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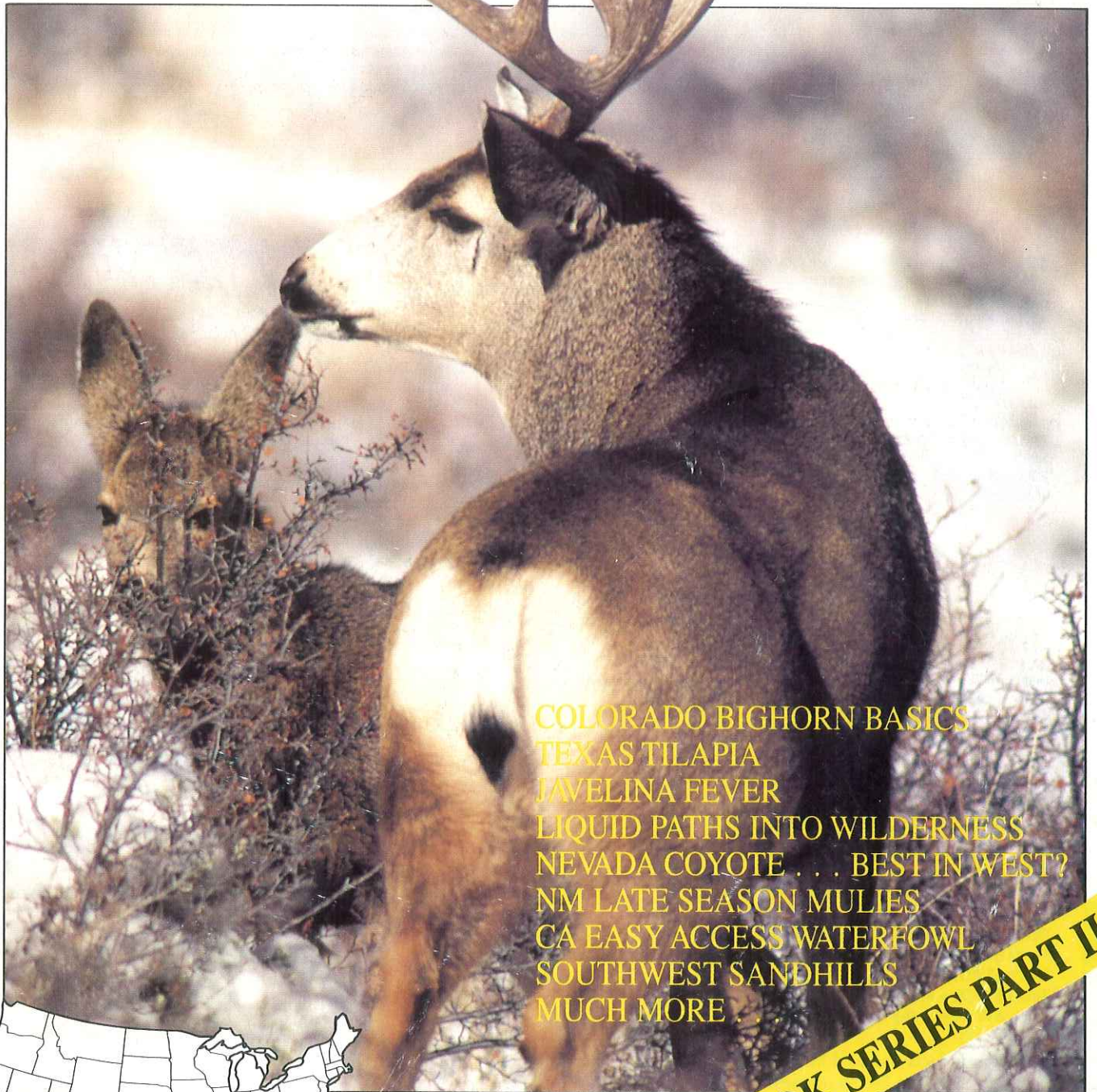
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THE SOUTHWESTERN SPORTSMAN

National Magazine



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THE SOUTHWESTERN SPORTSMAN

National Magazine

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*I've never hunted this stretch of the Verde River before
and I want a successful trip.*

SHALLOW STREAMS: LIQUID PATHS INTO WILDERNESS

Story and Photos by Jim Slingluff



Hunting ducks from canoe in shallow stream.

