

# Hunters take tippy trip

## River journey challenges duo to remain afloat

**W** AUTOMA — “Dennis ... what the heck is happening?”

I tried to phrase the question in a calm and reasonable manner, in a gravity of tone befitting a person who finds himself sitting in the Mekan River in frigid water up to his belly button.



Jim Lee

Passengers on the Titanic undoubtedly had similar queries.

One minute, Dennis Carey and I were cruising down this central Wisconsin stream in his new, slightly modified duck-hunting skiff, pirouetting around snags and slipping sneakily around brushy bends.

The next instant, the craft — under clear skies and without warning — flooded and sank.

“What’s going on?” I turned and repeated my query to the stunned captain of the vessel.

Nearly up to his armpits in an icy bath, Carey sputtered an apology.

“I noticed the river was deep and over my head in spots so I decided to paddle the skiff to shore and put on a life jacket,” he explained.

It’s strange how easily a lifesaving thought could become perilous.

As the pointed bow of the low-profile, kayak-shaped skiff moved upward onto shallow sand, it forced the stern, weighted by Carey, down to the point where any sudden movement invited a rush of current inside.

With two adults and a dog in a tiny, tippy craft, someone or something was always shifting.

The skiff had merely succumbed to the inevitable.

Fortunately, the incident occurred in the shallows, and the sinking was more of a flooded grounding.

Carey and I were wearing neoprene waders. For the most part, the two of us stayed dry. The same could not be said of our cargo.

Each of our shotguns took the plunge.

Jiggs, Carey’s obedient, all-purpose Drahthaar hunting dog, floated out of the boat and eagerly swam to shore, relishing an opportunity to escape the craft’s narrow confines.

Two boat cushions surfaced, as did a pair of life jackets. A zippered bag containing lunch and extra shotgun shells submerged. Paddles anchored by rope



Photo by Jim Lee

**Dennis Carey** readjusts makeshift seats on his duck-hunting skiff as his German wirehaired pointer watches. The low-slung craft unexpectedly filled with water and sank while approaching shore. After emptying the

remained with the ship.

“It was bound to happen; the way this whole day has been going,” Carey observed.

We hauled the skiff ashore, tipped out the water, repacked and resumed the journey.

The original plan was to float a section of the river where public lands abound, hoping to flush mallards and perhaps a wood duck or two. The problem was, neither of us was familiar with the territory, a factor that produced unexpected obstacles.

The first spot we selected from a map turned out to be a state-owned public fishing area where hunting was prohibited. Our second choice, we discovered belatedly, was posted as a waterfowl refuge.

We finally found a suitable stretch of river, deposited one car at the intended exit point, drove to the drop-off area and eventually slid the skiff off Carey’s truck, down a grassy embankment and into the current.

An hour later, we were bailing

out the boat.

“I feel like I’m piloting a submarine,” Carey remarked from his soggy paddling post as the trek restarted.

My job was to sit on a specially-mounted boat seat at the front of the craft, facing downstream, shotgun at the ready, prepared to fire at any ducks that might burst from partially iced-over stream-side sloughs.

Carey, the captain, sat on a makeshift seat at the stern with a long-shafted kayak paddle. His responsibility was to navigate the skiff through the river’s intricate weave of deadfalls, sandbars and side channels.

In the event the lead gunner brought down a duck, the positions would be reversed.

The fact that both of us were sitting higher than was suitable for the skiff, raising its tipability considerably, somehow escaped our notice.

We never got to test my paddling skills.

About a mile downstream from

flooded craft and reloading equipment (strewn on shore at right), Carey and outdoors writer Jim Lee continued their tenuous downstream journey on the Mekan River.

the dunking, a footbridge suddenly loomed across the 10-yard-wide stream. It was a menacingly sturdy, low, steel-girdered affair with wire cables underneath.

“Take the left side, as close to the bank as possible,” I advised Carey. “It’s our only opening.”

He tried.

I ducked limbo low. Not enough. Curse those fixed raised seats.

My head bounced off inflexible girders ... once, twice, thrice.

The skiff lurched.

Carey grabbed.

The dog shifted.

The skiff skidded sideways in the current.

I twisted.

Suddenly, with a sprightly bounce, the boat slipped out from under the doomsday overhang and popped out the downstream side.

“Well, I never thought we could do it but we made it, Dennis,” I gasped in relief.

There was no reply.

I looked back.

Carey was dangling from the outer bridge girder. He’d grabbed on in an attempt to hold the skiff in place while keeping it from capsizing ... only to have the boat slip out from under him.

Hanging half in the water and half out, he worked his way hand-over-hand to the bank, where we regrouped and emptied the semi-sloshed skiff.

By then, we were in a reflective mood.

“You know,” Carey said, “I never thought I’d say this, but I hope we don’t see any ducks. If we do and you shoot, you know we’re going to tip this thing over again.”

As fortune would have it, the only ducks we encountered — a trio of mallards — flushed well out of range.

Two hunters breathed a sigh of relief.

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