



River Write

HUNTSVILLE CANOE CLUB

April, 2012

From The Prez

The club had a pretty active March wrapping up with the Cajun Boil last weekend at Buck's Pocket. Bob & Brenda Barnett did their usual masterful job pulling everything together and preparing a wonderful meal & event. There wasn't any boating available for the whitewater enthusiasts but that didn't dampen the fun. There was flatwater paddling, hiking, Jim Schwaiger and Daniel Pritchett set up a zip line thru the trees, and Dave Branham was especially proficient in helping the kids with the Easter egg hunt!

Spring is now in full swing and Bob Barnett has kicked off the Wednesday evening paddles at the Wheeler Wildlife Refuge. These trips are a lot of fun and a good way for new members to get started and meet folks. Randy Griffin also has a Thursday evening paddle out of Ditto Landing for those that want a little more aggressive experience. Contact either of these guys if you want to participate. There are also several weekend trips planned for April including parts two and three of the Island Challenge. Contact Pete VanWaveren if you want to try this multi-day event.

The whitewater paddlers are trying to squeeze a few more trips out of the local water as every weekend in April has at least one trip scheduled. However, with the foliage coming out, it's apparent that we will soon be moving to the dam controlled rivers. We'll be scheduling a trip planning meeting soon to fill in the summer calendar. Everyone is welcome to come to this meeting especially if you want to lead a trip or two.

Jay Claunch has provided another excellent program for us this month. Anna Levesque is very well known and respected in the paddling community on a national level and I am really looking forward to hearing her presentation. Hope to see all of you at Tim's Cajun Kitchen on the 11th.
Brian England

April Program

Our program in April will be Anna Levesque, founder and director of **Girls at Play** (<http://www.watergirlsatplay.com>)
The following is from the GAP website:

GAP Mission Statement

We are based in beautiful Asheville, NC and we are dedicated to inspiring women and enhancing their lives through kayaking and yoga retreats, classes and trips. Girls at Play workshops, instructional tools and accessories provide an environment where kayaking feels accessible, fun, inspiring, adventurous and supportive. Join in the fun and open up to the new possibilities that await you!

About Anna

Anna Levesque is a world-class paddler and instructor dedicated to enhancing the lives of women through kayaking, yoga and travel. Anna's fifteen-plus years of experience as an accomplished international competitor, instructor and guide has placed her as the leading expert in her field. She is a Registered Yoga Teacher with Yoga Alliance, having had a steady practice for over ten years and having completed over 300 hours of yoga teacher training. As an athlete Anna was a member of the Canadian Freestyle Kayak Team from 1999 to 2003 and earned a bronze medal at the Freestyle World Championships in 2001. She placed in the top 3 in several freestyle competitions and extreme races during that time and has paddled in over 10 countries around the world. Anna combines her expertise in kayaking with her experience as a yoga instructor, a student of meditation and personal transformation to provide a holistic, empowering experience for her students. She resides with her husband, accomplished paddler Andrew Holcombe, in Asheville, NC. Join her for a paddling and yoga retreat, class or trip and open up to the infinite possibilities that await you!

New Meeting Location!!!!

The new meeting location is Tim's Cajun Kitchen
114 Jordan Lane NW, Huntsville, AL 35805
256-533-7589



Trip Schedule

<http://www.huntsvillecanoecclub.org/trips.html>

Check out the new trip schedule format. Go ahead! Click on it



News you can use!!

The email address is **brendahotz@ymail** for submissions to River Write



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This month's meeting is on Wednesday April 11th, The location is Tim's Cajun Kitchen 114 Jordan Lane NW, Huntsville, AL 35805 256-533-7589. Dinner will be at 6:00 p.m. and the meeting will begin at 7:00 p.m.

The Huntsville Canoe Club meets the second Wednesday of each month except in December. For information please contact a club officer!

