

25-MAY-B-4

**THE RIGOROUS KAYAK EXPEDITION OF THE REMOTE DEVILS
RIVER IN THREE GENERATIONS OF GEELHOEDS ROCK HOPPING,
RAPIDS RUNNING, AND PADDLING INTO THE WIND, WE
CELEBRATE THE MEMORIAL DAY WEEK IN EXPLORING THE WEST
TEXAS HILL COUNTRY DESERT CANYON OF EXOTIC GAME FARMS
AND THE CLEARWATER OF DEVILS RIVER TEXAS STATE NATURAL
AREAS AND CLIMBING TO CAVES IN PEAKS AND EAGLE NEST
DESCRIBED BY SPANISH EXPLORERS IN 1760**

MAY 23-28, 2025

It has been a very rigorous expedition, unlike the Grand Canyon Colorado River run that was an easy raft floating trip with no one pitched off into the rapids and the only intensive part being the long and steep climb out of the canyon up the Bright Angel trail. In the sign up for the Grand Canyon Rafting trip, they kept re-emphasizing how tough the hike out would be and what would be needed in disciplined packing since everything brought in would be packed out on the rafters' backs such that the easy rafting would turn into a heavy-duty climb.

For this Devils River with Angell Expeditions I had repeated warnings that were asked and re-asked after answering. "Are you sure you are up for this, and want to really go through with it?" This is not a trip for anyone who has already got expectations of a raft trip with the outboard-motor-powered, and porters and all gear furnished and everything done for you—the kind of trip that might be expected at the price of the expedition. It fulfilled one of the lacunae of the Colorado River trip which might be more fun if we actually had to navigate the river on our own strength and fast-learned skills. It can accommodate retirees if they are prepared to climb out of the Colorado Grand Canyon. The trip down the Devils River is one that would not accommodate the Golden Ager retirees. It was one reason that Charlie Angell was asking Michael if he was sure that I would be suitable for this trip, since all he knew about me was my date of birth. Michael's response was "Don't worry about him."

We got up before dawn on Saturday, a necessity, since we could not go out toward Del Rio and stay at whatever small facility we could find out in West Texas remote Hill Country since Jordan was working in Austin at CBS and could not get to San Antonio until late Friday night. This meant we were on our way in the dark in the Honda Odyssey, packed with borrowed fishing tackle, three tents,

hammocks, sleeping bags, and pads, four folding chairs and a number of extra items appropriate to celebrations. We saw the sun rise in the back window as we were heading into Western Texas Hill Country which are high rocky ranches of cactus and rocks and bordered by high game fences for Exotic Game Farms. If I opened my eyes I would think I was in a part of Limpopo Province. We spotted a big Rio Grande species turkey along the road and a number of whitetail deer, and saw some deer ranches that had a note on a sign "Whitetails for sale, Genetics certified." I saw a couple of herds of axis and fallow deer, and saw a white antelope with a tan forequarters that I recognized as Scimitar-Horned Oryx. These are the Game Rances I know well from their South African predecessors, which I would not condemn as a pseudo hunt since I might some day need to have the facility for the help needed when I can no longer climb high mountains in pursuit of the last of the list of my exotic game species.









We went to a hard scrabble road that led to a low house (called Marleen's house, presumably after a hostess we had never met) and a house trailer was parked in the scrub brush which was presumably the HQ of Angell Expeditions. The owner Charlie Angell was busy stacking kayaks on a trailer to be pulled by a van that had a faulty A/C that he apologized for since we would be making about twenty minutes on pavement and then an hour of rough road. We met a family of four from Uvida Colorado in the Southern Mountains of elk and mule deer country: the Mom is named Lluvia, and she has two sons, the older of whom is Christian whose high school graduation they are celebrating. Christian is going to "College" in Grand Junction for two years called "Colorado Mason College." When I later asked what his major would be there, he answered "welding." His father Troy is a general contractor and is a smoker and an avid fisherman. Son Christian is an avid bowhunter and was very envious of my African experience which is his dream, and I told him we would swap a hunt, I going to Colorado for Mule deer and elk and he could come to South Africa for Plains Game as I gave him the contact for Charl Watts. The charmer of the group is the role that we often

play—as we were the youngest and oldest participants in many trips such as the one down the Colorado River, and others—is ten-year old Rowan. He is a polite but very active water rat and is constantly sitting in or poking around in the river. I liked him. Since he was too young to kayak alone in this rigorous trip, he paddled in the front of one of four canoes we had on this trip, while his mom Lluvia used a kayak paddle in the rear of the canoe. They made a good team.



