

follow the leaders

Meet three women in the recreation industry who can show us all how to have a good time.

By Sigrid Bathen

Jerrie Groven: Three Forks Whitewater Tours, Coloma.

Jerrie Groven grew up in Torrance, in southern California, where her two sons, now 20 and 22, were born. Troubled by the increasing congestion and pollution, she decided to pack up her kids 16 years ago and move north, settling in Placerville. She has never looked back.

"I took my babies and bolted," says Groven, now 43 and the manager (with her husband, Scott) of a rafting business on the American River in Coloma. "I decided the city was not for us. I didn't want my kids to grow up there. I figured if I was going to be a single mom down there, I could be one here just as well, and the scenery is better."

Then a divorced single mother, she wanted to find work she could do at home so she could be with her children. She started her own home business making refrigerator magnets: "It was called 'Animal Magnetism.' That's how I brought my kids up. It worked out really well."

Nine years ago, she met Scott, who had just completed training to be a river guide and took her on a rafting date.

She was hooked. "I just loved it. I wasn't necessarily

*Photography
by Roy Wilcox*

Jerrie Grov



an indoor girl, but I wasn't a real outdoorsy type either. Maybe it just brings out the best in you. It changed me, gave me more confidence."

She started training to be a guide and, beginning in 1988, led tours for Auburn-based Whitewater Excitement. She and Scott now manage Three Forks Whitewater Tours, named for the three forks of the American River and owned by Scott's parents. They employ seven guides and run a guide school as well as conduct tours of varying length and difficulty, from a \$60 half-day trip with no lunch to \$175 for two days of rafting and camping and five meals—gourmet creations prepared by Groven and the other guides.

During the six months of the rafting "season," which officially begins April 1, Jerrie and Scott and his two children, Paul, 11, and Skye, 8, live at the rafting camp on the banks of the American in Coloma. Jerrie's 20-year-old son, Justin Carrion, also works for Three Forks. "We lead kind of an unconventional life," she says.

In guide school, Groven was the only woman. Although more women are becoming guides, they remain a rarity. "I occasionally get hassled because I'm a woman," she says. "Of course, there are people who will hassle anybody, they're just jerks.

Sometimes people are a little surprised when they see me. But once you go through a few rapids so they see that you know what you're doing, it's fine. Some of the men even paddle better because they think I'm such a frail river flower.

"Sometimes it's hard to get people to do what you tell them. But in the boat, they have to do what you tell them. Sometimes you get young, cocky men in the boat, and they have no fear and no concept that the river is so much stronger than they are. Sometimes you have to get their attention, harshly."

She says the number of women guides is increasing—"and not so much just young women. There are a lot in their 30s, 40s, even 50s."

While men can call on "brute strength" to move the boat, Groven says women "have to approach it differently. You have to learn with the river—it's called 'dancing with the river.' You have to work with the river, not against it. Women may make safer guides because they take fewer chances."

She has had a few close calls, but no serious accidents. "I fell out at a rapid in my first year and one of my legs got tangled up in the gear and tore some ligaments. I learned to keep my gear tied down. I learned how to

rig a boat a lot better. It was a real learning experience. I've seen things happen on the river, situations that were very dangerous."

Groven recently helped guide an annual 100-woman rafting trip with all female guides, organized by Mariah Wilderness Expeditions, which is owned by two women, Donna Hunter and Nancy Byrnes, whose Pt. Richmond-based company regularly schedules all-women rafting trips. During the trip, on a section of the south fork called the "meat grinder," the boat in front of Groven's flipped. Groven's became the "sweep boat," plucking rafters out of the river. "I was sure I would also flip," recalls Groven. "I had 11 people in my boat. It didn't flip."

