

**Devils River**  
**Texas State Natural Area**  
**Trip Report**  
**March 19 – 24, 2020**

**The Devils River**

Short on length and hard to access this little river packs a pretty good punch. The State of Texas lists six Significant Hazards which include one bridge crossing, three CIII rapids, one waterfall (Dolen Falls) and strong winds on Lake Amistad. There are 19 named CI to CIII rapids and dozens of unnamed drops, rock gardens, cane alleys and “jeep crossings” to bedevil a paddler along the way. The reward is crystal clear, clean water, dark skies, spectacular desert scenery, challenging whitewater and a wilderness paddling experience in the middle of an Iowa winter. The Devils River is not for the faint of heart. Less than a thousand paddlers run this river each year.

Located in Southwest Texas, the Devils River is a long ways from anywhere. It is 450 miles east of El Paso and 220 miles west of San Antonio. It is over 1,200 miles from Waterloo, Iowa. The river is short. There is only public access to the lower 47 miles. Of that distance, the last 16 miles is partially covered by the waters of Lake Amistad National Recreation Area. From Bakers Crossing to Rough Canyon Marina, on Lake Amistad, there are only four recognized public campsites. These campsites must be reserved in advance. Most of the shoreline is privately owned and closely protected.

I found our 47 mile trip down the Devils River was tough to plan and physically challenging to complete. The logistics can be daunting. Everyone must have a Devil’s River Access Permit (DRAPs) to access the river on a certain date. Camping is only allowed at one of the designated campsites. These sites must be reserve in advance for a specific date. One can camp on the limited number of islands in the river, if they are not flooded. The distance between designated campsites is eight to twelve miles. As noted, the distance between campsites is filled with a variety of impediments which can include high or low water.

One must keep one eye on the map and the other on the sky. This river is noted for its extremes. Scant rain in its desert watershed leaves this river dependent on spring water. The lack of rain can turn a paddle into a hike. A rare heavy rainstorm can swell this little river into a raging torrent overnight. Our shuttle driver, Emilio, left us with one piece of sage advice, “*Always have an escape plan.*”

Yet the Devils River was a gem to see and I will treasure the experience. They say there are two kinds of paddlers on the Devils River: those that come back whenever they can and those who will never do it again. I would do it again.

**Trip Outline**

Trip Dates:	March 19-24, 2020
Nearest Cities:	Comstock, Texas Del Rio, Texas
Put in:	Baker’s Crossing, Texas Highway 163
Take out:	Rough Canyon Marina Lake Amistad National Recreation Area
Distance:	47.7 miles
Water level:	83 CFS – Bakers Crossing USGS 250 - 300 CFS - Pafford Crossing USGS

Boat: Spirit II, Wenonah (Roylex)  
Shuttle Driver: Emilio Hinojosa, Emilio's Charter Service  
Paddlers: Will Witt, Beaver Crossing, Nebraska  
Vern Fish, Waterloo, Iowa  
Difficulty: Intermediate – The Devils River provides a variety of whitewater challenges ranging from CI-CIII. Paddlers must have wilderness camping experience and be prepared for a physical challenge.  
Submitted by: Vern Fish, [vernfish@aol.com](mailto:vernfish@aol.com)

### **Trip Planning**

The first step is to read the trip guide written by Louis Aulbach, *The Devils River* (ISBN 978-1468022759). This well written guide provides a detailed outline for planning a trip. In today's digital age one should be able to find a copy online. This guide can be directly ordered from Louis Aulbach.

Louis Aulbach  
P.O. Box 925765  
Houston, TX 77292-5765

Please note that Mr. Aulbach's guide is dated. It does not show the campgrounds the State of Texas acquired to provide better access to the river at mile 12, 20 and 29. The Dan A. Hughes Unit of the Devils River State Natural Area is not included in the guide. With that said, I would still encourage you to read and use the book.

Texas Parks & Wildlife has created an outstanding planning guide on their website at <https://tpwd.texas.gov/state-parks/devils-river/river-trips>. This site includes a great video and the information needed to get Devil's River Access Permit (DRAPs) and reserve campsites. This website does an excellent job of identifying the hazards and impediments for which one must be prepared to address. The website includes a lot of details that will take time to absorb. I have tried to list the important river features a paddler will encounter in the attached Table of Features.

The Devils River Conservancy is a valuable source of information. This website can be accessed at <https://www.devilsriverconservancy.org/>. The Southwest Paddler also provides a nice summary of the route at <http://www.southwestpaddler.com/docs/riogrande9.html>.

### **Trip Reports**

There are many trip reports and YouTube videos on paddling this river. The following article is a good starting point <https://texashighways.com/travel/outdoors/paddling-the-devils-river-in-southwest-texas/>

### **Water Levels**

It is critical to know how much water is flowing in the Devils River. The Bakers Crossing gauging station can be accessed at: <https://water.weather.gov/ahps2/hydrograph.php?wfo=ewx&gage=bkct2>. We started at Baker Crossing with the river was running at 83 cfs. At this level, we were just able to squeeze under the old Bakers Crossing Bridge, just downstream. If the water had been higher, we would have been forced to portage around this bridge and our first campsite at Miller's Island at mile 7.33 might have been under water. As it was, we spent a lot of time dragging and lining the canoe over shallow runs.

