

Pikes Peak River Runners

San Juan River Spring Break Mar 2000



By Barb Deniston

Photo Credits: Christina King & Barb Deniston

Trip Participants: Barb Deniston, Christina King, David & Cheryl Conley, Keith Fuqua, Jim & Nancy Wason (children Daniel and Jessica Wason)

Mexican Hat (*sombrero rock formation*): 3/24/2000

Christina King and I loaded the Tracker for our trip to the put-in at Mexican Hat and were on our way by 8:30 a.m. The weather was beautiful, and the passes were clear. We stopped for lunch in Pagosa Springs at the Riverside Restaurant perched on the banks of the San Juan...our first close up view of the river we would be running much further downstream.



One of the two gentlemen sitting at the table next to ours took a picture of the two of us with the river in the background. (Sidebar here: the two men were wearing "Alien Hunter" T-shirts and were pouring over their maps in preparation for their upcoming "hunt".) Continuing our way, Christina spotted an Elk herd, which was a high point for me, as I had not previously seen Elk in the wild. At the turn for the 4-Corners landmark we came upon 20+ police cars, a huge equipment trailer and 30+ police officers staging for something. A few miles later, we spotted two police cars parked in a small gully out of sight of oncoming cars. We considered pulling over in anticipation of the pending excitement but settled instead on closely observing all oncoming vehicles to see if we could spot the imagined desperados. We scrutinized the occupants as well as the vehicles and were disappointed that we had seen no masked banditos, no gun racks and no furtive looks (though we agreed we had no idea what we thought might constitute either a furtive look or a getaway vehicle). We satisfied our sleuthing sensibilities to our satisfaction by deciding that either the dirty white truck or the car with the vinyl shredding off the top had to be the getaway car vehicle and decided to stay somewhere that night that had TV so we could find out what was going on the 10 o'clock news.

Christina spotted what looked like the Bluff put-in for the San Juan with decent camping facilities, however none of our group was there so we continued into Mexican Hat



and checked in to the San Juan Inn and Trading Post (Tony Hillerman references the Trading Post in Hunting Badger). The Trading Post is a favorite stop for river runners, particularly in the hot summer months when they can pull up to a beach far below, climb up the trail to the Trading Post and cool off with a chocolate milkshake

