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Lake Powell's Glen Canyon Dam is failing and Utahns need to stop pretending it's worth saving.

Breaking the Overton Window

By [Zak Podmore](#)



Photo caption: As Lake Powell continues to recede, a growing body of stakeholders argue that the best fix is to let it die. Zak Podmore

Lake Mead wraps itself around the southeastern edge of Nevada, a blob of dark blue clinging to the gray desert like a three-armed barometer of climate collapse.

One arm reaches upstream from Hoover Dam, past the inlets that pump water to Las Vegas and the wash that returns the city's treated wastewater to the reservoir. The lake narrows in Boulder Canyon and then splits into its main bays, one connecting to the Colorado River in western Grand Canyon and the other fed by the Virgin River in what's known as the Overton Arm.

If you look at maps of the Overton Arm today, you'll see it's dotted with place names like Old Swim Beach, places that are no longer anywhere near the reservoir. The Overton Arm has shifted, retreating down the historic path of the Virgin River toward the Hoover Dam as the reservoir shrinks.

Lake Mead and Lake Powell, the two largest reservoirs in the United States, haven't been close to full since 1999, and both are more than two-thirds empty today. Nobody can debate that.

But somehow, the Overton Window that frames what's permissible in the discourse around Colorado River management has not shifted as rapidly as the Overton Arm of Lake Mead, even as recognition spreads that the river is headed into a new phase of crisis in 2026.

The heat wave in March decimated an already dismal snowpack, and the Colorado River's spring runoff is set to be lower this year than any in modern history, breaking the record-low set in 2002.

But unlike 2002, when the Colorado's biggest reservoirs were mostly full, this year's meager snowmelt will flow into reservoirs that are now mostly empty.

There is a lot of noise around the stalled negotiations between the seven Colorado River states, the deepening mega-drought, and the states that are lawyering up. Those are all real factors in a vast system that's impacted by everything from layers of state water law and century-old legal frameworks to the bare mountainsides in the Wasatch.

It's possible for decision makers to hide behind competing narratives because water issues are so complicated. But after 15 years of reporting on water in the Southwest, much of the discussion appears to me as delusional. Basin states like Utah and Colorado are arguing over paper water that doesn't exist.

Some large environmental groups are behaving as if the Glen Canyon Dam—a failing, 60-year-old piece of concrete—is as integral to the Colorado River as the six-million-year-old Grand Canyon. Other voices are suggesting that we should build our way back into a wetter past by constructing a vast network of desalination plants.

Reading “water Twitter” or the op-ed pages these days all too often feels like we’re standing on Old Swim Beach in the Overton Arm. We’re miles from water. Lake Mead is barely visible far in the distance. And yet, there’s a group of people—some of the very people responsible for setting water policy—who are loudly stating that their feet are wet even though they’re ankle deep in sand.

One of the biggest delusions centers upon Lake Powell. The situation is as urgent as it is because of the design of the Glen Canyon Dam, which is on the brink of failure.

Unless, by some miracle, the Overton Arm refills with water, the Overton Window needs to recenter on fixing what Glen Canyon Institute has called the “antiquated plumbing” inside the Glen Canyon Dam. The dam must be modified so Lake Powell can be emptied, and there is little time left to wait.



Photo caption: Despite an historic drought, negotiations among the seven Colorado River states have repeatedly stalled. Zak Podmore

De Facto Dead Pool

Right now, it's not possible to drain Lake Powell, even in an emergency. And there is no way to significantly refill Lake Powell by sacrificing other reservoirs. The emergency water releases from Flaming Gorge Reservoir on the Wyoming/Utah border probably won't be enough to prevent Lake Powell from dropping to 3,500 feet in elevation by the early fall.

According to the Bureau of Reclamation, that's the safest minimum elevation that Lake Powell can reach, and releases from the dam are already being curtailed. Less water will flow through the Grand Canyon in 2026 than any year since 1963, when Lake Powell first started to fill.

The 3,500-foot elevation isn't true "dead pool" on Lake Powell, when water cannot flow downstream. But due to flaws in the dam's lowest outlets—at 3,370 feet—relying on them is extremely risky.

If 3,500 feet is the lowest safe elevation, it can be thought of as what High Country News has called "de facto dead pool." At that level, Lake Powell is over 23% full and contains nearly 6 million acre-feet of water, enough to supply downstream water users—27 million people and some of the most productive farmland in the country—for around nine months at standard rates of consumption.

