

# **John Day River Recreation Guide**

**Kimberly to Tumwater Falls**



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*View from the breakfast table, Cathedral Rock, JohnDay River.*

## ***Kimberly to Tumwater Falls***

This guide includes maps and recreation information about the lower John Day River basin from the small community of Kimberly, located at the confluence of the John Day River and the North Fork John Day River, to Tumwater Falls, an impassable waterfall located just upstream from the John Day arm of the Columbia River.

Enjoy your travels through the John Day country. Please take care to protect the river and the landscape for future generations.

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## The John Day River



*High water and sunshine; springtime in the lower canyon.*

Originally called Mah-Hah by Native Americans and later named Le Pages by Lewis and Clark, the river we now call the John Day was named after a fur trapper in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Native Americans captured trapper John Day and a companion at the junction of the Columbia and Mah-Hah Rivers. In retaliation for having been recently cheated by a different group of whites, the two trappers were stripped of everything including their clothes before being set free. What people began referring to as John Day's river soon appeared on maps as the John Day River.

The John Day River basin drains nearly 8,100 square miles of central and northeast Oregon. It is one of our nation's longest free-flowing river systems. Elevations range from 265 feet at the confluence with the Columbia River to over 9,000 feet at the headwaters in the Strawberry Mountain Range.

Most of the water in the John Day comes from snowmelt in the upper watershed, high in the mountains of Eastern Oregon. Springs and seeps help sustain summer flows.



## Facts



The John Day River system is fortunate to have designation under two important river preservation programs; the National Wild and Scenic Rivers Act and the Oregon Scenic Waterways Act. Together, these two acts, one a federal program and one a state program, provide the best protection available today for the natural, scenic, and recreational values of our river environments.

The John Day country can be explored by vehicle, bicycle, on foot, horseback, or by boat. The “Journey Through Time” Scenic Byway parallels the river between Kimberly and Service Creek on State Highway 19. Paved roads cross the river at Service Creek, Twickenham, Clarno, and Cottonwood bridges. Gravel or dirt roads provide river access near Priest Hole, Burnt Ranch, and Clarno. Camping is available at several riverside locations. Hiking trails are available within the John Day Fossil Beds National Monument. Backcountry horse riding opportunities are being discovered, especially in Wilderness Study Areas (See WSAs). Spending one or more days floating down the river in a raft, drift boat, kayak, or canoe is a popular way to explore the John Day.

### *Seasons of Use*

Pleasant weather and higher flows make May and June the most popular time to float the river; however, weekends from Memorial Day to July Fourth draw large crowds to limited river campsites. Avoid floating the John Day on these weekends if solitude is what you seek.

Late July through early autumn can be extremely hot and dry. The river may be too low for anything heavier than an inflatable kayak, small cataraft, or canoe. As the river flow decreases the water gets clearer and warmer. Bass and catfish feed actively at dawn and dusk; their metabolism is in high gear now. Fish become concentrated in the deeper pools between shallow riffles. Good fishing and fewer people are an irresistible combination to some. Very slow current and strong upstream winds keep most people away.

Autumn draws hunters in search of mule deer, elk, bighorn sheep, waterfowl and chukar partridge. Hunters gain access to public lands by paddling downstream in canoes and light rafts. Nights are chilly, days can be hot. River levels are generally low.

Winter precipitation in the upper John Day basin causes flows to increase, sometimes suddenly. Roads can be icy and treacherous. A few hardy winter campers and steelhead fishers brave the cold each winter and have the river to themselves.



*Photo taken from River Mile 125.2, Coffin Rock is in the distance.*

## Natural History



*Example of columnar basalt.*

### ***Geology***

Much of the natural and cultural history of the John Day basin is influenced by the geology. The gently sloping plateaus and deeply incised canyons with narrow bottoms are characteristic of a young geology -the result of many episodes of flood basalts (known as the Columbia River Basalt Group) flowing west and north out of eastern Oregon between 16 and 14 million years ago (mya). These volcanic flows are extensive, covering large parts of northern Oregon and southern Washington, sometimes as much as three miles thick. Where the basalt flows were thin they cooled quickly, forming vertical and contorted columns (thus the name columnar basalt) that are common throughout the Columbia Plateau. The John Day River is still carving its way through these layers, creating a canyon as much as 1600 feet deep. The rhythmic layers steeply descending from the rim to the river's edge provide the canyon's most memorable scenery. Red Wall, the Palisades, Cathedral Rock and Hoot Owl are a few examples of the outstanding geologic features one will encounter while exploring the canyon.

Between Kimberly and Thirtymile Creek, the Columbia River Basalts cover the older sedimentary landscapes of the Clarno Formation (50-37mya) and the John Day Formation (37-19mya). The erosive action of the watershed has exposed the red and green soils of these ancient ecosystems. Some of these exposures contain fossil plants and animals for which the John Day basin is famous. In the late 1860s, frontier reverend Thomas Condon first explored the fossil beds and reported his fantastic discoveries.

The John Day basin is nationally and internationally important for these fossil exposures because they represent one of the longest continuous sequences (approximately 40 million years) of mammal evolution and ecological change found anywhere on earth.

Excellent examples of these exposures may be viewed at John Day Fossil Beds National Monument, which consists of three Units: Sheep Rock, Painted Hills and Clarno.

Through research and education The Bureau of Land Management and the National Park Service are jointly engaged in long-term management of the fossils found on federal public lands in the basin. Plant (leaves) and invertebrate (without backbone) fossils found on public land can be collected in reasonable amounts for personal use only, except where restrictions are posted. The public can collect petrified wood, but only 25lbs per day and no more than 250lbs annually. No commercial collecting is permitted. The general public cannot collect vertebrate (with backbone) fossils without a permit. Permits are generally issued to qualified institutions only.

### ***Plant Life***

Plant communities of the John Day basin can be characterized by four different settings (ecological sites):

- **Riparian Area** is land adjacent to water, where water, soil and vegetation interact to form a unique microclimate.



- **Riverine Terrace** settings are the remnants of previous floodplains, those generally dry and flat grass/sage/juniper plains that parallel the river and streams.
- **Upland** settings are the elevated and steeper grass/juniper covered slopes and plateaus of the foothills and lower elevation mountains.
- **Forest** settings of mixed ponderosa pine and Douglas fir are scattered from the upper uplands to the tops of the mountain ranges.

Each of these zones has its own scenic and socioeconomic importance for residents as well as visitors.

### *Weeds*

Non-native plant species can be found throughout the John Day River area. Most have no natural enemies and spread rapidly, crowding out native plants that provide food for wildlife and livestock. Noxious weeds are spread by wind, water, horses, motor vehicles, recreation users, wildlife and livestock. Weeds common in the John Day basin include yellow starthistle, leafy spurge, dalmation toadflax, scotch thistle, whitetop, puncture vine, poison hemlock, medusahead and three types of knapweed. Some have spines or toxic sap.



*Scotch Thistle*



*Puncture Vine*



*Medusahead*



*Yellow Starthistle*



*Dalmatian Toadflax*



*Poison Hemlock*



*Spotted Knapweed*



*Leafy Spurge*

***Wildlife***

Mule deer, elk and antelope are year-around residents of the John Day basin. The Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife and BLM began reintroducing bighorn sheep into portions of the upper basin near Dayville in 1978. Bighorns were reintroduced into the lower basin near Thirtymile Creek in 1989. The herds have been successful and are spreading to new locations. They are so successful, in fact, that they are now used as reintroduction stock for other locations in the West. The keen observer may spot the tawny-colored forms scampering about the cliffs and ridges high above the river.

All of these ungulates (mammals with hooves) are fair game for the cougar, the most powerful predator of the basin. Coyotes thrive, feeding on rodents, young birds, reptiles and anything else they can catch. Their high-pitched yelps can be heard at dusk and dawn. Although rare, the black bear can still be observed in the upper portions of the basin.

Waterfowl inhabit much of the river system, using it for nesting and wintering. Look for Canada geese, mallards and mergansers in or near the river. In 1933 the State of Oregon established the John Day Wildlife Refuge primarily to protect nesting and wintering waterfowl. The refuge is a half-mile strip of land with the John Day River in the middle. It stretches 84 river miles, from the mouth of Thirtymile Creek to the Columbia River.

Eagles (both bald and golden), hawks and prairie falcons can be seen soaring through the canyon in search of prey. Osprey cruise the river corridor looking for fish to catch. The John Day basin has a host of more common bird species: the serene notes of the canyon wren and the raucous call of the raven provide familiar sounds to basin travelers.



*Chukar Partridge*

Native quail and grouse species are found throughout the basin, from lowlands to the uplands and forests. Pheasants and chukar, introduced from Eurasia, live in the fields and rugged landscapes of the middle and lower river canyon. Chukar are known for their morning and evening serenade of rhythmic clucking as they scramble among the canyon rubble.

The spotted bat roosts in the many caves and crevices of the canyon. Listen for their high-pitched clicks and squeaking noises during evening flights. Watch for their darting shapes as darkness falls.

On shore or in the river one might see river otter, mink, muskrat and beaver.

Several native frogs, toads and salamanders live near the river, tributaries and springs. On warm summer evenings the alert listener is treated to a chorus of natural melodies ranging from the high-pitched chirp of the western tree frog to the deep bass notes of the bullfrog. Bullfrogs are not native to Oregon. They alter the ecosystem by eating large quantities of beneficial dragonfly nymphs and small native reptiles and amphibians.

Watch for rattlesnakes and scorpions in rocky areas near streams and springs. Both are native species.



## Cultural History

### *Native People*

Humans have been visiting and using the John Day basin for at least the last 10,000 years. The landscape played an important role in shaping the way human groups have accessed and used the resources of the basin. The economic pursuits of the Native American Indian were gathering, fishing and hunting. Native American Indians from the Columbia Plateau and the Great Basin have used or passed through the John Day country as evidenced by their stone tools, house remnants, and rock paintings. We know that thousands of years in the past areas of the river canyon were more intensely occupied than they were at the time of European contact. The archaeology suggests fluid social patterns with much travel and trade with neighboring peoples. In this region the wild salmon and steelhead have been revered by Native Americans for thousands of years. Root crops common to the shallow rocky soils and wet meadows of the upland landscape were important foods for all native groups of central and eastern Oregon.

During the 1850s, the U.S. government negotiated several treaties with Native American Indian bands occupying the John Day basin. Most lands occupied or used by these bands were ceded to the government but were reserved for the continuation of off-reservation subsistence activities. Virtually the entire John Day drainage basin is ceded land. Specifically, each treaty provides that:

*“...the exclusive right of taking fish in the streams running through and bordering said reservation is hereby secured to said Indians; and at all usual and accustomed stations, in common with Citizens of the United States, and of erecting suitable [structures] for curing the same; the privilege of hunting, gathering roots and berries, and pasturing their stock on unclaimed lands in common with citizens, is also secured to them”* (Treaty with the Tribes of Middle Oregon, 1855 and Treaty with the Wallawalla, Cayuse, and other tribes 1855)

These rights and privileges remain in effect, and federal agencies have trust responsibilities to provide for their continuing practice.

### ***Euro-American Settlement***

Historic use of the John Day River began in the early nineteenth century with fur trapping expeditions. Oregon Trail emigrants bound for the Willamette Valley crossed the John Day River at present-day McDonald Crossing beginning in the 1840s. Conflicts between native populations and newcomers led to military actions against the Indians and their relocation to reservations. Settlers established homesteads and ranches in the river corridor where fertile bottomlands could be farmed and water was available for irrigation and livestock. Small communities eventually were established along the river to provide goods and services for mines, homesteads and ranches. Road networks expanded and improved as population increased.

Agriculture, and eventually timber harvesting, became important sources of income in the area.

### ***Cattle***

Public Land grazing privileges exist nearly everywhere along the lower John Day River, including Wilderness Study Areas. Most grazing on public land near the river occurs during the winter and early spring. Managing agencies and ranchers continue to improve grazing systems to protect the integrity of upland and riparian plant communities.

## Recreation

Recreation in the John Day River basin has increased dramatically since the 1980s. Popular activities include sightseeing, camping, fishing, hunting, wildlife and bird watching, swimming, boating and hiking.



*Lower Burnt Ranch area, Wagner Mountain is in the distance.*

### ***Sightseeing from Main Roads***

Stunning vistas of rugged canyons, quaint towns where the real West still lives, fresh pears and apples from an orchard near Kimberly, a stroll through ancient fossil beds, smallmouth bass at the end of your fishing line-- all are available without leaving paved roads. These activities can be experienced in a day by driving from the old ranching town of Fossil to the Sheep Rock Unit of the John Day Fossil Beds National Monument.

Unpaved roads range from smooth and well maintained to extremely rough, suitable only for high-clearance four-wheel-drive vehicles.

Bring plenty of gas, extra food and a blanket. Be sure your spare tire has air; service stations are few and far between. Traffic can be light; a stranded motorist might have to wait a while before assistance arrives.

### ***Mountain Biking and Horse Riding***

There are no trails designed for mountain bike or horse use near the John Day River, however dirt roads across public land provide numerous riding opportunities. Popular backcountry horse riding areas include Sutton Mountain and Spring Basin Wilderness Study Areas. Bicycle use in Wilderness Study Areas is extremely limited (*See WSAs*).

### ***Wilderness Study Areas (WSAs)***

A Wilderness Study Area (WSA) is an area that is being reviewed by Congress for possible inclusion into the National Wilderness Preservation System. The BLM has the responsibility to maintain the suitability of these special areas for preservation as wilderness. WSAs are remote and undeveloped public lands which offer primitive and unconfined recreation opportunities and special resource values. Hunting, backpacking, horseback riding, floatboating and photography are just a few of the opportunities available to WSA visitors.

Forty-seven miles of the lower John Day River between Clarno and Cottonwood flow through WSAs, offering the visitor a primitive, multi-day river float. Three additional WSAs, Sutton Mountain, Pat's Cabin, and Spring Basin, are located near the river between Service Creek and Clarno, and may be reached via county roads. Within WSA boundaries, the use of motorized and mechanized vehicles (including bicycles) is extremely limited.



***Within a Wilderness Study Area, Observe the Following:***

- All motorized and mechanized vehicle use is limited to signed, designated routes, including 4x4s, ATVs, motorcycles, aircraft, mountain bikes and game carts.
- Some WSAs have NO designated routes.
- Non-motorized boating, hiking, horseback riding, camping and hunting are allowed.
- As always, practice “Leave No Trace” principles.
- Cutting of standing vegetation is not allowed.
- Activities involving surface disturbance are limited and require prior contact with the BLM

***Hiking***

Hiking within the John Day River canyon rewards the prepared backcountry explorer with unmatched solitude. Nearly all of the land at the top of the canyon rim is privately held. Most side canyon exploration is done from the river during float trips. Excellent hiking can be accessed from the road at nearby Spring Basin, Sutton Mountain and Pats Cabin Wilderness Study areas. Check the Prineville BLM website for guidance in visiting Wilderness Study Areas.

The three John Day Fossil Beds National Monument units have well maintained trail systems. For additional information contact the National Park Service at 541-987-2333 or visit their website, [www.nps.gov/joda/](http://www.nps.gov/joda/)

***Hunting***

Mule deer, elk, California bighorn sheep and antelope reside year-round in the John Day River basin. They use the hills along the river as winter range. Hunting is popular for chukar, pheasant, elk and deer along the river and side canyons. Ducks and geese may not be hunted on the John Day between Thirtymile Creek and the Columbia River. Public lands along the river are open to hunting during authorized seasons, but hunters need to be aware of their location at all times to

avoid trespassing onto private property, which is interspersed with public lands in many locations.

The State of Oregon John Day River Wildlife Refuge includes all land within ¼ mile of the John Day River mean high water line from the Columbia River upstream to Thirtymile Creek. The area is open to hunting of upland game birds during authorized seasons only between September 1 and October 31, but closed to all waterfowl hunting. Hunting of big game is allowed during authorized seasons. Hunting on private lands within this refuge requires landowner permission. *(2004-2005 Oregon Game Bird Regulations)*

Always consult current hunting regulations prior to your hunt. Laws can and do change from year to year.



*Bighorn Sheep*



*Native Steelhead*

### ***Fishing***

The John Day River claims the largest spawning populations of wild spring chinook salmon and summer steelhead remaining in the Columbia River System.

The steelhead run in the John Day is not supported by a hatchery program. Hatchery stock from other river systems will sometimes wander up the John Day. Native summer run steelhead enter the Columbia River as early as May and arrive at the mouth of the John Day throughout the summer and autumn. There the bulk of the run awaits high water caused by winter rains before leaping Tumwater Falls and swimming upstream to spawn, usually in the same tributary where they began life as an egg three or four years earlier.

Steelhead fishers catch these magnificent fish on bait, lures and flies. All wild steelhead must be released unharmed.

Smallmouth bass and channel catfish were introduced in the early 1970's and have become established throughout the lower river.

A hook baited with a gob of worms or chicken liver can entice a catfish to bite, especially at dusk and dawn. Cast your bait into a deep, still pool and wait for the tug.

Smallmouth bass weighing five or six pounds are caught each year in the John Day River. Most are considerably smaller. Flipping a curly-tail jig with light spinning gear or splatting a rubber-legged popper with a light fly rod into an eddy results in many hookups. Diving plugs and plastic worms are effective lures for larger bass.

The smallmouth bass fishery has become very popular, drawing people from throughout the Northwest. Fishing is generally best for smallmouth bass during spring and summer. Be sure to check with Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife for fishing seasons, slot and creel limits. For more information visit [www.dfw.state.or.us](http://www.dfw.state.or.us).



*Smallmouth Bass*



### ***Camping***

Private and public campgrounds are located throughout the John Day basin.

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) manages four semi-developed campgrounds along the mainstem and North Fork of the John Day River:

- Muleshoe Campground is located along Highway 19 approximately ten miles west of Spray.
- Lone Pine and Big Bend Campgrounds are located approximately three miles northeast of Kimberly along the North Fork.
- Donnelly Service Creek River Access Park located at the Highway 19/207 junction thirteen miles west of Spray, offers walk-in camping and a boat launch.

All four campgrounds charge a nominal fee and have picnic tables and toilets but no water or garbage collection. There is a small charge per extra vehicle (tow vehicles excluded) in all fee campgrounds, with a maximum of two vehicles allowed per site.

Also in the vicinity of the John Day River, Wheeler County operates Shelton Wayside and Bear Hollow, fee campgrounds with water and toilets. Both are located on Highway 19 between Fossil and Service Creek.

Camping is permitted on undeveloped BLM lands. Private land is interspersed with public land in all river sections, so it is essential to carry a current map showing land ownership. Please respect private property by camping and hiking only on BLM lands.



When camping in the backcountry, please follow the seven **Principles of Leave No Trace** outdoor ethics.

1. Plan Ahead and Prepare
2. Travel and Camp on Durable Surfaces
3. Dispose of Waste Properly
4. Leave What You Find
5. Minimize Campfire Impacts
6. Respect Wildlife
7. Be Considerate of Other Visitors

#### **Plan Ahead and Prepare**

- Know the regulations and special concerns for the area you'll visit.
- Prepare for extreme weather, hazards, and emergencies.
- Schedule your trip to avoid times of high use.
- Visit in small groups. Split larger parties into groups of 4-6.
- Repackage food to minimize waste.
- Use a map and compass or GPS receiver to eliminate the use of marking paint, rock cairns or flagging.

