

Pikes Peak River Runners

Salt River Saguaros March 2005



By Christina King

Photo Credits: Christina King, Bob Marley ([his trip report](#)) & Keith Fuqua

Group participants:

Pete & Christina King

Bill Cooke

Keith Fuqua & Ava Marshall

Dave & Rosalyn Sample

Marsha Hawk

Lynn Gardner

Bob Marley & Susan Groth

Lorie Erikson

We started planning this trip in February of 2005 when we got the permit. We watched the river flows peak out at about 30,000 cfs during the Feb 19, 2005 President's Weekend and looked forward to a good boating season on the Salt for our March 21, 2005 permit. Well go figure, come March 18th the entire Southwest US experienced a cold front and the snowmelt virtually ceased. It appeared that flows of 5,000 cfs would not be a reality this trip. We dropped from 2,000 to 1,600 to 1,400 cfs in about 3 days before we planned on leaving Colorado. Pete and I took Friday off to pack and leave for the Salt. After experimenting with packing up only the truck with two boats (frames, coolers, oars, kitchen) we proved it could be done (and in 6 inches of snow in our driveway). However, allowing for my woman's prerogative to change her mind, I changed mine. After going to bed at 10 pm, I festered all night about the low flow and determined that I wanted to switch boats and downsize from our 16 foot Avon Pro to the 14 foot Adventurer.





So.... the next morning, we unstrapped our packed truck (our truck looked like the Beverly Hillbilly rig) and started over with the flatbed trailer. We decided it is much easier to run rigged to Arizona on our trailer with the right boats rather than starting from scratch by rigging at the put-in. Plus, it is much more convenient to rig in the warm garage at home than in the rain on the Salt.



We left Woodland Park, Colorado right before lunch and dropped Canyon (our dog) off at my parents in Chalk Creek Canyon (near Buena Vista) for a week of R&R, then traveled on to Santa Fe New Mexico for our first night on the road. Enjoyed the quiet drive down Hwy 285 with no traffic. We drove the rest of the way to Show Low, Arizona the next day and arrived at the put-in in the late afternoon. What chaos! Last time we ran the [Salt \(1998\)](#), there was no one at the put-in and the flow was 5,000 cfs. This time there were many boaters (commercial and private) and the put-in was crazy. Our group saw several boating acquaintances (Jethro, Jeff Henry, Ken, JJ/Tina, Donnie, etc....) all convening at the Salt put-in with many boaters arriving several days before launching to "party". The river looked low to me and it turned out to be about 1,440 cfs at the [Chrysotile gauge](#). That would be our "high" flow for the trip. I remember our 1997 trip being low water (around 1600 cfs). It seems like the water this time is a bit higher. I do not know if I am remembering wrong or if the gauge is off. Don Sullivan (Salt Ranger) also seems to think that the gauge is reading a bit low even though the USGS just fixed it two days ago. I think the high water and debris has messed up the calibration.

As we unloaded our rigged boats (with a lot of help from our group) the Indian Rangers were very adamant that permits (even camping permits, if we had no plans to camp) were to be bought immediately or we would get a ticket. The rangers seemed very irritated by the entire situation and we had a difficult time figuring out how to do the right thing (quick enough) for them. It all worked out fine in the end, but I recommend boaters purchase their permits [two days per person (\$15/each, and \$10 per person/camping)] before you go down to the put-in. Do not use the commercial put-in (we did not) and expect that tensions are high. I would love to see a trailer turnaround and a bit of rock/gravel put down on the private put-in area because I bet this would alleviate a lot of congestion and help make rigging quicker. Maybe even relieve the aggravation for the rangers.

We were the last of our twelve-person group to arrive and finished final touch up rigging in the rain. I sure enjoy knowing that we have a warm and dry hotel room to return to in Show Low tonight. Keith, Ava, Pete, and I went out for dinner in Show Low after rigging and the rest of the group decides to camp at the put-in. It rained off and on all night. We watched the weather forecast that night and it indicated worse weather on Sunday (our launch day) with improving conditions as the week began.

Day 1 - Sunday, March 20, 2005 (1,250 cfs): 10 miles (Mile 60-50) – Hwy 60 Bridge put-in, Sandy Beach camp

We got up early and left Show Low to arrive at the put-in in time for last minute rigging and to be ready when the shuttle drivers showed up at 9 am. TeeJay at Rock House store shuttler showed up right on time with all the drivers and off our vehicles went. The morning was cold, and it rained so most of us bundled up in our cold weather river running gear. So much for the warm weather we had hoped for back in February. We watched a group leave the day before with one 18-foot raft with a highway "oversize load" sign on it. How appropriate! I cannot believe that they were going to run a Grand Canyon sized boat on this low flow. I am so glad I brought the 14-foot boat.



