



It takes a team to get the 25-foot Red Rogue voyageur canoe to the Yellowstone River and six people to paddle it. The brigade is seen launching from the Pelican FAS near Greycliff on July 14 at the halfway point of their 212-mile journey from Yankee Jim Canyon to Pompey's Pillar.

# River Rogues and Rapids

## A Voyageur Canoe Brigade's epic journey down the Yellowstone

Story and photos by  
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Sometimes the best river trips are a result of good timing and luck. For a group of 16 voyageur canoeists, months of careful planning for a 212-mile Yellowstone River trip came with some anxiety leading up to their launch date on July 9.

The group consisting of 13 Canadians and three Americans were unsure if the trip was going to even happen until days before they left for Montana.

The Yellowstone River had peaked twice in May and June at 60,000 cubic feet per second and on June 21 it was still well over 50,000 cfs and close to flood stage. By July 2 the river had dropped three feet but was still at 30,000 cfs, a dangerous level (Stillwater County Search and Rescue had suspended water-recovery efforts for a man missing since June due to debris, river speed and water clarity).

Plus, the Indian Fort Fishing Access Site near Reed Point was washed out, Itch-Ke-Pe city park in Columbus was closed indefinitely, the road to Buffalo Mirage FAS (Sportsman Park) was closed, the number of 40-50 foot cottonwoods in the river was astounding and two weeks of thunderstorms and heavy rain kept the river from dropping.

However, with mere days to go and talk of postponing the trip circulating via email, the weather turned hot and dry. Itch-Ke-Pe and Buffalo Mirage reopened and the river quickly dropped to a less-frightening 22,000 cfs at the Billings gauge. The trip was back on and the party finished packing, loaded up the voyageur canoes and drove to the Carbella FAS just below Yankee Jim Canyon in Paradise Valley, arriving on July 8.

The paddlers came from British Columbia, Alberta and Saskatchewan, plus one from Spokane, Wash. and two from Eau Claire, Wis.

They paddled the river in two 25-foot voyageur canoes with six people in each boat, averaging about 30 miles per day. The six-seat canoes are replicas of the ones used in the 17th-19th centuries by French-Canadians during the height the fur trade and are still popular in Canada among those wishing to explore historic fur trading routes through innumerable rivers and lakes.

### The History

Voyageur canoeing in Canada has a rich and layered history that began in the late 1600s as a way to get into the wilderness of Canada and the Pacific Northwest. Fur trading initially developed along the coasts of North America and as it expanded to the interior, the problem of transporting the 90-pound bales of beaver furs was solved in part by rugged voyageurs (French for "travelers.") They paddled and portaged in large maneuverable canoes through the maze of rivers and lakes, establishing trade routes for the Hudson Bay and North West Companies.

The most common designs were 36-foot "Montreal canoes" (600 pounds) or the 25-foot "North canoe" (300 pounds) constructed from white cedar and covered with birch bark. The larger canoe could carry three tons of cargo and the smaller one about half of that. These "freight" canoes were crewed by five or six voyageurs and could be portaged by two men.

This method of transporting furs continued into the late 1800s when railways and steam ships effectively ended the voyageur era. However, the spirit remains in the hundreds of Canadians (and Amer-



The Rocky Mountain voyageur canoe leads the way down the Yellowstone River on July 15 with Wayne Elliot of Denare Beach, Saskatchewan at the bow, and Merle Pederson of Rocky Mountain House, Alberta in the captain's seat at the stern.

icans) who participate in weeks' long canoe brigades retracing some of these traditional trading routes in voyageur canoes made with modern materials.

### The Red Rogues, et al.

The brigade of modern voyageurs arrived in Montana with two 25-foot canoes; the Red Rogue brought by Wayne Wilson of Kelowna, B.C. and the Rocky Mountain canoe brought by Merle Pederson of Rocky Mountain House, Alberta. Each voyageur canoe had been used extensively on prior expeditions.

The mostly Canadian crew has extensive backcountry and river experience and have been traveling in the massive boats on Canada's rivers and lakes for more than a decade. They have also paddled the entire Columbia River, plus parts of the Kootenai, Clark Fork and Missouri rivers in Montana.

Co-captain Chuck Pike of Vernon, B.C. said he has been paddling voyageur canoes since 2003 and Pederson started in 2005 via the 600-mile Saskatchewan Centennial Canoe Quest.