#### **Travel and Camp on Durable Surfaces**

- Durable surfaces include established trails and campsites, rock, gravel, dry grasses or snow.
- Good campsites are found, not made. Altering a site is not necessary.

***In popular areas:***

- Concentrate use on existing trails and campsites.
- Walk single file in the middle of the trail, even when wet or muddy.
- Keep campsites small. Focus activity in areas where vegetation is absent.

***In pristine areas:***

- Disperse use to prevent the creation of campsites and trails.
- Avoid places where impacts are just beginning.

**Dispose of Waste Properly**

- Pack it in, pack it out. Inspect your campsite and rest areas for trash or spilled foods. Pack out all trash, leftover food, and litter. Do not burn or bury trash.
- All human waste must be packed out of the John Day River canyon. When *not* camping within the John Day River canyon, solid human waste may be deposited in cat holes dug 6 to 8 inches deep at least 200 feet from water, camp, and trails. Cover and disguise the cat hole when finished.
- Pack out toilet paper and hygiene products.
- To wash yourself or your dishes, carry water 200 feet away from streams or lakes and use small amounts of biodegradable soap. Scatter strained dishwater.

**Leave What You Find**

- Preserve the past: examine, but do not remove or damage, cultural or historic structures and artifacts. Touching painted or incised Native American Indian images on stone can damage or accelerate their deterioration. It is important to show respect.
- Leave rocks, plants and other natural objects as you find them.
- Avoid introducing or transporting non-native species.
- Do not build structures, furniture, or dig trenches.

**Minimize Campfire Impacts**

- Burn only natural combustibles such as wood and paper. Burn no plastics, glass or metal; all are hazardous.
- Campfires can cause lasting impacts to the backcountry. Use a lightweight stove for cooking and enjoy a candle lantern for light.
- Firepan use is required for all campfires within the John Day River corridor.
- Keep fires small. Only use sticks from the ground that can be broken by hand.
- Burn all wood and coals to ash, put out campfires completely and pack out ashes.
- Know fire closure periods. In the John Day River corridor this is June 1 through October 1 annually.

**Respect Wildlife**

- Observe wildlife from a distance. Do not follow or approach them. Use binoculars for a closer look.
- Never feed animals. Feeding wildlife damages their health, alters natural behaviors, and exposes them to predators and other dangers.
- Protect wildlife and your food by storing rations and trash securely.
- Control pets at all times, or leave them at home.
- Avoid wildlife during sensitive times: mating, nesting, raising young, or winter.

**Be Considerate of Other Visitors**

- Respect other visitors and protect the quality of their experience.
- Be courteous.
- Camp away from other visitors.
- Let nature's sounds prevail. Avoid loud voices and noises.

## **Boating**

Boating the John Day in a raft, kayak, canoe, driftboat or jetboat are popular activities. As a free-flowing river, water levels fluctuate widely with snowpack, temperature and rainfall. Peak flows generally occur from March through May, with the boating season extending into early July. During drought years low flows can bring an end to the primary boating season by mid-June. For half to one-day float trips, the section between Spray and Burnt Ranch offers several boating access points, making various trip options available. The most popular multi-day float trips include the 48 mile section from Service Creek to Clarno, and the 70 mile section from Clarno to Cottonwood. The difficulty of rapids varies with flow level.

### ***Equipment***

Self-sufficiency is all-important when you are miles and days away from civilization. Make sure all equipment is in good condition. Carry a repair kit and an extra oar or paddle in each boat. Bring a life jacket or personal floatation device for each person and pack an extra one for each boat. Carry safety and first aid equipment and know how to use it. Cell phone coverage in the canyon is poor. Satellite telephones work well.

### ***Drinking Water***

Springs shown on the map usually flow year-round. All water for consumption should be filtered, treated or boiled. River water may contain suspended sediment, algae, bacteria and agricultural chemicals.

### ***Have a plan***

Tell someone where you are going and when you will be returning.



***Recommended Flows***

A wide range of opinion exists regarding minimum and maximum flow levels for a safe and enjoyable float trip. Minimum flow levels vary by watercraft, river segment, familiarity with the river channel, and how heavy the boat is loaded. Braided river channels and frequent upstream winds can add to the challenge of low-water boating. Canoes, kayaks and small inflatable craft can navigate the river at 250 cfs and even less, but dragging a boat over shallow riffles adds considerable time and effort to a trip.

Flows greater than 6,000 cfs create powerful hydraulics and standing waves in unexpected places. The river bed can change from year to year after flood events. It is not possible to list all possible hazards because rapids are different at every flow level.



*Clarno Rapids at 250 cfs*

***Powerboating***

Powerboat restrictions are in effect at different times and in different segments of the river:

	Upstream of Service Creek	Service Creek To Clarno	Clarno to Cottonwood	*Cottonwood to Tumwater Falls
<b>Non-Motorized</b>	Open	Open	Open	Open
<b>Electric Motor (40 lb. thrust or less)</b>	Open	Open	Closed	Open Oct.-April
<b>Powerboats</b>	Open	Open Oct.-April	Closed	Open Oct.-April

*\* All water craft must travel back upstream upon reaching Tumwater Falls; no take-out or portage is allowed on adjacent private land. At Class VI the falls are deadly. McDonald Crossing is the last public launch/take-out before Tumwater Falls.*

Personal Watercraft (Jet-Skis and similar boats) are permitted on the John Day below Tumwater Falls only.

***Whitewater Classifications - International Scale***

Class I	small waves, passages clear, no serious obstacles
Class II	medium-sized regular waves, passages clear, some maneuvering may be required
Class III	waves numerous, high, and irregular, rocks, eddies, narrow passages, scouting usually required
Class IV	powerful, irregular waves, boiling eddies, dangerous rocks, congested passages, precise maneuvering required, scouting mandatory
Class V	exceedingly difficult, violent rapids often following each other without interruption, big drops, violent current, scouting mandatory but often difficult
Class VI	limit of navigability, generally considered unrunnable

**Rapids:***Service Creek to Clarno Bridge*

Most of the John Day is a succession of long, gentle pools, riffles and river bends. Russo Rapid (River Mile 150.2) and Tap Horn Canyon Rapid (RM 149.2) are rated Class II. In Russo the current can push a boat into a rock wall on river left. Running Tap Horn in a hard boat requires careful maneuvering at lower flows (less than 1,200 cfs) to avoid hitting rocks. Both produce formidable standing waves that can swamp a canoe at higher flows (+2,500 cfs).

Burnt Ranch Rapid (RM132.4) is rated Class II+. Large boulders create powerful hydraulics at higher flows and unavoidable hazards at low flows. When in doubt, scout.

*Clarno Bridge to Cottonwood Bridge*

Clarno Rapid (RM104.8-104.2) Class III-IV, is considered to be the most difficult rapid on the lower John Day. At low, late summer flows Clarno Rapid is a giant boulder garden, impassable for heavy rafts and drift boats. Spring floods can turn it into a raging torrent of whitewater. Should you flip your boat and lose your gear here you are faced with a five mile hike back to Clarno Bridge. Scout these rapids from the left bank.

Basalt Rapids (RM93) Class II-III, is generally considered to be the other place in this segment where boating skills are tested. It is a good idea to scout these rapids, especially when traveling by canoe or drift boat.

**Flow Information**

The North Fork John Day contributes up to ten times as much water as the mainstem John Day at their confluence near Kimberly.

Flow levels for the John Day River can be found on the internet at the following web sites:

[www.westfly.com/cgi-bin/riverData?region=OR](http://www.westfly.com/cgi-bin/riverData?region=OR)

<http://ahps.wrh.noaa.gov/cgi-bin/ahps.cgi?pdt&sero3>

or from the River Service Center in Portland, Oregon at (503)261-9246. Snowpack information is available at [www.wcc.nrcs.usda.gov](http://www.wcc.nrcs.usda.gov).



*Sunset serenade, Priest Hole*

<b><i>River Segment</i></b>	<b><i>Miles</i></b>
Kimberly to Service Creek	27
Service Creek to Clarno	48
Clarno to Cottonwood	70
Cottonwood to Rock Creek	18
Rock Creek to Tumwater Falls	12

***Regulations***

Group size is limited to 16 people. Firepans are required. No fires of any kind are allowed between June 1 and October 1. Self-issue permits, available at most river access points, are required year-round.

***Boat Launch & Take-Outs***

Spray (RM 170) private land, toilet, campground, launch fee.

Wooden Bridge (RM 162) no toilet, no camping.

Muleshoe (RM 159.2) toilet, campground.

Service Creek (RM 157.4) toilet, walk-in campground.

Twickenham (RM 144.1) private land, toilet, no camping.

Priest Hole (RM 137.5) toilet, primitive camping.

Lower Burnt Ranch (RM 131.7) toilet, primitive camping.

Clarno East (RM 112.5) private land.

Clarno (RM 109.2) toilet, no camping.

Cottonwood (RM 39.6) toilet, no camping.

Rock Creek (RM 22.8) no toilet, primitive camping.

McDonald Crossing (RM 21.7) no toilet. Last takeout before Tumwater Falls.

***Approximate One Way Shuttle Distance and Drive Times***

Service Creek to Clarno	42 Miles	1 Hr
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Service Creek to Cottonwood	76 Miles	1.5 Hr
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Clarno to Cottonwood	74 Miles	1.5 Hr
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A list of shuttle services is maintained on the BLM website:

[www.or.blm.gov/Prineville/JohnDay/home.htm](http://www.or.blm.gov/Prineville/JohnDay/home.htm)

***On-Shore Hazards***

Getting bit, stung or poisoned can detract from your enjoyment of the John Day River area. Animals and plants to avoid include rattlesnakes, wasps, scorpions, black widow spiders, red ants, poison oak, poison ivy, stinging nettle and prickly pear cactus. Learn to recognize these plants and animals. Mosquitoes are rarely a problem on the John Day, but wood ticks are present throughout the spring, summer and fall.

## River Etiquette

If you float the river from late May through early July expect plenty of company. Your trip can still be pleasant if you take responsibility for your actions. Loud music, barking dogs, rowdy behavior, camping too close to others and other inconsiderate acts invite confrontation. Who needs it?

Camping on the John Day River requires a high level of consideration. Recovery from damage caused by backcountry visitors can take many years due to the dry climate. Campsites on the John Day River are used many times each year. Skunks, dogs and raccoons dig up buried trash and human waste. Fire rings on the ground attract more fires to the same place resulting in a big, charred patch of ground usually containing partially burned plastic and other trash. Even cutting dead limbs from trees leaves ugly, hacked up vegetation for future visitors to look at.

Please do not carry a saw, ax or hatchet. There is no need to cut down or chop up anything in the canyon. When camp fires are allowed, bring pre-cut firewood or briquettes from home. Small pieces of driftwood may be burned, but even dead wood has a purpose in the river; woody debris provides part of the foundation for the food chain in a healthy river system.

### ***Dogs***

The John Day canyon is not a safe place for pets. A thirsty dog may drink water from a stagnant puddle turned toxic by algae bloom. Rattlesnake bites, tick infestations, paws cut by sharp rocks and other medical emergencies cannot be attended to adequately in the wilderness. The nearest veterinarian might be hours or days away.



Even a well-trained dog may suddenly bolt after livestock or wildlife. A barking dog within earshot spoils someone else's wilderness experience. If you bring your dog it is important you maintain control of your pet at all times. Pet waste must be removed from campsites in the same manner you are required to remove your own. You are responsible for everything your dog decides to do.

### *Protect campsites from fire scars*



When fires are allowed boaters are required to use a firepan. Firepan use eliminates unsightly campfire rings and accompanying trash and protects the natural environment.

A firepan is a metal tray with rigid sides at least two inches high. Oil drain pans, small barrels cut in half and backyard barbecue grills make effective and inexpensive firepans. Firepans are also available from river and horse packing equipment suppliers. Elevate the firepan with flat rocks to avoid scorching sand or blackening the soil. Locate the firepan close to the river and away from dry grasses and other vegetation. Burn only wood from home, charcoal, or small pieces of driftwood no thicker than your wrist. Do not cut live or dead vegetation. Burn your fire down to white ash, let it cool completely, and pack out all of the ash with your trash.



*Volunteers cleaning and removing a campfire ring.*

***Leave No Trace in the John Day Canyon***

Burying human waste, an acceptable practice in many wilderness settings, is illegal in the John Day River canyon. In arid river canyons like the John Day, solid human waste decomposes very slowly. A river campsite can be transformed into a large "cat box" overnight by just one party utilizing the "cat hole" method of disposal. Just imagine how many people will use that same site in one season, day after day. As use levels increase, it becomes unacceptable to leave human waste within the river canyon. On overnight trips, all boating parties are required to carry a portable, reusable toilet system that can be dumped at a proper waste facility, such as the BLM dump stations at Clarno and Cottonwood, the SCAT machine at Heritage Landing near the mouth of the Deschutes River, or an RV dump station. Federal regulations prohibit dumping solid human waste into garbage receptacles and landfills. WAG Bag or PETT Toilet systems are permissible. To protect the environment in the event of a boating mishap, used Wag Bags must be stored in a screw-lid container or a heavy-duty dry bag during the trip.

An inexpensive toilet can be made from a five or three-gallon food service bucket capped with a water-tight Gamma Seal marine lid (available at boating supply stores). The bucket doesn't take up much space in your boat and it is readily available for emergency use.

***Tips for river toilet maintenance***

- Spray your toilet with non-stick cooking spray before using it for the first time on each trip. This makes it easier to clean.
- Before using any toilet system, add two inches of water to the container and an ounce of a bacteria or enzyme-based product to control odor and break down waste.
- The only thing that should go into the toilet is deposits and toilet paper. No feminine hygiene products, no cardboard roll from the center of the toilet paper. Such items are trash to go in the everyday garbage for hauling out.

## **Pine Creek Conservation Area**

### **Confederated Tribes of the Warm Springs Reservation of Oregon**

The Pine Creek Conservation Area (see map pages 11-13) is a 33,557-acre property owned and managed by the Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs. These sagebrush steppes, grasslands, juniper woodlands, and riparian areas are linked with over 10,000 acres of public land. The conservation area provides habitat for over 250 wildlife species.



The Tribes have long traditions of natural resource stewardship, and participate in management of natural resources throughout their Ceded Lands, where they retain rights to traditional activities. This project is one of three BPA- funded Conservation Areas owned by the Tribes in the John Day Basin.

Bonneville Power Administration is funding acquisition and management of the Conservation Area as mitigation for wildlife habitat losses at John Day Dam on the Columbia. Partners, including individuals, non-profit organizations, state and federal agencies, are assisting the Tribes with management and monitoring. The Conservation Area has the potential to be a model for watershed and wildlife habitat management in the lower John Day Basin.

The Conservation Area includes over 10 miles of Pine Creek and 6 miles of John Day River front. Riparian areas on Pine Creek are recovering from past grazing practices, and removal of passage barriers has helped steelhead access the stream for spawning.

Western Juniper has encroached into sagebrush and grasslands on the Conservation Area since the late 1800s. Juniper encroachment eliminates habitat for sagebrush and grassland-dependent wildlife. The Tribes are using prescribed fire and cutting to control juniper and restore sagebrush steppe and grassland. Juniper management will

benefit watersheds by improving groundwater recharge and increasing summer stream flow.

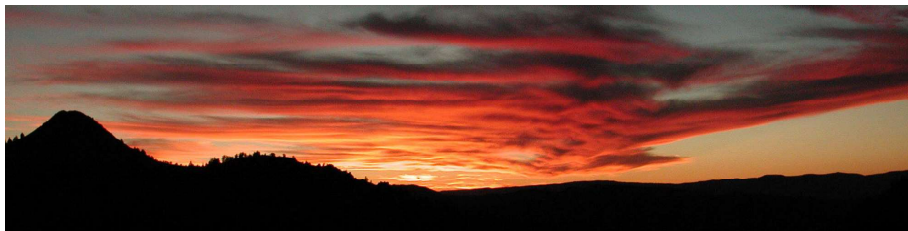
In addition to habitat restoration, the Tribes have implemented a successful access program, creating new opportunities for tribal members and the public to hike, view wildlife, or hunt mule deer, elk, or upland game birds.

Regulations are in place to protect resources, and most access is by foot only. Visitors are responsible for knowing current regulations. No camping is permitted within ¼ mile of the John Day River, except on BLM land or below the ordinary high water line.

*Access is conditioned upon visitors agreeing to comply with regulations and applicable Oregon and Federal law. Visitors will comply with any directions or instructions given them by Pine Creek Conservation Area employees in the administration of their duties. Visitors will not trespass on neighboring lands. Users failing to comply with these regulations and applicable law are subject to exclusion from the Pine Creek Conservation Area, payment of damages, and prosecution under applicable law.*

*Visitors to the Pine Creek Conservation Area assume the risk inherent with the activities they undertake, whether hunting, horseback riding, hiking, or any other activity. By assuming this risk they agree not to make a claim against or sue the Confederated Tribes or their employees for injuries or damages that they incur as a result of the inherent risks of their visit to Pine Creek Conservation Area.*

For information and complete regulations, visit an information station (located at Mile Markers 25 and 33 on Highway 218) or contact: Pine Creek Conservation Area, [pinecreek@bendnet.com](mailto:pinecreek@bendnet.com), (541) 489-3477.



