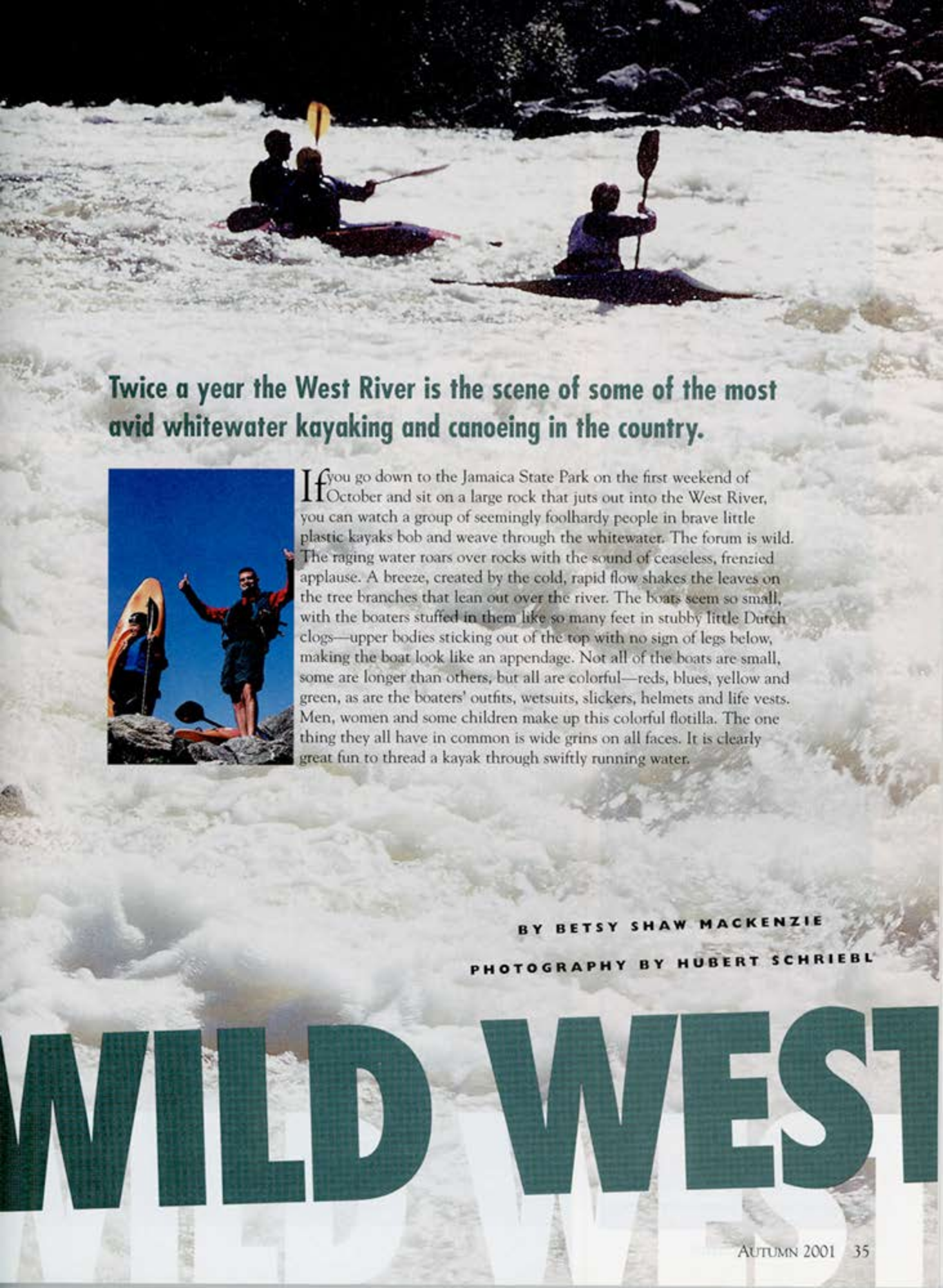




THE WILD



Twice a year the West River is the scene of some of the most avid whitewater kayaking and canoeing in the country.



If you go down to the Jamaica State Park on the first weekend of October and sit on a large rock that juts out into the West River, you can watch a group of seemingly foolhardy people in brave little plastic kayaks bob and weave through the whitewater. The forum is wild. The raging water roars over rocks with the sound of ceaseless, frenzied applause. A breeze, created by the cold, rapid flow shakes the leaves on the tree branches that lean out over the river. The boats seem so small, with the boaters stuffed in them like so many feet in stubby little Dutch clogs—upper bodies sticking out of the top with no sign of legs below, making the boat look like an appendage. Not all of the boats are small, some are longer than others, but all are colorful—reds, blues, yellow and green, as are the boaters' outfits, wetsuits, slickers, helmets and life vests. Men, women and some children make up this colorful flotilla. The one thing they all have in common is wide grins on all faces. It is clearly great fun to thread a kayak through swiftly running water.

