

Life on the Loose

My journey from suburban housewife
to outdoor guide

Carri Taylor-Carlson

Serendipity Ink / HenschelHAUS Publishing, Inc.
Milwaukee, Wisconsin

Chapter One

Solo on the Green

2002 Venture West Catalog

Here's the wilderness trip you've been waiting for. The Green River in southern Utah meanders fifty-two miles from Ruby Ranch to Mineral Bottoms. The twisting, looping Green winds its way between sandstone cliffs towering fifteen hundred feet on either side.

“You’re the only person on the river this week,” Dirk said as he helped load my canoe. “Oh, you’re traveling light. Do you have enough food, warm clothes?” His muscles bulged from hauling canoes. “Most people we put in fill the canoe.”

He should know, as one of the three brothers who owned Tex’s Riverways, my canoe outfitter. They launched hundreds of canoes each season. Good thing he couldn’t hear my heart slam against my chest.

I had brought two duffels, stuffed with clothes, food, and gear. Six gallons of water, a Coleman stove, and those duffels didn’t take up much space in an eighteen-foot aluminum canoe. It looked as empty as I felt. The breakfast cheese omelet and hash brown potatoes at the Westerner Cafe couldn’t fill the scared hole in my belly.

Dirk added to my growing panic when he said in a flat voice, “You know my concern for your safety requires me to tell you what you’re doing is dangerous. This is off-season.” He walked to the

Life on the Loose

bank where I sat in the canoe, and put his hand in the water as if to judge the current. “Ordinarily, we tell people if they run into trouble, another canoe will come along within an hour. For you, no such luck.” He looked smug, as if confident in some secret knowledge of pitfalls looming ahead of me on the river.

When I planned this trip down the Green River in Utah, I’d arrived at a midlife junction. It was time to start the business I had dreamed about for many years, adventure travel guide. I loved the symbolism: launch a canoe, launch a new life. Ten, fifteen miles a day in a mild current would be about right for an experienced paddler checking out an adventure for her soon-to-be clients. I envisioned warm sunny days, sixty to seventy degrees, with a slight chill at night, spectacular canyon scenery, and around every bend, convenient campsites on sandbars. It added up to a dream wilderness trip in my favorite Western state. What could go wrong? I relished the challenge, a chance to prove to myself that I could be an intrepid adventurer.

At breakfast, a man at an adjacent table announced in a loud voice, “The dog’s water froze last night. It was twenty-three when I went to bed at ten.” He slung a winter jacket on a chair, gulped his coffee, and took off his gloves. “Feels nice and warm in here.” He looked at me as if he could read my mind. How could he know?

In exactly thirty minutes I would leave for the river and five nights in a tent. Did I have to do this? Yes, if I wanted to reinvent myself as an outdoor guide. Thanks to lack of weather foresight and a habit of traveling light, my wardrobe included neither a fleece jacket nor long underwear. I knew better, but packed for Utah, not Montana. To my credit, I brought a rain jacket and rain pants that came in handy for warmth at night when I needed to wear everything I’d packed.

Solo on the Green

Food had been my primary concern, not my wardrobe. I had planned meals down to the cheese sauce for the Pasta Alfredo, fresh garlic, and the curry powder for the chicken. I would eat well.

As I stood by the river, “strong, confident, free” dissolved into “small, insignificant, scared.” At home, the Green River was a cute little wiggly blue line on a map. Now those fifty-five miles from Ruby Ranch to Mineral Bottoms looked more like a Lewis and Clark expedition than a casual six-day outing. At least I was going downstream, not up. I should have done some research, made a plan that more closely matched the risks of this solo voyage. As an experienced outdoors person, I should have known to bring fleece, even to Utah in early November.

Would I find campsites? Did I have enough food, water, fuel, and what if my stove broke down?

Then Dirk said, “When it’s time to come off the river, you’ll come around a bend and see a cottonwood on the left bank. It’s a big tree.” He walked to the bank and started to slide the canoe into the river. “You can’t miss it. Get ready to pull out there.”

“That’s it? You want me to watch for one tree? Anything else I should look for?” Now I felt the fear that would obsess me all day, every day, until I found that cottonwood. That fear sucked the joy out of the trip. Of course, I could miss it. Could I watch both sides of the river at the same time in a current that whipped me around every bend?

