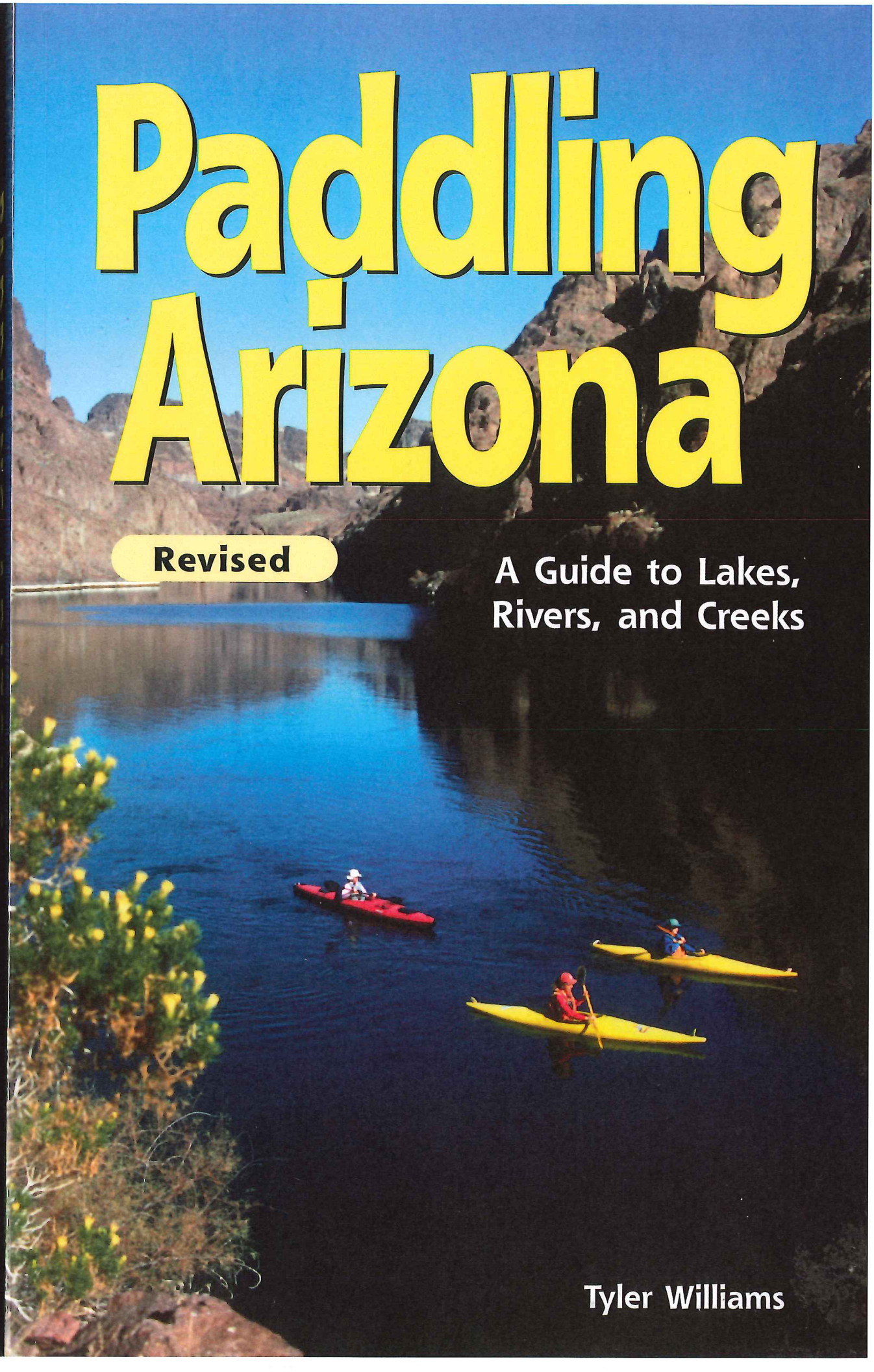
Paddling Arizona

Revised

A Guide to Lakes, Rivers, and Creeks



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PADDLING ARIZONA

A Guide to Lakes, Rivers, and Creeks

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Arizona Boating Seasons

For flatwater paddling, Arizona offers year-round opportunities. With the wide range of climates and environments found in the state, paddling excursions can be enjoyed any day of the year.