BY BETSY SHAW MACKENZIE

PHOTOGRAPHY BY HUBERT SCHRIEBL

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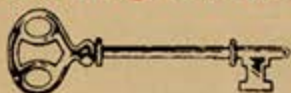
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**THE SCENE AT THE
JAMAICA STATE PARK ON
RELEASE WEEKENDS IS
LIVING, BREATHING PROOF
THAT VERMONT HAS PLENTY
TO OFFER ADVENTURE
SPORTS LOVERS.**

What we are witnessing is the West River dam release. It's a human-engineered act that transforms a tame, meandering river into a wild amusement park for thousands of boating enthusiasts. For over 30 years—every April and then again in early October—the Army Corps of Engineers releases water from the Ball Mountain Dam solely for the enjoyment of whitewater paddlers. The response is enormous. Last fall's attendance was 3,000 for the weekend, which has become a mini festival of sorts. Commercial rafting and canoeing companies bring people in by the busload. Kayak and canoe companies set up shop in makeshift kiosks, selling their wares along the riverside. Tents, campers, concession stands, vans, buses and trucks towing trailers stacked with canoes fill the park to capacity. On the water, kayaks, canoes and large rubber rafts are the vehicles of choice.

People come from all corners of New England and beyond, and the small town of Jamaica swells with hordes of youthful adventure seekers, each with a boat or two strapped to the tops of their cars. Pass through Jamaica on one of these weekends and, at first



glance, you might think you were in Colorado or California or some such youth-injected state. Surely this can't be poor old Vermont who struggles to hang on to her restless youth, resignedly watching them go west to the mountains or south to the cities. The scene at the Jamaica State Park on release weekends is living, breathing proof that Vermont has plenty to offer adventure sports lovers.

One advocate of all that Vermont has to offer boaters is Reid Greenberg, an avid paddler who recently moved to Chester where he enjoys the town's proximity to several of Southern Vermont's best runs: The West, Ball Mt. Brook, Wardsboro Brook, the Winhall, The Rock and the Big Branch. These are among his favorite local runs.



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"Many people say there isn't much whitewater kayaking here in this part of Vermont, but that's just not true, it's our hidden secret," says Greenberg.

Originally from Dummerston, Greenberg used to canoe the West River with his dad as a young boy. He also remembers watching the U.S. Canoe and Kayak Team time trials that were once held there. Now an athlete/representative for Wavesport/Riverside Associates, he didn't actually take up kayaking until he was 22. He competes in Freestyle Rodeo events on occasion, but mostly he attends trade shows and demos and spreads his enthusiasm for the sport. And he has plenty of that. "Whitewater paddling is like sex, only it lasts longer, at least for me," says Greenberg. "I still remember surfing my first wave. Just sitting in one spot with the river going by as you carve back and forth, everything just drowns out as the river moves around you."

"Surfing" is indeed one of the cooler whitewater maneuvers to watch. In a surf, the kayaker faces his boat upstream and finds the sweetspot of a standing wave and remains suspended there, caught in the balance between the two conflicting flow directions. It looks almost magical, with the kayaker suspended in time while the river rages past.

There are two schools of kayaking: river running, which is considered old school, and freestyle, which is new school. Both schools can be seen on the West on release weekends. The freestyle boats are more radically designed. They are much shorter, some



around 6.1 feet, and are meant for "playboating"—staying in one area on the river and performing maneuvers. According to Greenberg, these smaller trick boats can turn a mediocre spot into a great spot. Freestyle boats have really opened up opportunities for more advanced boaters in this area to have a good time without Class IV rapids. When they release the dam on the West, certain stretches are considered to be between Class III and IV. That is 1200 to 1800 cubic feet per second (CFS).

The mid to southern portion of Vermont is blessed with rivers that range in diversity from mild Class I-II all the way up to a few select hair-raising V+ runs that have certainly made paddlers aware of Vermont rivers. "The West is a fun river, and now with the



THE RIVER RATINGS WORK LIKE THIS:

There are six classes of difficulty.

CLASS I is considered the easiest. The water is basically flat but can be moving swiftly. There are few, if any, obstructions.

CLASS II is considered novice. The rapids are moderate with some maneuvering possibly required. Obstacles and waves are easily averted.

CLASS III is considered intermediate. Two to three foot standing waves should be expected and are not easily avoided. You should have a strong Eskimo roll before attempting a river of this class.

