

# ROCKY CONTOS

## Paddler, Neuroscientist

James John Achilles "Rocky" Contos is a conundrum. He counters his boxer's name with an intellectual's mind. His gentle, high-pitched voice belies a gritty toughness. He runs cutting-edge Class V, but rarely seeks it out. A neuroscientist from Southern California, Contos began kayaking in a college recreation class 20 years ago, and hasn't taken a conventional stroke since. Contos has never owned a new boat or accrued a single piece of sponsored gear, yet his paddling resume places him in an elite class. His early adventures included solo runs on many of the West's standards, from the big water of the Grand and Cataract canyons to the technical rapids of Burnt Ranch Gorge and Kings Canyon. He wrote honest, meticulous reports of his trips on the Web forum rec.boats.paddle, chronicling every arcane detail, from the average speed of the current to the time spent on pee breaks. The analytical approach drew some derision, but Contos kept on writing, and paddling. In 2000, he began traveling to Mexico, undertaking a methodical exploration of every river basin in the Sierra Madre. A decade later, his recorded totals in Mexico speak volumes: 7,459 river miles, 160 rivers, 83 first descents. The first descent total climbs to 119 when counting logical access points, but Contos often paddles right on by these, following rivers all the way to the ocean. It is an offbeat approach. It is the Rocky way. — Tyler Williams

**My first kayak was a Perception Mirage.** I didn't own a car, so I caught a ride to Sacramento, bought the boat, and paddled home to Berkeley—about 120 miles. I wanted to live off the land. Blackberries and figs were in season, so that's about all I ate.

**On the fourth day,** strong winds on Suisun Bay grabbed my paddle and flipped me over. I swam a half-mile to shore and began drying my things, because the trash bags I used to pack my gear weren't quite waterproof.

**I had some hard lessons in my first couple of seasons.** On a solo South Trinity run, I mistakenly drifted into a Class V rapid and pinned for about a minute. Being stuck there on the rock was unnerving, but the Mirage was a flexible boat, and it washed free. I had to chase it for a mile.

**On the Eel at 300,000 cfs,** my kayak washed away during a scout, and I had to swim across the river to reach railroad tracks on the far side. When I finally got to a house, they invited me inside for fish tacos.

**I love high water because that is when you feel the river the most.** I drove all night to catch the

Salmon River's peak at 92,000 cfs. I put in at noon on Marsh Creek, and paddled 69 miles to Sunflower Hot Springs. My sea kayak developed a crack and kept filling with water, but I paddled 150 miles in 12 hours on Day Two, and proved to myself that I could have paddled the entire 196 miles from Marsh Creek to Vinegar Creek during daylight.

**My endurance stems from my love of fruit and health,** both are central to me. It started in fifth grade, when a teacher inspired me to regularly exercise and eat a healthy diet.

**I regularly fast,** and when I'm not on a paddling trip, I run or cycle nearly every day.

**Paddling is not just about adventure and excitement,** but also exercise. That's one reason why I will keep paddling until I die.

**At 14, I started growing fruit,** and joined the California Rare Fruit Grower's Association. I'd go to their meetings as the only kid surrounded by a bunch of old guys. They helped me grow subtropical stuff, mangos, papayas, cherimoyas. It was great. I constantly search for ripe fruits and eat them for breakfast every morning.

**My first trip to Mexico was in 2000,** and my first river there was the lower Piaxtla. I didn't know it at the time, but farther upstream it creates the deepest canyon in North America. I explored it years later with Ben Stookesberry, Darin McQuoid, and Jesse Coombs.

**There was a long section of 200 feet per mile,** and then three big waterfalls that made a 1,600-foot mile. We needed two full climbing ropes to portage them all. The whole trip took seven days to cover just 36 miles. It was a pretty major undertaking.

**After a few years of paddling in Mexico,** I founded SierraRios, a non-profit organization to conserve the rivers there. I maintain a website that provides information on river running in Mexico, and I am writing four river guidebooks to comprehensively cover the country. I hope that my efforts will lead to more opposition to dam construction, which is rampant down there.

**Paddling for me has always been about adventure.** My main motivation with kayaking hasn't been the thrill; it's more about finding a way to travel through the landscape in a natural manner.