Delivering that water to Lake Mead would help prevent dead pool on the Hoover Dam as the seven basin states continue to negotiate a plan. But there is no easy way to move that water downstream unless river-level tunnels are drilled around the Glen Canyon Dam.

So why, after a quarter-plus century of warnings about climate change's toll on the Colorado River, hasn't the dam been upgraded to prevent dead pool? There's no great answer to that question.

Lake Powell does not directly supply water to any farms or major cities. Glen Canyon Dam is set to generate less electricity than ever this summer, the rough equivalent of the power produced by a 10,000-acre, utility-scale solar farm.

Only one of its boat ramps is expected to be operational by mid-summer, and the recreation economy of Page, Arizona, has started to shift toward land-based activities.

Modifying the dam and emptying Lake Powell would mean the end to reservoir recreation and hydropower generation, both of which are threatened already. But it would also make the overall management of water along the Colorado River more efficient.

There is growing recognition that the existence of Lake Powell is an impediment to water deliveries. The three Lower Basin states—California, Arizona and Nevada—have

called the Bureau of Reclamation “shortsighted” for focusing on plans to prop up Lake Powell without also considering a longer-term fix: “infrastructure repairs and improvements” at the dam.

There would be another major benefit to bypassing the Glen Canyon Dam with river-level tunnels. Its namesake, Glen Canyon, would continue to heal.

Already, 100,000 acres of land that were once flooded by Lake Powell have been re-exposed. And in the 100-plus side canyons that feed into the Colorado and San Juan rivers, the ecological recovery has been swift.

Native species are outcompeting invasive species along perennial streambeds, and researchers have found that after 15 years of recovery, biodiversity in many side canyons is as rich as areas that were never flooded.

The rivers flow more than 90 miles further than they did in 1999, carving through reservoir sediments to restore habitat for endangered fish, beavers, river otters, bighorn sheep, peregrine falcons and many other species.

But you wouldn't know any of that if you receive Colorado River updates from major environmental groups. American Rivers, which fundraises off of dam removal across the country, has long opposed upgrading the dam and recently questioned the feasibility of capping Lake Powell's water level to allow environmental restoration to continue.

The Audubon Society, Nature Conservancy and Environmental Defense Fund joined American Rivers and other groups in submitting lengthy recommendations to the Bureau of Reclamation in March, which made no demand that the federal agency study dam modifications.

The Sierra Club, to its credit, is finally calling upon Reclamation to fully analyze the construction of “new outlet works at or near the river bed level,” after remaining mostly silent on the issue in recent years. The Salt Lake City-based Glen Canyon Institute remains a leader in analyzing plumbing problems at the dam while also documenting the remarkable ecological recovery already underway in Glen Canyon.

The Great Reset

Back in the 1990s, when you could swim from the now-stranded beaches in the Overton Arm, there was an environmental argument for draining Lake Powell. But it made sense why that position was not part of mainstream water management discussions—the system appeared to be working.

The reservoirs emptied some during droughts, and refilled when wet cycles returned. The dams were churning out electricity, allowing the federal government to provide power to rural areas at subsidized rates. Millions of people came to lakes Mead and Powell every year to fish, camp and houseboat.



Photo caption: Native plant and animal species are returning to parts of Glen Canyon that were underwater for decades. Zak Podmore

There was some logic to an ostensibly pro-river group like American Rivers taking it for granted that the Glen Canyon Dam, despite the negative environmental consequences of its construction, would be around for decades to come. And it would have been shocking to see the governor of California, Arizona or Nevada demand dam upgrades.

Back then, acolytes of the environmentalist writer Edward Abbey dreamed of a precision earthquake near Page, imagining a future outside the scope of Overton Bay. The middle-of-the-river position was a flooded Glen Canyon.

But in a world where Swim Beach has become Old Swim Beach, the moderate, reasonable and sensible position is now represented by Glen Canyon Institute. The group says new bypass tunnels should be built around the dam so that the nearly 6 million acre-feet of water trapped in Lake Powell at 3,500 feet can be accessed. But it also proposes installing gates on those tunnels so the reservoir could be used again if 20th-century streamflows return.

Wealthy Imperial Valley farmers in California now see dam modifications as a necessity, not an environmentalist dream. Other groups like Living Rivers in Moab are calling for a full, permanent decommissioning of the dam, a proposal that has also become more reasonable as the Overton Arm has dried up and Lake Powell provides fewer real benefits to water managers.