Pederson, who lives on the North Saskatchewan River, was among the most experienced paddlers on the trip. He's spent 12 years as an outfitter in voyageur canoes and the decade before as a guide, while logging more than 45,000 river miles. He has run Class V (expert) rapids in solo whitewater canoes and on the trip shared a picture of him engulfed in whitewater on a Class V+ run.

Many of the team members met through message boards via the Canadian Voyageur Brigade Society and most have been taking yearly expeditions since the mid-to-late 2000s.

They have paddled the epic 1,080-mile main stem of the

Mackenzie River in the Northwest Territories which flows out of Great Slave Lake and meanders northwest to the Arctic Ocean and the land of polar bears. The Mackenzie is the second largest drainage basin in North America, behind the Mississippi.

In 2011 they spent six weeks paddling the length of the Columbia River during the David Thompson Columbia Brigade. Pike said they arrived at the Pacific Ocean "on the same day that [British-Canadian explorer] David Thompson reached the Pacific two hundred years earlier." Thompson (1770-1857) has been called "the greatest land geographer who lived," mapping 1.9 million square miles of North America over his lifetime.

Last summer they were among only three teams to complete the entire paddle from north-central British Columbia across Canada to the nation's capital in Ottawa, Ontario in celebration of Canada's 150th birthday. They followed traditional fur trade routes and arrived with much fanfare and celebration, including an escort from a hundred additional paddlers who joined them towards the end. Their

month-long trip ended on Canada Day, July 1.

### The Yellowstone

This year's trip on the Yellowstone included 16 men and women paddlers from three different brigades on the 212-mile stretch from Carbella to Pompey's Pillar over eight days.

The crews included a wide variety of personalities and professions. Select members of the party included Suzanne Davidson, chemical engineer; Wayne Wilson, museum director; "Captain" Bob Groves, attorney; Val Koenig, retired bank manager; "Captain" Pike, contractor; Kris Townsend, college professor and web manager of the Lewis and Clark Trail Heritage Foundation (lewisandclark.org) and Keith Barnard, Australian expatriate.

The day before the trip officially started Pederson and Wayne Elliott of Denare Beach, Saskatchewan ran Yankee Jim Canyon in a 17-foot tandem canoe, sight unseen. "We had to climb up on the rocks to scout one spot because we couldn't see where the water went around one bend," Pederson said.

Yankee Jim is a dangerous

stretch normally reserved for rafts and kayaks and can be Class IV (advanced) or higher at peak flows. Three days before their trip began a man drowned in the canyon after the raft he was in flipped in a rapid.

During the trip they would rotate drivers as there were only six people in each boat and they had four vehicles. They camped at fishing access sites and KOAs along the river.

They experienced tricky flows through Livingston on their second day to the point where Pederson said, "We had to pay attention."

They enjoyed the 22-mile section from Grey Bear FAS (west of Big Timber) to Pelican FAS (Greycliff) on day three so much they paddled it a second time instead of taking a scheduled rest day on July 13.

### The Flippin' Rogues Rapid Crew

On Saturday, July 14 they started at Pelican FAS and paddled to Itch-Ke-Pe park in Columbus. On the way they encounter strong currents and one particularly dicey rapid about 20 miles into the 33-mile leg.

At the Twin Bridges section west of Columbus—where the interstate crosses the river—large waves are formed just past the bridge which move laterally due to a pushy side-current off one of the abutments. The rapid is there year-round but was exceptionally high at 20,000 cfs. Pederson called it a Class IV hole, but said the runoff was easy so it would be downgraded to a Class III (intermediate) rapid.

The Rocky Mountain team went through first and the 25-foot canoe got nearly vertical on the five-foot haystacks. Pederson and crew managed to get through the wave train without swamping, although they had to bail gallons of water below the rapid.

The Red Rogues weren't so lucky.

The crew got over the initial wave fine but the current pushing off the eastbound bridge turned the

craft sideways on the second and third wave and the canoe began to take on water. When they hit the fourth—and largest—wave, the Red Rogue rolled upriver in surreal slow motion and flipped, casting all six paddlers in the water in an epic wipeout. Due to the strength of the current and 5,000 pound weight of the swamped canoe, it took most of the crew nearly a half-mile to get to shore, aided by the Rocky Mountain crew.

After a lively conversation that evening, which included good-natured ribbing of "Captain" Bob Groves of Kelowna, B.C. (who was at the helm of the Red Rogue), the site of the spill entered Yellowstone River lore as "Flippin' Rogue" rapid.

