

# Up a creek, with a paddle: Desert kayakers chase the water



Ron Dungan, The Republic | azcentral.com 10:17 a.m. MST April 29, 2016



(Photo: Evan Stafford)

It can be hard to find good places to kayak in Phoenix. Cody Howard and his pals have done their best. They've slid their boats off tile roofs into swimming pools. They've paddled in irrigation canals, at night. They've jumped wakes and done stunts on Bartlett Lake, a speedboat dragging them along.

"We did whatever we could to get on the water," Howard said.

Howard and his pals are among a handful of creek boaters who live in Arizona, kayakers who chase the water in a place where water hides. Howard has been all over the world to pursue his passion. He has dodged rattlesnakes along a stream in California and stumbled into an illegal pot farm on the same river just

two weeks later.

He loves the challenge of finding water in the desert. He and the other creek boaters load their kayaks, look for flash floods that may only last a few hours. They can spend whole afternoons driving around, looking for high water, only to turn back home without even getting a boat wet.

"I've spent summers chasing monsoons, only to never kayak," he said. "Some find it hard to believe there's even kayaking in Arizona."

Howard grew up in the desert, in a land of canyons, and he knows that some days, when the clouds stack up and the sky darkens and the rain falls, Arizona offers up big rapids down polished granite, a chance to be the first person to run a creek.

He watches weather reports, pores over topographical maps, follows stream flow reports and keeps in touch with friends. Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't.

When it does work out, it's special. The water flows, the kayak racing past prickly pear and saguaro cactus, and "the desert just comes alive," Howard said.

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## 'Lost more buddies to kayaking than I did in the war'

Definitions of creek boating, also known as steep creeking, or creeking, vary, but it generally involves launching a kayak down a high-running creek, a steep section of river. Elite creek boaters look for Class 5 or Class 6 rapids, waterfalls, deep cauldrons. They plunge over drop-offs down 20 feet of water. Thirty. Forty. More. They ping-pong off stony chutes, down unknown chasms and nameless runs where logs and undercuts lie waiting and the whitewater runs brown.

Howard didn't do much kayaking after the terrorist attacks of 9/11. He joined the Marines and was based in California, where he kept a boat under his bed at the barracks. He paddled the ocean and a local river a few times, but that was about it. When his unit deployed to Fallujah, Iraq, in 2004, he operated an amphibious assault vehicle and kayaking was put on hold even longer.

## Story Chapters

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After leaving the service, Howard combined his love of filmmaking and creek boating, posting his adventures online through Huckin Huge Films. He calls them missions. The films show the deep drops and jumps that make the sport so exciting, but it also shows the crews scouting ahead, waiting things out when high water makes a run too risky.

"It's super dangerous," Howard said. Flotsam and back eddies, hidden rocks and caves add a layer of risk. Safety is critical. [Fullscreen](#)

"Sometimes the waterfall itself won't necessarily be the most dangerous part of the river," Howard said. "Cody Howard takes kayaking to extremes" is not like getting hurt in other sports. Broken backs are common. Arms and elbows and collarbones are common. No injury timeouts, no doctors on hand and it may be hours to the nearest hospital.

"Now you've got to deal with being swept downstream with a broken collarbone," Howard said. His mentor, Jim McComb, died a few years ago in a kayaking accident on the East Verde River. Cody Howard of Scottsdale kayaks the Upper North Fork of the Kaweah River during a first descent of the river on the Sierra Nevada Mountains in California in June 2010. Kevin Smith

"He probably mentored more Arizona kayakers than anyone else," said Tyler Williams, author of "Paddling Arizona."

"He was like, the original Google Earth," Howard said. "He was the perfect mentor."

Williams, who learned to kayak in Idaho, started creek boating when he moved to Arizona and began exploring small creeks for their boating potential. This led him to take up canyoneering, another niche sport. Canyoneers walk, scramble, rappel or swim through canyons, skills that can come in handy during a creek boating adventure.

"You hike it ahead of time and figure out whether it's escapable or not," Williams said. The rocks look daunting on those walks, but water helps smooth them out. He looks for details. Some places may be too dangerous to run but the boats can be portaged — carried around the rapid until it is safe to paddle. Some places there's nowhere to portage but the kayakers can paddle. Mostly, he's looking for a way out. Not a climb or a scramble, someplace where he can carry a boat.

"As long as there's a place to get out with your boat, you're good to go," he said. "That's the puzzle."

McComb's death has made Howard more reflective about the dangers of creek boating. A brutal work schedule and a pectoral injury have kept him off the water until recently. He plans to ease back into the sport, and talks about respecting the river, the consequences of not doing so.

"I've lost more buddies to kayaking than I did in the war," he said.

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## Danger, both in and out of the water

One mission took Howard and his friends to a river in California. It was a first descent, which Howard said he likes because "I'd rather have a fresh, raw experience."

They bushwhacked to the water and saw their first rattlesnake. The river spilled high and white into granite potholes and drop-offs. They ran about a mile of falls and slides and portaged a section of big water, shouldering their kayaks past one rattlesnake after another.

"The whole thing was just this rattlesnake den," he said. "We're just flipping them with our paddles." They finished the portage and got back in the water, ran some rapids in the bedrock and camped out. They paddled the next day, again struggling with high water, portaging and rappelling and staying off the river too often for their liking. They wanted another shot.

