

A river's lifeblood for all

Legs trembling, I unlace my boots. The parched, dusty leather begs for quenching. I pull my weary feet from their sweaty confines. They need rejuvenation. Sitting next to the Gunnison River I thrust them into the water. The flow races by with a 42-degree temperature, plus or minus. But there is lifeblood in the river that I want to embrace.

The arduous, rock-choked path to the water has tested my hips, knees, ankles, and all the muscles in between. My body's vigor is drained, but the Gunnison roars with energy. Enough to restore what has been depleted. There are a number of scrambles from rim to river in Black Canyon, all of them demanding, all of them seat-of-your-pants descents.

The icy water causes my feet to tingle – it freezes the blood in my veins. The feeling is similar to the million prickles that occur when you sit with your legs crossed and a foot “goes to sleep.” Some might ask, “Why not do a cannonball into the river?” This is a revival moment; not a yahoo moment. It's good to remember that rivers can easily sweep you downstream, never to be seen again.

Rivers are rare in the American Southwest. That's the draw. Whether to fish, float, rest or revive, the Uncompahgre, San Miguel, Gunnison, Dolores or Colorado all have the strength to bring you back to life. And in the spring of the year, when the rivers swell with snowmelt, their capacity to revive surges.

The Gunnison River, for instance, can power its way through the canyon with 2.75 million horsepower when flooding. A strong jetliner moves with a mere 110,000 horsepower engine. The river drops some 2,100 feet through Black Canyon giving it tremendous power carving, grinding, and scouring away at the firmament of its bed. What energy.

We often call our rivers the lifeblood of our world. The

IF YOU GO:

Experience the Gunnison River at:

1. Black Canyon National Park: <https://www.nps.gov/blca/planyourvisit/hikinginnercanyon.htm>.

2. Gunnison Gorge National Conservation Area: https://www.blm.gov/nlcs_web/sites/co/st/en/BLM_Programs/NLCS/GunnisonGorgeNCA.html.

3. Dominguez Escalante National Conservation Area: https://www.blm.gov/nlcs_web/sites/co/st/en/BLM_Programs/NLCS/Dominguez-EscalanteNCA.html.

4. The Uncompahgre River at Ridgway State Park: <http://cpw.state.co.us/placestogo/parks/Ridgway>

5. The San Miguel River at: <http://www.colorado.com/bureau-land-management/san-miguel-river-recreation-area-blm>



Outdoors

By Paul Zaenger

problem is that we can be led to believe that humans are the only ones to benefit from the water. It can lead to low priority uses like hosing off parking lots, or misters at patio restaurants. The waters of the Gunnison are so much more life than that.

Like the blood in our arteries, flooding rivers are full of life, and carry an abundance of nutrients. The oxygenated water, roiled up by rapids, mixes with the goop and the sediment to add life-giving punch for organisms below the surface. The thin veneer of slime which makes the rocks slippery to stand on is made up of microscopic plants and bacteria along with the single-celled creatures which feed on them.

Algae are also abundant. Green, blue-green, yellow-green and more, these algae (there are over 90 species) and other plants combine with more primitive organisms to form the base level of life. Insect larvae, snails, water skimmers, beetle larvae, and a host of floating single-cell beings mean the water is teeming with life forms. Crayfish, nymphs, tadpoles, dragonflies, caddisflies, and many others live in the river; this flowing lifeblood of the canyon.

The current is full of fish. Eagles, osprey, herons, American dippers, mergansers, other water and shore birds, beavers, raccoons, and otters are all directly dependent on the river. Many more benefit from the river's presence simply because all are drawn to the water's

edge.

The Gunnison flows down to join the North Fork at the mouth of Black Canyon. The Uncompahgre adds its waters at Delta and the combined flow courses its way to the Colorado at Grand Junction. The Dolores River picks up the San Miguel just above Uravan, then drifts north to dump its water into the Colorado in eastern Utah.

What does it matter; all of these rivers? The network of streams sustains a tremendous variety of life. Rivers comprise some 1 percent of the total acreage of the west, but 72 percent of reptiles, 77 percent amphibians, 80 percent of all mammals, and 90 percent of all bird species routinely use them for food, water, migration and cover. Are we able to see that rivers mean so much more to our world than for just us?