*Sunset over Pine Creek Conservation Area*

## GPS Coordinates

Coordinates are based in UTM Zone 10 NAD27 CONUS

<b>RAPIDS</b>			
<b>Rapid Name</b>	<b>Type</b>	<b>Utm_x</b>	<b>Utm_y</b>
Russo Rapids	Class II	730285	4960606
Homestead Rapids	Class II	717651	4958439
Burnt Ranch Rapids	Class II-III	709409	4957405
Clarno Rapids	Class III	699015	4982697
Clarno Rapids	Class III-IV	698920	4982014
Basalt Rapids	Class II-III	696506	4997215
Tumwater Falls	Class V-VI	694707	5058833
<b>PLACES</b>			
Placenames	Elevation (ft)	Utm_x	Utm_y
Kimberly	1828	765742	4961470
Service Creek	1654	737302	4964017
Twickenham	1557	724511	4957430
Priest Hole	1508	716079	4957561
Lower Burnt Ranch	1436	708766	4957922
Clarno	1290	699819	4976531
Butte Creek	1160	698313	4991805
Thirtymile	981	699073	5003939
Cottonwood	524	697970	5038840
Tumwater Falls	270	694707	5058833

CAMPS					
Site Number	Utm_x	Utm_y	Site Number	Utm_x	Utm_y
154.30L	734368	4963255	123.60R	706912	4964975
153.20R	733544	4962097	123.30R	707022	4965134
153.15R	733503	4961989	122.90L	707428	4965409
152.02R	732067	4961583	122.80L	707365	4965574
152.02L	732051	4961476	122.75R	707436	4965696
151.86R	731897	4961620	122.55L	707130	4965826
148.85L	729275	4958839	122.35R	707432	4965989
139.80R	718096	4958685	121.10R	707155	4966193
139.15L	718096	4958685	121.07R	707155	4966906
139.15R	718096	4958685	120.90L	706861	4966954
138.92R	717719	4958502	119.40R	705247	4968178
138.91L	717772	4958349	119.30L	705025	4968130
138.70L	717493	4958324	106.46L	698644	4980108
138.26R	716932	4957934	106.30L	698447	4980196
138.18R	716884	4957853	106.00R	698244	4980493
137.95R	716618	4957547	104.68L	698961	4982290
137.52R	716313	4957429	104.30L	698856	4982772
137.25L	715890	4957593	103.94R	698515	4982958
136.78L	715384	4957776	103.77R	698568	4983150
136.57L	715235	4957331	103.15L	698843	4983978
135.84L	714204	4956896	99.58R	697983	4989099
132.85R	709911	4957744	96.75L	697704	4992595
132.45L	709470	4957525	92.82R	696627	4997286
132.07R	709112	4957540	92.80R	696715	4997291
132.05L	709015	4957564	92.60R	696923	4997367
131.80R	708888	4957859	92.56R	697013	4997427
130.05R	707767	4959484	92.06R	697552	4997451
130.00L	707620	4959538	91.65R	698267	4997735
129.60L	707095	4959520	91.55R	698325	4997875
129.60R	707070	4959623	91.15R	698638	4998167
126.40L	705567	4963675	90.84R	699036	4997859
126.05R	705928	4964076	90.00L	699663	4997123
125.77R	706149	4964176	89.97R	699795	4997184
125.70R	706141	4964028	89.70R	699682	4997507
125.25L	706419	4963455	89.55R	699912	4997912
125.20L	706500	4963442	88.70L	699926	4999107



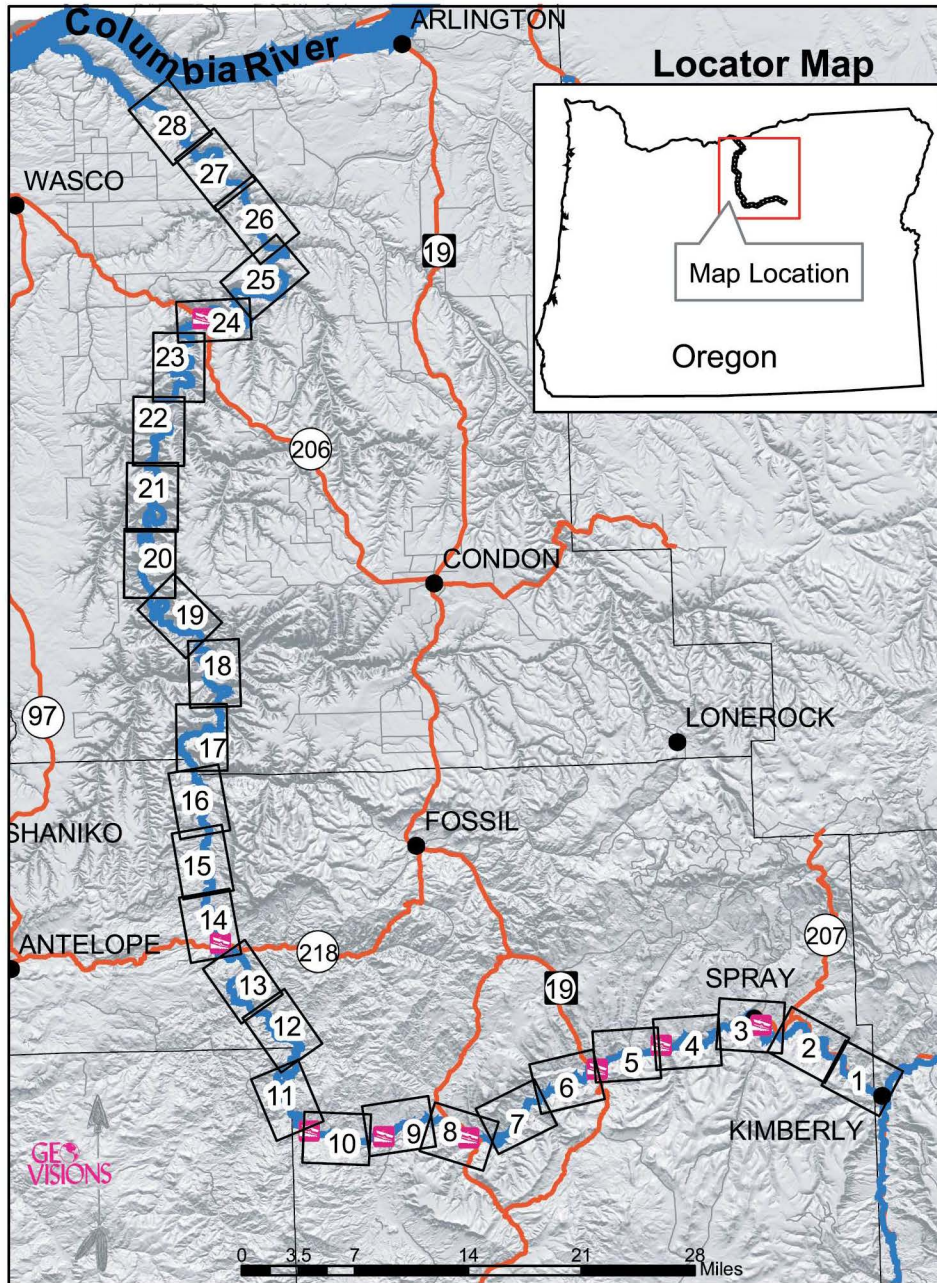
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88.55L	699783	4999517
86.50R	700717	5001198
86.35L	700489	5001909
86.25L	700369	5001987
81.65L	698218	5005810
81.50L	698009	5005777
81.50L	698009	5005777
80.85R	697666	5006314
79.50R	696717	5007198
79.05R	696329	5007559
78.57L	695636	5007691
78.50L	695526	5007788
78.00R	694925	5008147
77.70L	694698	5008502
77.50R	694405	5008480
77.36R	694207	5008508
77.15R	694015	5008610
76.63L	693667	5009119
75.60R	693391	5009795
75.40R	693682	5009748
75.00L	694265	5009898
74.40L	694111	5010628
73.65R	693145	5010178
73.25R	692887	5010681
72.50R	692887	5010681
71.80R	692321	5012632
71.79L	692227	5012677
70.50R	692321	5012632

Site Number	Utm_x	Utm_y
70.50R	692321	5012632
69.85L	693532	5014295
69.85L	693532	5014295
68.85R	692564	5014945
67.59L	692970	5016383
67.52L	692934	5016482
66.95L	692169	5016781
66.85R	691846	5016907
66.85R	691846	5016907
63.85L	693335	5018620
63.47L	693814	5018623
61.71R	692898	5020415
61.65R	692898	5020547
61.65R	692898	5020547
61.05R	693626	5020916
60.75L	693794	5021285
60.23L	693707	5022029
59.35R	692899	5022363
59.10R	693244	5022457
58.90L	693514	5022692
58.35L	693528	5023451
57.40R	692571	5024169
57.33R	692613	5024259
57.25R	692670	5024370
55.44R	693201	5026810
55.44R	693201	5026810
54.78L	693914	5027197
54.70L	693939	5027312
54.35L	693810	5027196

Site Number	Utm_x	Utm_y	Site Number	Utm_x	Utm_y
54.38R	694143	5027634	47.85R	695938	5030179
52.05L	693821	5028811	47.85R	695938	5030103
51.20L	694022	5029838	46.95R	695938	5030125
51.05L	693804	5029963	46.02R	695202	5033451
48.75R	694143	5027634	45.43L	695771	5034076
47.85R	695938	5030179	44.47R	697016	5034529
47.85R	695938	5030133	43.27R	695956	5035669

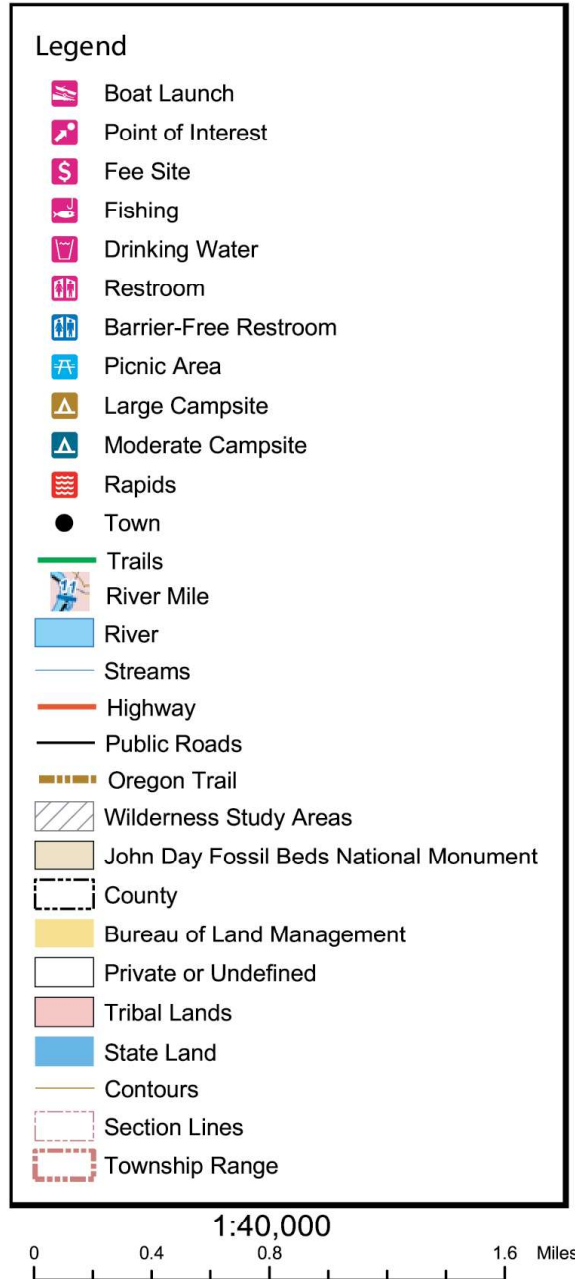


*Low water camp near Buckskin Canyon, 71.8R.*

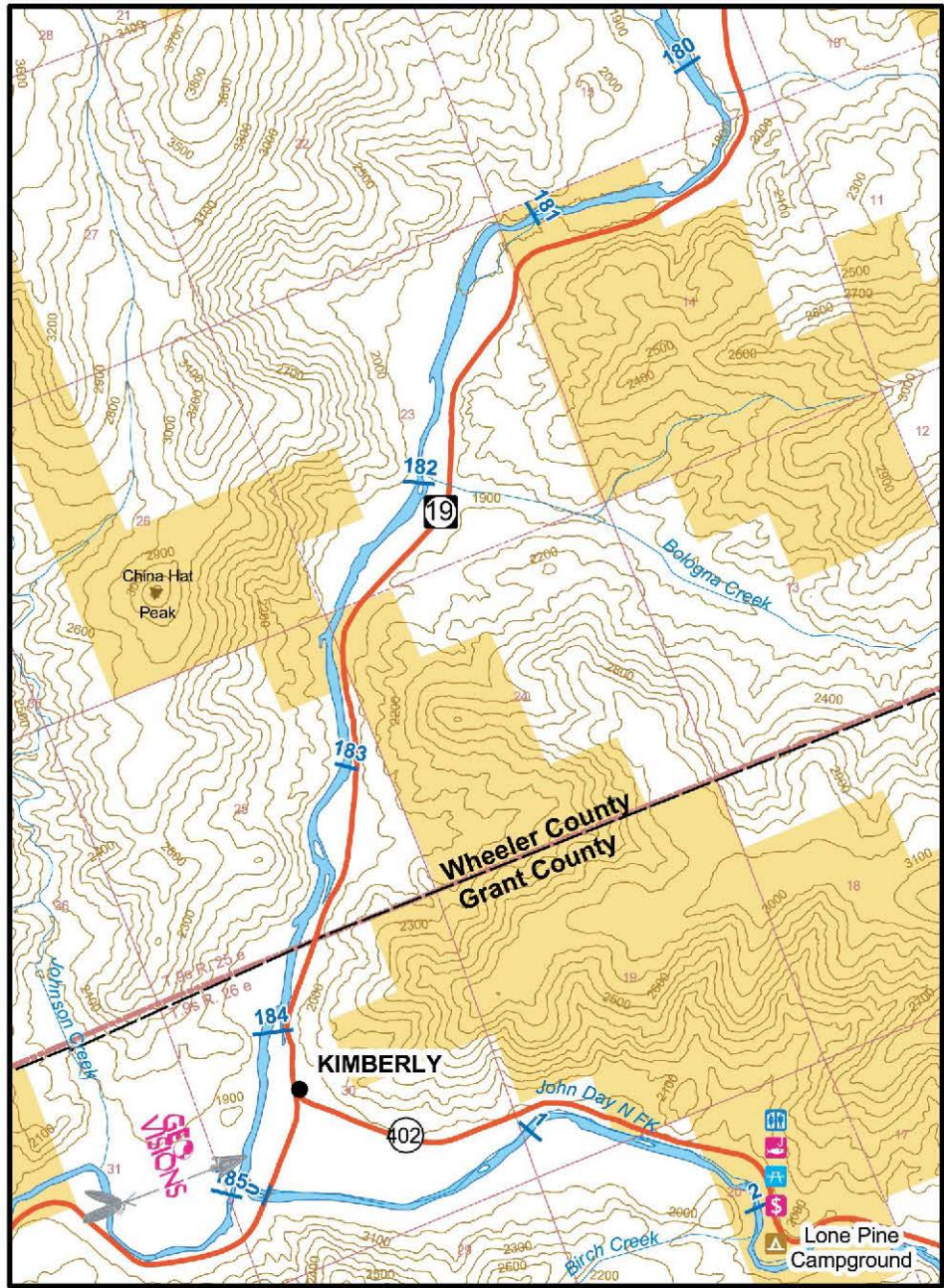


## NOTICE!

Thank you for using this interim guide while the BLM Prineville District develops a new John Day River Guide. In addition to regular boating information, this interim version identifies sites where camping is no longer recommended due to overgrown vegetation. An updated list of available campsites will be included in the new guide.

