but it was close. Photo by Lisa Birskovich
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ALL I EVER WANTED
BY DON SIMMON

Family and friends were gathered around the 27-inch CRT style television oh-ing, ah-ing, pointing, and smiling. The smiles on their faces and the excitement in their eyes painted a picture that stretched the full imagination of a 12-year-old boy. Nothing made my father and friends feel more like cavemen than meeting two or three times a year to beat their chests and watch the grainy tracking-lined video. They had just returned from what would unknowingly be the start of the Annual New River Rafting Trip on the Lower New River in West Virginia. If all the bravado and camaraderie had taught me one thing, it was that I had to go on the next trip. One problem, though: I wouldn’t turn 13 until a couple months after the next trip was scheduled. What was a kid to do?

The next year of my life would be consumed by pestering my father to take me along on the 2nd Annual New River Rafting trip. Every waking moment, I would find a way to slide in subtle mind-altering hint to have him change his mind. From pointing out my paddle ready strength while confidently taking out the trash, to commenting on my now obvious height advantage over my father, nothing was off limits.

For the rest of the summer I cut lawn after lawn and scraped and saved every penny I could find. As the summer progressed into fall and then winter, I had saved enough money to pay for my portion of the now-scheduled May trip. I had never wanted anything more in my 12 short years of existence. Being denied the opportunity to achieve my then life-long dream would have been devastating.

My father didn’t disappoint. Towards the end of February my father collected my saved earnings to pay for my portion of the trip. My father later told me his reasoning behind making a 12-year-old pay for his own trip. He didn’t want me to lose the lesson that was taken by working hard for something you wanted, paying for it, and then reaping the benefits of the hard work. This was as close as I would ever come to feeling like I had just won the lottery. I had conquered the beast and the fear of not being able to go on the trip had changed into anticipation of going on the trip. By this time, I knew the names of all the guides and the videoed rapids. In less than two months I would be rubbing elbows with the likes of Jack Lund, Wild Bill, Tug, and Bo. I had immortalized these men from over 40 viewings of the video. I had memorized rapids and dissected them like an NFL coach breaking down a defense. I was ready for this trip like no other.

The drive to Fayetteville, West Virginia was an agonizing five hours from our home in Louisville. All packed up and ready to go, I corralled my inner-man in an attempt to fit in with the hand-picked team of 40 year-old guys that my father had assembled. I had imagined each member of the team being specifically chosen for their own unique strengths that would help propel our team in super hero fashion down this amazing river; Uncle Ron for his strength, Mike for his agility, Joe to keep the team organized. In reality, these men were all life-long friends that had continued their friendship into middle age.

We disembarked from Louisville and I put my game face on. As the only child on the trip, I wanted to prove that I was closer to being a man than I was to being in diapers. Every inappropriate joke that was told produced a deep confident manly laugh to give the impression that I had a full understanding of the topic at hand. My head nodded in agreement with the petty one-liners about our nagging wives. For that very moment, I had these men fooled into thinking I was a mature adult. Weather, stocks, and retirement, nothing was spared in my conversation involvement. Even with the 40-year-old façade, my mind was still picturing the rapids of the Lower New River.

Our group arrived at the Fayetteville Super 8 motel, unpacked, and settled in for the antsy night. The room consisted of two beds and a small bathroom. The air of the room was thick and the walls had a yellowish tint due to the years of cigarette smoke. The soda I had during dinner didn’t look half as good as the pitchers of beers *The author guiding on the New River. Photo by Jamie Simmon*
the team was consuming, but the pizza we all shared hit the spot. After returning to the room I lay in bed gazing at the ceiling recalling the named rapids in my mind. Like a sleepless man counting sheep, I sputtered off the names of the upcoming rapids—“Surprise, Upper Railroad, Lower Railroad, Swimmers...”—until I drifted off asleep.

The following morning the team awoke to enjoy a nice continental breakfast. The contrast of my excitement compared to the now slightly hung over team was on full display. I had wanted this day to come for over a year and it was finally here. We left the motel and drove the short distance to the rafting company’s location. Upon arrival, we checked in for the trip and got fitted for our pfd’s, helmets, and paddles. I excitedly ran to be one of the first to board the decrepit bus in order to get a good seat for the ride. I had been eagerly awaiting the guide’s trip speech.

“Who has never done this before,” the guide asked while raising his hand.

I raised my hand while almost standing to show I was eagerly listening to every word that was spoken.

“Well son, it’s just riding a bus; you will be okay,” the guide said, as a bus full of rafting customers broke into laughter.

Not realizing I was the butt of the joke I laughed and smiled at every one-liner that was sent my way. I thoroughly enjoyed the way the guide captured all the guests’ eyes with every passenger on the bus waiting for his every word. As we approached the river my eyes were glued to the window trying to get a glimpse of one of the guides that I had immortalized. To my disappointment, none of the guides that I had grown to know from the video were placed on our trip.

We entered the raft. I sat in the back left position right next to Tracy. Tracy heaved the raft forward with one final push and we were no longer on the bank.

“All forward. All Backwards. Left back, right forward,” Tracy yelled.

I paddled and dug in like my life depended on it. Tracy quickly calmed me down as we were only practicing commands and paddle strokes in the eddy prior to entering the current of the New River. I wanted Tracy to understand that I was a natural and that I was here to give every ounce of my being to put this raft where we needed it.

We approached the first set of ripples and I anticipated seeing this manicured team in action. I couldn’t quite see the 10-foot wall of water we were going to smash through, but I knew it was coming. My year of hard work had led me to this point. Mouth wide open, I was ready to respond to Tracy’s every command. I was cocked and ready to paddle. The commands never came because we had just floated through a Class I shoal. Where was Surprise Rapid? The first rapid on the video is Surprise Rapid. I was lost. Had my training research led me astray?

My inexcusable mistake in research was not identifying that only the big rapids are filmed. Like most eastern rivers, the New River is a pool-drop river. Between most rapids there is a nice calm pool of water. The aforementioned rafting video never displayed the long flat water stretches that litter the Thurmond to Cunard section of the New River. The typical commercial
Lower New rafting trip includes the mild Thurmond to Cunard section, and then is followed by the more action riddled Cunard to Fayette Station section of the New River.

