

Rod was recently interviewed by American paddler, Norm Miller, creator of the Missouri River Paddlers group

Norm Miller: What was the most difficult part about your paddle trip and how did you overcome (if you did) the situation?

Rod Wellington: *Hands down, the most difficult part of the journey was a gruelling 26-mile manual portage around five hydro-electric dams at Great Falls, Montana. I chose a route on the east side of the river (from the Broadway Bay boat ramp to the Widow Coulee fishing access) and pulled a 16' sea kayak fully loaded with gear, food and water for three-and-a-half days in 100 degree heat. At its furthest point, the route took me seven miles away from the river, past an Air Force base, down the fly-infested shoulder of a busy highway and finally onto a pot-holed dirt road that in wet weather would've surely been a slick, muddy gumbo. Luckily, the temperature stayed high and the road stayed dry.*

In the days leading up to the portage I spent countless hours running errands on foot in Great Falls. My "old man" shoes (cheap, white and long-lasting) thankfully stayed in one piece (barely) but the constant walking had ruined my feet. By the time I began the portage, my feet were battered, blistered and beaten. I still had 26 miles to go.

At one point during the portage an older gentleman in a white minivan came to a rolling halt beside me and yelled through his open passenger window, "You need water!" I stopped in my tracks and answered, "No thanks. I'm fine. I'm carrying four GALLONS of water." As he exited the van to get a closer look at the sweaty dreadlocked peculiarity pulling a plastic kayak on wheels down a dusty road in the middle of friggin' nowhere, he chuckled and said, "No, no. You need WATER. As in, a RIVER!"

The upside to this exhausting undertaking was meeting a slew of incredibly supportive people on the side streets of Great Falls. Some of them had seen me on the evening news the night before and many more had seen me on the front page of the local newspaper. They stopped in droves to offer their encouragement. It was all quite heartwarming, even if the rest of my body felt like it was over-heating.

What do you feel was the most important thing that you planned for on your trip that you actually benefitted from?

RW: *Utilizing the 7.5' Alpaca Yukon Yak packraft on the upper stretches of the Missouri tributaries (Hell Roaring Creek, Red Rock Creek and Red Rock River). Dealing with the multitude of fences (electric, barbed wire, cables, rusty corrugated tin) strung across the river as it passed through ranchland would've be a harder chore using a 16' sea kayak, as Austrailan adventurer Mark Kalch found out. The Yukon Yak was*

nimble and light, 5lbs empty. It made portaging around fences, fallen trees and diversion dams easier, although disconnecting and reconnecting the heavy waterproof portage pack was time consuming. Still, it was one of the wiser pre-expedition decisions I made. And hey, I managed to sell it to the guy that oversees fishing apparel at Patagonia. We just happened to be camping at the same campground in Dillon, MT and he was looking for a new lightweight fishing boat to use on the Beaverhead River. By then I had switched to the sea kayak and the raft was of no use, so it was a win-win situation for both of us.

Was there anything that you planned for then you felt was unnecessary or overdone? Explain.

RW: No. Everything I planned for happened and everything that happened was necessary.

What were the 5-most important pieces of gear you carried on the trip? Explain.

RW: After struggling with cold temperatures in South Dakota in mid-September, it was time to resupply with some cold weather gear in October. I traded my old down sleeping bag that had long lost its loft, and bought a new Superlight down bag from The North Face. Also on the shopping list was a new MEC Tremblant down jacket, an MEC Capilano paddling hood, a pair of MEC Hot Mitts (5mm neoprene paddling mitts) and a Kokatat Gore-Tex paddling suit (drysuit). Other important gear included a copy of David Miller's "The Complete Paddler" (a paddling guide to the Missouri River) and a phone and laptop so I could share the journey with others online.

NM: Prior to your trip, what was your weakest asset or least skilled or qualified trait for the trip and how do you overcome this?

RW: Even though I had done other long distance river journeys, a lack in paddling confidence would qualify as an answer.