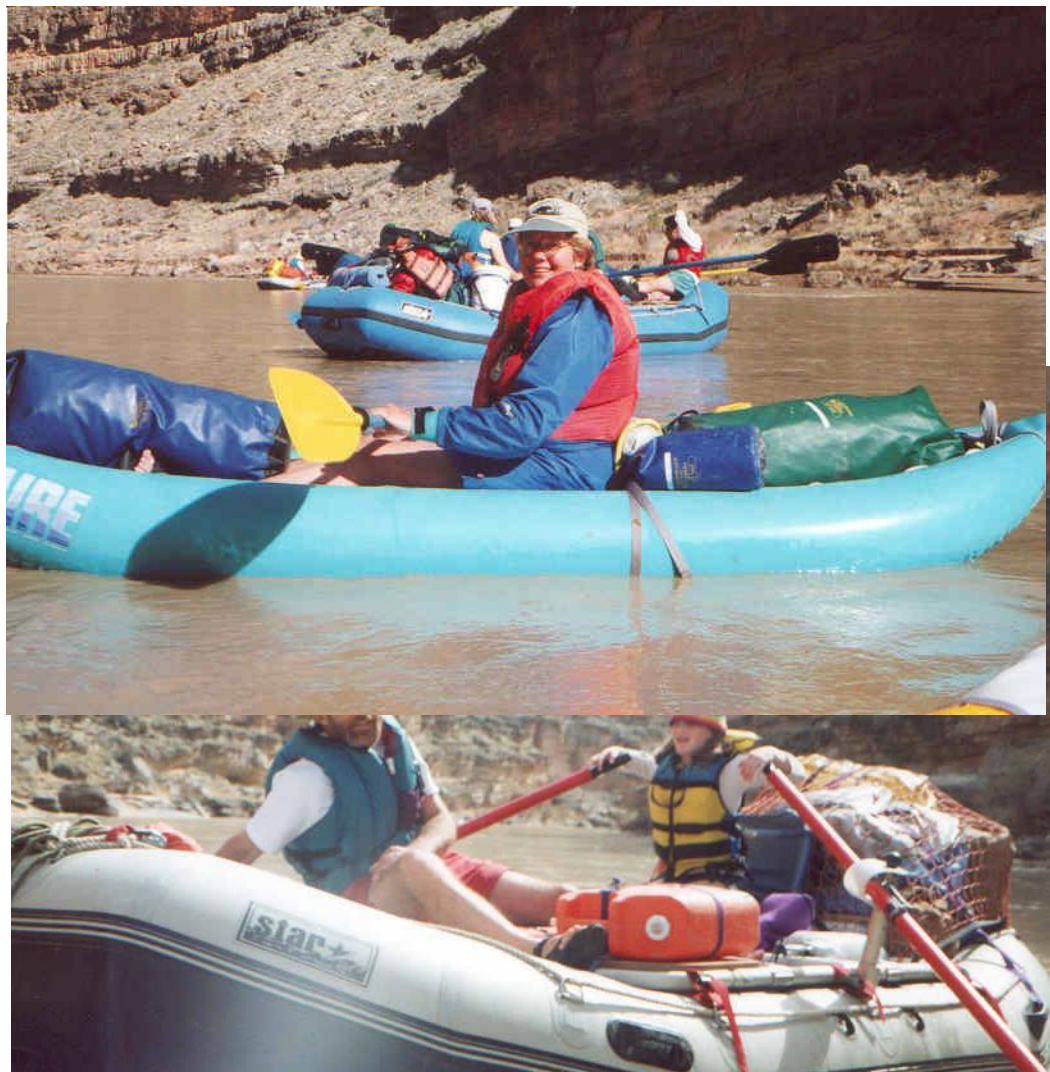


or ice cream. The motel portion of the trading post is quiet and secluded and overlooks the river. Two dogs, a husky and a big Rottweiler-cross patrolled the area occasionally barking at imagined intruders while allowing guests to rub their tummies and scratch their ears. Rooms are clean and comfortable as is the rate...\$40/night for 2 people/2 beds.

Pictures in the restaurant portion of the trading post date back to 1946 and depict not only the stark basics of the services but the wooden boats used by the early river runners. The boats had pointed prows, squared-off sterns and partial wooden decks covering roughly the 1st 2 or maybe 1/3 of the boat. The sides were much lower than those on a dory. After dinner, we headed off to check the put-in, which I was reluctant to do in the dark. Christina (being far more adventurous) would have liked to camp at the water's edge, however in deference to my timidity and in hopes of being enlightened by the 10 o'clock news agreed to remaining at the trading post for the night.

Honaker Trail Overlook camp: 3/25/00

Up at first light, coffee at the trading post restaurant and on to the put-in where we met the rest of our group including **Dave and Cheryl Conley, Keith Fuqua, Jim, and Nancy Wason and their two children, Jessica (11) and Daniel (13 next month)**. We ate breakfast, rigged our boats, and drove the vehicles to Valle's Trading Post from which point they would be shuttled to the takeout for us the following Tuesday. Our 3 rafts and 2 duckies launched at mile 26.6 around 10 a.m. The San Juan is filled with sand and clay that colors the water brown and provides no visibility for what is below the surface. The river was flowing 1600 cfs (current river flow).



Flows for the entire trip were:

March 25, 2000 (1590 cfs)
March 26, 2000 (1330 cfs)
March 27, 2000 (1150 cfs)
March 28, 2000 (1090 cfs)

We hit Gypsum Creek Rapid, a 3.5' drop within the first $\frac{1}{2}$ mile. Lots of big waves from a ducky (inflatable kayak) perspective and a fun ride. Jessica was with me in the ducky and paddled well. She was thoroughly drenched so we eddied out for her to change into her wetsuit, and we paddled on to the Mendenhall Loop.



At this point, you can take a 5-minute hike over the ridge saddle on river right and rejoin the river or you can paddle another 20 minutes to reach the same point. Nancy, Cheryl, Christina, Jessica, and Daniel hiked while Jim (with Christina's boat across his bow), Dave and I paddled. We had lunch on the beach and enjoyed the sunshine and 70-degree weather.