Tracy was in for a long first half of the trip as my dreams of huge rapids diminished after every Class I or Class II shoal this section had to offer. I didn’t appreciate the history, beauty, or stories being told. Patience was not my virtue as I plastered Tracy with the rafting equivalence of, “Are we there yet?” “Is this Surprise Rapid?”

“When do the rapids get bigger?”

“Is this a big one coming up?”

Shortly before lunch I hear the river growl ahead of us. My disappointment turned to anxiety as I knew this had to be Surprise Rapid. Surprise Rapid gets its name from the boogey water leading into it looking very similar to the other mild rapids that have been completed to that point. With one exception: a huge hole/breaking wave about ¾ of the way down the rapid. Surprise can flip a 16-foot raft. I had witnessed this beautiful carnage in my video research.

We entered the rapid and dropped into the 7-foot wall of water that the hole had to offer. For a brief moment, I had flashbacks of the countless hours of video research. My stomach tightened and my heart fluttered. I was living the very moment that I had dreamt for the last year. The downstream movement of the 14-foot raft completely stopped as the power of the river froze us. The raft buckled under the force and Uncle Ron who was initially 14 feet away was now within a paddle’s length of the back of the raft. His power and the team’s combined strengths ultimately pulled us through the hole to safety. We had done it. We had conquered Surprise Rapid. I looked to the right and noticed multiple video boaters perched on a nearby rock filming my greatest accomplishment. My tale would now live on. I was now part of the documented history of running this section of the river.

The rest of the trip was full of big rapids, laughter, and a true appreciation of being on the river. As our raft slowly approached the end of the trip at the New River Gorge Bridge, I told my father and crew that I would one day be a raft guide.

Many years have passed since the second Annual New River Rafting trip. That trip was followed annually by many more. I followed through with my statement and became a raft guide for the same company that graciously guided our team down the river. Kayaking quickly followed. The time spent “working” as a guide and kayaking on my days off hold a special place in my heart.

My raft guiding days have long passed and I’ve fallen into the real world of work, managing schedules, and kids. But that love of living that was planted like a seed by that initial video has never waned. Today, even being stuck behind a desk, my mind still wanders like it did when I was 12. My life has come full circle. I now have a 13-year-old son who shares my love for whitewater. Watching his enthusiasm makes me thankful for that grainy tracking-lined video that got all of this started.
On January 1st 2012, I was gearing up to run Section III of the Chattooga River when a ray of sunshine hit my eyes and little voice said “Juliet. You should whitewater kayak slalom race.” The race bug bit me hard. From that moment I became obsessed with whitewater slalom racing. I was on a mission and it first began by acquiring a racing boat.

My race boat was a psychedelic-looking purple and baby blue Dagger Blast, which was designed as a kid’s play-boat but fit my 115 pound, 5’3” frame like a second skin. I thought I would make sure this slalom racing thing was going to stick prior to buying a regulation slalom kayak. Now that I had secured a boat, the next step was to learn how to actually race slalom. After hours of watching Youtube videos, I finally picked up the phone and called a new friend, Will Leverette, and told him my plan to race. The next thing I knew I was on the open road headed for Swannanoa, North Carolina with my friend Amy Fox and her recently purchased race boat to meet Will for my first slalom lesson. By 11:30 the next morning, I was on the water, attaining upstream in preparation for my first run through three gates strategically hung along the banks of the Swannanoa River.

How hard could this be? I thought. Three gates? Bah! The water was barely moving. This was a serious miscalculation in my judgment. Not only did I smack the poles with my head, face and body, I swam…gasp…in front of members of the Warren Wilson College Paddling Team. I felt embarrassed to say the least. I was convinced the only way to save face and progress was to get up and do it again.

The next day took me to one of my favorite places, the Nantahala River, where day two of practice proceeded. The current was faster and colder. Compounded by the fact that Greater Wesser is below the practice gates, the butterflies in my stomach went into rapid transit mode. I got into the Blast and ferried across the river and began my upstream attainment and decided it was time to make those gates. I ferried out nice and wide, lined up and went straight through the center of the gate with no touches. The next gate was an upstream gate. I eddied out fairly low and paddled up and cleared the gate. It was at this point that I knew I could do it!

With one week left until my first race at the Locust Fork Invitational, I bought a dumbbell and began working those abs and stretching those hamstrings. During conference calls at the office, I would multi-task by doing tricep curls at my desk. Then it was time to rock–n-roll. My day one Women’s K1 Championship runs were most exciting. I hit several poles and “fiftied” some of the upstream gates but had actually cleared some gates and made it to the finish line upright! By the end of the day I had figured out where the upstream gates were located and was already plotting my run on Sunday in the Women’s K1 Novice race.

Of course, that night the rain came in and the Locust Fork Branch of the Black Warrior River rose several feet. The course was mandatorily re-designed as many of the gate poles were now in the water. My plan to clear the gates went straight into the mental trash can. The water was pushy and breaking waves were popping up...
everywhere. I said to myself: “Stay upright and go slowly through the gates.” I didn’t make all the gates and went way too fast, but boy was it an exciting ride! I couldn’t wait to hike back up and do it again.

The day after my first race, I was tagged in a photo taken by the Birmingham News. My pony-tail was flying in the wind and I had a photo taken by the Birmingham News. My The day after my first race, I was tagged in a photo taken by the Birmingham News. My pony-tail was flying in the wind and I had a photo taken by the Birmingham News. My pony-tail was flying in the wind and I had a photo taken by the Birmingham News.

In February 2012, three female racers made the first Women’s K1 Recreational Boat class at the Glacier Breaker. Mary Mills and Amy Fox brought their plastic boats and I brought the Dagger Blast and we raced. That weekend I got the experience of racing with people like Eric Jackson, Emily Jackson, Pat Keller, Isaac Levinson, Tracy Click, and so many other great kayakers.

