

american whitewater

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Cover Photos : Julie Keller© won the Still Image category at the National Paddling Film festival, winning Favorite Web Photo and Best Digital Image for her picture of Rush Peace at Bald River Falls.
Inset: Johnnie Kern on Canyon Creek by Dieter King



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Sinkholes the ultimate undercut?

• by John Tansil

There you are, cruising down the river, making all the right moves. You stroke right, boof left, and head for the slot your buddies said would be there. Now what was it they warned you about? DAMN....that was it! A squirrely cross-current catches your bow and now you're headed for the tombstone rock with a swift current against it, but no pillow. For a brief instant you panic, but then reflex action kicks in and a powerful sweep corrects your angle. As you brush the rock, you notice a log jammed up underneath. WHEW....that was close! Gotta be more careful! You could've joined that log for eternity!

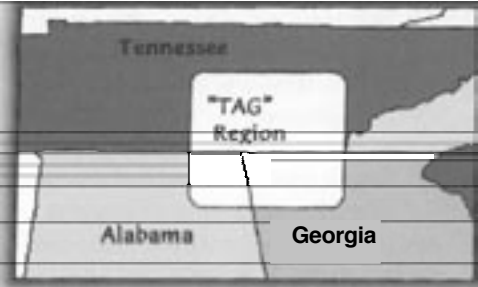
While this scenario may be fictitious, if someone paddles long enough, a similar situation will happen to them. It's inevitable. Just like "death and taxes." After all, whitewater is formed by swiftly-moving water flowing over and around rocks. The only problem is sometimes the water flows under certain rocks that are sticking up out of the current. And when that happens, the so-called undercut rock, or just "undercut" in boater-talk, allows the water to go through, but not the boat.

Undercut! Jeeze.... just the word alone is enough to send shivers up the spine of the most seasoned paddler.

But are undercuts all that bad? I mean most of them are easy to recognize: if the water piles up on the rock, it's not undercut....if it doesn't, it is. What could be simpler? And what the heck, if you can't wiggle out of a tight squeeze, what are you doing crammed in that tiny boat anyway? (The author assumes here that the reader is intelligent enough to recognize sarcasm and false bravado. He has swum several undercuts in his life and is scared to death of them.)

Well, suppose that instead of the current momentarily going under a big rock, the entire river disappeared. And not just under a rock, but into a cavern. And not just for a distance of a few feet but maybe for miles. Now that would certainly get your attention! Don't say it can't happen, because it can. Yes indeed, sinkholes, caves where entire rivers can be swallowed up, are for real. In fact, in certain parts of the country they're commonplace (see inset).

I respectfully submit that a sinkhole is the "ultimate undercut." A place where the water takes you from which there is no escape. An underground river, geologically interesting, but no place for a paddler. This story is about two creeks with sinkholes that were paddled....one that totally disappeared undergroundand another one that almost did.



The two rivers described in this article, Big Creek and Rocky River, fall off the Cumberland Plateau in southeastern Tennessee in an area well-known among paddlers for its steep creeks...and just as well-known among spelunkers for its caves. The limestone geology of the region where the states of Tennessee, Alabama, and Georgia meet has made this area a mecca for spelunkers who refer to their subterranean playground as "TAG." The importance of the area to caving is demonstrated by the fact that the headquarters of the National Speleological Society is located nearby in Huntsville, Alabama. Paddlers searching maps for steep creeks in this area will note names such as Lost Creek, Sinking Cove, Dry Creek, etc., indicative of the fact that not all surface water remains that way for long!

continued ►

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End of the line. All of the water in Big Creek flows into a sinkhole about four miles into the run. Photo by Tim.

Big Creek

"Did you find one?"

"Not yet."

"What? I can't hear you."

"NOT YET."

These words keep ringing through my ears as we stumble along the trail in total darkness. It seems like hours since we were forced to abort our run on Big Creek and we most definitely are not happy. The things that we are looking for, and are having a helluva time finding, are white trail blazes on trees. With no flashlight ~~and markers~~ that don't light, they are about the only thing that we can see in the diffuse light from the cloudy night sky. We had worked out a leap-frog system: find a mark and leave one person there while the other two attempt to follow the trail and find the next mark. If it's too far, we have a midpoint person. Once the next mark is found, we follow each other's voices to the lead scout. Talk about three blind mice....

We had made slow, steady progress but now we were stymied. This technique was not going to get us across the tributary creek that the trail seemed to cross. As we stop to rest and ponder the next move, Tim again voices his concern.

