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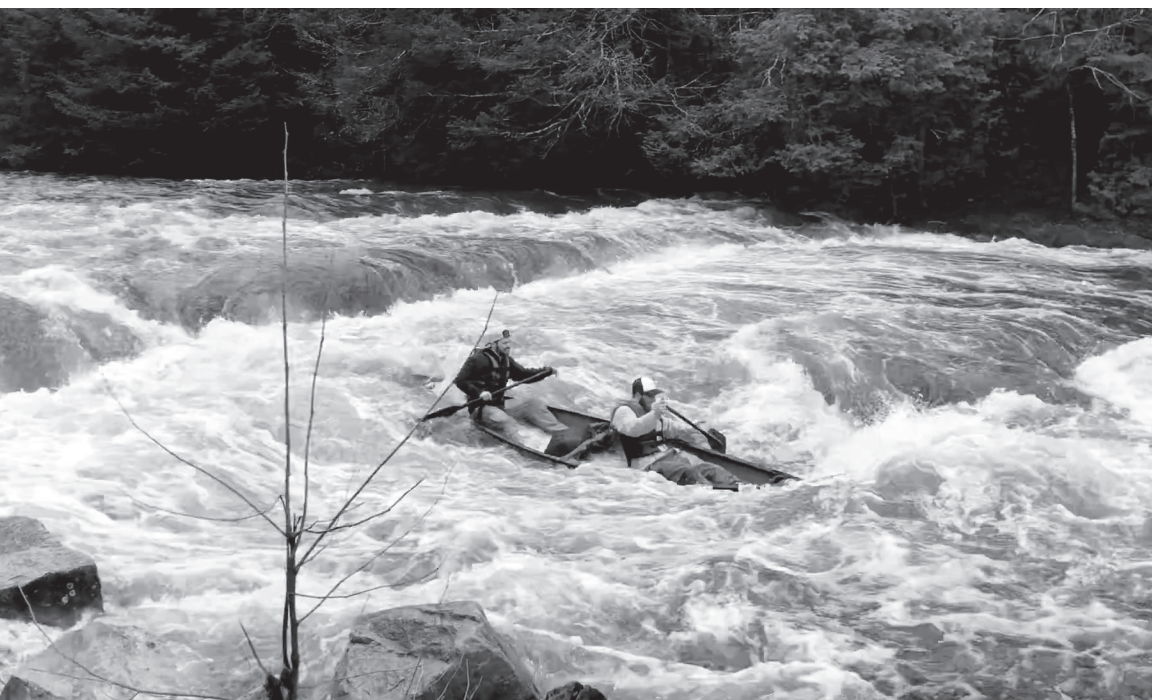
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Debacle on the Salmon

A rowdy river humbles two foolhardy canoeists

Michael Rouleau



THE FOG GREW DENSER AS I TURNED MY CAR ONTO THE GRAVEL ROAD and descended into the Salmon River State Forest in Colchester, Connecticut. I slalomed around potholes and puddles before parking in a woody pull-off not far from the river. We hopped out, threw on our life jackets, and removed the canoe from the roof of my car.

Since I'd discovered paddling a year earlier, I had wanted to try this run of quick water and intermediate rapids through a scenic ravine. Our end point would be six miles downstream, near the Comstock Covered Bridge, where we had parked another car.

I had read that this is a springtime-only adventure, as summer's low water levels make it impassable for paddlers. I knew that on this hazy April morning the river was still engorged with the snowmelt and rain of an early New England spring.

I was eager to start the season strong and knew that my buddy Nick would be up for the challenge. We excitedly carried the canoe down the dirt road toward the sound of rushing water. We couldn't see it, but we could hear it through the trees.

"You're going in there?" asked a fisherman walking uphill. He looked surprised. We didn't know that this was the opening day of fishing season on one of Connecticut's favorite trout streams.

"Yep!" I responded enthusiastically, with the undue confidence of a single-season paddler.

He stopped in his tracks and his voice took a grave tone: "I've come here many years, but I've never seen the water like this."

"We got it!" I shouted over the flow and smiled as we left him standing there.

Moments later we arrived at the edge. The river was a torrent. Nick and I looked out and saw whitecapped waves speeding downstream. The river bent out of view, and steep forested slopes rose beneath an overcast sky.

