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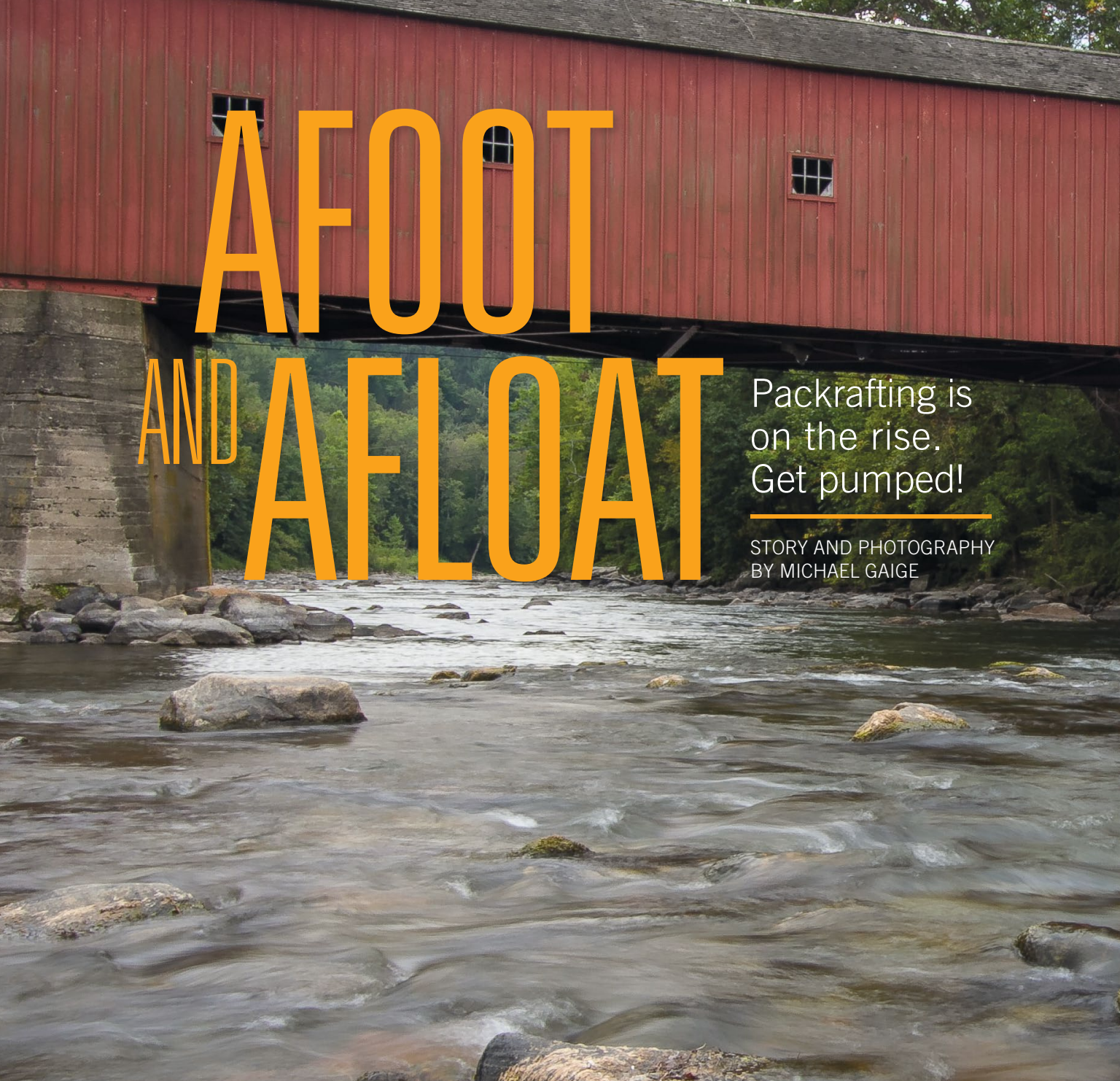
PACK & PADDLE

HIKE IT IN, FLOAT IT OUT:
DIVE INTO PACKRAFTING



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A FOOT AND A FLOAT

Packrafting is
on the rise.
Get pumped!

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY
BY MICHAEL GAIGE

From my midmorning snack spot, a leafy alcove on the Appalachian Trail (AT) in northwest Connecticut, I can't see the Housatonic River. But I can hear it coursing down below, underneath the lush riparian canopy of sycamores. Before long, another noise interrupts my solitude: tromping boots, as a pair of southbound hikers join me on the cliff.

A retired couple from North Carolina, they tell me they're section-hiking the AT in New England for two weeks. As our conversation unfolds, the woman, unable to ignore the cedar blades sticking out of my pack, asks, "Is that a kayak paddle?"

