

RECREATION

A wide variety of recreation opportunities are provided in a variety of settings on BLM land throughout the John Day Basin. Some of these activities include whitewater rafting, kayaking, canoeing, fishing, hunting, horseback riding, riding OHVs, camping, bird watching, rock hounding, photography, and sightseeing. Opportunities also exist for driving for pleasure and sightseeing for geological, botanical, zoological, archaeological, historical features and points of interest. In addition to locations where BLM public land is concentrated, recreation also occurs on state or county roads that provide access to BLM and USFS public lands.

Examples of high quality sightseeing opportunities on public lands include the Journey Through Time Scenic Byway, which highlights the John Day Basin's geologic and human history as it travels from Biggs, Oregon near the John Day River's confluence with the Columbia River, parallels miles of the John Day River including the scenic Picture Gorge area, and continues east of the city of John Day. Other popular sightseeing routes include the South Fork Back Country Byway along the South Fork John Day River near Dayville, and the North Fork of the John Day River northeast of Monument. An important aspect of sightseeing is the opportunity to view and photograph wildlife ranging from tiny hummingbirds to deer, bighorn sheep, elk, bear, and perhaps the occasional glimpse of a mountain lion. Sightseeing also occurs throughout the planning area.

Visitor use of the John Day Basin has increased and the season over which use occurs has expanded. Estimated annual use of BLM lands within the John Day River corridor was approximately 96,000 use days in 2003. Approximately 40,000 use days occur on the uplands within the JDBRMP area. Most visitor use occurs on the John Day River during the spring, summer and fall. In the spring and summer, visitor congestion occurs at popular watercraft launch and take-out sites at Service Creek, Twickenham, Clarno, and the Cottonwood Bridge. Fall hunting seasons In the fall hunting season encourages a similar increase in visitors.

RECREATION FACILITIES

There are 16 developed recreation sites managed by BLM within the planning area (see Map 9). Most of these sites are adjacent to the John Day River. None of the recreation sites within the planning area provide drinking water or trash receptacles. Most sites meet the accessibility requirements under the Americans with Disabilities Act.

BLM manages four developed campgrounds which are also available for day-use, Big Bend and Lone Pine on the North Fork John Day near Kimberly, and Muleshoe and Service Creek on the mainstem near the community of Service Creek. Each provides picnic tables, campfire grates, and vault toilets and each accommodates car camping, except Service Creek which provides walk-in campsites. Service Creek recreation site is owned by the Oregon Department of Transportation and managed and maintained by BLM under a lease agreement.

Four recreation sites are managed specifically for day use in the John Day Basin planning area. These include Monument River Access Park along the North Fork John Day in the town of Monument. In addition three sites exist along the mainstem of the John Day; Shady Grove near Spray, Clarno where State highway 218 crosses the river west of Fossil, and Cottonwood Bridge where State highway 206 crosses the river east of Moro. Clarno and Cottonwood are owned by the Oregon Parks and Recreation Department (OPRD) and are managed cooperatively by OPRD and BLM under a long term-lease agreement.

Five additional developed recreation sites are located in Wheeler County along the mainstem John Day River. Two sites are managed primarily for dispersed use, which are areas open to use with no specific locations for camping or picnicking identified. These are Priest Hole, which is accessible by vehicle, and Burnt Ranch Beach, which is accessible by foot or boat. Three additional sites are managed primarily for boat launching. These include Wooden Bridge, Lower Burnt Ranch, and Twickenham. Twickenham is available for boat launching and vehicle parking only and is a privately owned site managed under agreement by Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife and maintained by BLM.

BLM manages two interpretive sites located along the historic Oregon Trail. These are the John Day Crossing on the west side of the mainstem John Day near McDonald Crossing, and the Four Mile historic site on the east side of the mainstem near the community of Lone. These sites contain wooden ramadas which house interpretive displays depicting emigrant life on the Oregon Trail. John Day Crossing is owned by Sherman County Historical Society, and currently managed by BLM. A small picnic site, Rock Creek, is located near McDonald Crossing on the east side of the mainstem.

Within the planning area, there are many developed recreation sites managed by other federal, state, and county agencies. Developed campgrounds include Clyde Holliday State Park along State highway 26 near Mount Vernon, Bear Hollow and Shelton Wayside operated by Wheeler County, and approximately twelve U.S. Forest Service campgrounds spread throughout the Ochoco, Strawberry, and Blue Mountain Ranges. Several private campgrounds are also available within the planning area.