"You sure this is a good idea?" asked Nick, suddenly skeptical.

I was thrown off by the ominous scene, too. The river looked much angrier than I imagined. But we came all this way, and I had talked up this run and dreamt of it for months.

Michael Rouleau, in the stern, and his friend Nick approach turbulent water on the Salmon River in eastern Connecticut. COURTESY OF MICHAEL ROULEAU

“Yeah man, we got this!” I yelled over the water. “The guidebook says the only sketchy part is in a couple miles at an old, washed-out dam! Like we planned, we’ll get out and scout it first!”

Nick appeared convinced.

Conveniently beside the torrent was a calm eddy inviting us to put in our canoe. Nick wore fishing waders—waterproof coveralls with boots attached—and proudly jumped into the water to show off his gear. I hopped in the stern, and Nick walked us toward the mouth of the eddy, then took his position up front in the bow.

The last time Nick and I paddled together had not gone well. It was the previous summer and I had just purchased this canoe. We were embarking on a multiday paddle on the Connecticut River, I in the stern, Nick in the bow. There was no teamwork, no coordination between our paddling. The boat slithered like a water moccasin as our discordant strokes offset each other. Nick could only stand it so long before insisting that he take the stern and steer us straight.

But that was last season. I’d since logged more than 100 miles of river paddling and progressed into a fairly competent stern paddler. I’d embraced canoeing and felt confident in my abilities to read the river and steer the boat. I had to prove to Nick that I was not the same paddler, that I knew what I was doing this time around.

Together we oared perpendicularly out of the eddy. The flow caught the nose of the boat and swung us facing downstream. The current swiftly carried us. I twisted the paddle so the blade sliced the water, then pivoted the shaft against the hull of the canoe to stabilize us. With the paddle jammed in the water, I pushed out, turning us right, pulled in, turning us left, then parallel, making us straight again.

“Nice!” yelled Nick up front, seeming impressed with my maneuverability.

The run was immediately thrilling. The boat heaved downstream as waves splashed over the nose and soaked Nick. Within a few minutes, gallons accumulated at our feet. The boat swayed like a pendulum as the water sloshed around. Nick, used to being in the driver’s seat, paddled to his own rhythm. Three strokes on the left, two on the right, one on the left, five on the right.

“Nick!” I yelled, trying to calm him. The river was moving fast enough, after all. He didn’t even need to paddle.

But there was no reaching him. The rollicking water and pumping adrenaline locked us into a chaotic tempo. We plowed through waves and took on water. Nick threw his body weight from side to side as he paddled.

And I followed suit, throwing my weight from side to side—ruddering on the left, the right, the right longer, the left—trying to stabilize us and keep from capsizing.

Eventually the river relaxed. We got into a groove and relished successfully navigating the intro rapids. Our hearts pumped and we laughed. We breathed in the misty forest air and felt elated.

“We took on a lot of water,” I said, bringing our attention back to reality. The cold April water was above my ankles. I was wearing Tevas—open-toed sandals strapped at the front and back of the feet.

“Shoulda worn waders,” Nick said, looking warm in his.

“We should be arriving at the dam soon,” I said. “Let’s dump the canoe when we pull over to scout it.”

I looked in the distance and there it was. The river appeared to end as the water crested the dam and fell over the edge. I steered us to river right, we pulled onto the bank, dumped the water, and trudged with anticipation through brambles and overgrowth toward an old foundation beside the dam.



The canoeists inharmoniously paddled over the old dam, taking on water. COURTESY OF
MICHAEL ROULEAU

From our vantage we could see the whole obstacle. The guidebook was accurate. On river right, there's a break in the dam, creating a chute that smoothly channels water through three drops of a couple of feet each: a Class III rapid when the water is right. I didn't know if the water was "right," but it certainly wasn't low.

Nick and I deliberated and decided we should go for it. Below us, on the other side of the drop, stood a group of fishermen. Nick scrambled down and over to them.

"Hey guys, we're going to take our canoe down this!" he yelled over the sound of crashing water. Their eyebrows lifted. They looked amused.

"Can you film it?" Nick handed over his cell phone and one of the men happily took it.

