

Once, many years ago, I saw a documentary mourning the death of the San Juan behind the cork of Lake Powell, showing river runners floating to the Colorado confluence. The sound track featured a folk rendition of the "Old San Juan, the ghost of a wild old river."



After several kayak trips on the San Juan River to the Clay Hills takeout, where the San Juan dies into Powell reservoir, I wanted to return to this old haunt. Jane Lewis and I decided to see what is below the usual takeout, using sea kayaks. (In September of 2000 Paul Ekhart and I did a similar trip with the San Juan at 800 cfs, and the lake at 3679 feet. Then the river seemed to be diverted more to south, with no drops or waterfall and thick syrup-like mud until it met the clear water of the lake.)

THE PLAN: Jane and I would launch at Clay Hills [B]. We would paddle the San Juan Arm [C] to the Colorado Channel, then paddle the Escalante Arm [E], and finish at Halls Crossing [F], with trips up interesting side canyons and a bit of hiking, but mainly a more paddling-intensive trip. We'd be on the water a full eight days.

The Glen Canyon National Recreation Area (GCNRA) extends to the 3720' contour on the Navajo Reservation side of the San Juan Arm, or 20 feet above the maximum high water mark (HWM), so campable areas on that south side are also within the GCNRA.

An appeal of this trip is the short shuttle. On the way to the put-in we stashed and camouflaged an old mountain bike in a big tamarisk bush at the Highway 276 turnoff to Clay Hills [A] The truck was left at launch site twelve miles down Clay Hills Road 430 or Whirlwind Draw. After the trip, I hitched from Halls Crossing to the bike stash and rode to the truck. The National Parks and GCNRA prohibit hitching so it is best to ask for a ride at boat ramp/gas station/store; you should not be seen by a passing ranger with your thumb out.



Small drops over ledge rock

We put in on September 15 with the San Juan at 1700 cfs and the lake at ~3654 feet. There has been a sign at the San Juan normal takeout warning of a waterfall for many years, but it seems to come and go; there was nothing there but sludge in 2000. Good current flowed from the put-in. After noting a rock ridge on the right coming down to the river channel, we encountered several small Class 2 ledge drops, with rocks in the drops and no cleared channel as in the older rapids on the upper San Juan. The tami bushes are very dense through here, making portage more difficult at higher levels of flow. These drops would be fairly easy in plastic kayaks, given enough flow to create an open channel. One must have good river paddle skills to handle loaded kayaks through eddies, ferries and drops. With composite

boats, you should always carry some fresh resin and cloth, in case a fix is needed. Most of the drops could be portaged or lined depending on water levels.



Waterfall, portage on left!
GPS location: N37 15.181 W110 26.343

There is access by a double track that appears to follow below a line of cliffs, perhaps from the old Piute Farms Marina access. A group of Navajos arrived by truck to fish as we were breaking camp. Despite several days of rain, their trucks did not look too muddy.

After the waterfall there was a slight current toward a narrowing of the canyon, where a blockage of logs, wood, trash, and clay/mud/soil has collected. It was very difficult to push through this mass of

Finally, there was the unmistakable sound of a waterfall and chocolate-colored mist rising. Nope—not some new drink at Starbuck's. There is a pullout on river left, on the rock ledge across the river which creates the waterfall, and also a portage trail down to a whirlpool and sandbar beyond, where a camp spot is located. The waterfall is ~20 feet with a reversal/keeper below and what appears to be rock debris in the reversal; it's ugly from the view on the left at the scout/portage. With the sediment load here, the power of a keeper would be magnified.



Waterfall drop over ledge with portage on river left



Sandbar camp below drop

debris with dried soil on top, even with narrow sea kayaks. Water under the pileup is several feet deep. Each kayak stroke gained maybe 12 inches; it's a good place to pull out that old heavy duty spare paddle.

So much for the approach, and on to the good part. After the first mud/waterfall stretch the San Juan Arm becomes clear. This area is a long way in terms of fuel from the marinas, so not many boats travel this far, compared to the main Colorado channel; it is pretty deserted until below Great Bend [D]. In three days we didn't see any houseboats,

loud speed boats, or jet skis, and just a few small fishing boats. Campable spots are open; it is remarkably quiet. There are also many birds. Fish seemed to be abundant, and I regretted not getting a Utah license to have some tasty fish to fillet for dinner. Trolling would be easy.