Devils River State Natural Area

Del Norte Unit Trails Map

21715 Dolan Creek Road
Del Rio, TX 78840
(830) 395-2133
www.texasstateparks.org

LEGEND

- Headquarters
- Bunkhouse
- Maintenance Area
- Parking
- Restrooms
- Showers
- Composting Toilet
- Hiking Trails
- Primitive Campsites
- Swimming
- Birding Blinds
- Dinosaur Tracks



Fishes of the Devils River



Longnose Gar
Lepisosteus osseus



Spotted Gar
Lepisosteus oculatus



Central Stoneroller
Campostoma anomalum



Blacktail Shiner
Cyprinella venusta



Proserpine Shiner
Cyprinella proserpina



Mexantial Roundnose Minnow
Diionda argentosa



Devils River Minnow
Diionda diaboli



Texas Shiner
Hypoclinemus amabilis



Sand Shiner
Hypoclinemus stramineus



Bullhead Minnow
Pimephales vigilax



Gizzard Shad
Dorosoma cepedianum



Common Carp
Cyprinus carpio



River Carpsucker
Carpodacus carpio



Gray Redhorse
Moxostoma valenciennianum



Mexican tetra
Astyanax bimaculatus



Rio Grande Darter
Etheostoma grahami



Headwater Catfish
Ambloplites rupestris



Channel Catfish
Ictalurus punctatus



Flathead Catfish
Pylodictus olivaceus



Mosquitofish
Gambusia affinis holbrooki



Salfini Molly
Poecilia latipinna



Green Sunfish
Lepomis cyanellus



Longear Sunfish
Lepomis longiears



Redear Sunfish
Lepomis microlophus



Bluntnose Sunfish
Lepomis macrochirus



Redbreast Sunfish
Lepomis auratus



Redspotted Sunfish
Lepomis gibbosus



Largemouth Bass
Micropterus salmoides



Smallmouth Bass
Micropterus dolomieu



Blue Tilapia
Oreochromis aureus



Rio Grande Cichlid
Herichthys cyanoguttata









Our chief guide was a young fellow named Taylor, who has done a lot of the rivers around here, and a fellow named Tony who comes from Terlingua, which I had gone through with Michael and the boys when they were small and we went to Big Bend Of the Rio Grande. I remember this small town being the site of a big time Chili Cook Off contest. Due to the size of our party with five of us and four of the other family clients, they brought in another fellow to help, a retired army fellow named Patrick from Dallas who paddled one of the other of four canoes, as both Taylor and Tony were paddling the main cargo canoes. Many of the rapids we encountered could be run by the plastic kayaks, designed for just this river, and for that reason named "Diablos." Each of the Geelhoeds had one of five Diablos, and the two older males of the Musgroves each had one, one of which got a hole ripped in it as we went through one rapids and a "patch kit" of epoxy and fiberglass was used to fix it.

We put in at the shallows of the Devils river and saw that it was filled with rocks and ridges of limestone that must have been deposited as sediments from the large inland sea that covered this area 150 million years ago. In many places, the

ridges just barely under the surface, looked remarkably like the very rare phenomenon called “Strombolites” I remembered visiting in Leon Province in Mexico which I had visited with Rafa Sepulveda when I visited them in Monterey. These are the rare “fossilized bacteria” that NASA sent astronauts to study before space exploration, and I had a local expert guide show us these unusual relics of early life forms. Juday and Michael heard this and were amazed since they had made an inland trip from the coastal Mexico resorts to see the Strombolites. So we had each visited Bacolick, and had not known this.









They are rocks, and as rocks, they are the “hard places” that hang up the canoes for sure and the kayaks most of the time. This means that one of the two great annoyances of the trip that bugged me was “Rock Hopping.” This means that the “Running the Rapids” is a thrill and requires some skill, but for many, it means getting out of the boat and hauling it after you bumping into your ankles at awkward moments. The option is to let the canoe ahead of you and push it holding on to the rope with the danger that it might get away from you or pull you off balance in the rapids where you cannot see your feet trapped in the rocks. I liked thr running of the rapids, but I was annoyed at the excess Rock Hopping. It was due to the fact that, as Tony had said, “Never have I seen the river level so low.” This was despite the rains that had fallen recently which did not change the water level.















