

# POTOMAC RIVER EXPEDITION

## PART 1 - FAIRFAX STONE TO WILLIAMSPORT, MD

By Mike Luisi



DNR Photo by Mike Luisi

### INTRODUCTION



DNR Photo by Keith Lockwood

I have often wondered what life must have been like long ago...during a time of vast exploration and uncertainty about what challenges lied ahead. A time when the world, as we know it, was unspoiled, undiscovered, and far from understood. I try to imagine the overwhelming emotions that the first settlers of this country must have felt as they moved inland, anxious and unsure of what dangers and hardships awaited them around every corner, through every valley, and across every river. However, despite the tremendous physical, mental, and emotional obstacles they were faced with, their bravery and willingness to push on was not without its rewards. I do not know anyone that can honestly say they have fished in a river where no man has ever cast before...or reached the summit of a mountain and gazed upon land devoid of human influences as far as the eye could see. These were the simple rewards of life that were once so abundant and that now, for the majority of us, are real only through our imagination and our dreams...

I'm not saying that living in today's world is not challenging. Although different in many ways, we are still faced with the same basic obstacles that can cause an enormous amount of stress and anxiety in our life. In a world full of cell phones, traffic, crowds, and the philosophy that faster is better, it is difficult, *but not impossible*, to find a place to get away

and experience the peacefulness and tranquility that so many of us need and enjoy. One such place is a little spot called "Western Maryland," where my journey began earlier this summer. Whether you are at home or taking a few moments out of your busy day at the office to read this, I hope that for the next few minutes I can take you to a place so beautiful and wild, that I will inspire you to go out and try it for yourself, realizing through my experience, that the [Potomac River](#) is just one of the wonderful getaways that the State of Maryland has to offer.

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## THE MISSION

Our mission is to traverse the entire 383 miles of the Potomac River from its source at the Fairfax Stone, MD/WV, to its union with the Chesapeake Bay at Point Lookout, Maryland. As a fisheries biologist, there is no better way to develop an understanding of an aquatic system than to experience it "hands on." Being able to say, "Been there...done that!" can make a huge difference when you are trying to relay information to someone about a particular recreational opportunity that is available to them. What better way is there to explain to someone what it is like to fish the upper Potomac River than to have already done it yourself? Having the jobs that Angel and I do, we are both expected to answer an array of questions oriented towards fishing opportunities in the state of Maryland. Therefore, our goal during this trip is to document all that we can about the Potomac River so we can be a helpful and "user friendly" resource for anyone interested in pursuing similar interests.

Much of the emphasis of this article will be on the recreational opportunities (Kayaking, Canoeing, Fishing, etc.) available to travelers of the river. However, I feel that it would not be a complete story without the inclusion of the river's rich history and diversity of landscapes.

Obviously, this is a goal that will take a great deal of time to accomplish. Although we don't plan to complete our mission this year, we hope to travel approximately 170 miles from [Fairfax Stone to Williamsport, MD](#) this summer. Therefore, this article will be the first in a series of reports depicting this arduous journey.



## THE CREW



Well, if you are going to take this trip with me, I figure it is only polite to introduce myself along with my crew who made this trip entirely possible. My name is Mike Luisi and I am a Biologist with the Maryland Department of Natural Resources. I have been assigned the responsibility of organizing this trip and putting together this article, tough job huh? I recently completed my Masters Degree in Biology from Tennessee Technological University, where I was involved in a research project working with brown and rainbow trout on the Hiwassee River in southeastern Tennessee. I moved to Maryland last summer and reside in Annapolis with my wife Sarah.

My right-hand-man or I guess I should say my *right-hand-woman* on this trip was Angel Bolinger. Many of you who frequent our webpage may recognize this name because

Angel writes the Fishing Report and is the point of contact for the Maryland Sportfishing Tournament. Angel is a fisherman...oops...fisherwoman...oh forget being PC! Angel is a fisherman all the way! When she is not in the office writing about fish, she is working on a charterboat trying to help other people catch fish. Angel will be traveling along with me and I look forward to the time we will get to spend together.

Last but not least is our ground support, Keith Lockwood. When we could, we tried to meet Keith at the end of each day to reorganize and resupply. Angel and I didn't realize how great it was to have Keith waiting for us alongside the riverbank until it was too late. Keith was always happy to see us (I think his brain was a bit fried from being in the car all day) and always had an enlightening tale and an *optimistic* (ha, ha, ha!) outlook on the day's events. A native of the Jersey Shore, Keith has lived on the Eastern shore of Maryland for many years but rarely has he visited western Maryland. He kept saying that he couldn't believe how many *rocks* there were out here!

## THE ARSENAL

Just a few of the lures that proved to be worth taking along.





## THE JOURNEY BEGINS

A river has to start somewhere...why not from a stone?"

Well, we said we were going to start at the source, and that we did! Our quest for the Fairfax Stone, which is the point of origin of the Potomac River, lead us from Annapolis to the western most part of Maryland. Although historically significant, the location of the Fairfax Stone was not very well marked; therefore, we just kept driving down the side of the mountain until almost magically we reached our destination. Growing up in southern New Jersey, my family and I traveled almost every summer to some destination south of the Mason-Dixon line so we could enjoy the sweltering, humid August heat a little more intensely before school started again in September (go figure?). I remember crossing the Potomac River on interstate 495 and I was always impressed with its size (Remember...this was when I was a kid!). If anyone had taken me to Fairfax Stone then and told me that this is the same river I would have called them crazy! Well, as you can see, the mighty Potomac starts out as nothing more than a spring seep.



Thomas Lewis, a surveyor employed by Lord Fairfax set the original Fairfax Stone in 1746 on the northern most branch of the river, its purpose was to mark the boundary of land owned by Lord Fairfax between the Rappahannock and Potomac Rivers. There was much controversy over the Potomac's true source after the stone was set because some believed that the southern branch of the river was the true source. The south branch of the Potomac is longer and extends farther west than the northern branch. However, the Supreme Court decided the matter in 1910 when they ruled in favor of the original decision (Graham 1976).