The gauge at Paffords Crossing is near the end of the trip. This gauge can be accessed at <https://water.weather.gov/ahps2/hydrograph.php?wfo=ewx&gage=cmkt2>. If the water level is below 250 cfs, there might not have enough water for the last half your trip. For our trip, the water level ran from 250 to 300 which seemed like a lot of water. We had trouble portaging around Dolen Falls due to the high water level.

Finally, it is important to know the water level in Lake Amistad. This gauge can be accessed at <https://water.weather.gov/ahps2/hydrograph.php?wfo=ewx&gage=amit2>. The lake was at 1077 ft. which is 40 ft. below its approved level. This meant that the stretch below Pafford Crossing was not flooded and created a long series of shallow rapids that had to be walked or lined until mile 39.

### **Devils River Archeology**

There are hundreds if not thousands archeological sites within the Devils River Valley. Most of these are on private land or are a considerable distance away from the river. We did not leave the river to find or explore any of these sites. Louis Aulbach's book provides a nice summary of sites located in the river valley.

### **Shuttle Driver**

Finding a shuttle driver is important. We used Emilio Hinojosa who lives just west of Comstock, Texas. He shuttled us out to the Bakers Crossing for \$200 and left our vehicle at the Rough Canyon Marina on Lake Amistad on the day of our return. There are several other outfitters who provide this service. They are listed on the state website. Only state registered outfitters can leave vehicles at access points within the two units of the Devils River State Natural Area. Do not leave a vehicle at Bakers Crossing!

Emilio Hinojosa  
Emilio's Charter Service  
P.O. Box 733  
Comstock, Texas 78837  
830-317-0760 (c)

### **Maps**

I ordered a CD of 1:24,000 digital maps from YellowMaps ([www.yellowmaps.com](http://www.yellowmaps.com)). This CD was titled Southern Texas, Volume 24, Zone 14-5. Zone 14-5 covers the Devils River. I then digitally knitted the following quadrangle maps together to create five, 13 x 19 maps:

Bakers Crossing (029101H2)	Clarks Waterhole (029100G8)	Dolen Springs (029100H8)
Gills Ranch (029101F1)	Lechuguillia Creek (029101G1)	Rough Canyon (029100E8)
Statan Canyon (029100F8)	Telephone Canyon (029101H1)	

These maps were laminated to fit into a standard Sea to Summit map case. A sample of these maps has been attached to this report.

### **Permits & Fees**

Devil's River Access Permit (DRAPs) cost \$10 per paddler. These permits can be obtained up to five months in advance by calling the Texas State Parks Customer Service Center at 512-389-890. Ask for the Devils River agent.

Campsites can be reserved at Mile 12, San Pedro Paddlers Camp, Mile 20 or Mile 29 by calling Customer Service Center. These reservations cost \$5 per night per paddler.

### **Emergency Contact Information**

The following numbers were programed into our satellite phone:

Val Verde County Sheriff's Office	830-774-7513
Border Patrol (Comstock)	432-292-4600
Amistad National Recreation Area	830-317-0760 (c)
General Park Information	512-389-8901
Emilio Hinojosa	830-775-7491

Dennis Molln was our designated “Guardian Angel”. He got all of our satellite phone messages and he tracked our progress. He provided weather reports and water level updates. If we had gotten in trouble, he would have been our link between the authorities and our families.

### **Food & Motels**

There is one motel in Comstock, the Comstock Motel (432-292-4484). The only gas station convenience store is located across the street from Comstock Motel. The only restaurant, JP’s (432-292-4338), is located down the street from the Comstock Motel. Del Rio, Texas is closer to the Rough Canyon Marina and features a wide variety of motels and restaurants.

### **Highlights & Observations**

The Devils River is a small river that demands respect and attention. It is a forty-seven mile obstacle course that is constantly trying to reach up and grab the boat and pin it against a rock. The upper third flows through a floodplain filled with sycamore trees, big bass, weekend homes, cane alleys, shallow rapids and signs warning of the consequences of trespass. The middle third of the river starts to sink into a canyon surrounded by desert and cliffs. The clear running water now pulls the paddler into bigger rapids, drops and ledges. The last third is the flat water of Lake Amistad. The water is muddy but the cliffs are very impressive.

Once the descent of the upper third has been completed there are fewer people to be seen. There are roads and some buildings but there are very few people waving at you. The campsites are remote and provide solitude in big, open landscape. Water level is critical. Too much water, a CII becomes a CIII rapid. Too little water, the trip becomes a hike with a canoe. The water level on Lake Amistad impacts the last 6 miles of the river. We spent most of our fifth day walking the canoe down exposed limestone ledges that should have been under several feet of lake water.