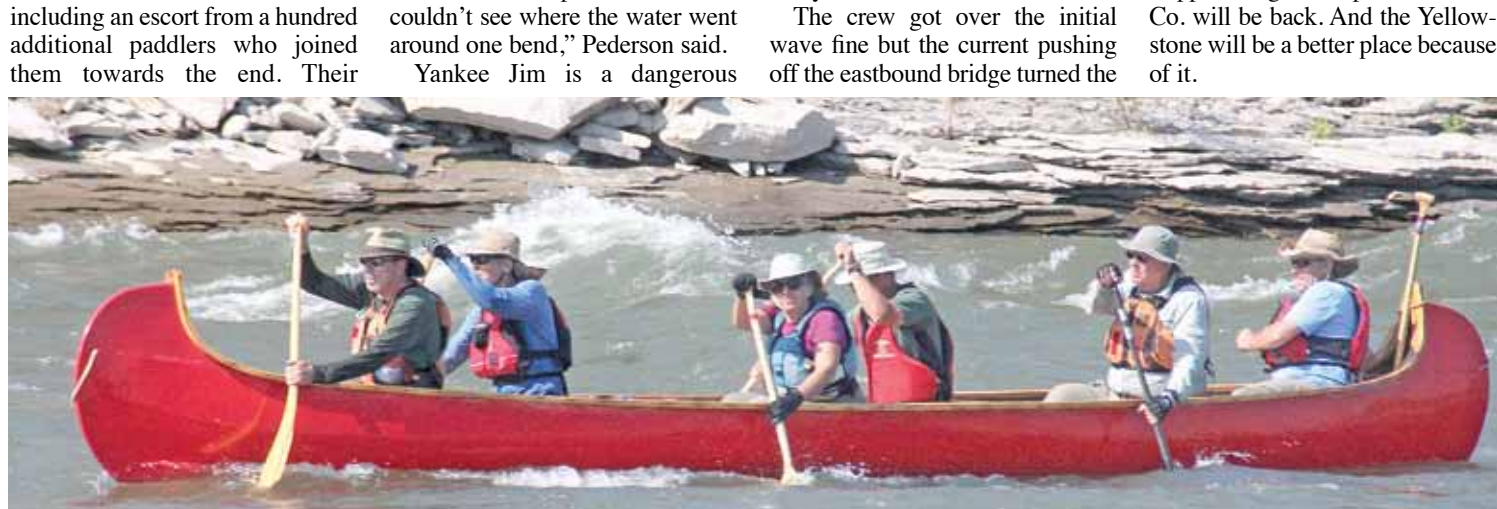
Over the next two days the brigade made their way from Columbus to Laurel and down to Coulson Park in Billings where the river was smoother and the water level continued to drop. They had a lay-over day on July 17 and drove to Pompey's Pillar and visited Pictograph Cave State Park before taking a self-guided brewery tour in the evening. On their final day on the water they paddled the 32 miles from Billings to Bundy Bridge near Pompey's Pillar while experiencing much of the same view as William Clark's party in July of 1806.

They finished their trip by visiting the Little Bighorn Battlefield the next day, then began their lengthy journeys back home on July 19.

The paddlers were thoroughly impressed with their experience, with many members calling the Yellowstone their favorite river. Townsend said "most every paddler said it was the best river they ever ran." Elliott called it "world class" but admitted parts of it "scared the s\*\*t out of a few paddlers."

The weather, strong flow, braided channels, rapids, history, solitude and perfect timing all combined to make it a trip to remember.

If their enthusiasm holds, the Flippin' Rogues Rapid Crew and Co. will be back. And the Yellowstone will be a better place because of it.



Members of the Red Rogues team are seen in the 25-foot voyageur canoe of the same name below Special K Ranch on the Yellowstone River on July 15. They took the cautious route through this stretch after flipping on a massive wave the previous day.



The 16 voyageur brigade members are seen at Coulson Park in Billings before launching on the last day of their 212-mile journey down the Yellowstone River July 18. From the left are Merle Pederson, Wayne Elliott, Bill Erickson, Sharon Cohlt, Wayne Wilson, Kris Townsend, Deb Williams, Eugene Peters, Suzanne Davidson, Val Konig, Chuck Pike, Darlene Mussenden, Kathy Walraven, Keith Barnard, Richard Wagens and Bob Groves.