Revised 2nd Edition

VERDE RIVER RECREATION GUIDE

An authoritative guide to boating, camping and outdoor adventure on the Verde River!

by Jim Slingluff

Covers designed by Bruce Robert Fischer / The Book Studio
Front cover: Jim Slingluff paddling at Prefalls on the Verde River. (Photo by Wayne House)
Photos not otherwise credited were taken by the author.

CAVEAT

(Warning)

Portions of the Verde River under discussion in this book lie in areas which may be under jurisdiction of the State of Arizona, the federal government, various Indian tribal authorities, or private ownership. Laws and regulations for each of these jurisdictions differ. Land ownership must be respected by persons who use the Verde River for recreational purposes.

Physical hazards may be encountered in areas of the Verde River and its tributaries. Water conditions change from day to day. Readers should take cognizance of the safety precautions identified in this book, as author and publishers cannot accept responsibility for such matters.

This book cannot replace lessons under a competent paddler. It cannot replace studying a quality instruction video or reading a book written to teach canoeing. It *can* give you some advice on how to avoid bad times on the water, but you will need to determine whether or not you find yourself in a bad situation.

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Dedication

To the people of the Verde Valley. You hold more potential influence over the future of the Verde than anyone else.

To the employees of Arizona Game and Fish Department, Arizona State Parks, and the U.S. Forest Service who labor to protect the Verde for its ecological and recreational values.

To John Parsons, who has given more than any other single person to the cause of creating a constituency for the Verde River.

SAFETY TIPS

- Unless you are a very competent intermediate boater—capable of running Class 3 water—do not paddle a wilderness section alone or as trip leader. Your best bet is to run it first with someone who has run it at the level and in the conditions you expect to encounter. If you do go into a section that you do not know well, remember that the minimum number of boats for a "safe" trip is three.
- Watch the weather.
- Do not drink or take mind-altering substances while paddling.
- Don't expose yourself or your loved ones to pointless risk.
- Read and follow the recommendations in the chapter "Being Safe and Happy on the River."

Boating Advice

Law and Boaters

The question "Who owns the land between the natural high water marks?" has plagued Arizona since 1985, when a State's Attorney claimed state ownership of the Verde River in a dispute with a gravel operation. Prior to that, streambed land was bought and sold for generations, in blissful ignorance of federal law which gives the state ownership to all lands below the highwater mark of all streams which were navigable at the time Arizona entered the Union. Immediately, the validity of deeds to over 40,000 parcels of land were thrown into doubt.

In 1986 the legislature passed a bill which allowed landowners to buy quit claims of streambed land from the state for a price per acre dramatically below market value. This same law gave boaters specific rights to passage to the Verde, Gila, and Salt Rivers. The Center for Law in the Public Interest took the state to court alleging that this issuance of quit claims violated the Arizona Constitution. (I was deposed by the parties involved in this case and spent over 5 hours being grilled by 7 attorneys.)

The arguments of the Center for Law were supported by legal briefs from virtually all the states in the western United States, except Arizona. In 1991 the Arizona Court of Appeals decided in favor of the Center and overturned the law. The legislature took up the problem in the 1992 legislature and passed House Bill 2594, which amended several statutes to try to fix the problem. This bill repealed the actions passed in 1986, including the specific mentioned rights of boaters for downstream access.

The new laws establish the Navigable Stream Adjudication commission through July 1, 2000. The members of the Commission are appointed by the Governor. This Commission is to look at all contested lands, determine whether the relevant streams were navigable at time of statehood, and determine the various relevant public values (habitat, recreation, etc.). If it is determined that the state has no legitimate claim to the land, that decision amounts to an abandonment of any state interest in that land (subject to court challenge). If it is determined that the state does have a legitimate claim, the Commission will then compile the list of public interests. The State Land Commissioner will then compare the advantages of keeping the land in state ownership to selling or renting it to the private sector at market value. In either case, the public interests must be protected. The Commissioner may also enter negotiations with a private person/corporation with a claim to a piece of property with an unclear history of navigability, and offer to surrender state claim to ownership in return for an agreement protecting the relevant public interests. All of this must be done under the light of public hearings and comment.

So, where does this leave boaters, other recreationists and the ability of the state to protect riparian habitat?

