



AMERICAN WHITEWATER

A VOLUNTEER PUBLICATION PROMOTING RIVER CONSERVATION, ACCESS AND SAFETY

American Whitewater Journal May/June 2018 – Volume 58 – Issue 3

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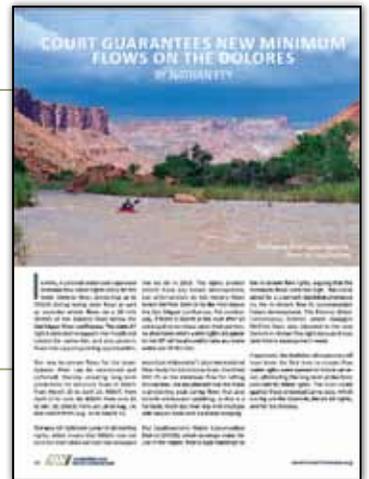
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The South Fork of the Salmon River (ID) is a magnificent river with an incredibly wide range of whitewater opportunities on numerous stretches, including the East Fork, all the way through a wilderness multi-day run that takes you to the confluence with the Salmon River at Mackey Bar on the Main Salmon wilderness run. The South Fork is under threat from a massive mining proposal, with three giant open-pit mines that will affect already restored wetlands, and re-route and re-channel streams in the headwaters of the East Fork of the South Fork. Stay tuned to American Whitewater for opportunities to take action to protect this fantastic whitewater resource.

Photo by Kevin Colburn

Publication Title: American Whitewater
Issue Date: May/June 2018 Statement of Frequency:
Published Bimonthly
Authorized Organization’s Name and Address:
American Whitewater
PO. Box 1540
Cullowhee, NC 28723

RIVER VOICES

WINTER'S RUN

STORY AND PHOTOS BY CHUCK MCHENRY



Cat's Paw Rapid on the Saint Francis River (MO) in the setting sun

IT IS A Thursday in February, and I am running the trail along the St. Francis River (MO). I have delayed until the heat of the day. The temperature at 1 pm is 15 degrees F, and the wind chill is 10. Three days ago, the Saint was eight feet over its normal level. From then until now the temperature has not gotten above freezing and last night registered single digits. The river has dropped in this time, and is now 36 inches on the gauge. This is a beefy level, with Class III to IV rapids, but the main attraction is ice, five feet of river-dropping ice formations in the river and along the river banks.

I half expected a few kayakers to be out and about. The level is a good one, but I am solo on this day; undoubtedly they all think it too cold.

The sun is big and shining with that close-to-the-earth-in-winter brilliance, in a crystalline blue, cloudless sky. The wind blows irregularly, and when it does, it blows faint, wispy trails of ice crystals off the trees, making a shimmering curtain of mist in the sky. How often do these conditions

occur? It must be rare, I think, as the last time this happened was years ago, with friends who no longer paddle.

As I run "Turtle Alley," that section between Turkey Creek Picnic Ground and Mud Creek Pool, where the trail follows only 10 to 20 yards from the river, there are bright flashes of light coming from the river: screaming photons, 186,000 miles per second, hurled from the sun, only to get trapped by the ice, jolted into quantum-pin turns, and sent streaming in every direction in prismatic chaos, some to finally find rest by crashing into the rods and cones in my eyes. Like tiny flashbulbs going off—blue, red, white—they speckle not only the bare trees all about me, but also the thicker branched canopy above, in an ever-changing light show that any rock band would kill to have on stage.

My thoughts wander. I've been running this trail for 30 years and little has changed. Unlike the graveled rivers, the Saint, trapped in its granite gorge, cannot change in any but the subtlest of ways. In 30 years I have seen the first door, at Three Doors rapid, gradually take preeminence over the

other two. As huge boulders get moved in the floods, I have seen play holes and waves change, to be replaced by new ones in other places. But that is all. The mighty flood of '93, with all its foot-tons of force, with all its pounding mega-cfs, could only make a few, barely noticeable differences. What has been changed by man rarely lasts. Footbridges and bathrooms have come and gone with the floods, and even the Silver Mines Dam, a mighty structure in its day, is slowly melting back into the river with each passing flood.

