

A scenic photograph of a river winding through a forested valley. The river is in the foreground, with ripples on its surface reflecting the sky. The banks are covered in dense evergreen trees, and some yellow wildflowers are visible near the water's edge. In the background, a mountain range is visible under a sky filled with large, grey clouds. The overall mood is serene and natural.

River Bends

Water Features and Periodical Pieces

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Kayaking

On the Frontier of Whitewater



Fear and Boating

From Dancing on Stage to Pirouetting Down Rivers

By Aidan McMullen



Photos by Helen Rolston-Clemmer

Three men scramble up a loose rock shelf. Their ears ring from an unending crash of water. Tens of thousands cubic feet of rain and snow-melt all crashing down at once. Here, where they climb, stands a two-story waterfall. They carry with them three boats made of thin plastic. They wear gear made of rubber and neoprene. They set down the boats in a pool of calm water beside the main current. Slowly, they each buckle their helmets and adjust their outfitting. As nerves begin to rise, the noise of the Kootenai Falls is drowned out by sharp inhales and exhales.

The first boater paddles into the main channel. Layne Rolston-Clemmer, a 20-year-old college kid and raft guide, cups the freezing water in his hand. Splashing his face, he adjusts to the cold and prepares for the drop 100 yards below. Layne lets the current take his boat, drifting down river with 50 yards to go. The water begins funneling toward the horizon line, the edge of the world comes into view as he gathers speed. 15 feet above the ledge, Layne needs to pick a line. Using landmarks he remembers from studying the rapid, he paddles to where he wants to be. About three feet from the falls, the front of the kayak leaves the water and drops through the air. There is no going back, and only now will he know if he found the right landing. The world downstream plummets into view at the speed of gravity.

Kayaking over a large waterfall requires technical skill, and often years of experience. More obviously, it is terrifying. Extreme boating requires being able to live, and perform, while afraid.

Layne Rolston-Clemmer is a tall young man with an athletic build. He sports short blonde hair and a matching blonde mustache. He has spent his life learning a long, complicated dance with fear.

When Helen Rolston-Clemmer, Layne's mother, took her 8-year-old son to a performance of the Nutcracker, a young boy's dreams began to take shape. "He saw the fight scene with the soldiers and the Rat King," Helen said. "He thought that looked like a lot of fun."

Layne began to take classes in ballet shortly after. Driven to better himself, he excelled as one of the few boys in the program. Not long after mastering the basics, he auditioned for the Nutcracker.

He got the role of Fritz, the main character's younger brother, "I was super stoked about it," Layne said. He would go on to be several side characters in the coming years, until his freshman year of high school.

Layne got the role of the Nutcracker; at 15, he had an important responsibility in the play. The fear and pressure began to creep into his head. "It just was not the year," Helene said. The combination of attention and puberty made for a bad mix.

The disillusioned achievement of his goal, and mounting pressure of ballet, drove Layne away from the art. He quit the Spring that followed his Nutcracker debut.

His stress and anxiety stayed with him after the end of his dancing career. Layne's fear only became more serious as he got older. By his senior year he found out he had emetophobia, a fear of puking.

"I was absolutely destroying an entire pizza," Layne said. "I got a piece of basil stuck in my throat." Gaggling, he was able to pull it out, but doing so put him on the edge of vomiting. "I went back to the bathroom and thought I was going to puke again," he said. "I had a full-blown panic attack."

This was not the last of his troubles, but he turned toward nature to help him manage his anxiety and fear. Layne became a raft guide outside of Missoula, Montana where he grew up.

The outdoor therapy worked; he loved it there. "It feels like being at a summer camp, and somehow you are getting paid," Layne said. Soon after starting there, he took up whitewater kayaking.

Layne Rolston-Clemmer was obsessed.

He loved the freedom of the sport. Freedom of the wild places kayaking would take him and the ability to mold himself into a better boater at his own pace. He loved the way it soothed the anxiety he struggled with for most of his life. "A healthy stressor," he called it, using it as a technique to stop overthinking.