Then began our paddle through the goosenecks around the Tabernacle (a frequently photographed aerial view of the San Juan), through several minor rapids and the Second Narrows section to our camp at the foot of Honaker Trail (mile 43). Daniel paddled this section with me and did very well. The river drops at an average of 11' per mile giving us good current, however my muscles (or vestiges of them) had been sorely challenged. For me, this 17-mile paddle was a 4-ibuprofen pill-popping day!



A gourmet salmon dinner was preceded by the cocktail hour and followed by Dutch oven brownies and a campfire complete with storytelling and stargazing. Away from city lights and deep in the canyons, the stars take on a fire and brilliance that is indescribable. We managed to stay awake until the 8 p.m. (the time mandated by Christina) and then nestled into our sleeping bags for coveted sleep. The weather was perfect...so much so that Christina did not bother with a tent but preferred to cocoon in her sleeping bag on the beach.

Government Rapid camp: 3/26/00

Juice, wonderful coffee, hot chocolate, hash browns, scrambled eggs, bacon, yogurt, bagels, croissants, etc. prepared us for our anticipated 22-mile day ahead.



Before leaving camp, several of the group hiked up the Honaker trail overlook (approx. 1.5-hour round trip hike up a narrow steep path) which displays a vast array of geologic markers and is in the deepest part of the canyon. Since I do not do heights...I read about the geologic formations in the river guide. (Not the same as first-hand viewing but plenty good enough for me. Chesser's illustrations in the river guide are excellent. It is so easy to learn things when actually seeing formations while reading about them. The rock colors, structures and configurations are spectacular, similar to but quite different from the canyon of the Green River.

Nancy paddled with me today and I enjoyed getting to know her better. The current remained swift, and we enjoyed bouncing our way through lots of little no-name rapids, navigating through a variety of rock gardens, and dodging sand bars (dodging MOST sand bars though we did perch on one or two of them). One of the nice things about a ducky is that the littlest rapids are much bigger from ducky perspective and are consequently great fun. Ross Rapid at mile 52 was the big rapid on this stretch and provided lots of action. I almost bounced out as we cut left, then regained balance in time to pull hard right to miss the big boulder and hole at the bottom.

We eddied out on river left for lunch and topped that event off with a staged photo of the shirtless men and the whole party in shorts assembled behind the word "wimp" which we had carefully drawn in the sand. The photo will be used to make a plate from which Steve Reed will have to eat on future trips since he cancelled at the last minute for this trip believing that the weather was going to be terrible. The paddle after lunch was long and slow.... lots of sandbars, lots of rock gardens, lots of work. Dave took my ducky to give me a break and I rode with Nancy paddling the Wason raft. We frequently smelled oil from the oil seeps but never saw evidence of oil itself. The area is rich in oil and has much lore associated with the efforts of men to sink wells.



We had originally planned to camp at Slickhorn Gulch but revised our plans and camped at Eagle Rock (mile 64) just before Government Rapid. Another gourmet meal, preceded by cocktail hour, followed by a luscious Dutch oven dessert. As the cliffs turned to silhouettes in the twilight, Jim and Dave pointed out the rock on the canyon rim that appeared to have several eagles perched on it...which in turn resulted in lively discussion. Though one of the "perched rocks" did look like the head and beak of the eagle on U.S. mail trucks, Christina thought that the remainder of the "eagle" looked more like a duck sitting on an egg. In the meantime, I spotted a rock formation that looked like an enormous eagle with wings spread in flight. Christina agreed so we decided that if we run the San Juan again, we would point out our eagle in flight to first timers as the eagle from which the site gets its name. (Any wonder that myths change content in the telling?)

As the twilight faded, the stars and planets began to appear and glittered across the canyon sky like diamonds on a jeweler's black velvet cloth. Keith built up the campfire and we moved closer together to savor the warmth of friendship and flames against the quiet gurgling of the river. We talked about Government Rapid to be run in the morning and the freshwater pools we would see when we stopped at Slickhorn Gulch to hike. Jim announced 8:02 p.m. and within minutes, camp was secured, and we were all in dreamland.

