

New Friends, Pristine Water, and Unexpected Adventures While Canoeing the North Fork Flathead

By *Roy & Sally Berke*

PLANNING & THE MEET-UP

After months of planning and preparation, several in-person and Zoom meetings, and a long drive across a good chunk of Wyoming and most of Montana, we set up camp on the banks of the NF Flathead river. It was Saturday night and we were the only ones there...well, except for the Border Patrol agents a few hundred meters to the West of us. Later that evening one of the agents blew through camp at a full gallop, eased his horse down to the river, and charged across only to disappear into the woods. Later on, he rode back escorting a hiker. The river was crystal clear and absolutely beautiful. The weather was warm with the nights cooling to the mid forties.

The next day, we prepared our canoe and gear while eagerly expecting the arrivals of nine fellow adventurers. We also enjoyed some Huckleberry bear claws we bought at the renowned Polebridge bakery that we visited on the drive in. It was mid afternoon before two vehicles bumped down the dirt road into the Canadian border launch area. It was Pete & Beth, and Craig & Adrienne with the news that the six of us would, as we decided after a brief discussion, be it. Three couples in three canoes. The boat minimum for safety. Most unfortunately, the trip/planning leader and four others were not able to join us. There had been a flurry of texts and calls; however, due to our early arrival at the put-in, we were out of cell phone range. Life is like a river, the course of our lives is always changing.

The hours-long car shuttle goes smoothly and soon we're all back together to visit and rest to the soothing sounds of the river.

RIVER DAY 1

We launch! The river is stunningly beautiful. Lunch is on a gravel bar. Then, some practice ferrying and catching eddies. Mid afternoon, we see a bear swim across the river and scramble up the canyon side to disappear. Heading into late afternoon, we scout Lower Kintla rapid, class II. Big drop, powerful water. Our view is quite distant (150+ meters and another 100 to the bottom of the drop, so no real details. Then, we see two rafts go through what looks to be an easy center right run. Off we go, first Craig & Adrienne, then Pete & Beth. Both teams tip up & down quite radically and eddy out.

It's our turn. We head into the main tongue going so fast it's hard to process all the sleeper rocks we sweep past turning slightly left and right as we shoot downward. Suddenly, we see the crux, a large rock pourover and hole. We steer left, one, two seconds...not going to make it so call out right turn, slight movement, bow rises up clips right side of rock and over we go! From my stern position, I sweep over the rock and tumble into the depths on the back side. Once surfaced, with a few strokes I grab the boat and yell for Sally to swim toward me. We're moving fast and there's another rock filled rapid just below at the next bend. At the same time Craig and Adrienne come flying by to the rescue. I grab their stern so I have one boat in each hand although ours is still upside down. Sally gets a hold of the stern painter while Craig & Adrienne power us over to the bushes on river right. With all the weight, drag and current, Adrienne's hands are stripping leaves and breaking branches until finally, we come to a stop. Craig clambors through the rocks and brush to help Sally out of the water and back to the boats.

After flipping and bailing the boat, we get ourselves sorted and continue on humbled once again by the power of nature, ever so grateful for our rescuers and the teamwork displayed by all.

The NF Flathead is not so flat! The current is fast, continuous, powerful, and fun at this flow of 3,870 July 8 to about 3,300 on July 12th. Over the course of five days we weave our canoes around, over and through shoals,

shallow rocks, standing waves up to 2 ½ feet, braided channels, islands, huge roots, and log jams. We all agree, to gather more beta and take more time scouting the named class III rapids. What if the lead boat has a problem?...

Due to steep banks and thick forest terrain, it's evening before we pitch camp on a rocky island. Sally and I have a lot of drying to do since some of our dry bags/boxes weren't so dry. But there's plenty of light at this northern latitude. It was an amazing day to reflect on as we chatted around the campfire.

RIVER DAY 2

At our usual morning meeting, we all shared what we were grateful for and continued with the plan for the day, and a review of the river map (waterproof copies graciously provided by Beth). Although we planned for a hike to the tiny town of Polebridge for Huckleberry treats, there was construction on the road, so we settled for lunch in the shade near the bridge. It was very hot. Several miles below Polebridge, we scouted and then navigated through a series of narrow braided channels and log jams. After rejecting one good campsite with no shade, we arrived at a beautiful beach site with some shade and a magnificent view of the distant mountains. Plenty of time to swim, sketch, and play some games led by Craig.