"Barb is probably worried sick. We told her we'd be at the take-out hours ago."

"What do you think she'll do?"

"Probably call the sheriff."

I inwardly groan. Not only did we have to scrub our run and attempt to walk out in darkness, now we face the further embarrassment of being "rescued." How could this have happened? I think back to the sequence of events that lead to our predicament.

None of us had done any interesting whitewater in months. Oh sure, Tim and I had paddled our local Missouri whitewater stream, the St. Francis, many times over the winter. But as

Tim likes to point out, "Paddling the Saint dulls your reflexes and makes you slow." At least we had the benefit of doing some paddling. The same couldn't be said for John E, the third member of our group, a former Missouri paddler who'd just taken a new job in West Virginia. He hadn't paddled since the previous fall. Now he was wondering why he had driven five hours to be wandering around in the dark in boating gear when he could have stayed a lot closer to home and been on perfectly good whitewater in



The author at Camera Lady Falls on Big Creek. Photo by Tim.

the daylight.

The choice of location was mine (or as my cohorts put it "This was all your fault."). Where we were was in Savage Gulf, the gorge formed by three tributaries of the Collins River, on the Cumberland Plateau in eastern Tennessee. We had chosen to run Big Creek, the tributary with a watershed that wouldn't drain as quickly since the rains had hit two days earlier. It had good highway access at the top of the run and another bridge crossing after the run flattened out and the three forks converged. My topo map

indicated pretty good gradient but it was hard to get specific since the map only had 100 foot contour intervals.

We put-in at the highway 56 bridge close to Altamont after jawing with a local. Yes there were a couple of waterfalls. No he didn't know if they were runnable. The usual paddler/nonpaddler dialogue about a steep creek. Just enough info to remind yourself to always have an eddy to scramble into. The flow at the put-in was just about right, enough to get us over any scrapey spots until the flow ~~doubled~~ about two miles downstream. We didn't have to wait long for the first big drop, an impressive slide with 30-40 feet of vertical. Maybe a Class V+ runnable drop? As we carried around, a woman appeared with a camera. She was the landowner and had seen us put-in at the bridge. She was real disappointed that we weren't running her waterfall. In the pool below, the drop looked more formidable. The slide terminated onto a thinly-padded ledge, guaranteeing compression fractures to a highspeed, airborne paddler.

The gorge kept getting deeper as we paddled downstream. The pool-drop whitewater was sometimes interrupted with woodchoked channels heightening our sense of caution. Even though we were trying to be especially careful, rusty boating skills combined with challenging drops lead to the inevitable and, at one time or another, we were all upside down.

One of the more interesting drops had a fast lead-in over a boof rock down to foam which was cradled on the right by an undercut. A quick recovery was required to line up for the next slot or risk pinning in a rock jumble. John flipped in the foam and rolled up at the top of the slot just in time to broach. As we scrambled to reach him, he recovered and slid through, denying us the chance to practice rescue skills.

My moment of truth came further downstream at the bottom of a steep

drop which Tim had neatly negotiated. It was pretty clear from the microeddy at the top that you'd better have speed built up or risk trashing in the unseen, but clearly present, hole at the bottom. Speed is not my forte and I paid the price with a windowshade before it spit me out.

Tim is ordinarily smooth as silk and makes us all look like klutzes when he carves up a wave, but every once in a while he'll catch a rear edge on his CruiseControl and provide us with some entertainment. Such was the case at the bottom of an innocent drop where he proceeded to flip and jam his paddle into a crack. My initial laughter gave way to concern as his upside down boat was going through contortions as he fought to recover. When he came up, I was biting down hard on my lip to maintain composure but he caught my look anyway.

In the early afternoon, I began to worry about our lack of progress. We'd put-in around 11:00 which meant we had about six or seven hours of daylight for a February day. I was sure we had passed the side creek that was supposed to come in on river left....and when it finally did appear at 2:00, we realized that we'd only gone about two miles and had another ten to go. The obvious plan was to paddle like hell and immediately portage anything that required scouting. This meant we had to skip a lot of the good drops, including the 20 foot waterfall shown in one of the pics. Our paddling mentality had changed from "enjoyable adventure" to "survival race to the take-out."

I was in the lead, stroking down a little riffle, when it happened. Looking downstream, I noticed the current headed straight for a vertical wall. Hmmmm, strange...rivers don't normally do this. Just as I paddled to the left away from the wall, my senses opened up and encompassed the total surroundings. *The water wasn't just hitting the rock wall and passing around it, it was literally going into the wall. This realization was further aided by the fact that a cavern opening was barely visible above the surface of the water.* I had eddied out into a

"pool" which was backed up at the downstream end by a low berm in which there was no opening and no downstream current. This was it, I thought. End of the line. A lot of emotions were racking my body... shock, awe, and, yes, delayed fear from the obvious "what if the sinkhole had a steep lead-in with no place to eddy out?"