For the first 15 years I was always alone on the trail—always amazed that no one else seemed interested. I would hide my boat and gear at the top, drive to the bottom, then run the three-mile trail back up, thus ensuring my shuttle. Then along came my wife, Di—I remember that first day when we ran together. I patronizingly told her I wouldn't leave her too far behind. By the first mile her license plate was disappearing in the turns ahead of me. I didn't know she

Opposite: Double Drop Rapid at Ice Noon

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was an adventure racer and a marathoner! Live and learn....

Don't know how, but in time I was able to keep up with her, and I had three to four good years of running the trail with her, watching everything change throughout the seasons, all within the unifying context of the river. In the spring we would run on beautiful carpets of red bud blossoms, flanked by Sweet William, phlox, goat's beard, violets, bluets...each adding their perfume to the air. Running the trail in full moonlight, we witnessed the dogwoods, in full bloom, doing their mysterious weaving dances through the woods. And we would kayak down a river of silver moonbeams, watching new universes form in the moonlit spray of rapids. We ran amid beautiful fall colors, picking careful footsteps in the leaves so as not to twist an ankle. We ran on her birthday, Dec. 24th, in a foot of freshly fallen snow, and were almost disappointed to reach millstream and have to get into our boats. But then, being on the river with all the rocks covered in snow was not so bad, either.

The warm days of spring and summer are certainly the best of all. It's always a laugh to run Turtle Alley and holler 'oooga-booga,' scaring hundreds of frantically plopping

turtles into the water. Spring is coolness under the green canopy...an occasional deer...chasing turkeys up the path until they have no other choice but to lift their ponderous bodies into the air and fly. There are ever-present terrapins and lizards, and startled ducks flapping their wings in that rapid-fire, strange looking, alternating up-and-down "V" that they make in flight. The snakes awake! The hog-nosed snake—what a faker, so menacing as he rears up and flattens his head like a cobra, vibrating his tail in the leaves like a rattler, then when all else fails, wriggling in death throes, being the ultimate ham, putting poor Hamlet to shame. It is rare, but a viper could cross the path, something to keep the adrenaline up! But most of all, there are the green snakes, fresh from shedding their skins—so intensely green and glowing they're almost luminescent, and so gentle and docile. In April, waves of tiny toads, fresh from their tadpole ponds, are everywhere, so thick it takes great effort not to step on them. And then the crows, in flocks, cawing in crow cacophony, feasting...and then it's done. They are gone. Fecundity, the overpowering by the masses, sends a million tiny frogs to the river, and some lucky few make it all the way, they must, because every year it starts anew!



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RIVER VOICES



Ice flowers

Once, in early spring, water still cold, I saw a red fox crossing the river at near the Millstream put-in. She was swimming so well I thought her a muskrat. She climbed up the bank, shook out the water, looked at me, and stopped dead still on the trail. Our eyes locked for moments then she gave me a, "Haven't you ever seen a fox before?" look, and off she went. Deer cross the river, even in flood, and I am amazed that with their hoofs they can swim at all, but they do quite well. Once, on one of those rare March days, when the sun came out bright and shining and warming the air like summer, I passed a beaver getting a tan on the bank, lolling on its back and completely unconcerned with a kayaker drifting by.

Summer comes and the trail overgrows, and after June, the days when the river is up are rare. These are the days for being alone on the river. For sliding and bumping down

the river and fishing the pools. I remember Di giving a yell, and watching her kayak sailing across the pool below double drop, fishing line taut, pulled by a grandfather small mouth. I was wondering what she was going to do if she flipped, hold on to the pole, or to the paddle?

Fall—the crisp air, and the smell of fallen leaves. Turtles digging under the earth to hide. Food everywhere! Wild grape, cat briar tips, persimmons, Chantrelle mushrooms, Maypops, pawpaws, hickory and hazel nuts, all laid out for the discerning gourmet. The wind blows with the promise of winter sleep.