A teal, unused to canoeists, tries to hide in the reeds, but his nerve fails when the canoe closes to within ten yards. He launches off the water in a failed flight of escape. Tucking the bird among the lashed-in bags of camp gear in the boat, I breathe a sigh of relief, now that I've proven my predictions about the hunting.

But my companions are still skeptical about the feasibility of canoeing this 20-mile stretch of the river. We're a half-mile into the trip, and the average water depth is still less than knee-deep.

We pass the next couple of miles uneventfully, if sighting numerous bald eagles can be called uneventful.

The land closes in on the river and the river responds by turning rocky, with well-defined banks. We are moving toward the canyon. The Verde is still shallow and rockstrewn. We still haven't hit knee-deep water, except in an occasional pool.

Sonoran desert and mountain suckers, the prey attracting the migrating eagles, scatter along the bottom. Suckers attract herons, too. While helping the Arizona Game and Fish Department with fish surveys in this area, we found suckers with healed-over, circular scars inflicted by one of these long-legged fishermen that struck, impaled the fish on

its beak, and then lost its dinner. It seems humans aren't the only predators who occasionally wound and fail to retrieve their prey.

I try to impale a few with my own "beak" — my bow and arrow. I get a couple, but the days are short, and the real quarry of this trip is ducks. I play Robin Hood only briefly, and then we move on to enter the redwall canyon stretch of the Verde.

The canyon walls are close and bright with color. This is a limestone canyon, stained red by erosion from a strata of sandstone. At its narrowest, the canyon floor is 25 feet wide, its receding walls rising 800 feet. Through most of its length, the canyon floor is less than 20 yards wide. It is ribboned with this pristine river, and fringed with a narrow band of riparian forest. A railroad track, laid here in the early part of this century, hugs the canyon wall just above the trees. We hardly notice it. From our water level viewpoint it merges into the rock.

The canyon engulfs us. Juniper and cliffrose stud the eroding canyon walls. Bald eagles, blue herons, and an occasional osprey prowl the air, intent on taking fish from these shallow, clear waters. The eagles will take the same ducks I hunt, if they have an opportunity.

Shallow creeks and rivers are boatable in many different canoes, but aluminum, canvas, and wood boats are easily damaged and difficult to repair. Plastic canoes are durable, slide easily over rocks, slip quietly through the water, and do not conduct heat or cold. Plastic canoes can open areas to sportsmen that are otherwise only a wish. A properly designed plastic canoe, loaded with 250 pounds of paddler and gear, can float in as little as three inches of water.

To use low-water creeks as a liquid path to remote areas, consider these suggestions:

1. Don't tackle rapids or paddle in weather conditions in which you would be afraid to swim. Whitewater paddlers, who always plan to get wet, do not paddle when the air temperature plus water temperature totals less than 100 degrees, unless they are equipped with protective gear which will prevent death by hypothermia. They wear quality life jackets and, if they plan to boat heavy rapids, they wear helmets. Why should folk with less paddling skill be less prepared? If you are going to paddle in cold weather, even on a lake, wear wool or some synthetic which is designed to retain warmth even if wet. Always wear your life jacket.

Draw, line, or portage your boat around rapids that you believe are beyond your ability. It is always faster to manhandle a canoe around a rapid than to unpin it from a midstream rock.

Anytime the current flows through trees you face a

special danger. "Sweepers" or "strainers," as they are called, are often involved in the few whitewater deaths that occur each year. The trees stop boats (and boaters) while allowing the current to pass through. A current need not be fast to pin a person to an underwater root.

2. For most of the trip the canoe will carry you and your gear, but be prepared to drag your boat through shallow or rock-strewn stretches. Shallow water rarely requires a portage.