The repealed laws guaranteed downstream passage to the Salt, Gila, and Verde but to no other streams. Under the new law, all KNOWN public interests (including but not limited to downstream boater access) to ALL streams which were NAVIGABLE AT THE TIME OF STATEHOOD must be protected by the state. Also, there is an Arizona statute which lists recreation as an appropriate and protected activity within Arizona. (I have heard rural, very conservative law officers in Arizona assert their belief that any downstream passage within the waters of a flowing stream is legally protected.) My belief is that the downstream passage for boaters is safe at least on the Salt, Gila, Verde, San Francisco, Oak, Beaver, Virgin, San Pedro, Blue, and Bill Williams as well as for sections of rivers such as the Little Colorado, Santa Cruz, East Verde, East Clear Creek, the Black, the White, Wet Beaver, and West Clear. (These lists are meant to serve as samples and NOT as the entire listing of rivers of which all or part could be under state ownership.)

This law should also increase the rights of other recreationists (such as horsemen, anglers, hunters, and hikers) as well as the ability of the state to protect habitat, on those streams and stream sections where the state asserts a claim to a particular stream or stream section.

Remember, the Commission (whose decisions are subject to court review) must consider all KNOWN PUBLIC VALUES CONNECTED WITH THOSE STREAMS WHICH WERE NAVIGABLE AT THE TIME ARIZONA ENTERED THE UNION. The knowledge of all individuals, groups, clubs, and agencies concerning public values connected to streams which may have been navigable at statehood should be made available to this Commission. Personal records, recreational business and club records, or newsletters on activities within riparian zones, or on habitat values, are relevant. The way to be informed is to write the State Land Commissioner and request to be kept informed on proposed actions, hearings, and determinations concern-

ing streambed lands under ARS 37-1126.B, 37-1127.B, 37-1128.B, 37-1151.B, 37-1153.B and 37-1154.C.

If there are particular streams in which you have an interest, mention them specifically. All recreationists, conservationists, and associated clubs should do this to help create a listing of the public interests associated with their particular interests. Also, write the Center for Law in the Public Interest and let them know the streams on which you possess specific information.

Boaters have a specific and heavy obligation. The only lands to which state claims can be made are those which were navigable at the time of statehood. Consider this:

—A stream could have been NAVIGABLE at statehood even if it has not been proven to have been navigated at statehood.

—A stream need not be navigable year-round to qualify as navigable.

—If a stream was navigable, but human interference through dams, diversions, or overpumping took away the water flow, the stream is still considered navigable for the purposes of establishing state claim to the land.

—The existence of nonnavigable sections, due to rapids, falls, waterless sections, or other natural occurrences does not render the stream as a whole nonnavigable for the purpose of asserting a state claim.

—There have been decisions in other states which uphold the idea that a stream which was not navigable at time of statehood, but by using the technology of today *is* navigable, became valid reason for the purpose of asserting state claim to the lands.

Boaters, paddler clubs, and paddler magazines SHOULD NOT say or infer that a stream is unboatable if what they mean is the stream is too low, or high, or rough, or flat or tree-lined for their particular paddling tastes. Such comments could find their way into the commission or court as evidence that a stream has minimal public value, or was not navigable at statehood. Also, go paddle small streams and keep careful records of dates and conditions. Finally, don't forget to write the state land commissioner and let him know you possess information relating to the issue of stream navigability and/or public values.

None of us can let our individual and group responsibilities drop on this. It is the boaters, (past, present, and future) who hold the responsibility to secure the beachhead for the coming fight. All share in the fight to see that all public interests are known and protected.

We have the opportunity to protect habitat and provide access only as long as we grasp our individual, club, and business responsibilities.

Why Boat Shallow Water?

Some boaters are only interested in hydraulic thrill. They would rather boat Class 3 water located in a cement ditch than Class 1 water in a beautiful canyon. I do like heavy water, but my deepest attraction is for the riparian habitat.

Canoes, and other human-powered boats can be used as a pack animal, as a means of hauling humans and gear into remote areas. While boats are restricted to watery trails, they have numerous advantages over pack animals. They are less expensive to buy, feed and house. Vet bills are a rarity. They do not eat the riparian growth or defecate on the beach.