Sitting on my rock, I pull my nearly frozen feet out of the water. They dry on the warm, sun-drenched stone. I draw in a deep breath. Bandanas at the ready, I wipe even between my toes. To be at one with the Gunnison River; to its life-giving lifeblood, is to be close to the divine. I am rejuvenated. My soul is restored. Oh, happy me.

Paul Zaenger has been a supervisory park ranger at Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Park since 1993. Other park assignments include Mount Rushmore National Memorial and Glen Canyon National Recreation Area.



The Great Pillars rise above the Gunnison River. Hiking routes and trails, some that are strenuous, will take you to various Colorado rivers. Many stretches of the western Colorado rivers are also accessible. (Submitted photo/National Park Service)

Selecting the right footwear

With it warming up outside, many of us are taking to the hiking trails. I just finished a short jaunt of about 4 miles and my feet feel like I just did the Bataan Death March. Forgetting my own advice, I thought it would be a good idea to break in my new boots on a hike like that.

In the past we have discussed foot pain and some of the things you can do to minimize it. The most important thing you can do for your feet is to dress them up in some quality footwear; designed for the specific outdoor activity you enjoy. I guess you can consider your shoes and boots to be the set of tires for your feet. And break in the new footwear with short walks and wearing them around home.

When you select a pair of outdoor shoes, some of the important things you should consider are comfort, durability, stability and support, weight, warmth and water resistance. All of these features need to be based upon the activity you are purchasing the shoes for.

Improperly fitting shoes will cause blisters, blackened toenails, bone spurs, plantar fasciitis, and a lot of other unpleasant miseries. Look for a snug fit at the heel and about a half inch of wiggle room up front for your toes. The sides should be wide enough that there is no pinching, but snug enough so there is no slippage.



Tips from the Posse

By Mark Rackay

When trying on the shoes, wear the hiking socks you plan on wearing while using the shoes. The socks should be taller than the shoe or boot so that you do not get chaffing from the upper edges of the shoe.

Pay special attention to the foot bed. The foot bed is what keeps your foot in a neutral position, and not slopping around, inside the shoe. If you have a tender spot on your heel or ball of the foot, pain in the arch, or have a heel slip when you walk, it is time to look at inserts. A trip to the drug store or sporting goods store will get you matched up with the correct inserts for your feet.

When choosing the type of outdoor shoe, base your decision on the type of terrain you will be hiking on, the load you will be carrying in your pack, and the time of year. Generally try and go with the lightest weight boots you can get to do the job correctly for you.

If the trails you are going to hike are generally groomed and well kept, and your pack is light, low cut trail shoes will work fine. Look for shoes with a stiff outer sole, stiffer than running shoes. I like waterproof shoes because puddles just seem to happen and wet feet are no fun.

If you are hitting a rougher and more primitive trail, or if you are carrying a heavier pack, the trail shoes will not work. Here is where the mid-length boot

comes in. Mid-length offers more support for carrying heavier loads and supports your ankle much better on an uneven trail. Again, I look for waterproof material such as Gore-Tex. The mid-length boots still offer a fair amount of flexibility at the balls of the feet to traverse the rocky trails.

When you are heading out across rough terrain, such as hunting conditions, and possible carrying a heavy pack, it is time to look at full-length boots. These will have a much more rigid sole and will provide substantial ankle support. These types of boots require a long break in period to get the sole and heel cup to soften. Wear them for short walks around home before taking them up on a serious hike.

For mid-length and full-length boots, I look for ample padding around the ankles to protect them from rocks. Also look for a padded tongue to help keep laces from cutting into your feet.

Depending on the time of year will determine how much insulation you need. Obviously boots for winter travel are going to require 800 grams of Thinsulate insulation and more, whereas for summer months 400 grams or none at all may be appropriate. Remember that insulation adds weight and bulk to the footwear; making them more cumbersome to wear.

I can't stress enough how important having waterproof footwear is. Wet feet can cause much pain and discomfort and in the winter months, can lead to hypothermia. Look for boots with waterproof Gore-Tex, or at least waterproof linings. If you choose an all leather boot,

waterproof them yourself with a product



Hiking shoes. (Submitted photo/Mark Rackay)

like Snowseal.

If you get anything from this article, it may be that one pair of outdoor footwear will not be enough. I have so many different boots and outdoors shoes, to cover all the outdoors activities I enjoy, that my wife refers to my closet as the “boot warehouse.”

So get started on your own “boot warehouse” and keep your feet happy. Those two feet are going to be carrying you around outside and it is important to take care of them. Until next time, see you on the trail.

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