

Colorado 2003

By John Kobak

Photos by JoAnn Lang

[Click on pictures for bigger image](#)

It's always hard to know when to head to Colorado for good paddling, since most all the rivers rely on snow melt. No snow in the Winter means no paddling in the Spring. In a normal year, the rivers peak about June 10th, some earlier some later. But the peak could be too high or too low depending on the snow pack. We cancelled last year's trip because of low water, this year we moved the trip up a about a week earlier figuring that even if it was a bad snow year we would still be able to paddle somewhere.

The snow reports for most of the river basins were close to 100% of normal. We thought it might be a little too high to hit the peak runoff so we were considering going to Southwest CO, where snow pack were less. On our drive West those rivers were falling so fast that our plans changed as we drove. My cell phone connects to my laptop and we got river level readings as we drove.

Our final plan was to skip Southwest CO and go to the Arkansas River basin near Buena Vista, then head to the Roaring Fork near Aspen, Clear Creek near Golden and end up at the Cache de la Poudre River near Fort Collins.

Most everyone left Cleveland on Friday after work, Elliott and I left Saturday morning and Brent flew from a wedding in Chicago on Sunday morning. We contacted each other as we drove and five of us met up in Sterling, CO while four stayed in Limon, CO. Bob Nicholson made it all the way to the BLM campground on the side of a mountain overlooking Johnson City where we would spend the first five days.

After our short morning drive, Elliott Drysdale, Mike Duvall, Bob Nicholson Cliff Wire and I decided to tackle the Numbers at about 1200 cfs. Brent was flying to Denver and renting a car so he would get there a little later. Dave Broer, Angie White, John (Smoltz) Garcia waited for him and ran the Numbers a little later in the day. Julie Garcia and Bill Miller took a rest day.

The Numbers of the Arkansas contains 6 class IV rapids interestingly named Rapids One, Two, Three, Four, Five and Six. Also interesting is that you can't really tell where one rapid starts and another ends. It's pretty continuous class IV paddling. All the rapids are boat scoutable and at 1200 cfs it's a fun run. Cliff did great considering that it was his first run ever in CO.

When the dawn broke on Monday plans began to gel for the next few days. We formed up into two groups with the paddlers looking for waterfall fun; Dave, Angie and Brent meeting up with David Duke in Crested Butte and ran Oh-Be-Joyful and Daisy Creeks. Both are only one mile long and it took 4 hours of driving and site-seeing to get there. In that mile OBJ drops 400' and Daisy 300'. Hence, they are both waterfall runs, details are sketchy but I did hear that there was one broken paddle, one swim and one badly sprained ankle. Possibly from the drop called Ankle Breaker?



Clear Creek

Our group; Elliott, Mike, Bob, Cliff, Bill, Julie & John (Smoltz) and I ran the scenic class 3-4 Brown's Canyon run at 1250 cfs. This 13 mi stretch has a lot of slow moving water and is the most popular rafting section. We saw several raft groups but no kayakers. Everyone ran quite cleanly even me in a demo kayak the Dagger GT 8.1. I liked it so well I hoped right back to CKS and bought one. Mike picked up a GT 7.8 to demo for Tuesday's Royal Gorge run.

This time it was our group that had the long drive. It is 1-1/2 hrs each way to the Royal Gorge near Canon City. The previous night's rain had increased the flow to 1550 cfs. It is a very scenic run which they call class 3 with a couple of fours thrown in. The first big one, Sunshine, saw 4 out of the 7 paddlers

rolling. Two other biggies; Sledge Hammer and Wall Banger proved to be much easier, however I got a little too far right at the wall and almost banged it. The run is known more for the spectacular scenery than the big rapids but everyone was glad that they paddled the scenic wonder. Mike liked his demo so well that he decided to buy a new kayak while Bob Nicholson picked up another GT to demo on Wed.

Meanwhile, our waterfall group, minus Dave Duke who stayed in Durango to recover, picked the nearby Clear Creek of the Arkansas. This 3.3 mi run averages over 160'/mi of non-stop excitement. They scouted it on their drive up and everyone did well on the class 5 section at about 290 cfs.