When deciding whether a section of creek is worth canoeing, I look at the effort it would take to gain the same access by backpacking. For example, let's say that a section of creek is 20 miles long. Over that 20 miles let's say that I will be out of my boat, dragging over wet rocks or simply wading beside my boat, for a total of a mile. Let's also say that that mile is broken into sections of four yards here, 15 yards there, and 40 yards over there. So, for one mile I'm out of my boat, and for 19 miles the boat carries me and my gear. Sounds like a fair deal to me.

I believe plastic canoes are the best single craft to have. They do not conduct heat or cold very well, they are durable, and they slide easily off rocks. Touching a metal boat in the dead of winter or in the heat of summer is not fun. Metal, wood and fiberglass all lack the durability necessary to boat shallow creeks. None of the latter materials will slide off rocks as well as does plastic.

Coleman canoes are the least expensive and most widely available plastic canoe. It is easy to find a used Coleman for sale. Colemans are durable but they come with an internal metal skeleton that can resemble a train wreck if you wrap your boat. Colemans are a good choice for folk on a tight budget, or as someone's first canoe.

Those who become enmeshed in the sport of canoeing almost always graduate to some more expensive canoe of a design more specific to the type of paddling they intend to do. There is a large variety of "name" canoes sold in Arizona. Dagger, Old Town, Blue Hole, Mohawk and Mad River canoes are all available in Arizona and are all manufactured by quality companies.

Kayaks and decked canoes are craft built not to ship water when exposed to large waves and turbulence. They are used in whitewater and on large lakes or bodies of salt water. The amount of gear you can

take is limited and the paddler has no real choice of body position. A properly designed open canoe in the hands of a competent paddler can go anywhere these decked boats can.

Rafts and inflatable kayaks range from cheap to expensive. Use the cheap ones in a swimming pool. They are too fragile for stream boating. The expensive ones are durable and easy to learn to paddle. However, they do not slide as easily over rocks and it is ill-advised to use them to carry heavy rocket boxes.

Paddling With Loved Ones

When I teach beginners to canoe, I try to initially separate parents from children and separate romantically-involved adults. There seems to be something about humans being emotionally close to each other that convinces us that we need not show the other person any patience or courtesy. If you do find yourself taking loved ones out on the river, I have some suggestions.

1. Don't fight. It's not worth it. You will never convince your loved ones that this activity is something they want to do if—whenever they do it—you yell at them.
2. Don't demean their efforts, especially if you are better at the activity than they are. You were pretty incompetent once yourself.
3. Make it your number one priority that they have a good time. When I was teaching my wife to canoe, we would only boat in warm pleasant weather. I would insist that she bring a book, a little wine. I would offer to slowly guide the craft while she imitated Cleopatra. As she decided that she wanted to paddle more challenging water, I never criticized mistakes. As she wanted instruction, I met her request.

Eventually, when she decided that my willingness to do this sport in conditions that required dressing up in rubber suits was too weird for her to join me, I didn't press her to go. As a result, she doesn't discourage me from going.

4. Your kids absolutely have the power to make your trip miserable. Plan for their limitations and wishes. If they are having fun, they will tolerate more, more cheerfully. If you are traveling with young kids, plan short trips and short days. Add lots of sand castles, swimming, bug chasing and fishing.
5. When what you want is a serious hard-core trip, find like-minded travelers. Don't try to force it on those emotionally close to you.

6. Give your kids low-key instruction. Take it from me, many children don't understand that canoeing is a simple exercise in physics. They believe that paddle strokes are really a religious ritual. If they do them right, the canoe gods make the canoe go straight.

They don't understand the relations of force, resistance and symmetry. When the boat won't go straight, they believe they haven't pleased the gods, or that it is just one more example of their personal inadequacy. If you get mad on top of this, you only add to their isolation.

7. Play with your boat. Use it as a swimming platform. Swamp it. Learn the limits of when it will tip through roughhouse games. It's fun, and you will learn a lot about your boat and balance.

What to Consider Taking

This section is written for novice stream canoeists. I assume you know what to take for a camping trip, so I'll focus on stuff peculiar to boating. I'll also suggest some ways to hold down your costs of acquiring new equipment.

