

Big Southern Trip - 1998

by John Kobak

These trips keep getting better every year. An intensive week of boating sharpens everyone's skills. This year 25 Keel Haulers participated in the trip. We added two new rivers, the Watauga and the Tallulah Gorge. We had typical weather; We were greeted by cold, drizzly weather on the Nolichucky, found blue skies and warm temperatures for most of the trip and were chased away at the end by tornadoes and floods.

People were coming and going all during the trip. **Jeff Cramer** didn't come until after Easter. **Dan Lichty** only paddled one day on the Ocoee. **Josh Kaufman** one day on the Tallulah, **Cliff Wire and Paul Lang** paddled three days. **Dave Becker, Rob & Dave Hammond, Mark & Pam Poljak, and Ron Tomallo** paddled for four days. Others like **Syd Reames & Chuck Singer** planned to stay longer but were done in by the Tallulah. Some like **Ron Whitney, Sue Stumble, Scott Carroll, Chad Weston and Bob Weible** left on the fifth day. This left **Bill Bolton** (now living in MI), **Bob Boyce, Scott Debalski, Mike Duvall, Matt Muir, Jud Roberts** and myself to paddle the rest of the week along with **Jeff Cramer**.

Seventeen paddlers broke up into two groups early Friday morning. Snow was falling in the mountains, a large club from NC decided to stay in camp and leave the river to us. We had a great time on the Nolichucky at 2300 cfs. This med-hi flow provided a good challenge but it only produced two swimmers. The winds blew in late and we got off the river early since we didn't stop for lunch.

Bill Bolton, Dave Hammond, Paul Lang, and Bob Weible found two paddlers from NY to lead them down the Watauga River, a tight class V creek that rates 35 on the KH scale. They came back with smiles on their faces, a great day with only **Paul** swimming. Paul said it combined the best features of the Upper Yough and Big Sandy.

While all of this was going on **Matt Muir, Jud Roberts and Colin Drozdowski** met in WV to do the Middle Meadow River at 1600 cfs. Matt was bummed when he heard he missed the Watauga.

This was the year of the Tallulah Gorge. A scheduled release and lottery produced Ron's winning entry. Ron was gracious enough to share this awesome experience with ten of us. Five people were permitted to run each day. The run includes 58' high Oceana Falls, and 20' high Bridal Veil falls with series of class IV rapids thrown in just to make it interesting. 100 boaters are permitted each day along with 20 last minute walk-ons.

Luckily we were able to get two more permits on Sunday so a total of twelve Keel Haulers were able to enjoy the experience. Saturday had a 40% success rate. Ron, Josh, Paul, Bill and Dave Hammond gave it a try, **Paul & Bill** had swims and Josh got a nice cut below the eye when he went over in the middle of Oceana on his third run. They all headed over to the Ocoee for Sunday's trip.

The main contingent headed over to the Tellico River at 300 cfs on Saturday. Eighteen people split up into two groups to run the whole run from the Ledges, over Baby Falls and Jared's Knee all the way down to the lower takeout. It was a long day at this low level. A few skipped the Falls and a few ran it twice. Lots of photo opportunities.

I believe we had 16 paddlers on the Ocoee at relatively high flow. I hear that **Bob Boyce** got surfed really good at Broken Nose but got out OK and **Cliff** got stuck in Double Suck. I'm not sure how everyone else did since I headed over to the Tallulah.

On Sunday they upped the flow on the Tallulah from 500 to 700 CFS. **Dave Becker, Scott Debalski, Matt, Syd, Bob, Chuck** and myself took the long flight of stairs (>500) to the base of Hurricane Falls. The river starts out with a bang, there is no warmup. We sat there for 30 min before we put our kayaks in the water. I couldn't believe my eyes when I saw Oceana Falls. Half way down the 58' slide sat a large rock slab shooting a 15' high stream of water into the air. The run was on the far left just missing the slab and ends up by

punching the large hole at the bottom. This hole twisted **Syd**'s back and he was hurting for the rest of the run. He decided to quit paddling for the remainder of the trip. Everyone else came out OK, except Chuck who bumped his elbow. It was here we met acclaimed author **Ken Strickland** (The "Woe" of Blue Ridge Lake) and his buddy, **Hank Zachary**. They were gracious enough to show us the lines through the rest of the Gorge.

The next set of rapids were scary since if you were a swimmer you would go over Bridal Veil Falls. Even though it was a much lower and a smoother run than Oceana, at 700 cfs the bottom hole was a keeper. The only way through was on the far left. **Chuck** got turned sideways part way down and started to scream before hitting the hole. His swimming skills broke him free and he retrieved all his gear OK.

