

Finally Ran Zoar Gap

By Erik Eckilson

Ok – I admit it. I've been up to the Deerfield River many times in the past few years, but I had never run Zoar Gap. I've paddled the section above it, I've paddled the section below it, but I had never run the Gap itself.

For those of you who aren't familiar with it, the Deerfield is a pretty river located in the northwest corner of Massachusetts near Greenfield. Due to a power company dam release, its one of the few rivers in the northeast where you can paddle whitewater all summer long. The Fife Brook Section is an easy class II with the exception of Zoar Gap which is class III. More experienced boaters can run the Dryway which is class III/IV. RICKA has some paddlers with that level of skill, but I'm not one of them. The only time I go to the Dryway is to take pictures.

Anyway, we planned a RICKA Whitewater trip on the Fife Brook section of the Deerfield for Riverfest weekend – July 26th. With all the rain we had received the week before, we were hoping for a good release, and we got one – 1,200 cfs. That's enough to keep you from bottoming out in the shallow spots, but not so much as to wash out the holes and eddies in the class II section.

We arrived at the put-in below the Fife Brook Dam at around 10:30 - the place was mobbed. Just about every paddle club in the northeast must have had a group there, so RICKA was in good company. We had five boaters – me, Jim, Jay, Brendan and Dan. That's two canoes and three kayaks.

By the time we unloaded our gear and shuttled the cars it was 11:30, and the crowd had dissipated. We had a leisurely paddle down the

upper section and pulled into the class II take-out above Zoar Gap at around 2:30. It was decision time – should I run the Gap or not. It was a beautiful day – nice and warm. There were also plenty of people at the bottom of the rapid to fish me out if I swam, so why not.

There are three routes though Zoar Gap – left, right and center – each requiring a different combination of moves. Most people told me that the route just right of center would be the easiest, so that's the one I would try. Besides, that's the way Dan was going. I headed down to the eddy above the Gap and queued up for my turn. Dan went first, hit the eddy across the river and then disappeared down into the rapid.

Now it was my turn. I crossed the river and eddied behind a large rock just above the Gap - so far, so good. From there it's a straight shot down the right side. I pulled out of the eddy and paddled hard into the rapid in case I drifted to the center and needed to punch through the hole at the bottom. No problem. The current took me just where I needed to go – a clean run just right of center.

Jim was next. He took the “sneak” route to the far right. It's a more difficult route, but he made it look easy. He had a big smile on his face as he came through the drop at the bottom of the rapid.

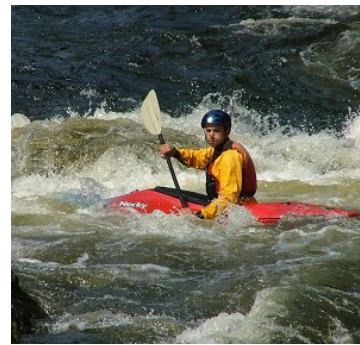
As is usually the case, Zoar Gap looked much worse than it actually was. With proper training, some good advice and a little luck, running it wasn't too bad. It felt cool to sit in the eddy below the Gap and look up at the crowd on the street, but all I could think of was “Thank god I didn't swim - that would have been embarrassing!”



Erik running Zoar Gap



Jim running Zoar Gap



Dan running Zoar Gap