Two weeks later he returned with a friend for another run of the same river. They got in the boats and paddled awhile, running some Class 5 water in the near dark, Howard wrote in a blog post on the adventure. They got out of the boats to find a place to camp when Howard's paddling partner, on leave from Iraq, told him to freeze. His foot was inches from a "deadfall pit," and a quick look around told them they had stumbled on a booby trapped camp, with tripwires and holes covered with blankets and leaves and who knew what underneath. The surrounding forest was known for marijuana grows.

"There were socks drying up on the trees," Howard said. There was an AK-47, and a poncho hanging on a line. They got back in the boats, ran a big waterfall as it was getting dark. They were in a tight canyon, an arboretum of oak, pine, poison oak, which made it tough to find a place to camp.

"We went well into the night," Howard said. "It got dark at 9:30 and we were in camp around 11."

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## Creek boating: Kayaking experience necessary

Creek boating is not for beginning kayakers. Learning an Eskimo roll is mandatory. Learning to paddle in Class 2, 3, 4 or 5 water is important. (Class 2s are easy, higher classes are more difficult and Class 5s are for experts.) Rappelling skills come in handy, but also, learning to read water, topo maps, a rating system that was created before creek boating existed and Class 6 rapids were considered unrunnable.

Flows vary, terrain matters and elevation drop is critical. Williams said that the Grand Canyon and Oak Creek can have comparable ratings on a given day. The Canyon pushes a lot of water with flows usually around 10,000 or 20,000 cubic feet per second. Oak Creek flows about about 300-500 cfs after a good storm, but it loses 100 feet of elevation in a mile. Context is important. Creek boaters research drainages, monitor the weather, consult Google Earth and talk to each other often.

"On a day when you think there's going to be water you check the internet every hour," Williams said. Even in the Sierra Nevadas in California, which has world-class kayaking water, timing is everything, and "certain runs have a window of a week," Williams said.

In Arizona, certain runs may open for a day or two. An hour.

"Everything happens at once, kind of," Williams said.

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## Chasing those elusive unicorns

In January, after three days of heavy rains and high-country snow, Howard and a group of his friends ditched work in search of water in a dry creek near [Cleator \(/story/life/az-narratives/2014/03/21/david-rhodes-cleator-life-arizona-ghost-town/6711953/\)](#). The creek, normally dry, flowed through classic Sonoran Desert terrain, with saguaro cactus and prickly pear. They met on the north end of Phoenix and raced up Interstate 17 in the morning.

"Kayaking and creek boating in Arizona's a super special thing," Howard said.

"You could be out of water in 12 hours," he said, and so timing is everything. "We pull the trigger on some of these runs the night before."

The rain had started on a Monday and kept coming Tuesday and Wednesday. That evening his cellphone was lighting up. He kept checking the computer, consulting websites that track the flows of various drainages throughout the state. A decision would be made at midnight, or 1 a.m. They would meet at 7.

At 5:30 a.m. Howard was awake and answering a message on his phone. The weather did not hold. The water froze, and everything dropped overnight. The whole trip was on standby but the rain kept coming. He went to work — when he answered the phone in the afternoon, he was carrying a load of two-by-fours — but he kept an eye on several drainages that day. Sycamore Creek. Christopher Creek. The Verde River.

The following morning, he met Jeff Merten and Nate Bushnell at a gas station and they started up I-17 and turned west, into the Bradshaw Mountains. They set up a shuttle and bounced up the road to the put-in point and when they got there the creek was dry.

"Chasing unicorns," they muttered. Howard said he had just gotten a text from some creek boating pals up by Payson who got stuck in the snow and needed to call a tow truck.

Things aren't nearly as cold in the desert, so Howard and his crew decide to put their boats in the Verde, just up the road. It wasn't the creek boating adventure they hoped for, but at least they could get paddles in the water. Long-term forecasts predicted an El Niño winter, with a lot of rain and snow, and the boaters talked confidently at a gas station in Camp Verde about the weeks and months to come. Clouds swirled and the river ran high and muddy. They didn't get off the water until that evening.

"The next day we went out to Tonto Creek," Howard said. "I've never seen more kayakers at a put-in than I did that day."

It looked like a promising season. Storms brought a flurry of phone calls and optimism to the kayaking community, which is still small, but growing. Most serious kayakers who wind up here leave, Howard said.

"They followed a girlfriend or a job here," he said, and when those things run their course, they move on.

Just like that, El Niño tail-spun into the desert and the arid thornscrub beyond, the creek beds dried up and snow melted in the high country.

"It was a bummer that it never really panned out this year," Howard said.

By mid-April, he was talking about California, where the flows are steady and the window is open longer.

"I've got a lot of buddies in Southern California that are jonesin,'" he said.

Williams said that Arizona is slowly getting some recognition in the creek boating community, in part because of Howard, whose website, Huckin Huge (<http://www.huckinhuge.com/>), gives it a high profile, in part because the water here may be runnable when other places are snowed in.

"It's still just a magical thing, when there's water in Arizona," Williams said. He talks of exotic landscapes, where you see saguaros and pines on the same day, "and you've got a river to run. It's as cool as any place I've ever been."

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