Then Di broke her ankle in the Black Canyon of the Gunnison, and I now run the trail, as before, alone, and I miss her running with me, but I smile at the constant flow of memories. Sometimes I become so lost

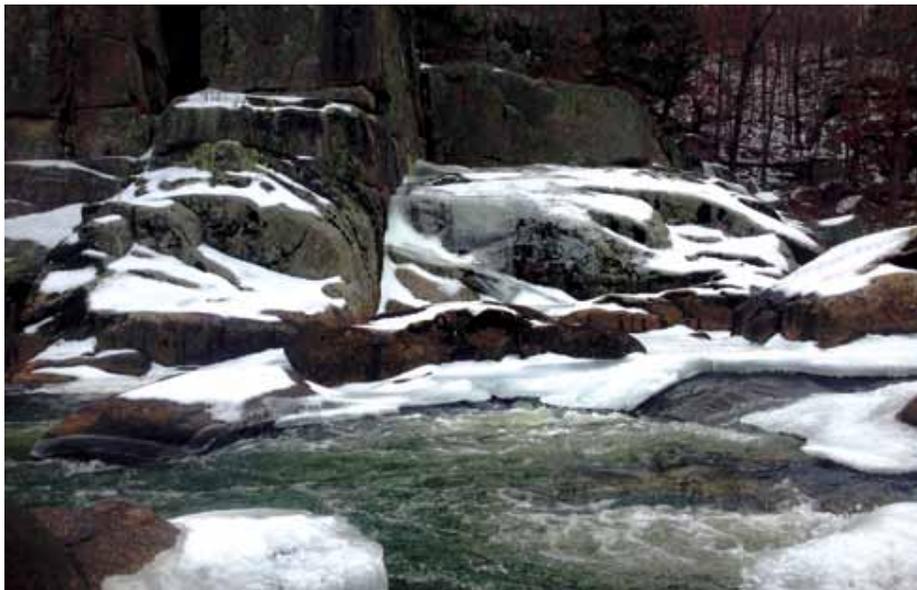
in thought that I don't even remember running up the heartbreak hills and am surprised to suddenly find I'm on the millstream trail, running on the bluffs, looking down at the river below with only a half mile to go, and checking the rapids for debris. I almost always stand at Pine Bluff, a 100-foot cliff, and look up and down river, and marvel at how truly beautiful it all is, and how lucky I am to be here now. This must surely be the best life I've lived so far....

Along Turtle Alley there is a thicket of Yellow Ironweed. In the late fall I make it a point to harvest the stalks, cutting them three to six inches above the ground. Some I cut in various diagonals. Some I frazzle. Some I cut star patterns across their cross-sections or other designs. I'm rewarded for these efforts in the winter with a bank full of delicately beautiful ice flowers, paper thin petals formed by the capillary action of water rising up the stalks then freezing and expanding and extending outward. I've seen pictures of ice flowers in magazines, and while they are pretty, with completely random and unpredictable shapes, they are tame. My ice flowers, too finely delicate to even touch, are the madly whorled, abstract, non-Euclidean visions of a mad Jack Frost with a paint brush!

By a presumed similar action, there are places on the trail where the clay itself rises up in brown crystalline stalks, shaped like dense staghorn mushrooms. Close inspection reveals a labyrinth of structure—ugly and beautiful in its uniqueness. They crunch when I run upon them.

On this particular February day the trail is treacherous. I fall twice—full-on, feet-out-from-under-me falls. For those who criticize the safety of running the river alone, how odd to think the trail is far more dangerous! Slick ice is everywhere. Sometimes it is covered by windblown leaves. Sometimes there is deep spring water under it, and breaking through and getting my shoes wet is not a savory prospect.