Summertime is the season to enjoy the high country lakes. Few settings are as peaceful as a glassy pond in the White Mountains on a cool August morning. As the day begins to warm, soft white thunderheads billow. By afternoon, it is time to scamper for shelter as those same beautiful clouds unleash furious storms.

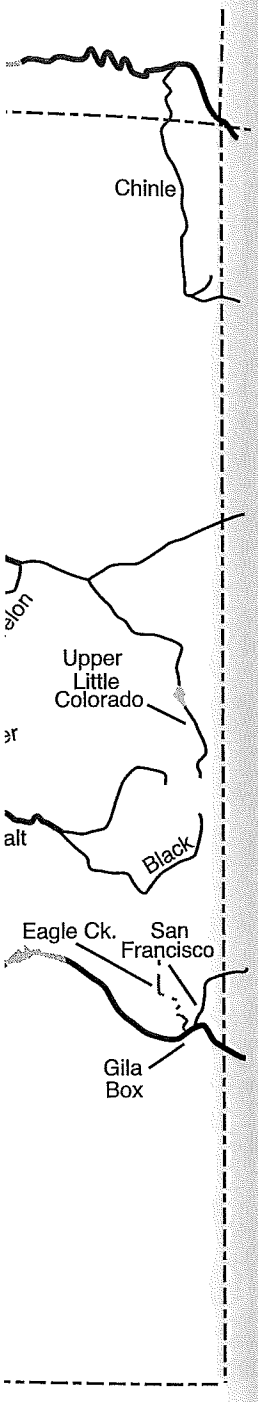
Low elevation desert waterways are certainly paddleable in the summer months, too. In fact, they are some of the few habitable places that exist in our summertime deserts. There are disadvantages to paddling the desert in summer, however. If you thought the thunderstorms of the mountains were fierce, you should see the speedboat crowds on a desert lake during a July weekend.

Autumn is a better time to explore desert waters. The crowds have thinned somewhat, and warm afternoon temperatures make life on the water pleasant. Migratory bird species begin to show up, and skies are often a cobalt blue. Mountain lakes are also excellent destinations throughout the fall. Evenings are brisk, however, and early snowfalls can force the closure of access roads.

Winter turns mountain paddling locales into wilderness skating rinks, but most locations below 5,000 feet remain ice-free. This is the time to find quiet on Arizona's desert waters. Afternoon temperatures are often in the 60s, with bright sunshine. Winter storms can bring periods of cold rain to the desert, but these rainy days also clean the atmosphere of pollutants, bringing post-storm crystalline freshness—glorious paddling weather.

Springtime bursts with desert wildflowers and warmer temperatures, prompting many of us to head for the outdoors. Beware of horrendously gusty winds during this time, however. As the spring storm track speeds by the state to the north, and the sun rapidly heats the Southwestern deserts, Arizona's windy season arrives. Open waters can become a nasty chop, turning a mellow afternoon paddle into an unwanted high-seas adventure. By the time the spring winds arrive, snow is melting in the high country and the forests are becoming green again, making way for another summer morning on a glassy mountain lake.

Arizona River Running Seasons



The river running season in Arizona is an elusive and erratic beast. In drier than normal years, there is no season at all. The Mogollon Rim forests gather only a meager winter snowpack, and the desert remains dusty throughout all seasons. In wet years, however, several feet of snow accumulates in the high country, and the low deserts become a verdant landscape of green grass and mossy springs. Arizona is a land of extremes, and only about a third of the time does this region experience a happy medium of precipitation.

Pacific storms can begin to move through Arizona as early as **October**. These autumn cold fronts sometimes combine with subtropical hurricane remnants, and the combination of weather systems can produce colossal rains, bringing rivers up throughout the state. **November** occasionally ushers in a series of storms producing both rain and snow, and thus high water. More often than not, however, fall is a time of blue skies, and it is not unusual for the Mogollon Rim to be snowless into **December**. This is the time when the Arizona snowpack really gets a chance to start accumulating, as short days and a low sun angle minimize evaporation and melting.

Mid-winter often produces the biggest floods in Arizona. These events result from low pressure systems which draw copious subtropical moisture up from the south. When the resulting heavy rain falls on an established snowpack, big water results.