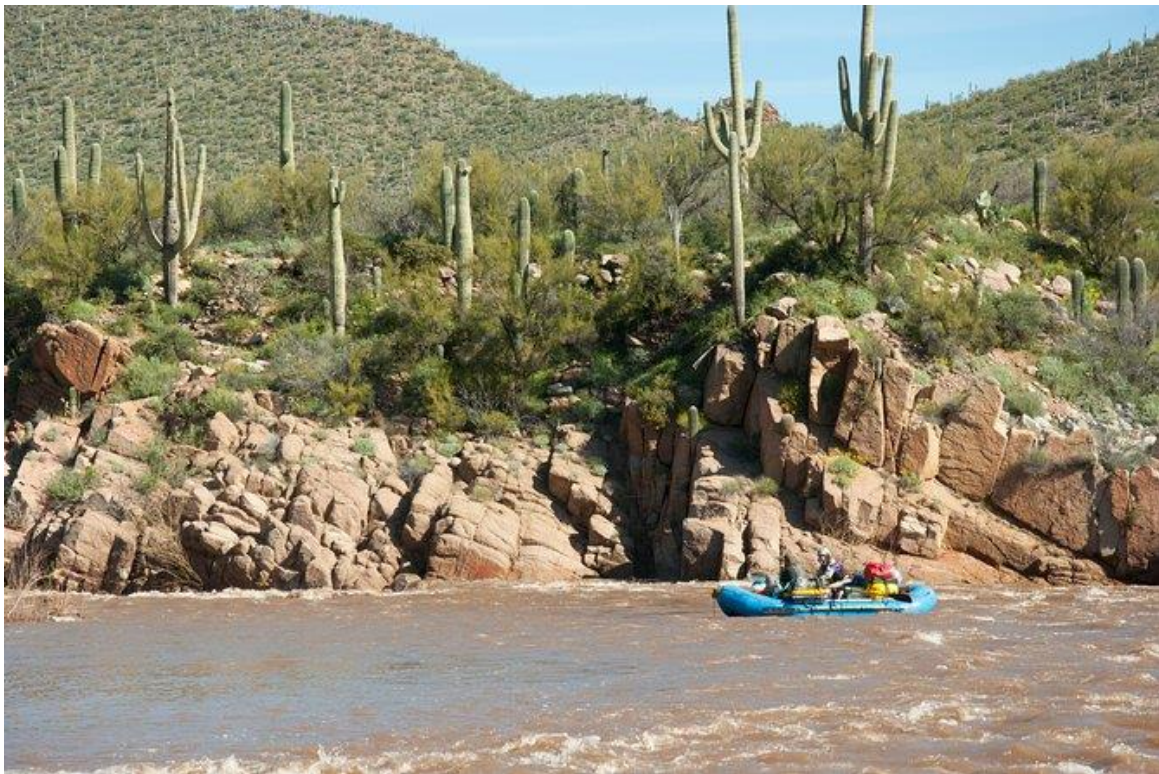
We launched by 10 am right as another group had arrived to rig and launch behind us. Just in time for everyone. Bob led our group, and our first stop was Bump & Grind Rapid. We scouted the run due to low flow and lots of rocks to dodge. Everyone ran through fine. Maytag Chute is the next rapid of note that is run hard right down a small channel (it is really a matter of selecting the right channel rather than a rapid). I have noticed that whenever in doubt normal river reading skills do not seem to apply on this river. It seems that taking the inside bend and going where most of the water goes is not a good indication of which channel to pick on this river. In fact, it seems if you doubt which channel to take, going right seems to be the best choice most of the time.

We ran Reforma, Mother Rock and Overboard rapids before camping at Sandy Beach (RAP) for the night and an early day. We experienced stiff winds at these rapids, so I do not really recall how they looked. In fact, it seemed to whip up a white froth at every rapid making it hard to line up, avoid rocks and even see the run. Several of us were blown into shore before we got to camp. It was nice to set up wet tents and get everything dried out before the sun went down. Pete, Bill, and I cooked a steak

dinner for everyone, and we all had a leisurely night in camp after the wind died down. Is Rosalyn a secret Chief fan?



Everyone enjoyed the bacon-wrapped scallops and Pete and Bill joke about building a Canyon Wren trap for future bacon wrapped nibblers. I think you can wrap anything in bacon and boaters will eat it. This camp (Sandy Beach RAP) is at the edge (beginning) of the Sonoran desert and marks the start of Saguaro cactus "forests". I don't notice any significant cactus blooms or flowers because I think we're a bit early (and it's too cold).

