

Pikes Peak River Runners

The Perfect Storm May 2003 Ruby Horsethief canyon on the Colorado river



By Barb Deniston



The morning of May 3rd, 2003 promised a perfect launch for the annual "dog float" through the Ruby Horsethief Canyons of the Colorado. Warm sun washed the beach at Loma while puffy white clouds chased across a bright blue sky. Canyon, Goldie, Snicklefritz, and Tonic, the K-9 contingency, played tag on the beach and posed for photos in their classy Ruffwear PFDs.

Ultimately, we launched with high spirits. Pete King rowed his Avon with a mountain of gear from all the duckiers as well as the all-essential kitchen and groover. Keeping him company was Bill Cooke who was recuperating from recent eye surgery, and veteran river dogs Canyon and Goldie. Bill's wife, Irene, rowed her "cat" and carried the bulk of the Cooke gear. Lisa Asmussen rowed her raft with her 3-year-old son Daniel as co-captain. This was Daniel's 3rd river trip and he proved to be quite a little river rat showing no fear when he

fell off the boat and swam like a fish. Just as we were leaving the Loma put-in an old bi-plane buzzed by us low on the river, circled and buzzed us again.



Christina King, complete with a shrink-wrapped walking boot and crutches to support her healing broken ankle, paddled her ducky. Laurie Baker and Mark paddled Laurie's ancient canoe which proved to be the swiftest, most aerodynamic craft on the river. Though this was Tonic's first trip, he settled down between Laurie and Mark and rode the river and the rapids like an old-timer. Glen Roberts had rigged up a solar panel-powered motor for his "cat" and was giving it a test run. Fortunately, Glen also had his oars as back-up. Glen's daughter Keri, and her two young daughters, Katie and Mindy paddled duckyes for the first time ever and did a terrific job. Keri's son Clint was a first timer rowing a "cat" and, by the end of the trip, proved himself to be an accomplished boatman.

Riding with Barb Deniston in her ducky was first-timer Snicklefritz who fell in twice and tried desperately to sit in Barb's lap, preferably with paws wrapped around Barb's neck. Rounding out the group was Barb's son, Jesse, who flew in from Arizona for the fun of paddling a ducky for the first time on a leisurely float trip.



We eddied out on river left for lunch but shortened our break when the wind suddenly picked up and scattered goodies everywhere. Following the "Leave No Trace" guidelines, our furry friends quickly cleaned up the area and we loaded up for the roughly 10-mile paddle to camp. Pete pulled hard on the oars and quickly outdistanced the rest of the flotilla in his effort to stake out our campsite and get gear unloaded and the kitchen set up for our arrival. For the next hour, the wind challenged us with gusts followed by calmer moments, and we continued to make progress with the help of the current running at about 4500 cfs. The calm periods became fewer and shorter, and we pulled paddle strokes with all our might to maintain slow torturous progress. White caps and waves made it appear that the river had been transformed into the water off Cape Cod. There were no more calm periods and the wind raged at what we later learned was a sustained 55 miles per hour. Despite the current and enormous physical effort, we were being forced upstream. Even Glen's motor could not make forward progress against the brutal force of the wind. To escape the fury of the onslaught, each boat managed to catch an eddy where we expected to wait for a short while for the windstorm to pass. Despite our paddling gear, the spray, driven by the wind, drenched us continually and the gale continued with no let-up. Time passed, the wind raged, rain clouds built on the horizon and only a few hours of daylight remained. Sleeping bags and tents were with Pete so survivor mode began to click in as we began to develop "plan B". The cliffs adjacent to the eddies extended upward about 20 feet where they met with an expanse of high grass leading to rock walls with wind-carved crannies. Our best hope was to muscle what gear we had to the top and work with what we had to contrive minimal shelter. As we maneuvered the first bags to the top, the wind suddenly calmed and we knew we were literally in the eye of the storm. Whether it would be enough to make camp, we did not know, but we would give it our best shot. The off-loaded gear was re-stashed, and as many ducky paddlers as possible were accommodated on Lisa's raft with the duckies in tow. Irene offered to tow Jesse and Barb, but a double tow proved too cumbersome. Ultimately, Glen and Clint pulled on the oars of their respective crafts, Christina rowed Lisa's boat and Keri, Jesse and Barb paddled their IKs with a strength none of them knew they had. With camp in sight, the wind once again began its relentless assault, but we managed to gain the eddy before it reached full strength. And so begins the Perfect Storm.

Though we felt we had earned the shish-ka-bob dinner planned for that evening, the likelihood that we would set the canyon on fire with wind-driven sparks resulted in a decision to settle for sandwiches. We could not even set up the kitchen as the wind blew everything away. Adversity is truly the mother of invention.

We made a human windbreak around Pete's boat so the food would not become airborne while Bill, Irene, and Clint made "custom" sandwiches and handed out cookies literally fist-to-fist to eliminate chocolate Frisbees.

Setting up tents required more ingenuity and lots of help. With the wind raging, hanging on to and erecting the tents was not a one-person job. At Pete's suggestion, boulders were rolled, dragged, and pushed to the tent perimeters where boat straps were anchored then attached to tent and fly lines. Before heading to their own tent, Christina and Pete double-checked boats, paddles and PFDs and made sure everything was securely tied down. Though there was some relief at being out of the immediate force of the wind, its screaming ferocity ripped at the walls and threatened to tear the fabric apart, and then.... the rain began, sounding like millions of rivets being simultaneously driven into the tent from all directions by a crazed Hercules. Keri and her daughters in one-man backpacker tents were literally flooded out and ultimately took shelter with Glen and Clint.

Once again, night passed, morning dawned, a canyon wren sang, and a watery sun was barely visible through the still weeping clouds. The decision was made to break camp without breakfast, roll or tow the duckies and get on the river for the paddle out as quickly as possible. It was cold and wet, still windy, but no longer a gale, and we all looked like Michelin men dressed in multi layers of stormy weather gear. What a rag-tag group we were, but what a warm and wonderful experience we had. No tempers were lost, no tears shed, no one panicked. Much was learned about the importance of developing a Plan B and working together. Thanks to Glen, Jesse learned a little bit about reading water and how to row and Clint, whose graduation is only a few weeks away, also graduated into the ranks of experienced boatmen.



Would I want to repeat the experience? No. Am I glad I had the adventure? You bet!