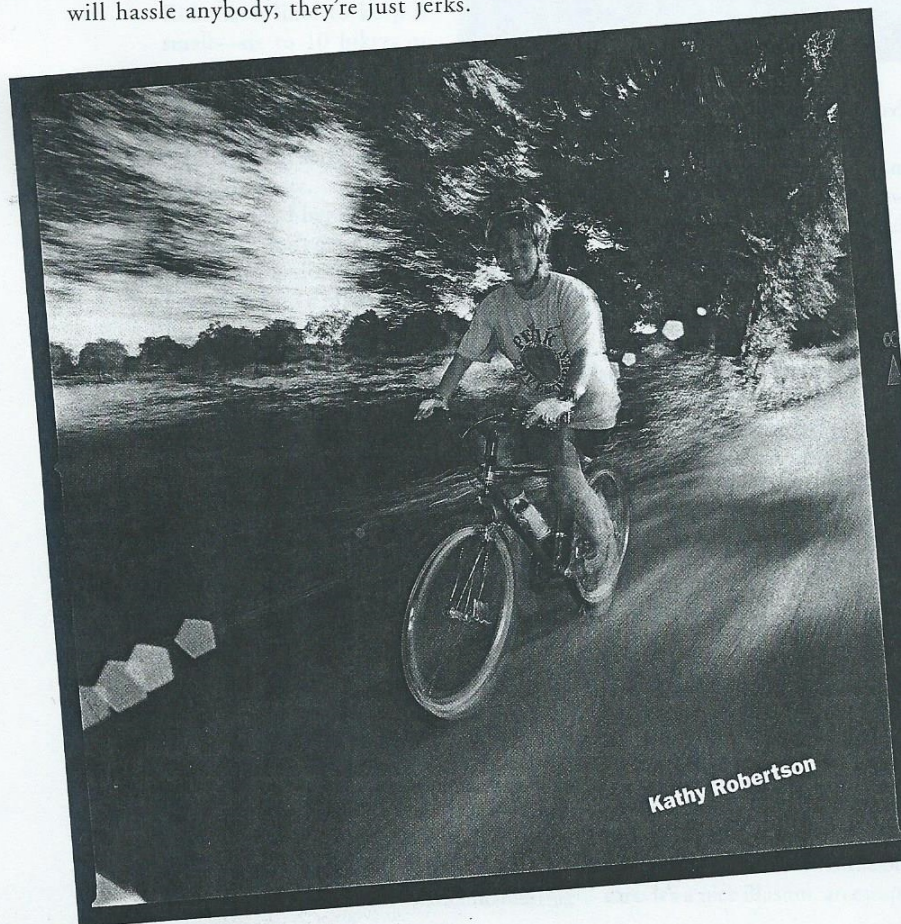
Kathy Robertson: Peak Adventures, California State University, Sacramento. Kathy Robertson, 49, became a backpacking enthusiast when her two sons, now 28 and 26, were kids and she wanted to find something healthy—and outdoors—to do with them. What started as a recreational avocation turned into a full-time career, and Robertson is now the director of Peak Adventures, organizing a variety of recreational programs for students at California State University, Sacramento.

"I led trips informally for years for friends, for my sons and his friends," she recalls. "I love the wilderness, and I really want to share that enthusiasm and love with other people. That's the main reason I do it.

"I also want to teach people to do this in a way that is respectful of the environment. We really emphasize 'leave no trace, pack it out, do it safely.' It's very simple once you know it, but there is a lot to know."

Robertson started her professional career working for the City of Sacramento Recreation Department. She managed the Alhambra Athletic Club for two years and a recreational program for a Tahoe resort area timeshare development. She also taught in the CSUS Recreation Department—a course called Recreation and Leisure Lifestyle Development that she describes as "a course in how to have fun, how to get more benefit out of leisure time."

Robertson was hired by Associated Students, Inc. at CSUS to run Peak Adventures seven years ago, taking over a smaller operation called Mountain Wolf Sports, which rented outdoor and camping equipment to students and had been merged with the bike repair shop on campus. Robertson changed the name—"Mountain Wolf sounded kind of lost and lonely"—and focused and expanded the operation to include a variety of backpacking trips, mountain biking, camping, day hiking, even inline skating and tours of various kinds.



Kathy Robertson

"We felt there was a segment we weren't reaching, so we started the day trips, such as to the Monterey Bay Aquarium, inline skating at Golden Gate Park, Apple Hill and Gold Country trips." Winter trips are also offered, including back country and cross-country skiing, snow camping and one mountaineering trip each year at Mount Shasta. Over spring break, a trip is offered to the Grand Canyon, and trips are also organized to Death Valley and the Trinity Alps and along the California coast. Many trips are necessarily short, "because students don't have a lot of time."

When Robertson interviewed for the Peak Adventures job, "it was like nine men and me," she says. "I was surprised that I got it. But I had been working with students forever, and that was a big part of my getting hired."

In leading wilderness trips, Robertson likes to keep it small—six to 10 hikers or campers. "We don't like to have a huge impact on the environment." The program is designed for students as well as faculty, staff and alumni, although anyone may participate.

Because of her administrative responsibilities, "I don't get to lead as many trips as I used to," and she has returned to college herself, to earn a master's degree in counseling. "I'm getting older and I'm not going to be able to do this forever. I would like to specialize in using outdoor experiences as a way of building self-esteem, especially in women who have been traumatized by one thing or another—using outdoor experiences as a method of empowerment."

Jill Tomczyk: Outdoor Adventures, University of California, Davis. Jill Tomczyk had her first rock climbing experience four years ago during her freshman year at UC Davis, when she went on a trip with students from her dormitory to Yosemite National Park.

"A lot of people in that dorm did rock climbing as a pastime," she recalls. "There were a lot of men and only about two of us women who tried it. I loved it right away. The sport was just starting to get big, and it was pretty much dominated by men because it was started by men. A lot of mountaineering

and rock climbing were geared to men's strength and physical abilities."

