

RIDING THE FLOOD

By Morgan Bulkeley

A FEW DAYS after the East Lee flood, March 27 to be exact, we launched our canoe at Great Barrington for a 12-mile paddle down the swollen Housatonic to Bartholomew's Cobble. There is no better way to observe a river than to get into it, and we were reminded of the local character who made an annual summer fetish of swimming from Farmington to Avon smoking a cigar while he floated on the current. But that was years ago.

And this was nothing like a summer excursion. It was the cold spring freshet. There were still remnants of drifted snow on shaded banks.

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THE RIVER for most of the way through this meandering stretch was at the very brim of its banks although grassy telltales caught in upthrust red osier and pensile silver maple twigs showed that it had been nearly 3 feet higher. In many places it spilled over into low meadows, flooded swampy woods and made shortcuts for the canoe. Twice it beguiled us into old oxbows broader than the mainstream which took us in half-mile circles back to points we had already passed.

A pleasant difference between this and summer canoeing was the impression of spaciousness given by the four extra feet of water contributed by the winter runoff. This slight elevation made all the difference between being in a ditch or riding high through the sunny countryside. Absence of the summer leaf-screen everywhere gave

views of familiar farms, pasture hills and backdrop mountains through spring's new, red beadwork on the silver maples that all along defined the submerged banks.

Another notable difference was the water quality. Compared to winter and summer concentration of pollution, the spring flood had no odor, showed no oil rainbow and carried no sludge or suds. The normal flood burden of mud and silt served to mask the unnatural pollution colors of dirty cream and gray and green with a healthy earthen color.

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THE SPRING CLEANING of the river was fortunate because, as the flood waters streamed south, a great counterflow of waterfowl was heading north up the instinctively remembered valley flyway. At every turn the canoe put up ducks, now a pair or sord of mallards flashing white, now a team of blacks waying silver wing-linings and quacking loudly, now from a flooded lowland of slim elms a creaking of wood ducks, once from a grassy backwater a spring of teal.

Above the old covered bridge 60 Canada geese, half resting on the bank, half dabbling in the water, watched the canoe approach. A dopping of 16 sheldrakes floated among them, the glistening males like so many white ice cakes. The sentinels honked alarm, and the whole flock took off amid great splashing of water.

Below the new covered bridge where a field of stubble slanted into the flood some 300 geese were foraging for spring greens and old field corn. In the treetops hundreds of grackles and thousands of redwings added their wild dissonance to the vociferous honking. Flocks of ducks, skeins and wedges of geese, coursed noisily, every which way, overhead. It was a symphony of spring to intoxicate the

dullest soul, and we mourned secretly that no one in Berkshire knew that it was going on.

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IN THE RIVER muskrats were reveling in their cleaner, expanded universe. We saw 10 in all, though perhaps a hundred saw us; one swam up a fast riffle directly to the canoe before he dove. Most unexpected for March were four leopard frogs sunning on a muddy bank. In close juxtaposition one of them contrasted his dark spots to the yellow kernels of an ear of field corn probably dropped there by a goose. He permitted himself to be admired and even petted before jumping into the icy river.

In a dramatic confrontation of seasons, as we neared the Cobble, we overtook the last floating ice cake of the departing winter, by chance just as we encountered the first returning bluebird of spring.