“Oh, you’ll recognize the tree. It’s at Mineral Bottoms, right in front of you.” As he said this, his voice a monotone, he wouldn’t look me in the eye, just stared at the river. I knew what he thought. This middle-aged woman is crazy. His disdain for my adventure eroded every remaining fragment of my fragile confidence. Damn Dirk. Damn the river. Damn my confident plan back in Milwaukee.

Life on the Loose

If I got myself into a jam, there was no one to lend a hand. The Green flowed through a wilderness canyon. I had choices: let go of the dream and stay the course in suburbia, or turn off the monkey-babble in my head, get in the canoe, and paddle.

“Don’t worry about me. I’ll be fine.” He didn’t ask about a cell phone. I didn’t have one, but even if I did, it would have been useless in the canyon. Would I admit to Dirk that I was scared? Never. Just in case, we made a plan, because this mother of four wasn’t ready to feed a turkey vulture in the desert.

“If you’re more than a day late,” he said, “I’ll send a helicopter to search for you.”

Dirk didn’t know I would swim miles in the murky Green, before I’d flag down a helicopter or pay hundreds of dollars for a rescue. There would be a way out of that canyon even if I had to crawl naked and bloody over prickly pear cactus all the way. Still, it was comforting to know we had a plan.

Everything changes when you’re at the edge, ready to slide into a river that will take you into the abyss, the unknown. Could I flip a switch, let go of my predictable life? A tree branch floated downriver and disappeared, and finally, tentatively, I let go of the root that bound me to the riverbank.

The current caught the bow of my canoe, and in thirty seconds, I was three hundred yards downriver. I wouldn’t need to paddle, the Green would do the work. There was no turning back.

* * * * *

Labyrinth Canyon lived up to its name. The river wound back and forth making a series of S curves as it flowed into Navajo canyon walls that shuttered it like skyscrapers on Wall Street. I was a passenger, surrounded by beauty as the placid river reflected each

Solo on the Green

nuance of the canyon that dwarfed my canoe. Again and again as I paddled and floated in the gentle current, I saw a wall of red rock coming at me, blocking my passage. Just when I'd think there's no way, it's a dead end, the river made a hard right or a hard left, and I coasted around the outside edge of the bend in the faster-moving current.

If only I could get the fear out of my gut, the terror that gripped my stomach every time I thought about the cottonwood tree. Dirk hadn't given any details. How big was it? How close to the river? I should have asked more questions. He said there were no other options. Did that mean the road at Mineral Bottoms was the only exit until the confluence with the Green and the Colorado? From the cottonwood, the Colorado River was fifty-five miles further downriver. Even if I got to the Colorado, there would be no jetboat ride back to Moab. The season ended on October 30. The boat would be winterized and put in a garage in Moab, and I would be on my own.

If I swept past the tree, I could climb out of the canyon, a thousand feet up to Canyonlands National Park, but there would be no trail to follow when I got there. I'd still be in the middle of nowhere. If I went too far, the canoe would be engulfed in whitewater that would take us both to a place of no return.

I paddled two-and-a-half hours on the first day. I saw desert, endless miles of sand lit by bright sunshine in a cloudless Utah sky. The river took me past a flat, beige landscape that gradually gave way to an increasingly deep, red rock canyon. The water reflected in perfect detail the rock walls and the golden tamarisks that lined its banks. That beauty was lost on me. My stomach hurt.

I looked at those walls, the map, and the walls again, and knew I had forgotten something important: how to read the brand-new, hundred-and-four-page, waterproof river map. Dirk had said

Life on the Loose

something like, “Be sure you always know where you are on the map, because at the end of the day, when you get off the river, you won’t be able to tell where you are. When you’re out of the canoe, all the canyons look the same.” He knew what he was talking about. All the canyons did look exactly the same, gaping holes, gashes in the landscape that suggested drainage, flowing water somewhere behind the weed-choked inlets that popped up on both sides of the river.

An experienced river rat would recognize the inlets and surmise the possibility of an opening that led to a campsite. Not me, I saw weeds.

