

Pikes Peak River Runners

Westwater Fireworks July 1998



By Christina King

Photo Credits: Christina King

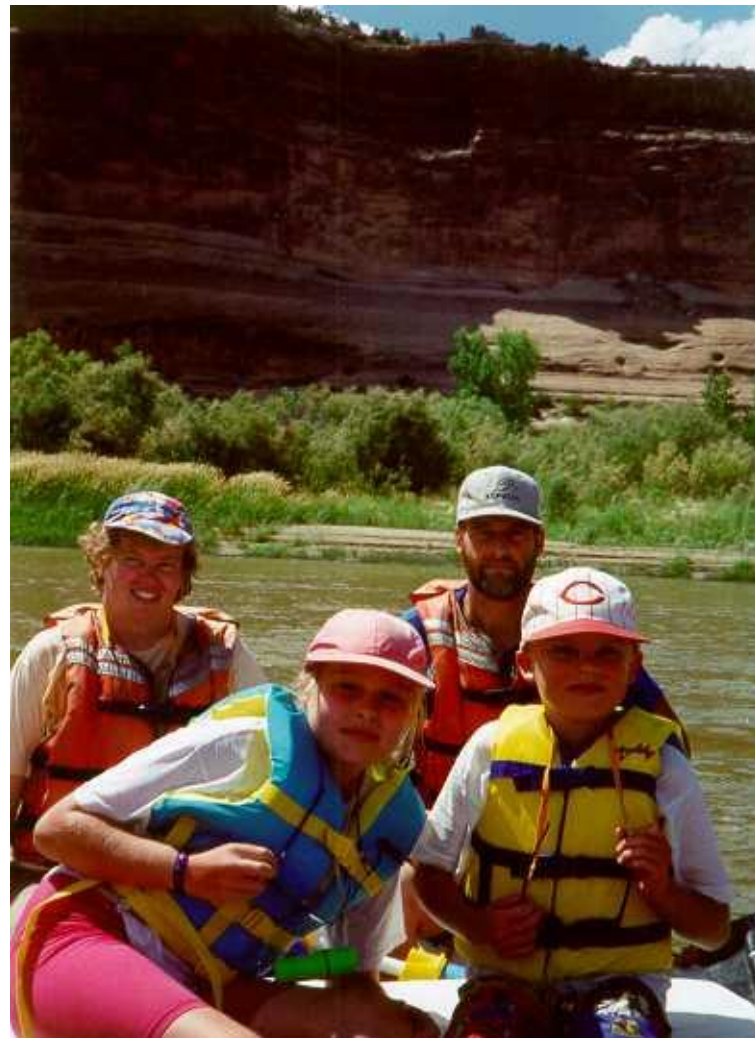
Trip Participants: Pete & Christina King, Jay Stout, The Ward family (Bob, Anne, Christina & Bryan), Julie & Kurt Leeman, David & Cheryl Conley, Keith Fuqua, Jeff & Karen Hodge, Ralph Hoffman, Chris Canady & Dana Eriksen & a few more I forgot to note in my journal

Last March Jay Stout found out that he was the lucky recipient of a July 4 Westwater Canyon river permit. As soon as Jay told us about the permit, club members signed up immediately. Westwater Canyon is a whitewater section of the Colorado River in Utah. We love the warm water, exciting rapids, and high canyon walls that deliver a wonderful desert river trip. The river always runs muddy brown and is a great overnight river trip. Because we had a long



holiday weekend, we also decided to run Ruby and Horsethief canyons above Westwater canyon. The put-in begins at the Loma, Colorado I-70 exit. Our group consisted of 22 people, 9 rafts, and 12 dipsticks (water squirt guns). Pete and I brought our two rafts with several guests. Julie and Kurt Leeman, from St Louis, novice river runners.

Bob and Anne Ward brought their children, Christina, and Bryan, to run the float section only. Bob and Pete ran the shuttle to the Westwater ranger station and then met the rest of our group at Cisco, Utah to complete the car shuttle. On the way to Cisco, Pete and Bob decided to take a shortcut (which in the desert means a long way). They got lost and had to backtrack. So much for saving time. Meanwhile, back at the put-in the rest of the group





was busy inflating and rigging the rafts. When the shuttle finally returned, we jumped in the rafts and started our trip. Julie and Kurt got the dipstick idea right away.

Ruby and Horsethief canyons are home to blue herons, eagles, and lots of boaters. This section does not require a permit and has no rapids. We saw every type of watercraft

imaginable. Kayaks, rafts, canoes, duckies, jet skis, motorboats, and even a septic tank pontoon rig. Scary! We started shooting off the dipsticks (water guns) towards any watercraft within shooting range. Our excuse was that we were hot. The temperature was 95°F and climbing. After a short float and water fighting episode, we stopped for lunch.