In hindsight, solo canoes or kayaks would have worked better than a 17 foot expedition canoe. Smaller boats would have been much easier to paddle through the tight turns and shallow rapids. I also would have spent an extra day and camped at San Pedro Point Paddler Camp at Mile 14. This would have shortened the distance to Mile 20 Campsite and given us time to explore the Devils River State Natural Area (Del Norte Unit).

### **The Value of Wild Rivers**

The Devils River is a wild river that runs through a spectacular landscape. It was a good place to hide. As we drove south, from the last grip of winter in the upper Midwest, we were constantly reminded of the oncoming impact of a possible world pandemic. However, for six days we were forced to focus on running whitewater and weaving through cane islands. The last thing we were worried about was a strange new virus.

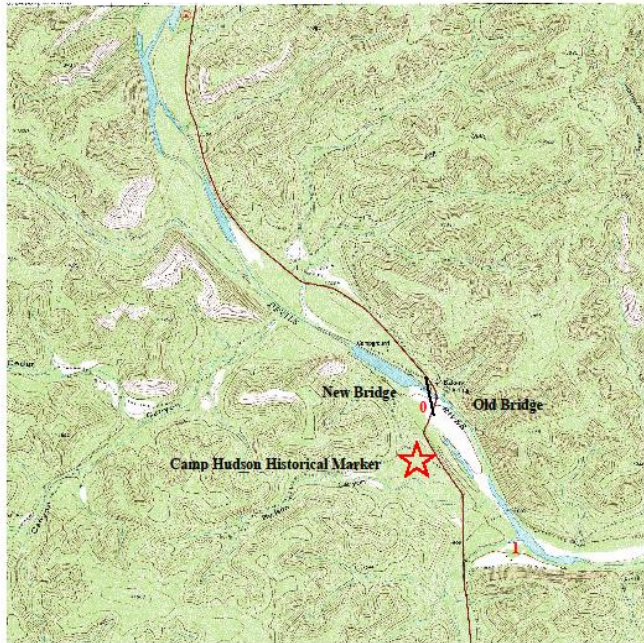
When we emerged from our voluntary retreat, we were sunburned and bruised but refreshed. However, in the course of 6 days the world had changed. The bars were closed and people were wearing masks. Everything seemed upside down. We had gone from the high of running CII whitewater on crystal clear water to watching people die in record numbers on CNN.

The trip home was surreal. Main streets in small towns were empty. The schools were shuttered and the only food available was carryout from Sonic restaurants. When I got home, I was told I had to self-quarantine for 14 days because I had been to Texas. I have always cherished the value of a wild river. As I emerge from my self-isolation, I have the memory of wild river in southwest Texas to off-set the scary new world I must rejoin. I can only hope that there will always be wild rivers where people can go to renew and rejoice.

**Submitted by:** Vern Fish, 3488 Kingswood Place, Waterloo, Iowa [vernfish@aol.com](mailto:vernfish@aol.com). See the attached Photo File for trip images and the Table of Features for summary of trips. The five maps that were created for this trip have also been attached. A trip log, which is a separate document, provides a daily summary and more trip details. There will also be a photo gallery of selected trip photos.

# Maps

## Devils River



### Notes:

9. #3 Rapid is near mile 12. It is listed as a CII.
10. We will camp at **Mile 12 Camp** the second night. Mile 12 Camp is on **River Right** but I do not have precise location. It should be marked.
11. #4 **Sycamore Chute Rapid** is at about mile 12.5 and it is rated CII. *It is listed as a "hazard" on the Texas paddler's map.* River flows through rock out crops at a fast rate and there is a rock in middle of stream capable of pinning a boat!

