

Dedicated to the Preservation and



Enjoyment of our Wildwaters

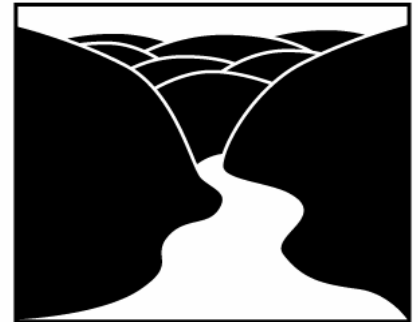
# Blue Ridge River Runner

OCTOBER 2004

## BRRR OCTOBER GENERAL MEMBERSHIP MEETING: OCTOBER 20, 2004

A woefully misinformed soul from work asked me the other day what the paddling season generally runs. The fundamental question—what he was really getting at—was: *at what point in the latter stages of the year do you stop boating?* With some difficulty I managed to stifle a chuckle, because, as we all know (right?), it's **12 months!** So come on out to the October club meeting at Big Lick Tropical Grill at 6:30pm and make plans with your BRRR friends to get out and enjoy that brisk autumn air...the paralyzing shock of sudden submersion in icy water...and (lest we forget) the ubiquitous ice cream headache that accompanies. Remember, GAF's just a few short weeks away! **Map to Big Lick on Page 2**

## BLUE RIDGE



## RIVER RUNNERS

**Journal of the  
Blue Ridge River Runners**

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## 2004 NANTAHALA OUTDOOR CENTER GUEST APPRECIATION FESTIVAL AND FLEA MARKET

The annual N.O.C. G.A.F. will be held the weekend of October 30-31, 2004. Again, as in years past, BRRR has rented Cabin D at the N.O.C. for the nights of Thursday, October 28 through Saturday, October 30. All the rooms are taken, but beds may be available at the Bunkhouse and/or Base Camp. If you need accommodations, visit [www.noc.com](http://www.noc.com) to make reservations. There are also several campgrounds in the area that usually have vacancies during the event

We also have reserved a stall at the Flea Market for BRRR members' use. Bring all your unused, overused, outdated and otherwise unnecessary outdoor sports gear and/or clothing. Don't forget to bring materials to attach price tags to your sale items. And bring your folding chair. And bring lots of money.

There will be paddling opportunities on the Nantahala and Ocoee Rivers for sure, and depending on water levels, other area rivers may be running. So bring your boats and paddling gear. One or more of the BRRR rafts will be available.

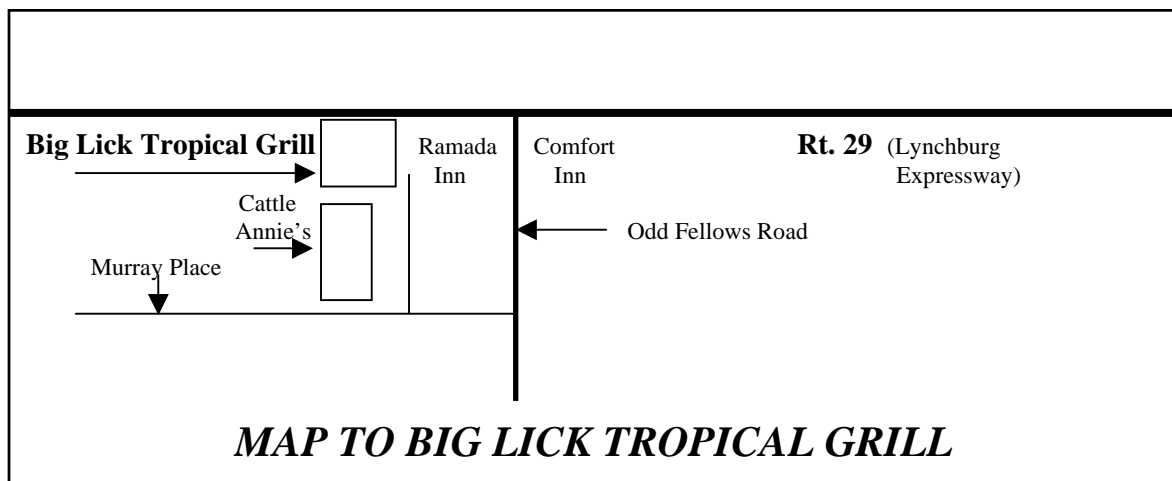
Other available activities include, but are not limited to, Mountain Biking, Hiking, Eating, Drinking, Sleeping, Telling Lies, and lest we forget, the annual N.O.C. Halloween party.

