

The Canyon and the Condor

My family and I were tired as we loaded our heavy gear onto the “Hatch River Expeditions” motorized raft. We’d been up late repacking our luggage into waterproof bags of various sizes, since we were going to spend the next week on a commercial rafting trip in the Grand Canyon. My parents, my brother Loren and I had traveled to the Southwest before, and I decided at a young age that it was my favorite part of the country. I liked to imagine the dusty plains scattered with lonely, wandering cowboys instead of concrete highways. I was slightly less excited for this particular trip than others we’d taken, since I would have rather gone horseback riding and I was nervous about falling off the raft.

I was also disappointed to discover that the only young person besides my brother and me on our tour was a shy thirteen-year old girl, accompanied by her parents. There were also two middle-aged women who had come together, a lawyer and his wife, and two other men had joined the group by themselves. Bob, our river guide, and Andy, his helper for the week, had met us all that morning at a restaurant in the middle-of-nowhere, Arizona, and driven us to Lake Mead, our launch point.

Our raft had been waiting for us on the sandy shore of the lake, which was nestled into tall, red hills. The word “HATCH” was printed in bold, black letters on each of the big pontoons attached to the sides of the boat. The main part of the raft was a deep metal rectangle with benches for seating along each side. There was another area attached to

the back of the boat where the steering wheel was located, and a big motor hung off the end. As we were loading everything onto the raft, I had a hard time imagining that the surrounding hills would eventually turn into one of the largest canyons in the world, over a mile deep in some parts.

Once the gear was on the boat, Andy held out his hand and started to help us onto the raft. I felt awkward stepping onto the boat the first time. There wasn't very much room to move with everyone's bags piled in the middle, and the few waves in the lake were rocking the raft from side to side. I climbed carefully to the back and found a seat next to Loren. While we were waiting for everyone else to settle in, it occurred to me how strange it was going to be to spend several hours a day for the next week sitting on the hard, metal benches of the little boat.

Once everyone had found a place to sit, Bob started the engine and wasted no time performing his river guide duties. As we passed through the small lake and entered the Colorado River, he explained what geological history was exposed in the rocks on either side of us. We were passing through Kaibab Limestone, which was formed 250 million years ago in the Paleozoic era. "And keep your eyes peeled for condors," he told us. My parents, both avid birdwatchers, had told Loren and me about the condors before we left for our trip. I was already excited to see one before the week was over. Bob explained more about their history as we floated farther down the river.

Condors are prehistoric scavenging birds who used to feast on mastodon and saber-toothed tiger carcasses. The first time the condor numbers dwindled was in the Pleistocene era around the same time that the big mammals on which they fed were wiped out. The condors managed to survive, and remained in the area from British

Colombia to Baja, California, until modern times. However, due to lead and DDT poisoning, shooting and habitat decline, the total population of California Condors in 1987 consisted of only 22 birds. Around that time, the United States began a condor rescue effort, which entailed capturing all of the wild condors and keeping them in captivity to breed. The birds only lay one egg every year or two, and cannot breed until age six, so rescue efforts have been slow. The first birds we reintroduced to the wild in 1991, and in 2005 there were about 60 wild condors in Arizona, and many of whom made their homes in the Grand Canyon.

I looked up pictures of California Condors online before we left, and they were ugly. They're related to vultures, and the family resemblance is quite strong. Their heads are small and bald, and they have dark brown or black bodies. They can be identified from underneath by triangular white patches on the bottom of each wing. I memorized what the finger-like tips of their nine-foot wingspan looked like, so I could be sure when I had spotted one.

When Loren and I were younger our parents took us on lots of bird watching outings. They tried their hardest to turn us into bird watchers, but we never caught the bug. I was bored a lot of the time, but I also always wanted to be the one to point out something exciting. My dad would reward my finds with an enthusiastic, "Good eye, Ilana!" which fed my little ego. Now that I was older, I still selfishly wanted to be the one to point out the big black shape soaring overhead or perched on the canyon's rim.

At the end of the first day, the red hills had, in fact, turned into a spectacular canyon. We had traveled far back in geologic time and were passing the Supai

Formation, formed 285 million years ago, made of limestone and sandstone. We made one stop in the middle of the day to hike up a side-canyon, but besides the one excursion, we spent the whole time riding the chocolate-milk colored waters, heading for our first campsite.

There aren't many places to stop and camp in the Grand Canyon, since the river is mostly lined with nothing but towering, rocky, orange cliffs on either side. Every so often we would pass small sandy beaches left exposed by the water. At the end of the day, we found our designated sandy campsite, pulled the raft up on shore, and hopped out, hungry for whatever Bob and Andy were making for dinner. After a surprisingly good meal of steak and vegetables, Loren and I set up our tent. It was warm and dry outside, so we pulled our sleeping bags out of the tent and fell asleep watching the stars.

After two days of rafting we had passed through the upper regions and into the lower regions of the canyon, and we were floating past layers formed almost 2,000 million years ago. The highlights of each day were certainly the rapids. Each rapid has a name and a ranking based on the skill level required to guide a boat through. Bob warned us that later in the week we would go down a class five, the most dangerous class that rafts are permitted to go through. Before the larger rapids, Bob would slow down the raft and make sure that he entered the current in the tongue, where the water meets on either side to form a "v" before cascading through the maze of rocks below. When we were hot, we would sit on the pontoons, where there was nothing to protect us from the freezing water. Loren made sure he was sitting on the front of one of the pontoons for each rapid. I was not as nervous as I thought I would be after we had gone through a few

small rapids, and I eventually worked up the courage to join Loren on the pontoons if I was willing to deal with wet clothes for the next couple of hours.

