

Deeper, closer, faster

New creative water sports are flooding the nation's rivers

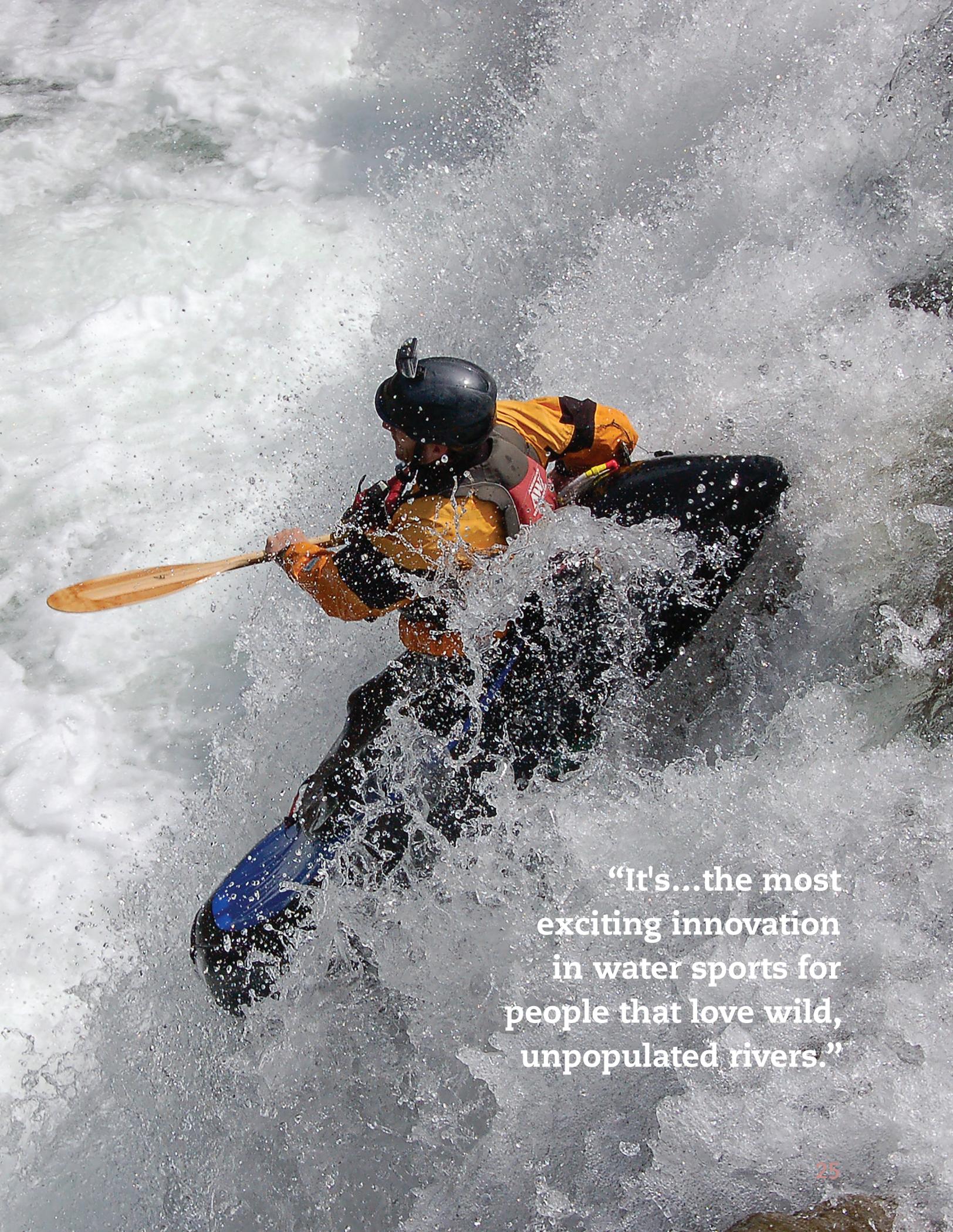
By Brianna Randall

The packraft swooshed across the South Fork of the Flathead's large cobbles as my husband landed his inflatable boat with a flourish. Rob unfolded his lanky frame from the tiny craft, his fly rod in hand and a stick dripping with plump Westslope cutthroat in the other.

"Dinner is served," he grinned.

We were in the middle of a ten-day expedition traversing the Bob Marshall Wilderness by boat and boots. Rob had just hauled in a handful of wild trout from a gin-clear pool at the confluence of the White River and the South Fork of the Flathead. Before we left, he'd debated whether to bring along his new favorite toy, a \$900 Alpaca raft that weighed five pounds and packed down to the size of a one-man tent. The grin told me he was glad that he had. His new packraft allowed him to sneak off into tiny tributaries, ducking under branches and skimming over shallow riffles to fly fish or snorkel in places our regular-sized rafts couldn't access.

Kevin Colburn pushing the limits of packrafting.



“It's...the most exciting innovation in water sports for people that love wild, unpopulated rivers.”

Like many river enthusiasts, Rob's love of water started with fishing. Casting lines across sparkling water is still one of the most beloved past-times on America's inland streams and rivers. National Forests in particular offer some of the best fishing opportunities in the country. According to the most recent Visitor Use Survey put out by the Forest Service, nearly seven percent of National Forest visitors indicate fishing is their primary reason for visiting. And for good reason: from the Columbia River in the West to the Delaware River in the East, public lands churn out coveted cold-water trophies like trout and warm-water sport fish like bass. Fortunately for those of us less interested in casting a line, those same National Forests also offer paddling opportunities that have long been draws for canoeists, river rafters and kayakers, too.