### ROLL SESSIONS COMING IN 2005!

We will be holding our annual Eskimo Roll Practice Sessions sometime in January and/or February, just about the time you have become fed up with cold weather, and feeling the need to brush up on your paddling skills.

We will probably be using the heated indoor pool at Sweetbrier College, but this has not been confirmed, yet.

If you are a novice with no roll, or if you're an expert with a bomb-proof roll on either side, with or without paddle, come join us. Learn from the experts, or share your skills with the novices, or just go off into the corner and do your own thing.



## **LIVIN' IN SEPTEMBER:**

### **A Month of Hurricanes, Headwaters and Helplessness**

by Jeff Oxley

*OK, I'm NOT having fun now*, I decided with a certainty that annihilated such trivial concerns as, say, *doubt*. Such a sobering conclusion was especially troublesome due to the fact that I was on a whitewater creek, a usually exhilarating milieu I actually seek out and enjoy immensely on a regular basis. Perhaps I should point out that at the particular moment in question I was velcroed broadside in a voracious reversal (some would undoubtedly label it "manky") at the base of THE biggest drop on a near-flood stage Jennings Creek, a jagged 8 foot ledge in the vicinity of the sprawling metropolis of Arcadia, Virginia. Lodged helplessly in the clutches of the hydraulic, a number of seemingly impertinent questions begged answering: how came I to be in such an unfortunate predicament? And, now that I've released my sprayskirt and am at the mercy of the scurrying current, where in the vast James River watershed will my ancient, spoonbladed paddle be deposited, seeing as I willingly relinquished it to the swiftly rising creek in order to facilitate my escape? A bit of background might aid in resolving some of these pressing issues, both for the reader as well as for myself.

The month of September 2004 will certainly be remembered as one of the most destructive (especially if you happen to be a Floridian) and delightful (if you happen to be an east coast whitewater boater) in recent recollection. The potent remains of a total of three different hurricanes were destined to visit the Blue Ridge and Piedmont regions of the Commonwealth in a single month, bringing with them copious quantities of welcome relief from the usual summer routine of limited rainfall.

The first of these bruisers, Frances, nailed Virginia the morning of the September 8, a date which happily coincided with one of my days off from work, a circumstance I shamelessly exploited by loading my kayak and hastily hooking up with fellow boating comrades Randy Couch and Mike Dabrowski. The time-honored oracles of whitewater forecasting (The Weather Channel, the USGS, IFLOWS and NOAA Internet web sites, etc.) had all been feverishly consulted, and a destination chosen based on the 4+ inches of rain that had already assaulted Bedford County's Apple Orchard Mountain: North Creek. The North drains the expansive western flank of Apple Orchard in a tumultuous descent of significant proportions before joining with the aforementioned Jennings Creek, which in turn feeds the James. H. Roger Corbett, the venerable Virginia author, paddler and chronicler of rivers, describes the run a class IV "small terror" and further asserts "not only does it not take prisoners, it shoots its own wounded"...based on a guidebook edition some 16 years outdated! As this would be a personal first descent for our little trio, we had no idea what was in store for us--a naiveté that was destined to change in short order.

*"Not only does it  
take no prisoners, it  
shoots  
its own wounded"*

*--H. Roger Corbett,  
Virginia Whitewater*

Turning south onto the Blue Ridge Parkway from Route 43 we found the road now virtually concealed by the driving sheets of rain that represented the core of Frances' remnants. We arrived first at Jennings Creek, which we deemed just a touch too low to run, a condition that present weather patterns assured was merely temporary, and continued on to the North. It seemed a bit low as well, but the chocolate-tinged water hurtling its way downhill in a big hurry bestowed a promise that couldn't be resisted. We

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proceeded to set shuttle at the towering James River bridge near Arcadia, positively elated about being assured of a double PFD (Personal First Descent) today: North Creek *and* Jennings...if we made it that far.

Upon our return to the North Creek putin we were greeted with a significantly higher water level than was available a mere half-hour ago, making it obvious that lack of water was not to be a concern today. Putting in a bit below the primitive campground recommended by the guidebook, the rocks we initially scraped over gave way in due course to deeper channels and the ensuing features that are the hallmarks of a rapidly filling creek: big holes, vision-obscuring standing waves and the occasional strainer to avoid. The North revealed itself to be a spectacular array of everything that makes creeking great, and the twisting course and blind turns forced us to constantly be on our toes. We were, to a man, fully in our element.