My New Boat

On Wednesday Elliott's daughter Megan arrived from her new home in Denver and hoped that she could paddle with us. She is fairly new to kayaking but has a good roll so I suggested that we do the 7 mi long Frog's Rock Run of the Arkansas which is rated at 3+ at the 1600 cfs level. She did great, one flip and a quick roll. I however was not so lucky. I can't blame my new boat but I'm sure I'll think of something. I bumped into Megan and fell into a sticky surfing hole and had problems getting out and when I did I had problems rolling which I didn't. I thought oh well tough hole, rocky river, new boat, all flimsy, but plausible excuses. The worse thing was that on the very last rapid I pulled into a staging eddy above the big boulder blocked drop called House Rock. I fell over in the eddy and thought, oh I should get some roll practice. Again, I was unsuccessful and then after missing several roll attempts on both sides I had terrible swim. Can't figure, works every time in a pool. Maybe this new boat has bad Mojo. While I was swimming and all the guys were attempting to rescue me, Julie quickly took charge and led Megan safely down the last rapid.

After our morning run, Elliott, Mike, Bob, Cliff and Bill headed up to do the Numbers again at the 1600 cfs flow. I went back to camp to rest and start writing this story. Our advanced group rested in the morning, picked up Julie after the Frog's Rock Run and then headed toward Eagle, CO to do some cave exploration.

Bob bought a Red Dagger GT but said he preferred the Orange/Yellow color that I had purchased. I immediately jumped at the chance to switch to the new kayak. If it had bad Mojo, better that Bob suffer then me. And suffer he did, as the trip went on. I was swimless for the rest of the trip, so even though these kayaks were virtually identical, the orange one was surely cursed and I was now free to watch the curse work on Bob.



Bob's Bad Mojo Boat

After a short drive over Independence Pass and a quick camp setup Elliott, Mike, Bob, Cliff, Bill and I ran the 10 mi Upper & Lower Woody Creek, Toothache sections of the Roaring Fork River. This scenic class III run is dotted with 6 million dollar riverside cabins. Most reminded me of my cabin in WV. (not) While we were paddling the other group (Dave, Angie, John, Brent, Dave Duke) drove by heading up to do a 2 mi section of the class 4-5 Castle Creek & then continue down the 4-1/2 mi class 4 section of the Roaring Fork (Slaughterhouse). Julie ran the Roaring Fork from below Slaughterhouse Falls.

After a night in Aspen, Elliott, Mike, Bob, Cliff, Bill and me paddled the Roaring Fork (Slaughterhouse) at 1000 cfs, while Dave, Angie, Brent, Duke headed up to scout the upper sections of the Crystal. John & Julie spent the whole day touring/shopping in Aspen.,

Kelly Miller flew in and then drove from Denver up Independence Pass in the dark to meet Brent. Mike and Cliff

had finished their week of paddling and left for home. Our groups split up again, with Brent and company heading back toward Vail picking a stretch of river called Ten Mile Creek.

Brent, Dave, Angie and Smoltz paddled the Class V section and picked up Kelly and Julie at the start of the Class IV section. At the takeout, the boys had the look like "we want to do that Class V section again", despite protests from the girls. While the girls waited patiently, drinking margaritas after running the shuttle, Julie finally went in search of the boys. Sure enough, we found out that Smoltz met the one pourover you didn't want to meet and wouldn't you know, that darn paddlesnake was there to graciously remove his paddle from his clutches. Fortunately, he had just bought another paddle in Glenwood Springs, so the fun would continue.

Elliott, Bob, Bill and I headed to Clear Creek near Golden, CO. We met up with Paul Lang, who had just driven all day and night from home and Karen Wattenmaker, a paddling friend from the 80's, who now lives in Denver. I'm sure some of our longtime members will remember Karen and her fast learn of kayaking and her many world adventure travels enjoying the sport. She now is a professional photographer who specializes in tourist, adventure and wild fire photography. See her web site:



Clear Creek was running 850 CFS, which was almost double from what we had run it before. We had lots of spills and thrills starting out with Elbow Falls which was not any harder at this level but the hole was still sticky, as I found out. The real action started at Screaming Quarter Mile, it seemed to last for at least a mile. At one point 4 of us were upside down but Bob missed his roll and swam in the wild holes and turbulence.

