

# THE MIGHTY COLORADO...

*IT'S NOT WHAT YOU'RE THINKING*

A PORTFOLIO BY BILL HATCHER  
TEXT BY TYLER WILLIAMS

MENTION THE COLORADO RIVER TO MOST PEOPLE, AND THEY'LL CONJURE IMAGES OF WHITEWATER RAFTERS SLICING THROUGH LAVA FALLS. IT'S ONE OF THE WORLD'S GREAT RIVERS. LESS FAMOUS, BUT ALSO IMPRESSIVE, IS THE LITTLE COLORADO RIVER, WHICH RUNS FOR 338 MILES FROM A SMALL SPRING NEAR GREER TO ITS SCENIC CONFLUENCE WITH THE LARGER COLORADO IN THE DEPTHS OF THE GRAND CANYON.

The light-blue water of the Little Colorado River meets the Colorado River near the eastern boundary of Grand Canyon National Park. Photographer Bill Hatcher made this photo at Cape Solitude, which overlooks the confluence from the south. "It's considered one of the most spectacular viewpoints in the Grand Canyon, for obvious reasons," Hatcher says.

The rapids sent us sluicing through boulders into a blur of action and reaction. Water plunged and recoiled into white curlers as photographer Bill Hatcher and I steered our little boats through the tumbling maze. It was hard to believe that we were actually paddling such a river. Just the night before, we'd camped along a dry riverbed a stone's throw upstream. But here it was — clear and deep, and demanding our full attention.

The water came from a natural wonder called Blue Spring. With a flow of more than 90 cubic feet per second, it is the largest spring in Northern Arizona, but hydrologists have yet to identify the water's origins. It boiled up from magical depths beneath a gray cliff of limestone, offering a bit of Caribbean splendor to the surrounding brown canyon country. Following the improbable stream through the rapids and deeper into the gorge, we drifted, surrounded by rock, on a river of turquoise.

Such an incongruous match of elements is natural for Arizona, the land of contrasts. The Little Colorado River links verdant, spruce-lined meadows in its upper reaches with sand-blown deserts downstream, carving a single, winding path across the northeast quadrant of the state. This is one of the most unique rivers anywhere. Its drainage basin covers an area the size of South Carolina, yet its channel is normally dry. Still, it can sometimes flood into a red-hued monster larger than the

"Big" Colorado, into which it empties.

As a paddler, I've tracked these random floods with great anticipation as they roll downstream, only to be disappointed when I arrive with my boat to find a dry riverbed, the water completely absorbed by thirsty sands upstream. Summertime flash floods like this come from thunderstorms falling upon the innumerable washes of the Painted Desert. In springtime, Little Colorado water comes from another source: clear snowmelt off the Mogollon Rim.