Oljeto camp in the rain: 3/27/00

Following another hearty breakfast and quantities of great coffee, we loaded the boats and eddied out river left about 2 miles later to scout Government Rapids. To my inexperienced eye, we are talking UGLY! Churning, boiling brown stuff...not at all like clear-water rapids. I took one look, saw that the sneak marked in the river runner's guide was no longer there and declined to run it. I could see the tongue but could not see a top entry and subsequent line. Christina was incredibly supportive, assuring me that I had run harder things on the Arkansas and that my reaction was because I was seeing full-blown brown water rapid for the first time. Weird stuff, no white combs, no whitewater per se.... looked like a huge pot of boiling mud to me with only my imagination to suggest where the rocks "might" be. I listened and looked as others pointed out lines they thought they saw and still could not pick out anything. Christina offered to come back and run my boat through and I gladly accepted.



Following this experience, I know I would willingly boat with this group again...no pressure and lots of support. As I watched the other boats go through and saw them slide up and over rocks, it appeared that they were all domers and would have caused few if any problems.... however, I am going to have to see a lot more brown water before I would be comfortable running a rapid like that. We were all glad that we had not tried to run this rapid yesterday when everyone was tired from the long day and the river was already in shadows.

With the 3 rafts and 2 duckies safely through, we continued to Slickhorn gulch to hike. I hiked to the first freshwater pool and the others continued high up onto the cliffs to other freshwater pools for swimming and even more spectacular views. Though the canyon walls are not sheer, the gradient is extreme and, in the effort to drill for oil, many mules, wagons, people and equipment fell from the narrow ledges. A wagon wheel, wagon bed and cable were clearly visible. At "my" little pool, a trickling waterfall poured over the rocks and fed the pool. Lots of little, tiny lizards busily darted from rock to rock and one lone yellow flower seemed to be growing out of a rock. It was noticeably quiet, and beautiful with stark contrasts of rock colors.



After the hike and lunch, we started off once more with Daniel paddling my kayak alone and me riding with David. We next stopped at Grand Gulch where I remained with the boats while the rest of the group scaled a sheer 10-foot rock wall using miniscule foot and hand holds to reach the area above. Grand Gulch allegedly contains the ruins of many Indian villages and attracts many hikers who follow a trail of 50+ miles to reach this section. David Connelly left a beer and a note for a friend of his who would be coming in on the land route the following day.

Our final paddle of the day brought us to Moonlight Creek or Oljeto

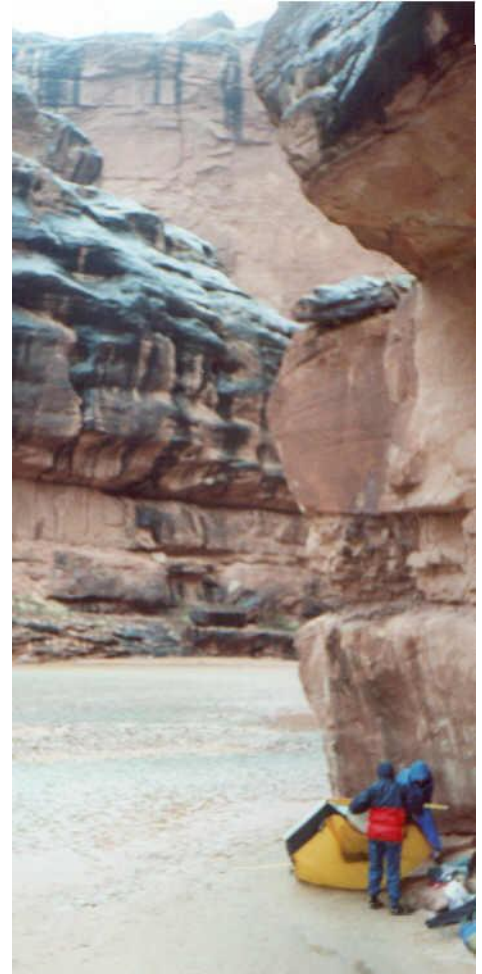


Wash on river left. En route we saw a muskrat, a beaver, and several blue herons. Campsites on this lower portion of the river are few and not particularly good, however, in the absence of a San Juan Trading Post and Inn, and in the presence of hunger, aching muscles and approaching darkness, this was as good as it got. Water level would not allow the boats to get into Moonlight Creek, however they could swing out and