Liam Rice, Layne's roommate, witnessed this obsession firsthand. "He wears his PFD (personal flotation device) around the house all the time," Liam said. Layne will often be trying kayak tricks in the living room, he added.

Not everywhere is as safe as the living room for a kayaker, and eventually Layne found that out.

It was a simple run; one he had done many times before on his home river. "I nearly punched my ticket," he said, visibly shaken up by the memory.

While safety boating in his kayak, Layne got stuck in a hydraulic on the Alberton Gorge. Water pushing upward against the current trapped him in a violent spiral. Desperate to get out, he clung to a rock, trying to think through an escape. He found none and continued his attempts to swim away. "I had a moment," Layne said, "where I actually thought I might die."

He did not die that day. After several more agonizing minutes of struggle, he made it to shore, vomiting water he had swallowed during the swim.

Despite the fear, and despite the puking, Layne got back

in the boat. He saw it as a sign that he needed to improve.

The swim he had was scary, not just to him, but to those who love him. His roommate often checks his location when Layne is out on the river, his mom does the same. His enthusiasm for the sport remains infectious, and it drowns out not only his own anxiety, but the others' fears as well.

He has introduced his roommate, Liam, to kayaking. "One of the greatest fears I have is drowning," said Liam, making boating a naturally difficult sport. Yet, he is getting out on the water a few times a week thanks to Layne's encouragement. "Overcoming my fear is really important to me," Liam said. "He's been there to keep me going, to keep me stoked."

Layne's Mom, Helen, has a different method of coping with the worry she feels for her son. "Mostly I have not allowed myself to think about it at all," Helen said, when recalling his dangerous swim. "I can see how much he loves kayaking," She adds. "I can see how good it makes him feel about himself." Her love for her son outweighs the reservations she has about the sport.

The first time Helen saw Layne in the boat was the day at Kootenai Falls. She stood on the bank of the river, camera in hand as he came into view above the cataract. Pointing her lens toward the bright blue water, Layne's boat begins to fall through the air. Click...click....click. The shutter opens and closes several times in less than a second. Removing her eyes from the viewfinder, she sees him paddle through the calm water beneath the falls, safe, and right-side up.

"You couldn't have just fallen in love with chess?" Helen would later ask him.



Featured Boat: Pyranha Ripper 2



The Ripper 2 is a reimagination of a beloved classic. It gave us all the that we loved from the original, while opening up the door to a whole new style of play. Maintaining it's length and iconic half slice look, the Ripper 2 stays true to the legacy of it's predecessor.

That said, Pyranha has designed an entirely new boat. The increased bow rocker completed changes the surfing experience; staying high and dry while carving a wave. The stern has been shrunk down so small you can hardly tell where it ends. This new design makes it the easiest half-slice to stern squirt on the market. The Ripper 2 takes high volume play to a new level. Class IV-V creeks are now playgrounds for stern squirts and splats. However, there is absolutely no reason for this boat to not have a drain plug. Even the Loki has a drain plug, Pyranha was just being lazy.

Featured River: The Lochsa

The Lochsa River runs ice-cold with fresh snow-melt from the Bitterroot Mountains. The west aspect of Lolo pass teems with the movement of Spring as the Lochsa Comes to life. Clean, clean water, clean enough to drink if one so pleases. Down this 70 mile stretch of clean, cold water includes a section of rapids famous to boaters all across the United States.

But, what makes this river special is not the beauty or the miles of class IV fun. The community of people surrounding the Lochsa is truly a special phenomenon. From grand river parties like Lochsa Madness and Rendezvous, to small games of hacky sack played during a hitch-hiked shuttle. The kindness and laughter that migrate to this river every Spring can warm a boater up better than any dry suit can.