The map didn’t look like any map I’d ever seen. Maps have marked trails and intersections. This one looked like a book, one where each page covered a section of the Green. As always, north was at the top, but I was supposed to be heading south, or so I thought when I studied the Utah map at home. After I turned the upside-down map around and put south where it belonged, it made sense, not much, but at least the sun set in the west now, and I had a better shot at locating myself as I paddled downstream.

The first night I stumbled into Trin Alcove, a place where three canyons came together at the apex of a hairpin bend. As the canoe swished around the corner, a broad bench of sand looked like an obvious site for a tent. Canyons, waiting to be explored, opened behind the beach, but Dirk’s warning played in my head. “You’re the only person on the river.” I played it safe, sat by the tent, and watched the water that looked like chocolate pudding slide by my temporary home.

At 5:30, it turned dark, cold, and lonely. Had I forgotten about November’s short days, or chosen not to acknowledge the fourteen-hour nights? And, where was the fleece I left behind in Milwaukee? I built a fire in the required firepan and propped it

Solo on the Green

between my legs for warmth. Even the songs of the canyon wrens ceased, their cheerful trill replaced by silence, while my little fire flickered and lit the rock that surrounded me. When the nighttime blues hit, exacerbated by wine, I felt the weight of the unknown, and wondered as I would every minute of every hour for the next four days, *What am I doing here?*

I had left four children at home. The oldest, Cathy, was seventeen; Linda and Wendy came in the middle; Chris at eleven was the youngest. If I started a business, I figured a couple weeks a year in the west, and three or four weekends closer to home would be overlooked, as they went about their busy lives. Maybe pride in their mother's adventures would overshadow the loss of an ordinary mom who cooked dinner every night and kept the cookie jar full.

What were they doing? Did Cathy and Linda get tickets for The Who concert? Did Wendy finish her science project for Mr. Horowitz? Did Chris go to Ricky and Ray's house for a sleep-over?

Did they miss me? Would they ever understand my need to live part of my life in wild places? I made hard choices. Safe at home, I longed for wilderness and adventure. Then when I left, I wanted to be at home with my family. I needed someone to tell me that what I was doing was okay, that I could be both a mom and an outdoor guide.

This new life was supposed to be easy; everything was supposed to fall into place, while my children unanimously expressed pride in their mom. Someone, maybe Cathy, would say, "You're way more cool than Sue's mom. She doesn't even know how to build a fire," and I would get all gooey inside and feel proud, and give everyone a hug. It never happened that way. They wanted a mom who looked like the other moms. I didn't know how to do that. Even

Life on the Loose

when I dressed up in my Chico's jeans and some clunky, hip jewelry, I didn't get it right. I wanted to look stylish with cool clothes and good hair, but I hated to shop, and was too frugal to pay for a haircut at a salon.

I watched the remains of the afterglow from the sunset and turned my thoughts to the river and my new life.

I'd always been the one who organized camping trips for family and friends, the person who planned every detail because it was fun, and because no one else wanted to do it. I'm not a detail person, but when it came to outdoor adventure, I loved every step of the process. I reserved the campsites, planned the meals, bought the groceries and set up the tents. This was my playtime.

Wasn't this logical, to start a business doing what I loved? I thought so. My husband Peter said if there was profit involved, then he could understand why I did it. But, of course, he was a businessman. He had made it clear that I couldn't expect his help with laundry, cooking, cleaning, the daily chores that keep a home running. He had said, "When you make as much money as I do, I'll help you at home." This was the early eighties, before women received enough well-deserved credit for their "work" at home. His attitude reflected the thinking of most suburban husbands with stay-at-home wives.

In his world, money mattered. I'd have to show a profit to earn his respect and his permission. Money would prove that I was more than a dilettante.

I ate a Snickers bar and went to bed.

On the second day, I positioned south where it belonged, on the downriver side of the map. As I glided past Bull Hollow, Ten-Mile Canyon, and Keg Spring Bottom, I worried. Between mother-guilt and the cottonwood, nothing felt right except the current that gently pulled me down the Green as I sang "Cruising Down the

Solo on the Green

River” and “Down by the Riverside” to keep up my spirits. Maybe I was a crazed, middle-aged housewife who should have stayed home with her family. Maybe I just needed a hug.

