

Gila Middle Box

August 2006



We left Albuquerque at 3:00pm on Friday excited for our first trip on the Gila River. The Gila rarely runs with enough water to justify the drive down but New Mexico was having a very wet summer and the flows were ranging between 800-2000 cfs on the Redrock gauge. I had followed the river for a few years and not ever seen flows this large that were consistent or holding for any period of time. Daily rain helped saturate the surrounding area so although flows fluctuated, they were not as dramatic as normal rain fluctuations. We had hoped to run both the Wilderness section and Middle Box but time constraints cut our trip to only the Middle Box. As we entered Silver City we were indecisive on where to camp. We wanted to camp as near to the take-out as possible in hopes of getting an early start but were told there was no camping around Redrock because of all the private property. We were also skeptical of taking the Redrock road because it had rained most of the afternoon and there may be washouts. We opted to head south on hwy 90 hoping to find some decent camping in the small wilderness area that touches this highway. Indeed we did get lucky and found a great camping spot just off the hwy up a forest service road. As we were scouting the campsite for a good place to pitch tent, I nearly stepped on a rattle snake. All the rain has cause tremendous growth and the grass is thick. Watch out for what lurks beneath!! It was not the first snake we saw as the rain brought them out in bulk. We did not have a chance to take a picture of the snake at the camp spot but here is one from the put

in.



We decided it would be cool to get one of those coiled strike shots so we approached...



We opted to set up tent in a much less grassy area, enjoyed dinner and got to bed early. The next morning we packed camp and headed to the take out in Redrock. We continued down hwy 90 towards Lordsburg and then took 464 up to Redrock. We parked near the bridge overlooking the river and were pleasantly surprised at the flow. Soon an elderly lady approached on a quad with a cigarette dangling in hand - truly what you would expect from a town such as Redrock! We had not even started our trip and already we could be facing problems. She approached and asked if we were going to park by the bridge. I thought, this can't be good the locals are already following us... I answered no, and that we were looking to kayak the river and asked if she had any suggestions for a takeout. She said that folks had been taking out off the game road just ahead of us. She told us to follow it all the way to the end and just park off the road. Now here is the real treat, she said if we had any problems to come back to her house and she would find a way to help us out. In all my years of kayaking, I have never met a nicer local at a take out, especially considering almost all of Redrock is private property. We hopped back in the car and headed down the game road. As we approached our first fork in the road, I thought man it sure would have been nice for her to tell us which fork to take. After two more forks we finally ended up at the end of the road. You actually enter a wildlife preserve and follow a fence around to a gate that enters back onto private property. Near the gate is some parking (maybe two or three vehicles worth). The take out is not optimal as you have to crawl through some bush and walk about 500 yards down a rock wash to get to the river. I have heard that some folks drive down the wash but we did not want to risk it. We both hopped into one vehicle and started heading to the put-in. As it was clear all night and morning, we decided to take the Redrock road back. This road is 28 miles of dirt as oppose to around 100 miles on the highways. You have to keep an eye out for trenches and washouts but can do around 40 mph for a good portion of the trip. It took us about 45 minutes to drive the Redrock road before we hit hwy 180. We took 180 to Bill Evans and headed down river. After crossing a wash with a healthy amount of water flowing through,

we pulled over and found a nice place to park with decent river access. I was somewhat concerned that if it rained, the wash may flood and my car would be stuck until morning but we did not find another launch site below the diversion damn. We packed our boats and readied for the launch.



The first 5-6 miles looks pretty much like what you see at put in, flat water with the occasional class 1 or 2 ripple thrown in. The big challenge is picking the right fork that does not run aground on rocks. For the most part you can see which fork the channel runs in, but every now and then it is not completely obvious. The end of Bill Evan's road ends in an old bird watching park (or something like that) so you can imagine the amount of avian companionship we had. In fact the whole trip was packed with wildlife. We saw coyotes, raccoons, skunks, snakes, beavers, deer, and tons of birds. The rain had done wonders for the area as you can see in the pictures, there was tons of green. Just as we began to wonder when the actual box canyon we had read about would start we saw the canyon walls begin to steepen.