3. Don't get downstream of a swamped canoe. A canoe full of water can weigh a ton. Pushed by a three-mile-per-hour current, it can break your leg or pin you against a rock.

4. Use a canoe made of plastic or Kevlar. In rocky creeks, other materials have too many faults. Kevlar is very strong, very light, and very expensive. Plastic canoes are made from one of two types of plastic. A.B.S. plastic (technically called acrylonite-butadiene-styrene) is the choice of the vast majority of all whitewater paddlers. Actually a lay-up of layers of plastic, this material is incredibly durable and can be patched in the rare event of damage. Since this plastic has internal strength, boats made with it do not require the web of internal framework found in Coleman canoes.

Colemans have a lot of advantages for the beginning or casual canoeist. They cost less than other brands of plastic canoes, and their plastic skin is tough and durable. Since they have been the plastic canoe of choice

I have all the opportunities I can handle. Surface feeding ducks, mostly mallards and teals, concentrate here late in the season, to look for food after they drop off the lakes of the high plateau country. On multi-day trips like this, my shooting is limited by the possession limit. Once it is reached, I must eat a bird before I can take another.

It's cold. The temperature drops. Ice forms in the water which has splashed into the canoe. The ropes securing the gear in the boat stiffen quickly. Unpacking will be a chore, if we don't camp soon.

Gordon moans about sleeping in a cold camp. I have a pleasant surprise for him.

It's a cave, completely hidden from the creek by a heavy growth of mesquite and walnut trees. Convenient natural rock shelves line the cave's walls. Long-gone cowboys have left us a rough-hewn plank table and chair. A large reflector rock sunk in the floor of the mouth of the cave promises a warm night. This cave has long provided sanctuary. In other caves close by I have found small corn cobs left by Indians longer gone than the cowboys. The roof of the cave is blackened by ancient cooking fires. We will add to the soot.

Renee gets water from a nearby spring, while I prepare the teal. I may get teased on this trip, but it won't be because I

failed to provide a wild dinner.

The next morning dawns awash in sun, and immersed in cold. We're thankful for the warmth of the cave as we pull on our wetsuits.

Strictly speaking, this is not a classic cottonwood-willow ribbon forest here. There are some cottonwoods and sycamores tucked back on sheltered beaches, but the dominant trees are mesquite, willow, and walnut. Small, marshy backwaters provide excellent habitat for squawfish and spikedace minnows.

We see evidence of beaver. Willow limbs, stripped of bark, gnawed to a point, float along with us and bob in the eddies. On occasion, we pass full-sized trees gnawed down and stripped. But no beaver dams exist here. The floods which wash this canyon in late winter and summer would destroy the dams. Instead, the beavers den in the river banks.

These same floods preserve the canyon for native fish. Bass and other exotics which evolved in larger rivers are washed downstream. Those that avoid being carried downstream by the muddy rush of high water often lack the instincts to avoid being stranded away from the channel when the water level drops. Paddle this creek after a flood, and you'll find the shoreline littered with dead bass, catfish,

by casual canoeists for years, a well-developed market in used Coleman canoes exists. Colemans are made with polyethylene plastic, not A.B.S. This plastic has less internal rigidity than A.B.S., so Coleman fits their canoes with a supporting metal framework. This framework is prone to extensive damage if the canoe is wrapped around trees or rocks. Paddlers who become entranced by whitewater typically move on to different canoes, reserving their Colemans for trips involving minimal whitewater.

With all of their faults, Colemans are a very good, inexpensive canoe for outdoorsmen who are going to paddle only easy rapids. They are well worth their cost.

There is one boat of hybrid material worth a glance. The Pokeboat, by Phoenix, is made of fiberglass cloth embedded in a plastic-like resin. I paddled a similarly constructed Phoenix kayak for years, and found it was one tough little boat. Phoenix can be contacted for details at 1-800-354-0190.

5. Canoes vary as much in design as cars. You would not take a low-slung sportscar on a four-wheel-drive track, and you should not use a long canoe designed for lake expeditions on small, shallow streams. You'll be happiest on small rivers in canoes under 16½ feet in length.

