

## Grand Canyon Impressions

*By John Kobak*

I was lucky enough to get invited on another Grand Canyon paddling trip from 7/24-8/11/06. It was an all Keel Hauler trip organized by a [WOMP](#) (Well organized Master Planner), John Fralick. John and Kathy now live in Salt Lake City and wanted to get together again with many of their old paddling friends. We had 4 first time Grand Canyon paddlers.



**WOMP**

The participants on our 18 day kayak/raft trip were: John Fralick, Kathy Chapman, Stephen Ingalls, Anne Kmieck, Mark Poljak, Pamela Poljak, Ronald Tomallo, Rachelle Schmidt, Ritch Kovacic, Sherie Sanzenbacher, Terry Markoff, Sabine I ben, Gabrielle Markoff, Michael Duvall, Robert Nicholson, Robert Weible and John Kobak. If you counted the people you will see that we had one extra over the 16 person limit. That is because Sabine and Gabrielle shared the same slot. Sabine paddled the first 87 miles to Phantom Ranch and hiked out the Bright Angel Trail, while Gabrielle hiked in and completed the last 139 miles which included all the bigger rapids. Sabine started hiking up around 3 PM, she left Indian Gardens at 6pm. About a half hour later thunder, lightning and rain started and the trail was covered with slippery rocks and puddles. She hooked up with a couple of other backpackers for the last 2 miles and got to the top shortly after 9 pm, completely soaked but happy.



**Typical Beach Kitchen**

We had [PRO Outfitters](#) supply us with the 4 rafts, one cataraft, all the kitchen gear and the food for all the meals. They also took us to the put-in and picked us up at the takeout. This is the same outfitter that our club has used for most of the private GC trips. They are very well organized and have good equipment. Check out their web site for lots of GC info.

Our eighteen day trip was one of the last trips to launch under the old permit system. As the Park Service transitions to a lottery-based system, private trips will be shortened to sixteen days.

Michael Duvall, Robert Weible, Robert Nicholson and I drove out together in my minivan. With four drivers



**Returning Road Warriors**

we could have driven, the almost 2000 miles, straight through without moteling it, but as it worked out that we were traveling on the weekend in both directions so we stayed at a motel one night each way. I'm sure we arrived less smelly and a little more rested.

An interesting aspect of paddling the Colorado River through the GC is the fluctuating water levels. The river is controlled by Glen Canyon dam. They generate power each day causing the water release to vary from about 18,000 CFS to 10,000 CFS in a 24 hour cycle. You can also get rain in various side canyons which add a few thousand CFS more from time to time, this also makes the river very muddy. Therefore you need to be aware of the water level when you camp, to not have gear float away when the river goes up or grounds the heavy rafts in rocks or sand when it goes down. The wave moves

down the canyon at about 5.3 MPH, so that each day high water occurs at a different time. At one point on our trip we paddled at about 20,000 CFS and at another point only 10,000 CFS. Water level does make a difference in the big rapids.

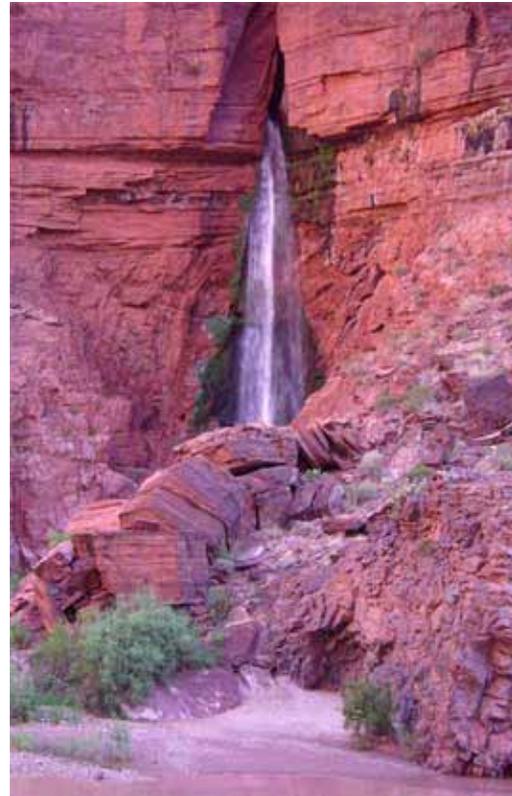
When we arrived at the Little Colorado River, the clear CO River turned muddy. Since this is monsoon season in AZ, there was so much rain in this little river that tons of debris including oil cans and basketballs flowed into the CO. We were always busy making sure that we didn't introduce even a crumb into the river, while the Little CO was dumping whatever was in everyone's yard all the way back to Winslow, AZ.



**Pam Poljak heading for Lava**

This is the first trip that I have taken in July and August; my other three trips were in September. It was an unusually wet monsoon season with Northern Arizona receiving 250% of the normal precipitation. I sure didn't enjoy the summer weather extremes. First, because the water is released from a very deep reservoir, the water temperature at the put-in was only 54°F. It warms about 1°F every 20 miles, so that at the takeout it measured 64°F. If you dress for a swim in the cold water you need some sort of wetsuit. If not, you need to prepare yourself for up to a 5 minute swim in very cold water. The daytime air temperature varied from 75-110°F while at night it hit 68°F, however lows for a few days never got below 85°F. You really don't need a sleeping bag at this time of year and often a tent with a rain fly is too hot. I debated each night whether to set up my tent or not. The three nights that I set up my tent it did not rain. Four other nights that I slept on my Therm-A-Rest pad in the sand, it did rain

for a portion of the night. I used the tent fly to stay dry.