Angel and I had a long trip home that evening but seeing the river that day, which was just a trickle through the woods, already made the trip complete. I was very excited to get on the water and let the river take me and OH BOY DID IT EVER!

## “THE WAIT IS OVER”

Day 1 - 6/4/01

Finally, after months of discussion, preparation and planning we were ready to tame the whitewaters of the upper Potomac River! We only had one day to go and in the morning we would be on the water. We didn't know what to expect and I admit I was a bit nervous about what was in store for us.

We (Me, Angel and Keith) set up camp in the Potomac State Forest at Lostland Run. There we met with Forest Manager John Denning who was kind enough to offer us a shelter camp. Luckily he did because rain was in the forecast and Angel's tent had seen better days. However, it wouldn't be



until the following evening she would find out just how bad her tent was.

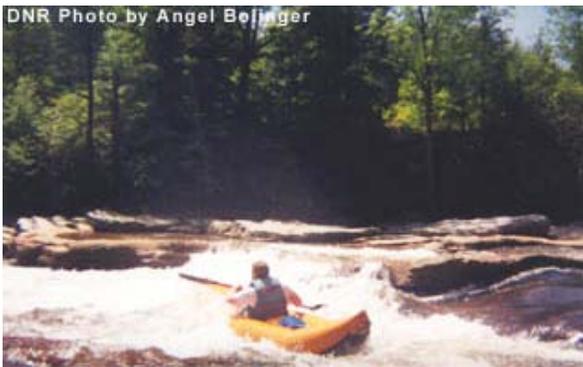
Jody Johnson, a DNR biologist stationed at the Mount Nebo field office, offered to accompany Angel and me on the first leg of our trip. He met us at camp that evening and because we had a few hours of daylight left we decided to go down to the river to see if we could catch a few fish on some of the \$0.99 lures we purchased at the local Wal-Mart. While Jody and Angel went upstream to fly fish, I decided that heading downstream with my spinning tackle would be the way to go. Wading was difficult but the view was fabulous. I made a few casts into the rushing waters and each time my lure passed behind a large boulder or through a deep pool I could feel my heart pounding in my chest, anxiously awaiting the first strike... and then it happened. Just as my lure hit the water I saw a flash and a few seconds later my line went tight. I set the hook and immediately was engaged in a battle. Although this fight would last for only a few seconds, its rewards were unforgettable. I was rewarded by a half dozen more beautiful rainbow trout throughout the evening and as the sun set to my west I sat down and closed my eyes, trying to take in all that surrounded me. For that moment I was in peace and felt like the river had accepted me. Little did I know that in the morning I would be awakened from this dream engaged in yet another battle, this time not as sure about the outcome!

## **“LETS GET WET”**

Day 2 - 6/5/01

[“Steyer, MD to Lostland Run”](#)

Approximately 8.5 miles / 5 hours

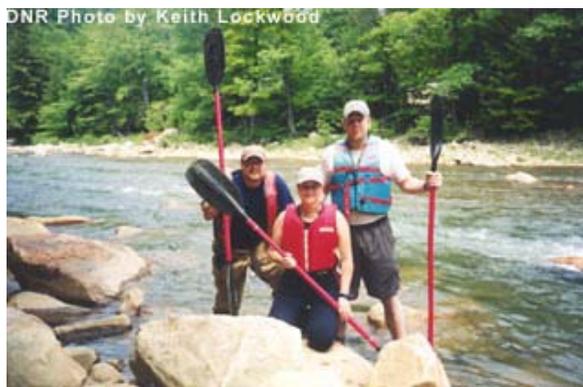


A night of rain ended with the rising sun. Keith and I rolled out of our tent onto the soggy ground and began to break down camp. Today was the day. We were meeting Jody and a few of his coworkers (Ken Pavol and Alan Klotz) in Steyer, MD where we planned to shove off from shore to see what the river had to offer us. However, first things first... BREAKFAST! Anyone who knows me knows that I like to eat. So I prepared a protein filled breakfast consisting of eggs, bacon, sausage, and hash browns which we all enjoyed (some a little more than others...mmmmm!).

The air was crisp and clean when we arrived in Steyer and it looked like the rain from last night had passed and the sun

was going to shine today. We loaded up our kayaks with fishing gear and other necessities before we finally pushed off down the river. We were in individual, self-bailing inflatable kayaks called *Rubber Duckys* and it was the first time that Angel and I had ever been in something like it. Now, Jody and I would not call ourselves whitewater experts but we both have spent a lot of time navigating whitewater rapids, however, this was a first for Angel. The first half-mile of river was slow and it gave each of us time to acclimate to our vessels and experiment with limits of its maneuverability...and then out of nowhere we were put to the test. [Jody](#) took the lead on the first set of rapids and I followed him mimicking his every move hoping that he was making the right decisions and correctly reading the water. This was no joke!! We were being presented with some serious class 3 and 4 rapids and it was not long until I was so caught up in getting to the end that I forgot about Angel. I quickly called to Jody and he turned into a small eddy where I joined

him. We spun our kayaks around and Angel was nowhere in sight!! Then, just as we were about to get out and go back up river to see if she was all right, she came crashing around the corner setting herself up for the largest drop of the day. Then it happened...the front of her kayak caught onto a rock and she started to spin. As she spun around Jody and I looked at each other realizing that she was in trouble. I thought to myself that there is no way she can make it, the river is going to eat her alive. I closed my eyes and held my breath for just a few seconds and when I opened them Angel was sitting right next to me in the eddy laughing and smiling. She said to me, "Isn't this great?" I don't think she knew how close she came to being dumped in the river and neither Jody nor I ever told her.