The one purchase at the Academy Sporting Good Store that Michael and I had gone to on Friday to get our fishing licenses that was an absolute essential—the closed river shoes I had bought. I had brought the Super Glued Shoe Goo-re-re-repaired running shoes back from Africa, with the thought that I might use them. They fell apart from their delaminating Shoe Goo before they were ever immersed.

Already on day one we had one further annoyance; when we got free of the Rock Hopping, we might get into the flat water of the river to paddle—and here we faced the constant Upriver Wind. Paddling the Diablos with high free board into a stiff wind requires hard work and the realization that after being freed from the rocks trapping us in the rapids, we were now “in irons” with a hard paddling needed to keep from being swept back upstream. It was hard work.

On Day One we came upon Dolan’s Falls, a single spot that requires a portage of the canoes and kayaks around them. The kayaks are carried to a ledge that is below the falls and then one drops down into the river. It seems that below the falls there were lots of turtles near the surface picking off flotsam. We got the canoes around first after emptying their content and hauling them down, which includes ten-liter plastic water carriers and big igloos of ice. The requirements for all day continuous drinking is a must, since the biggest injury that occurs most often is dehydration. For that reason the guides are always after the crew to take in more water and to top up the liter water bottle each of us secures on the kayak. They carry up to two gallons per day per person and no one drinks enough. The river water may be cleaner than most any other river in Texas since it is limestone spring fed, but norovirus is not something that would be a plus on this trip.

We can discuss the necessary features of the trip—pooping—and the emergency evacuation if needed. The answer to the first is the Groover, the answer to the second is “don’t get hurt”. The latter has as an incentive the fact that the Texas Natural Area is NOT a State or National Park and the jurisdiction is that of the local sheriff. If someone got hurt in the river, the response from the sheriff would be to get down to the takeout point 29 miles downstream where they could get a vehicle to them. This is not a good omen.

As for the Groover, I asked if this was named after a man’s name, like the “WC” “Water Closet” invention of Victorian England by a man named John Krapper, whose name had thereafter become fixed to toilets. No, the groover is from having US GIs in Vietnam using fifty caliber ammo cans as latrines and the sun being hot, they would get grooves of hot metal branded on them. In our case,

they are plastic pails with plastic lining in which one does NOT pee, that can be done in the river, but the Poop must be packed out in the successive series of Groovers used. They are secluded near the campsite and a pair of crossed paddles lets anyone know the Groover is in use.

When we could finally get to pull in at 20-Mile Paddle Camp, Devin and Jordan had set up my tent in a place sheltered by some trees with no rain fly over it since the addition of the rain fly making the tent interior still much hotter. We all got the dinner which had been planned for Spaghetti and Meatballs, but since we arrived late, we changed up and I went to the sleeping mat after dinner. We are in an area that is supposed to be one of the US Dark Skies best place to view the stars, but there was an overcast. The confluence of a new moon with a crescent that seems to engulf the bright planets is a rare view that is likely the origin of this emblem on the Islamic flags of several nations. We would not see it. We did have several overhead spectacular events, and the next one was my looking up directly into it through the mesh window of the tent for the second night without the rain fly.

We would have one more still more rigorous paddling day before a complete day off, with no river running except that which we wanted to do as we paddled around the island we would camp on for the second and third nights in the same place. Before that we had to thread through the biggest rapids of the trip which we would get out and scout to determine if we would try to run it in the boats or to hand line them through. The choice between running the rapids or rock hoping is not one choice that I need to spend much time determining since one is fun and the other annoying work.

This Davis Rapids had lots of onlookers since the river had “More people than I have ever seen on it due to this being Memorial Day weekend, and most trips we see no one, despite private property on each bank.” This time we scouted it and the canoes went first as they typically did, and they were being lined down by walking behind them. NONE of them made it. They were each swamped and many dumped contents. One boy on the sidelines was a good diver and swimmer and retrieved about everything. We had to reassemble all the canoes, then each of us had a choice to run or walk it. I chose to run, and did the sigmoid curve of the rapids just right but came to the typical rock at the foot of the rapids which I caught sideways and spilled over. But that was no big deal since we cleared the biggest of our rapids and from here on we would meet very narrow parts of the river with

only brush sits in the middle of the bank that had to be known to figure out where to try to get downstream.















