



# AMERICAN WHITEWATER

Conservation • Access • Events • Adventure • Safety

BY BOATERS FOR BOATERS  
Mar/Apr 2019

A photograph of several kayakers navigating a turbulent river with white water rapids. The kayakers are wearing colorful gear, including helmets and jackets. The river is surrounded by snow-covered rocks and banks. The water is a mix of blue and white, indicating fast-moving rapids.

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# AMERICAN WHITEWATER

A VOLUNTEER PUBLICATION PROMOTING RIVER CONSERVATION, ACCESS AND SAFETY

## American Whitewater Journal Mar/Apr 2019 – Volume 59 – Issue 2

### COLUMNS

- 5 The Journey Ahead **by Mark Singleton**
- 36 Whitewater Accident Summary July-December 2018 **by Charlie Walbridge**

### STEWARDSHIP

- 7 Public Lands Package Passes in the House! **by Evan Stafford**
- 9 Great Potential for New Wild and Scenic Streams in the Flathead National Forest (MT) **by Kevin Colburn**
- 11 First Ever New River Dries Release Schedule **by Kevin Colburn**
- 12 Devils Postpile to be Included in Wild and Scenic Inventory **by Theresa Simsiman**
- 13 Farewell to Southern Rockies Stewardship Director Nathan Fey **by Kevin Colburn**
- 15 A River Runs Through Us **by Noah Booth and Lili Pongraz**



### FEATURE ARTICLES

#### RIVER VOICES

- 18 Carnegie Hero Award Medals Bestowed on Pair of Ohiopyle Kayakers for Their Lifesaving Youghiogheny River Rescue **by Scott Patton**
- 28 From the Cuyahoga to the Cheakamus and Back: Four Decades of River- and Creek-running in North America **by Andrew C. Gross**

#### MENTAL GAME

- 32 The Come Back Home **by Carin Tinney**

#### SAFETY

- 42 Analysis of and Suggestions for Preventing Flush Drownings **by Charlie Duffy**

#### POETRY

- 50 Whitewater Joy **by Norma Sims Roche**



We call this “Nathan in a Winter Bathtub.” After an an incredibly successful 12-year run as American Whitewater’s first Colorado and Southern Rockies Stewardship Director, it’s time for us to wish Nathan Fey a heart filled farewell! We will greatly miss working with Nathan and the dedication he has brought to his role, but fortunately he’s not going too far and we look forward to collaborating with him in his new role as the Deputy Director of the Colorado Office of Outdoor Recreation Industry. We’d like to congratulate Nathan on this exciting new step in his career and wish him the best!

Photo by Peter Holcombe

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# A RIVER RUNS THROUGH US

BY NOAH BOOTH AND LILI PONGRACZ



*University of Montana students experience the North Fork Blackfoot River firsthand, as part of a field studies program.  
Photo by Kacie Heron, American Rivers*

IT WAS A crisp October morning at the confluence of the North Fork Blackfoot and Big Blackfoot Rivers, where the sky was beginning to awake with evidence of a clear and sunny day. We, a rambunctious crew of University of Montana students, dressed in ragtag ensembles of borrowed river gear, were there as the crust of early morning sleepiness was wiped away to be replaced by a palpable atmosphere of excitement for the unknown adventure ahead.

It was the third and final day of a field studies trip through Wilderness and Civilization, an all-encompassing university program that focuses on people's relationship with the landscape. Our purpose was to learn more about the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act in consideration of its 50th anniversary. Our focus was centered on the Wild and Scenic eligible North Fork of the Blackfoot River that flows out of the Scapegoat Wilderness in Western Montana. The North Fork is a

local hike-in gem that rewards boaters and other users with amazing scenery, fun whitewater, phenomenal fishing, and abundant wildlife in the midst of bear country. We had spent the last two days meeting with representatives from American Whitewater, the Blackfoot Challenge, Seeley Lake Ranger District, and American Rivers. The speakers shared a variety of perspectives about how the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act affects their work and lives. Out of approximately 169,829 miles of Montana rivers, only 388 miles have been designated Wild and Scenic. A proposal to designate and protect the North Fork along with segments of over 50 other streams in Montana is in the works, and as we began the final phase of our weekend field studies we carried the question of "Why?" with us.

By the time we finished situating our gear and running the shuttle, the golden streaks of day were evaporating the frost of the previous night's freeze. We were

all amused at how ridiculous we looked in our whitewater paddling costumes: a wetsuit complete with gloves and booties, numerous layers of jackets, a PFD, a helmet: the works. While cracking jokes and poking fun at each other we waddled down to the river to begin instruction. Jim Hepburn, a representative for American Whitewater and a guide for Tarkio Kayak Adventures, taught us the basics of paddling and river safety on the banks of the Blackfoot River. After this, with lots of gusto and very little grace, we pushed our boats into the river and pointed them downstream.