I emptied my boat and went back up and did it again. This time with Will Leverette recording and Eric Jackson providing commentary and some advice that is still helping me improve my kayaking. On the second run, I crossed the finish line and while I was the third racer of three, we made a class and my friends and I left with a ribbon. It was exhilarating to stand next to racers, some of them Olympic bound and receive a ribbon. I now dreamed of the day when I would earn a medal based on my excellent run on the course!

A few weeks passed and the Mulberry Fork Canoe and Kayak Races arrived. Warm weather and the traditional springtime Alabama rainstorm dumped more rain, making for a big-water run down the slalom course. All slalom races were moved from Saturday to Sunday which, left nothing
for me to do on Saturday but race the downriver, wildwater race with its large, chocolaty standing waves at Lunch Stop and Hawaii Five-O.

I had paddled this river several times with friends but racing alone down the river was a different feeling. There was a moment on the course where I realized that I was paddling alone down this almost flooded river. I believe it’s a feeling that gives the lucid a little discomfort and those a little off some peace of mind. I felt both of those sensations, plus the incredible feelings of strength and confidence.

My race down the slalom course might best be described this way: I put in at the top and slid all the way to the bottom really fast, occasionally making some of the gates. It wasn’t until I got into the eddy at an upstream gate by a surf wave called Hawaii Five-O that I realized I had to surf across this feature and exit downstream to the finish line. Like it or not, I had no choice but to commit and go for it. I don’t think I took my paddle out of the water one single time while peeling out and fortunately managed to avoid flipping over. I can’t imagine the look on the face of my 89-year-old Grandmother from Japan as she sat on the bluff of the Mulberry Fork with my parents watching me paddle across those waves but I was happy my family could share in this moment. At the end of the day I was just glad not to have capsized.

I spent the time between races creeking in Tennessee where I could sense my eddy-catching skills were improving along with my desire to make more precise moves on the river. On this trip, I kayaked with Joane Farrell, a 69-year-old whitewater kayaker who put my paddling skills to shame beating me for the third place spot in the Women’s K1 Championship race at the Locust Fork Classic one week later. Finally, another female paddler had been recruited and the Alabama Cup Races saw its first Women’s K1 Master’s class for the season.

Saturday’s races brought three runs for me in the Women’s K1 Championship race because there was an error in recording my second time. By run three I felt the improvement from race one to race four and finished the last upstream gate, coming in high with forward momentum, clearing the gate and moving right back out into the main flow and powering it up strong across the finish line with the cheer of my friends and spectators.

Every time I cross the finish line, I am reminded that I am now a racer.

After a huge barbecue dinner and an entertaining and heart-felt awards ceremony, the temperature dropped into the low 50s and a light rain began to fall. I fell asleep under the stars at King’s Bend by the bank of the Black Warrior River and dreamed of my exciting day.

The next morning I discovered that I would be racing in the Mixed K2 class in addition to the Women’s K1 Cruising class. One racer wore a green tuxedo bib and another a red and white string bikini top over his pfd. My K2 partner, Tony Diliberto donned a stylish, bright blue Friends of the Locust Fork River fitted Ladies t-shirt with an elegant scarf. With my matching blue, inflated glove attached to my helmet, we were ready to K2 the slalom course.

With no practice runs, we ran the course making the most difficult move from upstream gate 4 to almost parallel downstream gate 5 with no touches. While we missed one gate, we still paddled up and cleared the gate and were just out of third place by seven seconds. There was one K2 that capsized and swam and I was so grateful it wasn’t us! It had been over a year and a half since I last paddled a K2, braving the Upper Gauley River during Gauley Fest. Slalom racing took the K2 to a different level and reminded me to lean, not just while peeling out but also by leaning my head and torso when clearing the gate poles. I left the races ecstatic and happy to see so many of friends place in the Alabama Cup Series.

If you asked me when I started kayaking if I thought I would be racing slalom three days before my 40th birthday, I would have laughed. Some people have said I dream big. Maybe they are right. However, it doesn’t stop me from believing that all dreams start as a thought and can be transformed into an idea and subsequently an action and one day be reality. I thought my first race season would end with the last race of the Alabama Cup Series and now my calendar is booked for two more downriver races in April. I think I will just keep on dreaming.
AW’s Biggest Fundraiser

Sept 14-16
Summersville, WV

More info: http://gauleyfest.americanwhitewater.org
The contrast between reported accidents this year and last has been quite remarkable. In the first six months of 2012, 20 fatalities were reported to American Whitewater, much less than half of the 50-plus tragedies during the same period last year. The big difference has been water levels. While most of the country saw unusually high water in 2011, this year severe droughts have plagued much of the nation. The situation has been particularly bad in Colorado and California, two major centers of whitewater activity. While high water extends the whitewater season and increases the difficulty of some commonly run rivers, low water curtails these opportunities and confines paddlers to a handful of well-known runs at modest water levels. When people get on the water less often and there’s less exposure to river hazards and, as a result, fewer casualties.

Kayak Accidents
On January 8th seven kayakers began a trip down West Virginia’s Upper Blackwater River. Everyone was familiar with this classic Class V run. Water levels were moderate, but temperatures were only in the mid 30s. Robert Norr, 20, had been down the river twice before. The group encountered no problems until Flatliner Falls, one of the last big drops. Because an expert paddler died here just over a year ago the group approached the rapid with great care. Two paddlers discussed the route with Mr. Norr in an eddy. Water falls off of both sides of a pointed ledge and paddlers must paddle hard over the center to avoid falling into a bad pin rock on the left. One boater peeled out and ran the drop cleanly, and Mr. Norr ran next. Here’s an account of what happened from Kyle Mandler, who was behind him:

“Bob exited the eddy under control and stroking confidently...I could see that he was drifting to the left...as he neared the lip he may have realized that he was off-line and attempted to get over by turning his bow towards the river-right. Due to the shape of the ledge...Bob’s boat was parallel to the ledge as he landed...The force of the water immediately flipped and submerged him, pinning him below the surface. I began my run approximately five seconds after Bob and by the time I reached the lip his boat was completely submerged.”