Cold November Morning

By Peter Murray

A cold November morning in New Hampshire, 2023, a father and son are rushing down the Upper Pemi. A class five steep creek being fed by snow run-off and a rainstorm from the prior night. Time is of the essence; the son needs to make it to his class at 11, and it was nearly 9 when the duo started.

Both paddlers are familiar with this stretch of river, the father had made it a regular habit to run the creek alone, when no one was available, and the son who was still new to the white water world had already tackled the UP a few times without incident.

That morning embodied the unusual unbalance of a New England November, the ever present gray overcast induces rest in the mind. The bitter temperatures make the muscles tense as the father and son duo thunder down the river. The smooth granite boulders, so great no force could get them to budge, and the river's current appearing like glass as it jetted through boulders and cliffs, did not give warning to the dangers that lurked in the river. Under the visible surface, rocks that appeared well shaped and forgiving had turned into death traps. Over time the current had pushed against the rock hard enough large cavities were formed, where the current

could push something or someone into a small pocket beneath the boulder, and hold whatever it managed to grab like a baseball in a mit.

The father and son, accustomed to these dangers, and familiar with the trickery of the river, paddled with patience, and avoided areas where they knew of the traps and dangers. In a small amount of time the two had cleared the last big rapid, a sharp turn of river where the paddler must avoid being smashed into a gorge cliff-face and run off a ten foot waterfall that the whole force of the river channels into. As if that wasn't enough the two had to make a portage just above, which involved free repelling down a small ledge with kayaks and gear, in order to avoid a siv that claimed the life of someone in the past.

With only a bit of turbulence, and a look at the view of the massive rock cauldron the waterfall leads into, the two headed downriver, picking up hast now that the biggest challenges were behind them, only pausing briefly to discuss how they were supposed the paddle the drops ahead.



The son watched his father in front of him as they went down a shallow rapid, with bumpy waves and a small drop that neither thought to discuss. The son watched as his father 20 feet in front of him was nudged by current close to some rocks popping out, but was then carried into a current that looked unwelcoming. Still studying the line of the river, the son was pushed into the current he didn't intend to be in, and was pushed sideways into a small rock that lay under the surface. It was this rock that put him in grave danger, as his kayak flipped in what would usually be safe water.

The son reached for the surface with his paddle, ready to execute a roll and get himself upright, but upon reaching up, his hands felt not the cold air, but the feeling of rough granite. Moments later he felt his boat shake as it was pushed sideways into a feature he could not see, fearing the situation had become what he feared most, he searched frantically along the surface but could only find rough cold granite. He went to the other side of his boat, trying to search for air with his hands, now clammy and numb from the freezing temperatures. He wouldn't dare to open his eyes, afraid of what the water would do to them, fear struck his core at a level he wasn't aware of. He was trapped in his boat under a rock he didn't know existed, he didn't know how he got to where he was, the last thing he could remember was a rock the size of his head flipping him over, and seeing his dad facing him with concern in his eyes as he dropped off the next rapid.

The son had been underwater for more than 40 seconds now trying to find freedom, but he could only feel the rock above his kayak and occasionally the bottom of the river pressing against his back. He feared he was trapped in an unknown spot, which meant there was a possibility that if he left his boat, he could be pushed further into the unknown, putting himself somewhere where he might drown before he was found or rescued. Almost a minute passed, the son frantically went through multiple possibilities and outcomes of his situation. Low on air he had to decide if he should pull his skirt and risk being pushed further under the rock, or if he

should stay in his kayak in hopes of being let go. He felt the true fear of death race through his mind and soul as he found the grabloop and yanked on it, feeling the skirt come loose and with no air left he used his last burst of energy to eject himself from the boat and clamber for air, and felt the rocks presence fade away as his head burst into the bitter air, gasping he searched for the nearest shore, and found a small sandy beach surrounded by rocks. He dragged himself onto shore, dizzy and exhausted, legs weak and unable to find enough energy to stand, he crawled to a boulder where he could get a view downstream. He saw his dad running up the shore line, waving to see if he was okay. He turned his attention to the river, he saw his boat floating downstream with his paddle nowhere in sight, it would later be found stuck under the rock. With a new level of fear engraved in him, he prepared to get to the end of the journey that had gone so wrong for him.