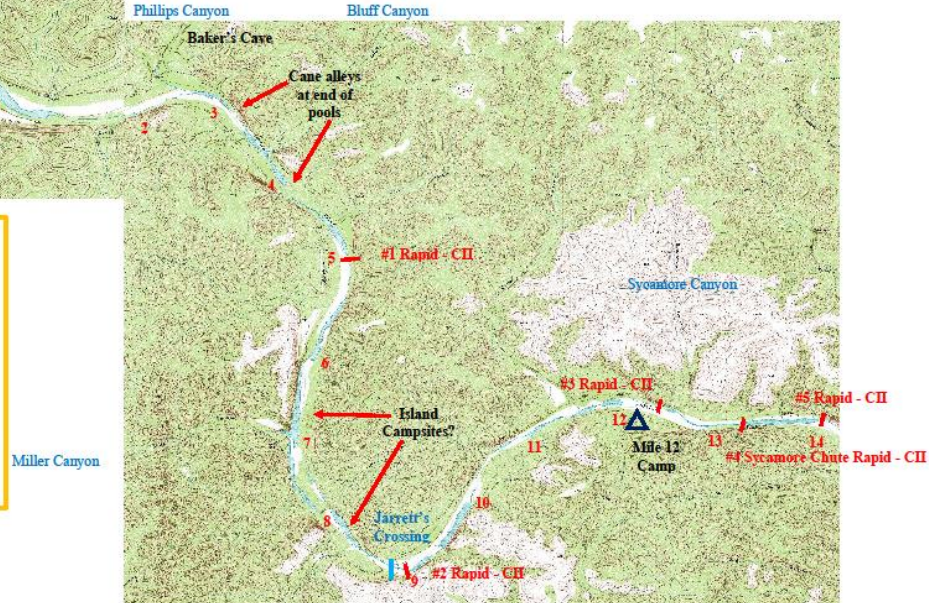
## Map #1

Mile 0 - Mile 15

### Bakers Crossing to Sycamore Canyon

#### Notes:

1. The Upper Devils River is shallow. Be prepared to wade and drag your boat.
2. The **Old Bridge** is considered a hazard!
3. A series of shallow pools empty into narrow, shallow cane alleys.
4. Cane alleys are hard to see and find.
5. #1 **Rapid** is at mile 5. It is listed as a CII.
6. **Jarrett's Crossing** is low water road just before mile #9.
7. #2 **Rapid** is directly below Jarrett's Crossing. It is listed as a CII.
8. Google Map shows several "gnarly" islands before mile 12. We will need to camp on one of these islands the first night.