All these thoughts flashed through my mind in a matter of seconds as I sat in the eddy and motioned for Tim and John to join me there. We got out of our boats and went up to the trail on river-left which we had occasionally been using for the portages. From there we could see that the riverbed continued on, carrying the water when there was too much flow for the sinkhole to handle.

In the past we'd run into a lot of obstacles running rivers... log jams, barbed-wire fences, dams, etc., but this was a first. What we did now when the river disappeared was what we did for the other obstacles...we shouldered our boats and started walking. It soon became apparent that we could make much better use of whatever daylight time remained if we abandoned our boats. However, the inevitable darkness caught us just before we discovered a trail sign with directions engraved in the wooden surface. Having no light to read the directions, we did the next best thing and tried to use our fingers to make out the individual letters.

We had no luck deciphering the trail sign and continued following the trail that paralleled the creek as best we could. Sometime later, I checked my watch and announced the time to my friends. It wasn't until they responded with "How can you read the watch in the dark?" that I realized that the tiny watch light would probably have been enough to read the trail sign. The subsequent verbal abuse was the definite low point of the day for me.

Such were the events that lead us to be stranded in Savage Gulf. By now it was about 11:00 pm and we were stuck...we couldn't go forward and there was no reason to go back. The

obvious choice was to wait for daylight or for any potential rescuers to find us. It didn't take long for the latter to happen. We saw lights and heard voices and were soon greeted warmly by members of the local rescue squad. They got on a walkie-talkie and announced they had found the men that had "fallen into the Gulf." I could see that Tim and John were having trouble understanding some of their language, but not me...I was a native Tennessean...and the southern English sounded natural. After walking a short distance, we were met by more rescuers on ATVs and rode on them to the take-out.

It was becoming increasingly apparent to us that we had done a "bad" thing in the eyes of the local authorities. And I'm not talking about getting stranded and having to be rescued, I'm talking about the legality of being there in the first place. So it was with apprehension that we were introduced to "Ranger Jim" who informed us that Savage Gulf was a Tennessee State Natural Area and State Park with special use restrictions. Any activity, other than day-hiking on the designated hiking trails, required a permit. Whitewater paddling on the streams was not allowed.

Ranger Jim had been in charge of the park for 18 years leading up to the present time of our adventure (February 1995) and had not seen any other kayakers in the park during that time. He had been contacted several years earlier by Chattanooga paddlers requesting permission to paddle and had turned down the request. (Although Ranger Jim had not encountered any whitewater activity during his tenure, he was probably not aware that boaters can be as secretive as deer. Clearly, local paddlers with intimate knowledge of water levels, location of the sinks and access points could paddle in Savage Gulf with a much higher probability of not being detected.)

Throughout our conversation, the ranger was very pleasant and frequently flashed a toothy grin. We had expected to be fined for illegal activity and, possibly, charged for the rescue

operation....neither of these happened. While Ranger Jim and I talked, Tim, Barb, and John were chatting with members of the rescue team. We offered them some money, but they wouldn't take it, requesting instead that we make a donation by check through the mail when we got home. We apologized for the trouble we had caused and thanked them for what they had done.

The next day we hiked the three miles down a side trail to retrieve our boats and came upon the trail sign we had "fingered" the night before. The sign pointed the way up the side trail out of the gorge, however, in hindsight, it was probably good that we hadn't been able to read it since the trail was extremely rugged and wouldn't have been passable without a strong light.

Five years after the fact I still have mixed emotions about this (mis)adventure. There were any number of things that could have stopped us from paddling Big Creek: knowing that the river disappeared underground, or that running the river was illegal, or that we'd get stuck in the dark and have a rescue squad come after us, or that we'd have to carry our boats out 3 miles on a steep trail, etc. However, ignorance of these facts allowed us to paddle some whitewater that few others have experienced...and it's not too often that one gets to do this, especially in an area with a high concentration of paddlers.

My reservations about our epic stem from this episode making legal access to paddling in Savage Gulf potentially more difficult in the future. As a general rule, non-local boaters, most of whom aren't familiar with local-stream issues, shouldn't cause difficulties for local paddlers. **For this reason, I certainly don't recommend paddling the creeks in Savage Gulf.** But, yeah, the good news is there are much better steep creeks in the area that don't have the logistics and legality issues. Now if I can just talk my friends into paddling this other creek I found on the map....