around the jutting canyon wall and come in on a rock shelf on the other side...which they did. All gear had to be carried up and over rock face slanting at about a 45-degree angle to a point roughly 20' above the water. After setting up the kitchen on the top of the rock incline, there was room for only two tents consequently the Conley's and I camped down on the flashflood plain. Keith staked out a rock slab under a ledge, Christina staked out a place on a small rectangle of ground for her sleeping bag (no tent) and the Wason's set up camp on a small rocky prominence just off from the "kitchen" rock. The wind had shifted during the late afternoon and cloud cover was blowing in suggesting that a weather change was on its way.

Last night out is always filled with mixed emotions...sadness at leaving a place of quiet majesty, where 8 p.m. is late, mornings are announced by canyon wrens, nature provides pageantry and learning experiences, and battles are fought with water... happiness that the trip has been fun filled, the weather good and there have been no mishaps of consequenceand anticipation of the trip home and hot showers. Though this night was complete with easy going laughter, cocktails, dinner, dessert and a campfire, a degree of tension was evident. We had a tiny mouse in camp whose hunger had made him fearless of humans as he scampered everywhere in search of morsels and though his antics were amusing, we recalled that the Hantavirus found in mouse droppings and urine is prevalent in the Four Corners area.

We also discussed the fact that our camp had all the components for a disaster if a storm with heavy rain and wind blew in. The tents in the flood plain would be swept away in a flashflood and those on the rock point above would likely be swept into the river. We had limited options in terms of a contingency plan and finally settled on securing the kitchen, carrying all non-essential equipment to the boats to make maximum space on the kitchen rock in case the flood plain campers had to try to outrun a flash flood. By 8:06, the few stars that had been visible disappeared and we all headed to our respective sleeping areas. Sleep came fast only to be interrupted by the freshening wind slapping the tents followed by the patter of rain. As the wind's force increased, an enormous crash resounded from the kitchen rock. The two hundred pounds that comprised our kitchen had blown over into the cliff. We knew the river gods continued to smile on us, however because the kitchen could have blown off the rock onto the boats below wreaking all kinds of havoc. Instead, the tables and stoves fell over on the ground with no damage.



Because the rain was not torrential, Dave believed a flashflood to be unlikely for the moment but decided to move their tent closer to the cliff wall next to mine to provide a tiny bit of lead time if we would have to try to outrun a flash flood. Dave, Cheryl, and I dressed in rain gear and moved the tent, then determined to stay in rain gear so we would have some protection if we had to run. Sliding my wet, mud-coated self into my sleeping bag was mentally off-putting but ended up not being at all uncomfortable.

Clay Hills takeout: 3/28/00

The flood did not come, no tents blew off the point, morning came, no one whined, and the coffee was good. Jessica wanted to paddle the ducky alone, so I rode with Keith. Though the rain continued, wind velocity died

down we were all comfortable but wearing full river gear as opposed to shorts and T-shirts. An up-river wind, flat water, limited current and lots of sandbars made the paddle out arduous. Though the river miles were 8, we guessed that probably 16 miles had been rowed or paddled due to the need to crisscross the river looking for passable channels.

The takeout itself was, if not hell, then certainly purgatory. We were about 50 yards from the takeout and the water level had decreased to about 6 inches from bank to bank. It took 3 people pulling and 1 pushing to literally drag the boats through the sand and whale's belly (quicksand-like mud) for about 40 yards. A drop-off enabled the boats to float the last 10 yards but also required the pushers and pullers to drag their mud-encrusted selves back in the boats. Yuck!!!

We unloaded one boat at a time, de-rigged, ate lunch, changed into dry clothes, loaded up and headed home. Though it was snowing on Wolf Creek Pass and raining and snowing on LaVeta Pass, the trip home was relatively uneventful. We arrived at my house around 3 a.m., tossed Christina's gear into her car and she headed up Ute Pass to Woodland Park.