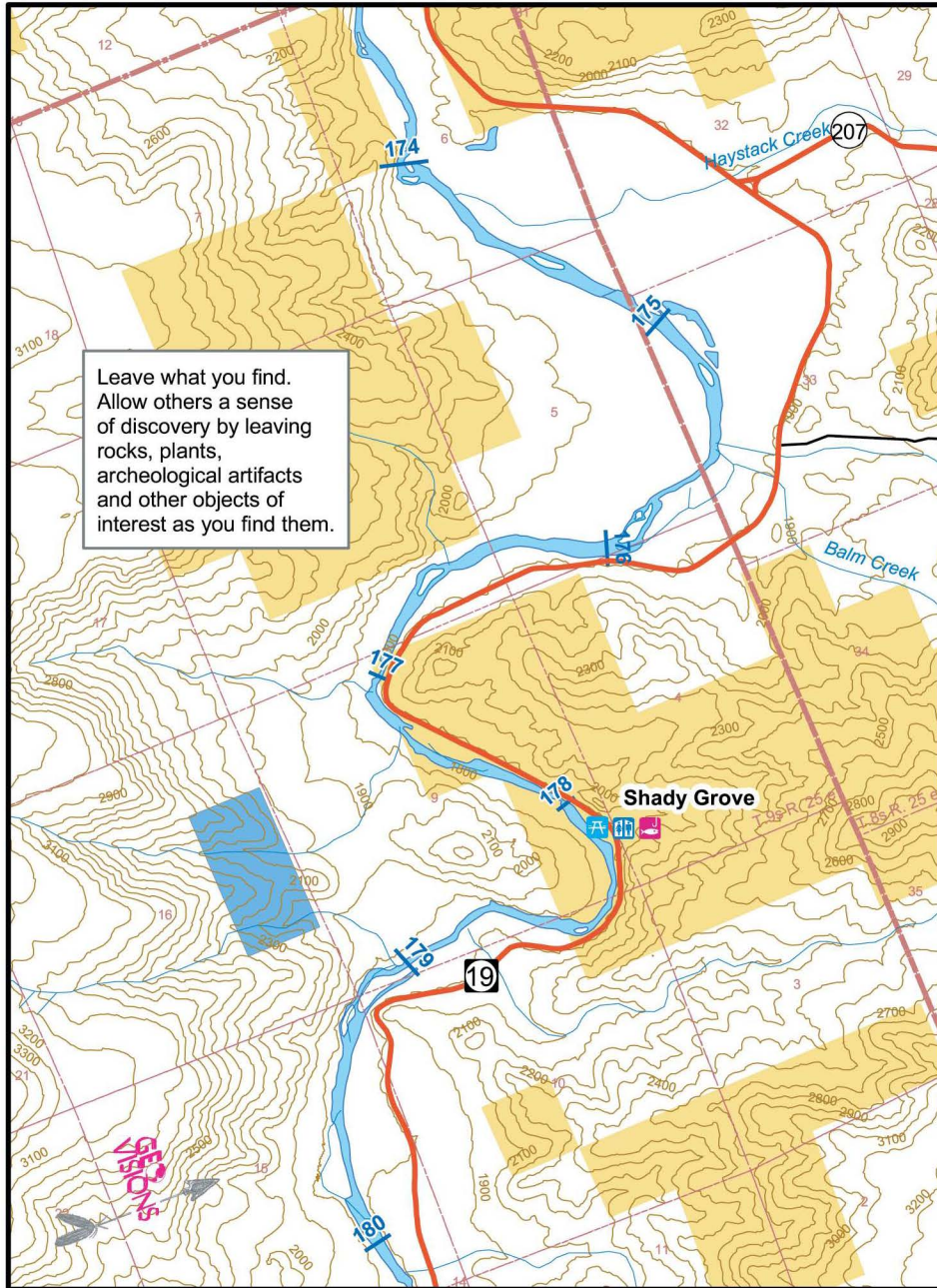




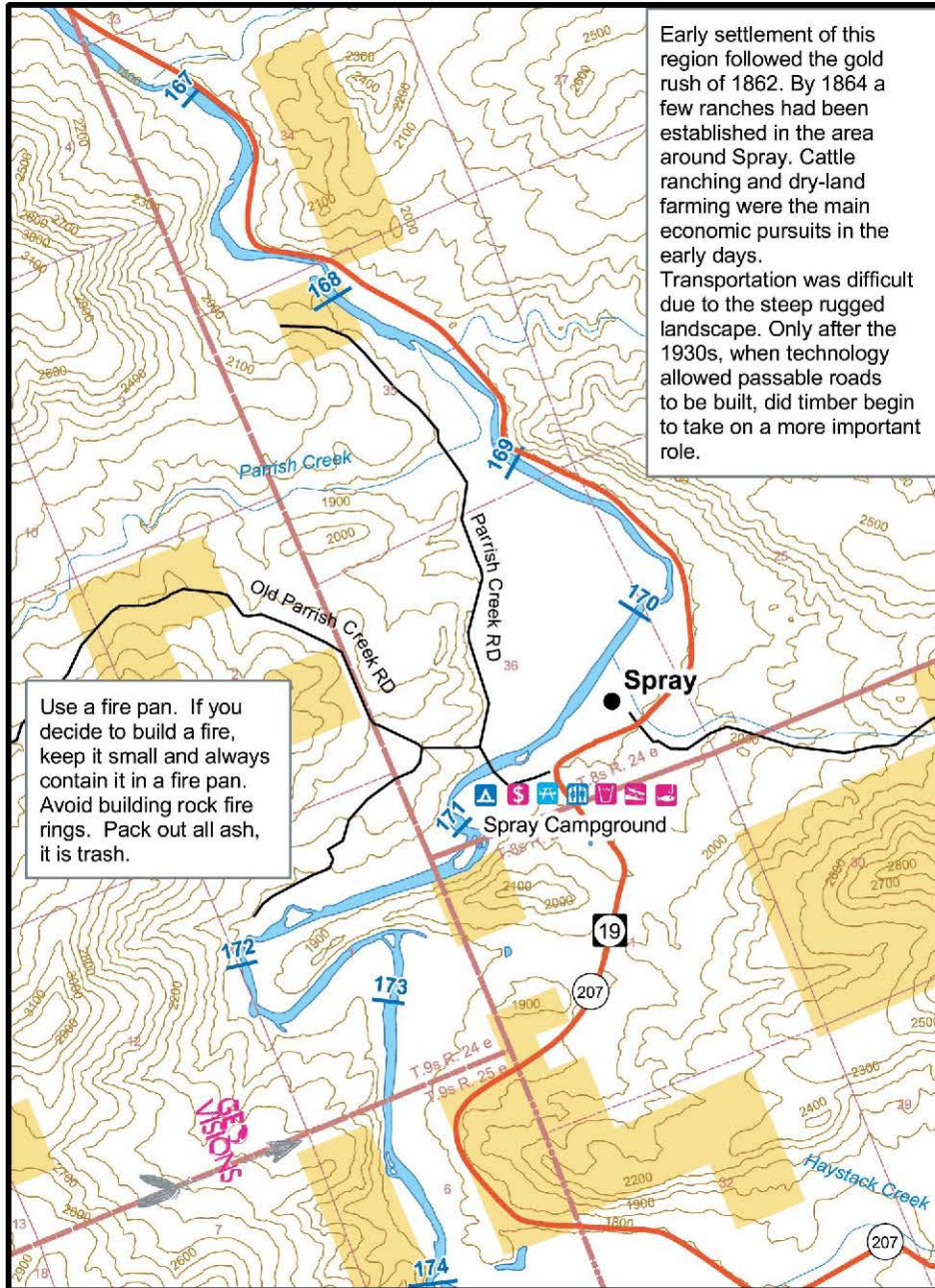


Map 1





Map 2

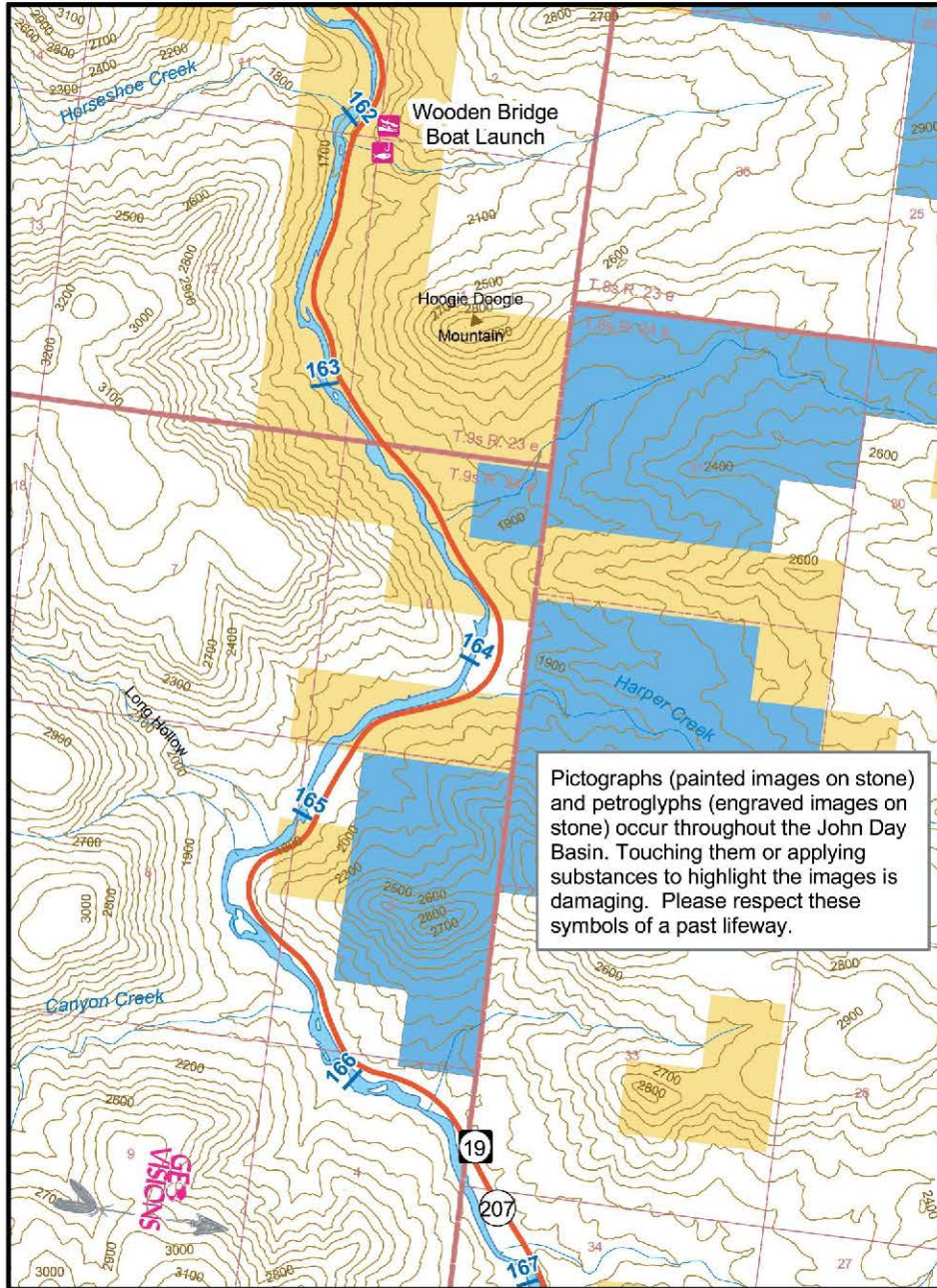


Early settlement of this region followed the gold rush of 1862. By 1864 a few ranches had been established in the area around Spray. Cattle ranching and dry-land farming were the main economic pursuits in the early days. Transportation was difficult due to the steep rugged landscape. Only after the 1930s, when technology allowed passable roads to be built, did timber begin to take on a more important role.

Use a fire pan. If you decide to build a fire, keep it small and always contain it in a fire pan. Avoid building rock fire rings. Pack out all ash, it is trash.