The rest of the day went about the same. Either Jody or I took the lead and at the end of each series of rapids we turned around in an eddy to watch Angel defy the laws of physics and gravity as she plunged onward mastering the technique of running rapids backwards!

Feeling more comfortable now after a few hours on the water gave me the opportunity to look around and soak up some of the sights and sounds we were swiftly passing by. The scenery throughout this section was breathtaking and at times I wished the river would just stop so that I could appreciate more fully the beauty of the landscape. However, in the end, the river didn't stop and we surged forward to our takeout at Lostland Run (where we camped and fished the night before). By the end of the day and with the aid of a few minor adjustments to her kayak, Angel went through a complete metamorphosis. For the first time she could finally experience the exhilarating feeling of whitewater splashing in her face instead of running down her back!

## “THE REWARDS OF BEING A FISHERIES BIOLOGIST”

Day 3 - 6/6/01

[“Barnum, MD to Luke, MD”](#)

Approximately 5 miles / 5 hours

For the second morning in a row we awoke to soggy ground and a cool damp chill in the air. Angel was forced to spend the night in the backseat of our truck because her tent was leaking and mine was full (Me and Keith). Fortunately, the rain held off while we made breakfast and broke down camp but on our way to meet with Jody the skies open up and let us have it!! It poured for an hour or so and we began to think that we would have to call off the trip. Then without warning the skies cleared and the rain stopped.

Feeling a little banged up and sore from the previous day, Jody, Angel and I decided to take it easy today and do a little fishing along the way. We put our duckys in a few miles below Jennings Randolph Reservoir and immediately we came upon a nice area that just looked fishy. We were all itching to get our lines in the water so we decided to wade around and see if we could catch a few trout. Angel was on a mission. Before Jody and I could even get our gear out, she yelled, “Got one!” Using light spinning tackle we managed to catch a handful of small rainbow trout that morning. Spinners, crankbaits and topwater poppers worked well and we all enjoyed the rays of the warming sun as the clouds broke and the fog lifted.

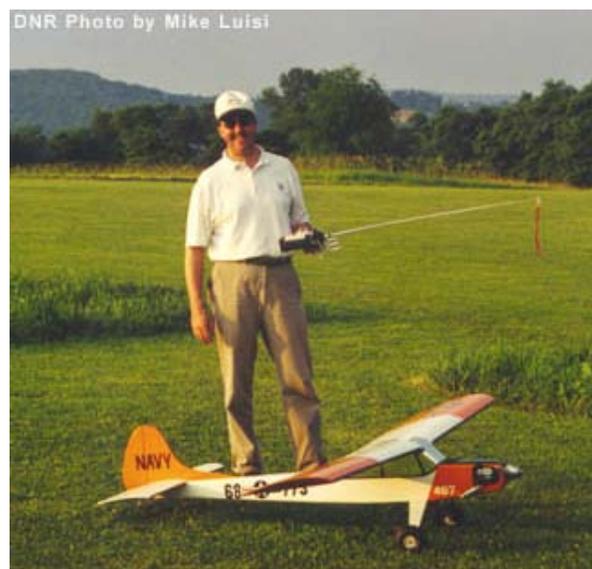
At the time I didn't realize how lucky I was when I pulled those fish from the river. I was later informed that the area we had spent the previous two days floating had been devoid of life for many years and was referred to as a biological desert only a few years ago. A land rich with coal brought the settlers of this country to the hills of western Maryland long ago. As more and more people moved out here, small towns began to form around producing mines and before long coal mining became the way of life in this area. Although coal brought life to this region of the country, it also took life in more ways than one. Children lost their fathers and mothers lost their sons in catastrophes such as the explosion of 1911, which took the lives of twenty-three miners in Mine No. 20 (Gude 1984). Although tragic, I consider the harmful effects that these mines caused on the environment just as disastrous. Acid mine drainage played havoc on the aquatic ecosystem in nearby streams which eventually resulted in Ph levels unfit for fish and other forms of stream life. Fish populations in the upper Potomac River went from being considered by some as “natures

infinite bounty” to a river that could not sustain even the simplest forms of aquatic organisms (Gude 1984). However, thanks to the dedication and hard work of some environmentally conscious individuals and the advent of the [Lime Doser Program](#), the fragile balance necessary to sustain life in these streams has been restored. The river now flourishes with life in all forms and with the aid of the departments stocking program, anglers now have the opportunity to experience to the thrill of seeing a trout rise to take the fly that has been so delicately created.

We were all a bit tired as the day came to an end and to make matters worse, both [Angel and Jody broke their rods](#)...and no...it wasn't a fish that did it!All in all we had a great day, stopping at numerous points along the way and indulging in one of the simplest pleasures of life...catching a fish. As we exited at the [confluence of the Potomac and Savage Rivers](#) I pondered on the previous days events realizing just how lucky I was to get the opportunity to do this. Angel and I packed up and headed back to Annapolis to begin making preparations for the long leg of our journey that will take us from Steyer, WV to Williamsport, MD. We are going home to get the canoe and the proper gear that we will need to successfully complete our mission. We are determined to follow through with our plans and I didn't realize it at the time but the excitement and adventures had only just begun.