Day Two was the hardest of the paddling for both the number of rock hoppings we had to do in shallow rapids, and then in the open water stretches that were gusts of wind strong enough to blow us all the way back unless we kept paddling into the wind. I was ready when we pulled into the island and set up for our two night campsite. This time the first night without the rain fly I knew that both Devin and Jordan were going to sleep out in hammocks. That was until the first clap of thunder and spitting rain. It was going to be a brief shower we had been told, and it was hot enough that for a short time the rain spattering my face as I looked up through the mesh window was cooling, and it was not a short rain. Since it was now too late to put up the rain fly and I just slept wet. We were making plans for a morning climb. To takeoff right after breakfast to a pinnacle peak we had viewed across the river as we approached the island. Before we got to the pull out place, we saw a linear series of caves and a facing on the river big painting of about two thousand years ago with the Pecos Indians having painted in red ochre a Coyote chasing a turkey. I asked about this protected pictograph and

told the story of how the “turkey” got its name along with the country—the vulture headed guinea fowl being called the Ottomans’ “Turk d’ Indie.”

















We needed to wade cross the river and I put on the camp running shoes for their last trip before the soles fell off—just as Jordan’s water shoes had done as well—and we began the climb up the desert rocky slope filled with “Shin Daggers” and ocotillo and prickly pear and a bunch of the rocky limestone ledges, there is no trail so we did some improvising around centipedes and a lot of aoudad droppings. Where the aoudad come to shelter their kids in the caves up at the peak is also where the mountain lions might come to find them, and we saw no evidence of the latter but a lot of evidence of the former.



















We could get sweeping views of the Devils River below us at 1,220 feet as we were up at 1,486 feet. Our meridian is 101*, and 100* is the arbitrary dividing line between Eastern and Western fauna and flora. One of the caves had a loft apartment in it, and it might have been an ideal shelter in the storms.











We climbed back down, taking care not to get impaled on the shin daggers or holding on to the Ocatillo. I recited the rhyme about marsh grasses: “Rushes are round; sedges have edges” as I had tried to grasp some of the bush alongside our “rock hopping” and in one handful I did not closely monitor before grasping it as we swept through some narrow rapids, I discovered SEDGES—which lacerated my fingers. The prickly pear and barrel cactus are scattered among the roller bearing rocks to trip one up and make a landing not pleasant.





