



Ralph Kline

PADDLING THE GREEN RIVER FROM MINERAL BOTTOM TO THE CONFLUENCE

by Ralph Kline

This being my first experience kayak camping, I was in good hands with my most experienced companions, Frank Bering, Dick Dieckman, and my brother, Larry Kline. I had done my best to prepare for the trip with a kayaking class and several outings near my home in the San Francisco Bay Area. Nothing, however, could prepare me for the splendor and majesty of the Labyrinth and Stillwater Canyons along the Green River.

Our outfitter, Tex's Riverways, did an excellent job delivering us and our gear to the put-in at Mineral Bottom and picking us



Dick Dieckman, Larry Kline, and Frank Bering

up five days later at the confluence of the Green and Colorado Rivers, about fifty-two miles downstream, for a jet boat ride back to Moab.



Loading up for the shuttle

At the put-in, I learned how small the cargo space really is in a sea kayak, and also how much it can actually hold if packed properly. This was all new territory for me. Much to my relief, our original plan for dealing with "solid waste" by wrapping it in newspaper burritos was replaced with a rented, washable, reusable toilet system, a concept and "posture" I was more able to wrap my mind around, as this was also new territory for me.

Much time was spent the first day loading and unloading, being transported (1.5 hours to the put-in), and just getting organized. Starting at 8:00am in Moab, we began our journey in the water at

about 1:00pm, but the wait was worth it. The adventure truly began when we descended Horsethief Road as it dropped down to Mineral Bottom, and the scenery continued nonstop to the end. With names like Deadhorse, Jasper and Shot Canyons, not to mention Hardscrabble, Queen Anne, and Saddle Horse Bottoms, you know the history is rich despite the seemingly barren and hostile environment for settlers.

We spent four nights out in the wilderness paddling anywhere from two to four hours each day. Our first day out took us almost 16 miles downriver to Potato Bottom where our camp was the most open of our trip with unobstructed views in all directions. The Butte of the Cross was visible down river to the south and Big Horn Mesa to the north. Paddling the first day was mellow and the water was smooth. The only challenge was to



The author with Butte of the Cross in the background

paddle past several decomposing cattle carcasses floating down river this year. We met up with canoers and rafters along the way and speculated with them about the source and fate of these bloated beasts.



Bonita Bend

The second day was a short six miles to a prime "destination camp" at Bonita Bend. This spot is also called Anderson Bottom and features an "abandoned me-ander" in which the Green River now bypasses about two miles of its original course. The result is a flat dry valley with interesting flora surrounded by steep rock formations. We hiked this area in the afternoon before dinner taking in the whites, reds, pinks, and greens of the landscape contrasting with the blue sky.

The third day we began to hit challenging water conditions as we passed the Sphinx and Turk's Head, two distinct landmarks along the river.



A stop at Deadhorse Canyon where Larry and Frank had camped last year provided a much needed respite and an excellent photo opportunity with its panoramic views. In the afternoon strong headwinds would come and go at times generating one foot waves, something I had not experienced in any of my outings back home near the ocean! Larry got the group to travel more closely together for safety, a move I very much appreciated as a kayaking novice.

We paddled over 17 miles that day to Horse Canyon, a spot we chose for its shelter against the bad weather forecast before we left civilization. Our campsite was surrounded by high cliffs on all sides, and the skies were overcast much of the night as predicted, but we felt we had beaten the odds when there was no rain.

The fourth day out turned out to be our last day of actual paddling mostly by happenstance. We had intended to have two short days before our pickup by the jet boat, but lack of suitable camping areas and safe landing sites

at the river's edge pushed us further down the Green River and then about a mile past the confluence with the Colorado for a seventeen mile day. The wind had come up early in the day and was strong, blowing sometimes at our backs but more often in our faces. The water was choppy much of the time. When we reached the confluence, the wind picked up and the waves grew to a foot and a half, though they seemed more like three feet to me. Time to pay attention!

I felt fortunate to have had conditions change gradually over the previous few days giving me time to adapt and learn. The most treacherous part for me was the ferry across the Colorado to reach a camp for the night on the other side. We also had to paddle upstream almost a half mile on the far side. The wind now at our backs helped us move along, but paddling and even surfing with the waves was yet another first time experience. This was quite enough novelty for me in one day! After much searching, our party settled on a narrow landing with room for just two boats at a time. This was a two foot wide shelf dropping off to deep water and a ten foot high sandy slope up to safe ground. Dick and Larry off-loaded their cargo first bag-by-bag and carried their kayaks up the slope while Frank and I waited just upstream telling stories and awaiting our turn. It took a good 45 minutes to get all four of us safely off the water.

Our last night out was stormy with strong winds and rain. I, of course, chose to set up camp on the nice but exposed spot overlooking the river and, consequently, a prime location to experience the full force of nature. I don't know how strong the wind gusts were that night, but they were indeed a test of endurance and equipment. About 2:30am the storm finally died down, and I fell asleep dreaming of home and a soft, comfortable and safe bed.

I didn't realize that the jet boat ride to Moab which I still had to endure would be very cold and, at times, wet. Following the suggestion of Tex's jetboat team to wear pretty much all the clothes in my possession helped considerably, but it was still cold! This made the last leg back to Moab in a heated bus very pleasant and another memorable experience.



Loading up for the jet boat ride back to Moab

Summing it all up, it was a trip I will not soon forget. Whether I take up kayak camping as an avocation is still undecided, but kayaking is something I will continue to enjoy at every opportunity.

This Green River trip is one of splendid scenery at every turn. It is also a trip through a remote area without any access along the fifty plus mile route and weather challenges that can change unpredictably. I was very lucky to have serious and experienced companions to make it as safe as possible. It made enjoying the journey that much more pleasurable.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Read the next article, written by Ralph's brother, Larry, for more about this trip on the Green River, specifically the surprising and challenging difference in availability of campsites.