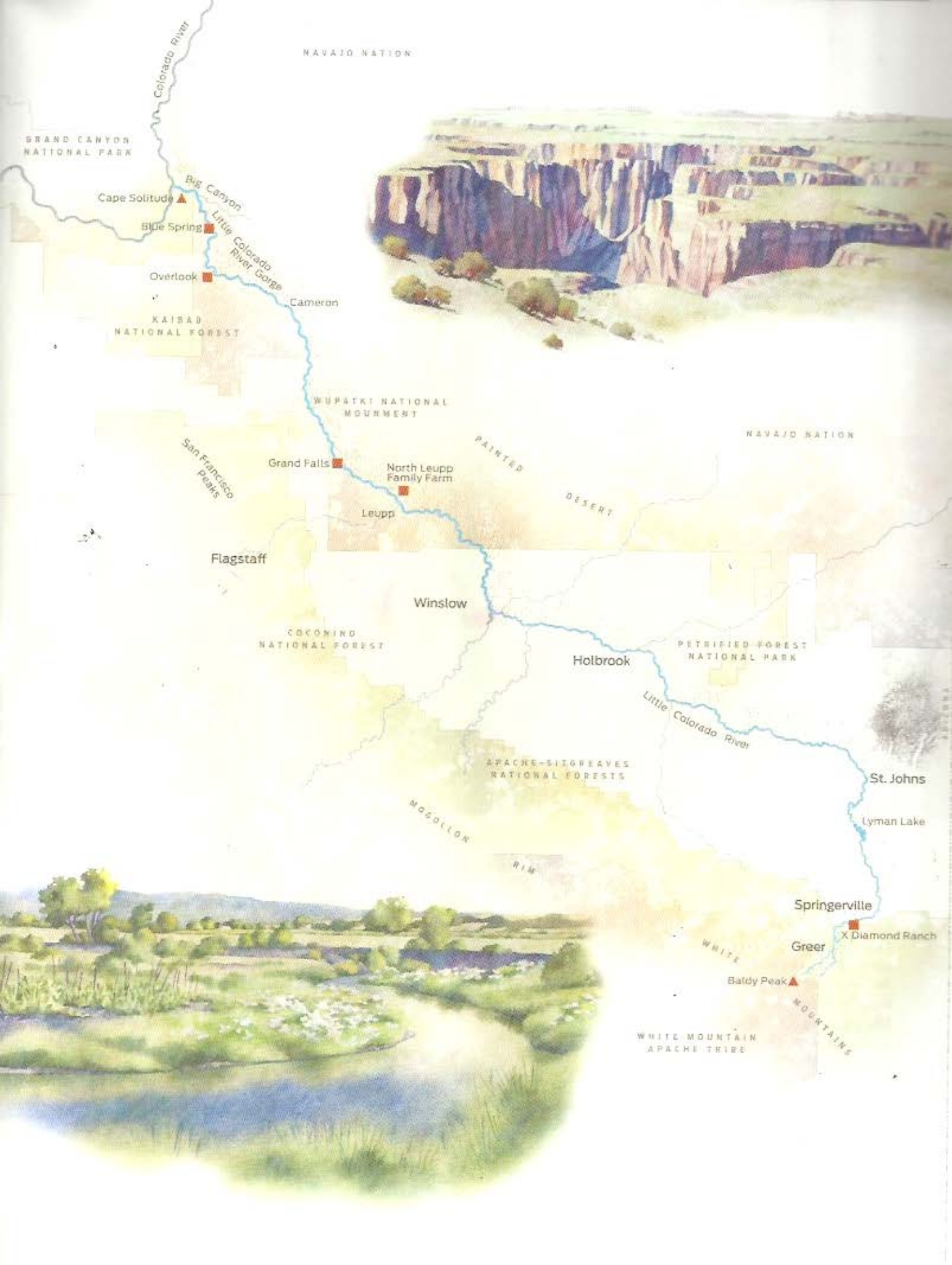
Bill and I went to the Rim's highest volcanic bulge — the White Mountains — to find the river's source. We were zigzagging down a gentle slope of Engelmann spruce when Bill stopped and looked back at me with a sheepish grin. "Water," he said. A boulder dripped a trickle from its base, feeding a kitchen-sink-size pool of translucent liquid. The water emerged, our altimeter told us, at 10,120 feet, upon a lens of impervious rock that produced several seeps across the mountainside. We weaved through the forest of springs into meadows ringed in golden aspens, passing more damp rivulets, watching the little stream grow and then diminish, already struggling to stay on the surface, as if it knew that a harsh desert awaited below the high haven.

The Little Colorado emerges from the mountains into a perfect, green valley ringed by cliffs of basalt, where a few well-kept cabins line the floodplain. This is the X Diamond Ranch, established in 1879. Wink Crigler has lived here her entire life, watering fields of corn and hay with the river's water in summer and walking slippery, makeshift bridges of ponderosa pines following floods.

"The river used to spread across this valley," she explained, gesturing out her front window, "but the flood of '68 cut a new channel. I watched our bridge wash away in the flash of an eye."