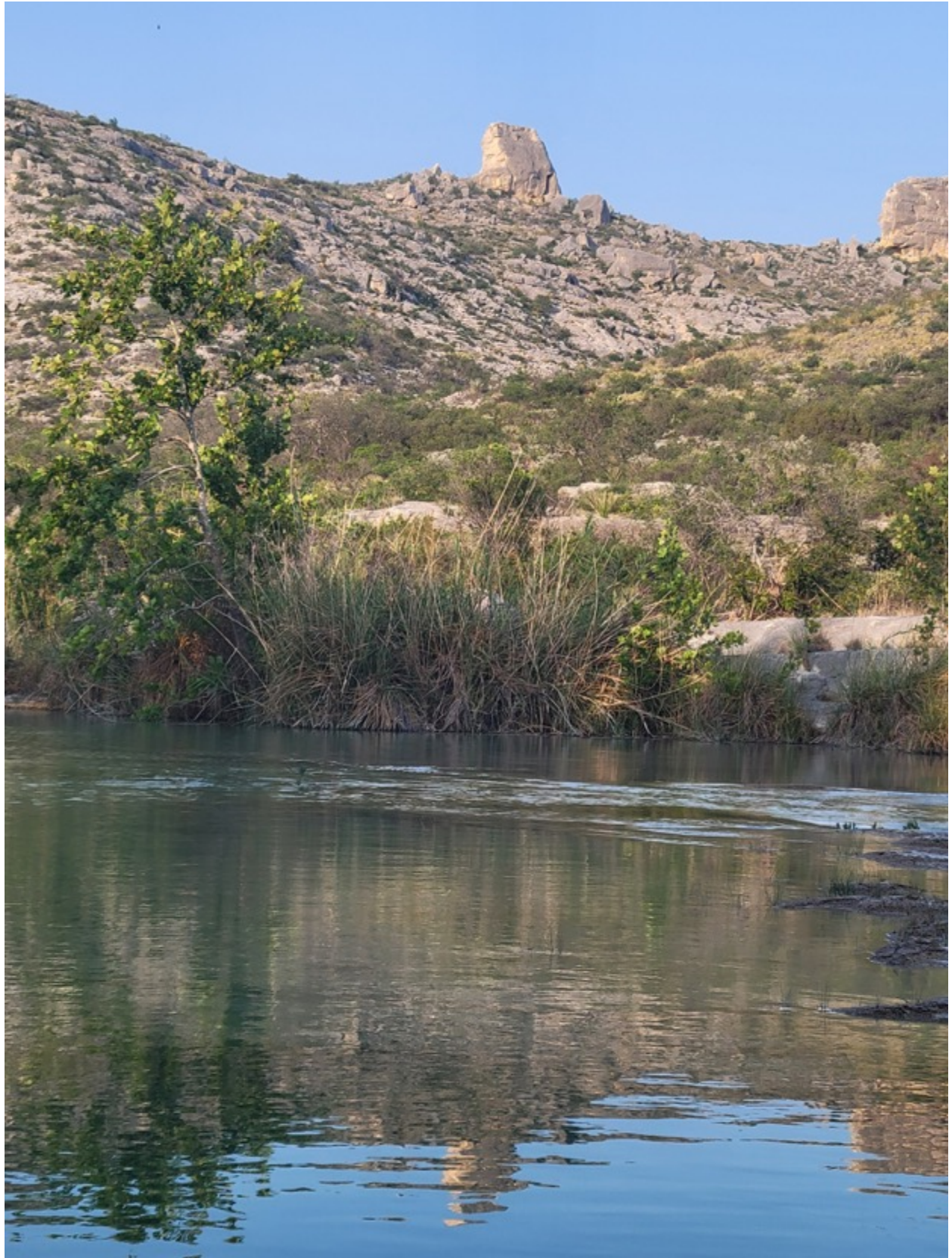


Memorial Day was a very lazy day, and the temperature led to an enervating drowsiness to nap in the folding chairs set out in the limestone shallows next to our kayaks, while almost all of us soaked in the cool river, except for Rowan, who was in it every minute. Michael and I and both Devin and Jordan rigged up the fishing gear and went out to cast a few times in the channels around the island, and Jordan boated a smallmouth bass. I got a hit, but made use of most of my time in circling them and taking photos. I spotted one twenty-incher followed by two sixteen inchers and directed Devin to them, but they eluded our translucent crayfish artificial baits. Jordan pointed out a gar swimming by.