Mail Application to:
Post Office Box 52
Huntsville, Alabama 35804

Wednesday Evening Paddles

Wednesday evening paddle returns

Wednesday April 4th kicks off our annual Wednesday Evening Paddles. As always we will meet at Captain D's in Madison at 5:00 o'clock. We are usually on the water by 5:30 and take out about dusk. This is a good way to break up the week, meet new people and enjoy the company of old friends plus the added benefit of exercise that most of us need. Bring your dinner as most of us do and picnic on some sandy beach or in a secluded cove. Combine all of that with the wildlife that we regularly see, such as Blue Heron, Osprey, Beaver and the natural beauty of Wheeler Wildlife Refuge and it's no wonder that it's one of our most popular outings. See you on the water, Bob Barnett

Trip Reports

Tennessee River Challenge, First Leg by Carla Knight

At 6:45 AM on St. Patrick's Day, Pete Van Waveren, Alberta Cooley, Randy Griffin and Carla Knight met at the Whitesburg Yacht Club for our first leg of the Island Challenge on the TN River. We discovered a public access put-in just below the "Bridge to Nowhere" and upstream of the AL state line. We pushed back the planned start date one day to avoid the weather prediction of thunder showers on Friday, which was a wise choice, as we had perfect sunny weather all weekend, highs in the mid eighties and lows in the mid fifties. Alberta decided to leave her car at the Guntersville Dam, which proved to be a Godsend at the end of the trip. An added bonus: We got to see a bald eagle's nest in a tree with a bald eagle.



All smiles at shuttle to put-in.

We made pretty good time the first day, the current was moving quickly. I was peddling my Hobie Oasis tandem kayak with the mirage drive. I honestly thought I'd be faster than everyone with the new technology. The mirage drive mimics a penguin's fins, but with a shorter, wider hull which didn't exactly slice through the water, it wasn't long before I was dragging behind everyone else. The first island looked like it was being towed away from us as we paddled toward it at the end of the first day, the effect of an optical illusion and my tired, aching muscles.

is, I like a challenge and paddling (or in my case, peddling) is a more immediate experience. There is more time to notice and savor the dogwoods in bloom along the shore, an osprey's nest in the tree, the shimmering light reflecting off the water. The sun was low on the horizon before the next campsite was in site, when a barge blew its whistle behind me. The channel the barge had to travel was between me and the island where the campsite was located, so I was obliged to move out of the barge's lane until it passed,



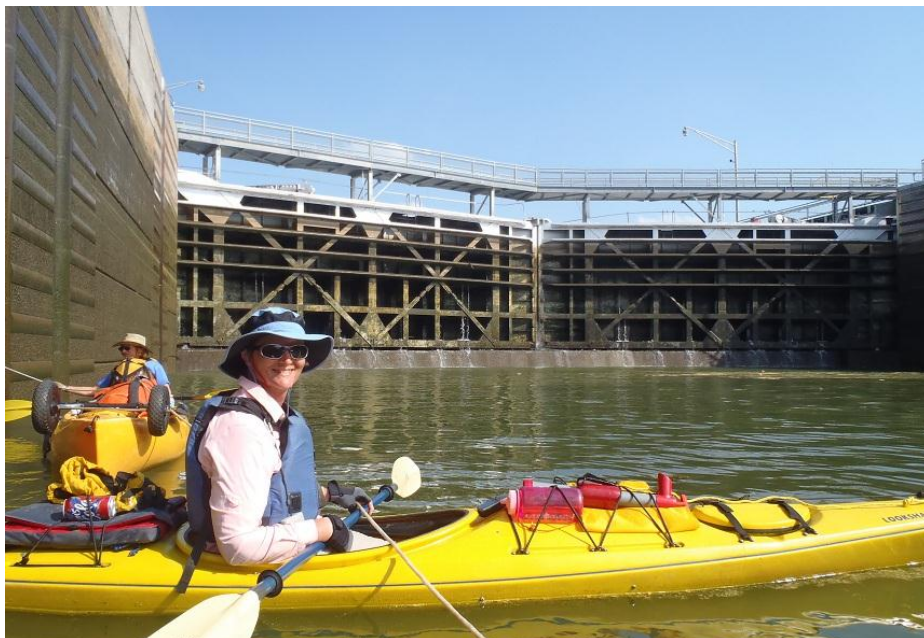
Fueling up in the morning.