6. Anything you are unwilling to lose should be firmly fastened into the canoe somehow. Carabiners are useful for securing items you may want quick access to.

7. Anything you are unwilling to have wet should be in a waterproof container. The ammo cans and rocket boxes sold by surplus stores and some outdoor stores are commonly used by experienced paddlers. A wide variety of rubber or plastic coated gear bags also are on the market. However, gear can be waterproofed by putting it in doubled plastic trash bags, removing the excess air, and then putting it in a burlap bag, duffel bag, or soft backpack. Removing the air reduces the chance of a puncture or rip.

8. Don't overestimate the distance you can travel in one day. Why work that hard, anyway? If you keep your planned distance to five to ten miles a day, you'll have time to explore your world, and not just pass through it.

9. Start your canoeing exploration with a short trip. As with hiking, it's best to develop your skills in a forgiving situation.

10. If you are going to paddle a creek with lots of trees, carry a saw. Sometimes the only way to salvage a canoe which is pinned to an underwater stump is to saw away the stump.

11. There is a multitude of instructional aids available. L. L. Bean sells an excellent instructional video entitled "Guide to Canoeing." It costs \$38.95, and can be ordered by calling 1-800-221-4221. The book I recommend is *Canoeing: Skills for the Serious Paddler* by Dave Harrison. This book is published by *Sports Illustrated* and runs \$9.95. **• Sw Sp Mg •**

or carp, a windfall for coyotes, racoons, and other scavengers. This is an extreme habitat. Only those species with adequate abilities survive.

On a streamside rock, we find feces consisting entirely of fish remains, a sure sign of river otter. These otter descend from Louisiana otters introduced by the Arizona Game and Fish Department to replace the native population, thought to be extinct.

Suddenly, a teal wheels in overhead, as if to land in front of me. A bird this dumb should not stay in the gene pool. Snatching my gun, I take him, my gift to generations of teal to come.

For the rest of the trip I'll ignore teal and concentrate on mallards.

The canyon walls open into a floodplain that cradles the river. In the floodplain, cottonwoods join the willows in increasing numbers.

Ducks! Mallards! They're feeding on algae in the shallows, 80 yards downstream. Keeping paddle movement to a minimum, I sneak closer. They see me and I know it. But ducks will sometimes let you come within range, if they haven't been shot at too much during their migration.

Darn. Not this time. There they go, downstream. I'll see them again, I expect. My opportunity apparently gone, I relax to watch the scenery. I overlook the hen sitting in the reeds. Just as I pass, she explodes off the water, like a flushing pheasant, and streaks directly overhead. I'm humbled. Maybe my genes shouldn't be in the gene pool, either? Gordon and Renee can't stop laughing. I'll hear about this for the rest of the trip.

Combining duck hunting and a canoe trip is an annual event with me. Every season, it takes me a while to sharpen my shooting. In a canoe, I wear a life jacket, and I kneel to paddle. This unusual shooting position, combined with the

unaccustomed padding of the life jacket, affects my gun handling. The solution is obvious. Before each trip I should go to the range, wearing my life jacket, and shoot trap from a kneeling position.

I have never been able to bring myself to do it. I get as far as imagining going through my shooting stations at the Tucson Rod and Gun Club, on my knees, in my bright red life jacket, and I chicken out.

We paddle past the mouth of Sycamore Creek. During the first stretch of this trip the Verde had cut a spectacular path through an 800-foot-deep redwall canyon. Sycamore Creek is the signpost which marks the mouth of that canyon but the head of another. The second canyon is 100 feet deep, with walls of black basalt. There is a sudden change in the river, also. Extra water from Sycamore Creek and underground springs swells the Verde from a creek to a very small river. Periodically, the canyon widens and forms extensive floodplains, made up of a mix of rock bars, sandy beaches, and benches treed with walnut, sycamore, and cottonwood.