After taking off his kayak gear, and putting on some school clothes that were in his car, he drove to school, arriving in class 10 minutes late. He still hadn't recovered from the event, and that reality sunk in as he sat down at a desk, looking like he just saw a ghost, and not being able to do something as simple as copy notes of a board.

It was in this event he learned about the truth of fear and dangers of kayaking, he discovered what it feels like to know death could only be a minute away if he made the wrong decision. So with this in mind, he carries his kayak onto rivers old and new with an awareness he would not have found otherwise.





Falling Water

A Poem

That sound never stops, does it?
The Crash?
It doesn't.
A constant thunder of debris and water.
The gentle hum of something more.
It falls.
It keeps falling, never stops.
Until it itself becomes a fall.
A place, and an action, all at once.

Whitewater,
Both air, and water.
All at once.
It takes in oxygen, it moves.
It's just like you and me,
It breathes.



Rafts



And Other Crafts



Clean Up on the Big Blackfoot River

The Beaversharks, a Missoula based hacky sack team, made the short trip out to the Blackfoot river this past Earth Day. The goal was to organize a raft flotilla to clean up the beautiful stretch of river between Whittaker bridge and Johnsrud park. This goal was not exactly reached; only one raft embarked from the put-in ramp that Tuesday. It was the raft of the Beaversharks that organized the event. This may have been for the best however. Despite the proximity to the city, the river harbored barely enough trash to keep the crew of four busy. They managed to only fill one trash bag after scouring several beaches and eddies. It still felt like an accomplishment, and the river was better off for it, but the overwhelming emotion that day was pride. Pride in a greater community that could keep this legendary river so clean and so loved.



The Raft-A-Pult



Ducky Disaster

By Logan O’Brion - Menominee River, July 31st. 2023

Now that I was fully invested in my new life as a white-water bum, I was eager to dip my toes into some other forms of aquatic fun. The Outpost had inflatable whitewater “kayaks” that guides could use for free whenever they were available. With options such as those open to us, fellow guides Zane and Jeff rallied with me to cook up an absolutely terrible scheme: take the inflatable duckies out to Deadman Island, spend the night there, and then take the duckies down the gorge first thing the next morning.

With all the planning of a five minute conversation, We loaded our minimal gear into my van, strapped the duckies to the roof deck, and headed off to drop a car at the takeout. The trip there is all of about three minutes, so we really hadn’t done our due diligence in securing the payload. This oversight quickly made itself apparent as we rounded the last corner and every single ducky careened off the roof to the rutted two track that lay before us. With night falling, we re-secured the boats, parked Zane’s battered Subaru, and hauled ass to the put in.

By the time we finally got to the river, the only light left was the moon. Undeterred, we loaded up and pushed off into the inky blackness. All things considered, the flat-water paddle to the island may have been the smoothest part of the trip. It would not be until we reached the island when things would yet again go South.

With daytime temps nearing triple digits, it seemed only logical that evening temperatures to drop down to perfection. NOT SO. As I set up my hammock in nothing but a hawaiian shirt and some swim trunks, the first chill went through my body.

We soon had a fire going, but it did little for us as we all retired to our hammocks for the night. After a bout of frigid tossing and turning, the collective decision was made to return to the fire. We pulled our duckies fireside where they served as impromptu mattresses. We were to take turns stoking the fire, but one after another Zane and Jeff fell into sleep. I did not. The fire, however, remained well stoked all night long. Despite my doubts, the cold darkness did eventually give way to the warmth of morning.