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**Deer Creek Falls across from camp on layover day**  
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People wonder about food on a trip like this. Well it's pretty complicated. We have enough food to prepare over 800 meals. The rafts with their big coolers can

bring frozen meat for the first 5 days including Steak, Halibut, Lamp Chops, Chicken and Hamburger which we cooked on a charcoal grill. Some meals also included appetizers and deserts. The cooks really had their hands full cutting, chopping, mixing, and cooking all the complicated recipes. Each morning we enjoyed a big breakfast including eggs, bacon, pancakes, French toast or omelets to go with our juice, fruit and coffee. Steve and Terry were our breakfast chefs and got the coffee served before 5:30 AM each day. Of course that was 8:30 AM Eastern time. So our days were spent very close to Eastern time, with most people in bed by 8:30 PM or 11:30 PM EDST.

We had 5 women and 5 men paddling kayaks. With all the big rapids we had an occasional minor swim. No rafts ever flipped, which was a good thing, since up righting one of the 18' oar rigs laden down with our gear would be quite a chore. The park service points out that 90% of the injuries on a trip like this are not on the water but on dry land. We had lots of hikes up the various side canyons but other than the heat, over 115°F one day, everyone did fine. We had a few scrapes and bruises from minor falls, sharp sticks and cactus.

We did have a rather unusual number of people come down with a condition well known to raft guides in the Canyon as "toelio." This is an infection of unknown type

and origin that causes itchy, burning red spots on the feet. Eleven of the group got it; one so bad that he was not able to take hikes. The infection is thought to arise from prolonged exposure to water, sun, and sand.



The beauty of the Grand Canyon

I won't bother telling you about what we did each day in the canyon, several links are provided from similar previous trips. We did a lot of hiking - most of the "big name" hikes and a few new ones, too. Each day, we watched the colors change as we sunk deeper into one of the world's greatest wonders.

In Mexico, they claim to have a deeper, bigger, better canyon called Copper Canyon. I traveled by train up that canyon and can tell you there is no comparison. The Grand Canyon is much more spectacular and paddling or hiking is probably the best way to see it all. If you want to read a good story about paddling Copper Canyon take a look at the Jul/Aug 2006 issue of AW.

Throughout the trip, we had interesting and unusual weather. At Silver Grotto, we had the chance to see, from a safe distance, a flash flood rip through a slot canyon and raised the water 15 feet in a matter of minutes. The old adage, "If you can hear it, it's too late to avoid", is definitely true. Overhead, heavy rains created multi-colored waterfalls as sediment from normally dry creek beds washed over the canyon walls. We had hail at the bottom of the Grand Canyon. There was a spectacular lightning display above Unkar Delta;

one bolt seemed to rip the air from rim to rim, right above our heads.



Silver Grotto - Before/After Flash Flood, same view



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Here is what our beach looked like after the rain almost washed away our kitchen setup at Silver Grotto.  
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For two days, the river turned from muddy brown to almost black as the rains washed

charred soil from earlier North Rim wildfires into the tributaries that feed the CO river. The river smelled and tasted like burned wood for two days. At Whitmore Wash, a single rumble of thunder continued for what much have been thirty seconds.

Since this was an all Keel Hauler trip and almost everybody knew everyone, it went very well. I saw very few people raising their voice in anger. When you put at least 10 type "A" personalities on a small beach in an isolated place with hot temperatures, an occasional rain shower and the fear of large rapids, you are bound to get some cross words (or a script for a reality TV show) but I was amazed at how well this group got along with each other.

I'm often asked about how difficult the river is. I found that the easiest route through most of the rapids was to go right down the middle through the biggest waves. It's those swirlies that will get you if you try to sneak. The rapids in the canyon use a

different rating system than the traditional Class I - VI that we are familiar with. In the canyon they rate each rapid on a 1 to 10 scale. The difficult rapids were Lava a 10; Horn, Granite, Crystal, Hance and Hermit rate 9; while many others rate at least 6-7. Actually the kayak lines were a little easier than the raft lines since we could more easily maneuver away from big trouble.



Steve at Crystal

We scouted all the difficult rapids however the rafts still needed to run them all. Sometimes a less confident kayaker would load his boat on to a raft for a difficult rapid. I'm not sure which was more exciting. Luckily all the rapids were the pool-drop variety. After all the big

waves, you had the swirlies which probably flipped the majority of the kayaks. However, from that point rolling was in flat water so that there were few actual swims, or the swims were not that bad.

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**Here is what I looked like when I got back from the trip**  
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The Keel Hauler rating system gives the GC a difficulty rating of 26 or about the same as the Cheat Canyon or the New River Gorge; however the really big waves big waves and huge holes on the Colorado intimidate most paddlers until you realize that there are not many rocks that come into play. All GC rapids are created at the outlet of a side canyon and new rocks constantly move into the river causing some change in the rapids from year to year.

The outfitter had warned us that the takeout road is really a streambed called Diamond Creek. If a big rain comes, a flash flood could occur trapping you at the takeout for hours or even days. When we got to the takeout, the skies were BLACK. We just got loaded up and were driving out when it started to rain. Luckily we got out without a problem. I saw on the on-line gauge for Diamond Creek that 2 hours after we drove out, the normal 10 cfs creek got up to 4000 CFS, and did not get low enough to drive in or out for two days. The God's must be crazy, but still love us; we sure lucked out this time.



Anasazi Granary at Nankoweap



Our First Stop - Snow Cap - RT66 Tourist Trap

[Slide Show of 2006 trip](#) by Bob Nicholson - A Big File

[Barry Adams 2004 trip](#) by Matt Muir mostly pictures.

[Judi Cleary's 2001 trip report](#) a daily log & great photos

[Keel Haulers Canoe Club Home Page](#)

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