February is the month when Arizona paddlers start to pay attention. The Sonoran Desert is often sufficiently saturated by this point in the winter to produce runnable streamflows with each passing storm. At higher elevations, February is a crucial period. Warm sunny weather at this time can result in a dreaded "trickle off," in which the runoff begins too early, bringing rivers up slightly, but not high enough for good paddling. If February is cold and snowy, however, things are setting up perfectly for a good **March**—the time of year when Arizona streams are most likely to be running.

Spring often arrives quickly at this latitude, with a few days of high atmospheric pressure bringing mountain temperatures into the 50s or 60s, resulting in a rapidly melting snowpack. These warm spells are sometimes followed by big snowstorms that can extend the paddling season into April. If unsettled weather persists, **April** can be a prime paddling time in Arizona, but things are drying out fast. The only river in Arizona likely to running by **May** is the Salt, which drains the 11,000-foot-high White Mountains. The Salt can continue with elevated flows into **June**, but this is rare. The entire state is usually dry and hot by summer solstice.

But wait, **July** means the monsoon season is arriving, and hope is rekindled in the Arizona paddler's psyche. As subtropical moisture invades

from the south, heavy thunderstorms often result, producing brief periods of high water. "Brief" is the operative word here. Paddlers might consider using weather radar to predict runnable flows during monsoon season, as rivers are often already dropping when "real-time" flow data is available over the internet. The monsoon comes in a random cycle defined by bursts and breaks. During a burst, clouds, humidity, and widespread rain are dominant, making Arizona feel like an exotic tropical paddling destination. Before planning an **August** paddling safari for Arizona, however, remember that monsoon thunderstorms are usually scattered, and it takes a significant downpour to generate runoff. Whitewater junkies are well-advised to stay in British Columbia during late summer. The monsoon retreats to Mexico by mid-**September** most years, and it is time again to pray for next winter's storms.

Arizona Hydrology

Paddling rivers in Arizona requires close attention to the weather, and a commitment to be ready to put in at a moment's notice. The reason for this mandatory fireman-like readiness? Water fluctuation.

Arizona has the most dynamic hydrology in the United States. Arizona rivers that normally carry a measly base flow of 200 cfs can spike to over 100,000 cfs, and normally dry riverbeds can suddenly flood at 50,000 cfs or more. These high water events rarely last long, however. A river in the eastern United States, for example, might rise to a peak level and gradually return to a base flow over the course of a few days, whereas an Arizona river can peak and fall over the course of a few hours.

Even when Arizona streams are running from snowmelt (rather than rainfall), the daily fluctuation between the afternoon melt and the nighttime freeze is greater than in other regions. It is not unusual for a snowmelt-fed Arizona creek to fluctuate from a morning low of 300 cfs to an evening high of 1,000 cfs, thus changing the stream's character dramatically over the course of a single day. "Riding the wave" of runoff is more than just a theoretical euphemism in Arizona. It is the truth. So get your boat loaded and ready, it's time to go boatin'!

Before gluing yourself to the internet flow page waiting for that magical river level, perhaps we should discuss Arizona hydrology as it relates to paddling.

One important factor in Arizona streamflow is the snow level. As you might have guessed, the snow level is the elevation above which precipitation falls as snow, and below which precipitation falls as rain. Snow levels usually drop over the course of a storm, falling with the passage of the associated cold front. A very cold storm in Arizona will have a snow level of 4,000 feet or less. In these instances, paddlers should not expect exceptionally high water, as the precipitation on river headwaters will be frozen

into the form of snow. A warm winter storm will bring snow levels of 8,000 feet or higher. Assuming there is some snowpack on the ground, a storm of this nature spells flood.

The ideal snow levels for Arizona paddlers are 6,000 to 6,500 feet. Environments below these elevations are too warm to maintain a snowpack, so any snow that falls at these low elevations is quickly lost to evaporation and low intensity runoff. When the snow level is over 6,500 feet, only the highest headwaters gain a snowpack. Drainage basins between 6,000 and 6,500 feet that might otherwise collect snow are quickly flooded away by rainfall, and a potentially long spring season is replaced with a short-lived winter flood.

Soil and rock substrates also affect streamflows. Unfortunately, Arizona's highest mountains (the 12,000-foot-high San Francisco Peaks) are made of porous cinders, and very little surface runoff is gained from these sometimes snowy mountains. The nearby western Mogollon Plateau is slightly better for producing runoff. But this too is a porous crack-filled geologic landscape of basalt and limestone. On the other end of the substrate spectrum are the slickrock deserts of Northeastern Arizona. Here much of the land is solid rock, and most of the moisture that falls runs off immediately. Central Arizona's granitic soils are perhaps the best for producing runoff yet also slowly releasing water in the form of springs and seeps.