We got there before sunset and were able to pitch our tents and get situated before it got dark. The island was opposite the Scottsboro nuclear power facility, and the river was kind of noisy with barge traffic the first night. Previous campers had left a lot of garbage on the island and a lot had washed up as well. The campsite itself was very comfortable with sand covered by leaves and grass. I was very comfortable in my sleeping bag and tent.

The middle day was a bit of a slog, paddling glassy water in the Guntersville Lake. I'm glad we didn't have much headwind; that would have been brutal. The middle day was Sunday and the generators weren't producing as much power, so the current wasn't as strong in the river, and the river was much wider, creating a large pool. One might wonder, why go through this? For me the answer

as the more maneuverable boat must give way to the less maneuverable boat. I was still able to reach the campsite and pitch my tent before it became dark.

This campsite was much better than the first. The water around the island was clean instead of sludgy, and there was a gradual slope to the shore, making it much easier to drag the boats ashore. I was dog tired and thought that I would be sore and stiff in the morning, but I drank some shiraz that night and took 600mg of Ibuprofen and I felt fine the next morning when I arose. Pete joked that we were having a Lake Wobegon trip: All the women were strong and all the men were good looking. Not that they're mutually exclusive, but I know with my hat hair I sure didn't feel particularly good looking!



Locking down at Guntersville

I got an hour's head start on the group the next morning so I wouldn't slow them down too much. We arrived at the lunch site, right before the 431 bridge, at the same time. Then I promptly lost my advantage by paddling the wrong direction after lunch. However, with cell phones this problem was quickly corrected and we took a break right before locking through.

wasn't nearly as difficult as I thought it might be. We were descending instead of rising, which made the water less turbulent, and we stayed clear of the gates where the water was more turbulent. However, there seemed to be a Venturi tube wind affect within the lock. The wind was so much stronger than outside the lock. I was concerned about needing fenders within the lock but discovered they weren't necessary.

I was the closest to the lock wall and was able to use my paddle to push off and avoid scraping my kayak on the wall. We dropped about 33 feet while we were in the lock. It was about 3:30 PM after we locked through and we decided not to attempt paddling the remaining 15 miles to the Whitesburg Yacht Club as it would be dark by the time we got there. It was great that Alberta had her car at the dam and she was able to shuttle Randy to his truck towing Pete's trailer for hauling the kayaks. It was nice to get off the river well before sundown. Pete and I were able to clean our boats before Randy returned with the truck. Our first leg totaled about 65 miles. It was a very enjoyable first leg, and I'm looking forward to the next.



Quiet time on the last day

Morgan Cove Paddle

by Carla Knight

I drove to Buck's Pocket State Park in a driving rain the evening of Friday, March 30th so I could be there in plenty of time for the next morning's paddle to Morgan Cove, which I had agreed to lead. I probably would have left the following morning if I hadn't agreed to lead the paddle, but as Robert Service so aptly noted more than a century ago, "A promise made is a debt unpaid and the trail has its own stern code." As I drove over the Highway 431 Bridge, I looked down where we had paddled our first leg of the TN River challenge two weeks prior, and fondly recalled that trip as quite the adventure, but it sure looked different in the pouring rain. When I got to Buck's Pocket, the weather wasn't any better. I heated my freeze dried chili on my sterno stove amid the rain, eating it under a tent shelter set up by Bob Barnett and his family. I didn't want to pitch my tent during the rain on wet, soggy ground, so I slept in my RAV4.

The next morning it was sunny and beautiful and I was asked by trip members if I could lead the Morgan Cove trip after the Cajun boil instead of before, so they could hike in the morning. I told them I was flexible, so we agreed to paddle late afternoon. In the morning Dan Pritchett and Jim Schwaiger set up a zip line for the kids to enjoy.

