## THE RESURRECTION OF GLENCAN

A photographer rediscovers a landscape that briefly reemerged in the wake of a prolonged Western

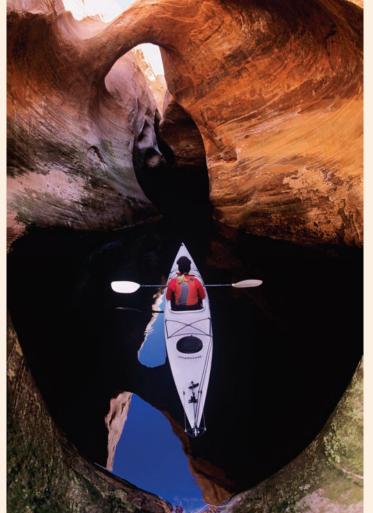






n the first half of the 20th century, the Bureau of Reclamation embarked on a program of massive public works projects to begin harnessing the water resources of the American West. In 1928, Congress authorized the first mega-project of this new era in the construction of Boulder (Hoover) Dam on the lower Colorado River. This enormous concrete structure was the first installment on a vast scheme by the Bureau to convert virtually every mile of the Colorado River into a series of stair-step lakes from its headwaters in the Rockies to its delta in the Sea of Cortez.

With the successful construction of Hoover Dam under its belt, the Bureau turned its attention to other potential dam sites along the Colorado River. Two massive dams were proposed for the Grand Canyon, but died due to public opposition. Licking its wounds, the Bureau soon found an exceptional location for its next dam just a few miles upriver from Grand Canyon's Marble Canyon. The sheer Navajo sandstone walls of Glen Canyon were a dam-builder's dream and would form an ideal foundation for the 10-million-ton concrete plug that soon rose from the drawing boards. Due to minimal public opposition and nonexistent environmental-review laws, the plans were fasttracked and construction began in 1956. By the time the last bucket of concrete poured into Glen Canyon Dam in 1963, a nascent Lake Powell was already beginning to pool at its base. It took another 17 years before the reservoir finally topped off in 1980, flooding 186 miles of the Colorado River and countless miles of side canyons beneath hundreds of feet of water. Beginning at Hite, Utah, and ending just above Lee's Ferry on the Colorado River, Glen Canyon was named by the Powell Expedition of 1869 due to the many deep, sinuous side canyons that branched off the Colorado River every few miles. Adorned with their hanging gardens of Maidenoutdoorphotographer.com December 2008 97



hair fern, the sound of croaking frogs and the descending trill of canyon wrens, these hidden grottos teemed with life. Beavers dammed willow and cattail-lined streams to provide habitat for multitudes of creatures. Along the Colorado, large numbers of blue herons roosted in extensive groves of cottonwood trees as deer and covotes left their tracks in the wet sand. These narrow, life-supporting, river-edge riparian zones were the exception in this land of barren rock and windblown sand. The flooding of Glen Canyon extinguished all this life. Now, where the reservoir's fluctuating waterline

meets the land, it's devoid of life, save for a few non-native tamarisk shrubs clinging tenaciously to sun-blasted rocks.

## Rediscovering A Lost Canyon

My first impressions of Glen Canyon and Lake Powell were from the deck of a houseboat in 1984. At that point in time, I had little knowledge of what lay beneath the waves. Fast-forward to the '90s when I spent much of my time exploring the canyonlands all across Utah's vast Colorado Plateau Province. By then, my shelves were stacked deep with books describing Glen Canyon as the most inspiring stretch of canyon country along the entire Colorado River. **98** Outdoor Photographer outdoorphotographer.com Compared with my first trip to Lake Powell, I now understood the magnitude of what had been lost with the flooding of Glen Canyon. So when the deep winter snowpack in the Rockies failed to materialize and recharge the waters of Lake Powell in the early years of this decade, I decided to embark on a project to explore and photograph these "lost" canyons as they began to emerge into the light of day. With the waters at historic lows, I wanted to see for myself and make a photographic record of the spectacular canyons for which Glen was so renowned. As when prying open

