

Trumpeter (1997)
ISSN: 0832-6193
A Day on the Florida

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The mountain summer has been unbearably hot. The heat is ponderous and omnipresent and for the first time in my association with the mountains and woods, I have no desire to walk over or through them. Even above timberline, across the broad swathes of tundra that stretch over the vastness of the San Juan, the sun gleams cruelly down and the wind will not blow. No wind, no mild breezes to refresh and invigorate. The forest is humid and still; the lake basins, besieged by legions of mosquitoes, offer no relief. Emerging from the chill water, I have only a few scant moments before the mosquitoes land again and, even when submerged, I have to endure the irate buzz of their furious expectation. Unwilling to spend another day on fatigue and frustration, I decide to walk a river.

I have camped several times at a place called Transfer Park, a meadow scooped out of the mountains beside the Florida River. The Forest Service maintains campgrounds and picnic facilities at Transfer Park, in part because of the location's beauty but also as a nod to its history. The meadow was once used as a supply depot, a "transfer station" to which supplies and material were brought on wagons, loaded upon mules, and packed up the Florida to Log Town, a logging camp higher in the mountains. Log Town is a pile of decrepit timbers now and idle campers enjoying the pleasant mountain scenery have replaced the seething activity of men working in Transfer Park. Yesterday's toil is today's leisure, I suppose.

Just above Transfer Park, the Florida flows out of its mountain canyon: the walls here are about fifty or sixty feet high, sheer faces of craggy, phthisic rock which level off on both sides to benches of ponderosa and aspen. The river carves a narrow, snaking path; along its course, the walls are often no more than thirty or forty feet apart. Nothing especially startling for slickrock meanders, but this is the closest to a slot canyon that the San Juan can offer. Great, shattered slabs of rock lie hunchbacked in the river, limestone that has spalled off during the freeze-and-thaw cycle of long Colorado winters, growing smoother as the water runs season by season on its way to the sea. These fallen stones are conspicuous among the bands of streaming water, for the gravel bed of the Florida is a panoply of rusts, browns, and charcoal. In the dim light of early morning the water looks black and satiny, reminding me of adulterated mercury running.

But that was this morning. From the bluff where I now stand, the refulgent water beckons, far below me now as I climb further into the mountains. The frigid water of my dawn crossing is far in the distance, and here in the stifling woods I long to be down on the bank, bare feet dangling in the current - the harder I work, the more appealing the river becomes. Even under the sagging boughs of white and Douglas firs, under the branching crowns of ponderosas, I

cannot escape the heat. Why? I ask aloud, to no one, because no one is around. Why is it so hot? This is the San Juan for heaven's sake and there should be gray clouds overhead, an upstart wind stirring the conifers into a frenzy. Sheets of rain descending on the high country, a funeral shroud of mist and vapor rife with portent and dread. Instead, the sun beams down, a candescent silver dollar adrift in - how does it go? - a cerulean blue sky. So I am hot. Tired. And the mosquitoes have found me.

Go on? No, where I am resting is too lovely. I have stumbled upon a pocket meadow, a mere patio of grass, and in one corner a spring is running. The welling pool is inviting, and the country too rough for cows. Although there are two bottles in my pack, I cannot resist the temptation of pure water (one of the many attractions of the San Juan - potable water). I bend to drink. But something, perhaps the light glinting on the surface, causes me to pause, flashes a picture in my mind. Sitting back on my heels, I think for a moment. That's it! Two squat sheepherder's wagons are parked back at the campground; the woollies must be about. I cannot find any evidence of their presence in this meadow, but still...damn. Once again, sheep have flawed the experience. Drinking the bottled water, I feel swindled.

This is not the first time either. Taking in the scene around me, I consider the extremes to which we go in order to deliver those greasy-fleshed buggers to our plates: allowing them to mow the high country meadows down to a mangy stubble, fouling the water courses in the process, and utilizing every nefarious technique available to insure that they will not be disturbed while ravaging the land. Traps and poison, dogs and guns. On the far side of the river, beyond the last ridge before the Weminuche Wilderness, a government hunter runs dogs every spring to clean out the lions from a particular grazing allotment. Word has it that he shoots whatever he can. Coyotes, bobcats. The black bears treed by his hounds. And more lions than he should, extending his field of slaughter beyond the bounds of the specific allotment. Killing the people's wildlife with the people's dollars; efficient government working for you and your family.