Conservative organizations like the Blue Ribbon Coalition now stand where monkey wrenchers were once seen to occupy—outside the scope of polite discourse. Last year, the pro-motorized-recreation group released its draft Colorado River Abundance Act, which proposes spending at least \$40 billion in federal funds to artificially prop up Lake Powell through the construction of expensive and energy-intensive desalination plants—a price tag 40 times greater than the cost of the Glen Canyon Dam itself, even after being adjusted for inflation.

A classic boondoggle, the Blue Ribbon Coalition has proposed taking this costly and complicated path in service of its one major goal: continued reservoir recreation on Lake Powell.

Aridification has come to the Colorado River Basin. What makes more sense? Should we prepare to drain Lake Powell and celebrate the largest environmental restoration in the history of the Southwest? Or should we bury our heads in the sand of Old Swim Beach and pray for rain?

Zak Podmore is the author of *Life After Dead Pool: Lake Powell's Last Days and the Rebirth of the Colorado River*, which was published by Torrey House in 2024. He lives in Bluff, Utah.

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As Lake Powell recedes, a Utah author's new book explores the past, present and possible futures of Glen Canyon.

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Zak Podmore for The Salt Lake City Weekly

July 9, 2024



Photo caption: Native plants dominate the new banks of the San Juan River after decades underwater.

The following is an excerpt from the book "Life After Dead Pool: Lake Powell's Last Days and the Rebirth of the Colorado River" by Zak Podmore. The book, to be published in August by Torrey House Press, is currently available for preorder. The excerpt below is reprinted with permission.

Wade McKinney and I had high expectations for ourselves when our alarms went off at 6:30 a.m. on a cold winter morning at my house in Bluff. Wade, a river guide who I'd met a few years earlier on an all-kayak trip in the Grand Canyon, had arrived from southwest Colorado the night before. We talked about getting an early start so we could make the two-and-a-half hour drive to Clay Hills Crossing on the San Juan River and start our two-week paddle down the final miles of the San Juan, across the reservoir delta, and into Lake Powell.

By 8 o'clock, we were still on the couch drinking coffee and catching up. We motivated ourselves for a brief flurry of packing, stuffing gear in drybags and lashing sea kayaks to the roof of Wade's 1985 Toyota truck before we retreated to the house again for some breakfast. Wade dumped a pound of ground bison meat into a cast iron pan and scrambled in eight eggs while flipping a heap of hash browns in another skillet. Soon

he'd engaged all four burners on the stove, making espresso and dropping dollops of pancake batter onto yet another pan that he'd smeared with butter.

He sliced up three oranges, all while I danced around him trying to keep the contents of the various pans from burning and mostly getting in the way. After he'd served up the meal (and Wade had gone back to the stove two or three times to ensure there were no leftovers), we were further delayed by a mid-morning food coma. By the time we pulled out of the driveway, it was well past noon.

In the summer months, when he's rowing boats and guiding clients down the Grand Canyon, Wade is legendary among his colleagues for his work ethic. His days start well before dawn when he lights coals for a Dutch oven so he can have fresh-baked pastries ready by the time the bleary-eyed guests emerge from their tents. He doesn't rest until after the morning's camp has been broken down, the boats packed, the rapids run, the guests entertained with endless stories, the boats unloaded at the next camp, the dinner cooked, and the dishes put away.



Photo caption: Wade McKinney stands beside Fatt Falls, which formed in the bed of Lake Powell after water levels began dropping in 2000. Wade McKinney stands beside Fatt Falls, which formed in the bed of Lake Powell after water levels began dropping in 2000.

In the off-season, though, Wade is equally legendary among his friends for his ability to, as he puts it, relentlessly squander his time. He is the only person I know who has packed two weeks of food to run an 80-mile section of river—a very relaxed pace to begin with—and then has proceeded to spend twelve days at a single campsite just downstream from the launch point. On that particular trip, Wade was with his frequent river companion, Quinn, and in those 12 days they never strayed far from their boats, preferring instead to do 200 pushups and 400 squats in the morning and then spend the rest of the day, as Wade often says, "lounging like lions in the sun." Only when the copious amount of food they'd packed was nearly gone did they get back on the water to complete the entire run in two marathon days.

