

Pikes Peak River Runners

Snap, Crackle, Pop and Roll

July 1999

Westwater (Colorado river)



By Christina King

Note: I have no pictures of this trip, too many rescues happening at once.

Pete and I were on the home-stretch of a long one-day drive from Boise to Fruita. We had just completed a 185 mile (9 day) river trip encompassing the Middlefork and the Main Salmon rivers. As we drove by the Westwater Canyon exit (off of I-70) we saw smoke from the first of a series of fires. It looked like the canyon was right in the line of fire. We soon found out that is exactly what was happening. Lightning strikes had started numerous fires along the canyon. We met our group in Fruita and updated them on our Idaho escapades. We re-supplied with food and ice and went to sleep with warm water on our minds.

Day 1: Sunday, July 4

Our group consisted of 14 boaters from Winter Park, Colorado Springs, and Woodland Park. The day dawned with high winds (not a good sign). The fires had grown in size and the high winds did not help the forecast. Our plan was to run Loma to Cisco because our Westwater Canyon permit was not until July 5. As we rigged at Loma, the BLM ranger informed us that camping was not allowed at Black Rocks or anywhere in Colorado's Ruby or Horsethief canyons. We would have to camp below the Utah stateline. That meant at least a 23 mile day in very windy conditions. We struggled against the wind all afternoon and longingly looked at the nice empty campsites at Black Rocks. We saw several fires high along the mesa rims with flames and lots of smoke (snap and crackle). We took a nice shade break at the railroad trestle trailhead to the Anasazi petroglyphs. Karen saw a nice Big Horn ram parading for her camera at the amphitheater. We camped at the first place below the Colorado stateline (Pebble Beach). The theme for the day was WIND and FIRE.

Day 2: Monday July 5

Monday morning we floated down to the Westwater Canyon ranger station and checked in with the ranger. We were assigned Big Horn as our camp. The ranger told us the level was 13,000 cfs and called it a "snappy" level. Some boaters call the levels between 13,000 and 19,000 cfs the "Terrible Teens". 13,000 cfs flow is actually considered a medium level. How prophetic that description was to become! We ate lunch in the shade at Little Dee and made last minutes adjustments before the big rapids.

Funnel Falls was the first major rapid. Pete ran lead and Ralph was close behind. Ralph missed the safe drop and went left over the huge collapsing wave/hole. His boat stood up on end and fell sideways with Ralph almost falling in the river on the "lowside". Davida saved the day by high-siding and his boat fell back down (right side up). Irene Cooke made the same mistake and flipped immediately in front of me. Irene popped up right away next to her boat. I did not follow the crowd and stayed safely away from that wave. I followed Irene and her cataract into an aggressive (boiling) eddy on the right to pick her up. Meanwhile out of the corner of my eye, I saw Rich and Jenny float by in the current. As I was hauling Irene into my boat, Rich had flipped in the same left run. In the space of 3 minutes we had two flipped boats and three people swimming the first

major rapid. With my hands full, I figured the rest of the group would catch Rich and Jenny. The eddy we were in was not a place to flip Irene's boat. Bill Cooke and Karen Hodge decided to take a break from their in-depth comparison of PERA retirement plans and helped push Irene's cat into the current and the chase was on. Thanks Bill and Karen (so glad you put those PERA files away)!

Skull rapid was approaching quickly. We saw no one ahead of us. We presumed they were chasing people and boats. As I rowed backwards into the Skull lateral wave (on the left) to avoid the hole on the right, I was worried. The lateral wave was big. I actually did not break the lateral as intended and had to run the left side of the hole, but came through okay. The only boat we saw at this point was Ralph's. Ralph had done another "lowside" and fallen in again. Ralph told us Jay had flipped in the lateral wave at Skull and he and his daughter had swum the Skull hole. Luckily, Rich and Jenny had gotten picked up before Skull rapid (by Pete and Jeff). They had a long swim and drank a lot of river water. Jeff had also fallen victim to the "lowside" phenomenon and swam in Skull. Three boats were now upside-down with two more people in the water. We heard a whistle and looked up on the cliff and there was Jay. Hugging the wall like Spiderman. Ralph told Jay to jump in the river and Davida hauled him in. Jeff had picked up Angie. Angie told us that the bottom of the Skull hole is very dark and faded to black as she saw Skull from the inside out.

All of the boats were caught in the flat water below the final rapid appropriately called Last Chance. We rolled them right side up. The final tally of losses included; misc beer and soda, 3 oars, 1 wet ruined camera, 1 chair, 1 pair of glasses, 1 hat, 1 oarlock, and a fair amount of self-confidence. (100% more men flipped than women). It could have been much worse. At least everyone was safe and sound. It took a fair amount of camp discussion to document this story. Thanks to everyone. This river trip was definitely a snap, crackle, pop, and roll adventure in more ways than one. Can't wait to go back next 4th of July!