RIVER DAY 3

Another dewey night with a nice sunrise. Forty Five degree low rising to sixty by 7:30 am. Nineties by mid afternoon. It was an easy day of paddling with some turns, strainers and wave trains. We enjoyed a short hike in old growth forest on the Glacier National Park side during a snack break. The trail followed a major stream. Lunch was on a forested bench on river left followed by a few more miles of paddling past Camas creek and bridge. Two more miles brought us to Big Creek, a developed campground. We stopped at the launch ramp for a walk about and gathered some good info

on campsites and the class III rapids in the lower section—river mile 9 to 4 at Glacier Rim.

Back on the water, we paddled about 1.5 miles to set up camp at river mile 13.5, a beautiful shady site with a lower riverside area for camp kitchen. Here, we came up with a plan to enjoy a layover day and get more info on the rapids.

RIVER DAY 4

Pete, Craig and I would hike up to the road, about 1.5 miles and catch rides. I would go up to Big Creek to see about joining a party in order to boat scout the section down to Glacier Rim. The first vehicle gave me a ride; however, there weren't many people going down river so I wound up hiking back to camp in the afternoon.

It was a relaxing day for me except for the hike up to the road, which took the three of us into an extraordinary forest biozone none of us had ever experienced before. Some locals call it "God's Hair." It's an area of dense smaller trees growing so close together that most falling trees never make it to the ground. The result is a crazy maze of trees criss-crossed by fallen trees at all angles and horizontal trees that must be passed over under, or balanced on while traversing forward for long stretches without touching the ground. And all the while while in this forest your body is in constant contact with numerous branches, needles, bark and debris. It is full contact hiking while pulling and pushing through the friction resistance with arms and hands in order to make progress. What a unique place, this low level canopy of filtered green light!

As for Pete and Craig, they caught the first car going South. Their new friends took them all the way to take out at the Blankenship bridge (confluence with the middle fork) even though it wasn't on their way. Pete and Craig drove Craig's car back along the canyon hiking down to the river and scouting Upper Fools Hen rapid and a few other places. Then, they left the car at Great Northern Flats, an alternate take out, before catching a ride

back to Big Creek campground. Shortly after arriving at the launch ramp, Craig called out to a passing raft and secured a ride down river to camp. **Talk about bold friendliness, confidence, paddle culture and good timing!!** Although I didn't know they were on it at the time, I saw the raft they took as it passed me in a rapid far across the river. They beat me back to camp by half an hour and avoided a quite difficult hike. The ladies enjoyed a quiet day at camp.

RIVER DAY 5

All six up early and launched around 9:45 am for Great Northern Flats to unload gear and add air bags for the canyon run to take out. Our canoe will stay at the Flats while Beth and Sally shuttle some gear and the car to take out.

After an hour or so, four of us in the two most whitewater capable boats launched for the 11 mile run to Blankenship bridge. It doesn't take long for us to reach the first big wave train and take on lots of water. We bailed and laughed and talked excitedly about the size of the waves and the beauty around us. A couple of miles further and we came to the first of three class III rapids. We scouted from an island and decided to take the right channel over some small ledges and skirt the right side of a long wave train with a sharp left at the bottom. No problem!

Then, after some easy class II, we came to Upper Fools Hen, which I call Three Doors for the three glassy tongues between boulders, all leading into broken whitewater. We scouted carefully from river left and looked for hidden rocks—plenty there. We agreed on the smallest passage on the left and one by one, each pair had a clean run.

Next, it was Lower Fools Hen, mostly a river wide ledge with a couple of breaks. The rapid is framed by a rock reef on the right and a vertical cliff on the left. After boat scouting from eddies, Pete took us through a small tongue and some curling whitewater center right. We eddied out and waited with throw bag in hand. No need, Craig and Adrienne danced their way

down another section of the ledge at the far right. That was it for the named rapids; however, all the experienced river runners had mentioned a dangerous ledge on river right past a large culvert. It doesn't look that bad from upriver, yet has a powerful keeper hole that has taken lives.

When we saw it, we stopped for lunch and scouted carefully. There was just enough water for us to float the left side channel and thus we avoided the strong current toward the ledge. Now the river broadened out and we began to see some cabins along the banks. At one point, Pete noticed a familiar shape amongst the rocks under a shade tree where we had stopped to wait for Craig & Adrienne. It was a handcrafted birch bark canoe about 16 inches long. Amazing! Beth and Sally timed it perfectly and were 50 feet from the beach when we pulled in at Blankenship bridge.

FINAL THOUGHTS

A delicious dinner* and reminiscing on the trip was yet another highlight of the trip. It was certainly well earned after a 14 mile paddle, shuttling gear, and vehicles, and setting up camp.

After five days of shared adventure on an amazing wild river, our bonds were strong and it was bittersweet to suddenly go off on separate paths. All of us are looking forward to meeting again at some distant riverside to join in with the current and to see around the next bend in life.

**Sunflower Cafe at Glacier Campground (glaciercampground.com)*