In any season it is important that your gear that needs to stay dry does so. It's also important that you not lose any important gear in the event of an upset. (I know. You don't plan to upset. Almost no one does. The key is to plan for it, even if you don't plan to do it.)

Ammo Cans

Traditionally used by the Armed Forces to store ammunition, these small metal cans can be bought at surplus and camping stores pretty cheap. They are waterproof. They close securely. They can be easily tied into boats. For more money it is possible to buy plastic versions that are lighter in weight.

These cans are good for your personal toiletries, cameras, short-barreled handguns, or anything you might want quick access to, or items you don't want mixed in with other gear, such as your tools or medical supplies.

Rocket Boxes

Again, these are Armed Forces surplus items. The Armed Forces uses them to store larger-sized ammo and projectiles. They are waterproof and close securely. They are great for your food boxes, camp lantern, books and other such gear. Most of these are

rectangular in shape.

It is possible, though somewhat difficult, to find square ones. Square ones are good for dutch ovens and other kitchen gear that don't fit so well in the narrow rocket boxes. Rocket boxes can also be used to create portable, comfortable and very secure camp toilets.

Milk Crates

Not my personal favorite, but I have friends who pack these sturdy, open containers with canned food and other stuff that it doesn't hurt to get wet. They then weave rope over the top to hold the stuff into the crate and then tie the crate into the boat.

Waterproof Bags (also called wet bags or dry bags)

Heavy duty bags of various sizes, sold at stores that cater to boaters and through various catalogs. In these you store your sleeping bag, clothing and other stuff you really don't want to get wet. These bags are made of rubber or plastic, so they are soft sided. The gear you want dry and protected from being crushed should go into the ammo cans and rocket boxes.

Plastic Bags (inside other bags or backpacks)

Here is how the casual or new boater can imitate the benefits of waterproof bags without running out and buying them. Place the stuff you want kept dry inside a plastic bag. Press or suck all possible air out of the bag (this helps lessen the chance of tears or punctures). Seal that bag and place it inside another plastic bag, remove the air, and seal. Put the plastic bags inside a burlap bag, canvas bag or backpack to protect the plastic from general abuse and tie the whole shebang into your boat.

Strong Ropes and Straps

Take extras. It is better to carry extra ropes and straps needlessly than it is to be in a remote situation and want them. In addition to tying the boats to trees, or tying things into the boats, ropes/straps can be used to help pull boats off some midstream pin.

Life Jackets (of adequate size, design and condition)

You would think this would be obvious. Avoid "horse collar" personal flotation devices. It is easy to slip out of them and they are not comfortable. Small children should be in life jackets which have straps that run between their legs. If you need to pull your child out of the water, and your only available grip is on their jacket, you want the kid to exit the water with the jacket. It is not uncommon for children to slip right out the bottom of a jacket in this sort of situation.

Spare paddles

One spare per boat. Don't tie it in. You may lose your grip on one of your regular paddles at an inopportune time and need to quickly grab your spare.

Saw

Some large-toothed saw that can be packed into a small space. Such saws are available in backpacking stores or hunting/fishing stores. This is for more than the possible cutting of firewood. In my experience, the most common of pins in the stream involve trees or downed wood of some sort. Often, the only way I have been able to retrieve someone's canoe has been to cut away a stump or tree limb.

Various Personal Gear

- **Strap** or tie-on for your eyeglasses.
- **Shoes** that tie securely to your feet. Take an extra pair to change into when you are done wading and to serve as a spare.
- **Extra trash bags.** You can use these to replace torn ones that were being used to keep gear dry, or to carry out trash left behind by other folk.
- **Water purification** materials.
- **Fire lids** or small stoves. Using fire lids helps keep alive the fragile grasses that hold the beaches together.
- **Duct tape** (furnace tape). It can be used to fix virtually anything. I've seen it used to patch holes in boats the size of someone's head. Don't leave home without it!
- **Hand lotion.** Lots of hand lotion. From your hands' perspective, boating is sort of like washing dishes for hours each day, for days on end. Many western streams carry skin drying chemicals and/or possess a ph balance which is hard on skin. Take lip moisturizer, also.
- **Sun tan lotion.** Arizona boating includes lots of sun, reflecting off water and your boat.