Wade had recently finished a solo trip on the wilderness section of the Salt River in Arizona—a four-day run for most boaters—in 19 days. While lounging like a lion, he'd gone toe to paw with a real feline, a half-starved mountain lion that invaded his camp and shredded his tent before he could scare it away with rocks and by firing his .22 rifle into the air. (A day later, the mountain lion attacked another rafter, who had to be evacuated.) The encounter was not enough to persuade Wade to shorten his layover plans; he spent the six subsequent days in the same camp, watching a series of floods roar through the canyon while keeping an eye open for the cat.

In short, Wade was the kind of guy who would not only agree to spend a couple weeks on Lake Powell at a moment's notice but also one who would never get stressed by how slowly I—a lazy, if not legendarily lazy, kayaker—was moving at any given moment.

After finishing our multi-course breakfast, our day did not take on a sense of urgency. We shopped for food and drove Wade's Toyota to the San Juan to unload our boats at Clay Hills. By then it was too late to paddle, so we built a fire in a campsite tucked into the tamarisk-choked flats. We were already below Lake Powell's high-water mark, though the campsite hadn't been flooded in more than 20 years.

Having run the San Juan many times, I was familiar with the effects of Lake Powell on the last 17 miles of the multi-day river trip that ends at Clay Hills. The San Juan is not known for its difficult rapids, but, compared to other popular rafting destinations in the Utah desert, it flows at a relatively fast pace. The gradient of the river, the number of feet it descends per mile, is on par with the Grand Canyon. But unlike the Grand—where water pools along flat, slow-moving stretches and then explodes in discrete rapids—the San Juan takes more of a steady approach, pouring through rock gardens and around the bends of its limestone gorge with just a few minor rapids along the way.

That pattern changes dramatically when the San Juan River approaches Lake Powell's historic high-water mark at 3,700 feet in elevation after Slickhorn Canyon. Below Slickhorn, the current slows considerably, and it braids out into shallow channels that weave back and forth between ever-shifting sandbars. Nearly all river runners exit the San Juan River at the Clay Hills Crossing boat ramp where a warning sign reads:

DANGEROUS
Waterfall Ahead
DO NOT Proceed
Take All Craft Out Here

The San Juan is the only major river that flows into Lake Powell besides the Colorado. I'd already paddled through the Colorado's reservoir delta near Hite, and now we were going to see the San Juan's delta, as well as a stretch of returning river corridor that few people visit.

The next morning, Wade and I lowered our kayaks from the truck's rack beside the warning sign and began to load bags into our boats. Wade's reputation for setting a leisurely pace is matched by his ability to fit an ungodly amount of gear into his kayak. For this trip, he decided to leave behind his 12-person, teepee-like tent and collapsible titanium wood stove, which he typically brings on winter kayak adventures. But he made up for it with other amenities: blow torch (for campfire starting), fire blanket (for containing campfire ashes), two sleeping pads, a ukulele and his beloved Dutch oven (for making riverside pastries). Wade talked me into bringing a full-sized guitar to play along with the uke, and both of us ended up strapping bulging dry bags to the back decks of our boats.

With all of this in place, we slid into drysuits and started downstream. Almost immediately the current picked up from the maze of sandbars. We floated between banks of the "Dominy Formation"—the name geologists have given to the sediment that has accumulated in Lake Powell, a tongue-in-cheek homage to the infamous Floyd Dominy, who was commissioner of the Bureau of Reclamation when the Glen Canyon Dam was being completed.

Dead and dying tamarisk lined the river. After running several small rapids, we heard the roar of Fatt Falls, where the river disappeared over a clean horizon line with plumes of mist rising from beyond.

We pulled over in a small eddy on the left bank. The rapid wasn't so much a waterfall as a bedrock slide, the water careening over an 18-foot drop at a 60-degree angle. We passed our kayaks down a water-slicked rock ledge beside the drop. The easy portage took all of 10 minutes, even with the heavy boats.

As we continued downstream in our kayaks, a single coal-black thunderhead consumed the canyon ahead while the sun shone on our backs. Sunlight cut under the approaching storm, igniting the Wingate Sandstone walls into a corridor of red fire that vanished into sheets of angry rain. The storm soon enveloped us, and the rain turned to sleet. Gusts of wind forced us to pick up our pace, our hands exposed and numb.



Photo caption: Wade McKinney paddles toward the drowned confluence of the San Juan and Colorado rivers. Wade McKinney paddles toward the drowned confluence of the San Juan and Colorado rivers.