## “HERE WE GO AGAIN”

Day 4 - 6/24/01



Another travel day!It has been 18 days since we left the river and as we drive with our canoe ( a 17ft Tripper rented from Spring River Corp., which is located in Annapolis, MD) strapped on the car thoughts begin racing through my mind about the next week that Angel and I have so meticulously planned. What will go wrong?What will go right? Did we bring enough food? And so on.... (Remember...I like to eat!)Keith Lockwood is with us again and he is going to be our ground support for the next few days. After we put in tomorrow we plan to get to the town of Pinto, MD to set up camp. The problem is that there are no campgrounds along the river in, around, or anywhere near the town. Therefore we decided to go to Pinto to scout it out and try to come up with a plan. After an hour or so our options for a campsite looked bleak and then up ahead I saw what appeared to be a miniature airplane flying just over the hill. What we luckily stumbled upon was the Cumberland Aircraft Model Society. There were a handful of gentlemen leisurely enjoying the crisp evening air and they were more than happy to help us with our problem. All I can tell you is that when we left that

night our problem was solved. Thanks guys!!>

We camped that evening at the primitive campsites at Savage River State Park and as we pulled up I saw a large black figure by the edge of the woods. I'll give you three guesses to tell me what it was. You got it!It was the first black bear that Angel and I have ever seen!Lets just say we had some company at our campsite that night and all through the night the cars that passed by stopped to take pictures of our big buddy.

The cars were not the only things that passed by all night. The midnight train came by about once an hour and I can speak for all of us when I say that sleeping was pretty tough. We went to bed early anxious about what was in store for us tomorrow.

## “NOTHING LIKE THE SMELL OF A PAPER MILL IN THE MORNING”

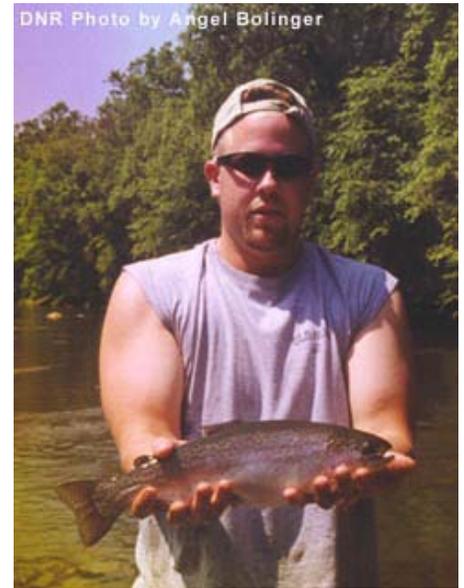
Day 5 - 6/25/01

“Steyer, WV to Pinto, MD”

## Approximately 13.5 miles

We are on our way! Keith saw us off around 9:30 in the morning and there was a hint of the paper mill lingering in the air. The paper plant in Luke, MD has effected the water quality in the North Branch of the Potomac for years, however, improvements made at the effluent source have decreased the amount of dissolved solids and turbidity downstream making the section we are about to float a better home for large sunfish and smallmouth bass (personal communication, Ken Pavol).

Angel and I were very focused on fishing and I was impressed with the fishing clinic that she put on. We hit this one large pool late in the morning and she tore them up! In about 45 minutes she reeled in 12 redbreast sunfish and 3 nice smallmouth bass. Later that day, I put on a white grub and jighead because the ratteltrap I was using got cold. About three casts into this new bait there was a strike! Now, I had been catching small fish all day long and when this fish hit I knew that it was big. My ultralight was completely bent in half and my drag was intermittently running. After fighting that fish for a few minutes I thought that I was about to land a nice smallmouth. Thinking that we were out of trout waters, you can understand my surprise when I looked down to see a beautiful 15-inch rainbow trout on the end of my line. Wow! That was fun!



Over the years I have spent a lot of time canoeing and fishing rivers and lakes and I must tell you that this float was by far the most fun that I have ever had. The views were spectacular and the fishing even better. Limited access points in this area make for a peaceful and quiet trip. Thinking back I don't recall even seeing another person that day. It was so quiet that morning that many times we got within a few yards of deer taking their morning naps in the ivy along the riverbank. More than once we were witness to a doe teaching her fawn(s) how to traverse the river and run from danger. However, what sticks out in my mind the most is the bald eagle that we saw almost as soon as we got underway that morning. All throughout the day we kept seeing this bird soaring through the valley ahead of us. It was as if it was watching over Angel and me, clearing the path and chasing away danger. I only wish it would have stayed with us a few more days and in a minute you will see why!

The day ended in Pinto and we met with Keith who had a great dinner planned. All was well but what happened next could not have been planned any better. While we were pitching the tent, I thought I heard something move right next to me. As I turned I was literally face to face with a little baby deer that was desperately looking for its mother. When it realized that I was not what it was looking for it began to quiver with fear and made a call for help. It turned quickly to see its mother waiting about 100 yards down the trail and a moment later it was gone.

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**“WHITEWATER + POOR JUDGEMENT = A LOT OF WET GEAR”**

Day 6 - 6/26/01

“Pinto, MD to Cumberland, MD”

Approximately 10 miles



Another restless night of sleep was not what I needed before setting out today. We shoved off around 8:30 and immediately the fish started to bite. I found that using a topwater popper in the early morning was most productive for me. Angel stuck by her trusty Git-Zit with a white paddle-tail grub. Fishing was great today! Angel caught a really nice smallie (16 inches) and I had one boil at my popper that was huge! The scenery was spectacular and the riverbank was alive with wildlife, however, I didn't see our guardian (the bald eagle from the previous day) at all today. He must have figured that we were ok and that we could handle any situation no matter how difficult. Well, he was dead wrong!

I was warned that there was an old earthen dam (pictured above) that we would probably have to portage before we reached Cumberland and I had the coordinates of the dam locked into my GPS unit. As we approached the structure, it was apparent that we were not going to be able to run the slew where the wall had broken down. Large boulders and powerful hydraulics made it too risky to try. We had to go around! We chose the West Virginia side to use for our portage and for the next hour everything went as planned. First Angel and I carried all of the gear around to the put in, about 30 yards away. Next, we carried the canoe down and began to reload. We were positioned in a large eddy and in order for us to get back to the river we had to cross an area where the current was running very hard and perpendicular to our position. I would later regret my next decision...I decided to try to build enough speed in the canoe to bust right through the rushing waters and reach safety on the other side. That was a big mistake! The instant that this column of water broadsided the canoe it rolled us over on our side and we began to take on water. Immediately I bailed out and the chill of the water took my breath away. Angel dropped her paddle and held on for dear life. It would have been ok; however, we were heading right for a large tree trunk that had fallen over our path! Angel contorted her body in a way that sends chills up my spine when I think about it and miraculously dodged the obstacle that could have seriously injured her. Trying to keep my composure and remain calm, my only objective now was to get to safety. The current pushed us into another eddy where we were able to gather our senses and assess the situation. Most of our [gear](#) was stored in waterproof containers; however, my camera took on some water and was out of commission. We were lucky that neither of us were injured and after another hour we were back on the water heading towards Cumberland.