- **Hats.** Take extra. The river gods seem to demand hats as periodic sacrifice. Take ones you can soak in water and wear to help keep you cool, if the water is hot.

Cold Weather/Cold Water

I'm assuming you don't have a wet suit or a dry suit. Even if you do, you should take some of this gear. Hypothermia is a real threat. Any time the air temperature plus the water temperature totals to less than 100 degrees you should be especially wary of this killer. Even if the total temperature exceeds 100, keep an eye out for symptoms. Especially watch children, small or thin folk, or those poorly prepared for boating conditions.

- **Flares.** A highway flare, available at automotive stores, stores easily and will light virtually any available wood.
- **Extra** change of **clothes.**
- Wear clothes made of **wool**, polypropylene or some other material which will help your body retain warmth even if the clothing is wet. Cotton does just the opposite. Wet cotton is worse than no clothing at all in most situations.
- **Wool cap** and a **wool scarf.** Your most significant heat loss occurs where there is lots of blood near your skin, such as your head, neck, armpits and groin.
- **Gloves** made of wool or polypro. It helps to wear a larger glove of some material which will cut the wind over a wool or polypro glove. Another option is to carry lots of nonsterile plastic medical gloves which you wear under your wool or polypro gloves.
- **Ski pants** or the plastic sauna pants that are sometimes available (at low cost) in health food stores. These help cut the wind and keep you dry from incidental splashes.
- Small plastic **boots** or plastic to wrap your feet in before you put your feet into your shoes.

Dealing with Pinned Boats

This is a casual discussion of an important topic within the paddling community. Not only have long and detailed articles been written about it, but multi-day training courses complete with graduation certificates are out there.

Remember this. Your boat can only be badly pinned if you put you and your boat in a situation where a pin is probable. It is possible to regularly boat the Verde and substantially avoid this possibility.

Rescuing Trapped People

Do it real fast. Better yet, make sure every person on the trip knows what evasive actions to take which can virtually eliminate the chance of a person being trapped. On occasion, people are trapped simply walking across a stream. If the water is fast and somewhat high, it is possible for a foot to become tightly wedged in rocks. If a person loses balance, it has happened that the force of the river has twisted their body downstream, breaking their leg and pinning them underwater.

Obviously, getting in this unhappy situation suggests first that the person has attempted to walk across a high, fast stream. "High," incidentally need not be much over a person's knee, especially if the water is fast and the stream bed very rocky. "High" to your child may be very low indeed.

The person's upper body must be supported up out of the water. The more body out of water, the less pull the force of the current has on the person. You don't have enough strength to do this just by lifting.

If you followed my excellent suggestion to bring lots of rope and/or straps, you can usually secure each end to trees or rocks on the banks. This rope can then be made taut, located so it intersects the trapped person and is itself sufficiently above the water level to be able to provide secure support.

Sometimes the person is trapped in conjunction with the boat. Maybe the person ended up swimming downstream of an uncontrolled and/or swamped boat with both paddler and boat being swept on to a tree or rock. It's kind of like a sandwich. The person is the filling. The boat and the obstruction are the pieces of bread.

Another possibility, especially with kayaks, is that the boat, with person inside, was swept onto a rock or tree. The force of the water then collapses the boat onto the paddler's legs, and wraps boat and legs around the obstruction.

Another possibility is that the boater attempted to run a very steep, near vertical, drop and pinned the bow on a rock. Rather than the

boat spinning sideways, for some reason the boat may stay in a linear position. The water rushes over the boat and pins the person, face down, underwater, to the front of the boat.

The possibility of a swimmer being trapped by being caught between a swamped boat and an obstruction is the only one which is likely at low flows. The other two possibilities usually occur at higher flows and to the boaters who dance with the river in those more challenging of times. The risk of any of these accidents occurring can be substantially reduced by not being careless and by making the right decision.

I always carry a saw on canoe or kayak trips. Using the saw I can free boat or paddler trapped against wood by sawing away the wood. I have helped retrieve boats that otherwise would have to have been left, except that we had a saw and could simply remove the obstruction. Saws can also be used, if necessary, to saw through the boats themselves, if the boat is not metal.