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the cover of an ancient sarcophagus to reveal a desiccated, cobweb-covered occupant, I didn't necessarily expect the experience to be a pretty one. As I organized gear for my first trip into a dewatered section of Davis Gulch in early 2003, I imagined myself floundering through bootsucking mud beneath dead cottonwood trees with skeletal branches pointing skyward and a canyon bottom filled wall-to-wall with impenetrable groves of tamarisk. Much to my surprise, as I descended into the canyon below the old high-water mark of the reservoir, I discovered stream banks lined with willow and cottonwood shoots and frogs with periscope eyes floating in small pools in the clear stream. Ravens and canyon wrens vied for ledges on the newly revealed canyon walls and lizards darted over fresh deer prints pressed into the damp sand beneath my feet. A fuzzy carpet of green grass sprouted along the canyon floor a mere hundred feet upstream from the reced-

ing waters of the reservoir. While drought usually presents great challenges to life in the West, here along the alcoves and narrows beneath the canyon rims, a lost world was being reborn. Like a cork erupting from a well-shaken bottle of champagne, life was exploding everywhere.

My forays into the canyons soon evolved into a five-year project culminating in a book, *The Resurrection of Glen Canyon: A New Vision for Living in the American West.* When I first embarked on this project, I was primarily motivated by my desire to explore places I thought were forever out of my reach; to search for magic light in canyons few people had ever seen before. But as the project evolved, it took on additional mean-



ing as I realized it was about more than beautiful, glowing sandstone chambers; it was about witnessing the transformation of these canyons as life reclaimed the barren ground.

Willow Gulch provided the most remarkable example of this transformation process. Located several miles north of Davis Gulch, Willow has carved a deep groove into the Navajo sandstone on its short journey to the Escalante River. For my first trip into Willow back in 2005 to photograph its dewatered section, I dropped in near its headwaters and wound my way deeper and deeper into its labyrinth until I encountered the old high-water mark of the reservoir. I always feel as if I'm walking into a time machine as I descend into these formerly reservoir-flooded canyons. As I wandered down Willow, I was dismayed to discover a mile-long devastation zone of crumbling sediment banks, oozing mud, windblown tumbleweeds and swirling clouds of dust. Not a pretty picture. Other than a few shots of the apocalyptic scene, I saved a lot of money on film that day.

Exactly two years later, I returned to Willow and witnessed a phenomenal transformation. Where there had been nothing but devastation, life now flourished. Thick stands of willow and cattail crowded the sandy banks along the shallow stream. Fifteen-foot-tall cottonwood trees restaked their claims. The windblown tumbleweeds were nowhere to be seen, and the canyon echoed with the sounds of birds, frogs and gurgling water. A sculpted 10-foot-tall waterfall, which had been entirely buried beneath the reservoir sediment on my previous trip, was now fully exposed. Further down the 97 Outdoor Photographer outdoorphotographer.com canyon, as I rounded that last bend in the walls and saw the stagnant waters of the reservoir, the scene immediately changed back to one of devastation.

In what I came to refer to as "The Dead Zone," that place where the reservoir meets the land, bubbles rose through the oozing muck at the reservoir's edge while dead cottonwood logs floated on the scum-covered water. All greenery had vanished and the canyon was dead silent except for the sound of an idling powerboat around the next bend. Anxious to return to the living world of the canyon above the reservoir, a profound feeling swept over me as soon as I retreated upstream around the first bend. As though a line had been drawn in the sand, I was immediately out of the Dead Zone and surrounded again by willows, cattails, cottonwoods and the sounds of life. It was like flipping a switch. Down canyon was an example of how we manage our world, and here was an example of how the forces of nature manage things.

The water level of Lake Powell dropped to an all-time low of 145 feet below its full-pool capacity in April 2005. Last winter's above-average snowpack raised the water level to its highest point since 2002. As I write this, it laps at the dam, 71 feet down the face. Much of what I saw has once again slipped beneath the waves. It's difficult to say where things are headed. As we continue to conduct a vast global experiment by dumping CO2 into the air, we will undoubtedly affect the precipitation patterns in the West. Scientist's suggest that our planet's wet places will get wetter and the dry places dryer. If this assumption is correct, we can look forward to more prolonged and severe droughts in the West with all their ramifications, including their effect on the lost canyons of Glen Canyon.

See more of **James Kay**'s explorations in Glen Canyon in the forthcoming book The Resurrection of Glen Canyon: A New Vision for Living in the American West by Annette McGivney; Photographs by James Kay. Go to www.BraidedRiver Books.org for more information.



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