Of course all of this information is disseminated by the professionals at the National Weather Service and the United States Geological Survey, and much of that information is readily available to the public.

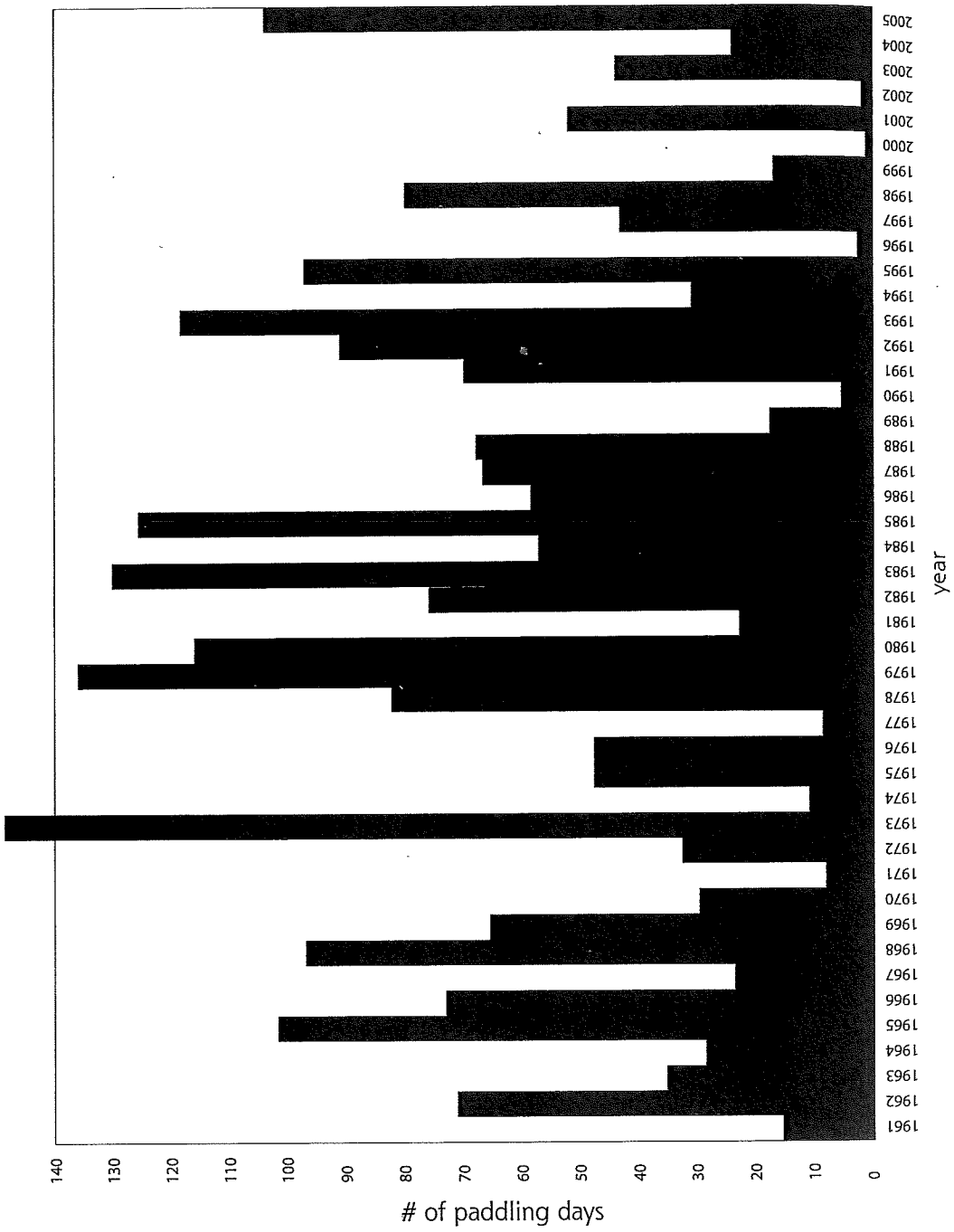
Water Year Graph

As indicated in the previous summary of Arizona boating seasons, mid-February to mid-April is generally the paddling season in Arizona. However, flows are erratic, and can occur at any time of year. Additionally, different streams run at different times. Therefore, a formula was devised to produce the following graph, which depicts the length of a given paddling season over the past 40+ water years (Water years begin October 1st, and end September 30th.).

