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SEPTEMBER 2005



Troop 20, Hudson, N.H.,
on Maine's Penobscot River.

Tackling monster rapids
(or is it the other way around?)

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By Curt Garfield » Photographs by Bill Curtsinger and Heather Perry

Exterminator

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Five days of high adventure
lead up to one thrilling climax:
a MONSTER CLASS V RAPID.



Maine's Ripogenus Gorge is a noisy and scary place. But don't tell that to the Scouts of Troop 20, Hudson, N.H. There are few places they'd rather be than paddling a rubber raft in the middle of a **Class V rapid**.

The waters of the West Branch of the Penobscot River rip through the sluice gates of the McKay Power Station near the head of the gorge with such force they have created a roaring rapid below.

It has gained a reputation among whitewater rafters and kayakers across the Northeast. They call it Exterminator Hole.

The Scouts tried to shake off the butterflies in their bellies as they watched some of their guides prepare three self-bailing rubber rafts, while another checked to make sure that each Scout and leader had a personal flotation device (PFD), rain suit and helmet.

These Scouts, many of them experienced whitewater rafters, had spent the morning attending a briefing on rafting techniques and safety, and

they'd been brushing up their skills on some easy rapids near their campsite.

Now they felt ready to tackle Exterminator Hole, where water discharge could reach 3,400 cubic feet per second.

But were they?

Commanding Respect

Ripogenus Gorge commands respect. The river is rated Class IV but has segments of classes I to V water, making for alternate periods of calm and fast. Steep banks constrict the river on both sides of its 13-

WHITewater LINGO

CHUTE: A channel or gap running through an otherwise obstructive course. Normally a strong volume of water squirting between the obstacles that looks much like water being poured from a pail.

DROP OR PITCH: A section of rapids (it may be in the middle of the river) that is usually steep—sometimes a vertical drop—and often falling rapidly over a short distance.

FALLS: An abrupt drop in the river, usually a near-vertical place where the water literally falls over the rocks or ledge.

LINING: Guiding a canoe through difficult and unrunnable rapids with bow and stern lines.

RAPIDS: Usually when the river seems to fall down in front of the canoe; there are more obstructions, larger rocks spaced closer together, with a heavier volume of water than with rips.

RIFFLES: A section of shallow river in which small waves are noticeable, usually over a gravel or sand bottom.

RIPS: Similar to riffles, only stronger in nature; they may be whitewater showing over small, head-sized rocks spaced widely apart.

STANDING WAVES: Larger, curling waves that stand right up out of the water.

STRAINER: A dangerous obstruction in the river composed of debris—usually downed trees—that allows water to pass through, but can easily trap a canoe or raft (and its occupants).

mile stretch and increase the water's speed. (There are six classes of whitewater, ranging from Class I, easy, to Class VI, extreme).

Wearing a PFD is second nature to the Scouts of Troop 20. For the first five days of their annual high-adventure trek, they had paddled and portaged their fleet of canoes through a network of lakes and streams north of the lumber town of Millinocket.

The whitewater rafting adventure—two runs through the treacherous gorge—would be the climax of the trip and a test of their Scouting skills and teamwork.

On the way, the Scouts learned some history lessons and completed service projects. When Maine's north woods economy switched gears from timber to recreation and rafting in the



Rafting injuries are often caused by paddles. Keep your blade outside the raft, and hold it low and close to your body. Reserve goofing around (as Kyle Harris does at left) for calm spots.



When tackling whitewater, use the buddy system. Each craft should have a buddy boat on the water.



The rafters of Troop 20 take a well-deserved break to celebrate their running of Exterminator Hole.

mid-'70s, rivers like the West Branch, the Kennebec and the Dead, which were once jammed with logs, took on a new role in the state's economy.

Troop 20 stopped to visit the Boom House on Ambajeus Lake where the logs were collected and floated down the West Branch to the mills. While there, the Scouts watched the construction of a birch-bark canoe with primitive tools and had an encounter with a moose.

The Warm-Up

Although Troop 20 hired a professional outfitter for the whitewater segment of the trip, it was the five days of paddling and safety drills beforehand that got the Scouts in top shape, both physically and mentally. It also built up their confidence.

"The five days on the water helped a lot," Life Scout Calvin Rioux says. "It made the rafting easier and more fun."

In the gorge, the first challenge

came quickly. One by one, the guides pointed their Scout-laden rafts downstream and into Exterminator Hole. For the next 13 miles there would be no way to escape the river.

"It was wild and wet, especially Exterminator Hole," says Nick Gaudet, who was making his first trip on the river.

"The key to a successful run is listening to your guide, doing what he says, and working as a team," Eagle Scout Chris Keegan says. "If you don't, you could flip over and have to swim through the rapids."

Getting Wet

Exterminator Hole did deliver soakings to a couple of adult leaders, as well as senior patrol leader Mike Berry. All were rescued with a man overboard drill the Scouts learned during their training.

"We began to head toward the rapid and then we headed straight toward a rock wall," Mike says.

"We hit the wall and went into Exterminator Hole sideways. All I can remember was hitting the rock wall and then being underwater and seeing a yellow raft before I was pulled up by our Scoutmaster."

While entering a rapid sideways isn't advised, staying calm and listening to the guide (who's no doubt shouting commands over the roar of the river as the raft bucks and bounces) can get you out of almost any sticky situation.

"Going through Exterminator Hole was the most exciting part because the rapids are throwing you everywhere," says First Class Scout and first-time rafter Nigel Mount.

"It's a lot of fun and very intense."

The most excruciating moments are often the seconds right before you enter the rapid. Once you're in, you have only your fellow rafters to bail you out of a jam.

"The most exciting part of whitewater is the rush of anxiety before the hard rapids," Life Scout Kyle Harris says. **"This trip really develops a strong trust in other people."**

Enough to make them want to do it again?

Says Nick: "I'm coming back next year."

Chances are he won't be alone. ✦



Your best plan for making it down a roaring rapid in one piece is to listen to your guide...and hang on for your life!



WANT TO GO?

Outfitters provide rafts, paddles, PFDs and other items for a fee. Here's what you'll need for personal gear:

- Towel and a change of clothing for the end of the trip
- Strap-on sandals or old sneakers
- Swimsuit, shorts, shirt
- Sunscreen
- Sunglasses with strap (A hat is optional but recommended.)
- Non-cotton synthetic clothing (polypropylene) for added warmth. (Wetsuits are required in Maine and other cool climates in the spring and fall.)



The best way to wind down after a day of whitewater? Talk about your trip by the fire.