As we shoved off the next day to continue our South Fork of the Flathead trip, we spied a lone packrafter navigating some whitewater as he headed toward the pool that provided our dinner the evening before. Mike Fiebig waved as we crossed bows. Fiebig, a long-time river adventurer, has served as a guide on river trips from Central America to Alaska and now works as the Associate Director of the Northern Rockies office of American Rivers. He's taken a standup paddleboard (SUP) through stretches of the Grand Canyon and often surfs waves on the Yellowstone River. But, like my husband, packrafting is his first choice when he looks at his quiver of river toys.

"It's hands-down the most exciting innovation in water sports for people that love wild, unpopulated rivers," says Fiebig. "The packraft has opened up all sorts of National Forest lands to paddling."

For those seeking ways to interact with water, fishing, rafting and kayaking have been the historic options. In the last decade though, these traditional river activities have had to make room for a whole new fleet of water-based sports. Some of them like river snorkeling have only a trickle of followers, while others like packrafting and paddleboarding are inundating the nation's lakes and rivers.

Paddleboarding is the fastest growing watersport in the country. From expedition-style multi-day trips to surfing big ocean or river waves to leisurely skims across a pond, SUPs are easy to use, provide great exercise and give a whole new perspective on the water.



Chad Addleman river surfing the Pipeline wave on the Lochsa River, Nez Perce-Clearwater National Forest, Idaho.

Co-owners of Strongwater Mountain Surf Co. Kevin "K.B." Brown and Luke Rieker opened their surf shop in 2008 in downtown Missoula, Montana. "When we opened, we were the only place in Missoula selling SUPs. Now you can buy them at Costco," says Brown.

These two embody the do-it-yourself spirit that is re-defining how Americans play on water. They are pioneering custom-made surfboards specially designed to ride river waves. Their boards are short and thick, with a wide tail that helps surfers stay up in freshwater's mushier waves. The duo credit the popularity of SUPs with ushering in river surfing. But, according to Rieker, river surfing is just more fun. "When you see it, it's hard to resist. If you see us surfing and you don't wanna do it, you're crazy!" he laughs.

"The public lands around Missoula make it a prime destination for river surfing," says Brown. "We have a dozen awesome waves we can surf year-round." Both Rieker and Brown agree that their personal favorites are Pipeline, a wave on the Lochsa River in Idaho's Nez Perce-Clearwater National Forest, and Lunch Counter, a famous wave on the Snake River in Wyoming's Bridger-Teton National Forest. On mountain rivers from the Carolinas to California, surfers are catching waves, inventing new tricks and making gear to suit their needs.

Both river surfboards and SUPs are more inviting than traditional kayaking, since people are often put off by being strapped in, or by having to learn technical safety moves like rolls and wet exits. Kevin Colburn, the National Stewardship Director for American Whitewater, a river advocacy organization, says that more and more people are gravitating toward river sports that are closer to home and lower risk.

Colburn defines himself as "a lifelong river guy." He's explored waterways across the country on kayaks, SUPs, Bellyaks, packrafts, and while river snorkeling and river boarding. "What the emerging river sports have in common is that they create the opportunity to have original experiences on the same landscapes people have experienced before. To me, that's the definition of adventure—seeing places in new ways."

Colburn personally loves the rush of rapids best, and points out that the best whitewater is on public lands not only because the famous runs boast good waves, but because they also integrate beautiful scenery and good water quality.



Bellyaking is for the dogs...and their human counterparts.

If you're looking for a face-first perspective on the river instead of the bird's-eye view from a SUP, riverboarding or Bellyaking might be the tool for you. Riverboards are extra-buoyant, over-sized boogie boards that allow you to hurtle through rapids like a superhero (but remember that all good superheroes wear helmets). Taking riverboarding to another level, Adam Masters founded Bellyak, Inc. in North Carolina in 2010.

Masters grew up as a kayaker, but continually looked for new ways to experience rivers. For him, that meant getting closer to the water and ditching the paddle. Like Reiker and Brown, Masters eventually started making his own gear to suit his needs. His first creation was made out of a cut-up kayak, foam and duct tape in his backyard. Since then, he's refined and patented the Bellyak, an eight-foot-long "belly-on-top" kayak that's stouter than a surfboard and shapelier than a SUP. "People scratch their heads when they see it, but once they're on it's really comfortable and intuitive," says Masters.

Again, like packrafting or SUPing, the Bellyak eliminates the fear of being trapped and doesn't require learning a new skillset. "It's just like swimming, but with a kayak beneath you." In fact, Masters uses the Bellyak in

therapeutic settings for people with disabilities, since you only need to use your arms. That doesn't mean Bellyaks can't tackle more technical water, though. Masters' favorite river runs are Class III rapids, like those on the Ocoee River in the Cherokee National Forest or the French Broad River in the Pisgah National Forest.

Whether traversing untamed wilderness creeks or cruising around a placid forest lake, bombing down river waves or paddling little riffles, the expanding world of creative river sports offers more opportunities than ever before to experience the myriad waterways that make our country special.

Kevin Colburn, the lifelong river guy, sums it up best: "Water travel and outdoor recreation are constantly evolving. The river remains the alluring constant, and we seek an ever deeper knowledge of it through whatever means we can dream up."

With 119 Wild and Scenic Rivers, more than 1,200 boating sites and thousands of lakes, America's National Forests provide enough space for that evolution to continue. Now is the perfect time to see what you can dream up during your next adventure on the water, whether it involves a paddle, a surfboard or simply a swimsuit and a smile. 🌲



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