Several of the blind drops we'd encountered thus far had had to be bank scouted, so it was with the usual caution that we approached the final eddy above the particularly ominous drop now confronting us. Exiting our kayaks, we approached via river right streambank and stared in shock at a horrendous drop that I swear must have been lifted directly from any one of my occasional whitewater nightmares. The ledge itself was fairly moderate—maybe 10 to 12 feet—but what happened to that water as it descended, and after it descended, rendered it a legitimate class VI. Snaking diagonally from the right edge of the rim down and to the left was a diabolical ridge of ages-old granite directing the flow into a hideous vortex...and that was only for starters. In addition, the outflow was blocked by a pair of large boulders, effectively channeling the water—and anything or anyone foolish enough to be in it—counterclockwise to the left and into a terminal cave etched into the boulder forming the left bank. Any escape from the cave (a dubious proposition at best) would deposit a swimmer squarely in a recirculating hydraulic that surely must have been the inspiration for those border drawings on ancient nautical maps depicting hapless ships being sucked into untold depths by fearsome whirlpools. In short, a plunge over the edge would almost certainly be fatal.

Running the ledge was, of course, out of the question. The only point of contention at this phase in the game was how to portage, a venture which, alas, involved an entirely new set of problems. Circumventing the drop on the right appeared futile due to a monolithic column of bedrock rising to the treetops and melding seamlessly into the surrounding mountainside, eliminating the possibility of an uphill-and-around portage on the right. However, closer inspection revealed a tiny shelf etched tenuously into the base of the spire, and we again considered our limited options. Randy elected to portage via the narrow shelf on the right, a sketchy move (less refined gentlemen might more accurately articulate it as a *balsy* move) considering he would have to carry his boat—lining this drop wasn't an option—and a slip would put him in the drink. Mike and I opted to clamber our way upstream as far as we could, put in and strive to ferry into one of a pair of marginally discernable features against the left bank that could loosely be described as eddies. Satisfied that I'd made enough progress upstream to catch the upper eddy, I peeled out and promptly succeeded in blowing my initial eddy as the increased velocity of the flow effortlessly swept me well past it, but thankfully I was able to stick the final river-left one a scant couple of yards above the manky-mank. I hopped out again, pulled my boat out of the creek (thereby giving Mike maximum room), and stood just behind the rock forming the squirrely eddy, ready to snag Mike's grab loop in case he missed. Thankfully Mike stuck the same eddy without incident and we forged our way through the underbrush to the road bed, safely around the nameless horror.

Reunited with Randy at the base of the drop, Mike and I learned that as much as we had thrilled to our own portage ordeals, Randy had had one of his own. Clawing hand-over-hand across the shear face of the river-right spire, he had come eyeball to eyeball(s) with an exceedingly large, hairy spider that had made its home in an anonymous crack in the rock. Unable to move or do much of anything other than return its

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malevolent stare, Randy successfully confronted his long-standing arachnophobia and managed to keep his grip while the spider brushed past his outstretched arm and disappeared into an unseen location below his feet. Upon lowering himself onto a river-level log and preparing to enter his kayak, Randy again made the spider's acquaintance as it had chosen the very same log as its refuge. Randy was again forced to challenge the spider's position and had once again persevered. "I'd just as soon not come across any more of those today", he nervously quipped. Not being especially partial to spiders myself, I echoed his sentiments and we continued downstream as the creek leapt higher.

The hole-dodging recommenced and at length we reached the final bridge just before the confluence of North Creek and Jennings. Hurtling through with just a couple of feet of space separating our nogginns from the underside of the bridge, we greeted swollen and muddy Jennings Creek with an odd mixture of exhilaration and trepidation. This creek was BIG, and getting bigger by the moment. The confluence rapid tossed each of us around alarmingly, and it was clear that class III+ Jennings Creek (per Corbett) was now at least a class higher. In less than 10 minutes the big ledge we'd scouted on the shuttle was upon us, and we scrambled into a river left eddy and disembarked to have another look.

We picked our lines and selected our guide marks, noting with dread the huge chunk of log wedged into the ledge just to the right of the only sane line—*we're gonna want to avoid that*, we astutely observed—and in order to more precisely judge our launching pad we selected yet another guidepost in the form of an inch-thick tree branch poking timidly above the thrashing water. About this time a truck happened by containing a pair of government employees, who stopped and promptly declared us certifiably insane for even considering running the ledge. Nevertheless, they weren't about to pass on the spectacle of a lifetime, and hung around while we trudged back to our boats, and our increasingly uncertain fate.