This frontier-style machismo has been going on for too long in America; with our last frontiers finally closed, perverted and misdirected blood sport is forced to retreat to the confines of government sponsorship and condolence. The government-funded hunter, destroying wildlife for private interests, is one of many exploitative and ruinous activities that occur on our public lands. For all of our country's ambitious endorsement of free enterprise and the Darwinian system of the open market, the Feds do a fine job of providing life support to antiquated trades and industries of the past: the open range rancher, the logger, the miner, the trapper. Advocates for these trades will say America needs the products they produce: the beef, the timber, the minerals, the furs. Where would we be without them? This is nonsense, of course; most of our beef and our timber is produced on private lands in states such as Missouri, Alabama, Mississippi, and Florida, and not in Montana, Colorado, Utah, or Arizona. It is

not profitable, either in dollars or production, to have a two or three man placer operation laboring away on some backwoods creek, struggling with hydraulic equipment to uncover a few ounces of gold. For the last item, I will only ask, What do you need fur for?

The United States Government manages to keep these industries alive and well, however, instead of relegating them to the same museum where we they sent the bison herds and other relics of the American West's frontier era. This is done by auctioning off public land holdings to private bidders, usually below market cost: grazing leases, timber sales, mining claims, all can be had at bargain basement prices (mining claims are filed under a law penned in 1872!). No one is held responsible for the damage inflicted on public lands as a result of this grievous, contrary process and opponents are often left wondering how special interests, and their minority constituencies, continue to wield such undue influence in our country.

All of this is an entirely different can of worms; right now I am just pissed off about the predator control. My anger is not directed at the activity so much as the characters the government unearths to do this dirty job. To shoot coyotes from helicopters, brain the pups hauled from the den, or scatter poison across the landscape, eliminating countless "non-target" species in the process? To set leghold traps with no intention of running the trapline on a regular interval, thus leaving the unfortunate animal to die a tedious, miserable death? A pathetic occupation, its continuing existence is a shameful testament to the profligate greed and inanity that motivates a "dying breed" of people.

Such has been the way of things in the San Juan. Predator control has run rampant here for decades, killing with impunity, slaying everything equipped with canines. After years of carnage, principally to benefit the sheep industry, black bears remain rare on the east side of the Continental Divide in the San Juan; rare in some of the best bear habitat in the lower forty-eight states. Grizzlies are most likely extinct, just as they are in the rest of the southwestern states. Lions and bears are not the only ones to suffer at the hands of federal exterminators. Wolves were extirpated. Coyotes, although still abused annually, persist, perhaps laughing at man's frenzied crusade against them. In the war against these five species, one can only guess at what collateral damage was, is, and will be inflicted on others: badgers, martens, bobcats, eagles. A long list to be sure.

Resting in this mountainous place, sobered by the litany of persecution, I cannot help but long for the abundance of life that once flourished here. Or maybe it only seems abundant in hindsight, confronted as I am with such paucity. I have never seen a wolf, or a badger, or a bobcat. Or a lion for that matter. These were once a common sight to certain men, if only as hides tacked out to cure in the sun. Grim deeds, I think, committed by men who were probably rather unreflective about their tasks, but grim nonetheless. And today is a day of sunshine and light, not darkness lingering from the actions man has

perpetrated in this country. Time to move on.

After a while, the level plateau that I am walking upon finally dissipates, rising up into a mountain on my right and dropping off into a bend of the river on the left. Longing for a swim, I descend.

The way is tangled and steep, the micro-climate of the river bottom supporting big Douglas firs and the jumbled foliation of ferns and berry bushes. Decades of trees have grown and fallen here, and I trip over decaying stumps and deadfall, barely retaining my balance with timely handholds. I am moving into a deep-shaded realm, a camouflaged littoral of blacks and muted greens, stippled and hidden under the eaves of the living trees.

Stopping about ten feet shy of the plangent river, I crane my neck to see into the water. Good for trout, quick running and full of holes, shady spots along both banks. The water is too rough to see any fish, however, roiling around time-slick boulders and spitting over old timber lying in the stream. From Log Town? I wonder. There is a decent stretch of bank to the right, trees growing up under the shelter of the mountain. I make for it.

