

Rock and roll with the rolling stones during a challenging trek down the Cass River

By Tom Lounsbury

The record spring floods of 2019 in the Thumb had caused the Cass River to do a bit of “custom” landscaping along its riverbanks by removing soil and rocks with turbulent currents, and pushing a lot of it downstream. This was especially so on the Cass River’s Upper Reaches. An example was a residence located near Caro which had a decent-sized island formed in the middle of the river behind their home, almost overnight. When another flood occurred, the island completely disappeared, with the previously compiled soil and rocks being forced further downstream toward the Caro Dam.

Terrain 360, based in Richmond, Virginia, had been contracted to map a number of rivers in southeast Michigan. This would eventually include the Flint River, Shiawassee River, Saginaw River and Cass River, with this portion of the project being funded by the I-69 Thumb Region Prosperity Network and the Saginaw County Parks and Recreation. Ecotourism has become a highly popular outdoor pastime, including utilizing the access to the rivers in certain localities, and enjoying what they have to offer. Being able to go online and seeing detailed maps and information of each river is a definite plus for folks, and this is what Terrain 360 is all about, utilizing some very specialized equipment.

All of this fell right in line with the many goals of the Cass River Greenway (CRG) who had volunteers, me among them, ready and waiting to assist Terrain 360 (T-360) in its efforts, a very necessary part of the equation. Prior to T-360’s arrival, the Cass River had to be reconnoitered, with the Upper Reaches being done by Larry Kolb of Cass City (in a kayak), and Myles Willard of Mayville and myself (in a canoe).

The only obstruction we had encountered was a natural dam across the river, which had been formed by rocks being rolled downstream by flooding waters, and collecting in a sharp bend of the river. We were hoping at the time, this was a temporary situation, just like “overnight islands” formed in the river.

Major flooding can do amazing things to a river, including creating impassible logjams.

The T-360 project on the Cass River had to be delayed a bit due to continual flooding, causing the water to have the same appearance as chocolate milk, which would not be very photogenic to record per online viewing. However, matters would begin in mid-July, when the water became crystal clear. The problem with this timeframe is that the Upper Reaches can experience water level changes, according to the ongoing weather (which happens to most rivers). It just so happened that the weather had just turned splendid, being sunny, warm and dry for a week, which was causing me some concern.

The Upper Reaches of the Cass River is typically canoe and kayak territory, for which it is a real jewel. However, I had been informed that T-360 was coming with a custom-designed river raft featuring inflatable pontoons, oars and even an outboard. I was going to be the river guide on board, going from Evergreen Park in Sanilac County to Chippewa Landing in Tuscola County, hopefully in one day. I truthfully didn't know what to expect, and decided to go with the flow, and do my best in assisting matters.

On the scheduled morning, I met Ryan Crenshaw, who was the Captain of the vessel, and a highly skilled riverman. The river raft was definitely a bit bigger than I was expecting, although it appeared to have a relatively shallow draft, despite some obvious weight. It had a tall pole extending up with 5 cameras on top for a 360 degree pan, with wires feeding down to a computer – quite a high-tech setup. I still had confidence we might do well, and when we launched from Evergreen Park, the weather was warm and sunny, with clear blue skies. That stretch of river used to be called the “Dead-waters” by the old timers and features relatively deep waters and a slow current. This is due to a limestone shelf located downstream which acts as a dam. Once you get past this, the current picks right up. We were humming along fine with the outboard for the first mile or so, and then matters took a dramatic change when we got out of the “Dead-waters”.

The water level had dropped as I had surmised, but it was made much shallower by the countless rolling stones literally moving around and covering the river bottom. Crenshaw and I had no choice but to lift the outboard, get out and

start shoving the raft, which I can tell you can be a real challenge when you are stepping on animated, round stones, mostly the size of baseballs. This would become the pattern, with getting on again and off again at certain spots, with Crenshaw able to use the oars whenever possible, and the outboard was no longer a viable option. Some of the stretches we had to push through were on the lengthy side, which required teamwork, and I was doing my best to carry my weight. However, there were times Crenshaw could motivate a bit faster than me, and I ended up taking the occasional header when I lost my grip on the raft.

Well, folks, in my defense, I would like to state that Crenshaw was half my age and built like “Hulk Hogan”. It was like teaming up an old beater farm truck with a Hummer! During these times, I would have drag myself up and start wading as fast as possible to catch up, which is real interesting when you have rolling stones continually underfoot, and because you are wading downstream with a current faster than you, disrupted silt masks everything you are about to step into. A number of times I sensed I was about to step into a hole, but the brisk current, with the aid of rolling stones, kept my feet going forward, and down I would go backwards. Needless to say, folks, I ended with a whole bunch of dents in my “tailgate”!

At one point, I was caught in a rapids, and there was no way to get stabile footing, so I realized I needed a wading staff. I basically had to belly-crawl through matters to a dead ash tree lying near the shore, to break off a handy branch. This wasn't easy, because my life-vest kept me buoyant enough in the shallows, that the fast current wanted to carry me downstream, and I had to do some serious scrambling. The wading stick sure made a difference.

I was wearing swim trunks, and at one point when almost reaching the raft waiting for me in waist-deep water, I felt something bumping the back of my bare legs, and assumed it was debris coming with the current, and then it latched on! I looked down and saw a lamprey eel attached to my leg. I highly doubt it was a sea lamprey that far upstream, but instead a native creek lamprey which had mistaken my bare leg in the silty water for a fish (its true target). I would like to say that I let out manly bellow and wacked it away with my improvised wading stick, but according to Crenshaw, I “screamed like a girl” while flailing away at the

eel. Nope, folks, I sure do dislike things surprising me out of nowhere by latching on!

Despite a bit of effort here and there, we eventually made it to the Cemetery Road Bridge intact. There were times I'm certain that Crenshaw thought the old geezer assisting him was about to have a cardiac arrest, but that wasn't the case at all. It is just that he was able to shift into overdrive when required, while my "transmission" was often still in creeper gear. We got 'er done, though!

We ended up extracting the river raft at the Cemetery Road Bridge, as I had informed Crenshaw that the raft was too large to continue further downstream to the Dodge Road Bridge. This section, which is a true paddling favorite of mine, has one of the fastest drops in the Cass River and features multiple rapids with some pretty big boulders (which I know quite well and have even given some of the notable boulders very colorful names). It would have been no problem with something that was more narrow, lighter and nimble.

Crenshaw would launch the next morning from the Dodge Road Bridge and head downstream for Chippewa Landing, this time with Larry Kolb of Cass City as his river guide. I had discovered that we "older gents" needed to work in relays with the youthful and seasoned T-360 riverman. The fact is, I was in the recovery mode, and simply getting out of bed that morning was an ordeal. However, I was on hand to greet them that afternoon when they landed at Chippewa Landing.

When they came in, the river raft was motoring right along with the outboard, and with Larry Kolb sitting in the front. Larry had worn long pants, and I could tell right away that his pant-legs, especially, were a bit tattered (he sort of reminded me of someone rescued after being lost at sea for a while). Yep, folks, I'm real glad we had performed a relay, and I couldn't wait to hear the story!

One thing is for certain, it was an honor in assisting T-360 in mapping the Upper Reaches of the Cass River, and it was a real pleasure working with Ryan Crenshaw. He is a real good man to "traverse the river" with, anytime.