Around mid morning Pete Van Waveren drove up with his family and he decided he was going to paddle Morgan Cove before the Cajun boil, so I decided to join him and his family as our original paddle group set off for their hike. We headed to the right on Morgan Cove and explored a beautiful side creek.

I was told there was a spring that feed the side creek, but access to the spring was blocked by a fallen tree. We paddled up the side creek which had some beautiful boulders that reminded me of a Japanese garden. Dogwood were blossoming, it was very scenic. We paddled until we came to some obstacles that would have made continuing very difficult. Besides, we had to get back for the Cajun boil. We paddled around a tiny island on the return to the put-in, so I was able to get in a noon paddle and cement the route to Morgan Cove in my mind.

When I returned, I decided to pitch my tent prior to the Cajun boil. The Cajun boil was great, the food was delicious and the weather cooperated. We decided to leave for our Morgan Cove paddle just after the Easter egg hunt was set up for the kids. As we drove to Morgan Cove the clouds were rolling in and getting darker. When we got to Morgan Cove all the local boaters on the water were coming in and the clouds looked black and ominous. We decided not to become lightening rods, so we drove back to the campground. On the return trip it hailed, thundered and lightening flashed. Good call.

I decided I had enough rain for one weekend, so I struck my tent, gathered my gear in the rain and headed for home, so the paddle I was supposed to lead never happened. Oh well, the best laid plans of mice and men



Locust Fork

March 18, 2012

By Todd Click

March 18th turned out to be an absolutely gorgeous day to paddle. When we got to the put-in, it was sunny with blue skies, quite warm, and the water level was at about 2.9 feet. I had brought a dry top just in case, but it turned out to be so warm, that I didn't even need it! As we got on the water, I think it is safe to say that spirits were high. We ended up having a total of 15 people in our group, including Jenn Perkin's son Levi and Tony Hardman's daughter Catherine. This was only my second time on the Locust, and I was really excited.



Jenn, Levi, and Catherine

When I went down it before, it had been cool and cloudy. But with the bright sunshine and trees and plants turning green everywhere, it looked a lot different! As we went downstream, we passed most rapids without any trouble. Levi was in a Jackson Dynamic Duo with Brian McAnnally, and looked like he was having a blast. As his confidence built, he even started asking to go over the rapids backwards and sideways, smiling all the way.

I know I was even playing a bit more than I have in several weeks, due to the summer-like temps and the nice cool water. Some took time to practice rolling between the rapids, and Catherine even showed us her hand roll. (I don't know many that can do that as well as she did!)

When we got to Double-trouble, we did have a couple of swims, but no major problems at this level. When we got down to Powell Falls, we all

decided to stop and have a little fun. Levi and Catherine took turns jumping off of the rock into the river, and I even think I saw Jay and Jenn jump in a time or two.



Catherine, Todd in background.

Joe Y., Matt and myself decided to carry our kayaks up and launch off of the rock. Even though it's not that high, I have to say that is the highest point I have launched from. Matt and Joe landed easily on their launches, but I ended up rolling when I landed. I needed to cool off anyway! When we got to Ender hole, I think everyone took a turn trying to surf it, with varied levels of success. Levi and Catherine took turns in the duo with Brian, and we even got to see a family in a raft surf the hole for a bit. I took a few turns trying to get into the hole, but usually ended up rolling or washing out. Finally, the last time I tried to get in there, I ended up flipping. I'm not sure what happened to my roll that last time,



Joe Yeazitis launching at Powell Falls

but I finally had to swim. It did make me feel a bit better when I saw that I wasn't the only one! All in all, it was a great day. And it's always cool to see

kids like Levi and Catherine having a blast out on the water. It makes me a bit jealous when I realize I didn't get into kayaking until I was 28! Also, Steve Berger got some pretty awesome footage of the day with his GoPro camera. You can find the videos on YouTube, or by visiting the links below:

Catherine and Levi promo video:

<http://youtu.be/ok7pse4xH4s>

Locust Fork part 1: <http://youtu.be/Zy4xqShgAV8>

Locust Fork part 2: <http://youtu.be/jSyWgmaGIU>

Upper & Lower Mulberry

Saturday March 10th.