Her question is a reasonable one: A paddle is not considered essential equipment for a trek on the AT. But early this morning I slid my paddle and PFD, along with my rolled-up tent, sleeping bag, and other gear, into my backpack. Like the couple, I'm hiking a segment of the trail. But unlike them, instead of messing around with shuttles and spotting cars, I'm carrying my packraft to make a loop trip out of a linear trail. When I arrive at the spot where the AT crosses the Housatonic River at Route 7, I'll inflate the small boat and paddle back downstream.

"That's the problem with linear trails," I tell them. "You have to figure out how to get back to where you started."



The author navigates the boulder-strewn Housatonic River, in northwest Connecticut. Even in low water, a packraft resists punctures.

Enter the packraft. Simply put, a packraft is a one-person—or sometimes two-person—whitewater-capable raft. Packrafts are engineered to meet the somewhat mutually exclusive goals of being lightweight and durable. In this way, a packraft encourages amphibious travel: It gets hikers off trails and paddlers into the woods. With a portable boat, that river or lake you see from the summit becomes another trek. On this trip, my packraft allows me to hike 23 miles northbound on the AT for two days then float 18 miles southbound on the Housatonic River in one.

I'm not the only fan who's riding the wave. Not

long ago, a single company manufactured packrafts. Today, seven U.S.-based companies make boats here and abroad. What was an extreme wilderness sport is steadily becoming mainstream—even family friendly.

I show the North Carolinians my raft. Rolled up, the boat measures roughly 8 by 20 inches, or about the size of a tent, and weighs 5 pounds, 12 ounces. I describe the boat's merits and performance. The woman's eyes light up. Her husband looks skeptical, but I see his mental gears cranking away.

"There's lots of fun water where you live," I suggest. "Trails, too."

AIRING UP AND PUTTING IN

My AT trek ends early the next morning at a sandy beach adjacent to an agricultural field. The Housatonic pools here, the current barely discernable. For this next leg of my journey, moving from land to water is as simple as three easy steps: unroll, stuff, and inflate. First, I unroll the boat and unpack my backpack. My packraft, made by Alpacka Rafts, has a waterproof zipper on the stern. This allows me to stow my tent, sleeping bag, food, and empty backpack in the air-filled hull. I pull open the zipper and, taking care to balance the load, slide my gear in.

With my stuff stowed, I thread the inflation bag onto the raft's main valve. Almost as if I'm about to launch a kite, I scoop up a bagful of air and squeeze it into the boat. Inflation is surprisingly efficient; after three minutes, the boat is 90 percent there. The last 10 percent goes in the old-fashioned way. Using a separate valve similar to one found on a camping mattress, I top off the boat with as much air as my lungs can deliver. Getting



sufficient pressure is key to giving the raft its form and rigidity. Once inflated, it measures just over 7 feet long.

I assemble my five-piece, 2-pound paddle and settle in. I tighten the spray deck—a cover that functions like a kayak paddling skirt—across me. The lack of current here means I need to work my paddling muscles to make miles. On flatwater, a packraft is slow compared to a canoe or kayak; my GPS clocks my cruising speed at nearly 3 miles per hour—slightly faster than I'd walk on a trail. The tradeoff for slowness is a boat that fits in my backpack and is incredibly stable. There's no chance of tipping on flatwater unless you try really, really hard.

As the current picks up, so does my speed, and I get a better read on the river: It's low. Uncomfortably low. Recommendations suggest 150 cubic feet per second (CFS) as a minimum passable flow for this section. The level today is 200 CFS, but the boulder-strewn stream looks better suited to hopping across than to paddling. In what feels a bit like packraft pinball, I navigate around, between, and occasionally off rocks and boulders. A quick flick of the paddle spins the boat 180 degrees to dodge hidden stones.

With their short lengths and flat bottoms, packrafts are nimble in ways canoes and kayaks aren't; plus, hitting a rock results in a bounce rather than a hard thud. That bounceability comes from the raft's materials and craftsmanship. Most packrafts are constructed of woven nylon coated in urethane, a fabric with a certain amount of stretch. The tube sections are stitched and glued or otherwise sealed together. When fully inflated, this translates into a firm craft able to resist punctures from most rocks and sticks, and one that's suitable to run in high-volume whitewater.

In preparation for a paddle, the author stows his tent in the hull of his unrolled raft before inflating the vessel, pictured (inset) in its most compact state.



A packraft differs from other inflatable craft in a few key ways. Although it sacrifices speed, a packraft is lighter and smaller than an inflatable kayak, which typically tips the scales at 30 pounds. And compared to its vinyl pool-toy cousins, a packraft is much more durable. This is critical if you're depending on the boat to get you out of the wilderness without an epic swim and/or walk.