The most popular day use sites within the planning area are located within John Day Fossil Beds National Monument. These day use sites are set aside to study, protect and display the rich fossil beds and unique geological features of the John Day River Valley. The monument includes three separate management units; Clarno, Painted Hills, and Sheep Rock. The Thomas Condon Paleontology Center in the Sheep Rock Unit opened in 2005, and serves as the monument's visitor center. Hiking trails, interpretive displays, and picnic facilities are available in all three units. A variety of city and county parks are also available for day use.

Trends show a gradual increase each year in visitor use at BLM developed recreation sites. Use at the John Day Fossil Beds National Monument is expected to increase considerably as visitors discover the new Paleontology Center. With no camping facilities available within the monument, there is expected to be an increased demand for public and private campgrounds located near the monument.

Rivers, Scenic/Back-Country Byways and local events are increasingly being promoted as travel and tourist destinations by local Chambers of Commerce and other groups. The acquisition of additional public lands along the North Fork John Day as a result of the Oregon Land Exchange Act of 2000 brings a potential for new recreation opportunities to the region.

RECREATION ACTIVITIES

Rockhounding

Rockhounding is a popular recreation activity in the planning area. Some public lands in the planning area contain agate, quartz, calcite, zeolites, petrified wood, dendrites, thunder eggs, opal, ammonites and leaf fossils. These prized items occur on scattered parcels of public land, some of which are surrounded by private land and contain no legal public access.

Boating

Floating the John Day River in a raft, kayak, canoe, driftboat, or pontoon boat is a popular recreational activity. When asked in a 2000/2001 social survey, 94% of respondents listed peace and solitude, viewing scenery and wildlife, being with friends and family, and riverside camping as the most important reasons they boat the John Day River. The most popular sections for boating include the mainstem from Spray downstream to Cottonwood Bridge, and the North Fork from Dale downstream to Monument. In some sections, multiple launch points and easy access present a variety of options for one-day float trips. Other sections, with little to no public road access, offer the rare opportunity for remote, multi-day float trips up to 8 days in length. The primary boating season extends from early May to mid-July, except during drought years when low water flows shorten the season. The difficulty of rapids ranges from Class I to Class IV and varies by river section and flow level. Powerboat use is regulated by river section and by season, with restrictions designed to provide a variety of boating opportunities throughout the river system as a whole, and to enhance the management goals for each river segment.

In 2004, BLM's boater self-issue permit system recorded 16,192 boater use days between Service Creek and Clarno, of which 85% consisted of overnight trips. Boating use is increasing at an average of 3% each year, with the greatest increase occurring in river sections offering opportunities for shorter trips of one to three days in length. On peak weekends and holidays, the number of overnight boating groups exceeds the number of public land campsites located within a reasonable boating distance of major launch points. As use levels increase, competition for public land campsites increases, and boating groups who are unsuccessful at finding a public land campsite stop on private property to camp. The BLM administers 26 Special Recreation Permits which authorize commercial guides and outfitters to operate a business on the John Day River. In 2004, commercial boating use days between Service Creek and Clarno accounted for 10% of the total boating use days.

BLM employees staff river launch points during boating season to encourage boaters to care for the river by practicing Leave No Trace outdoor skills and to respect private property rights. Regulations limit group size to 16 people, and the use of firepans and river toilets is required. No fires of any kind are allowed between June 1 and September 30. Self-issue permits, available at most river access points, are required year-round.

Fishing

Fishing is a popular recreation activity throughout Oregon and in the planning area. Fishing for bass, steelhead, and trout occurs on the main-stem of the John Day River and on the North, Middle and South Forks. To protect limited populations ODFW does not permit angling for bull trout and Chinook salmon on rivers and streams within the John Day Basin.

Steelhead fishing provides limited recreational opportunity in the John Day River and its tributaries as fish populations appear to be declining. Steelhead fishing generally occurs from November through January. Wild steelhead with unclipped adipose fins cannot be kept, however they can be caught if released unharmed. During most seasons some fin-clipped hatchery steelhead may be retained, however hatchery strays account for only 6-8% of the total steelhead population on the John Day River and its tributaries. The trout fishery has declined slightly from historic levels, but trout fishing continues to be a recreation opportunity enjoyed by visitors to the area.

NAVIGABILITY – JOHN DAY RIVER

On June 14, 2005, the Oregon State Land Board adopted the findings and conclusions of a Division of State Lands report which found that the 174-mile segment of the John Day River from Tumwater Falls (River Mile 10) to Kimberly (River Mile 184), met the federal criteria for navigability designation. To be considered navigable, the river was determined to be navigable by craft used at the time of Oregon statehood in 1859.