By Daniel Harris

A day that will live in infamy... Well at least for this flatwater paddler. After watching a little video Steve Berger put together a week prior in his competing in the yearly Alabama Cup races, I have to say it piqued my interest to get back in some moving water for a change. We talked on Facebook a bit about water levels and gear and everything involved to convince me that I had the right stuff to at least get through the journey in one piece. The journey being The Mulberry River from above Garden City, AL at County Road 10 down to the Birmingham Canoe Club takeout. A total of 9

miles of class 2 whitewater at least, with water levels at 6 feet on this given day.

It has been three years since my paddle touched the bubbling water at a location known as Nelson's Gap which runs from Walnut Grove to a little ghost town of Old Snead Alabama. Steve and Jim were there as well on that day and I remember having a grand time in my 9 foot Quest rec boat. Even tried catching an eddy or two briefly.

Since that day I have been concentrating on the flatwater scene trying to chase down a few choice "Old Guys" that have the stamina of superman in a race called the Phatwater Challenge held every year in Natchez, MS. Those old guys being Randy Griffin and Muril Robertson. Two of the strongest folks in longboats I have ever had the pleasure of paddling behind.

I still will be chasing them down along with many other strong longboaters including Steve Berger which by the way is a locomotive in a longboat as well. In my book, he is already in the 5 hour club at the Phatwater, just missing it by 45 seconds! For those of you who do not know the "Phat" as we call it is a 42.5 mile torture fest on the Mighty Mississippi River

which starts at the Grand Gulf and ends with a painful exit out of your kayak at Natchez, MS

The big day arrived and the stars lined up for all of us to have the perfect paddling experience. Steve had a nice semi dry suit and helmet he let me borrow to go along top of the shorty wetsuit I already had. Jim Shwaiger (I can't spell it man!) was generous enough to loan me his SOT Torrent with much valued knee straps and back rest! After suiting up in the gear supplied I have to say I felt secure in the fact that I would not freeze to death. Jim did a fabulous job with the safety instruction before launching into the swift waters at CR 10 and off we went....



I had not even seen the first rapid when another boater (who will be nameless fortunately because I'm bad with names) slides the bow of his boat over the Torrent I was sitting in, giving me an uppercut to the jaw and



Dan showing off his skills on the Mulberry, look, Dave Landers is lurking behind....

down I went in the briny water! As I tensed up from the icy cold upside down my knees inadvertently drew towards each other tightening the grip I had on the knee

straps which held me firmly in the craft. Since I have no rolling skills my mind had to make the connection to my knees to tell them "Hey guys you can let loose now before I drown!"

Bobbing up from that experience my mind kicked in to flip the Torrent back over so as to reenter the craft. Success! I was almost in when the real fun starts. Two back to back waves knock me back in the water for another go at it. The second attempt at self rescue was a good one and I was finally out of the ice bucket.

I do not harbor any ill feelings to the nameless paddler who will remain nameless because

names escape me... We shook hands afterward, and all is good. :^)

So I was primed and ready for what lies ahead.

The water was slightly stained in a good way, not muddy like in the footage I witnessed in

Stevens video earlier in the week and I was happy for that. we continued on through most of the trip and I held my own I have to say, challenged by ever growing rollers. Some of them would swallow me up and spit me out like an anorexic movie star model.

Thanks to Jim's fine instruction on one such

encounter we were coming up on, I asked him which side would be the better line to take. He pointed to the left bank and that's where I went, spotting Steve Berger already heading that way. Here we go into another drop, roller coaster waves all around.... I was doing GREAT! Loving this stuff. Man there is nothing better than.... Huh?.. BAM!!!! The bottom dropped out from under me and I was face to face with the biggest wall of water that peeled my eyelids back. The peripheral vision just before the episode was of Steve Berger with his GoPro helmet cam on, taking in all the eye candy for future Youtube viewers.. And I was loving every bit of it!