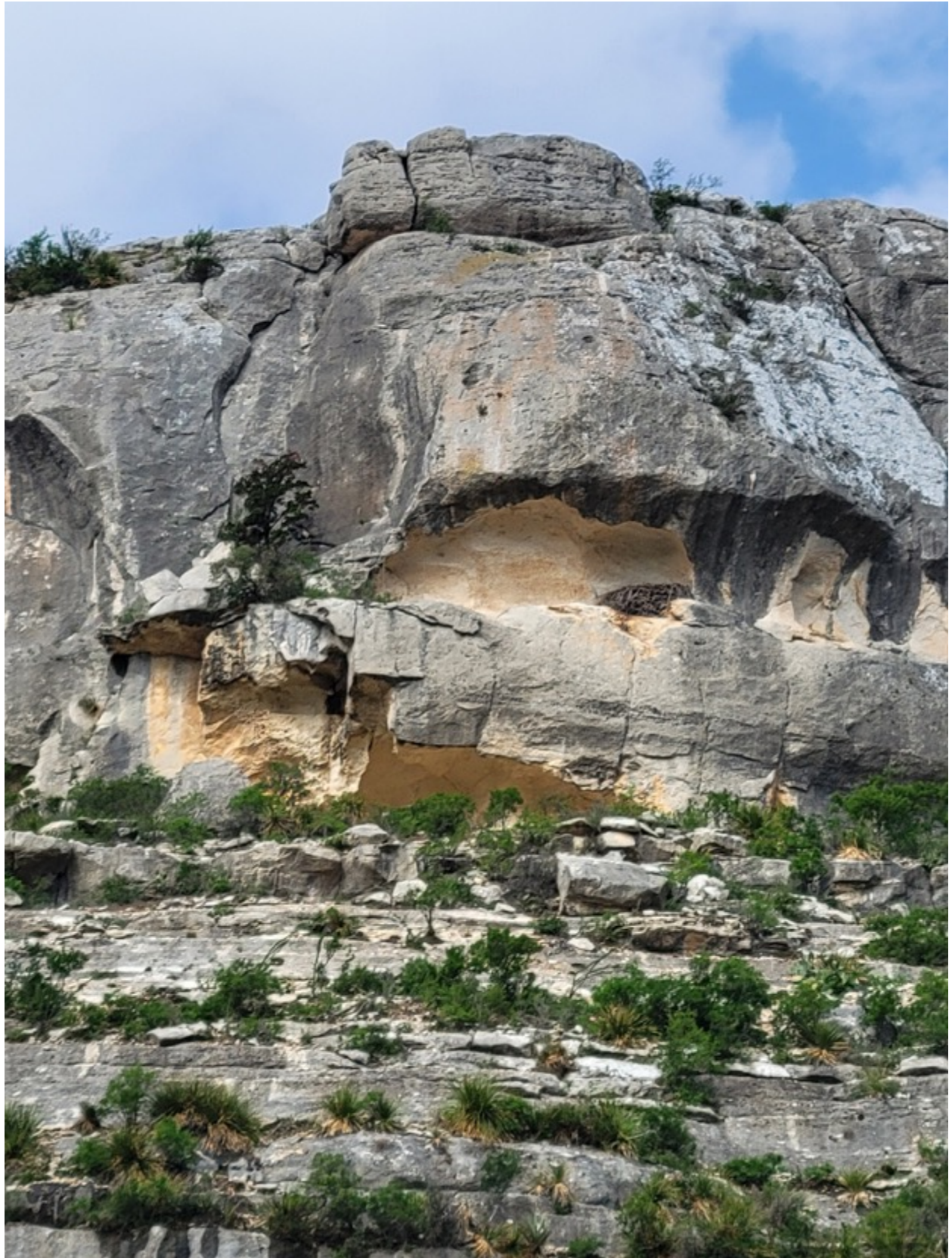
We would have a short trip on the river but better fishing luck and a lazy wait while casting outside the takeout point where we would reload the trailer. Right at this point, there is a cliff with a few ledges and a slightly overhung cave with a large eagle's nest in it. Did we discover it? Well, no, it was noted and described very specifically, the early Spanish explorers noted this same nest---in 1760!



















We hauled out when Charlie Angell had come with the trailer and the van with the A/C repaired. He was pleasantly surprised to see that each of us had pitched in to carry and pack and do other chores and that none of us were expecting to be carried. We posed at the takeout sign, before swapping addresses and photo accesses and promises to try to do another river run as Michael and Charlie discussed seasons and water flows. It is a time to consider the next trip since permits and deposits take a long lead time.









We drove again through the exotic game ranches and I spotted the scimitar-horned oryx. I explained the countercurrent water absorption clearing almost all moisture from their exhalation making oryx so desert-adapted, and Taylor told me that there were moves to eradicate aoudad and oryx since they outcompete the local indigenous species, such as desert bighorns. The aoudad are far more numerous in Texas than they now are in the Barbary Coast of Morocco where they originated. And Scimitar-horned oryx were so threatened in their Arabian peninsula that they were illegal to import to the USA whether dead or alive. But, those alive and breeding in Texas are repopulating the diminishing or extinct populations of these formerly “exotic” megafauna where they once were plentiful and now are gone.

We stopped in a family dining restaurant and got a good lunch from hard-working Tex-Mex Gonzalez family, as the wild and woolly young men had a last unwashed wilderness experience before driving back into San Antonio and getting laundered, showered, shaved and retrieving the lovable loyal Pablo for a walk with me and my grandsons. We had dinner of the freshwater drum fillets from our

December fishing trip as I could show pictures from that event. A good time for all!















As Jordan got back to Austin to go to CBS and Devin got back into his new four day work week of ten hour days with a raise coming up in July 1 the day before their birthday, we watched the Pacers beat the NY Knicks in game four while warnings of big-time thunderstorm, heavy rain and hail are predicted for precisely the 4:00 AM time I am getting up as Micael will drive me through the standing water of an unusual San Antonio downpour to the delayed American Airlines direct flight to DCA while all the SAT ramps are closed due to flooding.