

Cold Southern Trip

At least we were not in Cleveland

By John Kobak

This is the 33rd year that we have been running our Southern trip. We went on Memorial Day in the early years but we eventually moved to Easter week to take advantage of the extra vacation days that people get and the higher water levels. Sometimes Easter comes early and sometimes we start in the snow. This year we had an early Easter and a late Winter.



Michael, Wayne, Me, Bill, Elliott, Judi decision time

Because of the cold weather many people dropped out leaving only a small group of 9 hardy paddlers. Elliott Drysdale led the trip with me as his advisor. Wayne Carey, Bill Miller and Michael Duvall came down for the entire trip. Bruce Bookless came down and after one day of paddling headed back home. Judi Cleary and Larry Fordyce joined us a day late but stayed the entire trip. Erin Bethea came late and left early.

We decided to utilize Warrior Path State Park for our first two nights. They opened up their overflow area for us, so we had our own private campground including hot showers. A big campfire warmed us up.

We left Cleveland on Thursday in a heavy snow but it was much nicer in Northern TN. It was sunny and in the low 60's. The Nolichucky River was a low 875 cfs but the group thought it was perfect for our first river paddling of the year. No problems, just a little windy. We met Judi & Larry at camp that evening where everybody cooked-in in spite of the cool

weather. The weather turned cold and we awoke to 3" of snow and no water in the Tellico or Little Rivers. Judi suggested that we try the Pigeon River which runs along I-70 at the NC/TN border. It is a dam release and when we got there we saw plenty of water. However, we also saw snow and it was 30o F. We all agreed that it would be a nice day to shop and headed over to the NOC store on the Nantahala. Bruce gave up and headed back to Ohio.



Author at Bull Sluice – Click photo for animation

So Saturday night, as is our tradition, we arrived at Thunder Rock campground on the Ocoee. We enjoyed a Mexican dinner in Copperhill and met Erin who finally made it after some car problems. We started a big campfire and made sure that no one was drinking any alcohol.



Erin on the Pigeon

Up drives a TVA police officer, who quickly comes to our campfire to check our drinking habits. No one was drinking, however he was not happy. He asked Elliott, do you have beer in your cooler? I answered; "You have no right to look in our coolers." Boy was that the wrong thing to say. He promptly collected everyone's

ID and he said that alcohol is not permitted on any federal land. Elliott and everyone but me generously opened their coolers showing him their beer and wine. He said no alcohol is permitted even if it is locked away and no one is drinking. Of course he was wrong but he was on a roll.

Bill Miller pulled him aside and asked that he let us all go, since we were just a bunch of old guys. Well, he agreed but he still was mad at me for questioning his authority. He finally drove away, but we still can't figure out why he harassed us.

I wrote the forest service to complain about the harassment. They returned my call and said they would contact the TVA who patrol the area. The TVA supervisor called me and apologized and said he would discuss the complaint with the officer. He felt that he was over zealous. The TVA supervisor did discuss this with the officer who agreed that it happened exactly as I said. He was told by the supervisor in no uncertain terms that no searches of coolers can take place when there is no actual alcohol consumption taking place. Finding cans in the trash is not probable cause either. I decided not to ask for a formal reprimand because I was assured that this type of action will not happen again.

On Sunday morning we had our annual pancake breakfast and got on the Ocoee (1200 cfs) by 11 AM. Judi & Larry decided to Shred it. The only real entertainment of the day was when they tried to punch Hell Hole unsuccessfully.



Michael at Seven Foot Falls

We got an early start for Tallulah Falls Campground where we camped for two nights. The weather was a little warmer here but the Chattooga was only running at 1.3'. Elliott, Judi, Larry and Erin decided to do a hike of the Tallulah Falls Gorge while Bill, Michael, Wayne and I tackled the low water on Section IV.

Our biggest challenge at this level were the hundreds of rocks strewn all about. Five Falls is where the action starts. We set our usual safety rope up at Corkscrew and Jawbone. But it stayed dry, as the group looked solid. The low flow made the middle crack in "Crack in the Rock" look doable but we all decided to carry, Wayne was the only one to give Sock-Em-Dog a try and hit it perfectly. The day was sunny but cool with a windy paddle across Lake Tugaloo.



Bill at Corkscrew

No one wanted to do a repeat run at these levels so we drove back to the Ocoee. No water, so we kept on driving until we reached the Pigeon River again. The dam releases here are very unpredictable. We just missed a morning release of 2100 cfs but we paddled the dropping flow which was probably below 1000 cfs. It was the first time for everyone but Wayne. It is a nice challenging class III run and not as dirty as some say. The best part was that there was a Bar-B-Q restaurant at the takeout that is worth a stop.



Wayne at Sock-Em-Dog

We jumped back in our cars and everyone but Erin headed up to the Big South Fork, which was also running low. We made it by dark. The alcohol policy at Bandy Creek campground is reasonable. "Keep all your drinks in your campsite. No drinking in your car." Rain was predicted and started up when we did our shuttle on Wed morning.

The river was only running 875 CFS and Elliott told everyone that it would be no fun. He was wrong, it was a good level and the first three rapids were very challenging. Everyone got sluiced at a rapid called the EI, and ended up upside down. Luckily the winter roll practice helped all but one, which was our only swim on the entire trip. The steady rain all day long was more than 1-1/2" and the river went up to 2500 cfs on Thursday, but the temperatures were turning cold again so most of us headed home while Judi and Larry headed to the Lower Yough only to find that it had risen to over 4.5' with a snow storm predicted.

This was probably one of the colder trips that I remember but it was still fun to get out on the river to kick off Spring.

Thanks to Wayne, Larry & Judi for the pictures