Mr. Norr and his boat had been pushed completely under a large flat rock just below the drop. Rescuers moved in quickly, and the first ropes were thrown in less than a minute. Although they were only 5-10 feet from the pin spot they could barely see Mr. Norr and could not make contact. After a while Mr. Norr’s PFD, sprayskirt, and finally his boat came loose. Rescuers were hopeful that he might still be in the boat, but it was empty.

With time running out Bobby Miller attempted a risky live bait rescue, wading in from downstream and reaching up and over the submerged pin rock into the pocket. Braving a powerful current that threatened to pull him under the rock, Miller grabbed Mr. Norr’s wrist and attached a rope. The others pulled hard, first by themselves and then with a Z-Drag, but this only removed Mr. Norr’s drytop and thermal layers. After several hours had passed, and rescue efforts were called off. The next day a group of kayakers working with the Davis Fire Company returned and released Mr. Norr’s body.

This accident serves as a brutal reminder that small mistakes can be fatal in difficult whitewater, and that rescue isn’t always possible under these conditions.

At the end of January two men launched kayaks from the Muddy Creek Boat Access on Pennsylvania’s Susquehanna River. They planned to paddle out to an island and camp. Although there are no real rapids here, this is a wide, fast-moving river with small waves and strong currents. According to the Baltimore Sun, Nicholas Herr, 24, capsized part way across. Both men were wearing life vests, but may not have been prepared for the icy water. When his partner tried to assist him, Mr. Herr panicked, capsized his kayak and pulled him into the water. While his partner swam to shore, Mr. Herr held onto his kayak, washed downstream, and disappeared. His body was not found for two months.

Montana’s Gallatin River was the scene of an unfortunate incident on June 6th. Harold Vaughn, 21, was practicing rolls with a friend above Gallatin Canyon. He missed a roll and drifted downstream into a logjam where he was pinned upside down. His paddling partner called 911; rescuers pulled Mr. Vaughn from the strainer and tried CPR, without success.

Washington’s Little White Salmon is one of the most challenging regularly run rivers on the West Coast. On June 16th Jenna Watson, 38, was making her first run with six other paddlers. Stephen Cameron, who was on the trip, reports that she ran the first two miles without any problems, with solid lines on all the major drops except Island, which she portaged.

S-Turn is a two-tiered rapid that begins with a 12-foot waterfall followed by a three-foot ledge. About 15 feet downstream of the second drop the water pushes into an undercut wall on river left. Ms. Watson boofed the top ledge on river left, angled away from the wall, then boofed the final drop. Suddenly, she flipped on the central boil at the bottom of the rapid which turned her boat and shot her left towards the wall. She tried one roll, before she was pushed into the undercut wall upside-down. Her pink helmet was initially visible through the clear water and witnesses assumed she was trapped against a hidden log or against her deck by the force of the water.

Paddlers from her group and a second group scouting S-Turn on the left saw the situation and ran over to help. Ropes were thrown from above and upstream of where Ms. Watson was trapped in the hopes that
she would be able to grab a hold. It was an awkward and difficult place to work. After a minute or so her kayak came out, but she wasn’t in it. One paddler bravely volunteered to attempt a live-bait rescue. He clipped in and dove into the undercut, swam about 15 feet, and returned with Ms. Watson 30 seconds later. She had been underwater for about four minutes; she wasn’t breathing and didn’t have a pulse. The group notified authorities via a satellite phone and performed CPR for two hours before deciding to stop and carry her body out of the canyon.

S-Turn is actually considered one of the more straightforward rapids on the Little White and is not a rapid where most groups set safety. The undercut wall is a known hazard, but has seen only one previous mishap and a couple of near misses. Most boaters are only peripherally focused on it as they run S-Turn. Ms. Watson was paddling well, and no one in the group had any doubts about her ability. Right above S-Turn, another paddler described the lines and hazards of the rapid and offered her an opportunity to scout, which she declined. She ran the drop well until she encountered the final hazard. It was a small mistake with awful consequences.

Finally, a freak accident claimed the life of a well-known American whitewater explorer. Mark Hentze, 37, spent many winters in Columbia and had recently published a whitewater guidebook for the country. At 10 pm on March 6th he was camped beside the Rio Santo Domingo when the water rose 15 meters (49.2 feet) in a just few minutes. His body was found over 12 miles downstream at the Rio Verde and Rio Caldera confluence. His companion, who barely escaped with his life, wrote a gripping account that you can find in the AW accident database.

Canoeing Accidents
There have been two open canoeing deaths so far this season, one of which was in West Virginia’s New River Gorge on April 14. Jason Moore, 38, swam earlier in the day and complained that he was not well. After swimming Lower Keaney Rapid Mr. Moore was too tired to continue and remained on shore while his friends paddled downstream to get help. It was dark when rescuers arrived and they couldn’t locate him. Friends found Mr. Moore early the next morning, dead, lying on a large rock near his canoe. It’s quite likely that some underlying health problem was responsible for his death.

On June 27th Edwin Rutkowski, 68, was canoeing Class III Marten Rapid on Oregon’s McKenzie River with his son. Neither man was wearing a PFD. When their boat capsized his son was able to grab a hold of a rock, but Mr. Rutkowski washed downstream and disappeared. An hour later a helicopter spotted his body floating in the river.

Rafting Accidents
Rafting deaths often result from preventable errors, like the following two instances, when individuals failed to wear pfd’s. On April 17th Daniel Kuhn was participating in the Pe Ell River Run, a group float on Washington’s Chehalis River. According to the Lewis County Chronicle the 24-year-old man was not wearing a life vest and was drinking during the day. He fell behind his group and did not show up at the take-out as planned. His group thought he’d left with other friends and returned home. A few days later they realized their mistake and contacted authorities. Mr. Kuhn’s truck and his raft were quickly located, and search teams were deployed. His body was found several days afterwards.

In the second incident, four adults and two kids launched a raft into Class II-III “Swirly Canyon” on Idaho’s South Fork of the Payette River in June 17th. The Idaho Statesman reported that only the children were wearing pfd’s. When one of the adults fell out of the raft Tracy Ruby, 45, jumped in to help. The rafters recovered the first swimmer but not Ms. Ruby, who disappeared. Her body was recovered six miles downstream.

