Life in the Valley

sanews@salem.gannett.com

PHOTOS COURTESY OF GEORGE NUCKOLS/CREATURE CRAFTS

Boaters take a Creature Craft on a wild ride down the North Fork of the Smith River in northwest California.

Crafting a new kind of creature

Controversial boat makes whitewater more accessible, but some worry about safety

ZACH URNESS
STATESMAN JOURNAL

GASQUET, CALIF. It's been raining for almost a week here on California's northwest coast, and the Middle Fork Smith River has transformed into a raging, swirling, terrifying torrent of whitewater.

Even the craziest kayakers and rafters would have a difficult time convincing themselves to run the river's Class V rapids at this level, and there isn't enough whiskey in all the land to get me to consider it.

But as I look upstream, through a sheet of driving rain, something appears on the river that I've heard about but never actually seen in person.

Two neon-colored boats shaped like gigantic triangles bounce down the rapids and into a black-walled gorge, tipping and twisting as though riding ocean swells.

The person on the oars of the first boat is Aaron Babcock, who during the past two years has earned a reputation for running high-water rivers in the oddly shaped boats known as "Creature Crafts."

Action stage on the Illinois River? Sure.

High water on Chile's Baker and Futaleufu rivers? Hey, why not?

This type of behavior might be expected from an amped-up 20-something with Red Bull in his veins. But Babcock isn't one of those guys. He's a mellow, almost quiet, 37-year-old from Banks whose day job is leading trail maintenance crews in Southern Oregon forests.

Yet here he is, running titanic whitewater normally reserved for extreme athletes.

What makes it possible are the Creature Crafts.

"The Creature Craft allows me to run water that I wouldn't feel comfortable with in a raft," said Babcock, a longtime oarsman, who lives in Williams.

The added level of comfort comes from the Creature's unique design feature — an overhead brace or roll cage — that stops the boat from flipping upside down.

"In a raft, if you get flipped, the boat goes completely upside down and everybody falls out. You have to get out and re-flip it, which is sometimes impossible," Babcock said. "In a Creature, you're strapped into your seat and you tip over on your side but don't fall out. There's a technique to rolling it back up. It just allows you to stay in the boat and not swim."

Creature Crafts have faced plenty of scrutiny in the whitewater community. Some feel they give boaters a false sense of security, inspiring people to run rivers too dangerous or above their skill level.

But Creature inventor Darren Vancil said the boats are just the next in a long evolution, from canoes to kayaks to rafts and stand-up paddleboards.

"This is a safer boat — there's no argument," Vancil said. "Nobody has fun when they're scared to death."

What makes Creatures so attractive — and controversial — is that it allows people without elite skill to run Class V rivers.

"If you took a straight beginner, handed them a boat and turned them loose on huge whitewater, obviously that's not smart or what we're about," Vancil said. "But the reality is that most people don't have the time or inclination to build their skill over the 10 years required to run really big water. Creature Crafts get you there a lot sooner, and a lot more safely."

An outsider that changed the game

On the surface, Vancil is not a likely candidate to engineer a whitewater revolution.

He didn't grow up on rivers or whitewater but instead focused his energy on wrestling, a sport that took him to Colorado Mesa University in Grand Junction.

After graduating, Vancil started running rivers with almost reckless abandon. The toughness built up during decades of training served him well, as he was often knocked out of boats he'd built himself.

"Coming from a non-traditional river background, and not knowing anybody, I just started boating — I expected to flip and swim a lot," he said. "I probably swam over 100 times in those first years."

One day, his luck ran out. In 1997, he ran Gore Canyon's Class V rapids in a 9-foot boat he'd built himself.

"We ended up swimming every major rapid, then we got stuck in a toilet bowl, and I really got hurt," he said. "I needed two shoulder surgeries."

Instead of being scared off the river, Vancil used the time off to brainstorm designs for a new style of boat that wouldn't flip as easily.