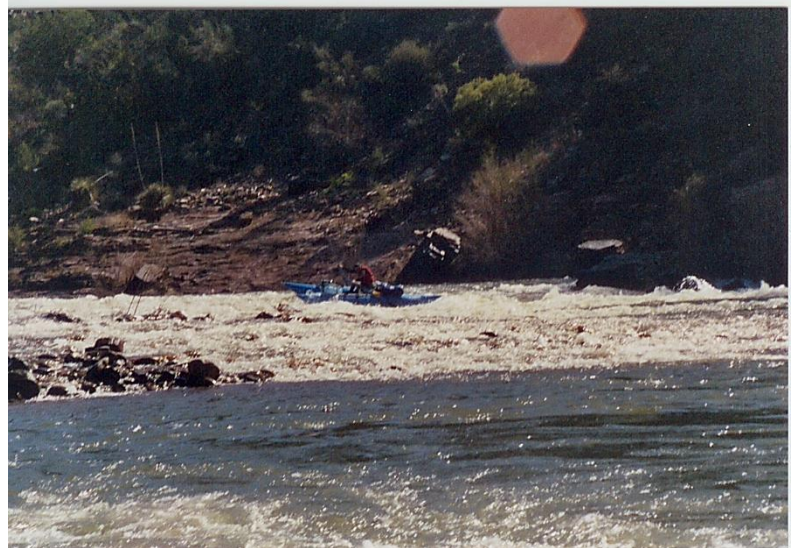


Note: The USFS's Salt River Resource guide map seems to be the best (most helpful and readable) river guide for this river (with camps noted and recommendations on rapids). However, do not trust it completely because high water and changing riverbed conditions can change the situation entirely.

Camping: Native American officials prohibit camping from mile 50-46.5 on the right side of the river. Many boaters are unaware of this regulation. This area (Salt River Banks Miles 50-46.5) is sacred to the Indians and they prohibit any visitation to the right side of the river. There are plenty of good camps in this area, but please try to honor their request and not stop or camp in this area. If you do camp, please choose the left side of the river. After all, it is their land. If you have questions about this regulation, please contact the Salt River Ranger directly at (928) 402-6200 drsullivan@fs.fed.us.

Day 2 - Monday, March 21, 2005 (1,350 cfs): (Mile 50 to Mile 31) 19 miles, Yankee Joe? camp

We have a big day planned today (about 20 miles). We woke up to a cold morning but blue skies (always a positive). I vaguely remember Rat Trap rapid from our 1998 run and we ran it fine. There were lots of chutes and rapids today, but I only recall two major ones (Eye of the Needle and Black Rock). Eye of the Needle is a left side run around a midstream boulder. The chute was tight on the left and I shipped my oars. I wonder if we ran this on the right at high water in 1998. Black Rock Rapid (I did not see any black rock as a marker) was big as well and we ran down the right. We did not scout any rapids today or the rest of the trip. We have seen lots of groups on the river and seem to be pushing down river at a slow pace (about 3 miles/hour). We crossed into the wilderness area today around Gleason Flats. Bill managed to rearrange a large boulder (less than 10 tons by his estimation) today in one of the shallow chutes.



Bill was right behind Dave and I and we heard the boulder grind and topple over in the middle of the chute (it moved several feet). It was quite funny, and we teased Bill that he personally made the rapid easier for the next boaters. Keith managed to shoot some action pictures of the new "Bill's Topple Rock Rapid". We camped at a small beach alcove (river left) (maybe Yankee Joe?) between Upper and Lower Corral after a long day on the river. 3 mph makes it hard to get miles in. Again, it was a nice sandy beach and a leisurely evening dinner with tasty Szechwan Chicken prepared by Keith and Ava.

I only got stuck briefly once today on a shallow area along with the rest of the group. Not bad considering some of the shallow channels in Gleason Flats and other open areas. Thank goodness for my 14-foot boat. Our group has a mix of 16 foot and 14-foot rafts/cats. No one seems to have a problem getting stuck. I do not think anyone had to get out of boats to get unstuck. It seems strange that as the weather improves the water appears to be going down every day. The cold nights must be drastically slowing the snowmelt. Since we launched, I have noticed that the high-water marks (driftwood, debris, tamarisk trees stripped of leaves) are obvious. Beaches seem cleaned out and have lots of new sand in some areas. I notice lots of manmade debris

and the river could really use a cleanup (tires, tarps, plastic, general trash, oil change bottles). I try to pick up trash when we stop for lunch/camps but only manage to make a small dent. If everyone made a concerted effort the canyon could really be spruced up.

