Rough work on the Patuxent

**Roughnecks crew paddles up river to remove blockages**

By PAMELA WOOD, Staff Writer

"We're kind of going on faith," Fred Tutman said as he paddled a canoe down the Patuxent River. "You know - 'If you build it, they will come.'"

"It" isn't a baseball diamond in a cornfield, as made famous by the movie "Field of Dreams." In this case, "it" is a path down the Patuxent River that's navigable for paddlers and clearly marked.

One day, Mr. Tutman, the Patuxent Riverkeeper, envisions a water trail that encourages ecotourism and fosters interest in the river. But there are plenty of obstacles in the way - literally.

Tree trunks, branches, tires and debris clog...
sections of the river, making it impassible for paddlers.

That's where the Patuxent Roughnecks come in.

Once a month since April, the crew has been searching out blockages in the river and dismantling them.

By the time they wrap up this year's work with their October trip, the Roughnecks will have cleared scores of obstacles - generally downed trees - mostly in the mid-section of the Patuxent along the Prince George's-Anne Arundel border.

For their most recent trip, the Roughnecks met at the riverkeeper office in a converted barn on Mr. Tutman's farm in Queen Anne, a rural hamlet off Route 214 between Davidsonville and Mitchellville.

The crew - six strong this week - loaded four kayaks and a two-man canoe and headed for U.S. Park Service property along the river to launch. That effort was thwarted, however, when they realized their desired put-in spot was blocked.

So they headed over to a tiny Prince George's County park and put in near an old bridge over the river that's used for fishing.

After about 10 minutes of paddling upriver toward the Route 214 bridge, the Roughnecks found their first obstacle. A tree had fallen across the river, leaving almost no room for even the smallest kayak to pass.

It took another 10 minutes for them to tie up and hoist themselves up on the riverbanks to assess the situation. Initially, the group decided to saw off one large branch.

After that didn't seem to work very well - and after crew member Jim Dwyer of Bowie slipped and got soaked in the cool waters of the Patuxent - they decided to employ a "come-along," a hand-operated winch small enough to carry in a kayak.

With one end of the come-along attached to a rope around the branch, and the other end strapped to a tree on the shore, the team cranked and cranked and cranked.

As the group strategized and sweated, the brown river gently gurgled by undisturbed.

Eventually the branch gave way and began to split off from the trunk with a loud crack, eliciting cheers of "Whoa!" and "Look at it go!"

Mr. Dwyer scrambled down the tree trunk and kicked the offending branch loose. It floated downstream, and the Roughnecks willed it not to create another blockage, cheering, "Go to the right! Go to the right!"
In the end, the branch did go right, resting against another tree trunk downstream - but not blocking the opening to the left.

"We're good, like nine pins," Mr. Tutman joked.

After an hour of work to clear that one tree branch, the Roughnecks climbed back into their boats and paddled on up the river.

They hoped to find a 4-foot-diameter tree blocking the river, which had been reported to Lauren Webster, who works for the riverkeeper program and coordinates the Roughnecks' trips.

Ms. Webster tracks reports of blockages and arranges for permission to get access. It can be difficult, given that there are few landmarks along much of the river, especially the narrow, forested sections along the Anne Arundel-Prince George's border.

And the river flows through seven counties.

The Roughnecks didn't find the 4-foot tree, but they did find a newly fallen sweetgum that was impossible to get past.

In this case, all it took to clear the way was to cut off a few small branches that still had bright green leaves and prickly gumballs attached.

The Roughnecks try to strike a balance with their work. While they want to make the river passable for paddlers, they don't want to upset the natural world of the river and its forested banks.

So they disturb things as little as possible, removing the fewest branches possible to make for a clear path.

While most of the work so far has been to improve human passage, they also keep their eyes out for spots that could cause problems for fish trying to get through.

"It's gone great," Ms. Webster said. "We've taken out a ton of blockages."

Mr. Tutman and Ms. Webster hope to use the newly cleared section of the river as a site for next year's Patuxent Sojourn, an annual multi-day paddling and camping trip.

They also plan to lobby for improved access to the river. Though much of the section flowing through this area is surrounded by parkland, there are few launches or other access points to the river from the Anne Arundel side.

The riverkeeper staffers hope that if the river is clear for paddlers, more people will be able to experience the river, and in turn, learn about it and care about it.

The Roughnecks' work can be backbreaking and tedious - and often wet - but the volunteers keep coming back for more.
Ms. Webster said she's had close to 20 Roughneck volunteers during this first year of the program. Some joined for one or two trips, while others, like Mr. Dwyer and Owings resident Howard Wellman, have been on every trip since April.

"Since I liked paddling the river, it seemed like a good thing to do to keep the river clear," Mr. Wellman said.

Kate Fritz of Gambrills figured that working with the Roughnecks was a good way to do her part to help the river.

"With volunteering, it's hard to recruit people," she said. "I like to help where I can."

For information about the Patuxent Roughnecks or other Patuxent Riverkeeper programs, visit www.paxriverkeeper.org or call 301-249-8200.

Published September 19, 2006, The Capital, Annapolis, Md.
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