We met Keith in Cumberland that afternoon and filled him in on the days events. Our plan was to portage Cumberland and put back in at Spring Gap in the morning. We stopped to get some drinking water and chicken livers for catfishing that night at the C&O Canal Spring Gap campground. As the sun went down that night we broke out our rods again and fished for a few minutes but the mosquitoes were so bad I thought they were going to carry Angel away. We retired to our tent early and Angel and I talked about what we could do tomorrow to increase the stakes on fishing. We are about even right now on total catch but we thought a little competition couldn't hurt. Hence, the creation of "THE GAME."

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## ["THE RIVER TAKES A NEW FORM"](#)

Day 7 - 6/27/01

["Spring Gap, MD to Paw Paw, WV"](#)

## Approximately 19 miles

Noisy neighbors caused yet another night of tossing and turning, however, Angel had no problem sleeping through the night, again! Energized and full of go-get-em spirit she dove into her shopping bag full of medicine and performed her morning rituals that I was never brave enough to hang around for. An occasional snort and a medley of rattling pill bottles became music to my ears as I packed up camp and prepared for another day on the water.

A dense fog hovering over the water this morning slowed down our departure but it also gave us a little more time to make sure we had everything we needed. Keith headed home today and we wouldn't see him again until we reached Williamsport, MD. For the next 5 days and approximately 86 miles, Angel and I were on our own. We were both sad to see Keith go. He has been with us from the start and has experienced everything we have through our sometimes slightly embellished campfire stories. Even though Angel and I wanted him to stay, as he faded out of our sight we looked at each other and both cracked a slight smile because Keith left us with something that was more valuable than gold...he left his THERM-A-REST!! now must describe to you the rules of "The Game."

First and most importantly the winner gets the Therm-A-Rest for the evening and the way I've been sleeping it is extremely important that I win today. The loser was rewarded the tasks of pitching the tent and cleaning up dinner. The winner is decided on a point system and points are awarded for different categories and individual fish caught. The score sheet looked like this:

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+1 First fish of the day	Course altering snag
+1 Every fish caught	Losing a lure
+2 Keeper Bass (>12 in.)	-1 Hitting the canoe with a cast
Most species caught per day	1 <sup>st</sup> cast of the day gets snagged
+3 Smallest fish caught	Putting a hook in your fishing partner!!!
+5 First fish of the day is a keeper bass (>12 in.)	
+5 Largest fish caught	

Initially this day started out like any other. We had a good bite early in the morning on topwater baits and an assortment of spinners and crankbaits and then it happened...we reached the South Branch of the Potomac. When we did the river tripled in width, the flow slowed dramatically and the bite was off. In a blink of an eye everything around us changed. Most obvious to us were the differences in landscape and fish habitat. We left the cliffs, deep channels and undercut banks behind us and we were now in an area dominated by rolling hills, shallow water and gradually tapered riverbanks. Moving into this more open setting, we also left the protection of the canopy that protected us from the penetrating rays of the sun. It wasn't long until we began to feel the effects of the heat. We decided we needed to cool down so we took the advise of Brad Stafford and stopped at a local "jumping rock." Brad, A DNR Police Officer that patrols these waters, helped us with the planning of this trip, [Angel and I](#) each took turns jumping from the rocky edge into the cool and refreshing creek below. Angel's fear of heights almost deterred her from jumping, however, the barking dog at the base of the rock was the push she needed to go through with it. Splash!!



Now midday, we decided to paddle a while and get a little closer to Paw Paw, WV which was where we had planned to camp that evening. We had about 7 miles to go and it was a very discouraging thought. Due to my lack of sleep and the extreme heat, every mile seemed like an eternity. Eventually we reached our destination after stopping about a mile upstream to fish again. We caught a few fallfish on crayfish crankbaits but nothing spectacular. It didn't even hit me until we began to set up camp that I won the contest for the day (Final score: Mike 14, Angel -3). Realizing this, I stopped in mid-stride and planted myself on the picnic table and watched as Angel lethargically prepared our tent for the night ahead.

[After a huge dinner](#) (even for me) I walked over to introduce myself to a group of people that looked as if they were a church / kids canoeing group while Angel cleaned up dinner (Ha, Ha, Ha!). It turns out they

were the [Shepard Springs Canoe Camp](#) from Sharpsburg, MD. They were on a trip to Little Orleans and planned on getting there tomorrow. A while later a thunderstorm was rolling in so we all retired to our tents. I inflated my therm-a-rest and for the first time in 4 days I got a great night sleep. I didn't know it at the time but I am lucky that I did because tomorrow would turn out to be the most challenging day yet, both physically and mentally.