Choked with toppled trees and with the flotsam and jetsam left by receding high water, the path that I have chosen throws me into a fit of curses, muttered oaths that does not rise over the sound of the river. Pulling myself carefully over logs, I am also glancing upstream, for the bend of the river hides deep water. The surface is near flawless, occasionally rippled by the hard, swift current. Stopping behind a regal fir, I peak about in anticipation.

Three pennants appear, waving, slender shapes fluttering in the endless flow, limned in black against the lighter gravel bottom. Fluid as the current that sustains them. I cannot distinguish the species; at ten or eleven inches, they could be rainbows or brookies. Or cutthroat. They are deeper than I first thought, maybe three feet down in what looks to be a four foot pool. A big pool, too, I could drive a Cadillac into it and not be cramped for space. And only the three trout. Should there be more? It is hard to say - perhaps they are tucked under the bank, or in the downstream side of that fat log across the way.

Swimming is the goal here, so I put piscine musings aside and examine the water for snags and other obstacles. Looks good, great in fact; the pool is out of a dream or vision, a storybook swimming hole where silver-flashed lovers turn under the moonlight. Where bears come to raze the dust from their funky pelts. No sun though. The bend is too severe, undercutting an eroded hillock directly above me, and is cast entirely in shade. And there are the trout to consider. I move downstream and select two pools, still water actually, removed from the rapids by two or three massive rounds of stone. I disrobe and enter the river.

God damn! I think. And then yell: a good, hearty, bellowing God damn this

freezing fucking water! Holy shit! Concentrated effort keeps me submerged to the earlobes and the invective gradually tapers off. After a few moments I calm down. My heartbeat has slowed dramatically, slowed to an audible, heavy thump and throb. Is this safe? I imagine myself blue and belly up, moving gradually down toward the campground. Do I care? No. The complete lack of sensation that I am experiencing (Am I? How can I be experiencing anything? After all, I am completely numb) is quite pleasing and rather exciting. Placing two fingers to my neck while raising my watch from the depths, I see that my pulse has slowed into the low forties. My body is maintaining core temperature, insuring that heart, lungs, and like organs are kept operational, writing off limbs and extremities. Beyond my control, the brain has taken over, willing to sacrifice hands and feet so that it, the brain, may survive. Thrilling, elemental drama. But chattering teeth are a bit much, and I like my feet (would not be here without them), so I clamber onto one of the boulders, naked, slick, and happy as a seal.

Warming and content under the sun, beguiled by the run of water around me, I try to imagine a riverine life that I much envy: the otter's. The otter is the most gregarious member of the mustelid family, a marked contrast to the ferocious weasel and mink or the downright unfriendly wolverine (another fabled beast rumored to reside in the San Juan). How delightful it must be to cruise smoothly through the currents and pools or to haul out on a bank or stone at a whim. Or expend day after day playing with your cohorts and catching fish, with no worries to pursue and detain or delay your experiences. Above all else, though, I admire the aquiline grace of the creature, the way its design has been so carefully sculpted by its home element, streamlined in the same fashion as the rock that I rest on. An aquatic mammal, a creature at home in the one element most foreign and dangerous to us.

Once fairly common in these rivers, otters were trapped out of the San Juan. The Colorado Division of Wildlife is struggling to re-establish these frisky mammals; they have been released in the upper Piedra east of here and also in the lower San Juan. I had the good fortune to spot one earlier in the summer: barreling along the East Fork of the San Juan after twilight, I nearly ran one down in the road. The otter had come up the embankment of a tributary and was making for the main channel. I pulled up short in a cloud of road dust and squealing rubber, and in the last light of day pushed my head out the window. The otter sat on the curb of the road, craning its head to examine the source of all the disturbing clatter, blinking black marble eyes at the dust kicked up by the skidding truck. Perhaps it was a little stunned, or simply inquisitive. Then it turned and dove underwater. That otter was further upstream than the release points; it may have been a juvenile out on a lark, stretching the bounds of its new found freedom. Or maybe it was an adult, insuring that it staked out unclaimed territory (otters have been known to make tramontane journeys, forsaking travel by water, driven by what unknown exploratory impulses). Whatever the case, plenty of room exists for otters in the San Juan,

plenty of healthy riparian areas, plenty of fish (they do not concentrate on gamefish such as trout and so unlike other predators cannot be said to compete with humans), and plenty of backcountry waterways where these curious and cautious creatures can go about their lives. Good luck I say.

