

Paddling the Grand Canyon of the East, Linville Gorge

Recently I was walking down the street when I saw a nervous squirrel scurry up a tree limb and drop what appeared to be a giant walnut onto the sidewalk below. Upon further examination it was not a walnut at all. It wasn't even a piece of wood or anything that may have originated in the tree. Nope, it appeared to be a half nibbled serving of chocolate cake. After my sides stopped splitting and the tears cleared from my eyes I was able to get a positive ID on the cakelike object. Yip, it was definitely cake, about baseball-sized, chocolate iced and now dirt covered. Mr. Squirrel must have stolen the cake from some poor, helpless child or senior citizen, I thought to myself as the greedy little rodent stared down at me from his safe haven above, waiting for me to abandon the scene of the crime so he could reclaim his precious morsel. The absurdity of this glorious discovery immediately sent my gears spinning. I knew there was some greater purpose or symbolism in this event. "I have to write this down, the story must be told, Mr. Squirrel will speak to the world through me," I told myself as I helped my three-year-old son across the street to the playground.

When I'm not examining rodent droppings or playing with my son I find myself kayaking, talking about kayaking, selling kayaks and pretty much celebrating the sport of kayaking. I tend to gravitate toward oddities and always have an eye out for adventure and amusement, in case the squirrel story didn't indicate that. Also, I find other kayakers and outdoor-folk to be odd, peculiar and bizarre people. You've got your share of normal people in the sport, but as a general rule, most whitewater kayakers are the ones who got picked on in high school; nerds, geeks, the weird kids. This is how I have come to know the sport of kayaking, and further how I became acquainted with the Linville Gorge in North Carolina. Don't get me wrong, the Linville is no funnier than the next valley or mountain in comparison to Mr. Squirrel. The gorge and its natural beauty are real things, and whether you believe it or not, the cake-eating squirrel is real too. Though, you won't capture the kind of sights you see in the Linville walking down any street or sidewalk. It is a place that is magic to see with your own eyes, to touch with your hands and feet and feel with every sense. Carry a kayak on your back in and out of the gorge and paddle the class V whitewater, then you may begin to appreciate how small you are in comparison to its greatness. Absorbing everything around you, the mental game you are presented with while navigating extremely difficult rapids, knowing how far away you are from help if something goes wrong; it is unbelievably challenging to process all of this and maintain your wits. You kind of feel like the squirrel who couldn't hold onto that big piece of cake. You want it, you're hungry for it, you might even take a bite of it, but it's tough to digest all at once.

Cradled on the Eastern slopes of the Appalachian Mountains between the towns of Boone and Morganton, North Carolina the Linville Gorge is known as the Grand Canyon of the East. Running a span of twenty-plus miles from the scenic Linville Falls to Lake James, the Linville River is an artery that cuts its way thousands of feet deep into the gorge. Aside from hiking its Western paths at the river's edge or its

Eastern Ridge across Hawksbill and Table Rock, the only way to navigate the gorge is by way of kayak. As insane a feat and bizarre a concept as it may seem, paddlers first began attempting this run in kayaks as early as 1974. Three young expeditionists by the names of Tom McEwan, Wick Walker and Jamie McEwan made the first known descents of the Linville Gorge in thirteen-foot fiberglass kayaks some 35 years ago. Though they did not return to reattempt the river after two valiant efforts and a couple broken kayaks, they did move on to accomplish many remarkable steppingstones in the world of paddlesports, including Olympic medals and descents of rivers and waterfalls that were never thought to be navigable. This group inspired awe and motivation for future generations to continue exploring the Linville's Class V rapids, not to mention rivers and rapids the world over.

Kayaking the Linville is not for just any paddler. The river should be considered of Class V+ difficulty to anyone who attempts it, regardless of skill level. Aside from the exceptionally technical whitewater, the consequences of an unplanned capsize or swim could be devastating, even in the easy rapids. This fact can be attributed to the overwhelming number of undercut rocks and sieves the gorge is laden with. Let down your guard on the Linville and you may very well find yourself underneath a rock. This goes for slow moving current all the way up to the most difficult rapids.