As mentioned earlier, you must rig a way to help the person keep his head above water. This usually means stringing ropes. Once you know the person is not immediately facing death, you can work the rest out.

Retrieving Pinned Boats

Rafts can be punctured with a knife, deflated and repaired on shore after the rescue.

Canoes and kayaks usually need to be lifted in some way. Try to get the current to work with you, not against you. Lift one end of the trapped boat up out of the water. Often the current will grab the other end and spin the boat off the obstruction. With canoes, you may have to try to spin the boat a bit to keep as much of the current as possible out of the inside of the canoe.

While rescuing people or craft, don't get downstream of the pin unless the situation is absolutely secure. A second pin involving you will not help the situation. Try to secure or remove all entangling lines, especially those with fish hooks on the end. Try to approach the situation from the sides. Don't get directly above the situation if you might get swept into it and become part of a problem.

It wouldn't hurt to do some reading on swift water rescue if you plan to boat. But, remember, you can decide what situations you will chance. If you boat low water, you can never eliminate the risk of a trapped boat. You can almost virtually remove the risk of a trapped person.

The International Whitewater Rating Scale

This scale has been standardized around the world. At least, these concepts have been standardized around the world. The application of these words has not.

Class 1

Moving water with few riffles or obstructions. Standing waves are not greater than one foot high, peak to trough.

Class 2

Small rapids with waves not greater than three feet, peak to trough. Channels are obvious and clear of obstructions. Scouting is not typically required. Maneuvering does not require the paddler to significantly fight the current.

Class 3

Powerful rapids with waves typically less than five feet, peak to trough. Scouting is advisable. Maneuvering is required, often in conflict with the push of the current, in order to miss obstacles.

Class 4

Long and difficult rapids which require intricate and precise maneuvering in turbulent, pushy water. Scouting is typically necessary. Rescue is difficult.

Class 5

Extremely difficult and violent rapids. Necessary maneuvering is difficult and requires precise boat control in violent, pushy current. Obstacles are frequent and difficult to miss. Rescue is difficult, perhaps impossible.

Class 6

The most extreme imaginable. (Some waterfalls 25 feet or greater in height are only considered Class 5.) Teams of experts run at significant risk to life.

Stream Sections Ranked by Boating Difficulty

This ranking assumes the cfs is not at flood flows. As the gauge at Camp Verde nears 300 cfs and the gauge at Tangle Creek ("Going into Horseshoe") nears 500, all of these sections are more difficult.

If a wave of water is traveling down the watershed, it is possible that one of the tributaries could be dangerously high while the gauge at Camp Verde is still at a safe level. When in doubt, stay safe.

This ranking is for the stream segment as a whole. Individual rapids or situations within the segment could be more difficult than the ranking indicates.

Finally, this ranking does not factor in the effects of weather or isolated location. If a section is listed as "shallow," boaters should anticipate getting out of their craft to drag through shallows at the regularly-occurring flows.

Easy Sections: Class 1 through Low Class 2

Verde River

- Morgan Ranch to Perkinsville (shallow water).
- Perkinsville to TAPCO (shallow water).
- Dead Horse Park to Bridgeport (shallow water).
- Bridgeport to Oak Creek.
- Oak Creek to Camp Verde.
- Camp Verde to Beasley Flats.
- Horseshoe Dam to Bartlett Dam.
- Bartlett Dam to Salt River.

Oak Creek

- Cornville to Verde River (shallow water).

Beaver Creek

- Montezuma Castle to Verde River.

Medium Sections: Low Class 2 to High Class 2

Verde River

- Beasley Flats to Childs (under 300 cfs at Camp Verde).
- Childs to Horseshoe Dam (under 500 cfs at Tangle Creek).

Oak Creek

- Page Springs to Cornville.

Beaver Creek

- Confluence of Wet/Dry to Montezuma Castle.

High Class 2 and 3

Hard Sections or Contains Strainers

Verde River

- Beasley Flats to Childs (above 300 cfs at Camp Verde).
- Childs to Horseshoe Dam (above 500 cfs at Tangle Creek).

Oak Creek

- All sections above Page Springs.

Wet Beaver Creek

- All sections.

I did not forget a section. If I did not list it, I am recommending you not even consider paddling it until you know for a fact that you are a strong, competent whitewater paddler.