

Rafting Colorado rivers not so wild in 2012: Water levels could be just right for first-timers, families

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Boaters with Kodi Rafting ride the rapids into Seidel's Suckhole on the Arkansas River through Brown's Canyon Thursday. (Mark Fox, Summit Daily file)

So, Goldilocks, last year you said you didn't want to go whitewater rafting because the rivers' water levels were too high.

What's your excuse this year?

Colorado's reservoirs are at normal levels, according to Denver Water, and state rivers are running at or below normal flows for this time of year. That means rafting, particularly for first-timers and families, could be just right.

"Here's the thing that people forget," says David Costlow, executive director of the Colorado River Outfitters Association. "Low season doesn't mean no water. That snow still comes down that defined ditch. It might not ever get to the super-wild stage, but there's water, and

it flows. It will still be at an acceptable level for people to get out there and have a great time."

Costlow says that despite rumors outside the industry, concerns that this season will be a repeat of the severe drought of 2002 are unlikely. "I make a point of keeping in contact with what I call the 'water buffaloes,' you know, Denver Water, CWC (Colorado Water Congress), to see what their take is. Well, it's gonna be low, yes, but it's not going to be 2002."

Ryan Barwick, owner of rafting outfitter [Rocky Mountain Adventures](#)— which runs Cache la Poudre, the Upper Colorado, Clear Creek, the North Platte and parts of the Arkansas River — says he's heartened, as well, by what he's hearing and by business so far. "Everything we're seeing is encouraging and definitely more encouraging than 2002," Barwick says. "We had a great March and April, and May is looking solid. On the retail side, the sales of kayaks and equipment definitely suggest that people are thinking they're going out there."

Barwick says that as the season moves into the wetter cycle, the industry has been discussing the fact that the ground is much more saturated than it was in 2002. "The water is going to flow much better," Barwick says. "It's



A flotilla of rafters waits to make a run as a fly-fisherman works a stretch of the Cache La Poudre. Experts say that reports of better fishing means better water flow, and thus better rafting. (*Helen H. Richardson, Denver Post file*)

not going to sink in. We're just way more optimistic this time that things are at a healthier level."

Another sign that the rivers are at a good level: the fishing is better this year. "Last year we were stuck up in Rocky Mountain National Park until August," Barwick says. "We couldn't drop a fly in anything else the whole summer."

Outfitters on the Arkansas River are in especially good shape, Costlow says, because they're on a voluntary flow-management program that allows for a dam release of water from the reservoirs upstream. "That water's always there when they need it," he explains. "Like last year, it wasn't needed really until right at the end. This year, they'll probably need it earlier."

Jon Donaldson, co-owner at [River Runners](#), which does run the Arkansas, as well as the Yampa River through a partnership with Adrift Adventures, says his company has already had one of its earliest seasons ever. "We typically open on May 1, but folks just started showing up. The weather has just been incredible, and we found out if you open, they will come."

Donaldson says they officially opened on April 1, and April 7, some spring breakers who had been skiing came off the mountain one day and showed up to raft. "They just kind of walked in, and we were blowing up boats, and they asked if they could raft," he said. "You don't get to do that every day."

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FIND AN OUTFITTER Looking for a river rafting company to match your skill level, river of choice or other needs? Find the best experience nearest you or your travels by visiting the Colorado River Outfitters Association site, which also offers tips on what gear to bring, river ratings and more. **craa.org**

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