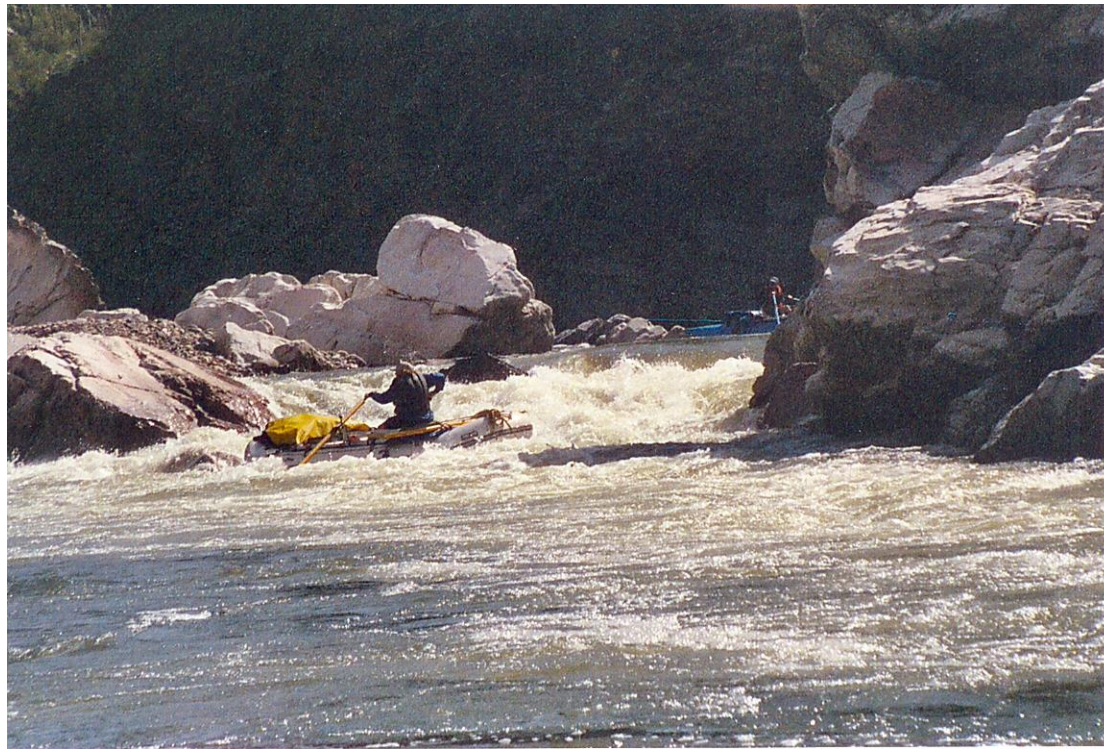


Note the debris left by high water in the Tamarisk trees on the right side of this picture.



Day 3 - Tuesday, March 22, 2005 (1,350 cfs): (Mile 31-16), 15 miles Coon Creek

We woke again to a blue sky but cold morning. Where is that warm weather? Ran Lower Corral rapid fine. We had intentions of scouting Quartzite Falls but did not see any pull out. I think the high water has scoured out any landings on either side. I have run it twice and only scouted once (high water there is no scout). It is easy to recognize Quartzite Falls because the canyon walls really narrow up and the distinctive (slate-colored slanted walls) identify the area easily. It kind of reminds me of the Flatirons rock walls in Boulder, Colorado but a grey color. I saw two chutes and was signaled by Keith (in front of me- just ran it) to run the right chute. I saw a rock past the chute on the run (lower down) but stuck with Keith's signal and ran right. I think both chutes would have worked fine. In fact, if Keith had not signaled I think a cleaner run (but steeper) was on the left and probably would have run that way. We re-grouped (all of us ran Quartzite fine) in the eddy above Corkscrew rapid (directly downstream of Quartzite Falls).