Once again, the sun feels fine. It is not that insane white eye bearing down on me as it has for the last two months of summer, but rather the pleasant smiling face from childhood, a benign visage ringed with a collar of yellow flannel triangles. A presence whose thermal output welded youthful days into a seamless chain that stretches from the far marches of memory into the present moment, each link fused by experience and adventure and discovery. The sun heats, the water cools - I am but a poor medium for these changes. But a joyful one regardless. And so, alone here in the wilderness, I doze.

Voices waken me. Is it only the water stirring, the restless purl of the stream's downhill racing? Or the ghosts in my head, shaking the dry husks of their frames? I have not seen anyone the entire day but, truth be told, I have heard voices along my walk, voices rising faint and disembodied among the high-held tree limbs, under the cliff walls, falling gently from the sky. Where are they coming from?

Feeling vulnerable, I roll off the rock and swim to shore. Donning my shorts, I listen. Not spirits these voices, but real people, moving downstream toward me. Even with the running water I can hear them clearly, aided by the water's reflective surface and the close-walled sides of the canyon. At least two voices, perhaps more below them. So much for solitude.

At last they come into view, three, four fisherman wading in the river. They are kids actually, eighteen or nineteen, trying the assortment of pools that abound on the Florida. They see me and I wave.

Hey there. No answer at first, then they acknowledge me with a nod. Any luck? Probably not, I think. With spin reels and spoons they are outfitted for smallmouth bass, not trout. Texans, I imagine. I watch their modus operandi: surround a likely hole and fire away. Thup, thup, thup, the silver shards enter the water like buffed riverrocks, scaring the trout. Only a monster rainbow could handle those lures and only if their shadows did not scare the trout first. At least they are fishing upstream.

Hey, I say. Up ahead is a nice hole. If you fish it from the shore you might catch some.

They watch me from under heavy brows. They don't look like the kind that accepts advice, especially from a half-naked stranger. Oh well. I watch them pass, sloshing forward, launching those ridiculous spoons into every nook and cranny of the river. They proceed toward the emerald pool upstream, gradually disappearing beyond the bend, their voices growing softer. There goes paradise,

I think. At least for a little bit.

I return to my basking rock. I had believed myself to be alone on the river, a sole sojourner taking in a slice of water, tree, rock, and sky. The elements that not only give life, but make life worth living. To be present before these vast simplicities is nothing if not soothing. Relaxing. Therapeutic, some say. And when alone, I am more able to contemplate these simplicities, and life, and my own life. But why must I be alone? Can I not think among the company of men? Do I need to be isolated in a wilderness to allow my mental powers free rein?

Aristotle was a city dweller. So too Descartes, Hume, Kant, and Hegel. Sartre. Yes, briefly viewed, Western philosophy appears to be a concern that afflicts city life. But what of John the Baptist's hiatus in the desert? Or Jesus being tempted by Satan (a mental demon?) in the wilderness? Or Thoreau, even though real wilderness at times unsettled him? And finally, consider the American West's half-hearted metaphysician Abbey. America is a bit thin with regards to world class philosophers; besides, the pragmatists, we have had to depend on philosophical writers to enlighten us. The best of these, Cooper, Wolfe, Faulkner, Hemingway, and McCarthy, have had a fine understanding of the way that open country shapes the solitary mind. In environments by turn hospitable and hostile, fictional Americans have tested the merits of civilization's ideas and customs, laboring among the primeval forces that shape both landscape and soul. Whether it be Faulkner's prophetic story *The Bear*, or La Longue Carabine conjecturing about the evil in men's heart in the upper Hudson Valley, or Ike McCaslin arguing about Keats with his cousin, or even Billy Parham confronting the fundamental questions of existence while adrift in the sticks of Mexico, all have struggled with these problems against a backdrop of wilderness. And while Hemingway's real-life exploits in the wilderness were extreme - the trophy hunting, the sport fishing - we may find in his cosmopolitan city existence a reason for this. Letting off steam, I think.