## [MY MINI-TRIATHLON](#)

Day 8 - 6/28/01

[Paw Paw Camp to Indigo Neck Hiker Biker Overnight \(HBO\)](#)

Approximately 23 miles

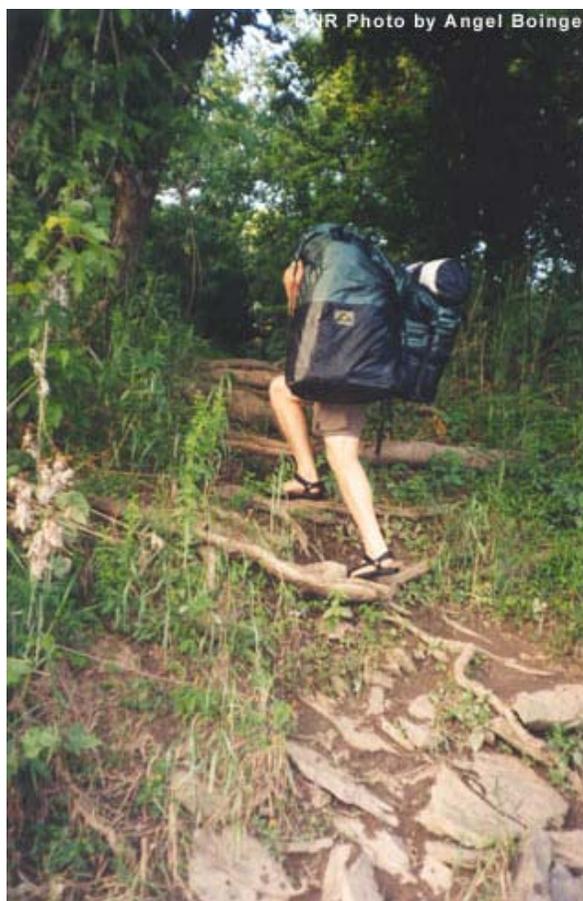
Since the morning we got out here, this is the first time a train did not wake me up. Instead, the deafening sound of a bike bell (Ring...Ring! Ring!) passed through my ears and went straight into my spine. Angel just lied there, undisturbed and motionless. I don't know how she does it!

You are probably wondering why there were bikes in our camp. Well I guess I should tell you. Our tent was only a hundred feet or so from the towpath of the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal. An idea born during the days of George Washington, a continuous route between the lands in the east and the Ohio River valley in the west was what America needed for prosperity. The C&O Canal would provide a navigable waterway between Washington D. C and Pittsburgh, PA, connecting different worlds separated by the peaks of the Appalachian mountain range. Urged on by Thomas Jefferson, Washington and his "Patowmack Company" began surveying the land in order to determine the route that was to be taken, clearing obstacles and building skirting canals around falls. After many years of planning the dream almost ended as funding was running out around the time of Washington's death in 1799. However, the Maryland and Virginia legislature appropriated enough money to complete the work at Great Falls and in 1802 the locks at Great Falls were opened (High 1997).

By the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, canal construction was booming in the United States and over 3,000 miles of canals were constructed by mid-century. Twenty-nine years after the death of Washington, the official ceremony was held. On July 4, 1828, President John Quincy Adams broke ground on what was known then as the "Great National Project." Estimated to cost 3 million dollars and take 10 years to build, the C&O canal was underway. Not only did the C&O canal fall short of its final destination in Pittsburgh, it took more that twice as long to complete and cost four times more than

originally estimated. The problems with canals were that other forms of transportation were surpassing the canal systems in speed and efficiency. The construction of the railroad was partially to blame for the failure of the canal, making the canal obsolete even before its completion in 1850. The Baltimore & Ohio Railroad reached Ohio in 1853 and was the major method of transportation to and from lands in the east. Nevertheless, the C&O canal remained operational for 74 years (1850 - 1924) transporting cargo with the aid of mule-towed vessels from Georgetown to Cumberland, MD (High 1997).

Now all that remains of the once heavily traveled waterway is a dried channel, which stands in order to preserve the rich history of this land. The C&O Canal now serves as a national historical park, drawing in tourists and history buffs from all around the country. Also, from a river traveler's point of view, the historical C&O canal offers easy access to its many campsites (Hiker/Biker Overnights; HBO) as you move



downstream from Cumberland to Georgetown. Angel and I used many of these campsites along our journey and we plan on spending our first night at one this evening. A complete listing of the HBO Campsites between Cumberland and Hancock and a few others is available [here](#).

Walking on the towpath I notice that we were about a half-mile from the Paw Paw tunnel. I went back to get Angel and we went to see what is considered the most remarkable structure along the canal. Three-fifths of a mile long, the Paw Paw tunnel was built to save 5 miles of canal construction. However, many believe that it would have been easier and more economically feasible to build the 5 miles of canal instead of the tunnel. The tunnel took 14 years to build and almost bankrupted the project costing over 600,000 dollars. We decided that we really didn't have to rush this morning to get on the water so we thought we would spend a little time learning about the history of the canal. I discovered that there was a path that lead up the hillside where you could see a spectacular view of the river valley. Hence, this became the first part of the triathlon. I ran about a mile up the mountain and took a picture (see picture at top of story) that puts this whole experience into perspective. As I looked out over the Potomac I felt for the first time a sense of how small I really was.

