

Of Rivers and Canoes

By F Thomas Biglione, naturalist

A mist rises from the Lower American River and snakes through the foothills, back into the Sierra Nevada, revealing its long route to where I stand. The morning chill makes another 30 minutes back at the diner seem like a good idea. But this will be a long paddle and it's best to get an early start. There is a deeper reason to be here at this hour—the thrill of seeing first light through the trees, hearing only the gurgling of the water and early bird song in the river's wakening rhythm.

My shoulders creak as I lift the canoe off the truck. I set it gently half in the water and return to the truck for thermos, lunch, and paddles. A last look around the boat, all gear in place, I ease into the eddy along river left, lean downstream, and swing into the current. The canoe comes alive in its element. It is as if one were made for the other; the river carrying the small boat along, the canoe giving expression to the river the way a tree makes wind visible.

The channel soon constricts, the current accelerates through a jumble of rubble and rock, enters a series of tight turns lined with blackberry bushes, and disappears. That's the nature of rivers, revealing only enough to lead you on, promising something new around each bend.

The boater's mantra on moving water runs through my thoughts, "angle, lean, and power", and a fourth—anticipate. Paddle with your back, not your arms, plant the blade firmly at your toe, ease off as it reaches your thigh, swing from your waist to recover, and keep it rhythmic.

I drift with the current. The sun spotlights a stand of cattails on river left. Red-winged blackbirds sing out territorial proclamations. Like their cousins, the meadow larks', it is a joyful song. A brace of mallards swim out from shore, circle nervously in muttered indecision, then erupt raucously. On my right a green heron scuttles from its fishing alder perch to hide deep in its branches. It's a shy bird with an oversized head and hunched form. Yet, were I cloaked with feathers, none would be more beautiful than his understated and elegant earth tones of chestnut, shimmering black-green cape, and slate blue wings. A belted kingfisher drops from a snag in looping flight, chattering to the other bank should I fail to notice him. How could anyone miss his striking navy-blue wings and viceroy collar? A flickering shadow passes through a gallery of cottonwoods— a hawk. It's an accipiter, a high-performance aerial acrobat.

A little farther downstream stands a tall grove of sycamores and I glide into an eddy to study a rookery of white egrets and great blue herons. Ponderous birds land and take off like cargo planes bringing a steady stream of frogs, minnows, meadow mice, and gopher burritos to their young. Backlit in the sun, attentive parents stand on the sunny side of their nests, shading their gawky chicks. The ground and branches below white-washed with the residue of digested rodents and amphibians. How useful for this fertilizer to arrive during the trees' growing season. I marvel at the synergy between bird and tree, nesting and foraging parents, and mixed species within this condominium in the wild.

Rivers should be savored. This river should be savored.

The river cradles the boat, carrying it along, acting on, and acted upon by the boat in the paddler's hands—not just the paddler's hands, but knees and hips as well. Centered over the canoe, the solo paddler allows the boat to move, sometimes wills it onto one edge as they dance between the river and sky to the river's flowing music. As a raven rises, rolls, and falls on mountain updrafts, the paddler and boat contra dance with a river, accelerating over drops, slowing to keep pace with white-crested haystacks, banking gently on water piled against steep banks to slide smoothly back down into the channel.

That is paddling. That is canoeing. Take your magic carpet over the river's flow lines, ride its standing waves, play in its eddies diving in and out, shoot down fast drops, glide silently under trees hugging the bank, and emerge once again into sunlight. Each sense fed by fragrance, light, sound, and wind. Willows smell of aspirin, figs of foreign lands carried on the

green, live scent of the river. Breezes tremble cottonwood leaves, rustle through alders at water's edge, caress your arms and face, and set diamonds atop each wavelet while the river weaves all together— wind, tree, water, boat, and paddler.