

A DAY ON THE WOLF

by George Vukelich

It was 7 A.M. when Buzz drowned the breakfast fire with the last of the coffee and the four of us piled into the two station wagons. The tents, still soggy from last night's cloudburst, were left standing to air and dry out on the river bank.

We eased the wagons over the rutted track that wound through the dripping woodland and up into the meadow where Johnny Conn's cattle huddled together switching their mud-streaked flanks, watching us warily.

Johnny Conn, part-time farmer and Wolf River guide, was waiting in the sun-washed clearing at the frame house. He had a cup of coffee in one hand and a map in the other.

"You fellows aren't just floating another old river today," he greeted us. "You're floating the Wolf. She bears respectin'." His forefinger traced a winding path on the map.

"She begins up here," he said. "Sixteen hundred and seventy-five feet above sea level in the Nicolet National Forest. Then she flows 223 miles south down to the Fox River ten miles west of Lake Winnebago. She drops darn near a thousand feet in that stretch." His eyes twinkled. "That's a pretty steep ride if you're going all the way."

Johnny folded the map and turned to the house. "Well," he said, "let's get the doughnuts."

We followed him into the cool walk-in basement and there they were, the surplus World War II rubber life rafts that Johnny Conn had made famous on the Wolf. They were patched and scarred and had a nice lived-in

look. We carried them to the wagon and loaded them on, one atop the other.

"How do you fill them?" I asked.

Johnny grinned. "I use an old vacuum cleaner," he said. "Course out on the river we have to pump 'em by hand. They leak a little and get soft."

He slung in a hand pump, his flyrod, two weather-beaten paddles, the gunny sack with our cooking utensils, and a pair of chest-high waders. Hours later, in the swift rock-strewn stream, we would see the wisdom of the waders — a guide spends as much time in the water as on the raft. Johnny also gave photographer George Gamsky a heavy clear plastic bag for his camera gear and film.

We followed the river road back to the blacktop and headed for White Lake to get Johnny his "lunch fixins." The countryside looked green and freshly scrubbed. A meadowlark sailed across the road. The sky was clear with the deep blue of a summer sky after a rain.

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We launched the rafts in the quiet stretch below the Langlade Bridge. Johnny set two planks across the gunwhales and photographer George Gamsky and I sat on them. Johnny, now in his waders, perched up on the stern. Buzz and Howard followed in the other raft and we edged out into midstream. Beneath our feet the thin floor of the raft undulated like a bowl of jelly.

I told Johnny it was a shock to actually feel the river beneath my soles. He passed me an old coffee can which I deduced was for bailing.

"You'll be a lot more shocked," he said, "when you feel it over your ankles."

Unloading Johnny Conn's "doughnuts," surplus rubber life rafts that have tamed some of the wildest stretches of the Wolf.



Sometimes on a spinning, bumpy ride through the rapids you lose a little air.





The lovely, unspoiled Wolf has many faces — raging white water, swift sleek stretches, and the calm, quiet places.

The current caught us and carried us gently downstream. Ahead of us, the river sparkled and disappeared behind a bend. There was a pungent smell of cedar on the water.

We rigged up to fish trout. Johnny used a flyrod with a weighted nightcrawler. I used spinning tackle with a size "O" French spinner. George Gambsky fiddled with his camera and aimed it at the other raft, where Buzz and Howard were whipping their flyrods from bow and stern. The red hat Buzz wore glared in the sunlight like a neon sign. It was a seamless piece of felt, cut in

a circle with a flopping crown. Lumberjacks in the Pacific Northwest, Buzz said, used to wear such hats before they switched to hard hats. Buzz swore he had never worn a more comfortable hat. It was certainly distinctive—on a clear day you could see him a mile away.

"Try that spot over there," Johnny suggested. "Next to the big rock."