Christina and Bryan spotted a dead sucker fish right away and wanted to serve it up for lunch. We ate a delicious lunch and resumed our float. Our goal was to camp at Black Rocks but so many people were on the river that we thought we would be out of luck. The entire afternoon we floated and dipsticked each other. No one passed unscathed. There were no other distractions such as rapids, so we entertained ourselves water fighting and looking at the scenery. Black Rocks has at least 6 campsite coves interspersed by carved black igneous rock that create a quiet sense of privacy. Most of the campsites have white sandy beaches with unique black rock formations surrounding the beach.



When we pulled into Black Rocks, we spotted an EMPTY large beautiful sandy beach. What luck! A kayaker, Roger, from a smaller group had heard about our club group and chose the smaller campsite below. Roger paid us a visit and we thanked him profusely. Camp was set up and we swam, sat in the shade, and admired the campsite. We were impressed with the

natural toilet spot where we put our groover (port-a-potty). A natural cave had formed at rivers edge which provided privacy and an unbelievable river view.

A river ranger came to our camp that evening and reminded us of the fireworks ban. The ranger camped upriver within hearing distance, so we heeded his warning very seriously. Our potato sack of fireworks was benched. Our July 4th dinner consisted of All-American burgers, corn on the cob, baked beans, and Dutch oven brownies with a large watermelon to top it all off. We were stuffed.

We woke up the next morning to scrambled egg and sausage burritos with Jeff and Karen Hodges special green chili sauce. What a treat!

Two miles below our campsite we stopped at McDonald Canyon, which contains the highest concentration of rock art or petroglyphs on this section of river. A short hike led us to a cavernous amphitheater which provided a perfect retreat for Anasazi Native Americans that "pecked" out symbols on the overhanging cliff walls. It is best to view these petroglyphs from a distance because walking on the boulders beneath the panel destroys other rock art figures. Pictographs are the painted drawings on cliffsides.

The Ruby and Horsethief canyons provide a relaxing 30-mile float. We pulled into the Westwater ranger station to check in with the river ranger and drop off the Ward family. After eating lunch in the shade, we rigged up the rafts for the rapids. Pete and I rigged to flip. We were not taking any chances. Lifejackets were cinched and straps tightened. Little "D" (Dolores) rapid was our first rapid. The large waves were fun, but Ralph Hoffman got stuck in the strong eddy on the right. Ralph spent the next 10 minutes getting out of that eddy.



We stopped at Outlaw Cave to look at the old artifacts. Pete commented that the old boots in the cave were awfully small. Must have been little outlaws back in the old days. The roof of the cave was stained black from stove smoke and lots of artifacts were laying around the cave. The thieves must have been desperate to haul all the supplies down to the bottom of the river canyon and hide out in this cave full of junk.



Everyone was thinking of the upcoming rapids. The rapids come in fast succession, Marble Canyon, Staircase and Big Hummer. The river disappeared at Funnel Falls rapid. Surprise rapid has a way of sneaking up on river runners, but we were prepared. The BIG rapid at Westwater is Skull.

Everyone had been talking about Skull rapid and dreading it since the before we began our river trip. Skull rapid has a large hole where all the water converges.



The Room of Doom is a circular cave/cliff on the right below the Skull hole. If you fall out or flip in the hole you have a 50/50 chance of washing into the Room of Doom. Getting out of the Room of Doom is impossible at this water level (9000 cfs). The only way out is to climb up and over a cliff.

Skull is named after skulls of dead domestic sheep (that ranchers through into the river) subsequently washing into the Room of Doom and lodging on the cliff walls. All we saw on the wall was a dipstick! Not ours. Everyone had great runs. Chris Canady and Dana Eriksen had the closest look at the Skull hole but managed to come through safe and sound. After regrouping in the eddy below Skull we continued our run through the rest of the rapids. About 500 yards downstream we spotted two rafts in a small eddy on the right and two people climbing down the



cliff towards them. The owners of the dipstick stuck in the Room of Doom were getting back to their rafts. Three people had fallen out of the paddleboat in Skull rapid and two were washed into the Room of Doom. Their mishap took two hours for them to climb up and out. Everyone was okay but three other rafts downstream were still worried until we gave them the message that their group was okay and only 15 minutes away (arriving soon).

Bowling Alley rapid was next and quickly followed by Sock it to Me rapid that had an enormous corkscrew wave. Last Chance rapid was our final rapid with everyone making the whitewater run successfully. We floated to our campsite at Big Horn to sit in the shade and enjoy a cool drink. What a day! A beautiful canyon, hot weather, cool river, and exciting rapids. This is what river running is all about. The next morning, we floated out of the canyon with no more rapids to run. Dipsticking commenced again and we all said our goodbyes at the takeout in Cisco. Three days ago, when we did the shuttle, seemed so long ago. We had experienced so many events that the days just flew by. The Westwater section is 17 miles. Our total river trip mileage is 47 miles.

We saved those fireworks for another weekend. Cannot wait to go again.