It was difficult to imagine such a tame little stream overwhelming a stout, timber-framed bridge, and I stared, questioning, until Crigler reminded me: "This river is dynamic."

"Dynamic" and "determined" are defining adjectives for the Little Colorado. Its story might end just beyond Crigler's ranch, where it is diverted into farmers' fields near the town of Springerville. The remnants are sent trickling through basalt gorges before slamming into a dam at Lyman Lake. The moun-



NAVAJO NATION

GRAND CANYON NATIONAL PARK

Colorado River

Cape Solitude

Blue Spring

Overlook

KAISAD NATIONAL FOREST

Cameron

WUPATKI NATIONAL MONUMENT

San Francisco Peaks

Grand Falls

North Leupp Family Farm

Leupp

PAINTED DESERT

NAVAJO NATION

Flagstaff

Winslow

COCONINO NATIONAL FOREST

Holbrook

PETRIFIED FOREST NATIONAL PARK

APACHE-SITOPREAVES NATIONAL FORESTS

MOGOLLON RIM

Little Colorado River

St. Johns

Lyman Lake

Springerville

Greer

X Diamond Ranch

Baldy Peak

WHITE MOUNTAIN APACHE TRIBE

WHITE MOUNTAINS





tains of the river's birth fade into the far horizon, and the Little Colorado adopts a new persona that challenges our notions of a river, diving beneath the sand before re-emerging quite unexpectedly amid the steppes. The Little Colorado has more than 1,200 springs in its system, just enough to keep the channel moist as it wends across endless high desert.

The river is poised to cascade over 185-foot Grand Falls and begin its plunge into canyon country when it runs past North Leupp Family Farm, where I met manager Tyrone Thompson in the shadow of the San Francisco Peaks. The river's water sustains fields of squash, corn and kale at the farm, where locals can rent a plot for a nominal fee. "I want people here to have the chance to eat healthy, from the land," Thompson said. That's not always so easy along an ephemeral river of mud, but people have been doing it for centuries.

