

River Voices

Rock Contos: A Profile

By Tom Diegel

Perhaps it was the time he had to unzip and shed his pfd to escape entrapment in an underwater cave. Or maybe it was when he got wrapped around a log on a flooded creek in urban San Diego, lost all his gear, and then got fined for trespassing as he dragged his soggy carcass back to the road. The two bandit solo trips down a certain well-known, heavily-regulated Southwest desert river in the middle of winter probably helped too. For sure, swimming across the Eel River at 250,000 cfs after losing his boat was also pretty notable. Soloing Ernie's and Robe Canyons in a weekend, as well as such California classics as Kings Canyon and the Cataracts of the Kern? Yup, he did that. It could have been getting Dengue fever in a Mexican jail after losing a boatful of gear and his wallet just a week prior to putting on as trip leader for a private Grand Canyon trip. But it was most likely been the dozens of solo first descents down some of the most remote and unknown rivers in North America and his subsequent verbose tales of them that has helped solidify the legend that is ...

Rocky Contos.

James John Achilles Contos is one of the few people whose parents, despite giving him four names, decided that these weren't quite enough and gave him a fifth name at an early age. Despite the burly-sounding name and his intrepid nature, "Rocky" is hardly physically intimidating, with only 145 pounds shrink-wrapped around his 6-foot frame and a soft nasal voice that has earned him his sixth name of "Mumbly." His path to expedition kayaking was an unlikely one. He grew up in San Diego with parents who are not outdoor-hippies, who took their kids on Sierra backpacks but are actually urban-bound gun dealers. However, after taking a kayak lesson from the well-known UC Davis outdoor program early in his undergrad years Rocky knew right away that he was destined to kayak. And his propensity to tackle rivers on his own terms was born right away. Not owning a car, he asked a buddy to drive him up the most logical river he saw, the Main American, to paddle for four days down towards the San Francisco Bay. En route he flipped in high winds/waves and had to swim a quarter mile to shore, where he dried out his gear that had been stored in garbage bags deep in the bowels of his new/used (and much beloved) Mirage. Thus a legend was born.

Rocky has not paddled thousands of miles solo because he likes to be alone; on the contrary, Rocky works very hard to find partners. The problem is that his perception of running rivers is simply different than everyone else's. Rocky likes to "do" rivers. Top to bottom, easy or hard. The concept of doing short runs that are in guidebooks seems silly to Rocky; he simply goes up as high in a drainage as he can, puts on in a trickle of water, and will literally try to follow it to the sea, if it's possible. And because there are always more rivers than time, he likes to do them fast in order to get them all in. This past spring, for example, he started at the Marsh Creek put in for the Middle Fork of the Salmon after driving all night. He paddled all the way down Marsh Creek,



the Middle Fork, the Main Salmon past Riggins, and down the lower gorge for an amazing 355 miles in 3.5 days. Though in this case the Main was running at 90,000 cfs (Rocky has an unusual affinity for big water), generally the speed at which he's able to paddle is extraordinary. Despite his scrawny arms, Rocky has an uncanny ability to somehow transcend the friction of the water and glide effortlessly down rivers faster than virtually anyone else. This could well be due to a secret weapon: his predisposition towards long, old boats.

Rocky and a farmer pose for a photo during an R-2 descent of Rio Ameca, Mexico

Photo by Barbara Conboy

Rocky has used his small Seattle yard, his parent's place, and various shuttle drivers' homes in Mexico as docks for his fleet of old boats (Extremes, MicroX's, Rockits, Freefalls, Overflows, etc) that he's picked up over the years, in part to feed his habit and replace boats that have been or undoubtedly will be broken, lost, or stolen.

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Of course, he hopes that by knowing that a spare boat awaits, someone will come meet him for yet another Crocky Paunchos adventure.