Using hydrologic records, I selected four geographically varied creeks (Santa Maria, Oak, Tonto, Chevelon), and counted the number of days per year each stream was high enough to paddle. I also counted the number of days per year the Salt River was over 500 cfs (roughly a minimum rafting level), as well as the number of days it was over 1,000 cfs (a "good" level). In order for a particular date to be counted as a "season day," two or more creeks had to be running. Days in which only one of the selected creeks was running counted as half a season day. When no creeks were running, but the Salt was over 1,000 cfs, I recorded one third of a season day. If no creeks were running, and the Salt was only over 500 cfs, I

recorded one fourth of a season day.

If you follow any of this, your mind is as convoluted as mine, and I suggest you seek professional help. For the rest of you who stopped reading at the top of the page, here is the gist of it: The below graph roughly represents the length of whitewater paddling seasons in Arizona over the past four decades.



precautions.

Surfing the Web and the Waves

National Streamflows: http://waterdata.usgs.gov/usa/nwis/rt
Arizona Streamflows: http://waterdata.usgs.gov/az/nwis/rt
Colorado Basin River Forecast Center: http://www.cbrfc.noaa.gov/

It is hard to believe that there was desert paddling before the internet, but there was. These were the days when paddlers had to employ the telephone ("How hard is it raining there? Is the creek clear or brown?"), their own hydrologic knowledge, and intuition. I remember when the first internet real-time flow data was introduced to me. It seemed too good to be true. The availability of internet-provided flow information has certainly increased the feasibility of paddling in Arizona, and aided in the exploration of new rivers here. The drive to explore, however, is as old as mankind, and Arizona rivers have seen adventurers since long before "internet" was even a word.

Arizona River Running History

It is likely that river running in Arizona began as soon as humans inhabited the Southwest. Although river travel was not integral to ancient Arizona cultures, the Mogollon, Sinagua, and Salado people probably used simple boats on rivers in the area.

Documented river runs of the first Europeans in Arizona are elusive, although there are vague reports of mountain men floating through the countryside on occasion. River running, however, was never a major source of exploration here. That all changed in 1869.

That is the year John Wesley Powell and his crew ran the Colorado River through Grand Canyon. With their trip, they filled a great blank on the maps of the day, and set a standard for river exploration that can never be equaled. The Powell party traveled mostly unknown territory, negotiating class IV and even V whitewater en-route. Their run through Grand Canyon remains the greatest first descent of all time, and it took place right here in Arizona.

Except for subsequent river trips on the Colorado, nearly a century went by before river running got a solid stroke in on other Arizona rivers.

The Salt River began seeing descents in the 1950s, with the Theodore Roosevelt Council of Boy Scouts generally recognized as the first to run the river. Pete Weinel of the Tonto National Forest, and Dr. John Ricker were the leading authorities on the Salt throughout the 60s, running the river in rafts at a multitude of water levels.

In the 1970s and early 80s, several factors coalesced, creating ripe con-

ditions for river exploration. Environmental awareness was on the increase, plastic kayaks burst onto the scene replacing the fragile fiberglass of old, and the weather cooperated, providing nearly a decade of consistently wet winters from 1978 to 1985. It was the golden age of paddling in Arizona.

A center of paddling activity during the period was Prescott College, an alternative institution that drew adventurers to Arizona from across the country. One of these adventurers was Brad Dimock.

Dimock bought a kayak directly from the father of plastic kayak manufacturing—Hollowform inventor Tom Johnson. The year was 1973. The boat cost $129.95. Dimock learned slalom technique from nationally renowned racer Chuck Stanley, then returned to Arizona and found himself part of a gang of enthusiastic dirt-bag river-guide paddlers who were always up for hair-brained adventures.

Dimock and his cohorts made several notable Arizona first descents including Chinle Creek, Chevelon Canyon, the Paria River, and most significantly, the Little Colorado River Gorge. Dimock reflects, "Throughout all the adventures there were several things that never changed. The equipment was minimal, the vehicles marginal, the food adequate at best."