Idaho, one of the few areas in the country with average water levels this spring, saw three other rafting fatalities. On May 27th two fishermen launched a raft on the Salmon River near Stanley, Idaho. The water was quite high. Their raft collided with a hidden log, throwing both men into the river. One man swam to safety, but Mark McCoy, 29, was carried over six miles until his clothes snagged on some willows in the vicinity of Sunbeam Dam. On June 3rd Jonathan Boling fell out of his raft on the Middle Fork of the Salmon at Velvet Falls. Mr. Boling, 34, was in the icy water for a short time, but was not breathing when he was pulled from the water. A heart attack is the likely culprit. On June 24th Brenda Reiner drowned after the raft she and her husband were in overturned in the Flathead River. Ms. Reiner, 57, washed into a downed tree and was pinned underwater. Her husband swam ashore and called for help, but it did not arrive in time.

Three commercial rafting deaths have been reported this year, all of which seem connected to guest’s health issues. On April 15th an older man fell out of his boat in Patton’s Run on North Carolina’s Nantahala River and was in the water for a while. He was pulled ashore by other paddlers and given CPR. An outfitter who assisted with the rescue said the man had a stoma: a breathing hole in his neck. It’s not clear if someone like this can swim whitewater safely. A regular life vest simply won’t hold a person high enough to keep a stoma clear of the water and there is no way to protect their airway from oncoming water.

Another incident occurred during a spring run of West Virginia’s Lower Gauley River. Darrin Rennee, 45, was rafting with relatives and friends on April 29th when he fell out of his raft on Lower Mash Rapids. Water levels were medium-high. Passengers on another boat picked him up quickly, but he had difficulty breathing moments later and passed out. And finally, a commercial rafting guest on California’s North Fork of the American River died after swimming the bottom portion of Slaughter’s Sluice and...
Chamberlain Falls on May 6th. There are both powerful Class IV drops. Stan Decker, 59, had been helping other paddlers back into the boat when he fell out himself. His swim was short but intense and he was unresponsive when picked up below Chamberlain Falls. In the last two incidents guides administered CPR and arranged for helicopter evacuations.

Two sportsmen died this past June on different whitewater sections of West Virginia’s New River. They were not in whitewater boats and the water was quite high in both cases. Both involved father and son teams that were not wearing life vests; in each accident the son was able to swim ashore while the father perished. June 16th two fishermen in a canoe or small raft (it’s not clear which) capsized in Silos Rapid, a Class III drop on the Upper New known for big waves. Bradley Alexander, 41, disappeared. On June 26th two men were using a Jon boat to ferry camping gear across the pool above Double Z Rapid when their boat capsized. Eddie Ramsey, 59, was carried downstream to his death. At low flows the pools on both the New and Gauley River are easily crossed, but they require a lot more skill at high water. Life jackets are an important safety precaution regardless of water level, and might well have saved these men’s life.

Near Misses and Rescues
There were very few rescues, near misses, or injuries reported in the first half of this year. A man broke his back after a flat landing at Mill Creek Falls in West Virginia; a woman missed her line, pitoned hard, and broke her foot at Bear Creek Falls on North Carolina’s Cheoah River. Both paddlers are recovering well. In March three paddlers attempted to run tiny Abram’s Creek in Smokey Mountain National Park at ridiculously low water levels. A full scale search began when they failed to finish, but they were found unhurt. I have many reports of solo paddlers encountering trouble and becoming stranded on midstream rocks and trees or the shore opposite a road and needing help. One even pulled a cell phone from a waterproof bag and dialed 911! This is the sort of mishap that experienced paddling groups routinely handle themselves, and paddling with smart, supportive partners makes good sense. Although most rescues used ropes or tethered boats, helicopters were sometimes called. All could have been done faster and cheaper by skilled whitewater boaters. One kayaker was stranded against a cliff above a Class IV rapid on Oregon’s Sandy River. His partner called for help. He was later hit by a landslide set off by a rescue helicopter, suffering minor injuries. Afterwards, the rescue team used ropes to approach him from above and make the extrication.

The accounts in this article come from print and online articles, message boards, and chat rooms, in addition to first person accounts. American Whitewater needs your help in collecting this information. Since most of us will never encounter a fatal accident in our paddling careers it’s important to share the facts so we can all learn from them. To report a whitewater accident, near miss, or serious injury, go to the Safety page on the AW site, click “report an accident”, and enter your information. Thanks!
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American Whitewater has been extraordinarily fortunate in our ability to leverage a strong grassroots base—members and other volunteers—to assist our limited staff with many whitewater river conservation and restoration efforts.

Over the years, American Whitewater volunteers have participated in numerous hydropower meetings as well as instream and recreational flow studies; filed comments and assisted with an uncountable number of filings; appeared as expert witnesses; lobbied; worked to fight new dams, remove existing dams, deny licenses, and improve public access to rivers and streams. In nearly every river stewardship issue AW has been involved with, the outcome has been favorable to paddlers. Not only has AW secured favorable decisions for the paddling community, but we are the only national organization representing paddlers as these decisions are being made.

A growing membership base is crucial to our ability to continue with our work. Some studies show that there are currently over 100,000 whitewater paddlers in the U.S. American Whitewater currently has 6,300 active members. When considering the amount of whitewater river miles that AW has had a direct impact on, this membership number is unimpressive. We need all paddlers to join American Whitewater. If you are a member, please be sure that everyone you paddle with understands the work AW does, and how you, as an AW member, value that work.

Membership support is what will determine our ability to continue our river stewardship work in the years to come. Individual Annual Memberships are only $35. If you are a member of your local paddling club and your club is an Affiliate Club member of AW, join as a Club Affiliate Individual for $25. This is less than a tank of gas or an inexpensive night out. This is certainly not too much to pay to have a national organization representing your paddling interests all across the country.