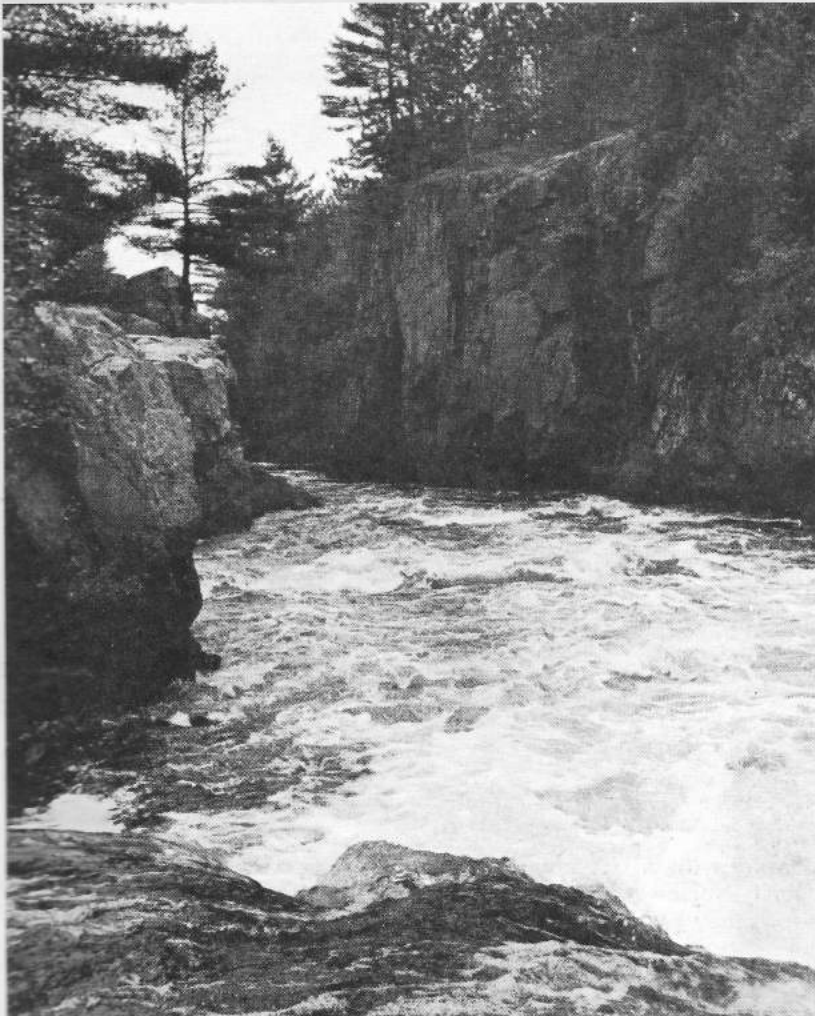
I flung the small spinner out to the spot. It banged into the stone and slid below the surface. As I reeled in, something struck, and the glass rod bent like a bow. The fish drove away from the rock and bored into the

open current. I cranked steadily and soon we could see him in the clear, hip-deep water ten feet away. It was a smallmouth bass. An extremely small smallmouth bass. I brought him in, unhooked him, and he flashed away in the direction of the rock.

Johnny laughed and leaned forward.

"Current makes them feel pretty heavy, doesn't it? There's better trout holes downstream." He hauled in his fly line and took up his paddle. "We got a little rapids coming up. Better warn George not to get his camera wet."

I nudged George and told him. He braced himself and held his camera at eye-level, pointed straight ahead. The current swung us around the bend and our first rapids came into view. They stretched from shore to shore but they weren't too big. There was calm water glistening down below them. On the stern, Johnny was sawing the water with a powerful, fluid S stroke. I knew he was picking out the main channel, the key route through any rapids. In a rigid canoe, missing the channel can be disastrous. In a limber rubber raft, there is a greater margin of safety. The raft will ride right over rocks that would normally rip the bottom out of a canoe. Johnny dragged the paddle like a rudder and we shot through the white-water stretch in seconds.



In Menominee County the Wolf River thunders through a narrow, steep-sided gorge called The Dalles.

We turned and watched Buzz and Howard skip through. The aplomb with which they streaked alongside brought a smile to Johnny's windburned face.