In 1979, two of Dimock's paddling partners, Wayne Van Voorhies and Kim Reynolds, took whitewater exploration up a notch with their descent of the Agua Fria River. The duo launched in Dewey, Arizona, and emerged at the I-17 in Black Canyon City three days later.

Other adventuresome boaters were knocking off the obvious runs by the early eighties. Joe Sharber and Jeff Bowman were probably the first to paddle Oak Creek on a cold snowy day in March, 1981. In eastern Arizona, the Metzger brothers, Kirk and Kris, were exploring the upper Little Colorado and upper Black Rivers, while paddler Steve Williams was pioneering upper Salt River tributaries.

During the late winter of 1983, a large group set off on the unknown East Verde. After two days of occasional wipeouts and frozen fingers, the majority of the party took out at Doll Baby Ranch to go catch a Joni Mitchell concert. Glenn Rink decided to stay with the river, and pressed on by himself. He became the first to run the entire East Verde, and probably the last to run it solo.

This bold and independent approach to river running exhibited by Rink was also a trademark of Dugald Bremner—perhaps Arizona's most renowned paddler. Another Prescott College product, Bremner was a natural paddler, and had a thirst for adventure. Always one to keep quiet about his latest backcountry haunt, it is difficult to ascertain what exactly Bremner ran, or when. It is likely, however, that he was the first to run lower West Clear Creek, lower Tonto Creek, upper Oak Creek, and the Salt River's Flying V Gorge, all between 1979 and 1985. Dugald was still investigating new runs over a decade later as he and Allen Haden went steep creeking on Pumphouse Wash and Rattlesnake Canyon. Dugald and I pushed our

limits on a first descent of Munds Canyon in 1997. Tragically, Dugald drowned on California's Silver Fork of the American less than two months after our Munds descent. If he were he still with us, Dugald would surely still be at the forefront of Arizona river exploration today.

Like the early '80s, the early 1990s brought a series of wet winters, and Arizona paddling continued to grow. Eagle Creek was paddled by Van Voorhies, Rink, and Bryan Brown in 1992. The off–limits Cibecue Creek is rumored to have been run by Brown and a Colorado contingent the following year. Also in 1993, Pat Phillips and Eric Seifer made the first push into Sycamore Creek's Butterfly Canyon, and lower Sycamore Creek was run by a group of Phoenix-area paddlers led by Jim McComb and Rob Reiterman. Four years later, McComb and Reiterman notched the most significant new Arizona run in over a decade with their descent of Tonto Creek's Hellsgate Canyon.

Well-timed spring storms produced an exceptional paddling season in 1998, presenting the opportunity for paddling on several new runs including Burro Creek, the Santa Maria River, upper West Clear Creek, and Woods Canyon. Prolonged drought suppressed river exploration for the next several years, but the wet winter of 2004-2005 again saw paddlers searching out new runs. McComb pushed farther upstream on Tonto Creek, leading a group down the headwaters above Hellsgate. Aaron Riding initiated the first runs of Black Canyon north of Phoenix, Fossil Creek was run on high water just prior to its base flow being restored, and a trio of Colorado paddlers (Evan Stafford, Todd Gillman, and Kyle McCutchen) completed the waterfall-riddled Christopher Creek Gorge. In recent years, Cody Howard has furthered Arizona paddling potential by exploring several low volume high gradient streambeds, including the Salome Creek Jug gorge, upper Salome Creek, Queen Creek above Superior, and his most significant descent, Poland Creek. Turkey Creek in the Bradshaw Mountains also saw its first descent in 2008. In that same year, Butterfly Canyon on Sycamore Creek finally saw a complete descent.

Despite its storied past, Arizona river exploration remains an ongoing quest. As this book goes to press, a few major whitewater streams in Arizona remain unrun, not to mention the many less obvious paddling destinations that magically spring forth with every good storm cycle. May your shuttle road be intact and the water level hold as the next ribbon of flowing water looms on the horizon!