I have an absolute fear of capsizing during open water crossings. On the large reservoirs of Montana and the Dakotas there are many open bays that need to be crossed while descending the Missouri River. I was terrified with each one. Even more so if it was windy and wavy. These crossings were mentally taxing. The key to managing the fear was to acknowledge and accept it, not to fight it. I reminded myself that nothing bad was happening to me in that moment, any moment when nothing bad was happening, which was 99.99% of the time. Additional confidence came in the form of this short mantra that David Miller gave me: "Trust your boat".

What was the least important item(s) that you brought and discovered there was never a need for?

RW: *After the Jefferson River I used my Katadyn water filter twice, both times in reservoirs to filter a half-gallon jug of backup water in case my tap water reserve ran out, which it never did. I left the filter with a friend in South Dakota and picked it up after the expedition. A Manfrotto tripod stuck with me until Great Falls, and then I shipped it home. Too bad, I really like that tripod and could've used it many times while filming. It's just too bloody bulky and I've yet to figure out a way to carry it in the kayak.*

What was the biggest surprise of the journey? Something you did not anticipate.

RW: *While crossing Fort Peck Lake I had no cell phone coverage or Internet access. When I reached wif-fi at the Fort Peck Marina I found a slew of paddler photographs on my Facebook newsfeed. "Who the heck are these people?" I asked myself. Turns out I had received a bunch of friend requests and my sister, who had access to my Facebook page, had answered the requests, most of whom were paddlers. Equally as cool was the fact that someone had hooked me up with the Missouri River Paddlers Facebook page. I'm still wondering who added me to their group. Whoever it was, thanks! You introduced me to an incredible collection of people who are passionate about paddling and protecting the Missouri River. Thanks for being a huge part of the journey, y'all!*

What kind of boat did you paddle and what were its good qualities and also the things you did not like about it?

RW: *16' Necky Eskia w/rudder. It was a scratched up, faded rental boat when I bought it for \$800 at a kayak shop in Vancouver, BC. It's wide and stable but heavy and sluggish compared to fibreglass or composite. But, would you drag a composite boat up a slope of rip rap or down the length of a concrete boat ramp? Of course not. That's why I love plastic boats.*

How did you plan your meals/food? Did this system work good for you and what would you change regarding this?

RW: *I choose not to eat animal products of any kind. Some people call me a vegan. I call me Rod.*

Meal/food planning is pretty simple. Breakfast: oatmeal, brown sugar, spirulina, nuts, raisins. No lunch. Dinner: boil and eat curry dinners and rice, canned beans and rice, Ramen noodles. Snacks: nuts, licorice, assorted candies. Fresh fruit and vegetables when available (sparse through the winter months, stuff freezes you know).

I only shipped one food drop. I sent a package of non-perishable food to Fort Peck Marina while resting in Great Falls, MT. You can easily arrange a ride into Glasgow, MT from Fort Peck Marina if you are running low on food, so shipping a package ahead from Great Falls or Fort Benton is not always necessary. Grocery services at Fort Peck Marina and the Fort Peck townsite are severely limited. Glasgow is about 17 miles north of the marina and has all amenities.

What was your system for obtaining drinking water and what were the benefits as well as the disadvantages you had dealing with water.

RW: Filtered river water in the tributaries above Clark Canyon Reservoir. Water was clear, little sediment. Below Clark Canyon Reservoir there are plenty of opportunities to obtain drinking water. I used two 2.5 litre collapsible Platypus bottles and newly purchased wine box bladders. The bladders were \$3.50 each at a kayak shop in Vancouver. You may be able to find similar bladders at your local army surplus store. They are tough, light, take up no room when empty and hold about a gallon of water. The most I carried was about five gallons of drinking water, usually in the cockpit, between my legs.

If you were going to give advice for someone planning the same journey what do you feel would be best advice and things to consider that you now know about this journey?

RW: Buy "The Complete Paddler", David Miller's paddling guide to the Missouri River. Join the Missouri River Paddlers Facebook page. Ask a lot of questions, especially about the large reservoirs in Montana and the Dakotas. These reservoirs are HUGE. Don't underestimate them. Cross them smartly and safely. When it's too windy, pitch your tent and read a book. And remember: Fear is merely an illusion. The thought of a tiger is not a tiger.