A little further down a rapid called Lynch's Launch spilled 5 out of our group of 7. **Dave** destroyed his beautiful Silver Creek paddle (possibly a victim of the paddle snake). He grabbed his spare and left his broken paddle on the river bank. The last bit of excitement came when **Chuck** missed another roll attempt and swam. A fast rope by a canoeist who was looking for his paddle brought him in but his boat ran down a few more rapids. **Chuck** had a long walk culminating in another swim when he ran out of river bank to walk on, he dove in to get to his boat on the far side of the river, but he washed through another rapid. I grabbed him before he dropped down the next set of rapids.

The river ends in Tugaloo Reservoir and you must paddle to the dam where Perception provides a shuttle back to the put-in. We usually complain when we get to this lake from the Chattooga, but I think today everyone was relieved to finally see some flatwater after this steep run. With unique rapids and huge canyon walls, the Tallulah is one tremendous river. Makes one feel lucky to be there, and grateful to AWA and Georgia Power for making it possible.

Monday and Tuesday are Chattooga days. Everyone chose to skip Section 3 and do two days on 4. We split up into two ten person groups on Monday, **Hank Zachary** joined us. Everything went pretty smooth until Five Falls. The two groups got together at this point to set safety. **Mike Duvall** bailed out after flipping in Corkscrew and missing three roll attempts. **Ron Whitney** quickly pulled him in from the rock in the center. His boat went down the sneak route in "Crack in the Rock". The rest of us followed. At the 2' level the right crack is very grabby.

As usual Jaw Bone provided some excitement for **Pam** (first timer), she missed the eddy move and ran down backward. No problem. On Tue we had ten kayakers, the level went up to 2.1' and we had even more fun. **Bob Boyce** swam three times, but was ok. The non-race across the lake went on as usual.

Next is Matt's account of his trip. *"Then Ron & I drove about half an hour and met **Joey Baranski** and **Jason**. The former led **Ron** down his first time; the latter has won the race. What race? Why, the Green Narrows race, of course, because that's where we were. Was I nervous? Does a dog sniff butts? Hell yes, I was nervous, almost to the point of debilitating. Hadn't slept too well.*

*After a couple of boofs, the nervousness settled into the a relatively comfortable condition of being adrenaline-soaked and on edge. Could be worse. **Joey** was The Man to follow, explaining each drop and letting me know exactly how far behind I should follow. And follow I did.*

*My day wasn't perfect. I hit a couple rocks, and dropped off the ledge at Groove Tube a mite early. And I blew the All-American Boof, getting shoved into a rockjam on the right instead of cleanboofing to the left. But I'm not the only commie in the group, because while I was beginning to shove off the rocks, **Recon Ron** slammed into me, making it way tough to extricate. (i.e., he'd just scrooed up the boof, too.) **Ron**, BTW, spanked the Monkey for the first time. You couldn't hope for a better line at Gorilla than his, and I got it on camera.*

*Of course I walked Gorilla and Sunshine. Gotta show the river some respect, eh? Only **Jason** ran Sunshine; at only about 80-85% (estimated by the locals), he needed an exact line, and that's what he got. I figure I had a good day, but I was happy to finish Hammer Factor (**fun** rapid) and get the hail into my car. "*

Some rain showers entered the TN plateau and brought the Emory water level up. The rest of us met at Frozen Head Campground on Wed morning and decided with the Emory running at 2200 cfs the best run would be to start on Daddy's creek at DBT and paddle down the best part of the Obed and take out at Nemo. Six paddlers had a great time. **Bob** was still in the mood for swimming, but came out OK. He decided to rest on Thursday. We replaced him with **Matt** who had just drove in from running the Green Narrows. He was excited to learn that we had saved the best for him, Upper Daddy's creek.

Thursday morning the ranger drove up and warned us that Tornadoes were heading toward us. We were going to Big South Fork on Friday so we broke camp and I left **Peggy** with the RV at the Nat'l Park Visitor Center in Wartburg, TN. We decided we could get on and off the river before anything got to the area. I listened to reports as we drove to the put-in, a tornado was spotted and was bearing down on Wartburg and would hit in 10 minutes.

Luckily I had told the ranger that **Peggy** was in the RV. She brought **Peggy** inside and the plan was to go into their vault if the storm worsened. Luckily they only got heavy rains. We really lucked out, we drove to the putin and while waiting for the shuttle to return the sun came out and we had a dry day of paddling. However the streams started to flow into the creek providing us with some good views of water falls. The level was 1.5' and rising. It was a scenic run that is reminiscent of the Upper Yough but with easier moves.

We only scouted one rapid this year. I remembered the lines through a couple of others. We got off early and when we crossed the Emory it was going into flood.

Scott, Mike, Bill, Bob and I drove up to the Big South Fork while **Matt, Jud and Jeff Cramer** drove to WV. They had a miserable drive following the rain all the way to the Tygart. The rain hadn't got there so they had a low flow run of Middle Fork and Tygart while we got completely washed out of a BSF run. The river had gone from 1000 to 40,000 cfs. Too much for us as we watched trees, 55 gal drums and debris hurtling down the river.

All in all, it was a great trip and some of the newer paddlers really improved. See you next year.