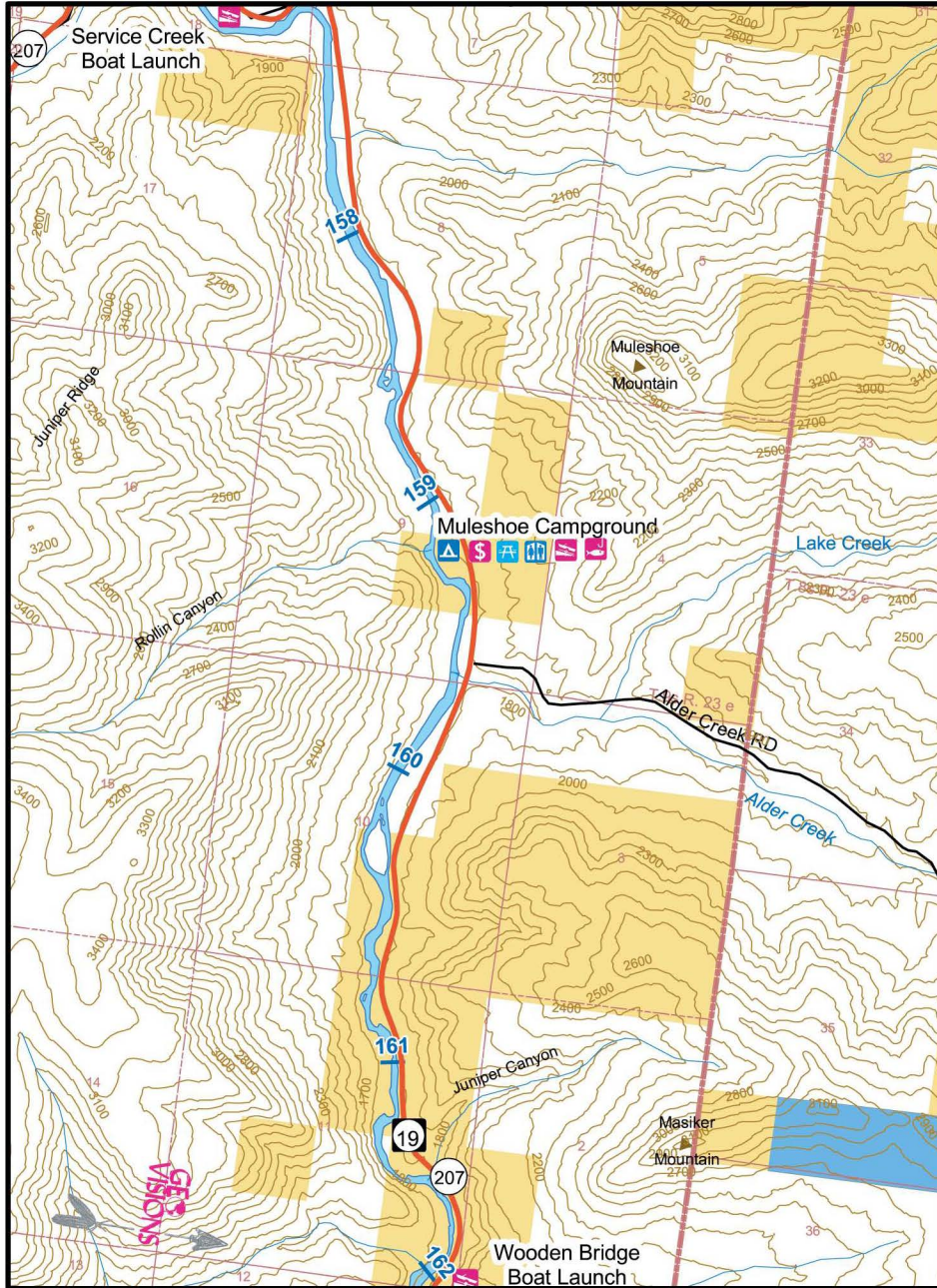
Map 3





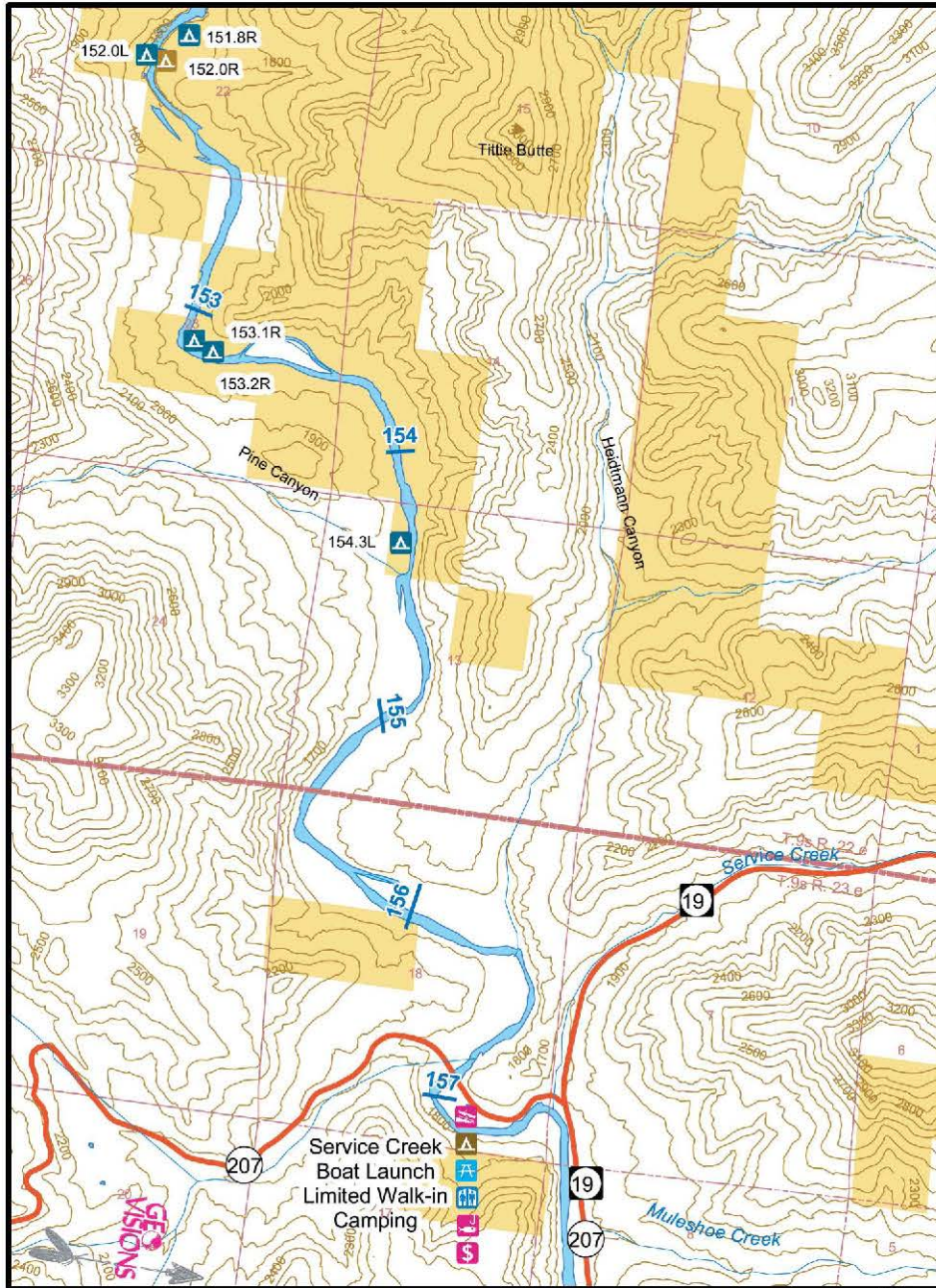
Map 4





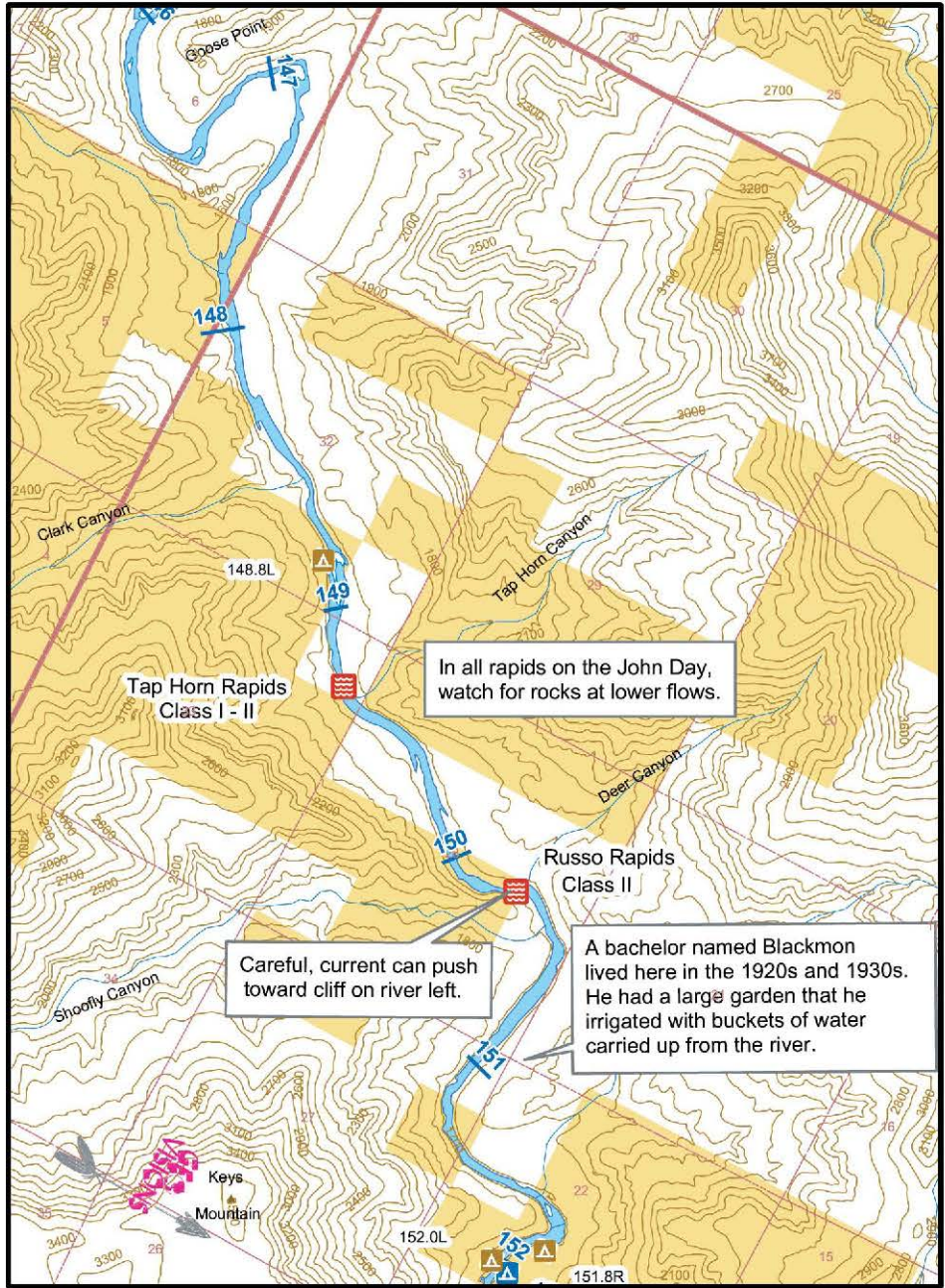
Map 5





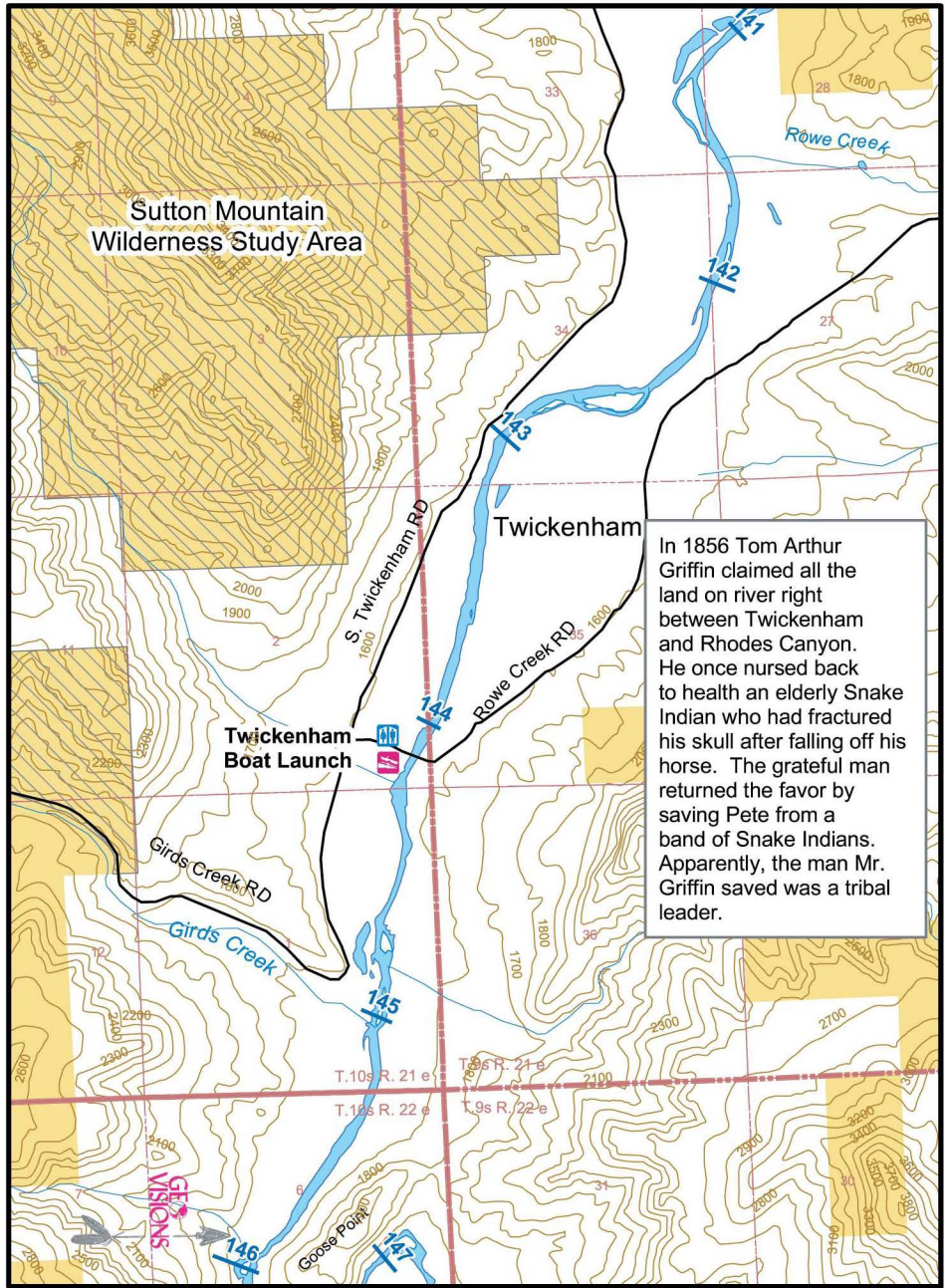
Map 6



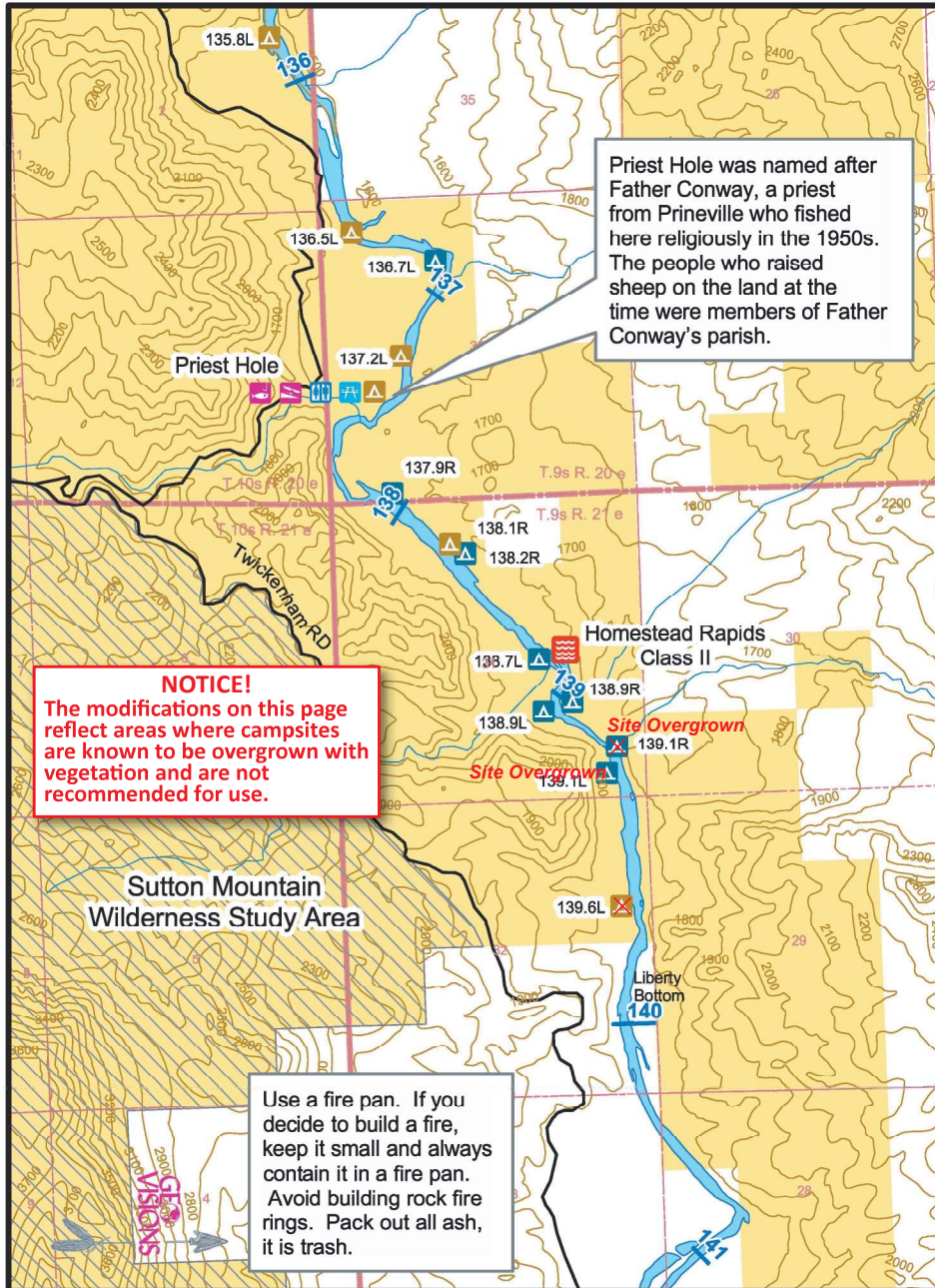


Map 7



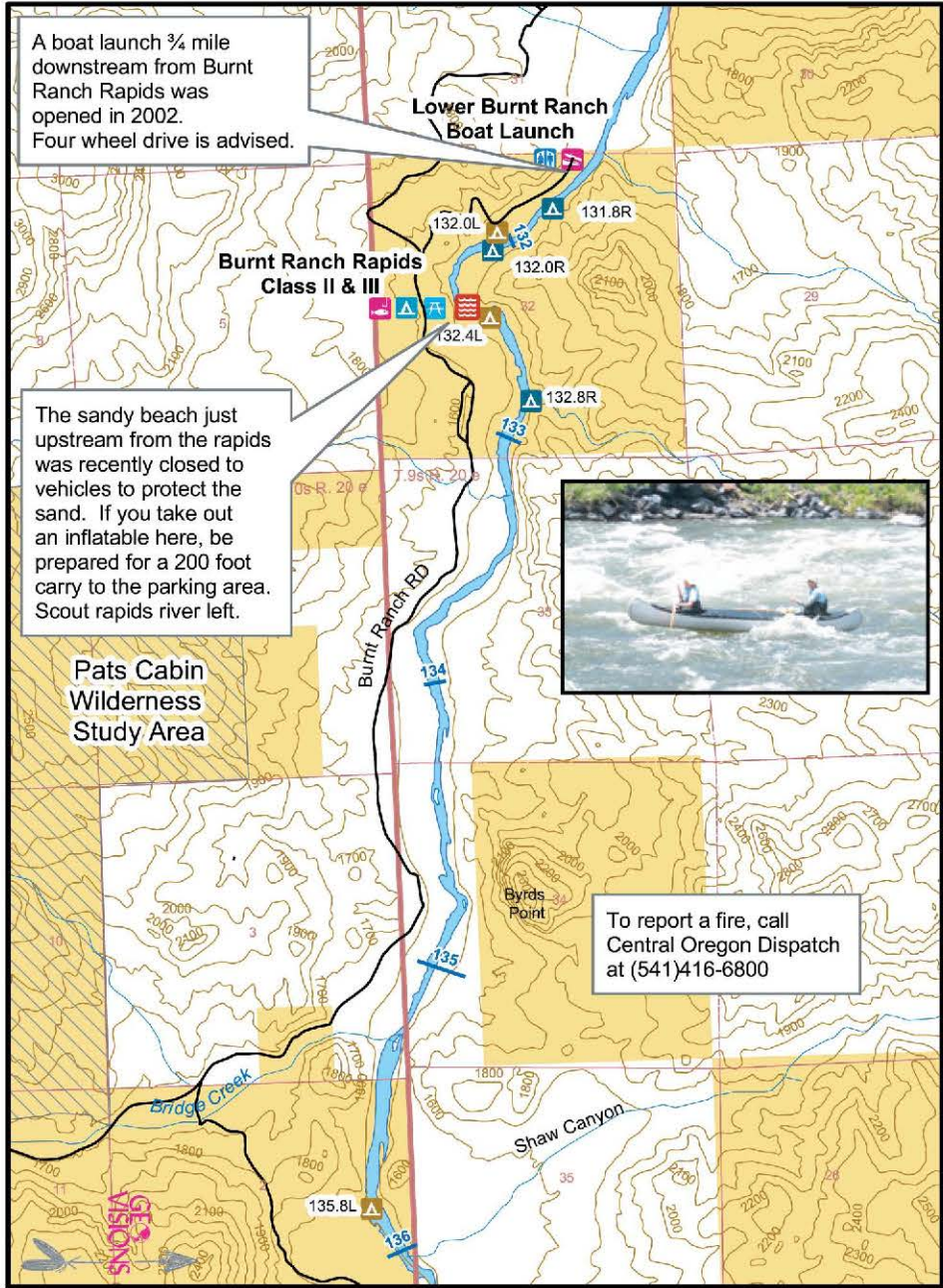


Map 8

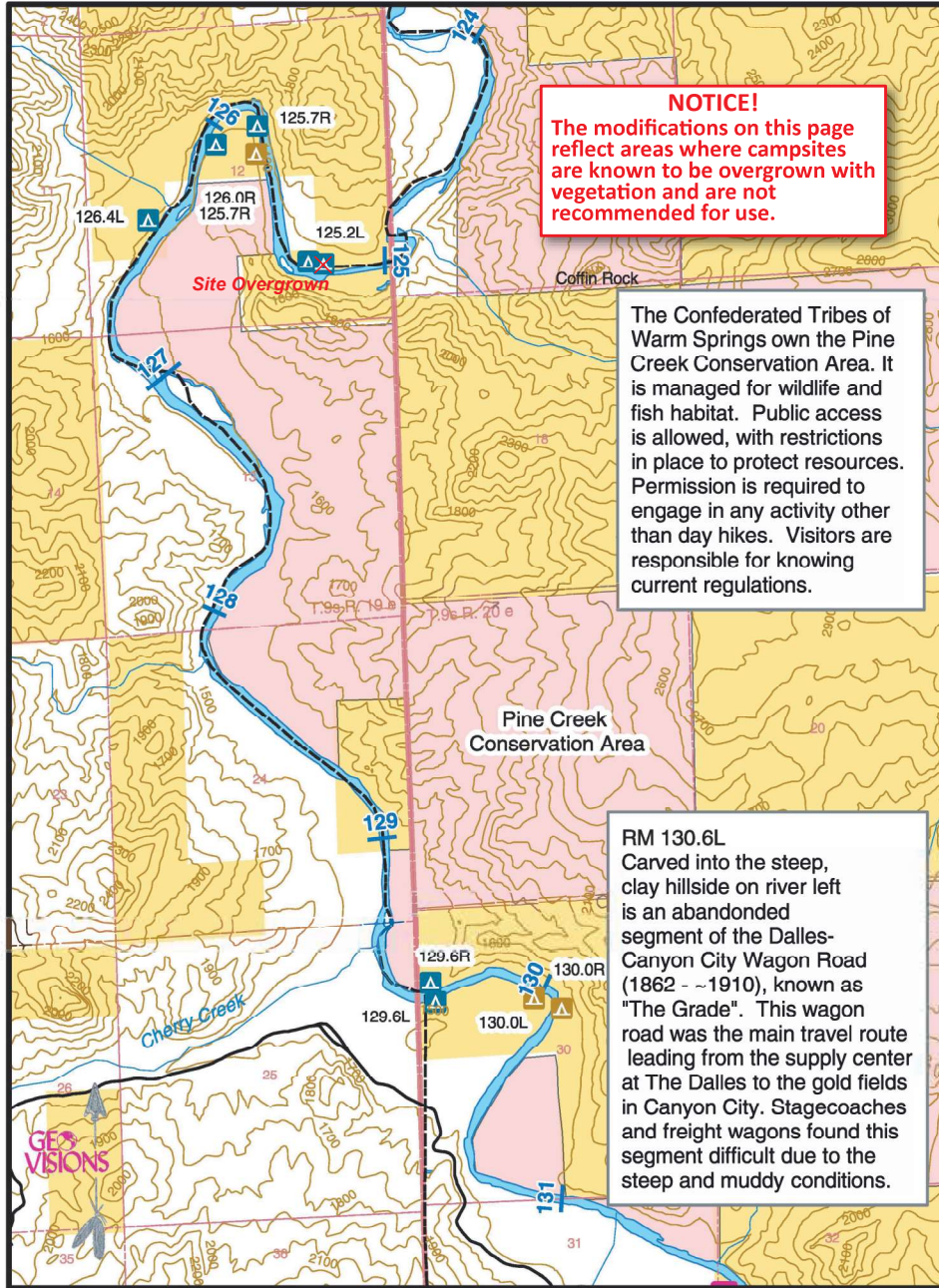


Map 9





Map 10



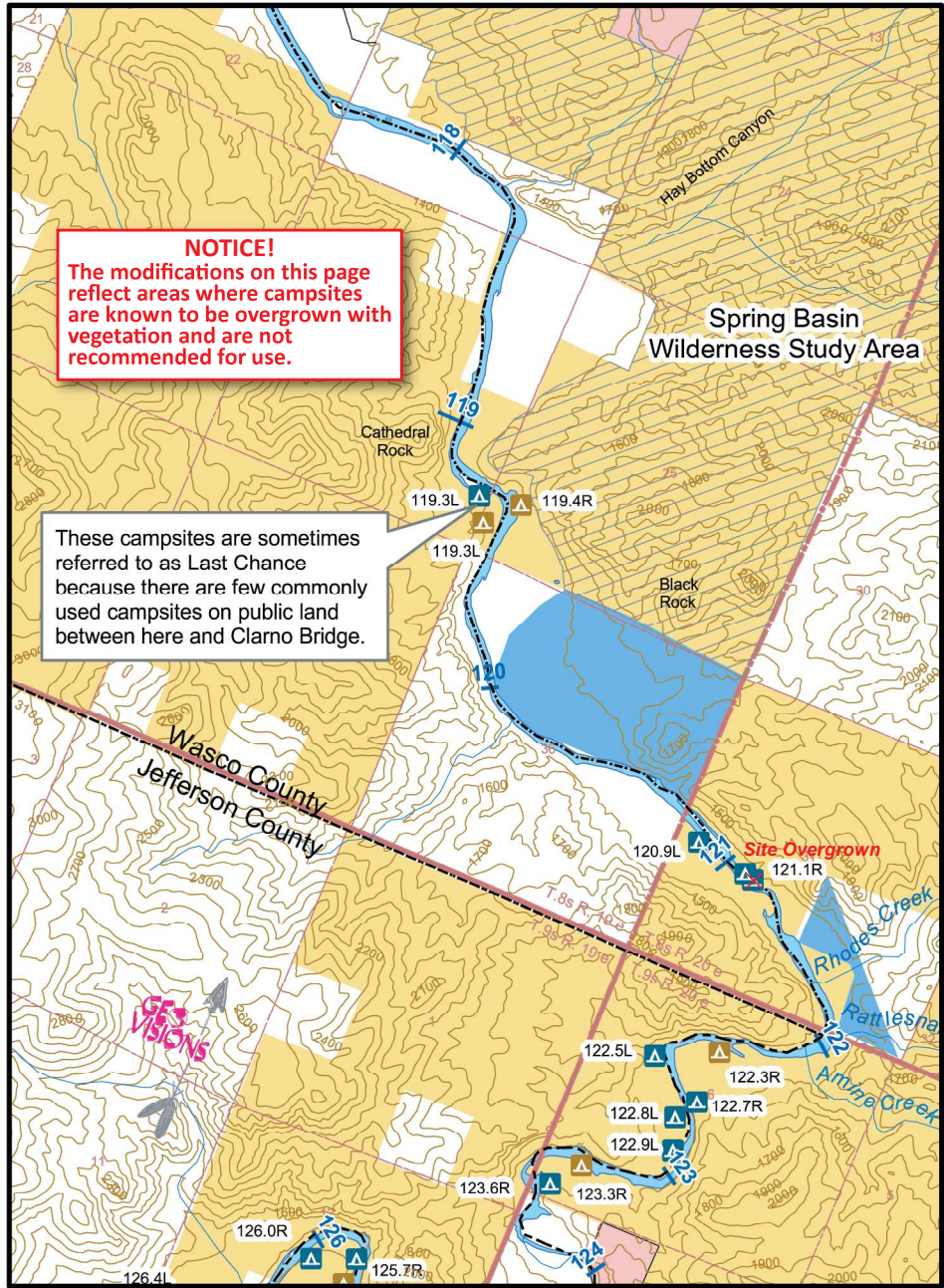
**NOTICE!**  
 The modifications on this page reflect areas where campsites are known to be overgrown with vegetation and are not recommended for use.

The Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs own the Pine Creek Conservation Area. It is managed for wildlife and fish habitat. Public access is allowed, with restrictions in place to protect resources. Permission is required to engage in any activity other than day hikes. Visitors are responsible for knowing current regulations.

