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A pair of grand rivers: Floating the Wallowa and Grand Ronde

Published: June 20, 2012

By PETE ZIMOWSKY — McClatchy Newspapers

A bald eagle, with its classic white head and tail, cruised effortlessly through a hallway of evergreens along the river, immediately catching the attention of rafters at camp during a May float trip on the Lower Wallowa and Grande Ronde.

Everything about the 40-mile adventure on a wild-and-scenic river system in northeastern Oregon is relaxing, from wildlife watching to camping to morel picking.

The float on the Wallowa and Grande Ronde rivers attracts boaters from across the Northwest for its beauty, but also because you don't have to plan months ahead to run the rivers.

The run is one of only a few multiday, wild-and-scenic and wilderness rivers in the West where you don't have to fill out an application in winter and hope to get a permit in a lottery. Just go for it when you feel like it.

A few other spur-of-the-moment rivers are the Owyhee River, Snake River in lower Hells Canyon (below Pittsburgh Landing) and the Lower Salmon River. All boaters need to do is fill out a self-issue permit at the launch and follow the rules.

The Wallowa and Grande Ronde rivers also make a great family trip or a float for youth groups.

OK, let's not forget the beautiful campsites and hiking through forests and open canyon slopes. Veteran river runners, who want time off from white-knuckled whitewater floats to do more camping and hiking than rowing, also make it an annual trip.

"The Grande Ronde is one of my favorite Oregon rivers," said Charles Ray, a rafter and fisherman from McCall, Idaho. "This river has it all - free flows, lots of wildlife, stunning scenery and geology, several distinct vegetation types, nice campsites and very good steelhead fishing."

While the scenery is great, don't totally take your eyes off the river. The float is spiced with some Class II -III (beginner- to intermediate-level) rapids, just enough to get the kids excited or to make it a whitewater classroom.

After making that spur-of-the-moment decision to run it, most rafters put on the Lower Wallowa at Minam, along Oregon 82 between La Grande and Joseph. They take out at the Powwatka Bridge or the Mud Creek access, about 7 miles before the remote burg of Troy, Ore.

Oh sure, you can do the whole run for 91 miles to the Snake River, but that will require at least a 5-day commitment. It's worth considering because sections of that part of the river go through desert canyonlands with bighorn sheep.

But floating the shorter stretch can be done in a long weekend, which is another important consideration.

A lot depends on flows, but the time is right now with medium flows conducive for most whitewater boats. The Wallowa River is still being fed by abundant snowmelt of the Eagle Cap Wilderness in the Wallowa Mountains, and the Grande Ronde is getting its runoff from the Elkhorn Mountains northwest of Baker City. The rivers will get lower as the summer progresses and will be good for canoes, kayaks, inflatable kayaks and smaller rafts.

Several other rivers feed these watersheds along the way in a place that Native Americans called Land of Winding Waters.

Those waters take rafters through steep basalt canyons that rise 3,000 to 4,000 feet above the river.

The rivers flow past dense evergreen forests, and in some places where there is no road access.

As you relax and float along, watch for elk, deer, osprey and, yes, bald eagles.

Binoculars are almost as important as your oars, except when you're negotiating those straightforward Class III rapids.

Here are notes from the Bureau of Land Management and Forest Service river map and Zimo's journal:

Getting there

From La Grande, Ore., take Oregon 82 northeast to Minam. The launch site for the Lower Wallowa and Grande Ronde is right off the highway on the north side of the road.

A camping spot

Oregon's Minam State Park is 12 miles north of the launch site and makes a good place to camp before launching.

Boat launches

If you want to explore other sections of the Grande Ronde, there are seven designated sites along the 91-mile corridor from Minam to Heller Bar in Washington where boaters can put in and take out. For a full list and other river information go to on.doi.gov/LdOCqI.

Rentals

Raft rentals and shuttles are available at the launch site at the Minam store (minamraftrentals.com or (541) 437-1111). Another shuttle service is Joining Waters shuttle service in Elgin, Ore., at joiningwaters.com; (541) 437-1794.

Recommended flows, craft

- The river is runnable April through November, although June through summer is the high-use season. You'll have to contend with low or high water and cold weather during shoulder seasons. (We canceled a trip in May one year because of snow.)

Here are some thoughts on the best watercraft to use:

- Up to 1,000 cfs, very low: hardshell and inflatable kayaks, whitewater canoes, small paddle or row rafts and catarafts. Note: All river levels demand experienced canoeists and canoes suitable for swift rivers.
- 1,000 to 2,000 cfs, low: same as above, but you can use larger rafts and expect some bumping and grinding.
- 2,000 to 6,000 cfs, medium: most craft; however, experienced drift boaters will like 5,000 cfs and up. Below that there is more busy rock dodging, which isn't fun in a drift boat. Note: It can be more difficult to maneuver small fishing cats loaded with gear in rapids.
- 10,000 cfs or more, very high: medium or large rafts; experienced drift boaters. Very swirly for canoes and kayaks.

Note: Many rafters like a higher flow because it means more time in camp and less time on the river with possible layover days in camp.

Rapids

The lower 10 miles of the Wallowa can be busy. Although there are plenty of mellow sections on both rivers, look out for these rapids (get an updated river map, which is available at the Minam Store):

Minam Roller, Class I to III; Red Rock, Class III; Blind Falls (memorize it on your river map because you can't see it), Class II to III; Sheep Creek, Class II to III; and Martins Misery, Class II to III. Note: A creek washout last summer created a new Class II-III rapids near river mile 64, downstream of Elbow

Creek. If you float all the way to the Snake River, you have to contend with The Narrows, a Class III-IV rapid. The difficulty of all rapids varies with flows.

Campsites

There are limited campsites on the Lower Wallowa. Most floaters try to get down to the Grande Ronde where more campsites are available. The competition for campsites is high on busy summer weekends, so plan your strategy.

Most of the good campsites have nice shaded areas on river benches with possibilities to go on bushwhacking hikes.

Special rules for floaters

- Get a free, self-issue permit at the put-in at Minam.
- Fire pans and portable toilets are required.
- Get an Oregon Aquatic Invasive Species Permit.
- Children ages 12 and under must wear PFDs while boats are under way.
- All boaters running Class III or higher whitewater rapids must wear approved PFDs.
- A throwable device is also required for boats 16 feet and longer, except for canoes or kayaks.
- Boaters must also have a sound device like a whistle or airhorn.

Outfitters

River and fishing outfitters are available for the rivers.

More information

- A river ranger's station is located at the launch. For current river conditions and more information, call (541) 437-5580.

Watch a video of the float here: <http://videos.idahostatesman.com/vmix-hosted-apps/p/media?id=4614888&item-index=2&query=Grande%20Ronde&sort=NULLhttp://Voices.IdahoStatesman.com/Outdoors>

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