**Map #2**  
**Mile 14 - Mile 17**  
**Dolan Falls**

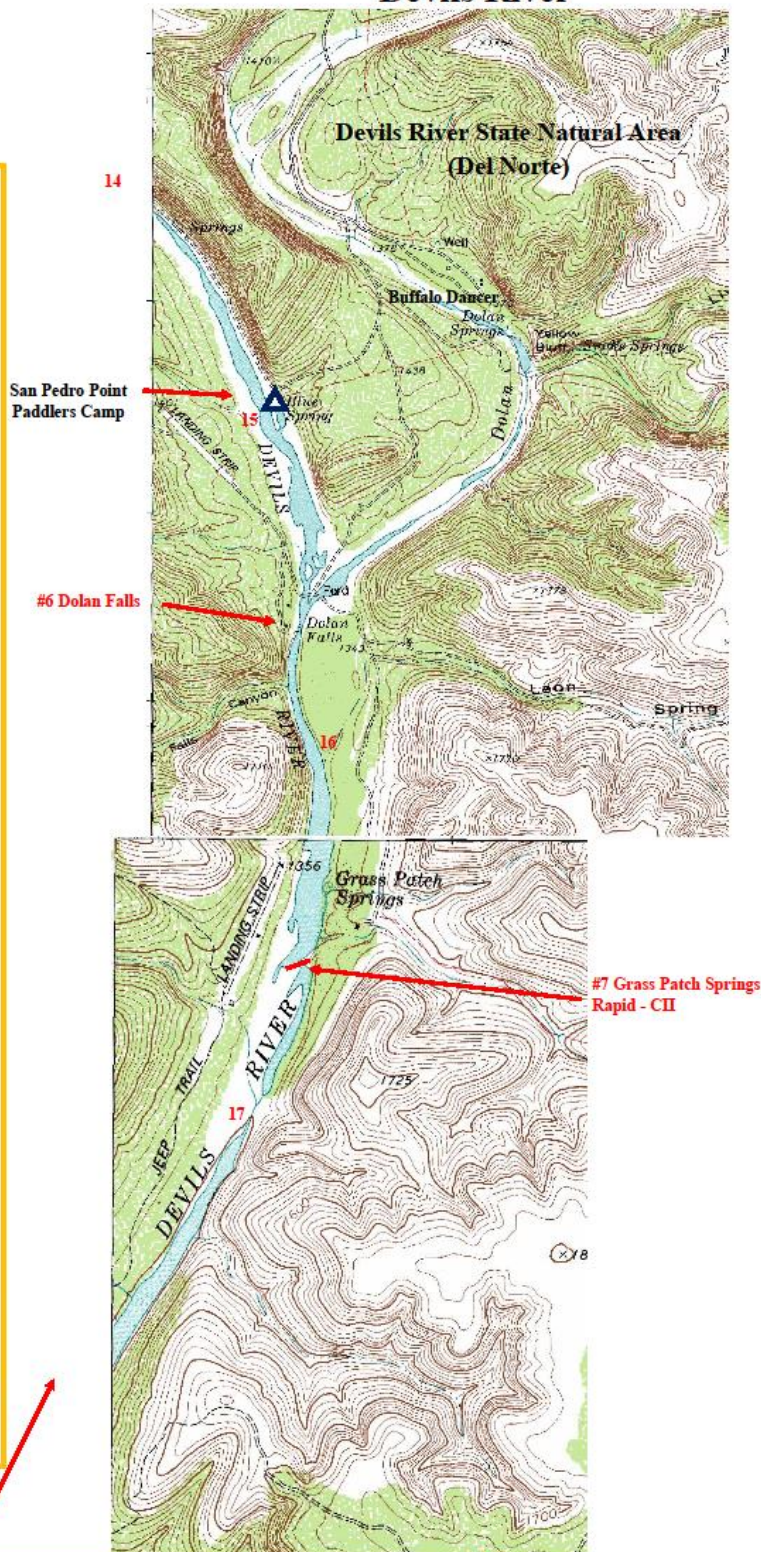
**Devils River**

**Notes:**

1. Just after mile 14 we will enter the **Devils River State Natural Area – Del Norte**. The land on river left will be public until we reach Dolan Falls.
2. **San Pedro Point Paddlers Camp** is on river left at mile 15. We do not have a permit to camp here but it does have a composting toilet. This might be a good spot for lunch or a walk up to the **Buffalo Dancer Pictograph**.
3. The springs just above Dolan Falls provide 75% of the flow in the river. The river flow should improve from this point.
4. There is a river ford just before Dolan Falls.
5. **#6 Dolan Falls (CIV)** is at mile 15.5 and it must be portaged! *Portage on river left. It is listed as a hazard on the Texas Paddlers Map.*
6. Private land on both sides of river downstream from Dolan Falls.
7. **#7 Grass Patch Springs Rapid – CII** – This CII is described as a “maze”. The river leans to the left and the entrance to the rapid is a “blind alley”. Paddlers must weave their way through rocks and clumps of cane and over two or three drops before reaching the next pool.
8. **#8 Three Tier Rapid – CIII** – This is complex CIII and it may be the most technical run on the river! Scout from the right bank but *run on river left. It is listed as a hazard on the Texas Paddlers Map.*

The rapid leans to the right and there is rocky chute on extreme upstream right. It may be necessary to line this chute into a small pool. Re-enter the main current and go to the far left to avoid ledges on right. Some paddlers line the entire rapid.

#8 Three Tier Rapid - CIII



**Emergency Contact Information**

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| 1. <b>Val Verde County Sheriff's Office</b><br>830-774-7513  | 2. <b>Dennis Molln "Guardian Angel"</b><br>319-404-7825<br><a href="mailto:Molln.dennis@gmail.com">Molln.dennis@gmail.com</a> |
| 3. <b>Emilio Hinojosa</b><br>Emilio's Charter Service<br>P.O. Box 733<br>Comstock, Texas 78837<br>830-317-0760 (c) | 4. <b>General Park Information</b><br>512-389-8901  |
|  | 5. <b>Amistad National Recreation Area</b><br>830-775-7491  |