RM 130.6L  
 Carved into the steep, clay hillside on river left is an abandoned segment of the Dalles-Canyon City Wagon Road (1862 - ~1910), known as "The Grade". This wagon road was the main travel route leading from the supply center at The Dalles to the gold fields in Canyon City. Stagecoaches and freight wagons found this segment difficult due to the steep and muddy conditions.

Map 11



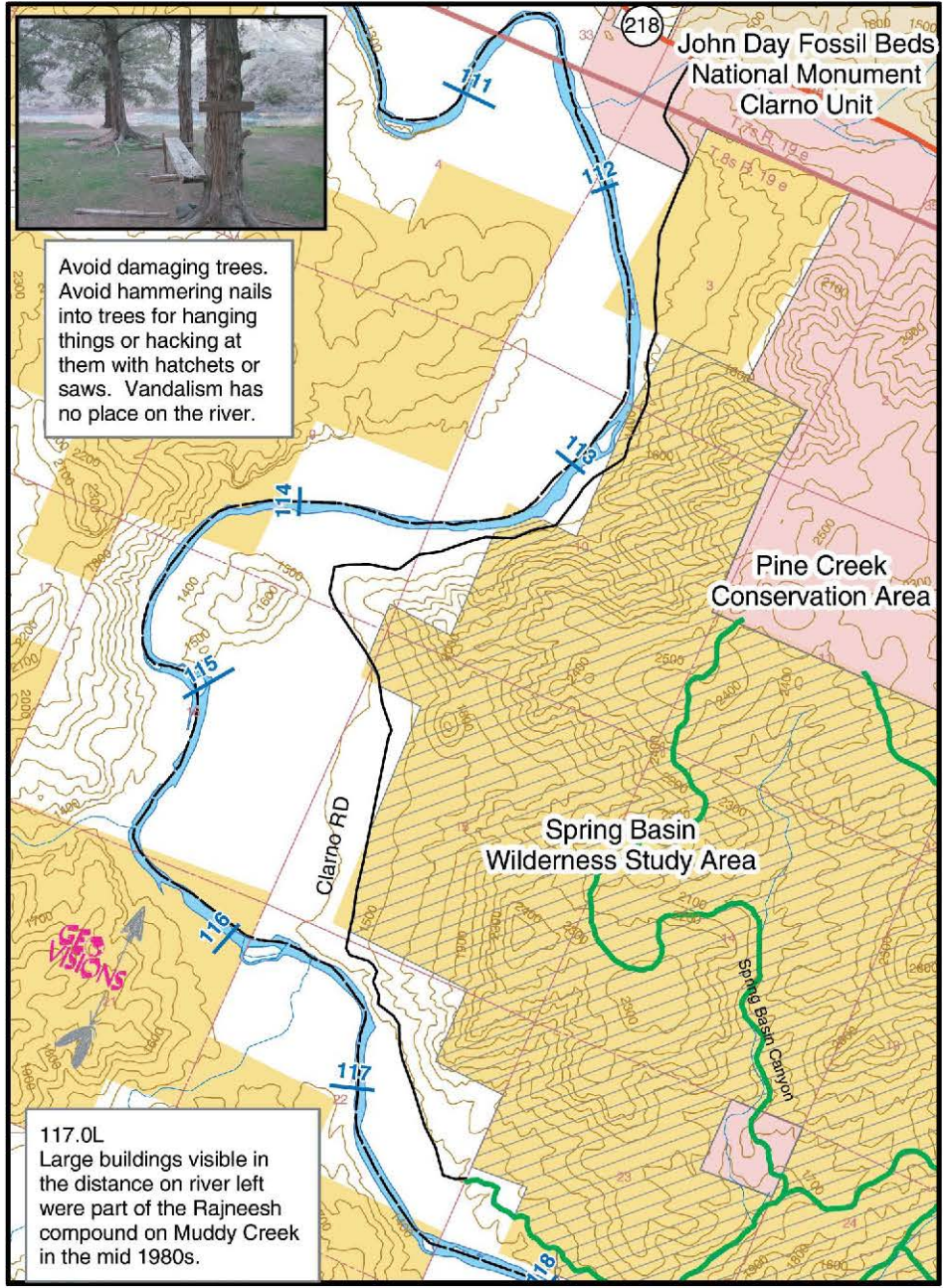


**NOTICE!**  
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These campsites are sometimes referred to as Last Chance because there are few commonly used campsites on public land between here and Clarno Bridge.

Map 12



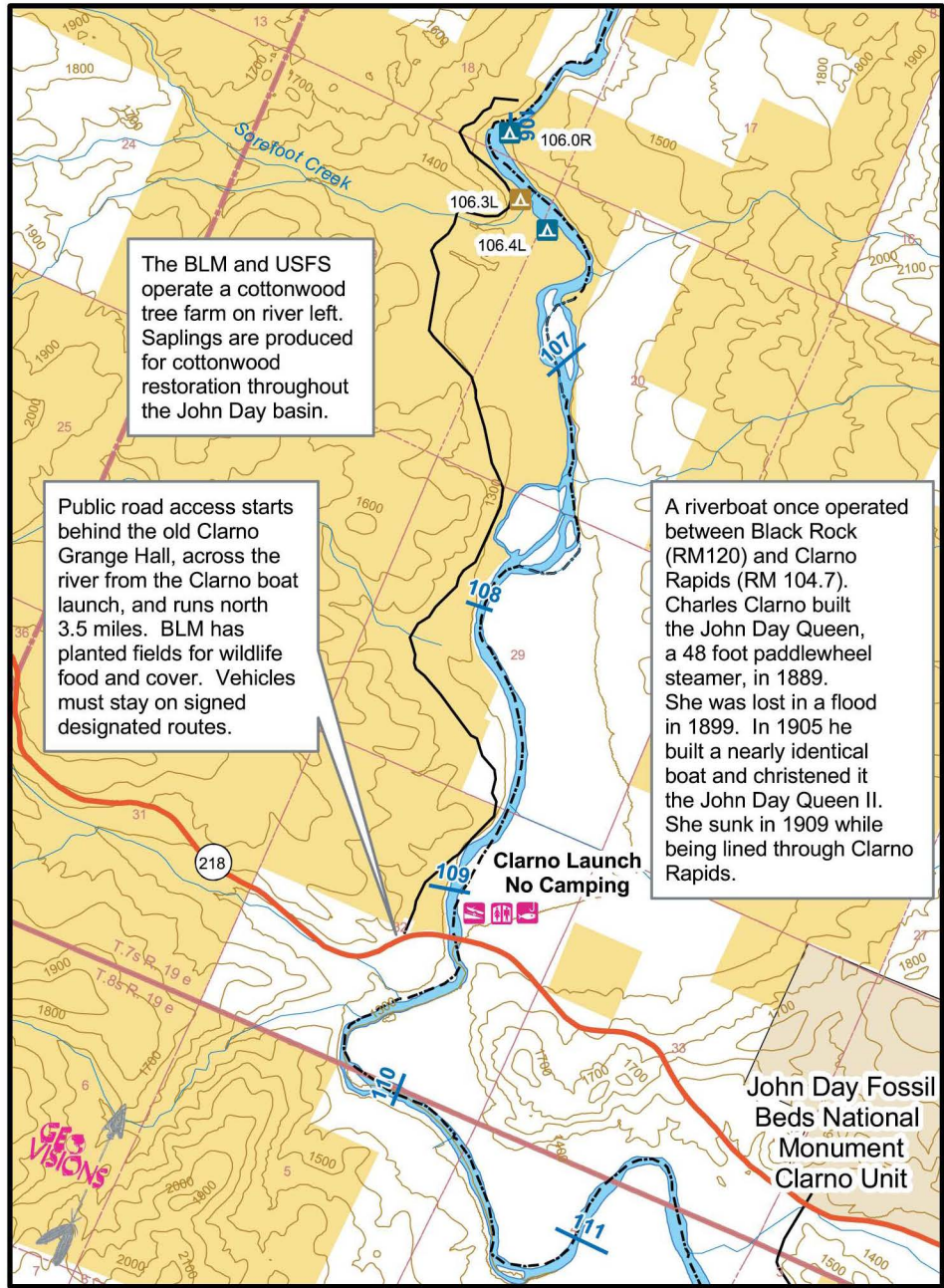


Avoid damaging trees. Avoid hammering nails into trees for hanging things or hacking at them with hatchets or saws. Vandalism has no place on the river.

117.0L  
Large buildings visible in the distance on river left were part of the Rajneesh compound on Muddy Creek in the mid 1980s.

Map 13





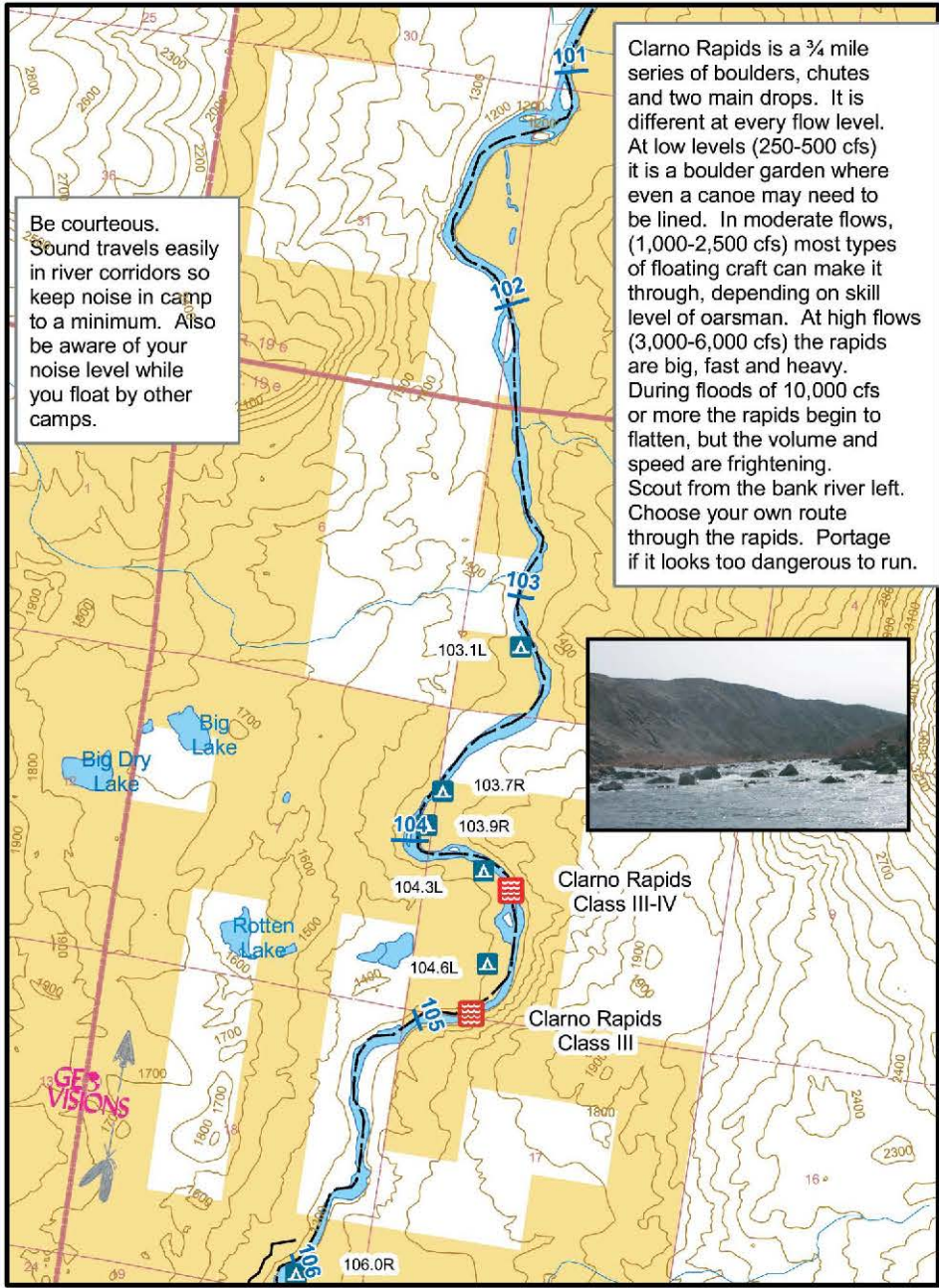
The BLM and USFS operate a cottonwood tree farm on river left. Saplings are produced for cottonwood restoration throughout the John Day basin.

Public road access starts behind the old Clarno Grange Hall, across the river from the Clarno boat launch, and runs north 3.5 miles. BLM has planted fields for wildlife food and cover. Vehicles must stay on signed designated routes.

A riverboat once operated between Black Rock (RM120) and Clarno Rapids (RM 104.7). Charles Clarno built the John Day Queen, a 48 foot paddlewheel steamer, in 1889. She was lost in a flood in 1899. In 1905 he built a nearly identical boat and christened it the John Day Queen II. She sunk in 1909 while being lined through Clarno Rapids.

John Day Fossil Beds National Monument  
Clarno Unit

Map 14



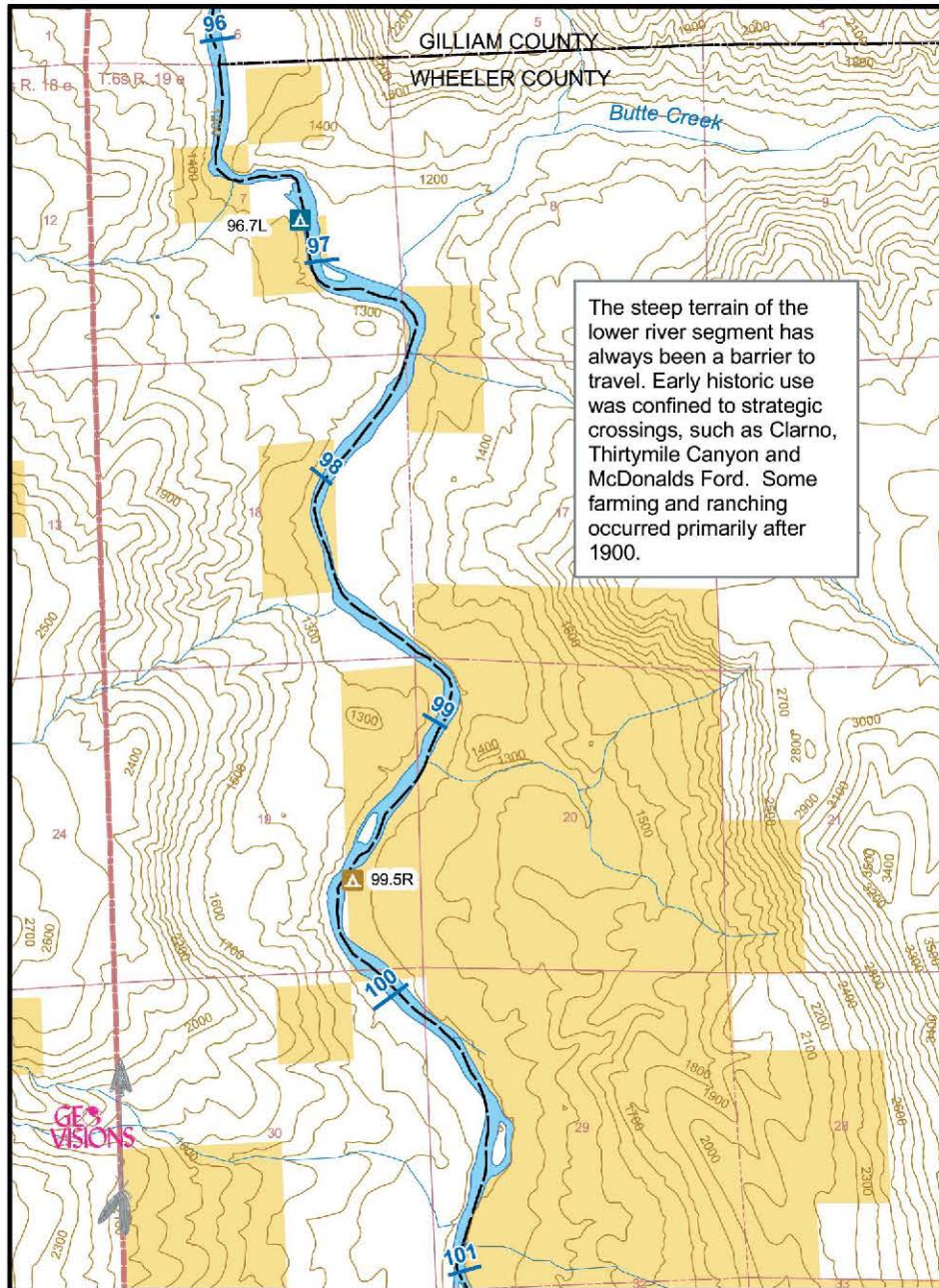
Be courteous. Sound travels easily in river corridors so keep noise in camp to a minimum. Also be aware of your noise level while you float by other camps.

Clarno Rapids is a ¾ mile series of boulders, chutes and two main drops. It is different at every flow level. At low levels (250-500 cfs) it is a boulder garden where even a canoe may need to be lined. In moderate flows, (1,000-2,500 cfs) most types of floating craft can make it through, depending on skill level of oarsman. At high flows (3,000-6,000 cfs) the rapids are big, fast and heavy. During floods of 10,000 cfs or more the rapids begin to flatten, but the volume and speed are frightening. Scout from the bank river left. Choose your own route through the rapids. Portage if it looks too dangerous to run.