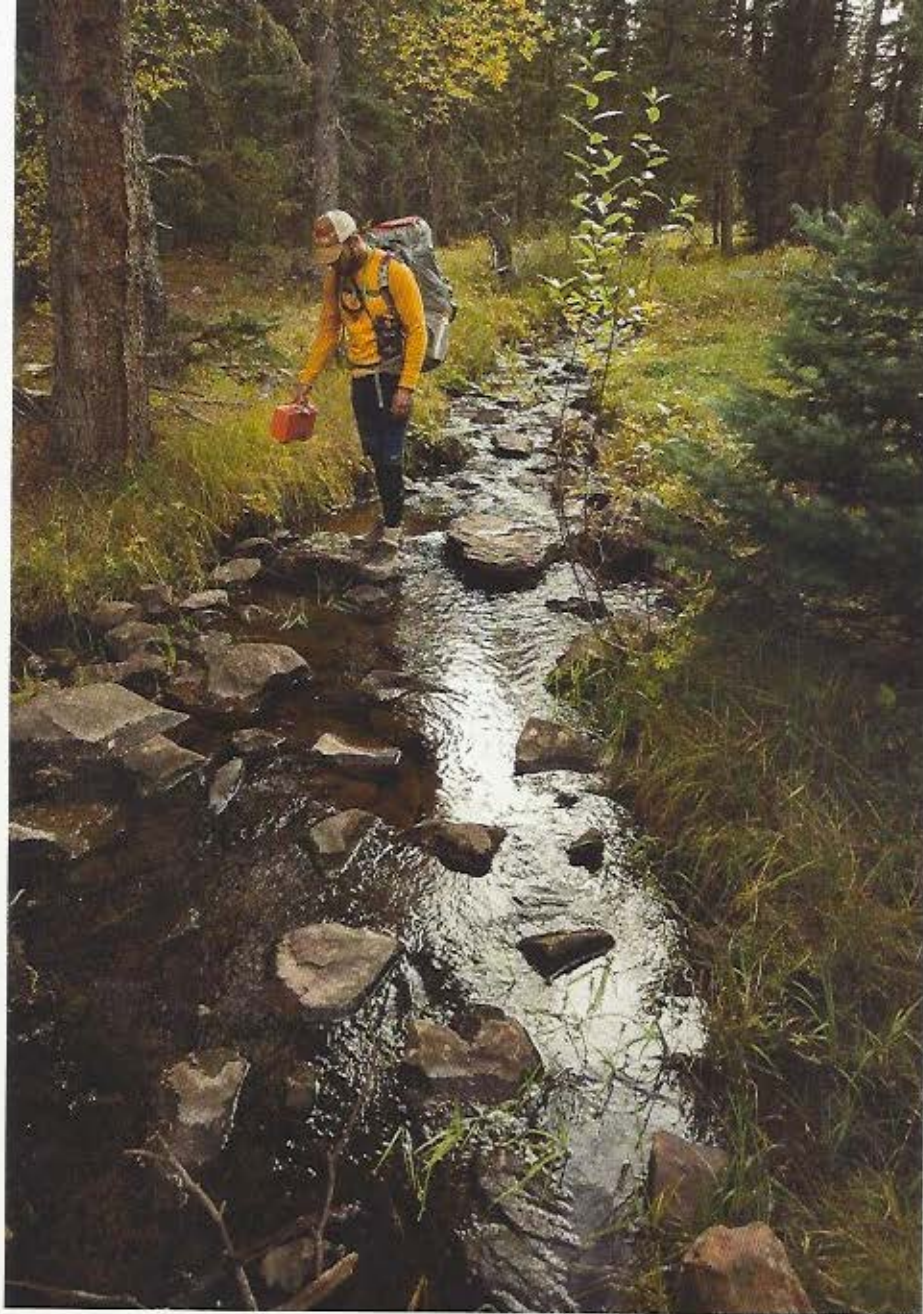
Today, the Little Colorado is at the center of controversy over a proposed development at its confluence with the Colorado River in the Grand Canyon. As Bill and I finished our

pack-raft descent below Blue Spring, I sat at that confluence and tried to envision a tram and boardwalk teeming with tourists. It wasn't easy. Cape Solitude soared silently 3,500 feet overhead, and the Little Colorado gently swirled the last of its milky turquoise into the big, dark Colorado River.

My mind traced the river's journey from spruce-cloaked mountains to surreal volcanic grasslands, through black gorges and past sandstone monoliths to fantastically blue springs, finally tumbling into pools fizzing like champagne while plunging into the greatest chasm ever known.

That spectacular path seemed too unlikely to be real, as unbelievable as the insult of human infrastructure might be at the river's grand finale.

Regardless, this determined little river will keep chipping away, blue water gnawing at red rock, long after any tram has come and gone and withered back into the desert. Despite what we might think a river should be, the Little Colorado presses on at its own pace, because this is a river like no other.