"Absolutely," he replied.

We scurried back to the boat, took our positions and launched into the current. We resumed our lack of coordination and inharmoniously paddled toward the chute, which was much less visible from this vantage point.

Moments later we were upon the dam but slightly off target. Rather than the middle of the chute, we were too far to the left. And rather than a clean slide through three drops, we teetered and tipped over the first. The nose of the canoe crashed into a hard surface. The hull flexed outward, as if to fold in half. And a surge of water came flooding in.

The second drop came, and we started to tip. Nick, ever the optimist, continued to paddle. I grabbed the gunwale and braced for the inevitable ejection. The third drop came, and it was over. My face plunged through a huge wave and my body swirled under water until being spit out unscathed before the filming fisherman.

Nick was sucked underneath like a bucket submerged, as his waders filled with water. He clung to the upside-down boat, which dragged him downstream out of the rapid.

Unaware of the unfolding circumstances, I giggled and trembled with adrenaline and thanked the fisherman for capturing what was sure to be some hilarious footage. Moments later, Nick pulled our capsized boat to shore—thankfully we were both still holding our paddles. He looked very stressed.

"The gear, the gear!" he gasped.

I peered out at the water and saw both of our drybags—full of food, water, cell phones, wallets, keys—floating downstream. I followed his lead and ran through the woods as if we'd catch up to the gear and dive into the rapids to retrieve it.

Nick wasn't as nimble as usual, for his waders still were full of water. He ran like a giant saturated sponge, water gushing out of his clothing with each stride. We ditched this plan within minutes and slogged back to the boat.

Without a word to the still-chuckling fishermen, we took our positions and were back on the water, more uncoordinated than ever. I noticed the yoke—the wooden beam stretching across the hull—had broken from the gunwale. That had released the drybags.

Nick paddled up front with terror-stricken urgency in the direction of our valuables. Our paddling reached new levels of franticness—bodies and oars flailing from side to side. Just as before, we slithered and swayed through the rowdy river. Water again pooled around my feet, making the boat ever harder to control as the liquid sloshed around. The river bent our gear out of view. We doubled down.

Around the bend stood a row of annoyed-looking fishermen—perhaps they weren't having luck on fishing opening day. The river's quick bend caused our boat to fishtail as the bow breached the eddy and the stern stayed in the current. We plowed through all five of their fishing lines.

"Sorry about that!"

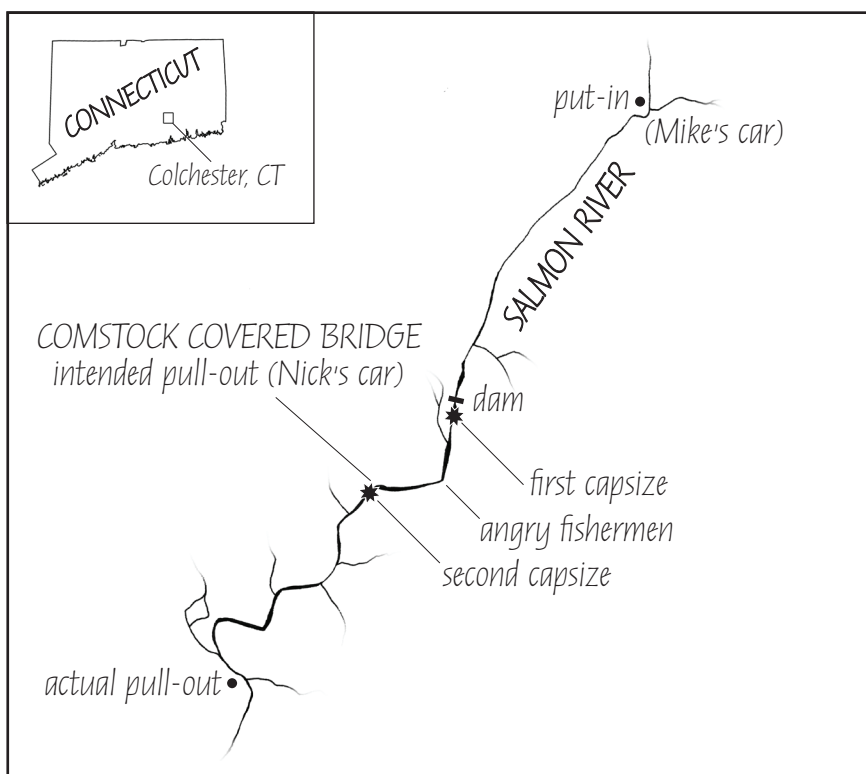
They hurled expletives at us. I couldn't help but laugh at the situation. This trip was devolving into a perfect mixture of failure and hilarity. How could it get any worse?