Post-mortem:

We actually knew beforehand that most of the water in the Collins River disappeared underground upstream of the take-out since we had left a car there and noted the minimal flow. However, we had assumed that the depletion took place after the Collins tributaries (Big Creek, Collins, Savage Creek) came together in the lowland cove where the geology was vastly different (gravel-bed river). Bad assumption....but then sinkholes on steep creeks were an alien concept to us. We also knew that the water eventually came out of the ground somewhere downstream of the take-out since the TVA gage on the Collins at McMinnville was reading about 4,000 cfs (with at least half that from the Collins and the rest from the Barren Fork tributary.) A hydrologist could probably have told us that something unusual was going on since, after general rainfall in the area, the Collins gage rises slower, peaks later, and stays up longer than the other river gages in the area. This phenomenon is indicative of the natural flow of a river with an upstream reservoir, except in this case the reservoir, rather than being above ground, was subterranean.

Paddlers should be aware that sinkholes frequently are not shown on topographic maps, even the ones with the most detail, i.e. the USGS 7.5 minute quadrangle maps. The sinkhole we encountered on Big Creek was not unique, the other creeks in Savage Gulf have them also, and none are shown on the USGS maps. They are however shown on the Savage Gulf Trails Map (available from: South Cumberland State Recreation Area, Rt. 1, Box 2196, Monteagle, TN 37356. Or phone (615) 924-2980).

Hey....let's be careful out there....don't paddle into a sinkhole and "Sail the Lost Sea!"

(The Lost Sea, a commercialized underground lake, is a popular tourist attraction in east Tennessee and the advertising phrase "Sail the Lost Sea" appears on billboards, barnroofs, and other similar eyesores throughout the southern Appalachians.)

Rocky River

The signs were there for a strange trip. My calendar from the Missouri Conservation Department had the Friday entry as "Mink begin breeding" and the Sunday entry as "Passage of the Earth through the ring-plane of Saturn from north to south." A portent of things to come?

I'd wanted to go boating all week long and the rivers in east Tennessee seemed to be cooperating. At the start of the week they were fairly high but by Thursday they had dropped like a rock....now what had happened to that foot of snow they got in Crossville last weekend?

I reluctantly called Tim to cancel (reluctant, because I had tentatively committed and I knew he would be disappointed.) But his response was upbeat. "OK. Barb and I are going anyway and Jason's going too. We'll scrape down something." "Well, you guys have fun and call me when you get back with a trip report." After talking to Tim and realizing they were boating and I wasn't, I was really depressed. So much so that I called the gages again on Friday morning. WHOA....things had sure changed overnight! The TVA gage for the Emory at Oakdale, frequently used by paddlers as a general indicator for flows on the Cumberland Plateau, had shot up from 2,000 cfs to over 10,000 cfs....it's amazing what warm weather can do to snow. Now I was interested! A few quick calls to Tim, Jason, and Chuck and we'd set up a trip.

The three of us met Tim and Barb at Old Stone Fort State Park on Saturday morning. Since grease, sugar, and caffeine are basic food groups for kayakers, the first order of the day was the breakfast buffet at Shoney's over which we discussed plans. In the early morning before people are fully awake, it's wise to seize the initiative, so I stepped right out with "Let's do the Rocky River. It's close, it's fairly steep, and it's rarely done." In the past I could get away with this, but after the fiasco the previous year when Tim, John E and I got stuck after dark on

Savage Gulfs Big Creek when it disappeared into a sinkhole, my buddies have started asking embarrassing questions such as: "How long is this run?" "Do you know someone who has done it?," etc. I tell you what, it's a sad day when your best friends don't trust you! But I'll have to admit my response was kind of lame. "Well, I don't personally know anyone who has done it but so-and-so, you know the guy we boated with a few weeks ago who's run almost every creek in the Southeast, knows people who have done it and they said it was a decent run." This must have satisfied them because we agreed to at least check the water level at the take-out.