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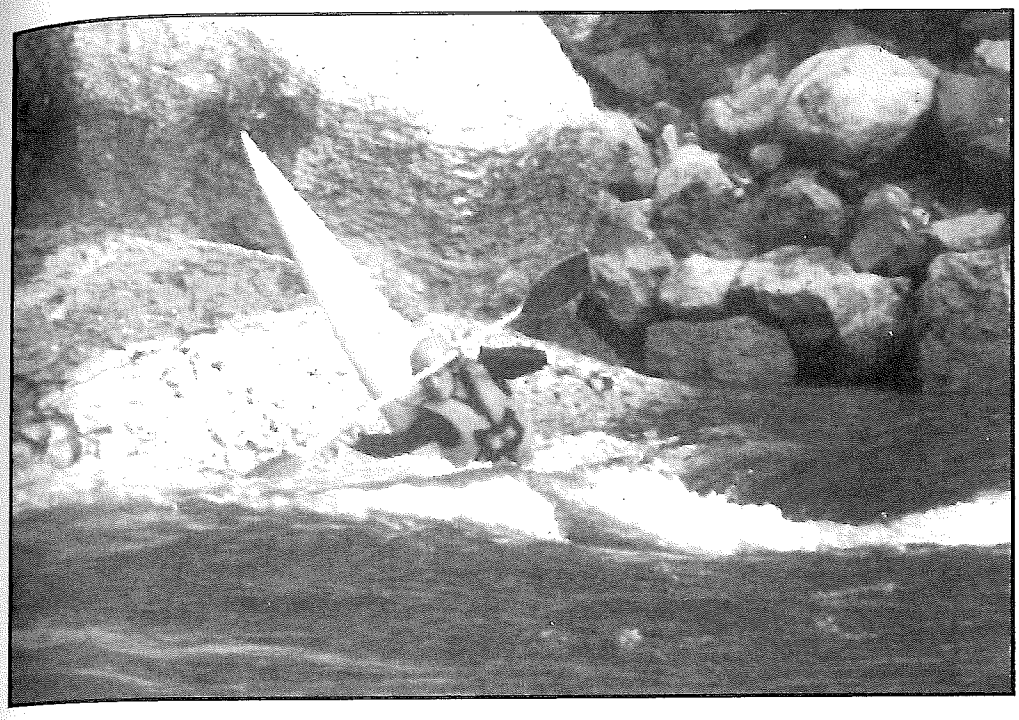
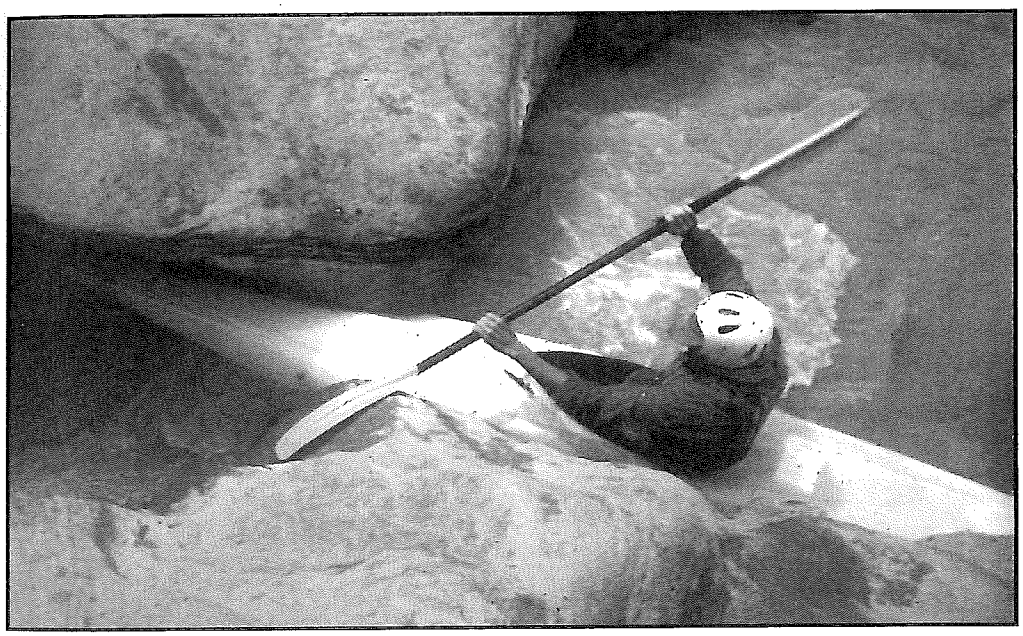


Brad Dimock collection

Back when throwing ends meant something...



Brad Dimock collection

...and creek boating was yet a developing realm