Americans have been fortunate in this regard. Continental Europeans long ago destroyed the last of their wilderness, leaving only their fellow men to converse with, while Americans continue to have, albeit in a greatly reduced state, wilderness with which to establish a discourse. To rant and rave in a grove of pines, to debate with a free-flowing stream; these are not merely pursuits for the hedonistic or soft-brained. If Americans have always depended on trying European ideals upon our unique landscapes, what do we do when those landscapes are irreparably marred or ruined? How can we improve civilization if nothing exists to which civilization can be compared? Wilderness provides a counter-measure against the extremes that civilization might foster, a last repository to which we can return again and again to see where we originated.

There is a value to setting oneself against the elements (remember Demosthenes raging at the sea to better his oratory powers or Odysseus wandering upon his raft) and this value is only heightened when one goes it alone. Like a cleansing

tonic, we should always have places available where city dwellers, or country folk, can lose themselves. What better way to explore the inner reaches of mind, body, and spirit than through trial and toil in the outer reaches, where everything, including what might be best left alone, rises to the surface. The backcountry is not a place for escape, but a place for emergence: your true face lies waiting to stare back at you, from a wind-ragged glacial pool high in the mountains, in the middle of a storm that boils with all the anger of the world. Find it.

The fisherman are gone now, leaving nothing in their wake. No tracks in the river, no stone that, although turned, will be noticed or missed. By now trout have returned, rimpled noses poised upstream while waiting for waterborne sustenance. Peace has once more fallen upon the Florida. But the day will not last forever, save in my mind, and even that is a doomed receptacle. I have five miles, roughly speaking, of river to walk. And although I could easily climb back onto the bench in the event of a storm or other mishap, the aim of this exercise is to descend a river by walking, swimming, and any other means that contingencies dictate. So on with the sandals and bathing trunks. Everything else goes into my backpack, which I have lined with a plastic garbage bag, including my boots, heavy, cumbersome, and huge (13 1/2) though they are. Sunglasses in place, I am on my way.

I encounter easier walking than I had expected. The river is low; although the San Juan received its usual complement of snow (a lot!), the dog days of July and August burned it up quickly, leaving me with a streamflow that rarely eclipses my knee. Wading along, I am free to inspect the country, occasionally stop and scan the sky for raptors, and generally enjoy what could have been a hot, dreary hike through familiar woods. And when the spirit moves me and the water is deep enough, I dive in.

I watch for non-human company, but being on foot at two in the afternoon is not the best for viewing wildlife. I do see a mule deer with fawn and a few odd red squirrels, but besides that, I have nothing to share the river with besides trout. They are everywhere: their shadows race downstream upon the cobbled riverbed, or skate past my ankles and take a chance upstream. Every ripple, every hole, every pool and shallow, is alive with those fleeting sparkles of bronze and silver. One cuts across a gravel bar directly before me, tilting on the rocks to expose a finned and speckled side. Then it is gone, like a spark in the wind. My rod, I think, why is it back in my truck? Why I am standing midstream on an August day, surrounded by the trout nation, with nothing to wave at them save by hands? "Fool!" I say aloud.

Walking further, I come to a peculiar formation. On the right side of the river the canyon wall has collapsed. But not the entire wall; for whatever reason, a large portion of rock has slid off the underside of the cliff, leaving a curved recess - an amphitheater of sorts, although a small one. Wading through the rubble, I move under the arch; there is about two spare inches when I stand under the

apex. The water under the vault, isolated by the embankment of shedded stone, is murky and still, lightly filmed with dust and leaves. In the corner a trout is floating, bloated and lightly furred with mold. The water moves catoptrically on the ceiling, short ribbons of electricity that wink and wend on the cool stone. A few lamina cascade into the pool when I pass my hand over the surface.

I move back into the sunlight. Seems a shame to relegate this pool to the status of stagnant backwater, a breeding ground for fat, lazy mosquitoes. Spring floods will surely flush it out, but what about the rest of the summer? Decaying trout, algae growth, mosquito larvae, who wants that? I take off my pack and go to work.