Join on-line today at http://americanwhitewater.org/content/Membership/join-AW/, call 1-866-BOAT4AW (866-262-8429), or fill out the form on the back of this page and mail it to:

Membership
P.O. Box 1540
Cullowhee, NC 28723
Name  ________________________________________________________________________________
Address  ________________________________________________________________________________
City, State, Zip ____________________________________________________________________________
Email  ________________________________________________________________________________
Phone  ______________________________________________ Member Number:  __________________

*Note: AW will never share your information with others

**Join or Renew Form**

card: info@americanwhitewater.org | 1-866-262-8429
P.O. Box 1540 Cullowhee, NC 28723

**Membership Level**

☐ $35  Standard  ☐ $100 Ender Club (Shirt Size: ________)
☐ $25  Member of Affiliate Club  ☐ $250 Platinum Paddler
☐ Club: __________________________
☐ $25  Student  ☐ $500 Explorer
☐ School: _________________________
☐ $25  Student  ☐ $750 Lifetime
☐ $50 Family  ☐ $1,000 Legacy
☐ $75 Affiliate Club  ☐ $2,500 Steward

**Payment**

☐ Credit Card    ☐ Cash    ☐ Check #___________

Card Number: ___________________________________________ Expiration Date: __________
Name on card: ________________________________
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**Additional Subscriptions**

☐ $30  Kayak Session Magazine - 4 issues per year (KS donates $5 to AW!)

**Journal Options**

☐ Do NOT mail me the AW Journal, email it to me <- Saves AW money, and trees! :)

**Auto-Renew (No Renewal Notices!)**

☐ Auto-renew my membership each year on the credit card below

**Donation**

☐ Donation of $_________

For current member rewards go to: americanwhitewater.org
Whitewater in the Ozarks is hard to come by. Most of us keep one eye tuned to the weather forecast all winter and spring. If rain is showing on radar, then we turn to Bill Herring’s excellent Ozark Whitewater Page, which catalogs all the rivers in the region from Class IV-V steep creeks to the Class II standbys. Since the Class III and IV stuff like Richland, Hurricane Creek, and the Hailstone (Upper Upper Buffalo) runs out in a matter of hours, or a day at best, most paddlers head to the more reliable creeks of Northwest Arkansas, namely the Mulberry River, the Upper Buffalo, or Big Piney Creek.

Big Piney Creek runs through a remote section of the Ozark National Forest. It is not a wilderness, but has many wilderness characteristics. It is essentially roadless, entirely forested, and is graced with many waterfalls entering from its side creeks. Though the eight mile run is mostly Class II, it has many pleasant surfing and play spots, and side hikes for the adventurous. Its one Class III rapid was briefly named Cascade of Extinction, but throughout Arkansas it is known simply as The Mother. Big Piney Creek has developed a reputation over the years as a great social rendezvous for paddlers, not just from Arkansas, but Missouri, Oklahoma, Texas, and Western Tennessee. There is not a great volume of rental boats, and the one local outfitter, Kerry Moore of Moore Outdoor, is very much one of the local paddlers. So a spring Saturday or Sunday on the Piney is pretty much old home week, as it has been since the early 70s. On any given weekend, Surfing Rapid could have a congregation of several dozen paddlers just hanging out, telling stories, and enjoying each other’s company. I even recall one spring Saturday afternoon when a grill was paddled in and grilled chicken was being served to anyone who wanted it. The Russian exchange paddling group even visited there during the 1990s.

But aside from all this, the Piney had a unique tradition. Everyone knew about it. I don’t know how they knew. I don’t ever remember how I first knew. But everyone knew.

There is no public put-in for Big Piney Creek. The put-in is on private land, at a place called Helton’s Farm. There was no sign. There were no posted instructions. But everyone knew that before entering the field that led to the put-in, you first drove up the tidy white farmhouse just up the hill, got out of your car, walked up to the porch, and paid Mrs. Helton. At first, she seemed somewhat amused that anyone would want to paddle down the creek. But if people wanted to do such a fool thing, she’d be happy to let them have access through their cattle field. For many years the rate was $1 per boat, and $2 for “those big rubber boats.” In recent years, just like everything else, the rate increased...to $2 per boat. I don’t know what happened if you didn’t know how to pay. I never heard of anyone not paying. Everyone just knew. It was a privilege to meet Mrs. Helton and contribute your dollar. It was insurance for future access to the Big Piney Creek.

If you wished, she’d always be happy to visit. Local paddlers tell how she related having swam to the other side of the creek in flood to rescue some cattle. She told of their favorite swimming hole on Indian Creek, where a local paddler has a community cabin now. She told of having ridden the now impassible mail route by mule from Treat (the community where the Helton farm is located) to Fort Douglas, up river.

For a while they offered shuttles down to the take-out. Someone suggested that these shuttles might have been where some of the local kids learned to drive.

Around her house the woman’s touch was evident, with flowers blooming everywhere. One local paddler fell in love with her hollyhocks, and tried to grow some like hers, without success. He also tells that for some reason Mrs. Helton got the idea his wife was married to one of his best friends. He and his wife never could get that idea out of her head, so they finally just quit trying. Mr. Helton was around, but the boat access was Mrs. Helton’s thing, kind of like egg money, I suppose.

Mr. Helton passed away quite a few years ago, but Mrs. Helton continued to live there on the farm. Though she almost completely lost her hearing in recent years, she still continued to appear on the porch, with a smile and change for your larger bill, if necessary. Conversation was difficult. Though she’d smile, you could tell she had no idea what you’d said. Every year we’d appear in the early spring, wondering if she’d still be there on the porch. And every year, there she’d be. It seemed like she would be there forever.

Then one spring, year before last, her son, who used to drive shuttle, was there collecting the money. We learned that Mrs. Helton had moved to a nursing home.

Not all paddling stories are about whitewater. Some are about the great local folks you meet where you go paddling.

This April we learned of her passing at age 97. Mrs. Opal Helton, rest in peace. You were a friend to all, but especially to the paddlers of the Ozarks.
Dear American Whitewater,

A Big Thank You from the Friendsville (MD) Mayor and Town Council.