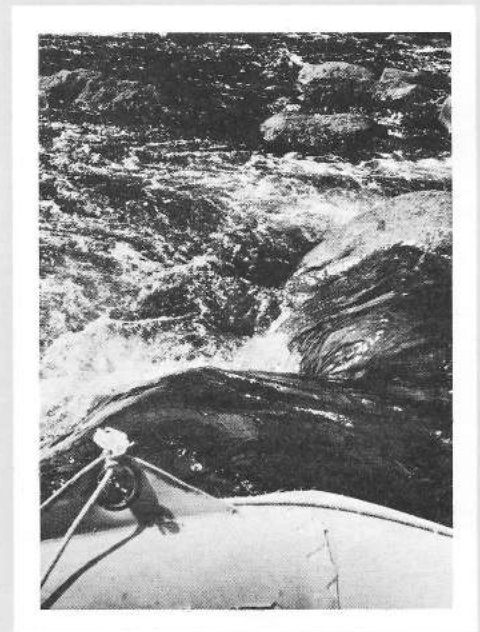
"There are bigger rapids downriver," Johnny said. "Real white water. You'll hear 'em a quarter of a mile before you see 'em."

We coasted quietly past a series of deep, fishy-looking pools and we worked them thoroughly without so much as a follow. Johnny peered at my spinner, glinting sharply over the rock-strewn bottom.

"That's a good bait," he kept saying. "If they're hitting, they should hit that one. I've seen some big trout hit a spinner like that." He single-hauled his fly line expectantly, slowly, his eyes intent upon the rod tip.

"Sometimes they just mouth the worm and spit it out before you can set the hook. You think the worm touched a rock or something and before you know, they're gone. The older ones get pretty smart."

Johnny fished carefully and talked about the Wolf River. The Wolf drains a watershed of 3,750 miles and it can be divided into four distinct segments: a head-water lakes region in the uneven surface of the highlands, a trouting-canoeing area in the region of what the geologists call "rapid fall," a scenic area where the river breaks over rocks, and a wetland marsh area rich in fish and wildlife. The river begins up at Pine Lake, flows southerly several miles into Little Rice Lake and then another dozen miles downstream, where it enters Post Lake. While there are dams on Pine and Little



Under foot, through the floor of the thin-skinned raft, you can actually feel the throbbing flow of the restless Wolf.

Rice, it is the dam on Post Lake that affects the river most drastically. During extremely dry periods the Post Lake Dam is closed, practically shutting off the river's flow. The river gets slow and sluggish then, and when the fast water goes, the trout go and chubs move into the old holes.

Below the Post Lake Dam, the river runs on a relatively direct course as a narrow, fast stream down the slope of the Canadian shield, a mass of impervious granite with a layer of glacial till on top. Most of the



Spinning, racing, careening. Seemingly sliding downhill through some marvelous Wolf River rapids.

river's fall occurs in this portion running through Langlade County, where we were, and Menominee County downstream.

In Menominee County, the Wolf winds through forty miles of virgin wilderness you have to see to believe. Then after tumbling from the forested highlands, the river drops down into the rich clay soils of agricultural lands. Below Shawano, it broadens into a wide stream, fed by such major tributaries as the Red, Embarrass, Little Wolf, and Waupaca rivers. Slowed and sluggish, the Wolf coils around aimlessly in the low, flat lands, leaving a trail of old ox-bows, bottomland lakes, and marshes in its wake.

"It's still pretty good trout water down to Keshena," Johnny allowed. "Below that the Wolf becomes another kind of river. Civilization does it. There's good walleye fishing during the spring spawning run, but the river isn't clean and fast and cold enough for trout. Trout are like wolves. Civilization moves in on them and they move out."

Of course, I reflected, there are people who don't care about the trout — or about the wilderness. Some people probably would vote for removing all the boulders up to here to make stream safe for outboards and water skiers. And each man has his own madness. But trout fishermen are more likely to take Nature as she is and let her be.

Up ahead the river disappeared around a bend and a dull steady roar signalled another rapids.

Johnny tucked away his flyrod and took up his paddle.

"Better warn George," he said. I did and George readied himself in the bow.

"Rapids," Johnny called across to the other raft. Buzz waved back that they understood and Howard in the stern was working his paddle. I leaned close to Johnny.

"Better hold the groceries up," he said. "We don't want the bread to get wet."

George, his camera at eye-level, leaned back against my knees, trying to provide a steady platform for his picture-taking. I put my arms around his chest, clasped my fingers together, and we skittered around the bend. These rapids were bigger and longer than the first and the water was white down to the next bend. And then we were into it. Spinning, racing, careening. The raft rolled and rose and dropped and rose and wallowed and rose again. At times, we could feel the huge boulders creasing the thin floor of the raft as we scraped over them. At other times, we literally flew above the surface as the current hurled us ahead.