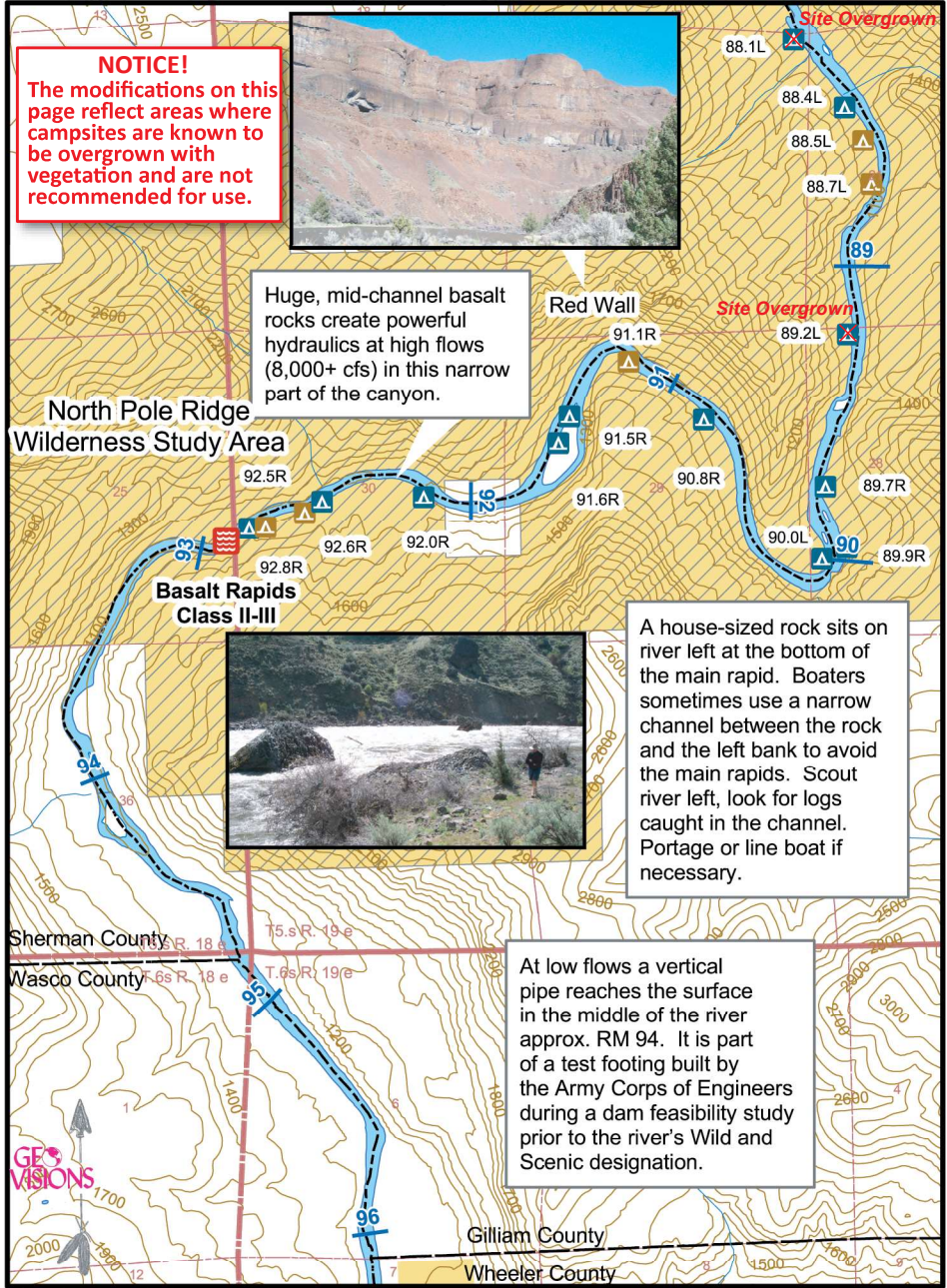


Map 15



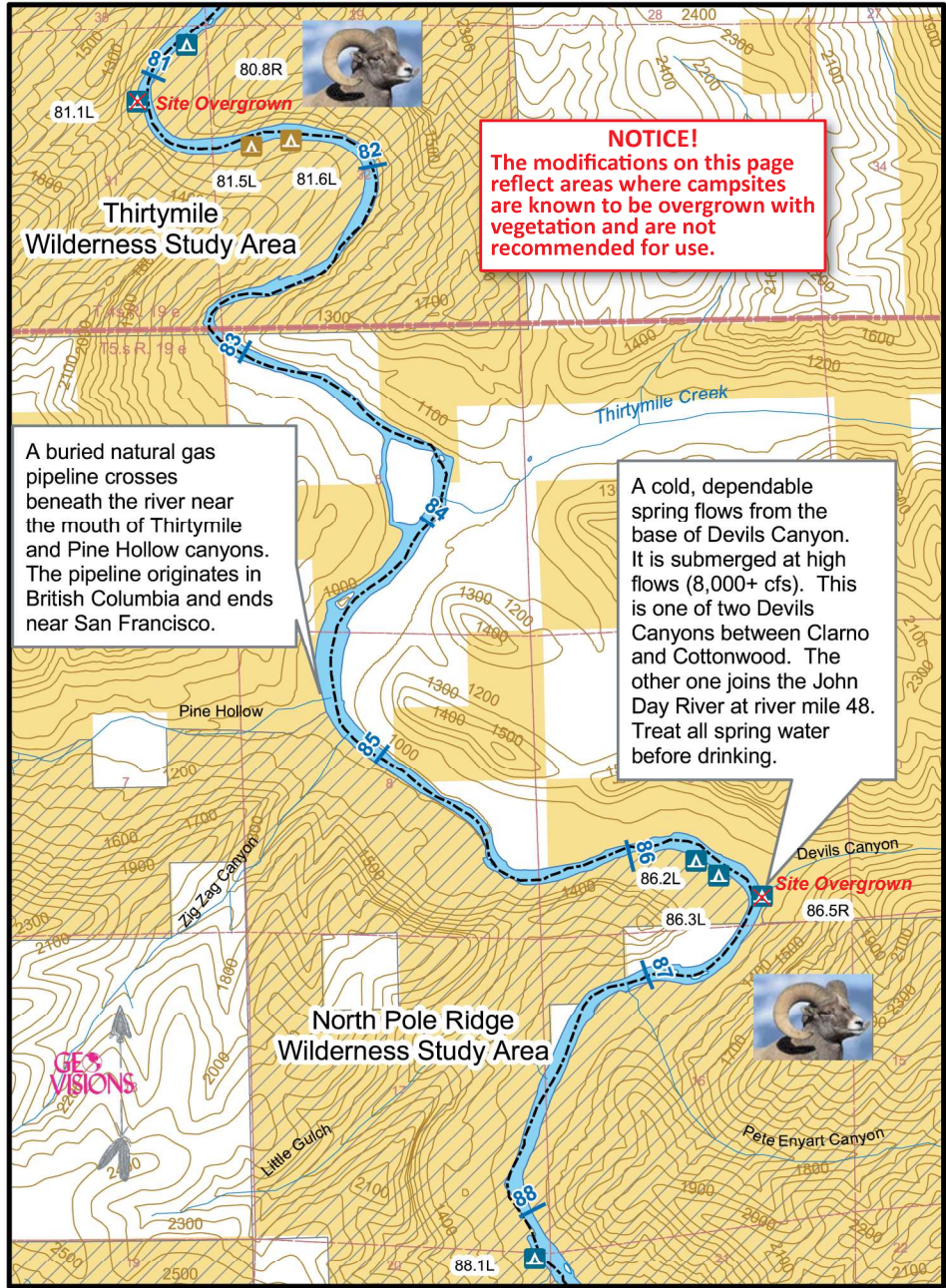


Map 16



Map 17





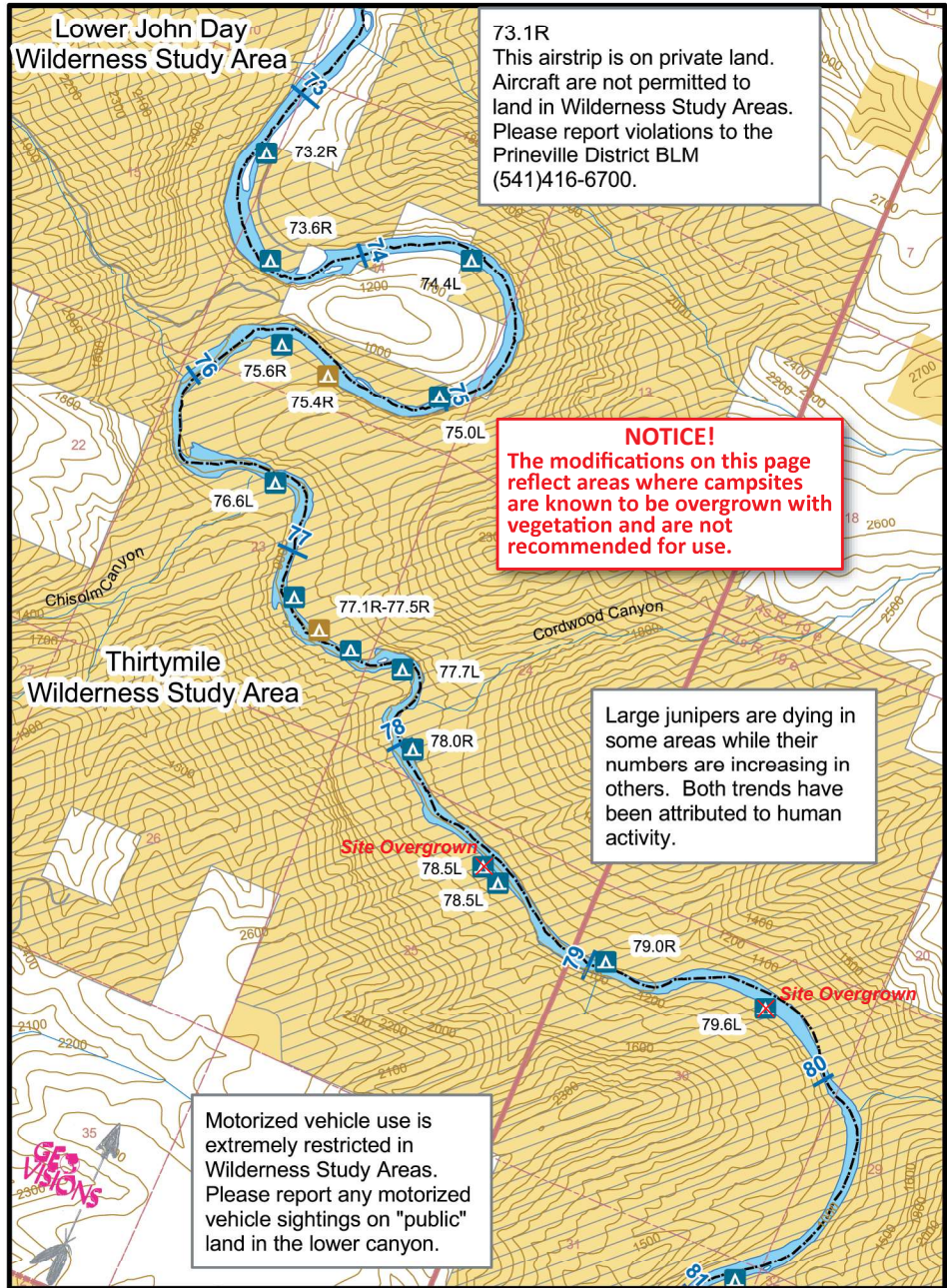
**NOTICE!**  
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A buried natural gas pipeline crosses beneath the river near the mouth of Thirtymile and Pine Hollow canyons. The pipeline originates in British Columbia and ends near San Francisco.

A cold, dependable spring flows from the base of Devils Canyon. It is submerged at high flows (8,000+ cfs). This is one of two Devils Canyons between Clarno and Cottonwood. The other one joins the John Day River at river mile 48. Treat all spring water before drinking.

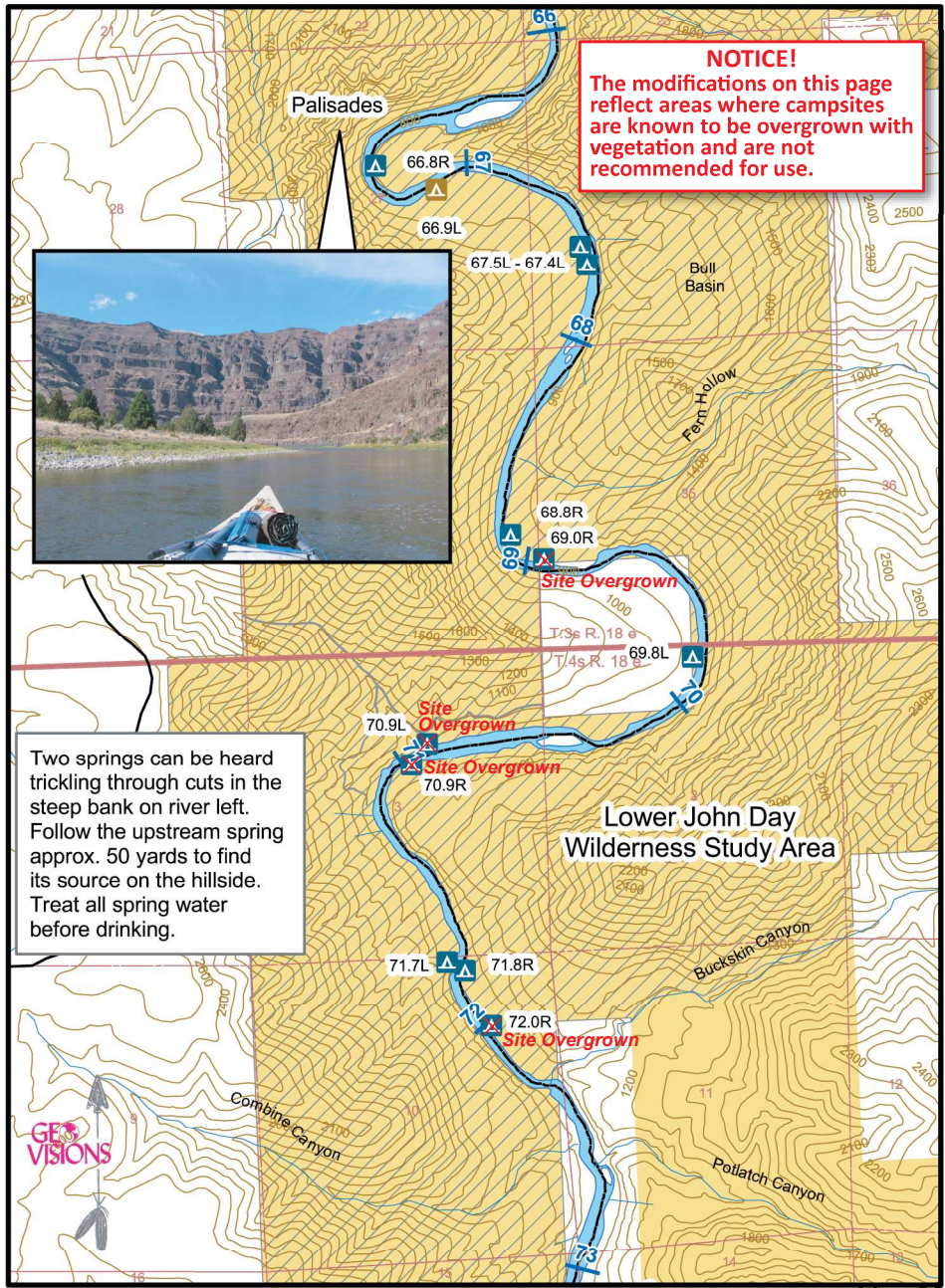
Map 18



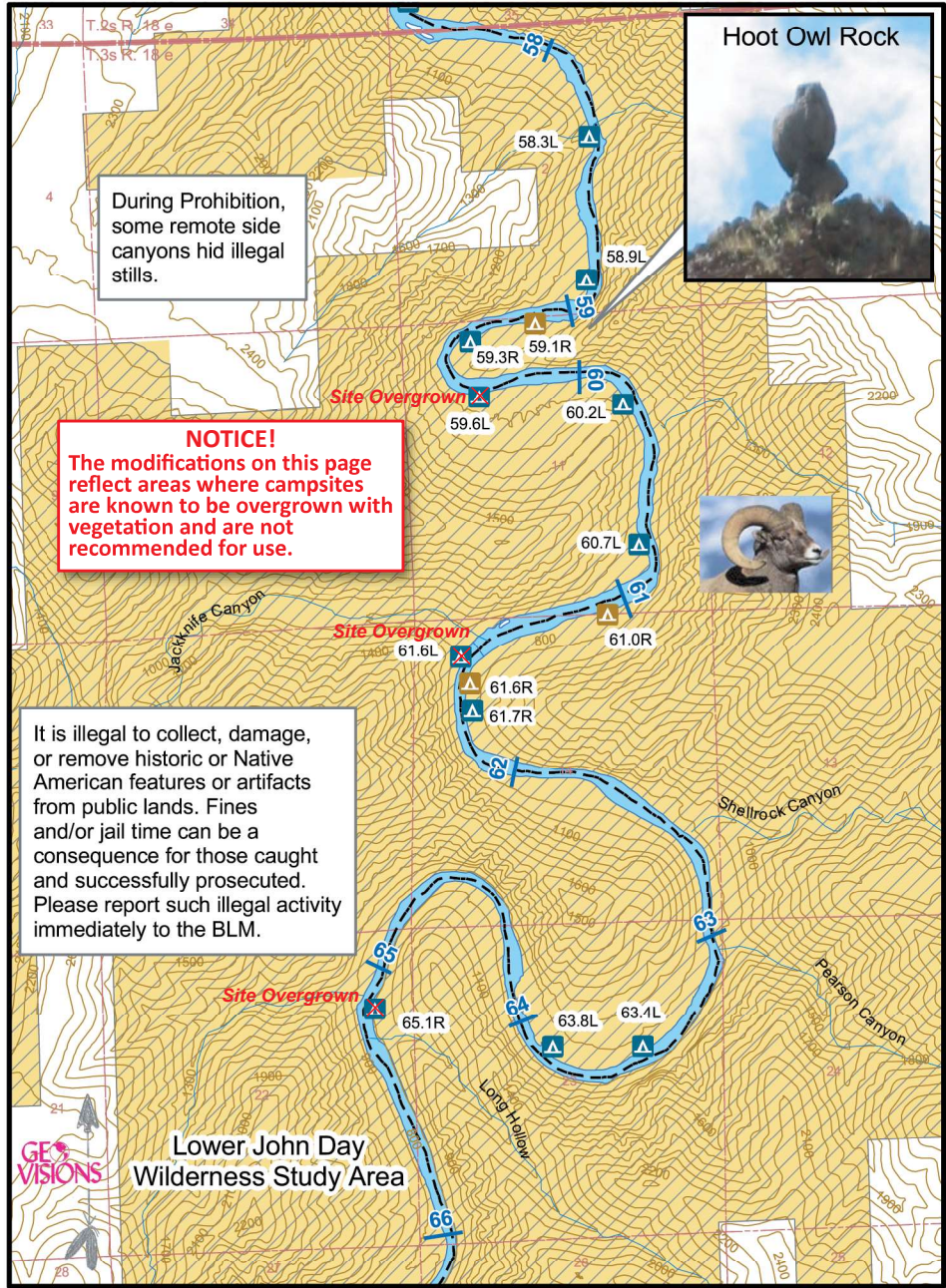


Map 19





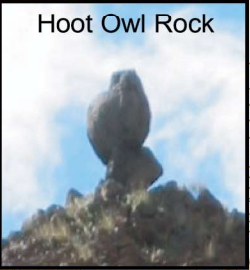




During Prohibition, some remote side canyons hid illegal stills.

