

OUTDOORS



MARC EVANS, left, and Hilary Hutcheson paddle down the Middle Fork of the Flathead River on Saturday. This photo was taken with a helmet-mounted camera during a trip from Schafer Meadows Guard Station to the Sportsmens Bridge — an epic 123-mile river journey in one day.

Glacier Raft Co. photos



RYAN THOMPSON paddles through the churning water of the upper Middle Fork.



THE LOWER Flathead River was slow going for the raft crews, including Thompson and Evans.

River marathon: 123 miles in under 18 hours

By JIM MANN
The Daily Inter Lake

Raft crews race from Schafer Meadows to Sportsmens Bridge

Two Glacier Raft Co. crews made an unprecedented 123-mile river run Saturday, surviving torrential flows on the upper Middle Fork Flathead River and enduring a grueling paddle through the lower reaches of the mainstem Flathead River.

"We made it in 17 hours and 44 minutes," said Hilary Hutcheson, a former Glacier Raft Co. guide who participated in the trip from the Schafer Meadows ranger station in the Great Bear Wilderness to Sportsmens Bridge on the lower Flathead River just north of Flathead Lake.

The two crews flew into the Schafer Meadows airstrip Friday evening aboard Red Eagle Aviation planes from Kalispell. The trip got under way at 5:10 a.m. Saturday, with a quick turn for the worse.

One of the two 14-foot rafts flipped just over a half-hour into the trip on

the daunting Three Forks rapids series.

DARWON STONEMAN, Glacier Raft Co. co-owner and the trip leader, was among the four boaters who had an early-morning swim on a river that was at its spring runoff crest over the weekend.

"It wasn't warm and sunny at 5:45 in the morning. We got out of the river really quick, all of us," Stoneman said. "But it wasn't a huge deal for us, because we work on those things in terms of being totally prepared."

The boaters were wearing dry suits and helmets and all have considerable river experience, particularly Stoneman, 61, who has run the upper Middle Fork countless times over the last 30 years. Even with the dry suits, the two crews pulled out for about an hour to warm up by a fire.

And then Stoneman took over on the stern

with the guide stick.

"I've been in there at higher levels before but in bigger boats," he said.

For Hutcheson, who has been away from guiding for several years, the incident was "a wake-up call, big time."

FROM THERE on out, the two crews scouted downstream rapids whenever possible, particularly in the challenging Class 5 rapids in Spruce Park.

"Spruce was great," Hutcheson said. "It was huge. It was surging. The holes in Spruce were bigger than the guides who've been up there have seen in a decade."

Stoneman said he has been on higher Middle Fork water years ago, but it was always aboard larger rafts. On Saturday, the Middle Fork was approaching its spring runoff peak of 7,000 cubic feet per second at Essex.

"It's chugging along right now. I don't think

just anybody should go up there right now," said Stoneman, noting that his crews were the first boaters to fly into Schafer this year. "They better be ready to swim if they go up there when it's like that."

THE CREWS finished the 27-mile stretch from Schafer to Bear Creek on U.S. 2 by 10 a.m. because the river was flowing so fast. Usually floaters take two to three days to navigate this stretch of wild water.

"The reality is we were probably on the river for just three hours," subtracting the hourlong layover and subsequent scouting stops, Stoneman said.

The paddlers included veteran guides Marc Evans, Ryan Thompson and Val Kryshak; Stoneman's son, D.J., who's in his second year of guiding; former guide Bryan Anderson; and former guide Shane

Hutcheson, Hilary's husband.

From Bear Creek, the crews paddled on to West Glacier for a food stop that included re-rigging the rafts with rowing frames to speed up the trip on slower downstream waters.

They had no idea just how slow the trip would be after reaching Kalispell, where the Flathead River turns into a slack-water drift through meandering oxbows.

"I think I would have rather flipped three more times on the upper Middle Fork rather than do that flat water on the lower river," Stoneman said. "That's motorboat country. As far as I'm concerned, it's like a lake for 12 miles below Kalispell."

"IT WAS VERY mentally excruciating going through that slow water," Hutcheson said. "It was like a mental game. It was so frustrating."

Each raft had a person on the oars and two paddlers, allowing rotating rest time for the fourth person.

The crews finally made it to the Sportsmens Bridge at 10:54 p.m., finishing a single-day trip that it is believed has not been done before.

Last year, a group of Montana Raft Co. guides made a long, single-day trip from Bear Creek to a takeout at Eagle Bend, about two miles downstream from Sportsmens Bridge.

The Glacier Raft Co. paddlers had planned on celebrating their trip afterwards with a stop at the Garden Bar in Bigfork, but that didn't happen.

"We were going to celebrate but everybody was pooped," Hutcheson said. "There was no celebration. It was more like people falling asleep in the truck on the way back to West Glacier."

"All of us were whipped," Stoneman added. "We were going to bed."

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Saturday, June 6th
9:00am-noon
Shady Lane Family Fishing Pond
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