

# FEATURES

## Fear and loathing in the wilderness

By ALLEN JERNIGAN  
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Lightning sizzled in the valley. Looking from Water Rock Knob into the darkness of Haywood County, we passed a bottle of Bolla Valpolicella—Waynesville's best—and watched the thunderstorm roll across the Great Smokies. If there ever was a dark and stormy night, this was it.

They could have been twin fireflies, swirling knee-high out of the rhododendron, or luminous eyes swinging this way and that, claws crunching on the ground. Claws! An-

other flash gave a glimpse of a dark, furry shape. But another warm slash of the dry, red Italian wine lent courage enough to ignore things that scurry in the night.

Sitting on the hood of the car, we spoke of the white water on the Tuckaseegee River, and of the subtle ways of the Cherokee with Floridian tourists. A star or two glimmered behind the clouds, then branches crunched and snapped not twenty-five feet away. Beth sat still and silent as the mountains; I jumped off the car, but never lost my grip on the bottle.

"Let's get out of here!" was enough to

send us both scrambling for door handles. Secure behind locked doors and rolled up windows, we laughed about city folk scared of noises in the night. But we turned on the headlights in time to see Mama Bear rendezvous with Baby Bear, who growled indignantly at the bright intrusion on their tender scene. Mama Bear rose on her hind legs and advanced, pointy teeth gleaming.

Beth's Japanese sewing machine fired up, and we fled the wilderness that is known as the Blue Ridge Parkway. We were no fools. We were deranged white water fanatics. And we were survivors.

But for the occasional kingfisher, mountain laurel, and fisherman, the river was ours alone. Which was good, not only for the solitude amid the scenic splendor of the Smokies, but so nobody played spectator to our first run. Beth sat in the bows, scanning for rocks and other obstacles. Astern, I manned the beer cooler, and attempted to guide our way through treacherous waters.

"Essential to success in white-watering are three paddle-strokes," I told Beth. "First is the draw. It takes you in the direction you draw, if you are sitting in the front. The second is the pry; it does the opposite. The third is the basic go forward flat water stroke."

"Okay," she said. "Just remember that it takes me a while to tell left from right."

With a few scrapes over rocks, and a few inches of river in the bilges from seepage and plowing through standing waves—hydraulics, in the lingo of paddlers—we felt lucky, even accomplished. Until...

At one point the entire river roars through a gap that could be no more than ten yards wide, though we didn't stop to measure. In the midst of the chute are the dreaded hydraulics, which wave by wave fill your boat with water until the river is at gunwale level. Hidden by the treacherous waves are two monster boulders, each the size of a dorm room. That left about five feet of room to maneuver. Remember, a canoe is about



Looking down river

three feet wide.

Into the valley of death we rode, budweisers safely stowed, white knuckles on the paddles. Whoosh into the thundering throat of the river. "Hang on! You're gonna get wet!" I cried.

"Why just me?" she replied.

"Because I'm in the back," was the answer the river swallowed.

We did fine past the nasty rocks, and only shipped a little water in evil hydraulics. But at the bottom of the rapids, the river turns. "Draw!" I screamed. Somebody pried. But we're here today to tell the tale. After all, we paddle white water. We're survivors.



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