Some, but not all rivers share the looming features that make up the anatomy of the Linville Gorge. The way the riverbed has formed underwater caves and sieves has a story behind it. One millennium after another, this river has eaten its way through rock and earth in search of the quickest and most direct path downstream. Eons ago you would have found the Linville Falls at the mouth of the gorge, in a completely different zip code than its current resting place. Passing ages and clashing elements have seen the falls migrate upstream nearly twenty miles as this natural, erosive process has given us the Eastern Seaboard's deepest and most remote gorge. During this process boulders and slabs of rock have been left to topple and fall upon one another, leaving gaps and holes in between - some of them large enough for a car to drive through, and others the size of your finger. The problem occurs when a capsule of air, i.e., kayak, with a living, breathing person in it, is forced into one of those holes that is not large enough for said kayak and person to fit through. The resulting product is ideally a successful rescue but can sometimes, dreadfully, result in casualties. To my knowledge no kayaker has ever drowned in the Linville, but the described scenario has unfortunately occurred on other rivers and resulted in deaths. This is why it is of utmost importance that the Linville is given well-deserved respect, and only the most skilled paddlers should attempt its descent. Help is a long ways away, whether you are paddling all the way to Lake James or hiking out one of the foot trails. First aid kits, spare paddles and rescue ropes are mandatory when entering the gorge with kayaks. These items weigh you down when hiking but are incredibly welcome when needed.

Despite the dangers of paddling the Linville River it is maybe the most rewarding and fulfilling place to be, both visually and physically, to the person who is lucky enough to be one with it. When paddling into Cathedral Gorge, where many of the

Linville's most difficult rapids congregate, you are given unequivocally amazing, long range views of Hawksbill and Table Rock, two towering peaks above the canyon. Onlookers from those peaks may even catch a glimpse of kayakers negotiating their way through the rock gardens and cascades below. Recommended viewing of the gorge would be from either Table Rock, on the Eastern rim (river-left), accessible from Highway 181, or Wiseman's View, accessible from Old Highway 105 on the Western rim (river-right). Table Rock requires a short, day hike to get to the goodies, however you can all but drive to the edge of Wiseman's View and see down into the depths of the gorge. You won't feel nearly as exposed or vulnerable as if you were kayaking the river, but you will undoubtedly be stunned by its vastness and beauty. These are also highly recommended scouting points before you consider paddling the Linville. You won't see detail in any rapids from that distance but you at least get a feel of just how deep into this chasm you are going to put yourself.

Traditionally, paddlers have put their kayaks in at the base of Linville Falls and paddle all the way to Nebo, near Lake James. This is more of a full day trip and requires a considerable amount of effort and time in setting up shuttle vehicles. This is great if you have all day and plenty of daylight. However, there is a quicker, slightly newer school way of boating the river. You hike down the Babel Tower trail, which is a couple miles drive downstream from the falls. Your take out vehicle is parked at the Conley Cove trail a couple more miles down. This method requires two cars and a far shorter drive, or one car and a bike. Regardless of how much you bite off, you will be chewing for a while, and either way you'll be getting a serious workout, guaranteed. Hiking down the hill at Babel Tower takes about thirty minutes at a good pace. Few paddlers know the river well enough to get through it all in less than a couple hours. Likely you will spend three to five hours on the water before you reach the takeout. If you choose to paddle the entire river you'll spend five to seven hours on the water. Once you reach Conley Cove, you're probably looking at a 45-minute hike out. Fifty pounds of kayak and gear on your shoulder tends to slow you down a little. Nevertheless you have to ready yourself for what seems like hundreds of rapids. This is where the Linville gets tricky, especially if you have not paddled the gorge often. Since a simple misstep in a class II rapid can cost you lots of time rescuing a kayaker and recovering gear, you have to know where you are going, or take lots of time to scout rapids properly before running them. It has taken decades and innumerable runs down the river for paddlers to decode all the proper lines down rapids and the same amount of time for the equipment to evolve to a point where it alone makes descending rivers easier. Many of the rapids have profound, if not memorable names and others, which on any other river would most certainly be named, have no name at all. The run begins with Babel Tower rapid, which is in itself of class V difficulty and typically sets the tone for the day. You then shuffle through a stack of the hardest rapids you've ever run, or portaged, including China Express, S-Turn, Drunk Tank, Cave Rapid, Hallway, Dr Seuss, Donkey Kong, Twiggy's Revenge, Cathedral Falls and Keehole, before you reach the takeout at the Conley Cove trail and finally, you relax and celebrate what you have done.

When I finally reach the top of the trail with my kayak perched on my head like a goofy, oversized hat, my neck hurts, I'm all sweaty and I am mentally and physically exhausted. All I want are dry clothes, food, water and a place to sit. This feeling brings me back to Mr Squirrel and his chocolate morsel. That huge chunk of cake is hard to carry up the tree, just like my kayak is hard to carry out of the gorge. I might drop it once in a while or have to stop and take a rest, but it is incredibly rewarding when it's all over. At least I can take pride in the fact that I earned my morsel and didn't steal it from some poor kid or senior citizen. No good squirrel.

By Spencer Cooke, Effort.tv

Spencer is a member of a kayak filmmaker group called Rapid Transit, which regularly produces short films available for free online viewing. His latest production, [The Eddy Feeling](#), documents the history of kayaking the Linville Gorge and a look at paddling the gorge today. It may be purchased on DVD at <http://RapidTransitVideo.com>