CLASS IV is advanced. Very technical, holes, hydraulics combined with powerful rapids make this class a challenge for advanced boaters.

CLASS V is for true experts. Turbulent rapids with unexpected drops, holes or chutes and long stretches demand lots of experience and superior stamina.

Lastly there is actually something called **CLASS VI**. This is considered extreme terrain and is for seasoned experts only. This class is very unpredictable and dangerous and every possible safety precaution should be taken.



evolution of smaller play boats, it is a tremendously fun 'play' run. It is my home run, and I know every eddy and every wave on that river." Greenberg doesn't wait for release weekends to ride the West. Last spring, while others were complaining about the constant rain, he was reveling in the swollen rivers every day.

On release weekends, the experts go on the upper river. They put-in just below the dam where the long pent up

water surges through the raised gates with a force ranging somewhere between Class III and Class IV. Lower down, you'll find "the Dumplings." This is a popular spot for spectators since a series of sucking "holes" and a daunting gauntlet of massive boulders makes it a challenge to get through. With the number of boats on the river, including guided rafts filled with 8 to 12 people, canoes and kayaks, you would think that the scene would resemble the L.A. free-

way. Yet there is no river rage here, and the boaters all appear to follow an unspoken river etiquette that keeps most people out of trouble. Another local enthusiast, Jack Pelz, finds the boating community on the West to be a chief attraction. "The West is a great river for all levels because it's very forgiving," he says. "It's not too threatening, and there are so many people around, you feel safe. Everyone is willing to help you out, it's a very accepting community." After his first trip down the West in a borrowed boat and motorcycle helmet a few years back, Jack was hooked.

"The community" is in a high state of revelry on release weekends. An old railroad bed that starts at the state park and follows the river all the way up to the dam is busy with spectators and the traffic of pickup trucks and vans shuttling boaters to their put-in. The numbers are mindboggling. From a spectator's point of view, these boaters, bobbing and dipping, sometimes disappearing for nerve-racking seconds at a time, are some sort of brave conquerors

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YOU REALLY HAVE TO KNOW YOUR PADDLING BUDDIES AND YOUR BOUNDARIES.

of nature or fearless extreme athletes. The kind of people that don't consider a weekend well spent unless they risked their neck somehow.

Sometimes, unlucky boaters get "dumped" and come through the Dumplings sans boat. Other boaters always come to their aid. You truly get a sense of the speed and power of the flow when someone is cruising by without a boat which ordinarily gives them a lot of control over where the river takes them and how fast. When they are in the water swimming, they are entirely at the mercy of Mother Nature.

But what looks entirely wild and untamable is actually just as safe and predictable as a ski slope once you know what you're doing. And, with experience, you can get to know a river. You can read the water and remember where the tough spots are. Similar to skiing, you pick a line for yourself, you look ahead and anticipate your path in advance. You learn to read the terrain.

For those experts, like Greenberg, who know the terrain well, there is even more excitement to be had. One of his true loves is "creekin'." Creekin' involves paddling on mountain streams. For this he uses a specific, creek boat. Creek boats are extra maneuverable and flat hulled with a big 74-gallon internal volume. When Reid is looking for adventure, he takes his creek boat and heads for the mountains. Creekin' is like the boating equivalent to backcountry skiing. There is a high element of risk since it is dependent on runoff, rather than controlled-dam released water. You should never do it alone. "I go on my instincts and I won't go if I'm not feeling good. I have had a few close calls, lost a boat and paddle and got caught behind a waterfall. A lot of time your success is directly proportional to with whom you creek. You really have to know your paddling buddies and your boundaries." One of his favorite runs is the Big Branch that runs off of Tabor Mountain.



Before getting in your kayak, whether it's on flat water, whitewater or steep mountain creeks, Greenberg emphasizes the importance of learning the basics and taking lessons. "Many people are hesitant and fearful of kayaking, but once you have learned some flatwater skills, the learning curve is pretty steep. You can become competent very quickly."

Despite the initial intimidation and perhaps the frustration of learning that first Eskimo roll, kayaking can be a very friendly sport. And, it's a sport that will give you a new appreciation for rain. What other sport can offer that?

Once you become aware of any subculture, you begin to notice evidence of it all around you. This is definitely true of boating in southern Vermont. There is a secret society of boaters around here, and those people you see with kayaks and canoes on the top of their cars aren't always just going fishing. Greenberg will testify to this. "There is a real network here. If you just drive around the area with your boat on top of your car you will meet other boaters. People will stop you and say 'hey, where can I go paddling?'" Or, if you are still not convinced, and you just want to watch, head over to that rock on the West this October and see for yourself. ■

Betsy Shaw Mackenzie is a recently retired professional athlete who is discovering the joys of recreational sports.

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