I do not know what kind of rock I am handling, but it is damn sharp (and damn heavy). My hands quickly become a network of cuts and scrapes, but I am able to move enough rock and allow the river to flow into the pool. Gradually, the river should raise the watermark and the pool will have a little more vitality to it (this is the plan anyhow). The cleansing torrent of next spring will scour out all the filth and muck, and some semblance of circulation should keep the pool fresh. Trout will go in and out at their whim and, I hope, eat the mosquito larvae. (This is only fair. Imagine how decrepit mosquitoes would be if we allowed them to develop without the guiding hand of trout predation. They would be inefficient, sickly.) When I return next summer, I will have a fine spot to rest by, a little hollow that will provide shade and reverberate my amateurish whistling. Why, I might even sing a little song to commemorate the moment. Ah, man sculpting nature to please the soul or to reflect the soul's inner, immortal beauty; what a noble and worthy endeavor. My only regret is that Jane Austen is not here to enjoy the moment with me.

Onward, and no more streamside construction projects. I am making good time and in another twenty minutes I come upon the motherlode. My paradise pool was, is, shall ever be a stunning, fetching spot, but this...my most delirious expectations would not have prepared me. A bald panel of rock rises on the right hand shore, clean and devoid of lasting impression as the water that I stand in. Beneath lies a deepwater pool, the water nearly expressionless as it exhausts itself in the streambed's depths. The pool would be a dusky jade, as the previous one, save for its depth and the shadow cast by the wall in this waspwaist of the canyon. So it is nearly black, and graced only with a stripped log emerging from the water at a forty-five degree angle and leaning into the rock, stretching across the water like a gangway. Under the shelter, I count twelve trout.

To hell with them! my mind shouts. The pool is theirs, certainly; they can have it back when I am finished. I slip off pack and sandals on a dry wash of smooth stone and then submerge.

Frigid, chilling to the marrow of every bone. Simply: cold. The sensation is heightened by the sunburn that I have acquired after walking on a liquid mirror

and laboring under the sun to clear out the pool, but it is awesome nevertheless. I am giddy, a strange vertigo overwhelming me and loosening the tension in my tired muscles. I swim to the head of the pool and allow the invisible current to tow me downstream. I swim back. After six or seven passes, I swim under the snag and reach out a hand. I find a worn stub from which a branch once grew, then another, and hoist myself up. In the keep of my chest, my heart is pounding from exertion, and so I hang there, feeling the river's tug, my legs stretching out and away from me. I release my hold and swim to shore.

The water peels off my skin, creating dark buttons on the sandy bank. I hug my knees to my chest and close my eyes, listening to the sound of the river. Or the sounds of the river. I try to pick up each contributing harmony, rhythm, and cadence; the slap of water on the canyon wall, the ripple as it washes upon the bank, the steady rush of it downstream. In college, I had to analyze Bach's *St. Matthew's Passion*, note after note after note. In so doing, I learned how to focus on the music, to pick up the counter-melody being played by two violins, to hear the gentle shift of the orchestra into the minor key. This same skill proves useful in the woods, as I am often confronted with a vast field of sounds: the wind among the trees, the boughs creaking dryly, the chatter of falling rock. Birds hidden in the undulating willows, the endless play of water upon rock and root. These are subtle differences to be sure, but the human ear, tied as it is to the animal, can learn to sort them out and attribute them to their right makers. We are a product of a diverse environment, if not this one along the Florida. With practice and time we learn, and the breaking crash of an elk in the trees is not confused with a mule deer's prancing run. Old secrets, these skills that we harbor within us. Old and rusty, but potent, needing only to be honed on the rough wheel of the wild world, in open country, to be keen again. Try their temper.

After a final swim, I rise and don my pack. The sun has passed over the canyon and the water now lies half in darkness. The river moves around a bend downstream, and I cannot see what is ahead. I look into the pool. A few trout have returned, five or six, joined in communal sway, hypnotized by the relentless motion of water. The sand about my feet is dry, the water rolls on. The trout drift in aquatic stasis. What lies behind me this day is gone. The woods, the pools, I have not been there. Only now exists, the water disappearing from my arms, the river brushing upon the beach of gravel and sand. I continue on my way.

Citation Format

Kroll, Andrew J. (1997) *A Day on the Florida Trumpeter*: 14, 3.
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