

Curt and Jason Do the Swirlies

I decided that it was time for my "adopted nephew" Jason, now almost 11, to do his first multiday wilderness trip. I therefore made him a deal he couldn't refuse. I offered to take him on a Sierra Club family raft trip down the Green River through Dinosaur National Monument in Utah, but he had to earn the trip as follows. We pretended that he was a newly appointed Assistant Professor of Paleontology at the Univ. of Utah, and that he needed to make the trip through DNM to collect fossils. At his salary of \$40,000 per year, less 25% for taxes and insurance, he would have to work two hours a week for six months to earn enough to pay for this trip. If he agreed to do this much *extra* work around the house (baby sitting his little brother, cleaning up the yard, doing dishes and laundry, etc), I would pay for the trip. He would also have to keep a timecard recording what he did and when. He committed to the work last January, and I signed us up for a trip in July.

I figured that by going on a Sierra Club family trip there would be enough parents around to handle any real child emergencies. With luck, the dads and guides would take the kids on day hikes and I could just hang out back at camp, within arm's length of the ice chest, and flirt with the moms.

On July 4 Jason and I both flew to Salt Lake City (me from Seattle and Jason from Orlando—his first solo flight!), and then we drove to Vernal. That afternoon we hiked a couple of miles to see some dinosaur tracks, and then we attended a very good local fireworks show. Vernal is the heart of Mormon, Dubya-voting country, but I'll save that story for another time.

The next day we visited the Dinosaur Fossil Quarry, which is one of the world's great paleontological sites. There are literally hundreds of dinosaur bones still in place where the poor critters settled out in a shallow river bend after drowning upstream. After his politically correct and cautious public discussion, the docent at the quarry told me that about ten percent of the visitors proclaim the whole thing to be a government-sponsored fraud, or just rocks that look like bones, or something equally absurd, because the existence of the fossils conflicts with their uneducated fundamentalist religious views. I find such people even more amazing than the fossils, which at least have a rational explanation.



Jason at the Fossil Quarry. It sure looks like a bone to me!

River Day 1 (July 6). About a dozen adults and an equal number of kids aged 5 to 13 headed down the river on five rafts. We stopped for lunch at a wonderful beach and sandbar, where everyone could play in the shallow water. After lunch someone wandered downstream a short ways from the lunch spot and discovered the most enormous mountain lion tracks I ever hope to see. Even the guides said they must be a bear because they were so huge, but I stuck with my verdict of lion (four

toes, not five; no claw marks, etc). We later stopped to scout Disaster Falls, the first serious rapid (class III). This was named by John Wesley Powell who lost a boat and much gear here on his first trip down the river in 1869. It wasn't clear to me which route the guides would take through the rapid, so I asked Jason where he would go. Without hesitation he replied, "Right down the middle!" (and that's just where the guides went). I couldn't have been prouder of him! That night at the campfire one of the guides recited "The Cremation of Sam McGee" by heart—a truly impressive display that finished off a wonderful day.



Playing games at the campsite.

River Day 2. Jason and I were in the paddle raft, and we had to do some real work getting through a string of class III rapids including the famous "Hell's Half Mile." I noticed that Jason paid very close attention to what the guides said when we stopped to scout several of the bigger and more technical rapids. Jason really enjoyed having the front left spot in the raft, where he set the paddle pace for everyone else in the raft according to whatever stroke the guide commanded. Later in the day Rachel, aged 5, taught me a song:

Ten little ducks went out to play
Over the hill and far away.
Momma duck said "quack, quack, quack,"
And nine little ducks came home that day.

Nine little ducks went out to play
Over the hill and far away.
Momma duck said....

Well, you can see where this is going. After she counted down to zero and then cycled through a couple of times more, Jason leaned over to me and said, "I'll bet you're glad I'm not a five-year old girl." After dinner a DNM river ranger stopped by camp and did an extensive check of the guides' licenses and permits (for guiding, food preparation, etc. He even measured the temperature of the food in the ice chests). The ranger had a book on animal tracks which confirmed my mountain lion analysis of the previous day. That night we slept out on a perfect beach.

River Day 3. Jason and I did five miles, and later another four, in a two-person inflatable kayak (rubber duckie). These are very stable and great fun. I felt completely in control even in class III rapids, even though I'm not a white-water kayaker. Jason pronounced "doing the swirlies"—his term for running rapids—to be just about the most fun there is. Little did he realize how much work I was doing paddling and steering in the back of the duckie.... In the afternoon we all did a long, hot hike

to see a great pictograph panel and to cool off afterwards in a small waterfall. One of the guides managed to fall off of the top of the waterfall and fall about 12 feet to the rocks at the bottom. This was one of the few accidents I've ever seen in the wilderness. The whole thing was quite irresponsible of the guide and could have had serious consequences had he fallen onto a child at the bottom of the waterfall. But in retrospect, maybe it was a good lesson for the kids (and the guide) who will now understand what I mean when I say "don't get too close to the edge." That evening we had a big thunderstorm with lots of lightning and strong winds and rain for a couple of hours. Jason is quite used to lightning, but he said he had never been in such wind. Jason was somewhat bummed out by the accident and the storm, but we had a beautiful sunset after the storm blew past, and overall it was a good day.



Sunset after the storm.

River Day 4. Our third campsite had a house-sized mud hole next to the river, and Jason lost no time the next morning getting knee deep into the middle of it. Some of the parents tried (with minimal success) to keep their kids out of it, but I figured that as long as Jason was bogged down in the mud hole I didn't have to worry about where he was. He had a great time getting covered from head to toe with mud. After five miles of flat water, we reached the first place where a road reaches the river and the guide who fell off of the waterfall could be sent to a hospital for a check out. (My diagnosis was a probable fractured arm, but it turned out he had a ruptured bursa in his elbow.) We then finished the day passing through Echo Park and more rapids in the beautiful Split Mountain section of DNM. We reached the take-out in mid afternoon.



Jason in the mud hole.

This was a perfect trip for kids aged 8 to 12. Younger ones might not appreciate it, and older ones might be too jaded. We saw dozens of bighorn sheep, sometimes getting within 10 feet of them as we floated past. The scenery was spectacular, and the food and people were great. It was the perfect introduction for Jason to white water, wilderness, and multi-day trips where you can't just go home if it starts raining or you get a scorpion in your underwear. For me, it was a perfect introduction to doing things with a group of kids I hadn't met before, and I *loved* it. This was definitely the most

enjoyable money I've ever spent. I can't wait for next summer's adventure with Jason!



Bighorn sheep grazing by the river.