Believe it or not I made it through without a scratch and on to even more glorious encounters through out this trip. Was dunked a couple more times trying to play like the big boys at the eddies and did not even attempt a



Jay Claunch showing us how it's supposed to be done.

shot at "Lunch Stop" even though the calls were there to "Just Do It". Those calls in my head sounded a lot like Steve and Jim's voices too!

When we got to "5-0" rapid there was another fine instruction from Jim as to what line to take.... serious business now and no playing around because you can really get yourself in deep "Doo Doo" if you take it wide right! I love the names they give to different structures and this one says it all "The Doo Doo Hole"! Just don't go there Man!!

I was not about to get caught up in that if I had anything to do with it. I stuck to the plan.. Go straight down the middle and take a hard left to kiss the beach and watch others delight in the festivities as they played around the rapids at 5-0..

I have to say after this experience, that it is a different ball game as far as muscle groups are concerned. Being a flat water paddler, you build up speed with your torso and arms and

legs in a way to conserve energy and build up stamina. In the whitewater world it is a full on cacophony of different strokes to keep balance with ever

changing waves coming at you from all angles which activate every strand of muscle tissue available. And then you may have a small rest period to straighten out gear and stretch for a bit before the next onslaught of boiling water.

At the end of the day, you have to agree that there is no better way to paddle. Whether it is whitewater or flatwater we are all brothers on the water. We are different but the same.

HCC... Thanks for an experience that will live in my heart for the rest of my life. If I did not mention anyone in this letter that I paddled with, I am truly sorry because I really have a problem with names... You know who you are and you are right there in my heart and your faces are there to remind me of a cherished experience.

Way Past Due Ocoee Trip Report

by Jim Schwaiger

I finally paddled the Ocoee last October and I've been telling Brenda I'd send in a report for almost 6 months now. In the spirit of better-late-than-never, this is it.

As I swam over to where Brian waited, I wondered how bad it really was. I had hit my tailbone on a rock ledge and it wasn't feeling too good. I was able to get back in and paddle down to Hell Hole to leave the river, but that last part was a bit painful every time I bumped a rock or dropped over a ledge. After a month of pain

while sitting, I'm pretty sure I broke it. Anyway, I talked to Brian a minute, caught my breath, and swam down to the next area to retrieve my kayak.

Seconds before, I had punched out and as my head surfaced, I saw two things clearly. I was already in the entrance to the rapid below



Middle Ocoee dam at the put in

Tablesaw and there was a pretty distinct drop coming up. I also saw a female kayaker right beside me. She instructed me to swim left and let go of my kayak. I did both without question. As I swam left, I realized there was no eddy to get into, so moving to shallow water was just going to make for a bumpier ride. I got on my back, feet downstream, toes up, and paddle in a death grip. I am swimming this one!

My desire to see what was in front of me took over, and I kept my head up looking downstream longer

than I should have. My butt was low in the water when I smacked a rock with my tailbone. Still

grimacing, I felt myself accelerating as I approached the hole left of Diamond Splitter. Then a solid punch slowed me down when I hit the hole. I got a good gulp of Ocoee water and a free sinus cleansing. I shook it off and noticed that I wasn't past the boil line, but still had a little downstream momentum. I felt the hydraulic pushing me and my



Matt Anderson at Double Suck

paddle blades back towards the maw. The only thing I thought to do was get the paddle parallel to the current. I still wasn't sure if I was going to get munched, so I started letting the paddle slip back towards the hole with a loose grip. Just as my right hand touched the left blade, I had to decide whether to let it go or not. I suddenly realized I was drifting out and I snatched the paddle back out of the froth. Now I saw Brian off to my left and a nice big eddy that I lumbered into with a weak crawl stroke. I was winded and my heart was racing as I started to try to speak.