The water was washing in over the gunwhales every time we dipped and I would have sworn we were completely and utterly out of control. Yet there was Johnny, high on the stern, working his paddle like a rudder again and squinting through the spray and blinding sunlight. It restored my confidence.

We slammed into a rock, spun off, and for a brief moment, we were staring up-river. I caught a glimpse of Buzz in his floppy red hat; then we were facing downriver again. The bailing can was floating next to my ankle. George's plastic camera bag was awash. We whirled around the far bend and I had a panicky feeling of coming to a falls. The river just seemed to stop, or rather, drop off.

"She drops a little bit," Johnny yelled.

The current swept us along into a notch the width of the raft. We scraped boulders on either side, wriggled our way through, and then plunged onto a boulder a foot below and stopped dead. The wall of water pounded into the raft from above and suddenly Johnny was out of the raft, pushing and prodding, and we popped free like a cork. He leaped back in as we floated into a tranquil pool.

I released George and he sat up and looked around at Johnny. The cigarette in my mouth was soaked to the filter and I threw it out and looked for a dry one.

Johnny guided us to a sandbar that split the river and we got out in knee-deep water and hauled the raft ashore. It was half full of water and soft as a pillow.

We stood in the river as Buzz and Howard came flying through. They looked as though they were coasting down a slide. From this distance the upper river seemed to drop sharply, as if pouring over a small dam.

We watched Buzz and Howard shoot toward the notch. They hit the rock below the notch and I held my breath. Their raft dropped over the rock and sort of eeled across it. Howard paddled to the sandbar. He had a wide grin.

We bailed out the rafts and hand-pumped them rigid again. When we were shipshape, Johnny felt the bottom of the damp burlap sack and then he reached inside.

"Bread didn't get wet," he said. "That's the main thing. Soggy bread can spoil a whole trip."

We fished from the sandbar for the next twenty minutes while the hot sun dried everything out. We caught another smallmouth bass — the same size as the one upstream — and then we climbed back into the rafts and pushed off.

We drifted lazily over the shallows. The pebbled river bottom looked like a flooded cobblestone roadway.

I asked Johnny what the average depth of the river was through here.

"About hip deep," he reflected. "Shore to shore. That's about the average. You could wade across it here."

I asked how deep the pools were below the last rapids. Johnny half-turned.

"Well," he said, "maybe eight or ten feet. All that water pouring down wears a hole in the bottom. Course, I never have time to measure it properly, coming through. But eight feet should be pretty close. Then she gets shallow again."

In the other raft, Buzz and Howard were busy with their flyrods again.

Johnny lifted his paddle and pointed toward the near shore.

"See that?" he asked. It was a cleared sandy spot on the sloping bank.

"Turtle's nest," Johnny said. Turtle came out of the river and laid some eggs in there. Heat of the sun will hatch 'em out if a skunk or weasel doesn't get to 'em first."

I watched the still barren spot as we floated past. "Notice," Johnny said, "the nest is above the high-water mark. So even if the river came up fast, it couldn't reach the eggs and flood 'em out."

He leaned on his paddle.

"Skunks and weasels. They're always looking for nests. You take when they find a nest of grouse eggs. Grouse'll be sitting on 'em to hatch 'em out. Well, if she don't leave, they'll get her too. And if she leaves, they get the eggs."

The turtle nest receded from view. Downstream, a great blue heron fished and poked in the far shallows. In the gliding rafts we fished and poked until the sun stood directly overhead.

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We had our lunch in a dried basin of an old beaver pond. Alongside, a tiny spring ran cold as snow.

Johnny placed foil-wrapped hamburger patties in the grey coals of a wood fire, the coffee cooked determinedly, and we sprawled around the site barefoot, our socks drying on an old white log.

From the venerable gunny sack, Johnny extracted the moisture-beaded plastic bags that contained green onions, radishes, and a carefully wrapped salt-shaker. He retrieved the foil packets of patties from the fire, gingerly opened them, and laid the hamburgers on slices of bread. We wolfed them down.

