

Boating on the Wallowa and Grande Ronde Rivers

The river corridor between Minam, Oregon, and Heller Bar, Washington includes the lower ten miles of the Wallowa River and the lower 81 miles of the Grande Ronde River. Public lands in this river corridor are managed in part by the Bureau of Land Management, U.S. Forest Service, and the States of Oregon and Washington. The river canyons in Oregon have been designated as both *National Wild and Scenic Rivers* and *Oregon State Scenic Waterways*, in recognition of their unique natural character and outstanding fish, wildlife, scenic, and recreational resources.

The “upper river” between Minam and Troy consists of steep, basalt canyons and ascending ridges within dense evergreen forest, many portions of which are only accessible by boat. The meandering curves of the “middle river” parallel seldom-traveled County roads, through the rural community of Troy and nearby ranches, as the canyon begins to widen and the forests gradually yield to open ridges and steep range lands. The “lower river” section in Washington is characterized by sparsely-vegetated, rugged terrain, and contains the history of ancient peoples and pioneer homesteads amongst a few active ranches. The entire river corridor is a complex ecosystem rich in unique natural features, history, spectacular scenery, and a wide variety of plant and animal life.

Each year the area receives thousands of visitors seeking the beauty and diverse outdoor recreation opportunities that the rivers offer. Where road and trail access is most limited, well-prepared whitewater boaters travel the river using a variety of specialized watercraft. A typical float trip begins at Minam on the Wallowa River and lasts two to three days, “taking out” on the Grande Ronde River downstream. Shorter or longer trips are possible with proper planning. Other popular river access points include Wildcat (aka, Powwatka) Bridge, Mud Creek, Palmer Junction, Troy, State Line, Cougar Creek, Boggan’s Oasis, Shumaker, and Heller Bar.

Early spring and autumn attract anglers in search of elusive steelhead trout. Peak recreational boating season occurs between May and July, although river trips are possible throughout the year, depending on river conditions. Because the rivers are primarily free-flowing, water levels and river character change dramatically with the seasons and local weather patterns. Higher, faster river flows typically occur in the spring and early summer, as warmer temperatures and increased rainfall melt high mountain snows. As the season progresses, the river level gradually drops. By August, river flows are typically very low, with shallow water and exposed rocks being common. Low water levels usually remain throughout the fall and winter months. Boaters are strongly advised to obtain up-to-date river conditions and weather forecasts when planning their trip.

Elevation ranges from 2,500 feet at Minam to 825 feet at the Snake River. Average river gradient is 19 ft. per mile, and numerous rapids are common. Primary rapids are rated Class II-III on the American Scale of Whitewater Difficulty, and require some technical maneuvering to navigate safely. “The Narrows” Rapid on the Grande Ronde River in Washington is rated Class III+-IV and may require lining or portaging. Scouting of all rapids is strongly advised. Recommended watercraft include high-quality, multi-chambered, inflatable rafts, drift boats, and whitewater kayaks. Poorer quality rafts and float tubes may be dangerous and are best left at home. Canoes are not recommended, unless specifically designed for whitewater use and operated by boaters with advanced whitewater skills and specialized equipment.

In keeping with the natural character of the river, amenities and developed facilities are few, and hazards do exist. You are responsible for your own safety. Recreation use has inherent risks and you may encounter a variety of unexpected and/or dangerous conditions which may lead to serious injury or death. Search and rescue assistance is dangerous, difficult, costly, and time-consuming. Remember to always tell someone where you are going and when you expect to return. It is your responsibility to be informed, plan ahead, and take precautions.

Primitive, undeveloped river camping is available on a first-come, first-serve basis. Visitors are required to follow low impact, “**Leave No Trace**” practices to minimize the impacts of their stay, and help preserve the natural resources. Mandatory use of fire pans and portable toilets, as well as packing out all garbage and treading lightly on vegetation, helps keep the river corridor clean and healthy for the next visitors and future generations. To prevent over-crowding and further reduce visitor impacts, boaters are strongly encouraged to plan their trip to avoid weekends and holidays whenever possible.

Backcountry roads are often unsigned and primitive and may require good map reading skills and GPS to follow. Some roads may be unmaintained or impassable; always inquire locally for current conditions. Gasoline, food, and other services are often not available in rural areas. Cell phone service is often unreliable or unavailable for long periods of time. Drivers should be well-rested and prepared, and carry extra fuel, food, water, and a good spare tire. Stay alert for traffic, road hazards, and animals on the roadways.

In 1987, federal and state agencies started a River Program for the cooperative management of the river corridor. Agency staff make periodic river trips to fulfill administrative functions, perform various work projects, monitor river conditions, and provide information and assistance to visitors. Please take time to read the bulletin boards provided at the primary river access points. These boards are posted with important information, seasonal restrictions, and special notices to help you have a safe and enjoyable visit.

For more information, please contact the Bureau of Land Management at 541-523-1256, or learn more online at:

www.rivers.gov