For many of us it was our very first time paddling a boat. Our troop of duckies, inflatable kayaks, and packrafts was an annoyance to the few fishermen still plying the ice-cold fall waters. Thankfully, as we floated downstream over the next several hours, our proficiency improved along with the temperature. We bunched up, spread out, and weaved in between one another

# STEWARDSHIP



*Students learn about the river they are about to float and its value*  
**Photo by Lisa Ronald at UM Wilderness Institute**

with the delicacy of a bull trout in an ill-fitting life jacket. By the time we dragged our boats ashore for lunch we were all happily sweating inside our neoprene.

Lunch marked a shift in the day, going from a wild and boisterous atmosphere to a more content and reflective one. With full stomachs and sore arms, we put our boats back in the water and, shortly thereafter, found ourselves in a long beautiful stretch of box canyon. Our boats wandered

downstream as our minds did the same, our pace slow in the rock wall's shadow.

As the sun sank lower into the sky, we reached our take-out destination, surprisingly exhausted but in high spirits. We were challenged to be adaptable with the schedule that day, and truly experienced being on "river time." We learned that patience, strength, and fluidity are all important characteristics in keeping a positive attitude on the river.

Several days later we discovered what each of our classmates were thinking while collectively reflecting on the experience from our memories and journals. One student shared his close encounters with bodies of water in the past: two near-drowning experiences left him with a fear of currents. Yet this paddle down the Blackfoot awakened curiosity, not fear. Chalk it up to the irresistible enjoyment of boating or to something much deeper, the effect remains a curious enigma. As he put it himself, "Extremes draw extremes, opposites attract, and with deeply rooted fear comes a primal curiosity and satisfaction."

Another classmate was inspired by the day's events, and left with questions about her relationship to rivers. She reflected on her sense of connection to her home landscape, remembering that it was the river she first canoed and whose banks she touched. Recognizing it, she wrote, "I am a woman of many rivers." That day she departed with a renewed appreciation for rivers and excitement to seek out the sense of community she felt amongst friends and strangers on the river.

The lessons the river taught us: You can't fight the nature of the thing itself. All you can do is direct your boat. You can eddy out, even get out of your watercraft, maybe stop for a lunch break or a scenic view,

**Some of the NF Blackfoot's Wild and Scenic properties on display.**  
**Photo by Lisa Ronald at UM Wilderness Institute**





*Preparing to run the hopefully-soon-to-be Wild and Scenic North Fork Blackfoot*  
**Photo by Kascie Heron, American Rivers**

because it's important to do so. Sometimes you need to park your paddle and simply take in the world around you. Other times you need to paddle with all your strength to go where you want, or to prevent yourself from going somewhere you shouldn't, or even to keep yourself from stagnating in the slack water. Simply put, the world is a river, time is the downstream flow, and your life is the boat that carries you.

Some of us were raised near the ocean, others around lakes or rivers. Similar to those bodies of water, with many sources feeding them, we all bring stories with new insight. We recognize how special it was to share this time on the river, all taking away something different from the experience. Again, many of us circled back to expressing appreciation for the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act and the ability it has to protect many more miles of thought-provoking, pristine Montana streams.

**About the Authors/Program**

Noah Booth is a third-year Communication Studies major and Wilderness Studies minor who hails from Saint Paul, Minnesota. Lili Pongracz is a sophomore

Biology major (focus: Organismal Studies) and Wilderness Studies minor from Bellingham, Washington.

*Here are the people who were involved with the first two days of the trip: Sara Schmidt, Communications Manager for the Blackfoot Challenge; U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service biologist Randy Garza, Vice Chair of the Challenge; Katie Knotek, Seeley Lake Ranger District; Rick Potts, retired USFWS.*

*And here are the people who were involved specifically with the float day: Lisa Ronald, Wilderness Communications Coordinator for the Wilderness Institute; Joanna Campbell, Nature Wisdom Guru and Director of Education Programs at the Wilderness Institute; Kascie Herron, Outreach and Communications Coordinator for American Rivers; Peter Metcalf, PhD student and Field Instructor/Coordinator for Wilderness and Civilization's 2018 field course.*

*All of the gear was kindly donated by Tarkio Kayak Adventures, Lewis and Clark Trail Adventures, and Professor Andrew Larson at the UM School of Forestry.*

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Contact Mark Singleton  
 mark@americanwhitewater.org  
 828-586-1930

Tallulah Race 2016. | Photo: Emrie Canen