We camp on a beach chosen for its large piles of driftwood. Bleached by the sun, worn by scraping over rocks, the wood is strewn on the beach and jammed hard against the living trees which secure the beach. Most of the driftwood is cottonwood or willow, with a little mesquite. A few pine cones, a long way from their high elevation origins, tumble out as we pull our firewood from the driftwood piles.

It's a cold, starry night. Stars are one of the rewards of winter camping. Unable to resist their lure, I make them my tent.

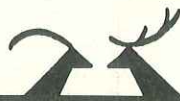
It's cold in the morning. We are slow getting to the boats. The fire is comfortable and we stay close, heating water both for coffee and to pour into our wetsuits.

Wetsuits help keep you warm, or at least alive, by providing an insulating layer of water between your body and your suit. A porous underlayer of neoprene slows down the exchange with the water from outside your suit. Your body heats that thin layer of water, helping insulate you from the colder water outside. Heated water poured into the suit takes up space which would otherwise be occupied by cold water, and saves your body the shock of trying to heat that initial rush of cold water.

Once afloat, we make good time. The river channel narrows as it cuts through the gravel bars. Concentrated, the water pushes the debris downstream, creating drops less cluttered with rock. This entire trip is 20 miles long. We covered five miles the first day. The increased water volume would allow us to do the final 15 miles in one day. But, we're here to enjoy, not work. We're glad we chose to paddle an extra day.

We eat lunch on a beach dominated by large sycamores, a spring, and grape vines. A small herd of mule deer were here first. They bound up the talus slope, and out a cut made by the railroad track, as we land.

I plan to use my canoe to hunt mule deer next season, if I get drawn for a permit. On another trip, farther down the



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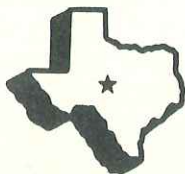
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Joe B. and Nancy G. Green, Owners

Verde, I met a sportsman paddling a Coleman canoe. He used his canoe to get to the remote sections of his hunt unit. He then used the canoe to float his trophy out. Beats packing a deer out by foot any day.

My last duck comes as a comedy routine. Paddling over a steep gravel bar, the current pushes one very surprised paddler into one very surprised flock of mallards. Ducks scatter everywhere. With speed and skill, I drop one, right at the top of a rapid, just in front of my paddle, which with speed and skill, I've dropped in the water, not into the canoe. Grabbing my spare paddle, I chase paddle and duck down the rapid.

The basalt canyon slowly decreases in depth as it melts into the Verde valley. A couple of miles above our take-out point the canyon fades away. Isolated no longer, we paddle between low banks, and glide past homes, barns, and rusting cars. Irrigation pumps sit on the banks, like sleeping vampires, waiting for hot weather, to awaken and thirstily suck the liquid life from the Verde.

Our trucks are in sight, parked in a grove of huge, old cottonwoods. These trees are part of the fourth-rarest plant community in North America. The cottonwood-willow ribbon forest has been reduced by over 90% in Arizona in the last 100 years. Cattle graze the young saplings. Those irrigation pumps are a threat, too. The water table can drop too fast for young trees to follow with their roots. The mature trees may survive, but may not be able to regenerate themselves. Dams also have drowned miles of habitat.

None of these troublesome thoughts disturb Renee and Gordon's peace. They glow from the trip.

"A 20-mile wilderness trip and I never put a pack on my back," chortles Renee. "Next time, I'll bring a lawn chair."

"I've never seen such concentrations of eagles," adds Gordon. "The sight of them flying within that redwall canyon was almost too beautiful to bear. It was worth the wading we had to do. How many other streams like this are in Arizona?"

"Good question," I reply. "Thin water boating is new to Arizona. I can tell you that the U.S. Forest Service has seen a



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large increase in low water boating on the lower Verde recently. There are a number of us now who are actively exploring the shallow creeks. I'll keep you posted on our discoveries."

We load our gear and glance across the river at the ruins of the defunct Arizona Power Company power plant. Climbing into the truck, we pass the Tuzigoot Indian ruins, headed for home. •SW Sp Mg•

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