

RIVER

A young dog earns his water wings on the Colorado River
By Peter Bronski



WITH THE RHYTHMIC STROKE OF OUR PADDLES, we leave the city of Glenwood Springs, Colo., behind and continue our float down the famed Colorado River. Ahead, a trio of herons stands at the water's edge on a small grassy island that sits mid-river, temporarily dividing the Colorado in two. We paddle for the channel on the right, hoping we've made the correct choice. As we enter the channel—well past the point of no return—we're confronted by a big rapid and tall waves.

Pointing our kayak resolutely downriver, we paddle hard into the rapid. Two waves crash over the bow, soaking Kelli (my wife), Altai (our dog) and me. The cold water is a momentary shock to our systems. We're drenched, but we make it through, exiting into calmer water below the rapid. Altai turns around to look at me, a shocked expression on his face, and seems to be thinking, *What was that?* Kelli and I, for our part, are elated. This is what whitewater rafting is all about.



Left: Peter Bronski; right (top) Peter Bronski, (lower left) Geoff Gourley, (lower right) Scott S. Warren



The author and his dog Altai on the river (top and far left).

Eight months earlier, Kelli and I had adopted Altai as a two-month-old puppy from a local shelter. His name, which means “golden mountain,” was both a reflection of his coloring and the embodiment of our wishes for what he would become as a full-grown dog. Kelli and I are passionate outdoor adventurers, and we hoped that Altai would become our companion in the mountains—hiking, climbing, camping, snowshoeing. Early on, he proved to be a more-than-able adventurer, romping in the snow, hiking on trails and scrambling over rocks to lofty summits.

But when whitewater rafting season came around, Kelli and I had concerns. Could we safely take him with us? Could we merge our passion for river adventure with our newfound responsibilities of puppy parenthood?

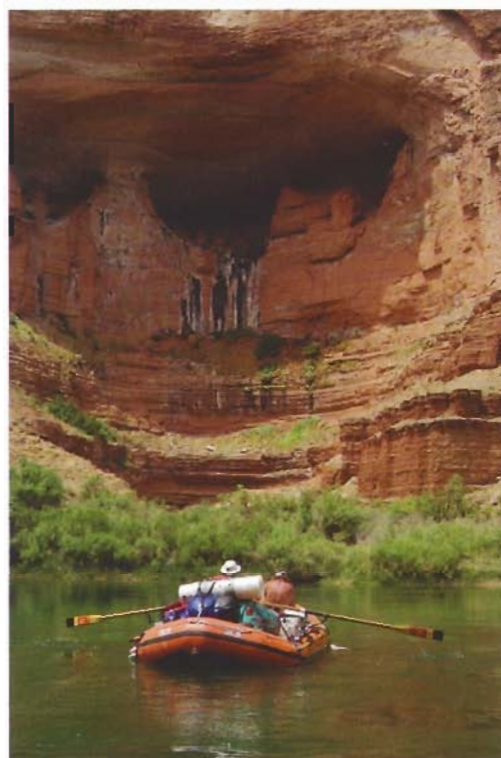
Preparation

I called Eren Howell to find out. Howell is co-owner of Dog Paddling Adventures, an Ontario, Canada-based guide service. Since 2000, DPA has been teaching people to run whitewater with their dogs on Ontario’s Madawaska River, and Howell seemed to be the definitive source of wisdom on the topic.

My primary concern, I told him, was how much whitewater was *too* much whitewater? When did rough water become too rough? “If you’re concerned about swimming it yourself, then definitely worry about your dog,” he told me, referring to that undesirable situation of being flipped out of the boat. “On the other hand, if you’re confident doing it, then your dog definitely can.” I had secretly hoped that, in response to my question, Howell would offer me a definitive grade on whitewater’s six-level classification system, taking the guesswork out of the equation. Now, it seemed, Altai’s safety rested squarely on my shoulders and my judgment.

I scoured the rivers of Colorado for an appropriate whitewater run, and ultimately settled on a 15-mile stretch of the Colorado River on the state’s Western Slope, starting in Glenwood Canyon, running past the town of Glenwood Springs and finishing humbly at a pullout along Interstate 70 known as Tibet’s Takeout. I chose the route for its scenic beauty—it is a transitional landscape, in which the evergreens and high summits of the Rockies slowly give way to the sagebrush and red rock of Utah’s canyon country—and also for its whitewater. Predominantly Class II with a series of Class III rapids thrown into the mix, it would offer Altai an introduction to whitewater rafting that wouldn’t scare him off the river for life, but would still give us a challenge and excitement.

In the weeks leading up to our planned adventure, a photograph I found on the Internet became our inspiration. Taken on a stretch of Arizona’s Upper Salt River, the photo showed a solo



whitewater rafter using a pair of oars in oarlocks to navigate his raft through a tumultuous, foaming rapid. In the bow of the boat, his yellow Lab stood smiling into the spray. With any luck, Kelli, Altai and I would be doing much the same thing, or having at least as much fun.