After 15 minutes, the deluge ended as abruptly as it had begun, and the sun shone back through to the gurgling brown river. As the air settled to a light breeze, we set our paddles down on our boats and let the sunlight warm us. The most magnificent aroma drifted from the red-barked willows that grew thick on banks of once-flooded Dominy formation sediment: fresh, fragrant and full of promise. Wade floated beside me, leaned back in his kayak, his eyes shut and a smile on his face.

"How would you even begin to describe that?" I asked.

Wade drew a deep breath through his nose without opening his eyes. "It smells like life," he said. "Clean, pure life."

We pulled over on a Dominy bank to dry out. After coaxing a fire from wet brush, we unpacked our ukulele and guitar, both of which we'd just started learning. A halting singalong of "Clouds so swift and rain fallin' in" seemed appropriate since we weren't going nowhere and, with beans heating on our camp stove, Wade dubbed our band the Legume Brothers: either the world's worst musical act or the canyon's best, depending on your perspective.

There was a huge supply of driftwood scattered near our camp, and Wade began fantasizing about a revival of Norman Nevills' river company, which offered pre-dam float trips down the San Juan and into Glen Canyon. "Twenty-five day trips from Mexican Hat to Lake Powell," he announced, "with a mandatory 20-day layover on this beach, and fires every night."

The next day, we discovered the healthiest Dominy-dominated corridor that I'd encountered on Lake Powell. The area had been mostly exposed since the early 2000s, and groves of 40-foot cottonwoods clung to the shore above a thick forest of privet and coyote willows. Beaver dens lined the banks, birds flitted through the trees and a family of river otters dove into the water from a blocky boulder, one after the other. The San Juan had not carved as deep into the Dominy Formation here as in Cataract Canyon; the pancake-flat banks were just a few feet higher than the river and stretched across what had once been a wide reservoir bay.

As we neared the Great Bend of the San Juan, a 180-degree meander that once awed the clients on Nevills' trips, the more familiar Dominy features started to emerge: the jumbles of sand, silt, and clay spanning the canyon bottom from wall to wall and the river cutting a crazy path between. We camped that night just above the delta on a plain of mud, where Wade coined another term, "bayou boot," to describe what happens when you misjudge solid ground and sink shin-deep in Dominy slop.

Taking care to avoid the bayous, we explored the wasteland of barren mud, working around bogs and over fractures in the ground. A low mound with a perfectly symmetrical shape caught my eye. The formation looked like a three-foot-high shield volcano, the small crater on its summit bubbling as gasses escaped from below. Brenda Bowen, a geologist I'd met in Cataract Canyon, had told me about encountering something similar in the Colorado River's reservoir delta near Hite. She and her colleagues had conducted a beer-in-hand experiment that I decided to repeat.

I asked Wade to grab my arm as I leaned over the crater with a BIC lighter, and I flicked it above the summit of the mound. The miniature volcano erupted in a plume of fire that sputtered down to a low flame for a few moments and blew out. The escaping gas, as Bowen had told me, was mostly methane produced by decaying organic matter in the Dominy formation.

Although hydropower dams have often been categorized as green energy, they are a significant contributor to greenhouse gas emissions. Reservoirs have a global emissions impact that's roughly equivalent to the entire nation of Canada, according to a 2016 article in the journal *Science*. Multiple studies have found that emissions from reservoirs can rival the warming impacts of fossil fuel power plants per kilowatt-hour generated. Bowen had identified yet another research project that could be undertaken on Lake Powell: a survey of the climate-warming gasses being released from decaying organic material trapped in the reservoir bed.

The next day we paddled past the delta front. The river poured into a wide bay, and the current stopped. The silt instantly began to settle out of the opaque brown river water, sinking to the bottom to form the San Juan's Dominy formation glacier. A relatively small river, the San Juan carries only about 15% of the water that the Colorado River dumps into Lake Powell each year. But the San Juan is exceptionally muddy, moving almost as much silt into the reservoir as the Colorado does.



Photo caption: The San Juan River just upstream from its delta in Lake Powell.

As we crossed the delta and paddled onto the reservoir, Wade and I were only 25 miles from the drowned confluence of the two rivers—where the San Juan met the Colorado in the heart of Glen Canyon before Lake Powell. The San Juan's delta was creeping closer to the confluence each day. If it reaches the main channel of Lake Powell, which could happen as soon as 2030, it will cause major problems for reservoir boaters. The glacier will keep marching past the confluence, effectively dividing Lake Powell into two reservoirs.