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## BRRR TRIP SCHEDULE

<b>TRIP/EVENT</b>	<b>DATE/LEVEL</b>	<b>COORDINATOR/PHONE</b>
<b>October General membership Meeting and Dinner</b> —Big Lick Tropical Grill, 4001 Murray Place, Lynchburg at <b>6:30</b> . See map at bottom of Page 2	<b>October 20</b> (All)	<b>David Morgan</b> 434-993-3288
<b>2004 Nantahala Outdoor Center Guest Appreciation Festival</b> —Wesser, NC. The Autumn classic returns! Unearth a great deal at the flea market, and paddle the Nanty, Ocoee, Chattooga and more (water levels permitting, of course).	<b>October 29-31</b> Novice-Adv. (rafts will be available)	<b>Jim Glidewell</b> 434-369-7104 <b>Howard Kirkland</b> Home: (434) 332-4839 or Cell: (434) 941-1225
<b>Annual Christmas Party and General Membership Meeting</b> --Danny Booker's home. Keep checking here for more details as our plans mature.	<b>December 4</b> at <b>6pm</b>	Details in next issue of <b>Blue Ridge River Runner</b>

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Prior to strapping myself back in I elected to indulge in one last read from river level, and was distressed to find that my little tree branch was completely obscured. *I'd better go get another read*, I reasoned, silently applauding myself on what a safe boater I was as I made my way back up the bank. Nothing could have prepared me for the shock that awaited me there: both of my guide marks, the log and the little tree branch, were **gone**—not dislodged, as the log at least had been far too solidly wedged to be washed free—but submerged. We were dumbfounded at the realization that the water had risen well over a foot in the *five minutes* it had taken us to scout the drop!

And therein lay my primary faux pas (see first paragraph of story). Instead of acquiescing to the all-too-obvious threat and walking the ledge, I succumbed to rationalization and concluded *I had better hurry up and run this puppy before it gets any bigger*—a potentially fatal lack of judgment. As the pair of government employees looked on in disbelief, I hurried back to my kayak, sealed up and put back on to meet my doom.

I happened (either by chance or by my compadre's designs) to have been the first one back on the creek, which meant that I would be assuming the role of probe, a role I wasn't completely happy with given the current situation, but I accepted my destiny with resignation. I picked my line as best I could and paddled hellbent-for-leather towards the waiting horizon line. I closed in on the lip and planted my mightiest boof stroke...but it wasn't nearly enough. The additional volume had created a fiendish hump three or four feet upstream from the edge and, boof or no boof, by the time I was airborne I'd been forced into a distinctly downward trajectory. I went deep, surfaced abruptly and with all downstream momentum cancelled was instantly and unceremoniously deposited squarely in the formidable recirculation at the base. I proceeded to get a merciless workout courtesy of Jennings Creek, finally stabilizing into a semi-inverted broadside surf that seemed to go on forever. I was vaguely aware of the government pair on the bank shouting to my friends, but held out little hope of a rope reaching me in time.

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## **BRRR 4<sup>th</sup> ANNUAL WHITEWATER EXTRAVAGANZA**

The BRRR's Fourth Annual West Virginia Whitewater Extravaganza on August 14-15, 2004 was a whopping success. Approximately thirty-five members, family and friends showed up for what has become one of our annual favorites.

The weather was outstanding, and the water level on the New River Gorge was around two feet on the paddlers' gauge. Danny Booker, Dave Morgan and Howard Kirkland served as raft guides; several members accompanied them, paddling hard boats.

Saturday night, Dren St. Clair served up her typically outstanding dinner of hot dogs and hamburgers, replete with all the fixin's, lemonade, iced tea and several delicious desserts. After dinner, Dave Morgan called the meeting to order, rapidly dispensed with the formalities, adjourned the meeting, and then invited the group over to Allen Pritchett's camper for a slide presentation from the recent Idaho excursion.

After gorging ourselves on Dren's delicious Sunday morning breakfast, many of the members packed up and headed home, while the rest of us enjoyed another outstanding day on the river.

If you weren't there, shame on you! However, there will be a repeat performance next year, so plan on attending then.