The Big Day

Then, suddenly, it is Saturday morning and the day of our river adventure: The inaugural day of whitewater with the puppy has come. We gather our Hyside Padillac (a durable, inflatable two-person kayak), lifejackets and paddles, and drive to the Grizzly Creek put-in on the Colorado River in Glenwood Canyon.

Accompanied by Altai—properly attired in his flotation jacket—Kelli and I walk the kayak down to the water’s edge. More than a dozen other rafts are lined up, with commercial guides and literal boatloads of paying clients ready to give it a go on the river. Altai is the only dog, and he gets lots of smiles as I strap our food, water and camera into the back of the boat. The Colorado is running swift and brown, and the rock walls of the canyon soar above us.

Kelli settles into the bow of the boat, Altai follows, and I push us off into the river’s main current. Altai’s ears are down, and he’s clearly not sure about this new activity. The inflated gunwales of the boat flex under his feet as he tries to walk around,



Left, © Craig Lovell/Corbis; right (top) Geoff Gourley, (bottom) Eric Fajtz

and he struggles to hold himself steady. We float downstream, and slowly but surely, Altai gets his river legs under him. As his comfort and confidence grow, so does the smile we've come to know so well, and he shows an endless curiosity about the canyon around us and the water surrounding him on all sides.

Before long, we tackle a series of straightforward rapids. Altai, who has been sitting in the bow in front of Kelli, comes back to sit between my legs; he seems to feel safer when sandwiched between us.

Then we face our first challenging Class III rapid of the day. We enter the rapid on river-right between two large boulders jutting out of the water. As the accelerating current pulls us into the rapid, a third large rock looms dead ahead. "Back-paddle right!" I yell to Kelli. Together, we quickly reverse our paddle strokes, which has the combined effect of halting our progress toward the boulder straight ahead of us and swinging the back of our kayak around so that we execute a 360-degree spin, exiting the rapid without touching a single rock. Both of us share the excitement and satisfaction of cleanly navigating our first major rapid.

By now, Altai, for his part, is learning to read the river. During calmer stretches between the rapids, he is alert, looking around at the canyon. But when he hears the subtle roar of approaching

whitewater, he drops his center of gravity and braces against the gunwale.

So continues our whitewater adventure. We follow a bend in the river oxymoronically dubbed No Name. As the river continues its westward march, the canyon slowly recedes, and the canyon walls are replaced by the hot springs for which the town of Glenwood Springs is famous. There's a pungent smell of sulfur, and the riverbank is streaked yellow and green with the mineral deposits from the springs. Amazingly, despite the busloads of commercial river trips driving up I-70 to the Grizzly Creek put-in, we have the river to ourselves.

As we float into the heart of downtown Glenwood Springs, the red ramparts of Elk Mountain loom over us. We pass an Amtrak station, and then a large Petco store. At the confluence of the Colorado and the Roaring Fork River, which flows down from Aspen, the river grows considerably. It's wide and gentle here, and we beach our kayak among willows on the shoreline to eat lunch before resuming our journey.

Back on the water, we pass the island with herons and the rapid alongside, and then face South Canyon Rapid, the biggest of the day. Our guidebook describes it as a giant wave train, and recommends tackling the rapid straight on and "staying at the top of the food chain." With Altai fully comfortable on the river now, we paddle hard into the rapid. It's like a wet roller coaster as we go up and over each successive wave.

With the South Canyon Rapid behind us, the river relaxes considerably, and the three of us kick back to enjoy the view. Just before Tibbet's Takeout, we navigate one final rapid, Dinosaur Hole, named for a nearby quarry where fossils were discovered. Soon, though, we're on the beach at Tibbet's, soaking up the warm early-afternoon sunlight. Altai lies down as Kelli and I deflate the kayak and pack up our gear. I glance over and see him smiling, and I know there's a river dog somewhere back in his bloodline. 🐾

ADVICE FOR WHITEWATER RAFTING

- If you don't have experience on whitewater, consider learning from a guide service. Dog Paddling Adventures (dogpaddlingadventures.com) offers dog-friendly whitewater canoeing trips on Ontario's Madawaska River. ROW Adventures (rowadventures.com) offers dog-friendly whitewater rafting trips on the Grand Ronde River in Washington and Oregon, and the Salmon River in Idaho.
- Both you and your dog should always wear personal flotation devices (PFDs). Just because your dog can swim doesn't mean he shouldn't wear a life vest—the power of moving water can defeat even the best dog paddle.
- Practice getting into, sitting in and getting out of your boat with your dog. For example, inflate a raft or kayak in your living room or backyard and work with your dog before you attempt your first shared river trip.
- Never tether your dog to yourself or to the boat. If your boat flips, or if you, your dog or both of you fall out of it, leashes and other tethers can get caught on rocks or other in-river debris, and the current may pull you under.
- Have fun!

Understanding Whitewater Grades

- Class I**—Fast-moving water with riffles and small waves: Easy
- Class II**—Straightforward rapids with wide, clear channels: Novice
- Class III**—Rapids with moderate, irregular waves and strong currents: Intermediate
- Class IV**—Powerful and turbulent, but predictable, rapids: Advanced
- Class V**—Extremely long, violent rapids: Expert
- Class VI**—Extremely dangerous, if not unrunnable