I met Angel back at camp and we were just about ready to go. We really wanted to eat fish tonight so we put "The Game" on hold for the day so that we could work on catching dinner. We had a long way to go so I decided to paddle while Angel worked on getting us fish. All I can really say about today was that it was HOT, HOT, HOT. By the middle of the afternoon I was exhausted but we had a [nice stringer](#) for tonight. When we reached Bonds Landing around 3:00 pm I [referred to our GPS](#) unit and we still had a long way to go. "This can't be right!" I said as I felt a feeling of frustration overwhelm me. The area we were traveling through was called the Paw Paw bends. Slithering through the open landscape the river bends back upon itself numerous times and makes this area difficult to assess in terms of mileage. We had somewhere to be and we were going to get there no matter what. We had over ten miles to go and both Angel and I were completely drained from the heat of the sun. We put our minds to it and we did it! We arrived at Little Orleans two hours later (averaging about 6 miles per hour! WOW!) When we got there the campsite was full. This was like a slap in the face. The nearest campsite was a hiker/biker a little over a mile away. When we made it there I had successfully completed the second leg of the triathlon, paddling 23 miles of river. The third and final test was to get all of our equipment up a 15-20 foot tall riverbank. As my tired, aching body sat down for dinner there was nothing that was going to stop me from eating and then sleeping...except for what happened next. I looked up to see a dark figure in the woods and before we knew it our campsite was being shared with a [dozen cows](#) and we were sitting right in their path! They stayed for a while and left as fast as they arrived. We resumed our meal and went to bed. I finally finished and the day was over. Although Angel worked hard catching dinner for tomorrow, she was kind enough to offer me the Therm-A-Rest. I just wish that she was kind enough to do something about the smell of her feet. They had a pungent, eye-watering scent that made you want to hold your breath until you passed out. I would have asked her to put her feet out the door of the tent but I was AFRAID they would attract wild critters. That evening I had enough and finally made her to rub some aftershave on her dogs to stop them from barking. Nothing more this evening...time to sleep prepare for tomorrow. Hopefully it won't be as difficult as today's challenges.

## "WILSOOONNNN!!!"

Day 9 - 6/29/01

[Indigo Neck \(HBO\) to Little Pool \(HBO\)](#)

Approximately 19 miles

There was not much to report on today. Fishing was about the same as it has been the last couple of days. Although we resumed *The Game*, fishing was still slow but we were beginning to figure it out. Early morning fishing was good in and around the grasses along the riverbank but as soon as the sun started to warm the shallow waters the fish seemed to move into the deeper, cooler river channel where I hooked a nice smallie later that day. We made it to Hancock by early afternoon and the rest of the day on the water was quiet, peaceful, and still very hot! One exciting fish story was when Angel pulled in a nice Channel Cat on a white grub. It



took her about 5 minutes to get it in and I had to chase it down in the canoe in order for her to land her prize. Everything went as planned for the rest of the day and it looked like it was going to be a rather uneventful day, and then we got to camp!

As soon as we pulled up to the campsite we were greeted by [Richard Deneen](#), otherwise known as the *In Fisherman*. A storm was

brewing and Richard was kind enough to help us get our gear to the campsite. While Angel and I batted down the hatches for the storm, Richard cleaned our fish from the previous day for dinner that evening. Not only did he clean our fish, he also fried them for us. It was awesome! After dinner Angel and I sat down to relax and Richard and his buddies went fishing in Little Pool. Having Richard cook dinner for us made me think about Keith. It had been a few days since Keith left us and both Angel and I really wished he could be there with us. So we made it happen. Similar to the way Tom Hanks created a friend in Wilson, we created "Keith!" Throughout the rest of the week "Keith" did everything that we did and went everywhere we went. "He" fished with us, cooked with us, and when the sun was bright, he even wore sunblock. It was time to go to sleep and tonight I was sleeping on the lumpy ground. I couldn't get it going today and because of that Angel won the competition for the day and got the Therm-A-Rest. Goodnight!

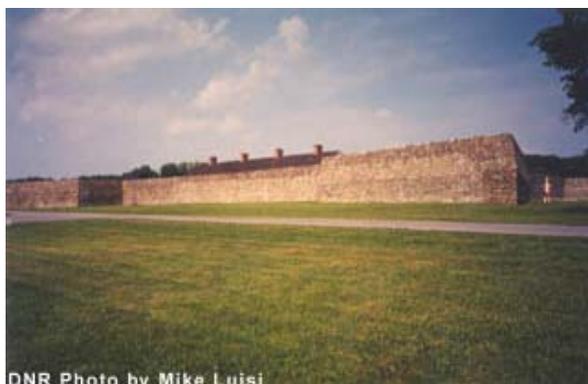


## "TWO DAYS LEFT"

Day 10 - 6/30/01

[Little Pool \(HBO\) to North Mountain \(HBO\)](#)

Approximately 11 miles



I woke up in the morning to the greatest smell on earth... bacon! Richard had prepared a huge breakfast for us and we were very thankful. I needed a day where breakfast didn't consist of a granola bar and well water. Richard was full of stories and comments about the fishing on the Potomac River. He considered himself a great walleye fisherman and couldn't say enough about how spectacular the fishing has been below Dam 4 over the last few years. We left that morning knowing that we were almost at the end of our journey. The next two days would be our last on the water and we began to feel that the worst was behind us. The last three days had been difficult with traveling approximately 20+ miles a day in temperatures exceeding 95 degrees. Now

we only have about 25 miles to go and two days to do it.

This was a great feeling and Angel and I took every advantage we could to get some fishing done. I would like to suggest to anyone reading this that does this themselves to plan shorter days if fishing is a priority. The long days that Angel and I put in limited the amount of fishing we could do. After pushing off from Little Pool we both put our paddles down and for the first time since this whole thing started we just sat back and let the river take us where it wanted to. Before long we were catching smallies on jigs and Texas rigs with charcoal and pumpkin 4 inch Fat Albert grubs. We stopped to have lunch and it was a pleasure to have [Keith join us](#) for the first time.

We made it to Fort Frederick in the early afternoon and Angel and I both thought it was a good time to get out and check it out. This fort was the cornerstone of the defense of the western frontier during the French and Indian War. Built of stone, the design of the fort was criticized by many, remarking that it was unnecessarily expensive. However, proponents of the new and expensive design justified its purpose by explaining that the Indians were using French taught tactics to burn such wooden forts as Fort Granville on the Juniata River, PA. Fort Frederick did not see any military activity during the Revolutionary War but served as a prisoner-of-war camp for German mercenaries captured during the Battle of Saratoga (High 1997).