Under the navigability designation, ownership of the bed and banks of the John Day was transferred to the State of Oregon; superseding previous federal or private ownership. Under this designation state ownership applies to land that lies below the mean high water level. This ownership declaration allows public use of the river, generally to the line of ordinary high water, for activities such as fishing and boating. The primary beneficiaries of this ruling are boaters and anglers now able to use areas previously inaccessible on what, in the past, had been considered private land. State ownership also requires permission from the State of Oregon for certain uses of the waterway (for example, the construction or maintenance of a dock or moorage, or the removal of sand or gravel).

Smallmouth bass fishing is growing in popularity and generally occurs from May to the end of October. The increase in popularity of bass fishing in the basin is due to word of mouth and media coverage in fishing publications. Consider the statement on flyfishusa.com, “In 1971, Seventy-five Smallmouth Bass were introduced to the river. Since then, they have flourished! The John Day River is arguably the best Smallmouth Bass water in the country.”

Hunting

Big game hunting is a major recreational activity and opportunities exist for hunting deer, antelope, elk, bighorn sheep, bear and cougar. A limited number of antelope, and a very limited number of big horn sheep tags are issued in the planning area. Local, statewide and out of state hunters come to hunt big game, and game-birds. A variety of predators are also hunted, including coyotes, cougar and bobcat.

Visitor use for hunting occurs during the summer, fall and early winter months and generally occurs on large tracts of BLM public land and on adjacent USFS lands. The Planning area includes all of the Fossil, North side, Desolation, and Murderer’s Creek hunting units and part of the Biggs, Heppner, Columbia Basin, Beulah, Ochoco and Grizzly units. These units are established and regulated by the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife (ODFW). ODFW establishes management objectives for each species within each hunting unit. The BLM issues special regulation permits in order to regulate commercial hunting on public lands.

About 5,000 deer and 2,700 elk were harvested by sport hunters within the John Day Basin. Information about hunting success is provided by management unit by ODFW. Consequently these numbers are approximate and do not indicate the ownership of the land on which the animals were taken.

Upland bird hunting occurs primarily during fall and early winter in shrub lands and riparian areas, with some bird seasons extending into March of the following year.

Waterfowl hunting for duck and geese occurs in the fall and early winter on the John Day River and tributary rivers. The mainstem of the John Day River is closed to waterfowl hunting downstream of Thirtymile Creek within the John Day Wildlife Refuge managed by Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife.

Statewide the number of Oregon resident deer hunters has declined over the past 30 years, while sales of elk tags have remained relatively constant. In contrast the number of non-resident elk hunters has increased over this time period. However the sale of both resident and nonresident deer and elk tags are anticipated to decline over the next five years. Nevertheless hunting for deer and elk are expected to remain popular recreational activities in the planning area.

Off Road Motorized Recreation

Off Highway Vehicle Use (OHV) use is allowed on the majority of BLM managed lands in the planning area. However on approximately 60% of these lands restrictions limit the season of use, and/or the routes open to OHV use. Less than 1 percent of BLM managed lands are closed to all OHV use. OHV use in the JDBRMP area is occurring in nearly every block of BLM land which is accessible to the public or to adjacent landowners, even where current restrictions prohibit such use. This widespread use appears to be limited only where steep, impassable terrain makes OHV use unfeasible. OHVs are used on BLM public lands throughout the year, primarily for gaining access to other recreational activities such as hunting, looking for horn sheds, and fishing. In addition OHV use for the pure fun of riding occurs in some parts of the planning area. There are no designated Class I, (ATV), II (4WD), or III (motorcycle) trail systems on BLM public lands within the planning area.

Hunters use All Terrain Vehicles (ATV refers to all OHVs less than 50 inches wide) on BLM lands in late summer to scout for big game, in fall to hunt and retrieve big game, and in fall and winter to access upland bird hunting areas. Commercial horn hunters use ATVs in late winter and early spring to hunt for recently dropped deer and elk antlers.

In the vicinity of the North Fork John Day River, an interim OHV designation for the 42,183 acres of acquired lands is in effect until this land use plan is completed. Some roads crossing sensitive fish streams are closed to motorized travel year-round. Use in other areas which provide critical deer and elk winter range, is seasonally limited to April 16 to November 30.

Designated Route Systems

In a designated route system, all open routes open to travel are signed as designated routes. All routes not marked as designated routes are closed. Designated route systems are in place in all WSAs, on the west side of the John Day River north of Clarno, and in the Murderer's Creek area along the South Fork John Day River. However, even with a designated route system, OHV users regularly drive past closed signs and off of designated routes.

Lower John Day River

Though much of the BLM land adjacent to the lower John Day River is closed to OHV use due to management guidelines for Wilderness Study Areas and Wild and Scenic River, unauthorized use of OHVs continues to occur. In addition adjacent land owners and fee hunters from adjacent private lands operate OHVs on BLM lands not open to the general public due to lack of public access.