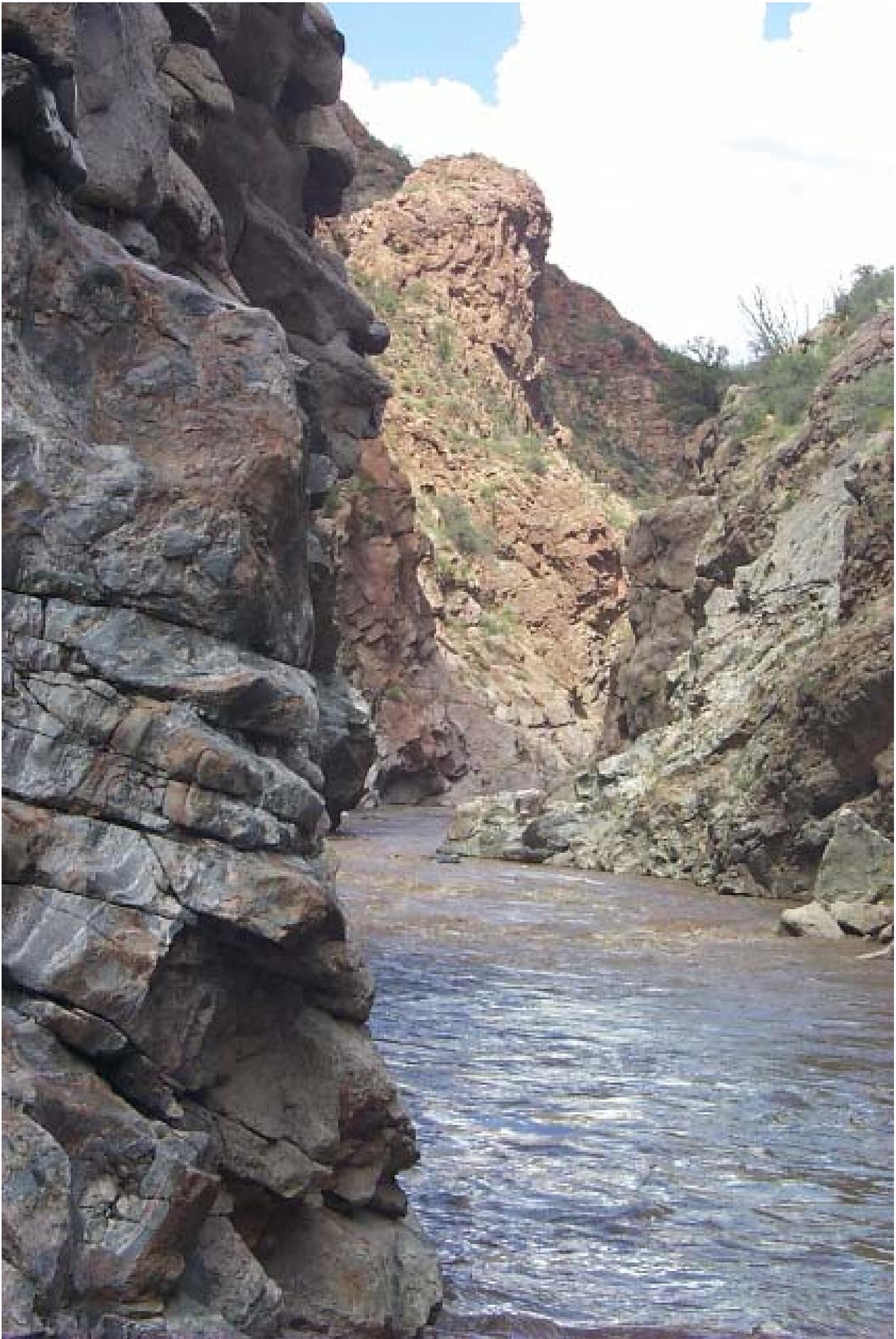


Soon after we were faced with another fork only this time the distinct sound of white water accompanied our decision. We chose the left fork and soon were thrust down a narrow channel into a huge hole. With little time to align our boats we hit the hole. My boat fully submerged but did not flip. Looking back we commented that we could have taken the other fork but after a bit more thought decided but that would have been a lame baptism into the canyon, the left fork is definitely the route to take! We boat scouted all the rapids and were not able to take many rapid shots because the river was flowing fast and was very pushy. By the time we found an eddy to pull over in following a rapid, it had disappeared behind a canyon wall or was too far to get a clear shot. For example, here is a river wide hole near the beginning of the box.



Most of the rapids are pool drop so not big concerns. Following a few drops the river does make a bend and water washes up against walls or boulders but nothing looked too threatening. During the drops a few large holes develop as well as some curling waves but we did not see anything too demanding at the flows we hit. Throughout the run there is lots of debris and logs piled up on rocks and washes. We did not encounter any major log strainers but at this level the river does flow swiftly under branches of overhanging trees and brush along the shores. The canyon is truly awesome. It felt a lot like the Salt River in the heart of the gorge. Here are some more shots in the box.









As you can see from the pictures, the water runs thick brown during runoff season. Your paddle would disappear an inch under the surface. The width of the Gila in the box varies from about 15' to 40'. The canyon walls are metamorphic rock so it offers a unique canyon from those of the Taos Box. There are lots of crevices and small caves carved into the walls that add to the unique beauty. If you look closely you can see debris and logs as high up as 30' feet on some walls indicating where the river hits in flood stages. We did not have any idea what the river flow was during our trip until we hit the Redrock gauge near take out. The river had come down quite a bit since the previous weekend and was near 700cfs and 5.6 feet at the Redrock gauge when we left town on Friday. We had hoped the Friday night rains brought it up as the river had gone from 1300cfs on Monday down to 700cfs on Friday. We were happy to know that a small spike did occur and we paddled from around 900 cfs down to 700 cfs on Saturday. The gauge at Redrock was showing 5.71 feet when we passed by. We both felt it was a great level but would be curious what it looked like at lower, more typical levels. We imagine it would be a lot more technical with more exposed rocks during the drops. We also thought that a few hundred cfs more would make things a bit more interesting albeit, more pushy.



After you pass the gauging station you are back in class 1 flat-water until the takeout. The nice part is even the flat-water flows fast at this level (compared to say the end of the Salt). Lots of cows and pastures line the river on this side of the gorge. It was about an hour float past the gauging station before we reached takeout. We launched at 12:00pm and reached take out at 5:00pm. We tended to paddle more and take less breaks not having a good idea of how long it would take. At the take out we hauled our gear up the rocky wash and through the trees to our vehicle and began the haul back to put in. The total shuttle takes about one and a half hours on the Redrock road. It was a wonderful trip and one I hope to do again soon (hopefully including the Wilderness run next time).