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The pair of minutes I spent desperately bracing and trying to rock my way out of this quandary quickly sapped my strength, and after the obligatory last ditch inverted paddle probe escape technique failed me I resorted to a more ignoble—albeit effective—means of egress. I could not have cared less about retaining my decrepit Lightning paddle, comically disfigured as it was with an appallingly diminished blade area, the inevitable result of two years of profound abuse on some of the East Coast's rockiest rivers. Surrendering it willingly to the pulsing flow, I punched out of the cockpit, surfaced, and seized my grab loop stubbornly. Released now from the recirc, I miraculously felt gravel under my bare feet and, unconcerned about the risk of an entrapment, jammed my feet into the streambed in an effort to slow or (preferably) stop my downstream progress enough to allow for a throw rope recovery. I skidded another 15 yards or so further, raking my tootsies painfully in the jagged alluvium, before finally bringing my downstream advance to a halt. Five minutes later my boat and I were safely ashore, grateful beneficiaries of a tandem throw rope rescue from Randy and Mike. Thanks guys, may the return favor be forever unnecessary!

“...and after the obligatory last ditch inverted paddle probe escape technique failed, I resorted to a more ignoble—albeit effective—means of egress”

Literally up the creek without a paddle, I was clearly done for the day. After bearing witness to my spectacular wipeout, Randy and Mike sagely decided against an attempt to run the ledge, which by this time had yet another foot of very angry water charging over it and was growing more menacing by the minute. Despite the assurance that it would not be missed, my comrades vowed to reenter the creek in a benevolent bid to locate my errant paddle, but their efforts would prove to be in vain. They later reported that they had covered another 1/2 mile of the burgeoning creek in mere minutes, before being forced off it entirely when at breakneck speed they approached a bridge thoroughly clogged with detritus.

In the meantime I stashed my boat by the roadside embankment and caught a lift from a passing motorist to the James River bridge takeout, where I sat waiting by the riverbank and watching the James swell for an interminable length of time, unaware that my former companions had vacated the river and taken to the road. *They've run into trouble*, I fretted after a full hour had passed with no sign of

either of them. Unbeknownst to me at the time, they had bummed a ride to the takeout, found me apparently absent (I was on the bank expecting their arrival via river, away from the road) and assumed I had hitched a ride back to my truck at the putin on North Creek.

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### **CLUB RAFTS—AVAILABLE FOR USE!**

Our trusty old 14' Momentum self-bailer raft has been patched together enough for another season or two, and our new 12-1/2' NRS Sprite self-bailer now has three thwarts, and foot cups for the passengers in front, and is ready to boogie. Our old 16' Riken Nez Perce Bucket Boat (non-self-bailer) will soon be put in the shop to have the foot cups replaced, and several small leaks repaired.

Dave Morgan, Howard Kirkland and Danny Booker have recently acquired a 16' Riken Nez Perce self-bailer, which they will gladly make available for club activities on an as-needed basis.

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Visions of certain memorably shocking scenes from *Deliverance* played through Randy and Mike's heads upon reaching my truck and finding no trace of Yours Truly, but they eventually surmised their error and returned to the takeout. Along the way they rescued my kayak from the roadside where it was in imminent danger of being irretrievably swept away by the near flood-stage creek that by now had stolen up to the base of the road bed.

On our return to the putin we were positively aghast at the current condition of both creeks despite the rain having finally run its mind-altering course. None of the bridges we'd been able to duck under on our trip down the North were passable now, and we realized how lucky we were to have caught *that* creek at a nearly ideal level—though our judgment to continue further on Jennings could certainly be called into question. Morbid curiosity resulted in a return visit to the class VI ledge on the North, which by now had transformed into an unimaginable terror, and Randy decided a cell phone call was in order to a certain longtime paddling buddy who had quite incorrectly assured us neither creek would run today.

After an ice cold beverage (or two, or...) we ventured further upstream, eventually reaching the upper terminus of the gravel road where we parked and explored a quarter mile or so of the trail to Apple Orchard Falls. Marveling at the pristine expanse of perpetual, evenly-spaced gradient known as North Creek, we ecstatically made plans to return at a future date armed with chain saws and clean out the occasional trees that hindered its passage, before grudgingly admitting that such an endeavor would be of decidedly limited benefit due to the infrequency with which the creek contains adequate water to paddle. Had we only known that, before the month reached its conclusion, we would be graced with the remnants of no less than **two** equally potent hurricanes dubbed Ivan and Jeanne—atmospheric events which each spawned their own unique whitewater adventures. Alas, those epics will have to wait for next time, because the water's on the rise again... ☹

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