Always active in school sports in her hometown of San Jose, Tomczyk, now 23 and a UCD architecture graduate, found that when she got to college "fewer women were interested in intense physical activities."

She trained as a teaching assistant for rock climbing through UCD's outdoor recreational program, Outdoor Adventures, and started assisting on trips. "I spent virtually every weekend away my first year at Davis, climbing." In the spring of 1994, she became a full-fledged guide, leading rock climbing trips to Cosumnes River Gorge near Placerville and to popular climbing areas near South Lake Tahoe.

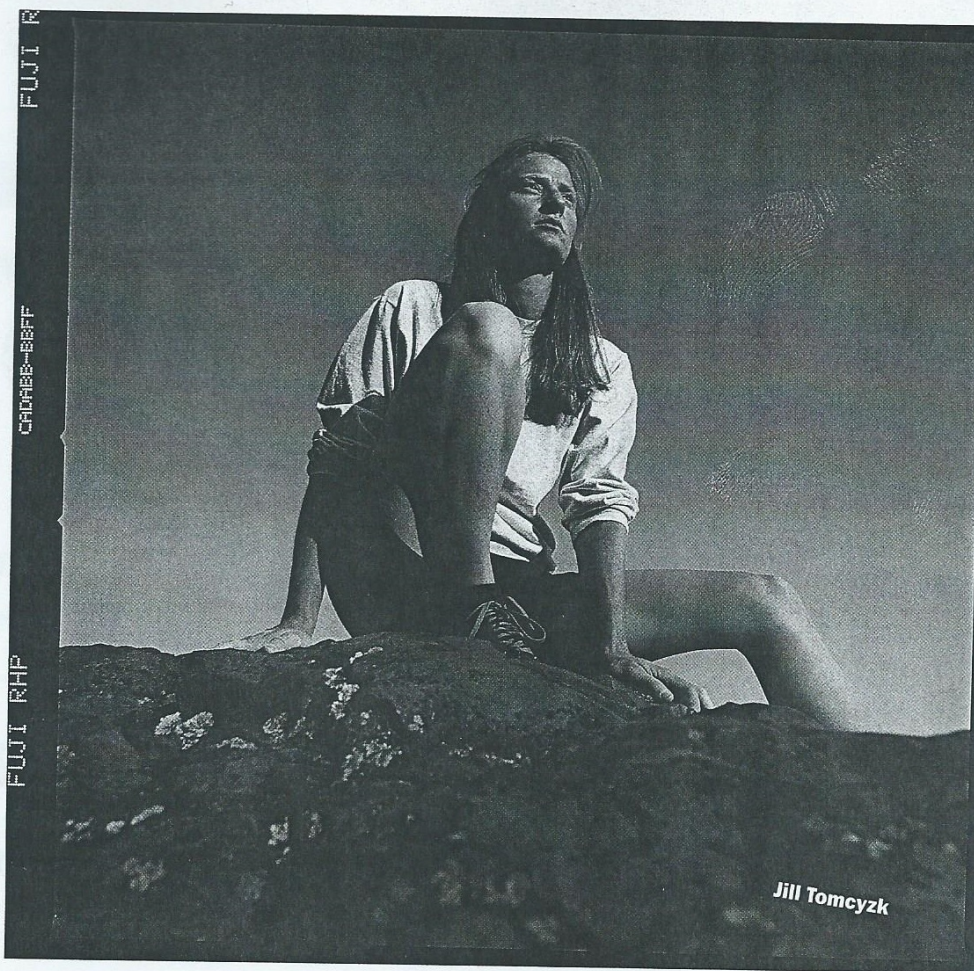
"For me personally, it's a great release of energy," Tomczyk says. "It challenges your physical and mental limitations. You deal with heights. You're in back country away from a lot of people. It's not as if you're on a basketball court in the middle of town."

"You really have to love being outside, being away from traffic, crowds, people. Once you get above the valley floor, it all looks like it's filled with trees instead of people and cars. It's a nice illusion, an escape."

She says rock climbing can be learned and practiced both indoors and outdoors. In Davis, the Rocknasium is fully equipped for indoor climbing, and outdoor trips are coordinated there as well. Tomczyk says she prefers to be outside while climbing but practices indoors during bad weather.

Being a woman in an "inherently dangerous sport," one that is dominated by men, presents its challenges. "It can be difficult being in the guide position and telling men what to do," says Tomczyk. "Climbing involves a lot of safety precautions. They definitely respect you, but I have had trouble with people accepting me and doing what I say. They want to take control. I have to say I'm in charge, and I have to tell you what to do. I've never had any major problems."

She also lifts weights to develop strength, but discounts the argument that women don't have the upper body strength to be effective rock climbers. "It's not a matter of upper body strength. It's about complete body control, leg strength, overall balance. What it really comes down to is finger and hand strength. You could do pullups all day long and that's not going to get you up the rock."



Jill Tomczyk