Sutton Mountain Area

Two WSA's, Sutton Mountain and Pat's Cabin are located northwest of Mitchell and were designated in March, 1996, after BLM inventoried approximately 39,370 acres of public land for wilderness character.

Deer, elk and upland game hunters use OHVs on designated routes to access portions of both WSA's, but steep topography limits use. OHV users have driven past route closure signs and travel off designated routes. This generally occurs during deer and elk hunting seasons and during upland bird seasons.

Johnson Heights/Rudio Mountain

In the Johnson Heights area public access is available up the Squaw Creek Road, approximately 8 miles where public access ends. This BLM road is primitive and not maintained. Consequently it gets use by OHVs. As with other areas the most popular use is to support hunting.

Motorized use on Rudio Mountain occurs on old logging spur roads on all of these public lands. Primary use of OHVs is to support hunting with occasional sightseeing trips.

South Fork John Day

Primary use of OHVs in this area occurs in the Battle Creek Road area is to support big game hunting although horn hunting is also popular during the winter and spring months. Local ranchers may also use OHVs to manage livestock.

Upper John Day

The Little Canyon Mountain project area includes 2,498 acres of public land designated as open to motorized use. A 104-acre mining pit is currently used as a play area by trucks, ATV's and motorcycles. The pit area also provides access to many user created OHV routes in the area. An irrigation ditch runs through the pit and is often diverted by vehicle users to create a 'mud-bogging' area. OHV users test their skills against steep and varied terrain in the area.

The Little Canyon Mountain area has a history of mining, and many vehicle routes are currently used to access mining claims. In addition to mining, the pit area has historically been used for dumping garbage, furniture, appliances, and old car bodies, in addition to target shooting. Recently, the pit area has been cleaned up and barriers have been constructed to prevent full size vehicles from entering the area and dumping trash. The BLM regularly receives complaints about OHV use in this area, especially regarding vehicle noise.

Dixie Creek is another area receiving significant OHV use. Past mining and timber management activities have resulted in numerous routes on public lands in this area. A county road provides access to BLM lands, though scattered private lands are intermingled with BLM lands throughout this area. The BLM public land boundaries in this area are not been marked, resulting in public land use mainly by local residents. ATV, motorcycle and vehicle use in this area have resulted in new OHV trails being created. OHV use associated with mining also occurs in the Dixie Creek area.

Motorized use on Rudio Mountain occurs on old logging spur roads on all of these public lands. Primary use of OHVs is to support hunting with occasional sightseeing trips.

North Fork John Day River

Roads were developed in this area where needed to harvest trees and manage cattle. These roads are generally located in river and creek bottoms, but some old routes that skirt steep side hills were constructed to harvest timber.

Since the acquisition of additional BLM lands, there has been a continued increase in motorized use violations of seasonal and permanent road closures. Trespass on private land also continues. These violations primarily occur during deer and elk hunting seasons.

OHV use on adjacent U.S. Forest Service Managed Lands

OHV use on adjacent U.S. Forest Service Umatilla, Wallowa-Whitman and Malheur National Forests has also increased dramatically since the mid 1980's. OHV use on these forests has become a year-round recreation activity. According to the tri-forest Current Management Situation Report for the U.S. Forest Service Blue Mountain Plan revision (AMS), OHV use is associated with hunting prior to and during hunting seasons, with vacation & leisure-time use during summer months, and with local residents year-round.

OHV USE TRENDS

OHV use of BLM public lands within the planning area has dramatically increased since the Two Rivers, John Day and Baker RMPs were finalized in the 1980s. Increased OHV use on BLM public lands in the planning area has resulted from more recreation users coming to eastern Oregon to hunt, fish, camp, and ride OHVs for fun. These OHV users continue to create unauthorized trails on BLM managed land.

OHV annual sales more than tripled between 1995 and 2003, to more than 1.1 million ATV's and motorcycles sold in 2003. ATV's continue to account for more than 70% of the OHV market. Cordell (2005) found that in the western region that included Oregon, the highest average OHV user days were attributed to the 51 and older age group. However, in just Oregon, the age group showing the greatest participation in OHV use was "under age 30" at 25.3%.

The 2003 State Park Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Planning (SCORP) survey for northeastern Oregon, which includes the JDBRMP area, found motorized activity increasing with almost all types of riders since 1987. Specifically, this survey found four-wheel use had increased 48 percent, OHV riding 47 percent, motorcycle use 73 percent, and snowmobiling increased 10.1 percent. These trends are valid for both BLM and U.S. Forest Service public lands since these riding opportunities are primarily on these public lands in this region.