While I was catching my breath in an eddy, Bob and his boat floated by hanging on to Karen's big kayak. She got him to shore while Elliott grabbed his paddle but his new kayak ran the class V diversion dam and kept going. Elliott & Paul portaged and gave chase only to find out that it had hung up on some rocks in mid river above another rapid. When I came by I tried some feeble attempts to throw a rock filled throw line into the cockpit. Paul & Elliott gave a shot at trying to bump it or grab it while they paddled by.

Finally Elliott made a most heroic rescue. He paddling out and grabbed the cockpit rim while his kayak submarined under Bob's, but he held on and the boat came off and restarted its journey down stream with all of us in hot pursuit. Elliott finally got a rope on it and dragged it down the river to near the takeout where Bob could get to it.



Elliott our Hero

On Sunday we headed up to Mountain Park Campground on the Poudre River. It's a very popular weekend camp but by late morning on Sunday lots of campsites along the river open up. We grabbed four adjacent sites as the campers moved out. This Nat'l Forest campground has hot showers which everyone enjoyed rather than relying on our Sunshowers.

Elliott, Bob, Bill, Karen Wattenmaker and I paddled from downstream of the White Mile to our Campground at 4' on rock gauge. It was a fun run with no problems. Later in the day Angie, Dave, Brent and Smoltz did a short run through Grandpa's gorge just above our campground.



Dave on Poudre

Elliott, Bob, Bill, Julie, Kelly and I decided to tackle the White Mile and the 14 mi section down to camp. The White mile was kicking up really good. It's an every paddler for themselves kind of rapid and until it lets up, you have your hands full negotiating the waves and big holes. Kelly was in front of me and Julie behind. When we got to the bottom I found out that at some point in the rapid they were both upside down and I didn't even know it. Is that concentration or are their rolls so fast that they rolled between the waves.



Brent in Spencer Hts

Brent, Smoltz, Dave & Angie tried out the South Fork of the Poudre which is a log choked 12 mi class IV run. It starts on the road to Pinagree Park and confluences just downstream from our campground. It was at its minimum level. They all agreed that at this low level there was a lot of easy water, but had a few must avoid trees. If it was higher it could get quite dangerous.

Tuesday was everyone's rest, hike, shop or relax day, however Elliott & Bob still managed to do the 6 mile Grandpa's Gorge section again. They had not skipped a day of paddling since the trip began.

On Wednesday, Julie took another rest day while the hot boaters headed up to scout Joe Wright Creek. They ended up running about a mile of the class V Spencer Hts section of Poudre.



Paul in Spencer Hts

Elliott, Bob, Smoltz, Kelly and I put in just below the Narrows and ran the 8 mi section to just below Pine Vu rapid where the gauge read 4.2'. The water was big and pushy but as Elliott liked to say, the paths opened up and the holes were avoidable. The toughest rapids at this level were in Upper Mishawaka where you needed to get left to avoid some big holes.



Kelly on Poudre

By the time we got to Pine Vu, which we had scouted several times during the week since the gauge is located here, we were concerned with making the move past the big center hole. Bill Miller, who was taking a day off to rest his sore shoulder, was waiting for us in the eddy above the rapid. He told everyone the best way to miss the hole was to head right after the first drop. Elliott said OK and was on his way. The rest followed in turn but Kelly not hearing Bill's instructions stopped to talk to him. By the time she looked around, everyone was gone so her decision was made for her. Bill loaded her kayak on his truck. We found Julie tucked happily in her hammock by the river upon our return.

Elliott and I left for home on Thursday morning while the rest of the paddles went back for more. Brent, Kelly, Dave and Angie started above the White Mile and paddled to the campground, while Bob, Bill, Julie and John did the 8 mi. Grandpa's Gorge section. The trip was coming to a close but Paul & Joanne Lang still had a week of adventure remaining headed to run Boulder Creek with Brent who was on his way back to Denver Airport. Bob was going to spend the next few weeks in CO with his family who were arriving in a few days. It was a great trip with good water levels and although we never had any really hot weather, it was a lot better than Cleveland's late Spring weather.