"I can see that being a problem for water travel as you get just a pile of mud building up in one specific location and no way of modifying that," Hannah Hartley, a grad student at the University of Utah who studied Lake Powell's sediment, told me. "There would be no natural force coming along and washing some of it downstream."

Boaters would likely no longer be able to motor from Bullfrog to Wahweap Marina or vice versa. Their path would be blocked by a shallow mud bar at the confluence.

All of that was still years away as Wade and I paddled down the blue water of Lake Powell's San Juan arm and past the confluence. On the reservoir, the Legume Brothers began to find a rhythm: mornings exploring the landscape on foot or lounging like lions, days in drysuits glued to the seat of our kayaks, and fires and music practice in camp at night. When storm fronts arrived every few days, they turned the reservoir into a violent froth of whitecaps, and it was all we could do to keep our boats straight enough as we fought our way to shore. More than once, we woke to a snow-capped canyon rim in the morning.

We landed our boats and hiked up stream after stream, often suffering from bayou boot in soggy canyon bottoms, sometimes strolling serenely over bedrock chutes and scrambling up falls. A week into our trip, we passed Kane Creek and the Crossing of the Fathers, where Dominguez and Escalante had despaired over the "sterile" country in 1776 during the first visit of Europeans to Glen Canyon. Wade and I were grateful horse meat was not on our dinner menu as it had been for the explorers.



Photo caption: Shifting sediment makes it hard to find footing and leads to "Bayou boot." Shifting sediment makes it hard to find footing and leads to "Bayou boot."

I told Wade that on another trip years earlier I'd found a sign posted at Kane Creek that read: "AREA CLOSED." A party of 20 houseboaters had decided to use the beach

under a cliff as a toilet for several days and the camp had been "deemed unsafe for recreational activities due to potential exposure to human feces," according to the sign.

At the time, graphic photographs of human turds on beaches and slickrock were posted at every boat ramp and marina: warnings to boaters to follow regulations for packing out waste.

The problem is as old as Lake Powell, which has seen regular closures of its beaches over the decades after fecal coliform bacteria has been detected. Worst hit were the road-accessible Lone Rock and Hobie Cat beaches near Wahweap and Bullfrog marinas.

In the early 1990s, Hobie Cat Beach saw annual parties that drew tens of thousands of people and resulted in hundreds of arrests. Outside magazine ran an article in 1993 that included the local law enforcement blotter from a single twenty-four hour period:

- 12:10 a.m. Drunk minor being transported to Visitor Center.
- 9:03 a.m. Gentleman passed out in men's restroom near gas station.
- 11:50 a.m. Cliff-diving accident below restaurant at employee swimming cove.
- 1:05 p.m. Visitor reports individual threatening with a knife on Hobie Cat Beach.
- 1:16 p.m. Gangs from Salt Lake roaming beach stealing T-shirts at gunpoint.
- 5:50 p.m. Hit-and-run jet ski at Bullfrog marina.
- 5:53 p.m. Call to Kane County Sheriff; suspected drug activity in A-loop of campground.
- 6:53 p.m. Car stopped for suspected DUI; found pound of dope.
- 7:42 p.m. Two boat collisions; intoxicated drivers, no injuries.
- 10:59 p.m. Fight breaks out over firewood on beach; one visitor hit in the face with two-by-four, several teeth missing.

Ah, the glory days. Luckily for Wade and me, the wintertime lake was deserted. We passed only a handful of boats over two weeks. We had no problem locating driftwood for fires, and we kept all of our teeth while staying clear of tangles with law enforcement. Though we were forced to filter and drink the lake water each night, we avoided E. coli infections.

The days of exploration felt endless and always surprising. In one canyon, we encountered a slot that narrowed to shoulder-width and remained that way mile after mile, around bends and through pools. We eventually came upon a great horned owl perched on a low ledge, peering down with wide yellow eyes, attentive to our intrusion but not worried enough to flee.

The slot was so long and winding and magical that Wade declared it was the most incredible canyon he'd ever explored, eclipsing the hundreds of world-class hikes in the Grand Canyon. I was inclined to agree. Even more remarkable was that it had been under water just 10 years prior—and that it was almost indistinguishable from the pre-dam photographs.