



THE SUN/LEFTY KREH

Mark Kovach maneuvers his rubber raft between Potomac rocks so Ben Schley can work a popping bug.

Rubber raft manages Potomac riffles

HARPER'S FERRY, W. Va. — "Hold tight and sit back; we'll be through this in a minute," Mark Kovach instructed us, as he pulled against the heavy oars.

Sitting in the inflatable raft, Ben Schley and I braced ourselves as the Potomac's force sucked us into Mad Dog Rapids, just below Harper's Ferry. The boat washed against a huge boulder, turned and, with a strong sweep of the right oar, Mark skillfully steered the raft straight into the chute, where the largest wave lapped over the front of the raft, and then we were through, drifting in the calm water below.

For Ben and me, it was a moment to be savored, for I've been through Mad Dog several times in a canoe, and each time, we shipped water and sweated out whether we would make it. With Mark and his raft, it was a piece of cake, and we could sit back and enjoy it.

For our guide, who runs Mark Kovach's Fishing Services, this was old stuff, and he has brought many clients through this section of the river without a mishap.

Mark has one of the most unique guiding operations in this part of the country. Having fished with guides all over the world, I can state flatly it's one of the most professional operations I know. Unlike many guided trips, where you get eight hours of fishing, Mark will start early and quit when you want. I met him at eight in the morning, and we pulled the raft out of the river at 11 that night.

He uses an inflatable raft for good reasons. The area he guides is perhaps the least fished portion of the Potomac River. From Dam Three, a mile upriver from Harper's Ferry, to Weaverton, the Potomac is filled with short riffles and a few tough rapids that only experienced anglers will attempt to negotiate with canoes and just don't try with

OUTDOORS



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jon boats. As a result, the only people who fish portions of the river are those who can wade to selected spots.

A rubber raft is the safest of all river boats and his 14½-footer can slide over ledges and slip through any of the riffles or rapids, making it possible to fish every pocket that might hold a bass. His clients use either light spinning gear or fly rods, and Mark explains that he prefers that people do not kill the bass that they catch.

His fee is \$95 a person based on two, or \$190 for one. "It cost too much to take a trip with just one person, so I need two anglers to make it worthwhile. Included in the trip is a fascinating history lesson on this storied part of the river. He furnishes all lures and flies, although he charges for any you lose. He knows this part of the Potomac better than anyone and constantly alerts his clients on where to cast and how to retrieve.

On a recent trip, I joined Mark and Ben Schley, a retired fishery biologist who has tested waters all over the world. It was a day of pure fun, and Ben is such a professional angler and Mark is so skillful and in-

teresting a conversationalist that more than 14 hours on the river simply slipped by.

Few bass were rising, and so we started out using underwater lures. Grubs, small plugs and streamer flies all produced. Although the action wasn't frantic, it was steady. At the day's end, Mark totaled the fish we caught and released, and it was just two short of a 100.

I've eaten shore lunches around the world, and with the exception of a feast on the Alta River in Norway, Mark's spread was the best. Fresh fruit, sandwiches almost too big to take a bite of and several kinds of drinks made the midday break a pleasant interlude.

In certain shallow areas, all three of us got out of the anchored raft and waded the ledges and investigated the riffles, deep holes and grassbeds, booking more than a dozen bass at one spot just below the Sandy Hook Bridge. It was a treat to be able to fish so much water denied to most anglers because of the riffles and rapids.

The hour before dark saw several types of mayflies hatching, including the famed white millers, and with small wet flies, Ben and I would see a rise, quickly cast and be hooked into another bass. We finished just above the Brunswick Bridge well after 10 in the evening. The drift down to the ramp in the darkness capped off a perfect day.

Mark also conducts fly fishing schools in the spring and early summer either at Harpers Ferry or Thurmont. He offers basic and intermediate instructions, and part of each course includes students getting in the water and testing their newly acquired knowledge.

Anyone who would like either to attend a school or make a float trip should contact him at: 737 Thayer avenue, Silver Spring, Md. 20910, or call 301-588-8742.