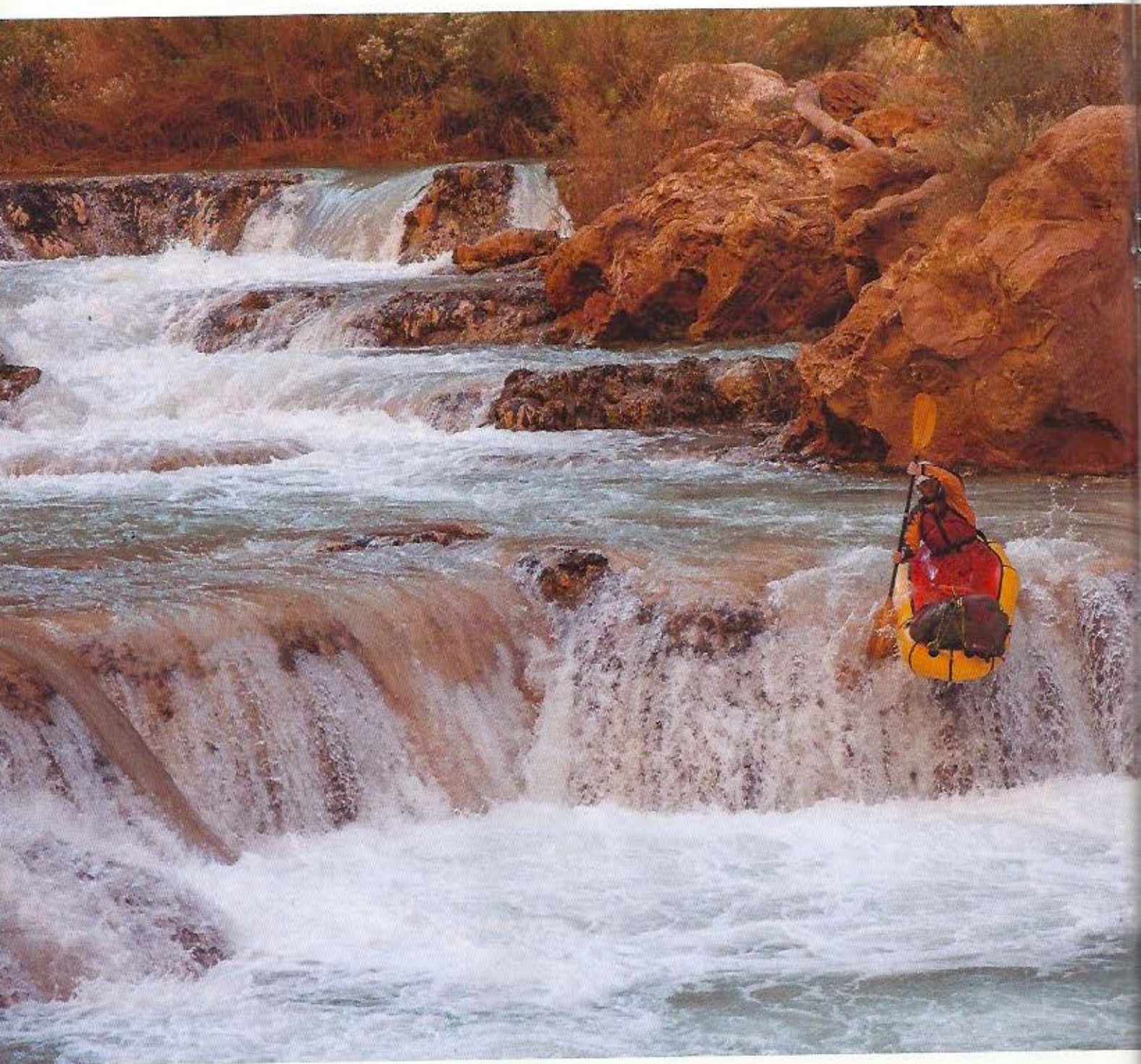


**ABOVE, LEFT:** Hatcher skis along the Little Colorado's West Fork after a spring snowstorm. "I used a remote to make this photo," he says. "I do this sometimes to give a place a sense of scale. I skied all the way up to the spring where the fork originates, following a series of long meadows."

**ABOVE:** Writer Tyler Williams walks on rocks in the river's East Fork about 4 miles from that fork's source in the White Mountains. "It was hard for Tyler

and me to wrap our minds around the idea that this little mountain stream is the same river system as the milkshake-colored water of Grand Falls," Hatcher says.

**LEFT:** Aspen leaves float in a small pool that marks the East Fork's source. "We went up there looking for the source, expecting it to be coming out of a crack in the rock," Hatcher says. "What we found instead was this beautiful, quiet pond."



**"WATER IS THE PRINCIPLE, OR THE ELEMENT, OF THINGS. ALL THINGS ARE WATER."**

**— PLUTARCH**