PADDLING BACK IN TIME

Although the modern-day materials are new, the concept of a hand-carryable vessel is not. The idea of an inflatable boat, in particular, dates back to the mid-19th century. Peter Halkett, a lieutenant in the English Royal Navy, designed a raft made of cotton permeated with rubber for use in the Arctic. The uninflated boat was worn as a cloak and held a paddle blade in a pocket. The whole thing weighed an impressive 7.5 pounds and could carry six people in a pinch. Despite positive reviews by expedition captains of the day, Halkett's boat never gained popularity. Perhaps it was too uncivilized for the Victorian Era.

One hundred years later, small, inflatable survival rafts leftover from World War II airplanes appeared in surplus stores. In 1952, the famed wilderness explorer and packraft pioneer Dick Griffith and his wife, Isabelle, used one to descend a remote river canyon in Mexico. And with that, packrafting was born.

The 1980s saw a surge of packraft production. Though not widely popular, these models had a following among serious backcountry explorers. In 2000, Thor Tingey took one on a wilderness trek through Alaska's Brooks Range: an ideal packrafting landscape of treeless tundra and cold, clear rivers.

"The Sherpa Raft was a bucket boat," Tingey tells me. "Every time I got in it, I was mildly to moderately hypothermic. I wanted to build a more durable and more comfortable boat." So he asked his sewing-savvy mother, Sheri, to make him an improved version. She did, and they began selling Alpacka Rafts from their Alaska garage in 2002. After 15 years in business, the company's fleet, now manufactured in Colorado, includes a dozen models that range from a 3-pound, 9-ounce Scout (\$545) to a 12-pound whitewater Alpackalypse (\$2,000).

Packraft manufacturers have swelled in recent years, from two in 2009 to at least 10 in 2016, with seven—Alpacka, Klymit, Supai, Kokopelli, AIRE, NRS, Feathercraft—in the United States alone. "We understand sales have doubled year-on-year for the past



7 TIPS FOR THE FIRST-TIME PACKRAFTER

- 1** Rent or buy? Several online companies rent packrafts by the day or the week and will ship the boat to you. Most sales are via manufacturers' websites.
- 2** On longer trips, paddle first and hike second. It's easier to carry weight in the boat than on your back, and your load will lighten as you eat through your food supply.
- 3** Pack smart. Packrafts are lightweight, but a boat, paddle, PFD, and accessories weigh almost 10 pounds combined. Eliminate nonessential gear to aid amphibiousness.
- 4** Bring a repair kit. Packrafts are durable, but accidents happen. A basic kit includes Tyvek tape, alcohol wipes, Aquaseal adhesive, a sewing needle and dental floss, and patches specific to the material of your boat.
- 5** Decide what type of water you want to paddle and how much time you have. Then link up an interesting way to get there and back. (See "Itinerary Ideas," page 30.)
- 6** Paddle safely. Always wear a PFD, a helmet in white-water, and tackle only what you're willing to swim. Practice getting back in the raft after falling out and always paddle with a friend.
- 7** Clean your raft. Help stop the spread of exotic plants and critters (Didymo algae, zebra mussels) by rinsing your boat with a hose immediately after each trip.

ITINERARY IDEAS

You can plop a packraft anywhere you find water, but the boat really comes alive on combo hikes and paddles. The three trips below (the latter two of which I've field-tested) give you a sense of what's possible. You'll need to do your own research, but that's half the fun!

1 WHITE MOUNTAIN PEMI SANDWICH (4–5 DAYS)

This trip starts and ends in Lincoln, N.H. Put in on the Pemigewasset River and enjoy 28 miles of quick water and Class II and III rapids to Ashland, N.H., being sure to portage Livermore Falls in Campton. Next, put in on Little Squam Lake and paddle it, and its big sister Squam Lake, 6 miles to the Rattlesnakes trail system on the north shore. (Consult AMC's *White Mountain Guide*, outdoors.org/amcstore.) Hike about 30 miles through the Sandwich Range, past Waterville Valley, and back to Lincoln. This trip can be shortened to a 10-mile paddle on the Pemi, 6 miles on the lakes, and an 18-mile hike by launching and ending in Campton (3 days).

2 AROUND VERMONT'S GREEN MOUNTAINS (7 DAYS)

This sweet loop on two Vermont rivers crests the Green Mountains twice. Begin at Clarendon Gorge and paddle Otter Creek 50 miles to Middlebury. Hike roads and trails to the Long Trail. Enter the White River in Granville and paddle bucolic Vermont countryside 20 miles to Riverside. Pick up the AT to the south and hike 25 miles back to Clarendon. Use AMC's *River Guide to Vermont and New Hampshire* to plot your route (outdoors.org/amcstore).