# Map # 3

Mile 17 - 26

Grass Patch Springs to Turkey Bluff

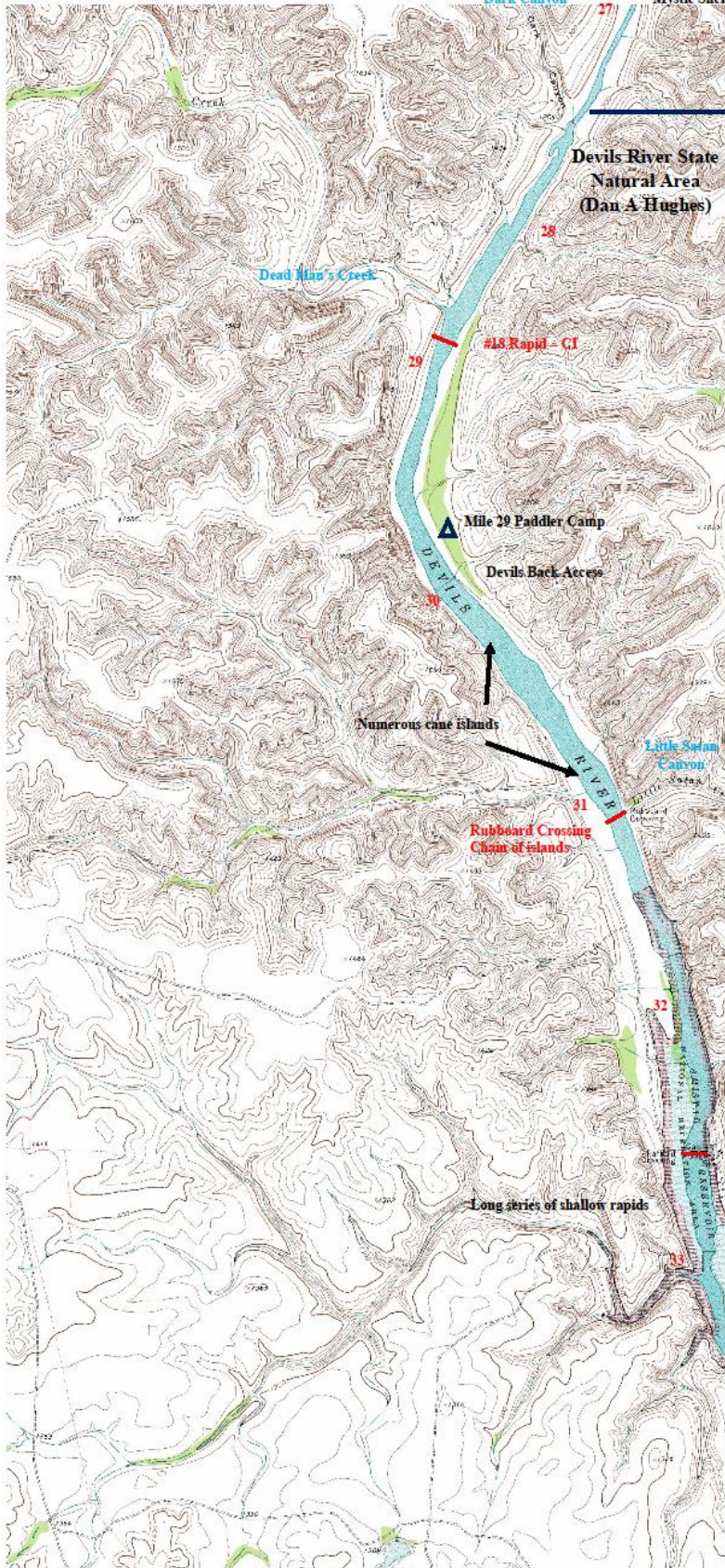
# Devils River

## Notes:

See back of map for notes and other details.



# Devils River



## Map # 4

Mile 28 – 33

Dark Canyon to Pafford Crossing

### Notes:

1. Below Turkey Bluff, the Devils River runs over limestone beds for several miles. The streambed becomes wide, "fluted" and shallow.
2. Below Dark Canyon we enter into the Devil River State Natural Area on river right.
3. #18 Rapid CI – No details
4. Mile 29 Paddler Camp is located on river left near mile 29. We will spend our fourth night at this site. Campsite location is marked with signs.
5. The road to Devils Back Access is closed until summer of 2020
6. #19 Weir Dam (Pafford Crossing) run on right side.
7. At mile 31.5 we enter the Amistad National Recreation Area.
8. Back county camping is allowed on the shores of Lake Amistad if you are at least ¼ mile from buildings.

### #19 Pafford Crossing (Weir Dam)

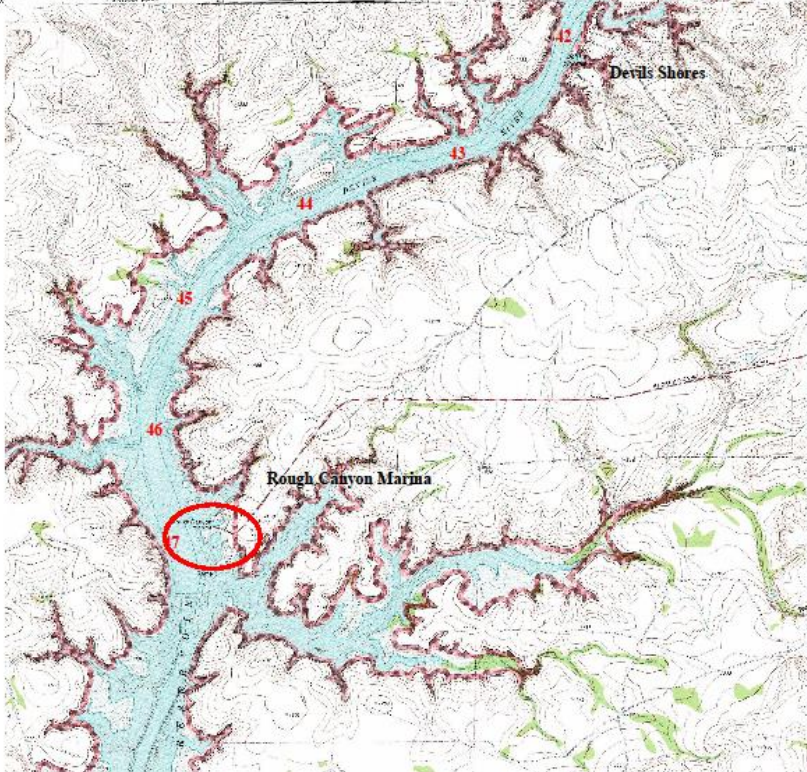
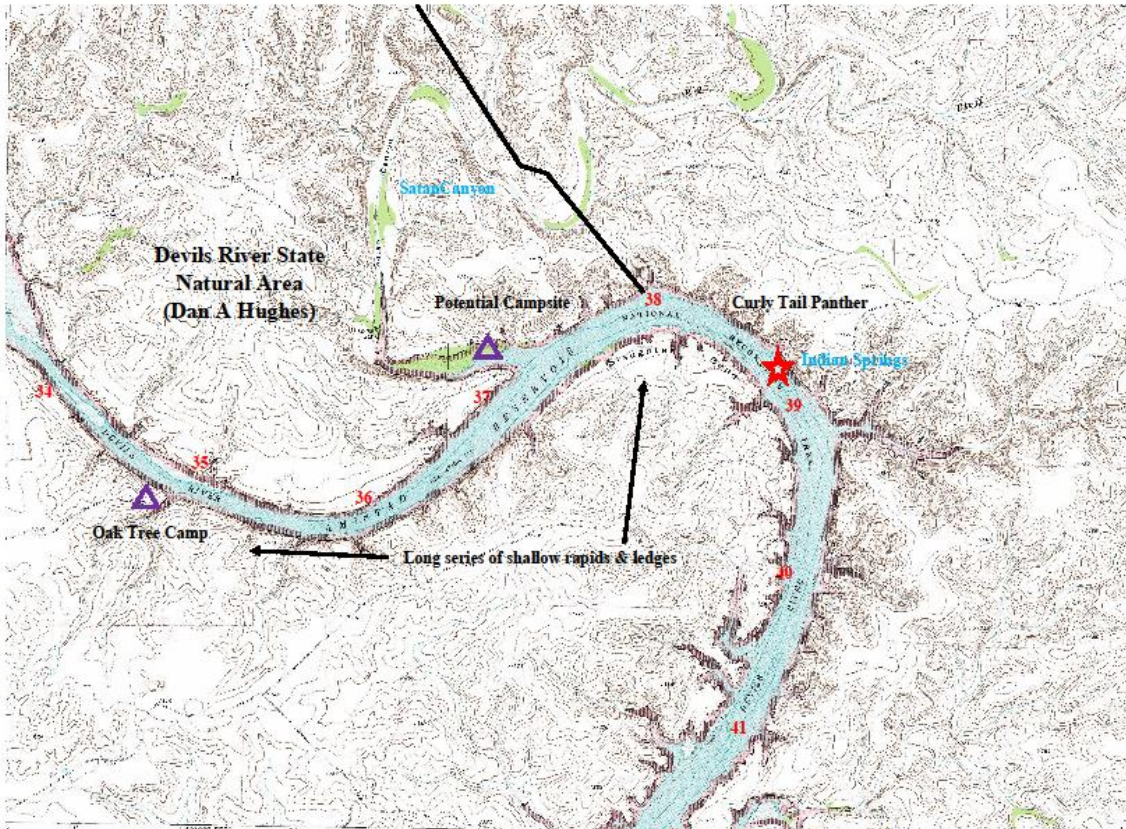
#### Emergency Contact Information