With our boat still fishtailed and our bodies miraculously unhooked by fishing lures, we now floated sideways. We drifted beneath the Comstock Covered Bridge—our planned end point. I could see Nick's car through the trees. This was also the busiest section of the river. The banks were lined with families and anglers, settled in for opening day.

Nick paddled of his own accord. I couldn't straighten out the boat, and we continued sideways through the choppy water. With maximum spectators watching, fate conspired and another flood of water filled our boat. We flipped again.

This time we were charged with the even more difficult—and embarrassing—task of righting the boat and dumping the water while in the middle of the river. I looked around and gave an imaginary wave to the people.

Luckily, we could stand, and within a couple minutes we were paddling yet again. The river bent into a much more secluded zone. The spectacle concluded. Our gear was nowhere to be seen, but the river was calmer, and we paddled gracefully. Where were the spectators now?



The canoeists' landmarks, intended pull-out, and final end point on the southwest-flowing Salmon River, a tributary of the Connecticut River. ABIGAIL COYLE/AMC

Farther and farther away from Nick's car we floated. What lay ahead and when would this end? The guidebook didn't describe this portion of the river. Another bend in the distance.

Taking advantage of the flat water, we moved swiftly downstream. We rounded the bend and there they were: two drybags bobbing tranquilly like buoys in a misty Maine harbor. We snatched them and exited the water as soon as possible. Good riddance, river.

Relief washed over us and cold set in—the sky was still gray and air still cool on this brisk New England spring day. We shed our clothes, down to our skivvies, and draped them over the boat. The final dumping of water came from Nick's waders. Shivering and half naked, we began the walk of shame and carried the canoe through the woods.

Shortly into our slog, we spotted a lowly fisherman camped in the trees. Still buzzing from our trials on the water, we walked toward him with a story to tell.

"I saw," he interrupted, not impressed.

"Our car is parked by the covered bridge," we said, sending needy glances.

"That's over a mile away. You boys need a ride?"

"Yes." This was no time for pride.

We situated the canoe in the bed of his pickup truck. The kind man turned up the heat and drove to our car, saving us the humiliation of walking disrobed past the angry fishermen and dumbstruck families.

I'm not sure if we'll attempt this river again. But if we do, we at least won't wear waders or strap gear to the yoke. A spare shirt and pants would be nice, too.

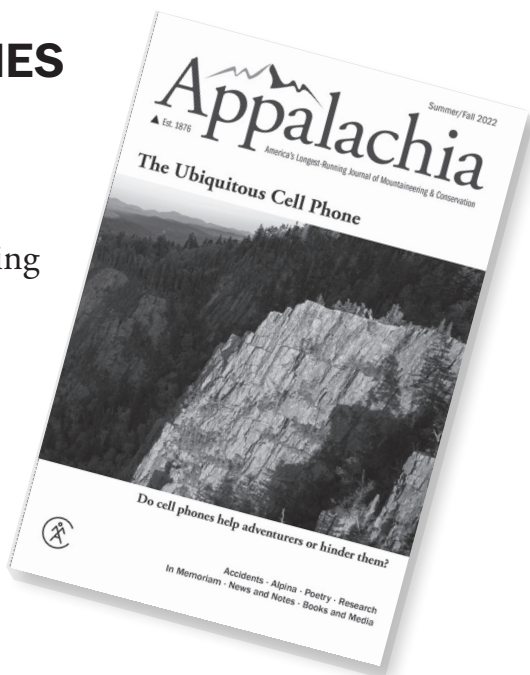
MICHAEL ROULEAU is a Connecticut-based outdoors enthusiast. He works in public relations at Eastern Connecticut State University and resides in Coventry with his wife, Amanda; son, Cole; and cat, Reiko.

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