There is plenty of driftwood on the beaches for fires in the San Juan Arm. Castle Canyon, for example, has a good landing, a clear stream, hiking, and a nice campable area.



Camp spot in a cove



Beach at Castle Canyon

One should camp higher above the main washout from canyons, in case of flash floods. There is NOAA weather radio working throughout most parts of the lake for weather updates. Occasionally, cell phones pick up reception.

The best drinking water can be found from seep/springs between sandstone layers, as marked by vegetation and dark water lines. Other water was taken from clear spring-fed streams in short side canyons, often with dryfalls at the head. Water was filtered with an MSR bag filter, which worked really well, using MSR Dromedary or Platypus bags. The output bag can be filled a bit over full, then pop out the filter hose from the input bag and drop it down hill, putting pressure on the output bag to backflush the filter.

(The same filter element has been used for over three months, trekking in the Bolivian Andes and Colorado, with no plugging. The filter was invaluable on a self-supported mountain bike trip home from Wyoming to Salida on Forest Service trails, after the RMSKC Flaming Gorge trip. The secret seems to be to collect settled water, and not



Spring seep between sandstone layers

start running the filter until the bag has hung a while to allow sediments to settle into the tapered area below the intake screen. MSR has a good design, with this elevated intake. These filters cannot be exposed to freezing.)



Lots of uncrowded camps in the upper San Juan Arm

Looking back at the relative quiet on the San Juan Arm up-lake from Big Bend, it is worth spending plenty of time there, rather than paddling in the Colorado channel where you will see more houseboats and noisy watercraft. We never saw a houseboat until almost to Wilson Creek.



Zane Gray Arch
in Explorer Canyon of the Escalante Arm



Petroglyphs in Explorer Canyon

The Escalante canyons are worthwhile for camping and hiking, but are more visited by houseboats, powerboats, and jet skis, with fewer open beaches for camping.

RESOURCES FOR MORE INFORMATION:

The area map on the first page is located at: <http://www.nps.gov/glca/planyourvisit/upload/mapglencanyonra.pdf>

Michael Kelsey has hiked most of these canyons and written a book about approaching them from the lake, *Boater's Guide to Lake Powell*. He created many maps with geological profiles; it's an excellent reference. Of course, much can change with varying lake levels; camp locations can totally disappear, leaving only vertical Wingate sandstone walls.

The Fish-n-Map company makes good maps of the lake with depth contours. One can also use Google Earth to scan the lake edge for campsites, by comparing the date of the images and the water level at that time with the current water level.

The lake or buoy miles given on maps are from the original river channel, but going point-to-point will shorten a transit considerably. Think about visibility and listen at sharp turns of the channel. A GPS can be useful for locating a heading across large open bays.

I have some GPX files and map notes of campable beaches at levels seen on this trip to share if you are interested. You can email me at: jaymtb@amigo.net

FINAL NOTES FROM THE AUTHOR:

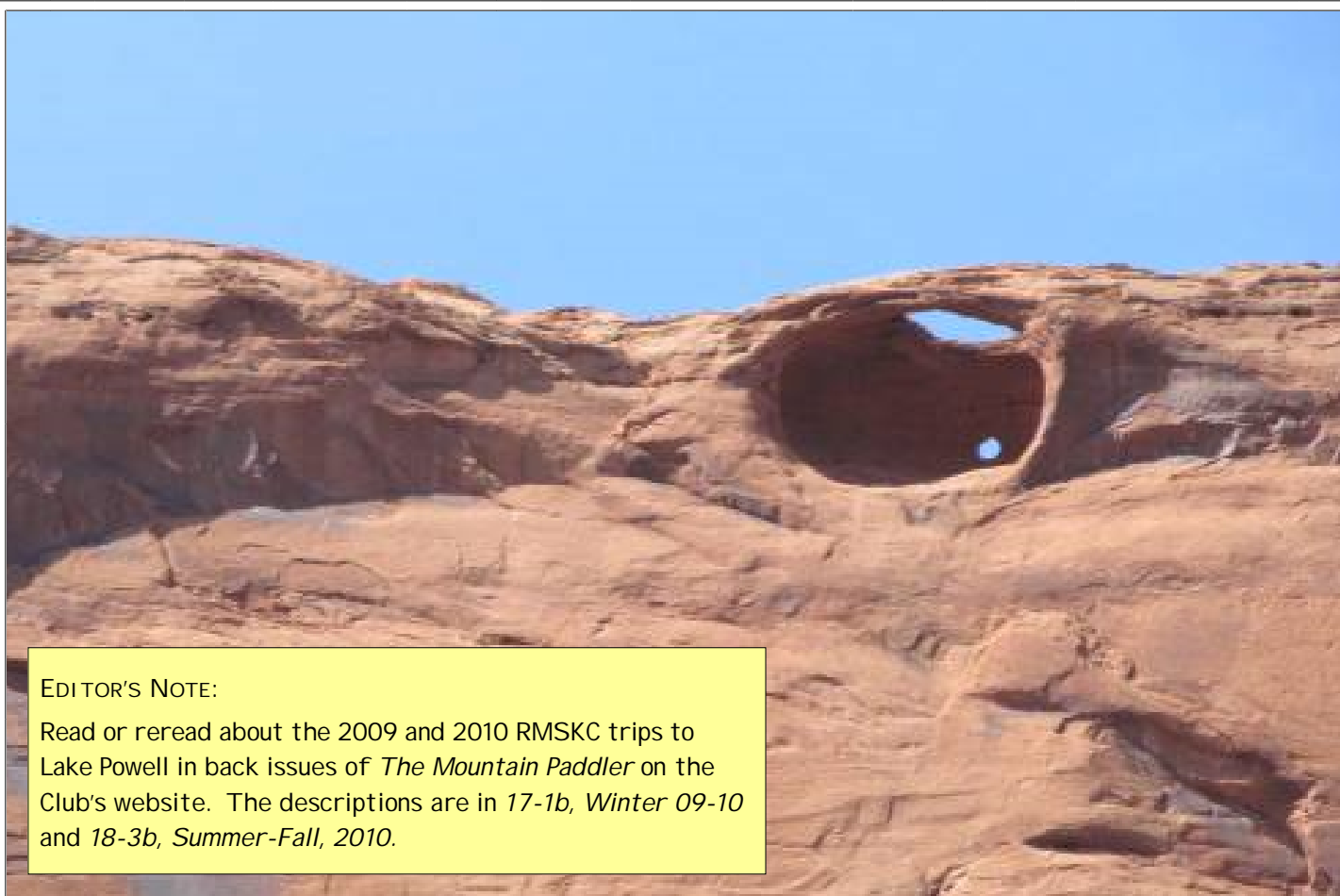
In September the water temperatures are quite warm and inviting for swimming, while spring temperatures in June can be chilly. Take into account there is a 4-day weekend in early October when Utah schools shut down, bringing a pulse of people to the lake.



A groover or WagBag is required for all boaters. There are pumpout/dump sinks at the Escalante Arm intersection.

To avoid the waterfall and small drops, a shuttle or drop-off from Piute Farms Wash could be arranged, but the shuttle distance would be long, compared to the twelve miles of dirt road and a section of Highway 276 that we used.

SERIOUS CONSIDERATIONS: Lake Powell can have significant winds blowing over many miles of fetch which can combine with boat wakes to create large steep waves. In many places there are tall walls on both sides of the channel with no takeout available. You need good open water paddling and rescue skills and endurance, as well as a seaworthy boat. Your kayak deck should be clear of baggage which would be a liability in rough water and wind.



EDITOR'S NOTE:

Read or reread about the 2009 and 2010 RMSKC trips to Lake Powell in back issues of *The Mountain Paddler* on the Club's website. The descriptions are in 17-1b, *Winter 09-10* and 18-3b, *Summer-Fall, 2010*.