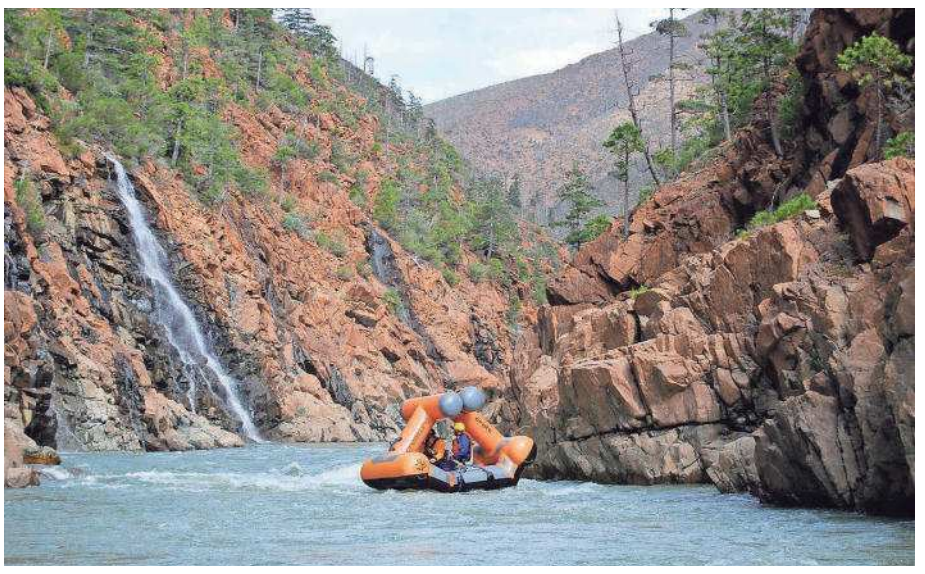
"I would wake up at night with an idea, then we'd go to the shop and see how it worked," he said. "I still wanted to run big whitewater, but I didn't want to go to the hospital again."

Like a mad scientist in his lab, Vancil used the discarded pieces of old boats to piece together his Frankenstein. The models were created and tested — ideas kept and tossed aside — until he developed something that resembles the current Creature Craft.

The first prototype was finished in 1998, and he started using the boats to run rivers in 1999.

Early on, the whitewater community did not embrace the bizarre-looking boats suddenly showing up on iconic rivers.

"We'd get to the put-in, and people would literally try to block us from getting on the river," he said. "People were beyond rude and disrespectful.



Boaters take a Creature Craft on a wild ride down the North Fork of the Smith River in northwest California.

"Again, I was an outsider, I didn't really speak the lingo, so these guys who've been kayaking for 10 years probably thought, 'What a bunch of dumbasses.' "

The boats have slowly gained a level of acceptance in the whitewater community — and even more respect from the rescue community, which uses them for ocean-rescue scenarios.

Vancil builds every boat himself — they cost about $5,000 to start and require another $2,000 or so for oars, frame and other equipment. For each purchase, he's taken pains to instruct everybody who buys one on how to best use it.

Even so, there's a weariness in the whitewater community about what the Creatures make possible.

"I understand the desire to push the limits — I've been there myself," said Will Volpert, who's been a raft guide his entire life and owns Indigo Creek Outfitters in Ashland. "The problem with the Creature Craft crowd is there is an obvious lack of basic safety standards practiced, probably because there aren't typically swimmers. However, when something does go wrong, it could go very wrong if we're not watching each other's backs.

"The Creature Craft is not going away, but it's important for people to learn lessons — hopefully without killing themselves or others — and to raise concerns about obvious incidences of terrible judgement."

No whiskey required

Turns out, it didn't take any whiskey to convince me to take a ride down the Smith River's Class V rapids.

All it took was watching the Creature Crafts arrive at the end of the first run in one piece.

On the next trip through the river's gorge, I jumped into the passenger seat of Babcock's Creature Craft, which is 12 feet and 8 inches long. It had enough space for two people and a decent amount of gear for an overnight trip. Behind us, Kelsey Lofdahl followed in a Creature that was 10 feet, 8 inches.

"They're a lot easier to maneuver than you'd expect," Lofdahl said.

The last thing I did was buckle a long Velcro seat belt that keeps you attached to the seat.

"Even if it gets bad — we get stuck in a hole or something — don't pull off your seatbelt," Babcock said. "Stay in the boat. That's the safest place to be."

The river heaved and boiled and sprinted as we entered the gorge. We dropped below waves that seemed to rise above the boat and crashed down into boiling holes. The experience was of being on a wet roller coaster, except that the roller coaster occasionally stops on the top of hills to twist and gyrate before finally dropping down the other side.

The scariest moment was arriving at the lip of the Oregon Hole — the gorge's biggest rapid — and seeing the foaming mouth of hole sure to eat alive anything that entered.

"We really don't want to be over there," Babcock said.

He kept to his word, weaving just left of the monster.

At the bottom of the worst rapids, on the final wave — and maybe just for fun — Babcock entered the rapid off-kilter, causing the Creature to be knocked on its side.

It's a strange feeling to be floating down the river horizontal, but after a few attempts, we managed to flip the boat back upward.

Overall, the most surprising thing about a trip in the Creature Crafts was that even in the huge whitewater, it wasn't really scary.

Being surrounded by all that material — almost as though you're in one of those hamster balls — does create an illusion of safety, for good or ill.

Zach Urness has been an outdoors writer, photographer and videographer in Oregon for eight years. He is the author of the book "Hiking Southern Oregon" and can be reached at zurness@StatesmanJournal.com or (503) 399-6801. Find him on Twitter at @ZachsORoutdoors.