The primary reason for Rocky's expeditionary zeal is his thirst for knowledge. Rocky is a neuroscientist and has been in academia all his life. After a long stint at UC San Diego earning his doctorate studying mouse brains, he moved to Seattle to work with a woman who has since won a Nobel Prize. The methodical process associated with deep science has manifested itself into Rocky's approach to kayaking, with not only far-too-many hours of creating meticulous map notations of potential first descents' drainage area sizes, amount of rainfall, gradient, and mile/kilometer markings but also his obsession with chronicling his adventures. With still photos, videos, tape recorders, written notes, and epic stories, Rocky not only wants to "do" rivers, he wants to know them thoroughly as well. Mile by mile, rapid by rapid, Rocky documents his trips like the good scientist that he is. Fortunately for him, just as he was entering his prime as an aspiring expedition kayaker, the Internet sprang to life and provided him the needed outlet for this documentation, and the early days of rec.boats.paddle was the chosen medium. After a particularly impressive string of postings during the epic 1997 El Nino year that sent many dry Southern

California rivers into a winter-long frenzy, Doug Ammons, a fellow brainiac expedition kayaker, published a hilarious and relatively scathing parody of Rocky's tomes entitled, "The Adventures of Crocky Paunchos" (years later, Doug sent Rocky a copy of his new book out of the blue and included a note apologizing for the article. In a testament to Rocky's good nature, he didn't really understand the need for Doug's apology). Unfazed, Rocky carried on, though the intensity of finishing up his doctorate precluded his ability to both do as many expeditions and write about them.

However, while finishing his doctorate Rocky was also researching and preparing himself for his next life's work: Mexican rivers. The Sierra Madre Mountains that drain into the Pacific are a several-hundred-mile long chain of mountains that rise out of the desert south of Arizona and run all the way down the long country, forming a spine that reaches up over 11,000 feet and is an amazing catcher's mitt for the monsoonal rains that pound the range every summer. It doesn't take a very long look at a map of Mexico to realize that there are a lot of blue ribbons snaking out of these mountains towards the Sea of Cortez. Despite the efforts of great kayakers doing intrepid and creative runs around the world, there were literally dozens of entire drainages with warm-water creeks and rivers that run every

summer just south of the border that had never been done. Rocky poured over the excellent Mexican topo maps for literally years, telling anyone who would listen: "Northern Mexico. Now THAT'S where there's a LOT of good whitewater!" It was hard to believe. But once Rocky was unleashed from his doctoral duties, he took a few months for planning then embarked on a four-month trip to explore the rivers of his dreams and prove to himself that he was right.

What followed has been an extraordinary streak in expedition kayaking. Rocky has done 47 first descents, many of which have been nearly a hundred miles to (in the case of Rio Yaqui, north of the Copper Canyon region) over 300 miles, nearly all solo, and almost all have had both exceptional scenery and high quality whitewater. By his count, he's done 51 trips for 4073 miles, 3026 of which have been first descent miles. Some of the runs he's done have seen one or two previous descents on certain sections, but in just a few years he has quietly and most certainly become the preeminent expert on northern Mexican "brownwater" (most of the rivers run brown after long, dry winter and springs). With his ultimate goals of writing and publishing a guidebook, starting some guide/logistics services, and saving these extraordinary rivers from a Mexican government eager to dam them for their power-creating potential, he has finally reinvigorated his writing career. Emboldened by a concerted effort to increase his vocabulary beyond the scientific realm, he has finally started turning his copious notes into written articles that are nearly as epic as the runs they describe.

While some first descenters or expeditionary paddlers prefer to keep their secrets to themselves, Rocky, as a result of the "publish or perish" pressures of academia, feels compelled to spread the gospel, and he eagerly anticipates the day when he is able to take groups of people south of the border to show them these Mexican gems, not unlike his well-known predecessor further south in Veracruz, Grant Amaral. However, future clients should be aware of a critical fact: Rocky has no adrenal glands (or at least, as friend, fellow expedition kayaker,