1. Val Verde County Sheriff's Office  
830-774-7513
2. Dennis Molln "Guardian Angel"  
319-404-7825  
Molln.dennis@gmail.com
3. Emilio Hinojosa  
Emilio's Charter Service  
P.O. Box 733  
Comstock, Texas 78837  
830-317-0760 (c)
4. General Park Information  
512-389-8901
5. Amistad National Recreation Area  
830-775-7491



# Devil's River

Map #5  
Mile 34-47  
Rough Canyon Marina



## Notes

1. Mile 34 to 47 is on the open waters of Lake Amistad. *High winds and rough water is a possibility.*
2. Potential campsite for last night at mile 37. Back county camping is allowed along the shores of the lake.
3. **Indian Springs** is located between mile 38 and 39 on river left. At low lake levels the spring can be seen gushing down the hill.
4. The **Curly Tail Panther** is located high on the cliff in a prominent alcove 200 feet above the lake.
5. **Rough Canyon Marina** is where our car will be parked.

## Table of Features Devil's River

Mile	Feature	Comments
0	<b>Camp Hudson Historical Marker</b>	Historical marker on way to Baker's Crossing
0	<b>Old Bridge</b>	The old highway bridge is just downstream from the put in. It is listed as a "hazard" on the Texas paddler's map. We barely squeezed under at 83 CFS at Baker USGS. The Pafford USGS gauge was between 250 & 300 CFS.
3	<b>Baker's Cave</b>	Cultural site on private land
3-6	<b>Cane Alleys</b>	Shallow pools separated by cane alleys
5	<b>#1 Rapid</b>	C-II rapid, no details
7.33	<b>Miller's Islands</b>	There were two small islands in the middle of river room for a couple of tents. If the river had risen by 6-12 inches, the islands would have flooded.
9	<b>Jarretts Crossing</b>	Low water crossing just before mile 9. There was a portage route on river right where we dragged the canoe across.
9+	<b>#2 Rapid</b>	C-II rapid, no details
12	<b>#3 Rapid</b>	C-II rapid, no details
12	<b>Mile 12 Campsite</b>	This a designated campsite on river right. This site was well marked but you need to be looking for the sign.
13.3	<b>#4 Sycamore Chute Rapid</b>	This C-II rapid is listed as a "hazard" on the Texas Paddler's Map. The flow is interrupted by a good sized rock that forces the paddle to go left or right. A 17 foot canoe will have trouble getting around this rock. We chose to portage down the left side. I believe we also could have lined downed the right side.
14	<b>#5 Rapid</b>	C-II rapid, a series of ledges that we lined.
14+	<b>Devils River State Natural Area – Del Norte</b>	Just after mile 14, the land on river left will be public until you reach Dolan Falls.
15	<b>San Pedro Point Paddlers Camp</b>	Possible stop, lunch or a hike (mile+) up canyon to see <b>Buffalo Dancer</b> pictograph. There is campsite and a compost toilet at this location. A major springs joins the river just upstream from this landing.
15.5	<b>River Ford</b>	There is a river ford just before Dolan Falls. We stopped here to scout the access to the portage.
15.5+	<b>#6 Dolan Falls C- IV</b>	<b>Portage on river left.</b> It is listed as a hazard on the Texas Paddlers Map. The falls is marked with a warning sign on river left. The current was running to fast to paddle or line down the left side. We chose to do an upstream ferry and line down the right side. We then lined the boat and gear down a 10 foot drop to a ledge where we loaded.
16.5	<b>#7 Grass Patch Springs Rapid</b>	This CII is described as a "maze". The river leans to the left and the entrance to the rapid is a "blind alley".
17.75	<b>#8 Three Tier Rapid</b>	This is complex CIII and it may be the most technical run on the river! It is listed as a hazard on the Texas Paddlers Map. Scout and line down the right bank to get into the pool below. Run the next three drops <b>on river left</b> . We chose to portage down the right side on a jeep road.
19	<b>#9 Rapid</b>	C-II+ rapid, no details