When the water was still, Bob would point out interesting geological formations and tells stories about life as a river guide. I didn't forget to keep scanning overhead for large, prehistoric birds, but I still hadn't seen any of the telltale white triangles. When it was quiet on the raft, I would try to wrap my head around the fact that the mile-high cliffs had been carved out by the river below me over a period of 17 million years. The whole thing was very hard to believe, so I couldn't think about it for too long.

In the middle of the third day, Bob announced that we'd be stopping for lunch at the Red Wall Cave. I didn't know what he was talking about, but I was hungry. We pulled over to the side of the river, Bob stopped the boat, and we climbed out, making our way over several large boulders. Eventually the rocks led to what looked like a small amphitheater carved into the side of the canyon. The floor of the cave was sandy and sloped slightly upwards toward the back. The ceiling was carved into a perfect half dome. It was just as hard to believe that the river had carved out the canyon, as it was to imagine that the same water and wind had carved out this perfect theater. I wondered what wildlife had used the strange cave over the years, and what for.

We sat and ate sandwiches before getting back into the raft and leaving the empty cave behind. After resuming our places in the boat, Loren asked Bob to tell us more about the class five rapid. "It's called Lava Falls, it's the fastest navigable white water in the canyon, and it will make all the other rapids seem like ripples," Bob answered. We wouldn't pass it for another few days, but Bob warned us that before we did, we would have to make sure that everything in the boat was securely strapped down,

and no one was allowed to ride on the pontoons. Naturally, his warnings made me a nervous. If Bob was worried about gear being thrown from the boat during the ride, there was definitely a chance that one of us could fall in too. Even though in the back of my mind I kept imagining myself flying out of the boat and being swallowed up by the white water, I couldn't help but share a little bit of Loren's obvious excitement.

Another few days passed, and we still hadn't spotted a condor. Bob told us that on his last trip they saw two, and I started to get frustrated. At that point, I no longer cared if I was the first one to find the bird or not. Something about the fact that condors had roamed North America with mastodons and saber-toothed tigers made them seem strange and exotic. I started to feel like my Grand Canyon trip wouldn't even have been complete without seeing the rare bird.

On the sixth day of our trip, I forgot about the condors for a while as we prepared to face Lava Falls. Everyone made sure that their belongings were securely attached to the rope that ran down the middle of the raft. Those of us who had been riding on the pontoons moved to the center of the boat. I sat next to my mom and gave her a nervous smile. Far in the distance I could see the brown river broken up by a long stretch of tumbling, white water. As we got closer, I could tell just by the sound that this rapid was much bigger than any we'd passed through before. The loud roar did not calm my nerves, nor did Bob's announcement, "I've been doing this for 40 years, and I still want to piss my pants every time."

I clutched a rope that ran down the middle of the raft tightly with both hands, and we were pulled into the rapid by the rushing water. The first big crash we went through

sent water shooting up on both sides of the boat, most of which landed in the middle of the raft. The water was freezing, and made me even tenser. There is no way to steer in such a big rapid, and the water led us down the river in a jagged path. We came close to hitting big boulders a few times, but at the last minute, the water would pull us away. There was a small stretch of calm water, and I was able to catch my breath for a few seconds before the jolting ride started again. I could see that we were close to the end of the rapid when we hit a giant wave, and I could feel the front of the raft rise far out of the water, and my stomach rise up into my chest. I flew a few inches off of the bench, and I tightened my grip of the rope to keep me from falling out of my seat. After we emerged at the other end, the lawyer turned around and asked Bob jokingly if we could turn around and do it again. It had been very exciting, but I would have needed at least a day to recover before going through a second time.

I moved back to the pontoon and replayed the ride we had just taken in my mind for a long time before remembering that the next day was the end of the tour. I would have to savor every rapid we went through because soon I'd be stuck in a car on my way back to the airport. I'd also have to look harder for condors, since we only had one more day to find them. That night, the air was warm and dry enough that Loren and I didn't bother setting up our tent. We unrolled our sleeping bags under the clearest view of the stars I had ever had. I stared at the tiny, bright specks, and tried to convince myself that in the grand scheme of things, the Grand Canyon was actually very small. This idea was just as hard to grasp as the fact that the whole canyon had been carved out of water, and I eventually forgot about it, rolled over and went to sleep.

The next morning I woke up early, anxious to enjoy our last day on the river. After breakfast, we climbed into the raft one last time and passed through a few rapids that were all disappointing after Lava Falls. One week isn't long enough to make it all the way to the end of the canyon at Lake Mead, so we were going to be picked up by a helicopter in the afternoon. We passed through a medium-sized rapid and Bob announced that that had been the last one of the trip. My heart sunk when I thought of returning to what Bob often referred to as "the real world".

Bob guided the raft to a sandy shore and we unloaded our gear for the last time. The helicopter hadn't come yet, so we found places to settle down and wait. I looked up at the sky but I didn't expect to see any birds. The helicopter came after about half an hour, and we took turns being flown out in groups of four to five to even out the weight. I'd never been in a helicopter before, and I'd also never seen the canyon from above. On our way up, we fast-forwarded through the geological history we'd floated by on the way down. We flew past the 2,000 million year old gray Vishnu Schist, the 545 million year old brown Tapeats Sandstone, and the 335 million year old Redwall Limestone. At the top, I looked around for condors perched on the rim, but the dusty, orange edge of the canyon was bare. I was disappointed but I reminded myself that the chances of seeing one the whole time had been small. Looking down from my condor's-eye-view, I watched the still, calm water until the canyon was out of sight, and all we could see was the very top layer of Kaibab Limestone.