Although learning about the history of Fork Frederick was interesting there was something that excited me even more about the place...the country store! Located right across the street from the fort, I went in and bought two Cokes and brought them back to Angel who was waiting with the canoe. After drinking lightly stained well water for a week, we both sat back in the shade and enjoyed our Cokes for the next few minutes. [It's amazing what a little caffeine can do!](#) We got back in the canoe and before long the river took us to McCoys Ferry where we planned on spending the night. However, it was a few miles upstream from McCoys Ferry when we began to see boats traveling the river for the first time. When we reached our campsite we ran into (literally) a group of guys hanging out at what they called [The Rock Lounge](#). They had been there a while and were having a great time, if you know what I mean. We hung out with them for a while but eventually left to get a campsite for the night. McCoys Ferry was full, however, the ranger there, Robert Conway, was nice enough to guide us to the hiker-biker, which was just a quarter mile downstream. Again it looked as if it was going to rain so he helped us gather our things and set up camp. For the first time in days I was not completely exhausted and I was able to enjoy the campfire and Angel's company. After the storm passed, we took some dirty clothes down to the river to wash. Angel and I were both a little ripe at this point and a bath and some clean clothes could only do us good. ["Keith" felt left out](#) so we decided to give him a bath also.

I went to bed that evening excited about the days to come. Tomorrow was our last full day on the water and we have another short easy day planned. The only thing in our path of success is Dam 5, which we will have to portage. It will be tough but I know we can do it.

## "THUNDER AND LIGHTENING AND DAMS...OH MY!"

Day 11 - 7/1/01

[North Mountain \(HBO\) to Jordan Junction \(HBO\)](#)

Approximately 12 miles



Last night it looked like a war zone across the river. The fourth of July was quickly approaching and the boys in West Virginia couldn't wait any longer. After dusk, the darkness of the moonless sky was intermittently interrupted as fireworks were set off in the distance. It was almost like they were celebrating for us. We were so close now and by tomorrow morning we would be in Williamsport, our final destination.

A storm was following us this morning and it was a little threatening.

We figured that it was more important to get to an area where there was some shelter in case the storm decided to open up on us. Dam 5 was only a few miles in front of us and because of that we had some really slack water to get through before our portage. Boat traffic was heavy and it made it difficult for us in the canoe. We reached Dam 5 by early afternoon and scouted out our portage. We made several trips to get all of our gear over the dam and our final trip was for "Keith." It wasn't Hoover Dam but it was the [first dam that "Keith"](#) had ever seen so we took a few pictures with him. We fished the rest of the day below the dam and the bite was on. We ended our trip on a high note as we cruised into camp for the last time. We were only about one mile upstream from Williamsport, where we were supposed to meet the real Keith tomorrow. I sure hope he remembers to pick us up!



The storm that was chasing us all day finally caught up with us when we got to camp. For the past couple of nights we have been threatened with storms but today the threat was over. The thunder started in the distance and before long was right on top of us. It was an intense thunderstorm but it only lasted a few minutes. After the storm passed we had dinner ("Keith" included) and decided to go catfishing. Well when I opened up the chicken livers that we bought last week I thought I was going to lose my dinner. They were so rotten that it was difficult to get one to stay on the hook. However, the fish didn't care! As soon as the first bait hit the water there was a tug on my line. After a short fight, I had a nice 20-inch channel cat to admire.

Sitting on the riverbank that evening I began to reflect on the adventures that Angel and I have had over the last few weeks. We have overcome so many challenges and when times got tough and we were hot and tired we worked to keep each other's spirits up. We made it!

## "THE END... FOR NOW"

Day 12 - 7/2/01

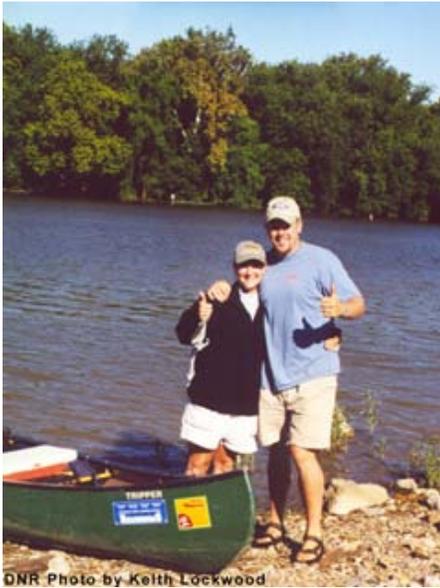
[Jordan Junction \(HBO\) to Williamsport, MD](#)

Approximately 1.5 miles

As we floated into Williamsport, Angel and I were both very quiet. It was hard to believe that in a few minutes we were going home and that we wouldn't be out here any longer. Tomorrow I will be back in my office chopping away at e-mails and phone messages that have accumulated over the past week but as I do I know that I will not be able to clear my mind of the journey I just completed. It saddens me to know that it is over, however, each time I feel the end is near I remind myself that this is just the beginning. Angel and I have traversed approximately 125 miles of the upper Potomac River and there are still many miles to go. Even though our travels for this year are done we will be back next year to tackle yet another chunk of the Nations River. See you then!

## Acknowledgements

I would like to first graciously thank Angel Bolinger for all of her tireless efforts to make this trip and report a success. Angel was the



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web mastermind that we can all thank for brining some life to this article and showing it off to the world! Also, I would like to recognize our behind the scenes person, Keith Lockwood. Not only was he the inspiration for "Keith" but without him, Angel and I would probably still be out there paddling our way home!

There were many, many more people whose enthusiasm, knowledge, and experience I feed off of in order to complete this task. To try and name everyone is impossible; however, I would like to acknowledge a few individuals that went out of their way to offer their assistance. They are: Jody Johnson, Alan Klotz, Ken Pavol, Ed Enamait, John Denning, Robert Conway, James Clise III, Cecil Petro, Bil Bowden, and Brad Stafford. Again, thank you to all of you who helped with this project, I could not have done it without you! Oh, I almost forgot...Thanks Gina and Marty for paying me to do this!

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