The Kline brothers, Larry and Ralph

YOU JUST NEVER KNOW

By Larry Kline

Sometimes a river never changes but sometimes it does. The Missouri Breaks in Montana is a case where it seldom changes. In the case of the Green River in late April 2010 this was NOT the case.

The previous year (April 2009) Frank Bering and I had noted our campsites, and many more potential sites, on the river flip chart, and were expecting them to be the same. Why not? The Green has a reputation as a gentle river much used by first-time canoeists and this section is named Stillwater Canyon. Yet, here is how it panned out this year:

On Day One we paddled right by our first camp of last year seeing nary a trace of it, although the river was flowing much lower. The entrance had been a narrow passage thru the tamarisk with a large sandbar in front of it.

This year we did find a spot just 0.3 miles downstream but its landing was evident only upon close review. The lesson begins: Things are changing.

Day Two and Day Three went as last year's experience and the river's reputation suggested, but Day Four was not even close!

Our plan for the fourth day was to camp at the mouth of Water Canyon just four miles upstream of the Confluence with the Colorado. We would use last year's campsite some 0.3 miles downstream on a sandbar backed by a long cliff face as our backup campsite. What we found this year was that Water Canyon was totally unsuitable for a kayak landing due to fast sweeping currents, nasty swirling 20 mph winds off the canyon walls, and high banks.



Dick Dieckman in the Confluence

So we headed downriver for our backup sandbar, only to find it was completely gone. Only the sheer rock wall was left. Some 100 to 200 yards of sand and tamarisk had been carried away in the prior 12 months. We continued on down past two lousy sites, one with the aroma from a dead cow carcass wafting in the stiff breeze. So now it was on to the Confluence itself and the really tumultuous waves and wind we weren't expecting. In fact, I had remembered it as a huge calm lake from the year before.

Not this time. We soon encountered 30 mph winds coming upstream against a 3 mph stream flow which generated 1.5 foot waves across the river. It was

sometimes a struggle to just hold onto our paddles! Just a few yards on each side the waves did cease but the wind continued unabated. On our right was a canoe tied to an exposed root on a 15 foot eroded bank. No occupants were in sight but we later learned they were a young couple who had put in with us at Mineral Bottom. They rode the jet-boat out with us the next day.

Thus began our **SERIOUS** efforts to find a landing and campsite for the night since we were running out of river before the Class III - IV rapids of Cataract Canyon just two miles downstream. And once again our expectations were dashed. The year before we had used a gently sloped sandbar backed by a wide opening in the tamarisk as our pickup point for the jet boat ride back to Moab, some 50 miles upstream on the Colorado. This pickup point was about one mile downstream of the Confluence and across the river on our left. As we searched for it we did finally see what remained—a highly eroded sand bar (two to three feet) with no chance of serving as a landing zone much less a camp site.

As we looked for a camp site down from our prior pickup point, for one brief moment my fully loaded kayak surfed going *upstream* over smaller one-foot waves; it was the 30 mph tailwind that pushed the boat up onto the backs of the waves and then caused my boat and me to surf down the fronts.

One member of our group capsized trying to exit his boat on a slippery bank at waist height with a 10-foot drop off into the water on the other side of the boat. Being grouped together at that moment let us easily pull him from the water. No doubt his upper body fitness from weight lifting helped get him back in his boat.



Final campsite: a narrow ledge, ten feet up, but that's all there was

Yes, we did find a campsite, and later that night the wind really came in with a vengeance. The winds increased to, we estimated, about 50 mph from midnight to exactly, as my brother vividly remembers, 2:35 am. My tent was nestled deep in the tamarisk yet one gust jerked it up and pulled one of its stakes out of the ground. Ralph had wanted to camp on an open spot above the "tammies" for a "view of the river". That night he put into effect an emergency evacuation plan: his dry bags were packed in case the tent blew to shreds. It did blow in a foot or two as the gusts hit, but it held up. And then came a calm before a series of gentle showers in the pre-dawn morning. At 9 am or so the sun came out to dry us off but was then followed by a gentle shower of graupel, also called soft hail. We learned later it had actually snowed in Moab that night. You folks in Denver may remember this Thursday night as well. It blew like stink across the West and over the mountains and then rained mud carried from the windswept desert shrub-lands of eastern Arizona and Utah. Most of that mud came from erosion due to off-road vehicles, mountain bikes, oil and gas drilling, and overgrazing, but not over-kayaking!

OTHER NOTES: For many years now, my brother and I have spoken of getting together for an outdoor adventure. Finally we put it together on the Green River. Since it was on my "turf", I felt a great deal of responsibility for his safety. I was thankful he had taken kayaking classes at home in California before the trip. We squeezed in two hours of paddling in rain and high winds at Bear Creek Lake the day before we drove to Utah. In retrospect that was a good experience considering what we encountered at the Confluence. I am also thankful my brother is a quick learner—it must be his youth; he is four years younger than I. In addition, we were fortunate the weather deteriorated in a series of steps that got progressively worse. Had it occurred in reverse, anyone new to river kayaking might well have been overwhelmed. In our case, Ralph got his "boots wet" in a gradual process, kept his cool and did very well in what became extreme conditions.

Speaking of extreme, one item we did **NOT** discuss was how to swim ashore after a capsize, let alone in high winds with up to two foot waves and with miles of gigantic rapids not too far away. Such a scenario on the "gentle" Green never entered our minds. The folks now experiencing the Gulf oil spill probably wish someone had made plans for that most unlikely of events...something to consider as we go about our lives.