At the end of the day, every sandbar, a potential campsite, was covered with a layer of mud that stuck to my shoes. To make it worse, a thin layer of ice coated the muck. The first time I explored one of those icy terraces, rather than lose my shoes in a sinkhole, I tiptoed onto the ice in bare feet and sank in something up to my knee. Quicksand?

I had grown up with a horror of quicksand. My mom convinced me that I would sink up to my eyeballs and die if I stepped on that allegedly treacherous sand along the shore of Lake Michigan where we spent our summers. Now I pictured myself disappearing forever in a bottomless mud bath while the canoe coasted down the Green. My family would never know what happened to their mother. I’d turn into a statistic, an unresolved death on the Green. Now there was a new worry, something else to obsess about besides finding the tree.

Only once, at Trin Alcove on that first night, did I find a site with reasonably easy river access and sand, not ice and mud. The rest of the time, I hauled the canoe across the mud or up a bank to a place where I could tie it on to something sturdy. Then I used a willow branch to floss the mud from between my toes. It wasn’t all bad. After dinner, I sat in front of my green tent that faced the river, watched the golden sun light up the rocks, and felt at peace with the journey.

Each day I paddled, ate two semi-frozen Snickers bars, one after lunch, and one after dinner, and tried to quell my thumping heart. Each night, I built a small fire in the firepan, wrapped my legs around it, and sat outside until my backside got cold. By 7:30, I tucked myself inside my warm sleeping bag where, secure in the

Life on the Loose

tent, sleep came slowly while I attempted to visualize the damn cottonwood. I couldn't still my mind. It wandered to sudden windstorms, quicksand, or my canoe ripped from its moorings, disappearing down the Green.

Each morning, I broke the ice in my water bottle, took a frozen towel into my sleeping bag, scrubbed my face with ice crystals, and peed in a bucket. Dirk had told me to pee in the river, but the bucket was easier, and closer. Later, I dumped the bucket in the river, so it ended in the same place. And the rest, along with kitty litter, went into a second bucket that came with me in the canoe. Or as Dirk put it, "There's a rule on the Green: no shit left behind."

After morning chores, I sat outside and waited for warmth from the sun before I could think about breakfast, or getting ready for the day. While I listened to the canyon wren, the sound of rustling leaves, and the soft gurgle of the river, the red rock canyon glowed as if lit from the inside by a giant candle.

Then it was D-Day, day five of the six-day journey. I'd gone around Bow Knot Bend, past Oak Bottom, and found Hell Roaring Canyon. I'd worried my way down the Green for four days, survived cold, lonely nights and stressful days, searched for campsites, and walked barefoot on ice. The river gave me perfect sunny days, idyllic canyon scenery, and an easy float, but where was the pleasure? Joy? Contentment?

My morning oatmeal tasted like warm sawdust. Coffee didn't perk up my spirits. I had to find that cottonwood. My mouth felt like it was full of gauze. My heart pounded. I checked the map and started down the final four miles. I scanned both sides of the river. My chest throbbed, tightened, my heartbeat matched the cadence of the second-hand ticking on my watch. I couldn't breathe. Time stopped.

Solo on the Green

I rounded a curve, paddled past an endless sandbar and then, suddenly, the obvious appeared, a detail Dirk had neglected to mention, a prominent dirt road, and that tree, a golden specimen, backlit by the late afternoon sun. The muscles in my gut unclenched as I landed the canoe, pitched the tent thirty-six hours early, and waited for the noon pickup on day six.

Relaxed, I savored the heat from the afternoon sun, the taste of strong coffee, the quiet, the woodsy smell of my tiny fire, and the silent river flowing south. I'd paddled through magnificent canyons and only occasionally noticed the details, the clean rock faces, their colors reflected in the river, and the changing contours, surprises around every bend. I could have trusted the Green to take me where I needed to be. Instead, I wasted much of the beauty, obsessed about how the trip would end.

I was about to leap into the unknown with a business full of risks. I would never know how a trip would end until it ended. I'd have to project total confidence, because future customers would depend on my guide expertise. Despite my best efforts to control every aspect of a trip, I'd have to fake it, pretend everything would be fine, and we'd be safe no matter what happened, or how scared and incompetent I felt.

I ate the last semi-frozen Snickers bar, toasted the cottonwood with a glass of wine, and slept soundly under the stars.