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and neuroscientist Preston Holmes has put it: “Rocky’s mind simply works ‘differently’”). As indicated earlier, Rocky’s yen for adventure has led him into plenty of misadventures, and his extraordinary confidence and self-reliance has given him such an acute sense of what he can accomplish at a high level that it is sometimes difficult for him to acknowledge other people’s limitations, whether mental or physical. On a recent first descent of Rio Chinipas in the Copper Canyon region that he described as the most difficult one he’d done in Mexico, Rocky determined—after six days of excruciating portaging and a little river-running that only got the strong crew a little over 20 miles—that “this tributary will probably be the least popular” of the three possible starts! After finally catching our breath from laughing, the rest of our crew agreed that it was not only a first, but very likely an “only” descent. That said, Rocky is a stellar partner on any river due to his excellent probing abilities, tremendous fitness, ability to suffer, quick laugh and smile, ferocious scrabble playing, and an extraordinary way of pulling off successful and memorable trips.

Perhaps in an era of quick-bang-for-your-buck river running and park-n-play, Crocky Paunchos’ fundamental desire to paddle from high-elevation, steep Class V down through hundreds of miles of Class I-III rapids and flatwater in big boats doesn’t engender much enthusiasm from either fellow experts or beginner/intermediate paddlers. But the vision that he’s had of exploring and popularizing remote, difficult, and undone rivers virtually under the collective noses of the US paddling community and the “temerity” (a favorite term) he’s exhibited in successfully tackling the “ineluctable defiles” (another favorite) is nothing short of extraordinary for this soft-spoken and affable neuroscientist with a grand zest for a little adventure. 

For more info, check out Rocky’s excellent website: www.sierrarios.com.

Book Review

Review of *Wherever Waters Flow, A Lifelong Love Affair with Wild Rivers*

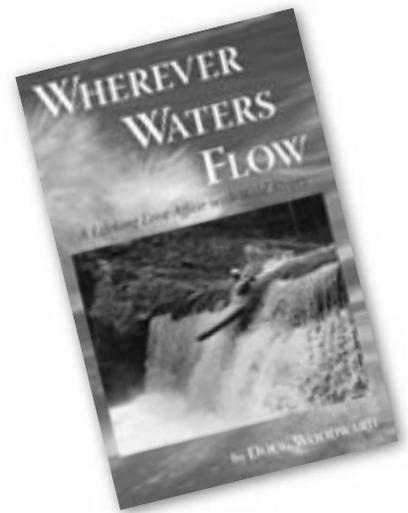
by Doug Woodward

Review by Charlie Walbridge

When I was just starting to paddle whitewater Doug Woodward was one of the sport’s established leaders. Many of the people I met began their careers as Explorer scouts under his leadership. I also knew that he, Claude Terry, and Payson Kennedy were close friends who had worked together as stunt doubles in the movie *Deliverance*. They would later start two of the Southeast’s leading whitewater outfitters. But there’s a lot more to the story, and his book fills in the blank spaces.

Beginning with Doug’s youth, and his time in the Boy Scouts, the book traces his early years exploring and learning from Appalachian rivers. From his first time in a canoe at scout camp his experience grew. Whitewater trips on the Cacapon and Potomac were followed by bolder runs on the Yough, Chattooga and Tellico (Including a first run of Baby Falls). His early tries at boatbuilding and his travels on the Eastern Racing Circuit give a clear picture of what the sport was like in the 60s and 70s. For anyone who started paddling during this time the book offers a pleasant jaunt down memory lane.

Doug was a well-traveled paddler who paddled in Idaho with Walt Blackadar and made one of the first hard-boat runs down the Grand Canyon. His love affair with the Chattooga led him and Claude Terry to work closely with then Governor Jimmy Carter to obtain “Wild



and Scenic” designation for the river. Much of his book is about paddling trips he took with his family, and their adventures and misadventures on the great Western and Arctic rivers. River running was central to his family life and these journeys were really quite remarkable.

The book (272 pages, hard cover) can be ordered from Doug Woodward himself at Headwaters Publishing, P.O. Box 494, Franklin, NC 28744 for \$26.95 + \$5 shipping.