19.5	<b>Ledge</b>	We found a ledge on which to camp just upstream from the mouth of Lechugilla Creek on river right. It had taken too long to make the run from Camp 12.
20	<b>#10 Indian Creek Rapid</b>	Could not find a clear path so we bumped and lined our way down the middle. Other paddlers had lined down the right side.
20	<b>Mile 20 Campsite</b>	This should have been our third night on the river. Big campsite with plenty of room.
21	<b>#11 Rough Canyon Rapid</b>	C-II rapid, moved from right to left with a clear line.
22	<b>#12 Reeds Chutes Rapid</b>	C-II rapid, dropped into a series of cane alleys which ended in a rough drop into the next pool. This was a wild, blind ride.
23	<b>Devils River Outfitters</b>	Private access to river on river left. Well marked with the Buccaneer Skull & Crossbones flag.
23+	<b>Dandridge Falls Rapid</b>	This CII consists of a series of ledges cut across the length of the river. It is listed as a hazard on the Texas Paddlers Map. Could not find a clear path so we lined down the left side.
24	<b>#14 Rapid</b>	This CII was a nice run down the left side. There were at least 4 four drops.
24	<b>Dry Devils Low Water Crossing</b>	We bumped our way across this low water crossing on the right side.
24.5	<b>#15 Dry Devil Rapid</b>	This C-II+, follow current down the center and then work way through the boulders.
25	<b>Turkey Bluff</b>	Cliff wall on river left, very impressive
25.25	<b>#16 Rapid</b>	C-II rapid, no details
25.75	<b>Cedar Springs Shelter</b>	Impressive pictograph site on private land. We did not stop to look.
26	<b>#17 Rapid</b>	C-II rapid, no details
26.5	<b>Cedar Canyon</b>	Small drop near mouth of Cedar Canyon. I failed to note this run on my maps.
26.5	<b>Mystic Shelter</b>	Impressive pictograph site on private land short distance south of Cedar Springs Canyon. We did not stop to look.
27.5	<b>Devils River SNA</b>	Public land on river left all the way to mile 38.
29	<b>#18 Rapid</b>	C-I rapid, small drop
29	<b>Mile 29 Campsite</b>	Designated campsite, this was our fourth night on the river. There were houses and road upstream but it felt like a very wild place.
30	<b>Devils Back Access</b>	River access on river left but the road into the river is closed until summer of 2020. We did not stop to look.
31	<b>Rubboard Crossing</b>	This is a series of small cane islands that form a "crossing" at the month of Little Satan Canyon. We passed through on river right.
31.5	<b>Lake Amistad</b>	At this point we have entered the National Recreation Area.
32.5	<b>#19 Weir Dam</b>	Pafford Crossing, we ran on right side. This is easy to find and the dam is noisy!
33 to 39	<b>Series of shallow rapids</b>	At lower lake levels this stretch of river is exposed creating a long series of low shallow rapids that required walking and lining. We did a lot hiking with the boat.
35	<b>Oak Tree Camp</b>	Private access to lake on river right which we could not see from the water.
38.75	<b>Indian Springs</b>	Massive springs on river left that is only visible when lake level is low
38.7	<b>Curly Tailed Panther</b>	Impressive pictograph site located 200 feet above lake level
40	<b>Mile 40 Campsite</b>	Lake Amistad campsite on river right, this was our fifth night on the river. There are a limited number of places to camp!
47	<b>Rough Canyon Marina</b>	Our car was parked at this marina. The lake level was 1077 which is only 22 feet above the historic low of 1055 set in 2013! The conservation pool (normal) level is 1117. The lake was 40 ft below its approved level.