"It's not eating trout," Johnny declared, "but it's better than eating crow."

We washed the meal down with the strong coffee and stretched full length in the drowsing meadow and smoked our cigarettes.

"Johnny," Howard said, sipping the coffee, "you and Buzz must make coffee out of the same paint can."

"I make it pretty strong," Johnny said.

"No, it's fine," Howard reassured him.

"You know," Buzz said, "you could kill yourself fishing this river from the shore."

"Or wading up it," Howard said.

"That's right," Johnny agreed, "awful lot of brush to walk through. I've done it all ways. The rubber raft is the easiest way. And the safest." He poured seconds on the coffee.

"Canoe is good too, of course. But you have to be pretty good in a canoe. In a raft, you could come through those rapids backwards and at worst, you might get a little wet. In a canoe —" he shrugged.

"You couldn't come through backwards," Howard said.

"That's right," Johnny said. "I've taken families through here and all they want is the ride. They don't even fish. We put life jackets on them and it's quite a ride. They don't have to know how to paddle. Now, you couldn't do that in a canoe."

Johnny doused the fire ashes and raked the steaming coals. We put on our socks, dry now, and got ready to fish trout.

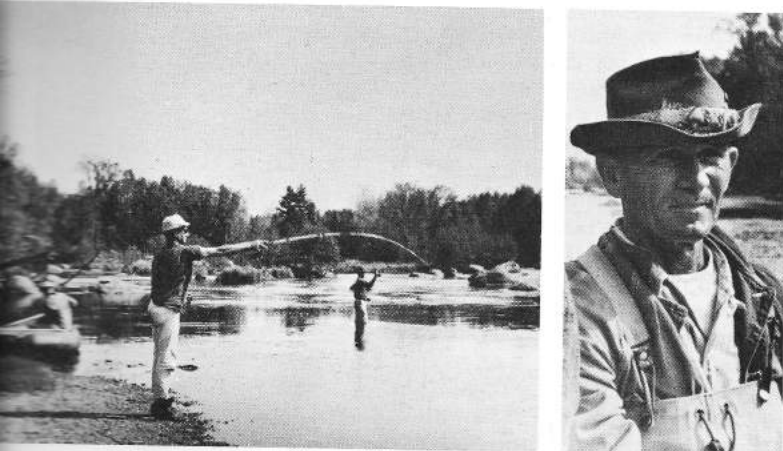
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Johnny moved us faster and we fished quietly and thoroughly. The remaining rapids we got through quickly. We fished the deep downstream pools and paddled past the sluggish waters where Johnny said chubs lived. A thunderhead began building on the horizon and Johnny kept a seasoned eye on it.

He was in and out of the river as my French spinner hung up on the rocky bottom. As soon as I hung up, he slid over the stern, towing the raft to the spot where the lure was caught. He worked it free every time. Once he came back with a handful of clean, waxy green weeds.

"If we stayed here until sundown, we'd probably see a deer come in to feed. This is a real delicacy for

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Fishing from a bar at the lower end of a rapids while drying out and pumping up after a headlong rush through white water. Right: Johnny Conn, Wolf River guide.

them. They stick their heads right down to the bottom and pull these up."

By four o'clock, the thunderhead was towering thousands of feet high, and others were building. We drifted into a wide, deep pool that lay in shadows. A large half-block area of granite formed one side.

"The ledge," Johnny said. "Deepest spot in the river."

We fished for twenty minutes here as huge, soft rain-drops began to spatter the river. We left the ledge, put up our fishing tackle and moved across the last bend. Parked in the clearing ahead was the blue station wagon we had left that morning.

The humidity on the shore was suffocating. Mosquitoes swirled around our heads as we opened the wagon and emptied the rafts of gear.

Johnny let the air out of the rafts and rolled them up like a couple of bulky sleeping bags and threw them in back. We piled into the wagon as the rain came.

"Well," Johnny said, "I'm sorry we didn't get any trout. But they're in there."

There was a smile on Howard's sun-burned face.

"I believe it," he said. "We'll be back."

He backed the wagon around and we headed away from the river.

I settled back with a cigarette. Under my soggy boots, I could still feel the throbbing, restless Wolf — even after we had left the sand road and swung onto the glistening blacktop.