We were ready to begin the next phase of our adventure. We loaded the duckies back up, pushed into the current, and headed for the gorge. Neither the Chipmunks nor The Boulder Garden gave us issue, and in no time we were on Sandy Beach facing a choice. Run the falls or portage Mishicot. We were proficient rafters, but kayaking remained an untamed frontier. We took one glance down at our gear loaded inflatables and made the only smart decision of the trip: we were going to portage.

Thus began one of the worst mile hikes I have ever had the displeasure to endure. With all of the gear we had to schlep down the

trail, each root and rock felt as though it were an insurmountable obstacle. Despite our grumblings, we did eventually reach the eddy below the class IV section where we could again take to the water.

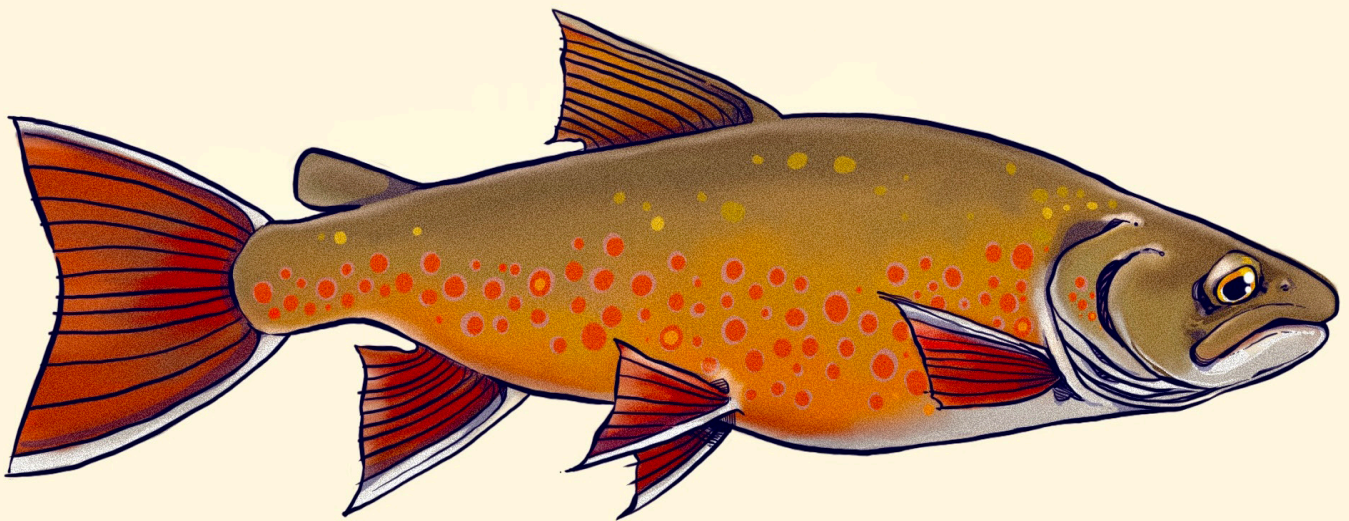
All that lay between us and the takeout was Terminal Surfer, a nasty recirculation wave. Although the wave was mean, it had a simple sneak line on river right that would pose no threat. Jeff and I paddled up to the wave and passed with no trouble.