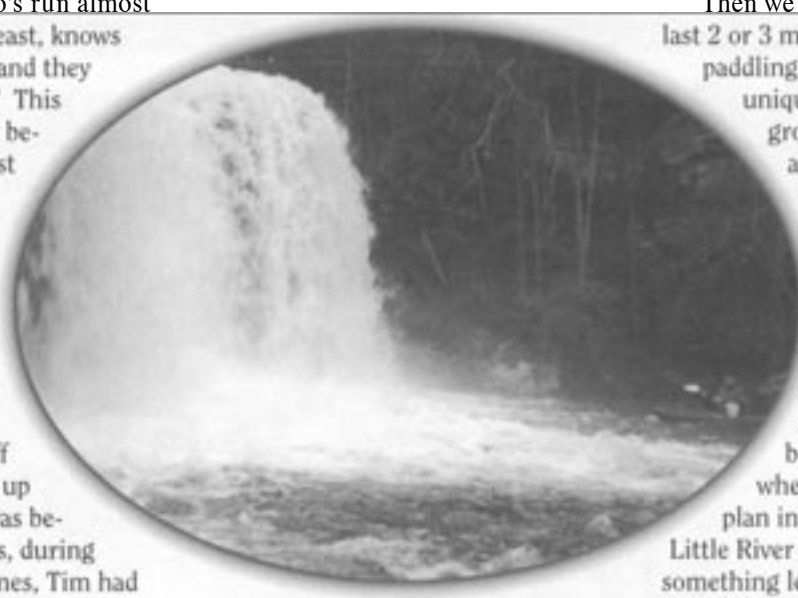
On the way to the river, we went through a space-warp and Tim disappeared. Actually what happened was that the rearview mirror in Chuck's van had fallen off and Chuck would hold it up periodically to see who was behind him. Unknown to us, during one of the visual dead-times, Tim had eddied out to get gas. We went on to the river hoping he would find us there. After checking the water level at the take-out (minimal) and not finding Tim, we decided to check out the put-in, down a dead-end gravel road to a cemetery and then a quarter mile walk to the river. The water level here looked super (and it was at this point that I **suspected** this river also had sinkholes and I was just hoping that the entire run had sufficient water.)

Driving back to the take-out we met Tim and Barb coming from the opposite direction. With the group together again, we hurriedly got ready, left Barb at the take-out and headed for the put-in. The bright sunny day, combined with the anticipation of paddling new whitewater, put us in that mood that can only be described as "good karma."

There was still a good deal of snow in the gorge and with the runoff coming from snowmelt, the water temp must have been in the 30s. But the air

temperature was about 50 and that's not bad for February. The water level was ideal for a first-time run on a creek we knew nothing about, except for the fact that it dropped 400 feet in the first 2 miles or so.

After a brief warm-up, the whitewater got serious with lots of Class IV. We scouted a ledge drop, ran it and a couple of other drops before eddying out above what appeared to be



John E at Ladder Falls on Big Creek.
Photo by Tim.

a constriction where the water ran underneath a boulder with a log thrown in for good measure. As we scouted from shore, we could tell this was no ordinary single drop, but a complex undercut cascade that went on for a few hundred feet. As we portaged around this, we walked over where two enormous springs were adding significant volume to the river. It was a totally eerie place. Getting back into the river required ropes and carabiners (and even worse, lots of daylight time, something which we didn't have too much of.) Back in the river, we rounded a corner where an impressive waterfall was coming in, only to come to another portage. This one wasn't as bad and in short order we were back in the river.

The good whitewater continued...the drops were steep but

they could be boat-scouted and, with minor exception, they were "clean." As we paddled downriver, we all noticed at one time or another that the river was not increasing in flow as it should have been from the side creeks coming in. We also noticed places off to the side out of the main flow that we strongly suspected were sinkholes (although there was no discernible surface current into the sinkholes).

Then we came to the **trees!** The last 2 or 3 miles of the run were like paddling through a forest....truly a unique slalom course. The trees growing in the riverbed were ample proof that the Rocky River normally had no water in this lower stretch because of the sinkholes upstream.

We finished the run with daylight to spare and after shuttle, changing clothes, loading boats, etc., talked about where to go next. The original plan included a run on Alabama's Little River and we were looking for something less intense to do on Sunday. (It seems odd to think of a 12 mile run with the upper part Class IV-V as "less intense," but we knew that river.) However, our immediate need was food and being in a starvation state, and hence easily manipulable, Tim suggested we go to Fall Creek Falls State Park and eat at the lodge. We'd camp there and then run Cane Creek through the park on Sunday. I won't describe the run down Cane Creek, only to say that an unfamiliar run with lots of steep drops, many with wood, and lots of snow along the bank does not equate to a "less intense" river.

My calendar was certainly correct about the weekend being strange, but what it didn't let me know was how great the boating was going to be!

Thanks to Tim and Barb, Chuck McHenry, Jason Bales, and other good friends for sharing boating adventures with me...even if we don't always know where we're going until we get there.