Just a few short months ago, paddlers from across the country were asked to give contributions to help the Town of Friendsville develop a new four-acre parcel of land that was gifted to the town for a parking lot. WOW! What an overwhelming response from individuals and companies from all over this great land who have had the thrill of paddling on the beautiful Upper Yough in our little town. We received many very generous donations from paddlers from all walks of life. No matter how large or small the donations are greatly appreciated. I can assure you the town council and myself are very grateful for your generosity.

The town is applying for additional grants for a rest room, changing room facilities and for parking lot development. The state and county are working side by side with the town to help move this project forward. We are currently waiting on two agencies in order to begin the next phase of our journey together. As we continue to develop the Kendall Trail many more of you can spend additional time hiking and biking throughout our quaint little town. Our business community really comes to life when the various paddlers come to town and we get to showcase everything we have to offer.

As of today we have received more than $22,000 in donations. Again, I am just amazed by the level of support from each and every person who has graciously given to our town and our community. Let us continue to work together to make this a reality that will be beneficial to so many people for decades to come.

Sincerely,

Spencer R. Schlosnagle
Mayor of Friendsville, Maryland

It's Easy to Support AW!

American Whitewater is proud of the work we have accomplished in our stewardship program but we need your help to sustain our success. Your support through membership and donations enables our staff to be active and engaged in the process of river stewardship. Donations don't have to be large; each person doing a small part makes a noticeable difference. Many donors fail to take full advantage of federal tax incentives specifically intended to encourage charitable contributions. Such incentives often enable a donor to make a larger gift to AW at little or no additional cost. For more information about maximizing your gift visit the IRS website dedicated to charitable organizations.

American Whitewater is a national non-profit 501(c)(3) organization, EIN# 23-7083760. To learn more about the Giving Options below, contact us at 866-BOAT4AW or visit the “Donate” link under “Support AW” on our website at www.americanwhitewater.org

- Donate online today!
- Monthly Giving: Contribute a minimum of $10 via credit card or electronic transfer from your bank account.
- Bequests: Include AW in your will or living trust. Bequests to AW are generally exempt from federal or state inheritance taxes, and subject to an unlimited deduction.
- Combined Federal Campaign: Federal employees including federal civilians, military personnel and U.S. Postal Workers can donate to AW through the CFC a once a year charitable fund raising program. Look for AW (Agency #11351) in the official CFC listing of eligible donors.
- Charitable Remainder Trusts: Convert a highly appreciated asset (such as real estate or stocks) into a lifetime income while minimizing income and estate taxes.
- Employer Matching: Many employers will match your donations to non-profit organizations. This includes membership payments, as well as additional contributions. Check to see if your employer has a matching program.
- MissionFish: Sell your items through the MissionFish program on eBay and the proceeds come directly to AW.
- Other Assets: A gift of real estate to AW qualifies you for a tax deduction based on the property's fair market value. If it is not a river access point, AW will sell the property and use the proceeds to protect access and restore rivers. Acceptance of property is subject to certain conditions. You may also be eligible to receive tax benefits for gifts of real property. Art and jewelry are examples of personal property items that may be eligible. Interested donors should check with your financial and tax advisors and AW on the feasibility and tax considerations of such gifts.
- Securities: Donating appreciated stock to AW benefits both the donor and whitewater rivers. The donor receives two tax-related benefits. First, the gain on the stock is not subject to capital gains taxes. Second, the donor can deduct the value of the stock as a charitable contribution.
- United Way: All federal campaigns, and a few of the local campaigns will allow you to donate to AW. AW’s UNITED WAY member # is 2302.
- Vehicle Donations: Turn that extra car, truck, or RV into a tax deductible donation benefiting AW.
AW’S ORIGINAL PURPOSE
BY CARLA MINER

The Affiliate Club Program lies at the very heart of American Whitewater’s existence. American Whitewater’s original purpose since 1954 has been to distribute information among its Affiliate Clubs. Our relationships with local clubs have provided the backbone for the river conservation and access work we accomplish. We have over 100 current AW Club Affiliates and they are all doing great work on your behalf. If you don’t belong to a club, consider joining one.

Our Affiliate Club Spotlight this issue is on the Loma Prieta Paddlers, an outstanding Affiliate Club and long time supporter of our mission to conserve and restore America’s whitewater resources and to enhance opportunities to enjoy them safely.

Loma Prieta Paddlers is a whitewater paddling club based in the San Jose, California area. For over 25 years LPP has been supporting the paddling community by hosting weekly pool roll sessions, a full schedule of river trips and an annual whitewater slalom race. The club welcomes all kinds of whitewater boaters from those new to the sport to those with years of paddling experience. The purpose of the club is to coordinate whitewater trips, serve as a meeting place for boaters, promote river safety, improve paddling skills, organize whitewater races, and to promote river conservation. The Club paddles the many rivers of California’s Sierra Nevada Mountains and the coastal ranges.

Club membership is easy, there are no club dues nor secret handshake to learn. To become a member all you need to do is participate - go to a club meeting, practice in the pool or join a trip. If you’re looking to improve your paddling skills, or you just want to paddle with an enjoyable group of fellow kayakers, check out Loma Prieta Paddlers website at http://lp.sierraclub.org/lpp/index.html.

Thank you Loma Prieta Paddlers for your continued support of American Whitewater!