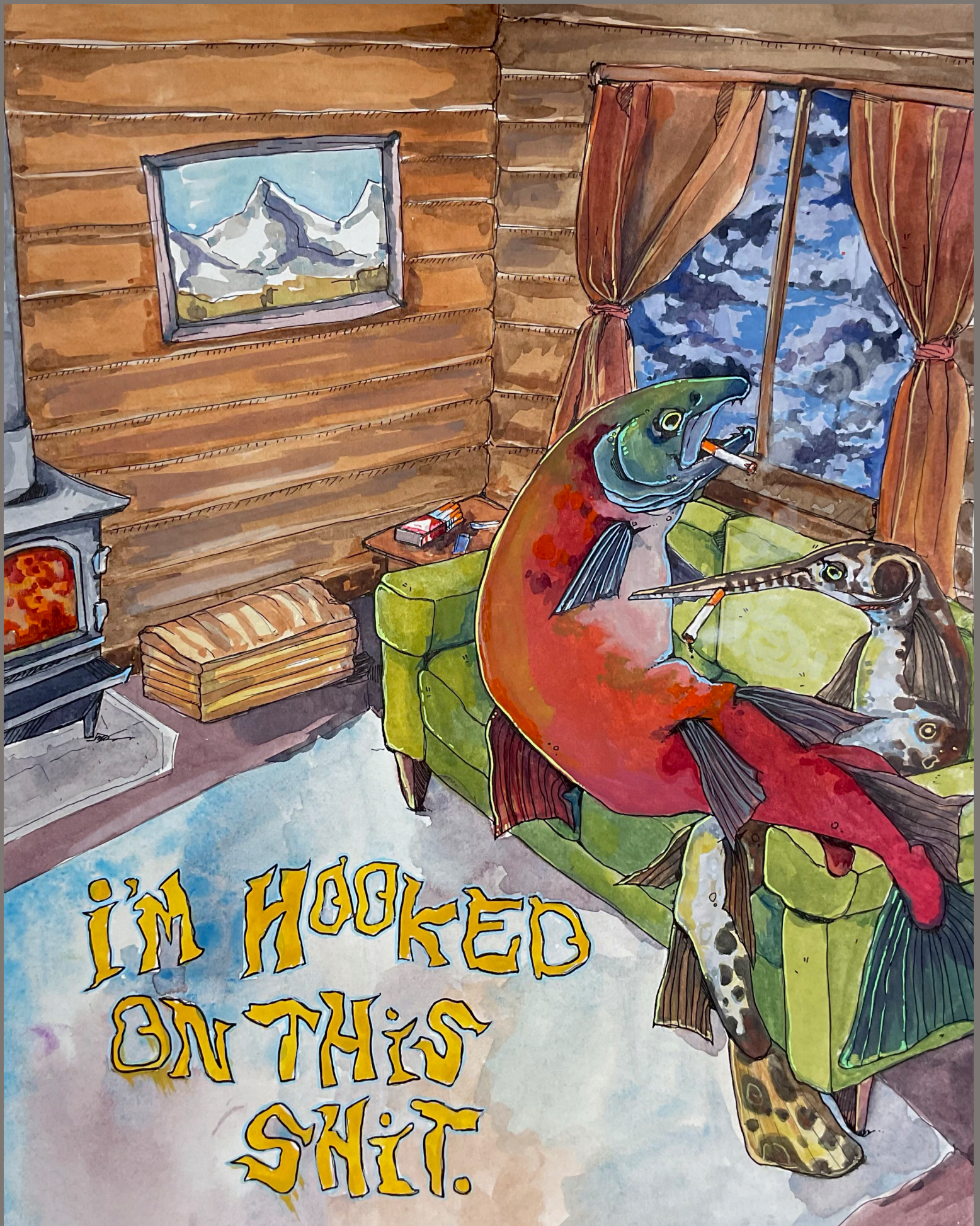
Zane was not so fortunate.

When I looked behind to check the progress of our little flotilla, I discovered Zane floating by, his overturned ducky and gear slowly making their way after. After the gear had been recovered, and no small amount of ribbing for the swimmer, we finally made it to the takeout. Deep down, we probably learned some lessons about preparedness, but they have not yet made themselves known. It was the first expedition of its type, and it will not be the last. Anyway, I still have not learned how to get a good nights sleep in a hammock.