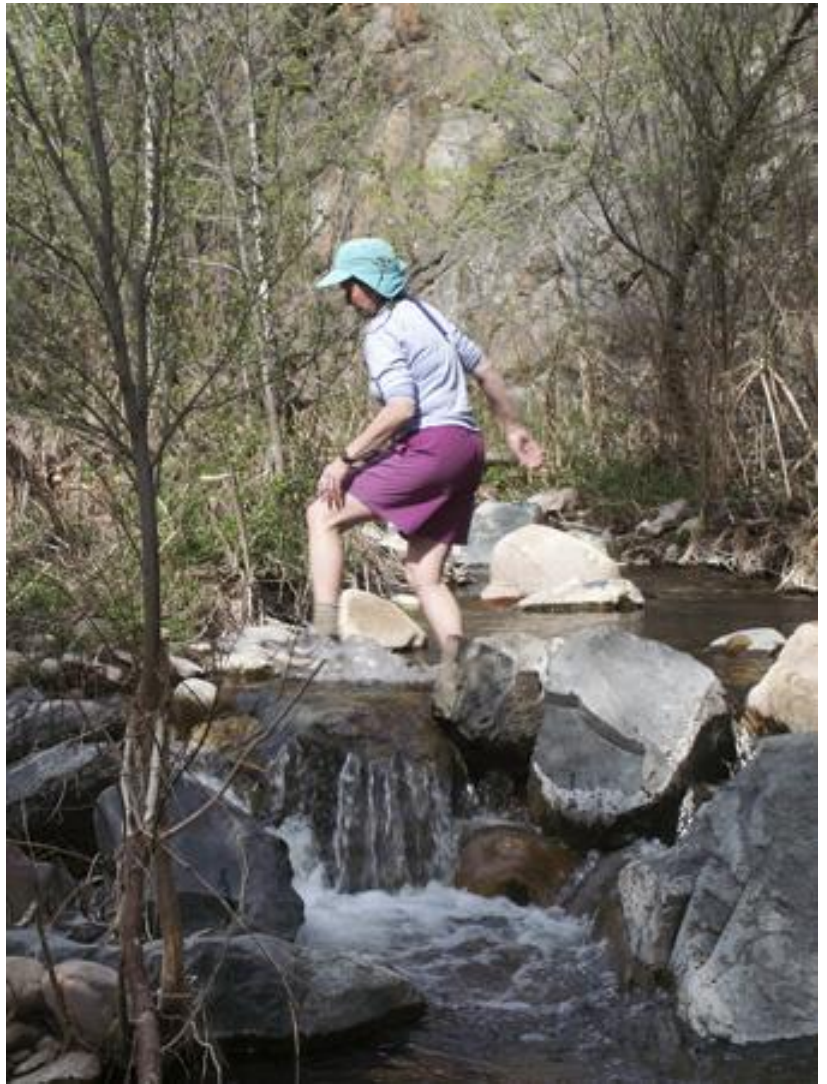


Above is a Quartzite rapid picture from a previous trip with a flow of 5,000 cfs (much higher water).

I ran the Corkscrew waves okay and remember that at high water this was a big rapid. Very manageable at this low water level. Lorie ended up riding in my boat today and rowed my "heavy" oars. Everyone complains about them, but I guess I am used to them. When you learn on wood oars, plastic Carlisle oars feel too light. Floated by Jeff Henry's group today but never saw them again the rest of the trip. Jeff launched a day ahead of us and is on a 5-day trip. We usually run this river in 3 days but extended the trip (4 days) to compensate for low water. Glad we did because the low flow made it hard to click off river miles. Yesterday was the hard (long 20-mile day). We had a late lunch at our camp (Coon Creek). Muddy, mucky, reedy landing but nice creek bed canyon. We joked that if you fell at the boats a reed could easily impale a boater.

Some of the group went hiking up the creek. Enjoyed a nice BBQ chicken dinner tonight prepared by Bob, Susan, and Laurie. Today we went about 15 miles.

Day 4 - Wednesday, March 23, 2005 (1,200 cfs): (Mile 16-Mile 8) 8 miles, Takeout at Hwy 288 bridge!



Weather front seems to be passing through and partly sunny with some clouds today. We only have about eight miles to the takeout. Do not remember any particular rapids but lots of shallow chutes and glorious views but Marsha took a turn at my "heavy" oars. This canyon is scenic. The Saguaro cactus trees are spectacular. We got to the takeout before lunch. Picked up the cars at the Rock House store. Other vehicles at the Rock House store boxed in Bob's vehicle and it was a real chore to get it out (involved lifting a trailer to get him out). We had the takeout to ourselves and left just as another group arrived at takeout.

On the way home, we made a side trip through Taos, scouting the Rio Grande river for runs in May. I expect to be spending some time here in May when the southern mountains begin their snowmelt. Got home in a blinding snowstorm with about 4 inches of rime ice on our trailer/truck tie-downs. We had to go to the carwash the next day to spray off the ice so we could derig. Another 4 inches of new snow on the driveway and gear. Dave drove straight through to get home at 4:30 am. We do not do those kinds of drives anymore. The older we get, the more vacation we take so we do not have to do those all-night drives. Checked the flow over the weekend and the river got even lower. I guess the snowmelt has not triggered higher flows yet. Hope to be back next year.