A couple of minutes before, I first heard the rush or aerated water roaring in my ear. I was part of the way (maybe most of the way) through Tablesaw -- reportedly near Prudential Rock. I never saw that particular rock due to my particular orientation at the time. I was already in the setup position and decided to wait a few seconds to see if the roar subsided. It did not. I tried my first roll and got absolutely nothing. I thought it must be the aerated

water, so I delayed again. The roar wasn't waning at all, so I tried a second attempt shortly after the first. I got a gulp of air, but lifted my head early and went right back in. That gave me some confidence and a little more time, so I knew I would try a third roll.

barely. I took a quick look at the next wave and turned back around and SPLASH, I was over.

Going back in time a few minutes, I was sitting in the last eddy above Tablesaw with Brian watching others going through the first part of the rapid. Brian clearly told me where I needed to be and

pointed out which guys had good lines. I felt confident. I had outlasted a couple of other newbies, and I only had one flip (and a quick roll) at Double Trouble. Nothing else had given me any trouble running through the sneak lines. And if I flip, I know my roll is pretty reliable, so I'll just roll up like I did earlier. Brian waited on a couple of more guys to pass and then followed the exact line we talked about. I let a couple go through, took a deep breath and took that first stroke.



Brian and Sam on the Ocoee

The third roll was exactly like the second; nice gulp of air, but right back in. After that first gulp of air, I started assessing my situation. I had no idea what was in front of me, I didn't get a good look at it before I flipped and couldn't remember what Brian had said. I also knew someone was down with a throw rope, but I didn't know where they were – or where I was for that matter. I decided at some point, I ought to just punch out and hope for the rope. After the third miss, I decided it was time to punch out. That was a bad decision. I was way beyond their reach.

Seconds before the flip, I was peeling out of the eddy above Tablesaw, hitting the curler to pull me a little to the right. The first diagonal breaking wave came at me from the left. I paddled hard and made it over to find the second diagonal breaking wave coming from the right. I dug in hard. As I came over, I got turned a bit to my right. The next big wave looked longer and it wasn't breaking so hard, but I couldn't stop my boat from turning even more. At the crest, I was sideways to the main flow and still turning. I was bracing and holding on, but just



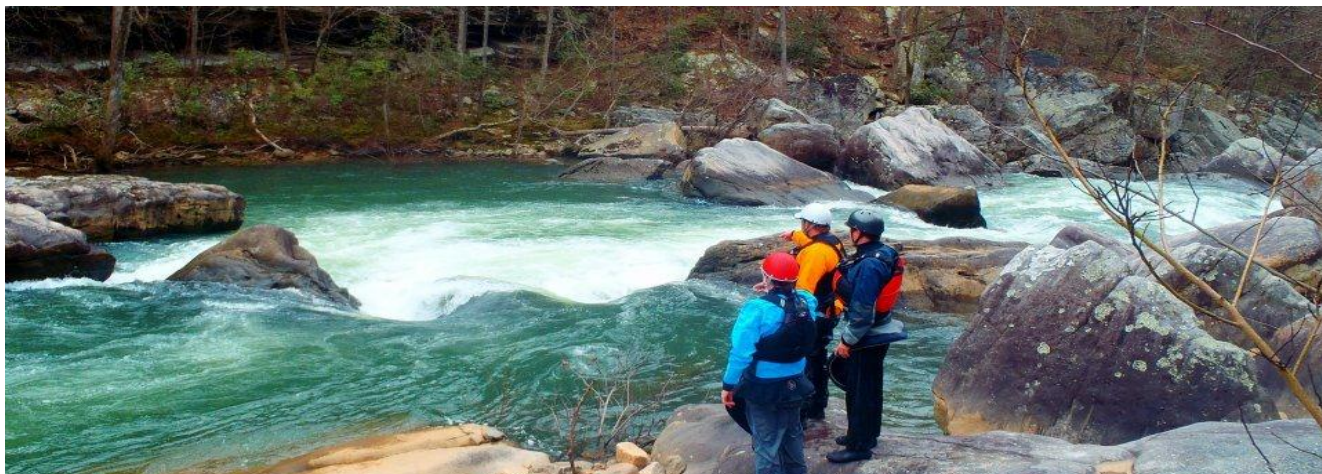
Matt Anderson waiting his turn at Hell hole.