RIVER VOICES



Ice shelves make for a narrow passage, Saint Francis River (MO)

There is an inch of newly fallen snow. Does it mute out all the normal noises? It seems so strangely quiet. No birds, no animal noises...where is everybody? Safe in dens and nests, I presume, on a day this cold. Even though there's a myriad of tracks crossing the trail—mice, rabbits, turkeys, deer—I see no creatures save the solitary eagle in the sky above. So very quiet...except when the wind gusts and trees awaken with complaining creaks, others answering, fading away as the wind moves upriver. Occasionally there is a dripping, where even at 20 degrees the sun is able to warm rock enough to melt ice. So very quiet...except for the Saint. She seems to be roaring angrily at me. Did I miscalculate her level? Did an ice dam break? I stop to check familiar landmarks and assure myself that it is no higher than three feet.

I pinned on the Saint at the three foot level, at Cat's Paw, in the middle of the night, solo, under the full moon. A vertical pin, bow up, on a rock called "shark's fin," and all my efforts to free myself only succeeded in sinking me gradually deeper, until the water was up to my chin. The thought

Ice bells

I reach Millstream and my boat, stashed in the woods, and change into my boating gear. The river is everything I thought it'd be. Ice is everywhere and the bright sun illuminates it into diamond candelabras. All of the rocks look like ice mushrooms. They have bald-ice domes and then stretch outwards over the water into skirts. Five-foot-long icicles, all in a row, hanging from brush and branches, form curtains of varying thickness, marking the cold of night and the relative warmth of day. Some of the curtains strangely bend in 90-degree arcs, crystalline rainbows starting out horizontal to the river, then gradually curving gracefully downwards to verticality. It dawns on me—as the river drops, ice forms on branches, and as the branches grow heavier, the branches begin sagging downward, until finally the branch itself is pointing downwards, leaving the first part of the icicle formation now pointing horizontally.

I resist the urge to go crashing into the ice, to send it flying all about, thinking instead that perhaps it will last the weekend and others will get to see it. I have memories of a good friend doing that very thing on a similar winter's day years ago. Full speed into an ice curtain and the crystals went everywhere like shrapnel and we were



all laughing and marveling at the beauty. The water itself is speckled bright with countless floating ice bells and prisms.

It is hard to play on the river in 15-degree weather. Nevertheless, I have to surf on the beautifully formed waves at Entrance Rapid, Cat's Paw, and Double Drop. My pogied hands can't stand the water for long, and I have to stick fingers in my mouth to warm them up again. Rickety-rack Rapid is an ice palace. The river's splashing and boiling has created a miasma of fantastic ice sculptures. I take pictures, but taking a picture is a study of doing things quickly and efficiently before wet fingers become unsuitably numb. The wind starts blowing upriver and I feel my hair starting to freeze to the inside of my helmet. At Mud Creek pool, high in the tree at the cliffs, is "Wally," a magnificent, American Bald Eagle, who I

see so often I have named him. Wally always cocks his head and watches me as I drift just below him. I like to think we have seen each other so many times that he knows me. The sun gets lower and disappears, and I know that the dam and Silver Mines areas will be deep in cold shadow, that there will be an instant 10-degree drop in temperature—a gentle urging to stop gawking and get on down the river.

There are huge sheets of ice cascading down the cliffs on river right at Silver Mines. A great heron wades in the pool near Little Drop and flies off, scolding me for interrupting his fishing. Fat Man's Squeeze is closed off by ice and I have to make an impromptu turn to river left. If I hit the ice shelf...would it break, or would I have to roll under it? The low water bridge at

the take-out is a mass of ice, no concrete visible anywhere.

Taking out is difficult. My boat cannot get a purchase on the ice-covered river bank. My zippers are frozen, making keys difficult to obtain, especially when hands are frozen after mere seconds. My helmet is frozen to my hair, and knots are impossibly ice-welded. Nevertheless, I unzip a few notches, back off, try again, back off, and finally I free enough space in my drysuit that I can get the key and I am done. I jump into the van with heater at full blast so I can defrost out of my gear.

It's been a run on a winter's day—nothing more, nothing less.



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