The AW Journal Club Affiliates by state:

**Alaska**
Fairbanks Paddlers, Fairbanks
Novato River Runners Inc., Chickaloon

**Alabama**
Birmingham Canoe Club, Birmingham
Coosa River Paddling Club, Montgomery
Huntsville Canoe Club, Huntsville

**Arizona**
Outdoors Unlimited, Flagstaff

**Arkansas**
Arkansas Canoe Club, Little Rock

**California**
California Floaters Society, Cameron Park
Chico Paddleheads, Chico
Gold Country Paddlers, Lotus
Guides House, Laytonville
Sequoya Paddlers, Forestville
Sierra Club Loma Prieta Paddlers, San Jose

**Colorado**
Avid Adventure Inc., Boulder
Colorado Whitewater Assn, Englewood
Grand Canyon Private Boaters Assn, Colorado Springs
Lower Dolores Boating Advocates, Dolores
Pikes Peak Whitewater Club, Colorado Springs
San Miguel Whitewater Asso, Telluride

**Connecticut**
AMC - Connecticut Chapter, Waterbury

**Delaware**
AMC Delaware Valley Chapter, Oaks
Wilmingon Trail Club, Newark

**Georgia**
Atlanta Whitewater Club, Atlanta
Georgia Canoeing Asso, Atlanta
Georgia Tech Outdoor Recreation, Atlanta
Paddlers4Christ, Ellijay

**Idaho**
Idaho Whitewater Association, Boise

**Illinois**
Chicago Whitewater Assn, Chicago
Ohio Valley Paddlers, Evansville

**Indiana**
Iowa Whitewater Coalition, W. Des Moines

**Kentucky**
Bardstown Boaters, Bardstown
Bluegrass Wildwater Asso, Lexington
Elkhorn Paddlers, Lexington
Viking Canoe Club, Louisville

**Louisiana**
Sabine Whitewater Club, Lake Charles

**Maine**
Penobscot Paddler & Chowder Society, Troy

**Maryland**
Blue Ridge Voyageurs, Silver Spring
Mason Dixon Canoe Cruisers, Boonsboro
Monocacy Canoe Club, Frederick

**Massachusetts**
AMC Boston Chapter Paddlers, Boston
UMass Outing Club - Whitewater Kayaking, Amherst

**Minnesota**
Minnesota Canoe Assn, Minneapolis
SCSU Outdoor Endeavors, Saint Cloud

**Missouri**
Missouri Whitewater Assn, St Louis
Ozark Mountain Paddlers, Springfield
Ozark Wilderness Waterways, Kansas City

**Montana**
Butte-Anaconda River Runners, Butte

**Nevada**
Sierra Nevada Whitewater Club, Reno

**New Hampshire**
AMC New Hampshire Paddlers, Raymond
Ledyard Canoe Club, Hanover
Merrimack Valley Paddlers, Nashua
Mt. Washington Valley Paddlers, Intervale

**New Jersey**
AMC Delaware Valley Chapter, Oaks
KCCNY, Flanders

**New Mexico**
Adobe Whitewater Club of New Mexico, Albuquerque

**New York**
ADK Schenectady, Schenectady
AMC NY/NJ Chapter, New York
Colgate University, Hamilton
FLOW Paddlers’ Club, Rochester
Hamilton College, Clinton
Housatonic Area Canoe & Kayak Sq., Ossining
St Lawrence University, Canton
Zoar Valley Paddling Club, Buffalo

**North Carolina**
Base Camp Cullowhee, Cullowhee
Carolina Canoe Club, Raleigh
Triad River Runners, Winston-Salem
Western Carolina Paddlers, Asheville

**Ohio**
Columbus Outdoor Pursuits, Columbus
Keelhauer Canoe Club, Cleveland
Outdoor Adventure Club, Dayton
Toledo River Gang, Haskins

**Oregon**
Eugene Kayaker, Eugene
Lower Columbia Canoe Club, Portland
Northwest Rafters Association, Roseburg
Oregon Kayak and Canoe Club, Portland
Oregon Whitewater Association, Beaverton
Willamette Kayak & Canoe Club, Corvallis

**Pennsylvania**
AMC Delaware Valley Chapter, Oaks
Bradford County Canoe and Kayak Club, Sayre
Canoe Club of Greater Harrisburg, Harrisburg
Conewago Canoe Club, York
Holtwood Hooligans, Paradise
Lehigh Valley Whitewater Inc., Lehigh Valley
Mach One Slalom Team, State College
DISCOUNTED AW MEMBERSHIP FOR AFFILIATE CLUB MEMBERS

By Carla Miner, Membership Manager

AW offers a discounted Affiliate Club membership of $25, a $10 savings. If you are renewing your AW membership or joining as a new member, select the Affiliate Club Discounted Personal Membership online at http://americanwhitewater.org/content/Membership/join-AW/

Or, if you are renewing or joining by mail or telephone just mention the name of the Affiliate Club you belong to and you can take advantage of the $25 membership.

A list of AW Affiliate Clubs can be found on our website at http://americanwhitewater.org/content/Membership/join-AW/. If you do not see your Club listed here please encourage them to renew their Club membership or to join AW as a new Affiliate Club. Your Club’s membership and your personal membership enable our staff to be active and engaged in the process of river stewardship. When you join or renew your membership your support is helping to meet the many challenges whitewater rivers face.

If you have any questions about the Affiliate Club membership, please contact me. I can be reached at 866_BOAT-4AW or membership@americanwhitewater.org.

JOIN AMERICAN WHITENWATER AS A CLUB AFFILIATE!

10 REASONS TO JOIN AW AS AN AFFILIATE CLUB

1. Support river access and restoration through the AW River Stewardship Team.

2. Be part of a national voice for the protection of the whitewater rivers your club values.

3. Tap into the professional expertise of AW staff for river issues that come up in your backyard.

4. Your club’s members can become AW members for $25. A $10 savings!

5. Receive the American Whitewater Journal, the oldest continually published whitewater magazine.

6. Your club is recognized in the list of Affiliate Clubs posted to the AW website.

7. Recognize your club in the list of Affiliate Clubs noted in each bi-monthly AW Journal.

8. Post Club information on the AW Website to help paddlers find you.

9. Gain Club satisfaction from lending support to AW’s stewardship efforts.

10. Improve your club members river karma.

For more information, contact Carla Miner at membership@americanwhitewater.org or sign-up online at www.americanwhitewater.org/membership.
American Whitewater is a member-driven publication. If you enjoy reading it, please consider letting its pages tell your story. We are looking for articles about whitewater rivers of any variety, so let your imagination flow free!

We’re always accepting submissions and we hope you’ll consider contributing. For complete submission details, story topics, deadlines, and guidelines, go to:

americanwhitewater.org > Library > AW Journal
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