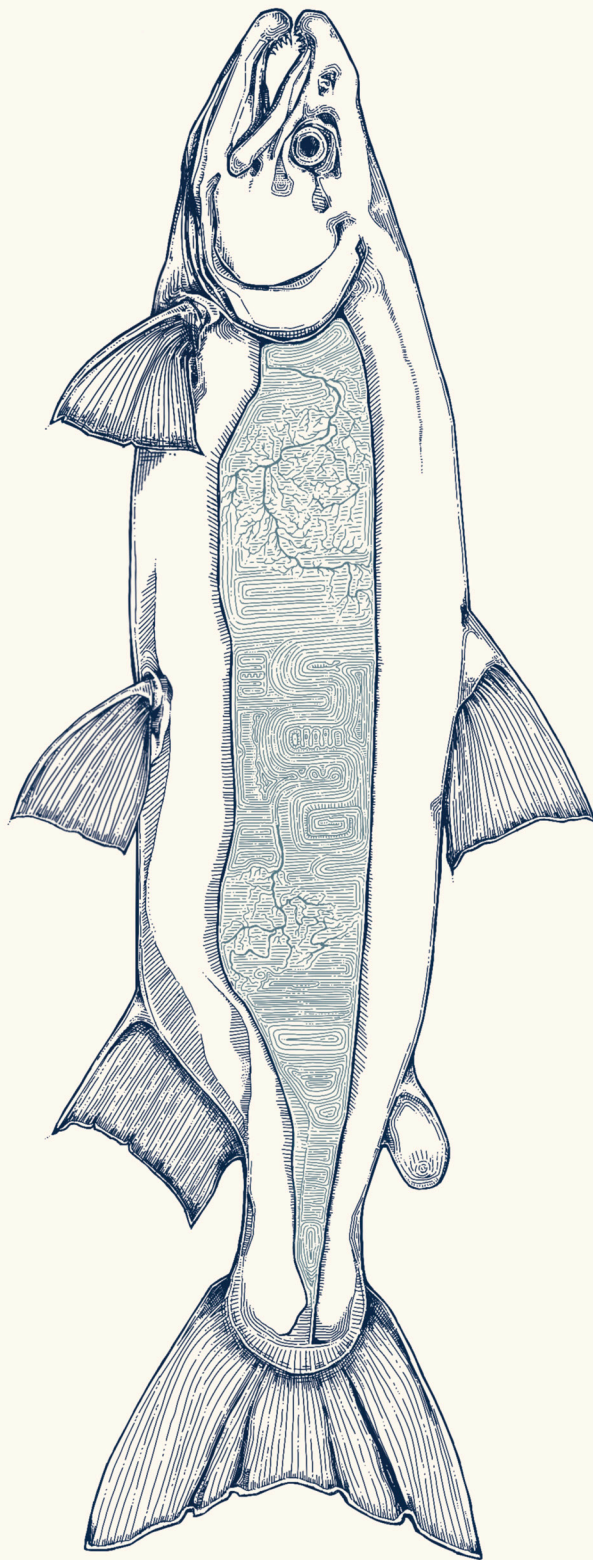


ART BY AYLA





i'm HOOKED
ON THIS
SHIT.



The Artist

Ayla Kaltenecker is a freshman at the University of Montana. She grew up in Boise, Idaho, where she worked with Idaho Fish and Game. Ayla is studying aquatic wildlife biology and media arts. Having taken classes in Fisheries Techniques, Rocky Mountain Flora, Advanced Research, and Human Dimensions of Wildlife Bio, she is well on her way to a double major with both a B.S and B.A. Ayla is not limited to her phenomenal 2-dimensional pieces, but also does a lot of 3-D work, including knitting and sculpture. Residents of Missoula will often see her hard at work with knitting needles in hand, no matter where she might be.



Ayla will spend the coming 2025 Summer working for The Idaho Power Co. conducting fisheries research. This will include data collection on bull trout and white sturgeon in river habitats across Idaho. This job adds to an already impressive start to her college career, as she is involved in the honors college, American Fisheries Society, Backcountry Hunters and Anglers, and Ceramics Club. She has received scholarships from several of these programs and others, including the College of Forestry. Just as impressive as her academic and professional achievement, is her demeanor. Ayla is undoubtedly one of the kindest people in the state of Montana. Her generosity is of a scale that saints would balk at. Amid countless hours of tireless work, Ayla will always find the time to make the lives of those around her better, one hand-knit hat at a time.