Earlier that day I drove over with Matt and told him, "I'll be surprised if I don't swim at least once today."

Little River Canyon –

Chairlift 03/11/2012

By Jay Claunch



Bottleneck

After a fun day on the Mulberry the day before, I got to make a run I had been interested in trying for a while. Paddlers included HCC members Halie Orr and Tara Terry along with a couple of Canyon regulars Daniel Blanchard and Chris Champion. The weather was great in the mid to upper 60's and the level was around 1000 cfs.

boulders sitting in the stream were. The sheer beauty of being flanked by the sheer walls of the canyon. I can now tell you these claims were in no way an exaggeration.

This has to be my best run to date in terms of beauty, fun, excitement, difficulty of the rapids, and oddly enough in successfulness of my paddling. There were a few pools and stretches of flatwater, but mostly I



We met at CMP, changed into our gear, and ran shuttle back to Eberhart Point. It's a long hike down to the river, with several switchbacks to decrease the trail gradient. As we were about to paddle off, a couple with some kids walked up, and I remember thinking to myself that I would walk down here unless it was to paddle! I had heard about the beauty of the canyon. How pretty and clear the water was. How enormous the



remember the chutes and drops, the peel outs and ferries, the long wave trains and boogie water, and of course the overall excitement of running Bottleneck, which is described as a tricky but forgiving IV. I remember thinking as I dropped the main drop of Bottleneck that I might flip here, but I didn't and my excitement was almost palpable. Sitting in the pool at the bottom looking back upstream was "Crap, that looks a lot scarier from down here (than it did while scouting)."

It was a great day to paddle and I had a blast. To top it off, you paddle up to a beach, where you can get to your vehicle about 50' away. Not a bad deal, if I do say so myself.

(This article originally appeared in the TimesDaily in Florence)

Something about the character outside Warrior Mountain Trading Post on March 3 reminded me of an old soothsayer at the beginning of a horror movie.

Maybe it was his gravelly voice, maybe the several layers of interesting garments he wore. He cocked one eye up toward the kayak atop my SUV and warned of the dangers that lie ahead.

It may yet be winter, he said, but there be ticks a-crawling, chiggers a-creeping and snakes a-slithering in yon woods.

Periodically scratching the white stubble on his chin, the prophet of Bankhead National Forest apparently did not comprehend the concept of a personal space bubble. Every time I took a step away from him, he stepped toward me. I wondered if we were going to circle all the way around my vehicle in this fashion.

Finally, he bid me farewell, adding an ominous, "Be careful out there."

His forbearing about creepy critters proved to be true, which is not surprising, considering the so-called winter we've had.

With an average temperature of 47 degrees, this is the ninth warmest winter on record at Muscle Shoals. It probably feels even warmer considering that last winter was the 11th coldest on record, averaging just 38.1 degrees.

I'm guessing we will be fighting all types of plagues from Mother Nature this year, from swarms of tornadoes to swarms of mosquitoes.

The official National Weather Service 90-day outlook calls for above-normal temperatures and normal precipitation.

After we sprang forward this morning for daylight saving time we will head directly toward the vernal equinox on March 20. "Equinox" refers to the twice yearly date when the sun shines directly on the equator, and the length of day and night are almost equal in all parts of the world. So spring begins in the northern hemisphere, autumn in the southern half.

This division between seasons may be less evident in 2012. With the kind of winter we've had, Canada geese and senior citizens could have saved a lot of miles on wings and Winnebagos by staying up north. Bears and reptiles had no reason for a long winter's nap. And those confounded fire ants have been building up troop strength in their diabolical scheme for world domination.

Yes, the winter of 2011-12 felt a lot like spring, which makes one wonder how spring and summer will feel.

When we returned from our run down Sipsey River, I found a deer tick attached to my shoulder in one of the few places not covered by my farmer john wetsuit. The old soothsayer would be satisfied, probably stepping a little too close and warning, "It's a sign of things to come."

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