In addition to the increase in the popularity of OHVs, the advancement of OHV technology makes for more user-friendly four wheel drive vehicles which enable recreation users to go cross-country and cover broader ranges of terrain than before. Each year BLM receives complaints associated with ATV use, specifically vehicles in closed areas, trespass on private lands, wildlife disturbance, and soil and vegetation damage due to cross-country use over muddy terrain. Public lands in riparian areas are particularly susceptible to damage. For example, despite an OHV closure, users enter the John Day River channel at Clarno, Cottonwood, and other locations during low water periods and drive in the channel for many miles to access the river canyon. Some OHV users drive into the John Day riverbed at low flows to camp, leaving behind fire rings filled with trash that wash into the river when flows increase.

Conflicts continue to increase between public land users and adjacent private land owners who are concerned about trespass. Unauthorized OHV use is most frequent on BLM public lands in the North Fork of the John Day, Sutton Mountain/Pat's Cabin and Spring Basin areas. Unauthorized OHV use also occurs on public lands where no public access is available, such as public lands on both sides of the John Day River from Kimberly to Tumwater Falls, Rudio Mountain, and public lands south and south west of Kimberly. In addition trespass is common, during the fall hunting season in game units such as the Heppner unit, where OHV use on USFS and BLM roads and primitive routes has increased.

More user-developed trails on BLM public lands and also U.S. Forest Service designated Class I (ATV) and Class III (motorcycle) trails are available to ride than in past years. Despite this increased use, there are fewer BLM and U.S. Forest Service on-site law enforcement officers in popular OHV use areas to manage this use.

COMMERCIAL RECREATION

Some individuals do not have the knowledge, skill, equipment, or time to engage in and plan float, fishing, or hunting trips or any of a range of recreational activities that take place within the John Day Basin. As a result guide, equipment rental, and shuttle operations have developed to serve this population. Currently guiding and boat rentals involving the delivery and pick up of boats at BLM managed sites is regulated by the BLM. The BLM issues Special Recreation Permits (SRPs) to authorize these uses on the public lands and related waters. SRPs enable the BLM to manage visitor use, protect natural and cultural resources, and as a mechanism to authorize commercial use, competitive use, vending, special area use, and organized group activities or events.

Within the planning area, BLM currently administers 26 river related SRPs authorizing boat rental, guiding, hunting, and fishing on specified sections of the John Day River. The activities and areas authorized vary by individual SRP. In addition, the BLM administers three upland SRPs for guided hunting during specific hunting seasons and in specified areas. The term of each SRP ranges from one to five years based on an annual evaluation of the permittee's performance.

Between 1996 and 2006, the number of commercial SRPs for the John Day River has dropped from 34 to 26 due to non-renewal of an SRP by the permittee, or non-renewal by BLM due to failure to meet permit stipulations. Outfitter and guide services offered may currently exceed public demand, based on the low number of user days reported by guides and outfitters. Most permitted guides and outfitters are not able to generate adequate income by operating solely on the John Day River. Their income from the John Day River is used to supplement other sources of income, including guiding and outfitting on other rivers or income derived from other businesses or employment.

The BLM has had a moratorium on issuing new commercial guide and outfitter permits for the John Day River since 1996. In 2001 the John Day River Plan required a needs assessment to identify a need for a particular river-related service before a new commercial guide or outfitter permit could be issued.

An estimated 15 vehicle shuttle services are used by John Day River boaters, and none are currently under BLM SRP because the services do not traverse more than one mile of BLM-managed land or water.

There have been no competitive event or vending SRPs issued within the planning area, although a John Day River Plan decision allows BLM to consider issuing vending permits at river launch points to benefit resource protection, such as for the sale of river toilets, firepans, or firewood. The BLM occasionally issues SRPs for organized group activities or events within the planning area.

In 2001, the Prineville District limited the availability of new SRPs for commercial, competitive, and organized group use on public lands within the district boundary. New SRP proposals will be considered for authorization for activities or events not exceeding seven consecutive days in length annually which do not require preparation of an environmental assessment. The BLM has received numerous requests for new river SRPs as well as new upland SRPs for guided hunting, nature hikes, and paleontological tours.

TRANSPORTATION AND ACCESS

Primary ground transportation within the planning area is provided over a mix of federal, state, and county roads and highways. Except for the extreme northern portions of the planning area most of the John Day basin is connected by basically rural roads. While the surface of the Federal Highways and many of the state and county routes are generally in good condition these roads cross difficult terrain and wind around and over rivers, streams, canyons, rimrock, and mountains.