3 LITTLE ALASKA IN THE ADIRONDACKS (3 DAYS)

For experienced whitewater paddlers, this route ventures through remote corners of Adirondack Park and the rarely paddled Cold River (www.dec.ny.gov/lands). The river is high enough only during spring or after big rains. Begin at the Coreys Road trailhead and hike to Duck Hole. Put in the Cold River about 1 mile below Duck Hole. Paddle intense whitewater, taking care to scout and portage the waterfalls and larger rapids. Join the Raquette River and paddle north back to Coreys. Not for the faint of heart!

For further reading and trip ideas, consult: the American Packraft Association at packrafting.org; apaddleinmypack.wordpress.com, the most useful blog I know; and *Packrafting! An Introduction and How-To Guide*, by Roman Dial (Backpacking Light, 2008). —M.G.

three years," says Brad Meiklejohn, the president of the American Packrafting Association. "We conservatively estimate 20,000 packrafters worldwide."

Although Alaska is still packraft central, "Growth is happening in the Rocky Mountains region and the Southwest," Meiklejohn says. "There are good trips to be done in the Adirondacks, Maine's North Woods, Labrador, and Newfoundland. New Zealand is a hotbed, and Sweden and Norway. The biggest concern now is safety," he explains. "The gear is there to make you feel you can do Class III rapids, but without experience, people can get into trouble. So we are focusing on education."

As for me, after multiple summers working in Alaska, packrafting became irresistible. Without ever trying one, I bought an Alpacka in 2006 and set out on the creeks and lakes near my home in the Adirondacks. As my proficiency and ambition expanded, I ventured back to Alaska with raft in hand—as carry-on luggage, no less—and as far south as Patagonia.

Whether you envision extended wilderness expeditions, a family day at the lake, or a boat to keep in your office for use during lunch breaks, there is a packraft to meet your aspirations. "People are buying them to do all kinds of things," Tingey says. "It's not just about suffering in the Arctic for two weeks anymore."

RUNNING THE RIVER

Back on the Housatonic, I navigate my multicolored raft around silent rocks and boulders. Although this low water offers only occasional drops and small shoots, packrafts are capable craft in whitewater, with some models easily handling Class III and IV rapids. A broad, flat floor allows the boats to skim over boils and bobble over waves. Kayakers who like to surf in standing waves might find the stability and drag of a packraft limiting, but novices intimidated by the notion of squeezing into a hard-shell kayak will feel comfortable in a packraft. While I love whitewater, for me, getting outdoors isn't about proving technical skill. It's enough to be outside, to sense the world, and to feel it lift my spirits.

As the river meanders on, I silently drift past herons feeding in the shallows. Bald eagles and ospreys glide above me, searching for fish, while mergansers navigate the rock-strewn current beside me. An otter rides the riffles next to me, playfully looking me over. Decked out in olive and tan waders, a half-dozen anglers line the riverbank, likely fishing for the Housatonic's famed trout. (Packrafts make excellent fishing craft, especially on remote lakes and rivers, where hiking-in a canoe can





Although his trip on the Housatonic was calm, the author, above, has successfully navigated his packraft through more turbulent waters, including Class IV rapids.

be impractical or exhausting.) Add all of this to the oak forests and talus-sloped woodlands I saw on the AT, and I'm getting a holistic picture of the Housatonic landscape.

Drifting past bridge abutments of dry-stacked stone, I think about the evolution of craft this river has seen over the past 400 years, from dugout and birch-bark canoes to spruce-ribbed guide boats to inflatables. As I drop through quick water beneath the West Cornwall Covered Bridge, I'm struck by the juxtaposition of my packraft against the once-cutting-edge stone and wood structure, built in 1841. I feel modernity tug at tradition. Perhaps people have always felt this way about innovation.

LEARN MORE

Planning a paddle? Find out how to use a throwbag in a whitewater rescue and how rivers are classified at [outdoors.org/learnhow](https://www.outdoors.org/learnhow). To read about whitewater conservation in New England, turn to page 23, and to find seven regional water trails to paddle, turn to page 14.

As I near the trailhead where I began my three-day Housatonic yo-yo, I have an epiphany: I should paddle and hike my way to Katahdin. Surely I could find a route that would combine the heights of the AT with the limitless lakes and rivers in the valleys below it.

And then I see my truck. Therein lies the problem with loop trips: The adventure always ends when you get back to your car. ●

Michael Gaige is a consulting ecologist, a writer, and a wilderness explorer from upstate New York. After 10 years of packrafting, he's still working out how to fit his camping gear, raft, and 2-year-old daughter into his backpack.