Check out more of her work on instagram!
[@crispy.crackerss](#)

Stills of Stillwater

By Aidan McMullen





Still Stills

By Cristopher Otis





The Battle of Bitterroot Bridge

Byline: Ruby McFann, Aidan McMullen, Jack Snow, Brooke Strickler



Three cars drive over the Maclay Bridge as others wait for their turn on the other side of the Bitterroot on Tuesday April 1, 2025.

Five pairs of headlights swim through the fog single file across a narrow bridge. A few cars pull over to let them pass. Beneath the road, two channels of the Bitterroot River converge, colliding into swirls of freezing water. The rusted trusses and steel cables of the Maclay bridge look as old and permanent as the river below them. The city of Missoula challenges this permanence.

In 2002, Missoula proposed a plan to revamp the bridge infrastructure across the Bitterroot. Over 20 years later, nothing has changed.

The bridge still stands, and vehicles still use it.

According to the Montana Department of Transportation's project timeline, the South Ave. Bridge, a new alternative to the Maclay Bridge, should be 90% developed. Yet Thaddeus Lesnik, the consultant project engineer, said they are only 30-60% through the design process.

What is the hold up?

The South Ave. Bridge would replace the Maclay Bridge and improve the road service of the area. The new bridge would be a wider, two laned access to the Target Range community, across the Bitterroot River from Missoula.

The current bridge, as it stands, does not meet the needs of the community. "Emergency services vehicles, buses and those types of vehicles aren't able to legally cross it," said Lesnik. "It does not meet standards."

The town has made attempts to renovate the current bridge, “Missoula County had to put a lot of money into the bridge to bring it back to being structurally stable,” Lesnik said, “but there are still lots of things that are not stable.”

The city continues to move forward with plans, but not everyone wants to see a new bridge built.

Peggy Morrison, a member of the Maclay Bridge Alliance, is working with the group to oppose the construction of a new bridge. “The proposed South Ave. Bridge is totally unnecessary,” said Morrison, “it’s a move by the county to try and citify the area.”

Morrison explained how Target Range is a rural community. She has 13-acres, where she raises hay and keeps horses. The new bridge threatens this way of living. “A one lane bridge slows everything down,” said Morrison. “A two-lane bridge speeds things up.”

Among concerns of urbanization, the old Maclay Bridge has a historical tie to the community. Morrison described the bridge as part of the valley’s history. “It is listed in the National Registry of Historical Places,” said Montana Department of Transportation Historian Jon Axline, “it’s historically significant, but also more than 100 years old.”

The construction of South Ave. Bridge would better serve the city’s need for safe roadways, according to the county, but it would put an end to the history between the Maclay and the Target Range community.

According to Lesnik, the consultant engineer, there cannot be two structures in the floodplain due to environmental complications. Therefore, the old bridge must be demolished if the new one were to be completed. This is what Peggy

Morrison, and the Maclay Bridge Alliance are fighting against.

Despite being far behind their 20-year schedule, the city of Missoula continues to move forward with the plans for South Ave. Bridge, and the Maclay Alliance continues to oppose this progress.

“I want my grandchildren to be able to live in a rural area,” said Morrison. What started as a hope for safer roads has developed into a back-and-forth battle of community autonomy. This battle has no clear end in sight, but the Maclay Bridge Alliance does not plan to stop. Morrison urges others to join the fight against the new bridge, feeling that there is not enough public outcry for the cause. “There are a lot of people that totally ignore things that are happening around them unless it specifically affects them,” she said.



SPRING 2025 EDITION



Photo by Helen Rolston-Clemmer