**NOTICE!**  
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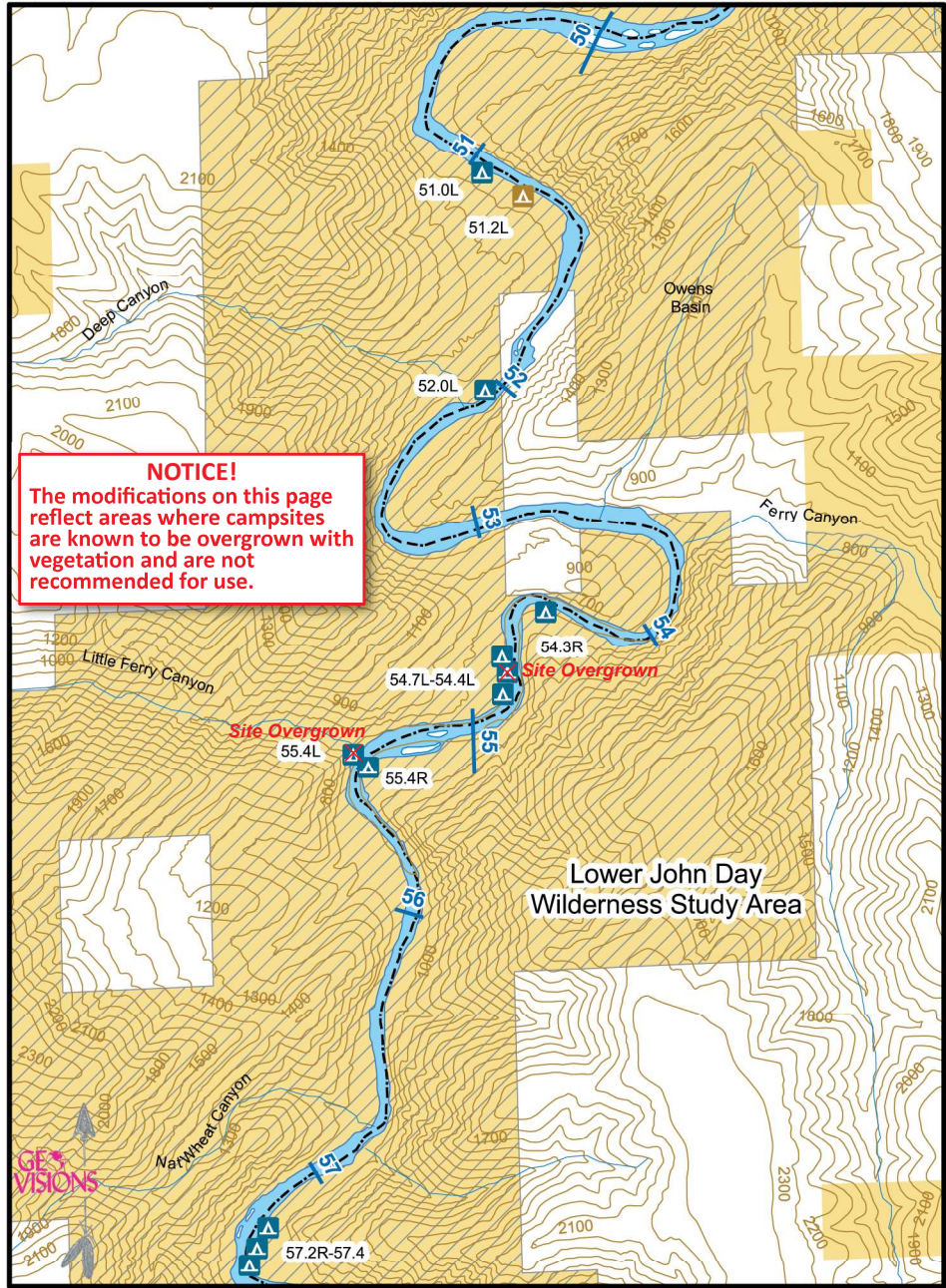
It is illegal to collect, damage, or remove historic or Native American features or artifacts from public lands. Fines and/or jail time can be a consequence for those caught and successfully prosecuted. Please report such illegal activity immediately to the BLM.



Lower John Day  
Wilderness Study Area

Map 21





Map 22



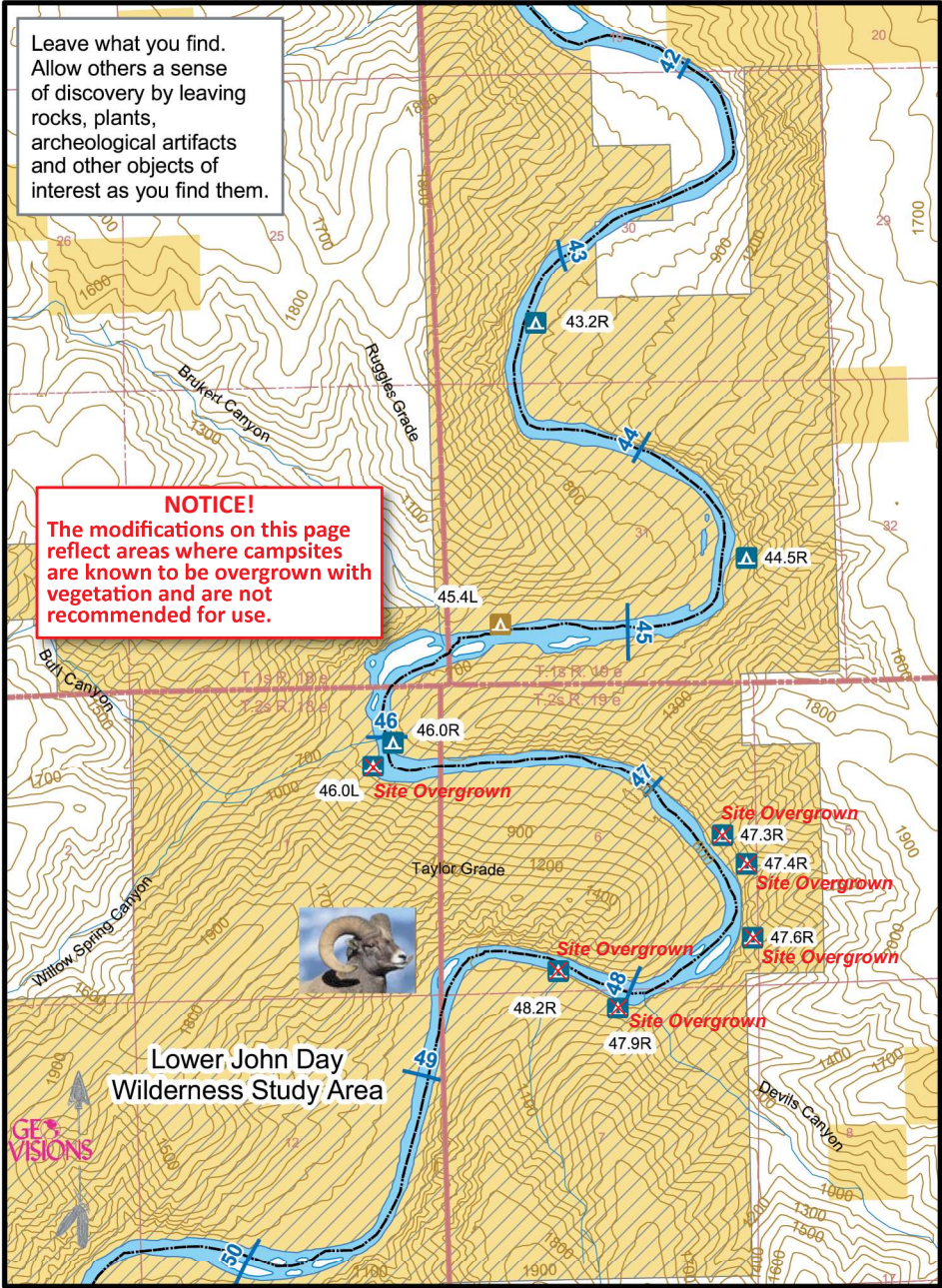
Leave what you find.  
Allow others a sense  
of discovery by leaving  
rocks, plants,  
archeological artifacts  
and other objects of  
interest as you find them.

**NOTICE!**  
The modifications on this page  
reflect areas where campsites  
are known to be overgrown with  
vegetation and are not  
recommended for use.



Lower John Day  
Wilderness Study Area

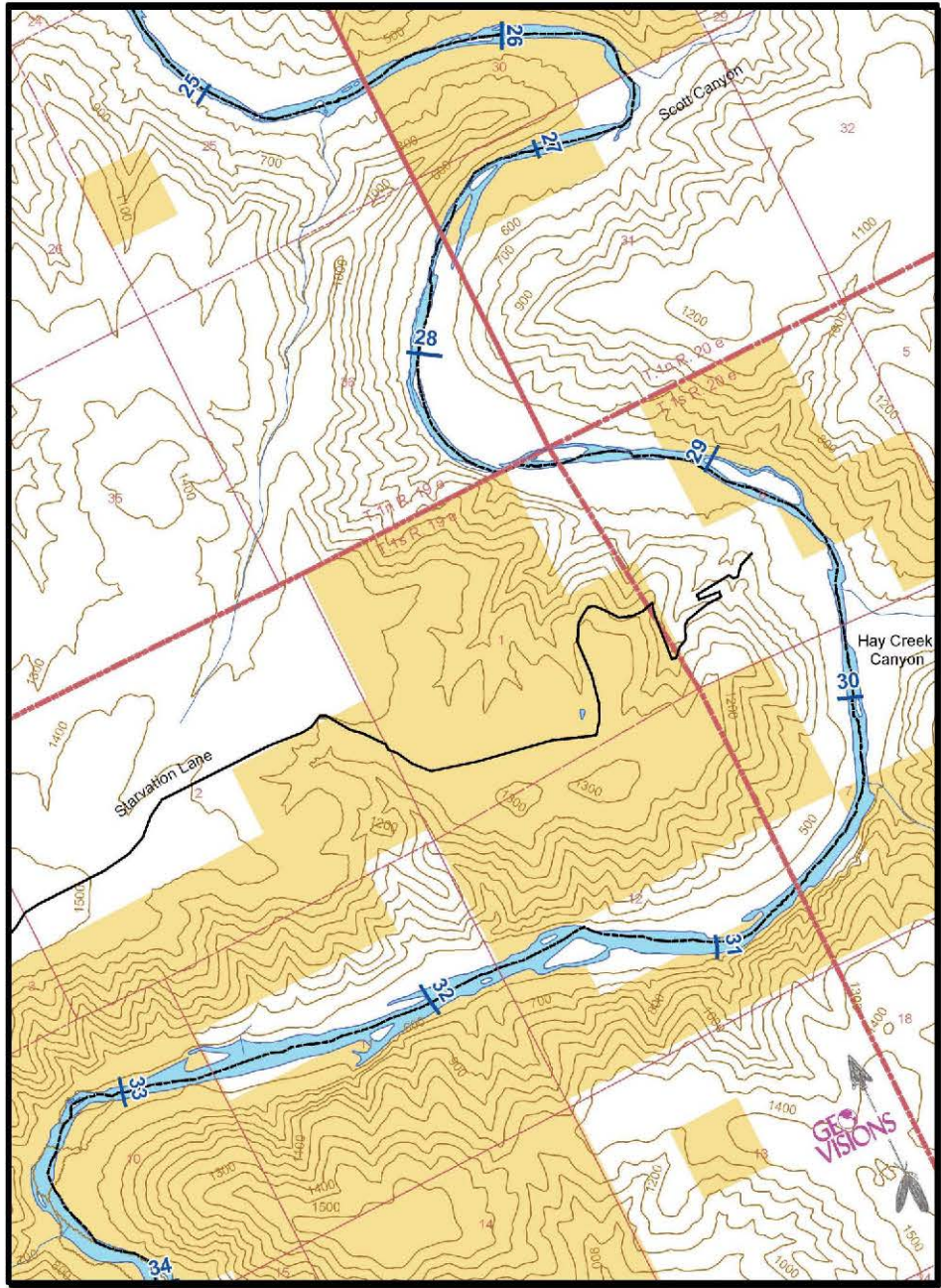
GE'S  
VISIONS



Map 23

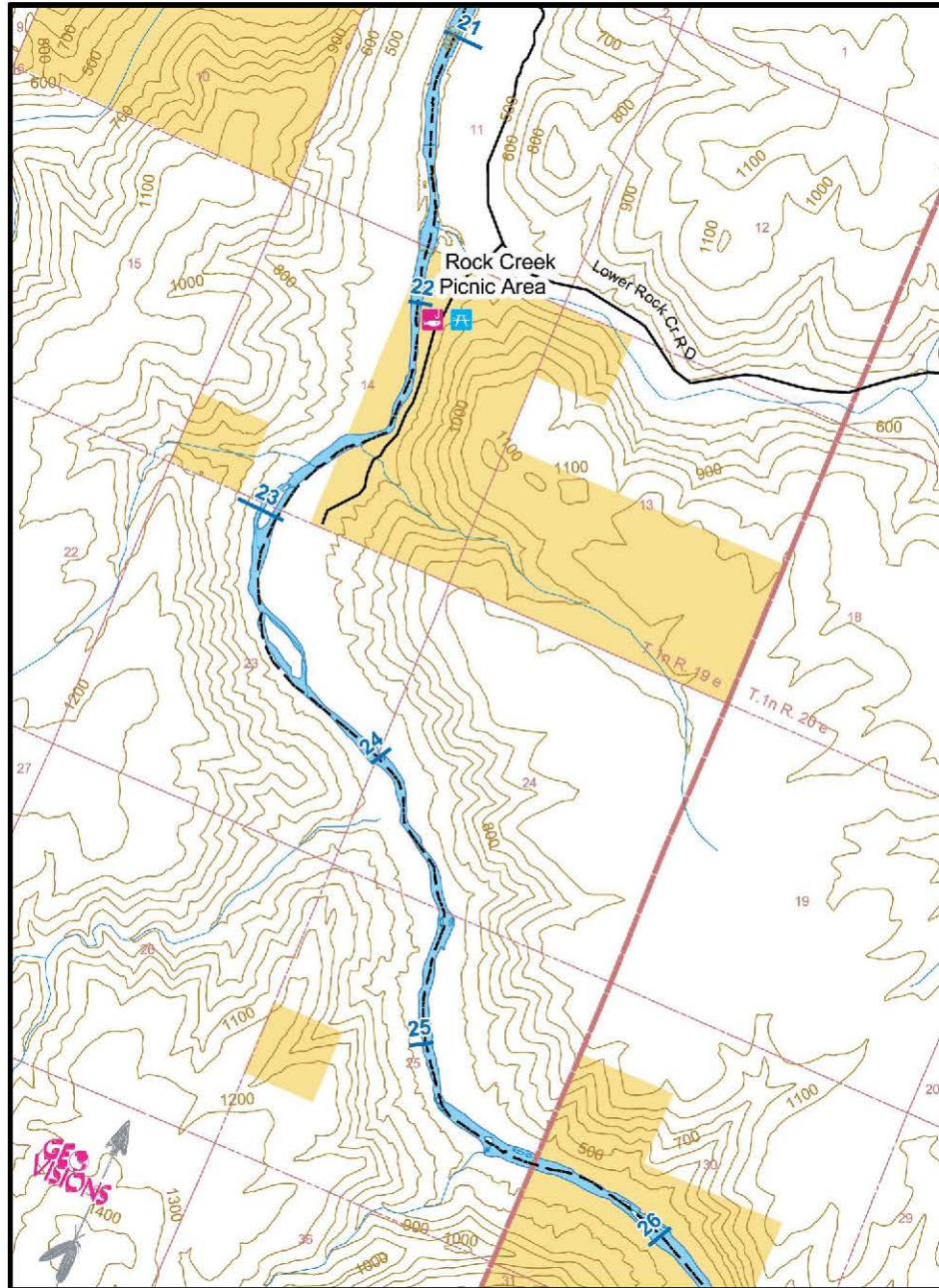




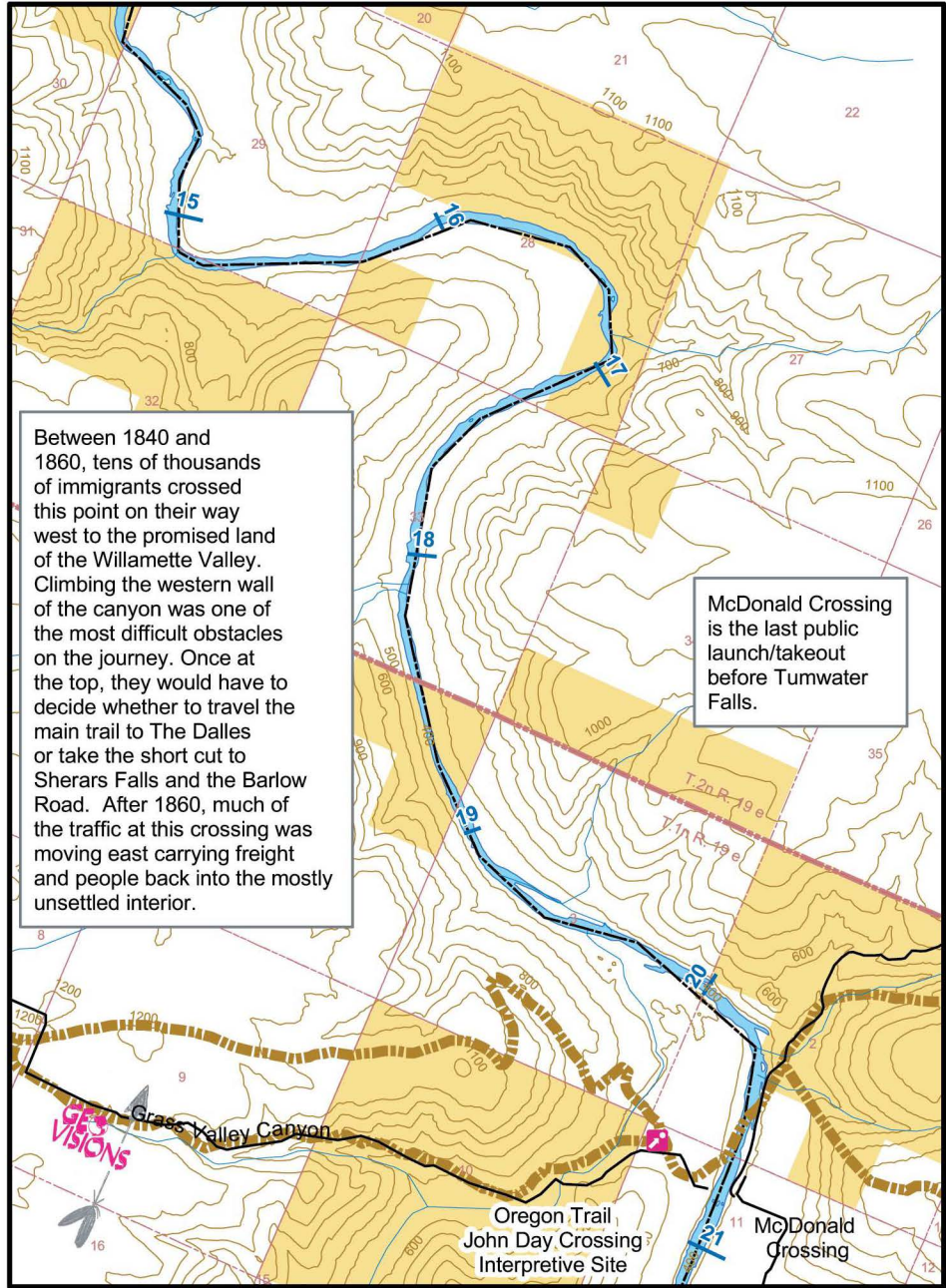


Map 25



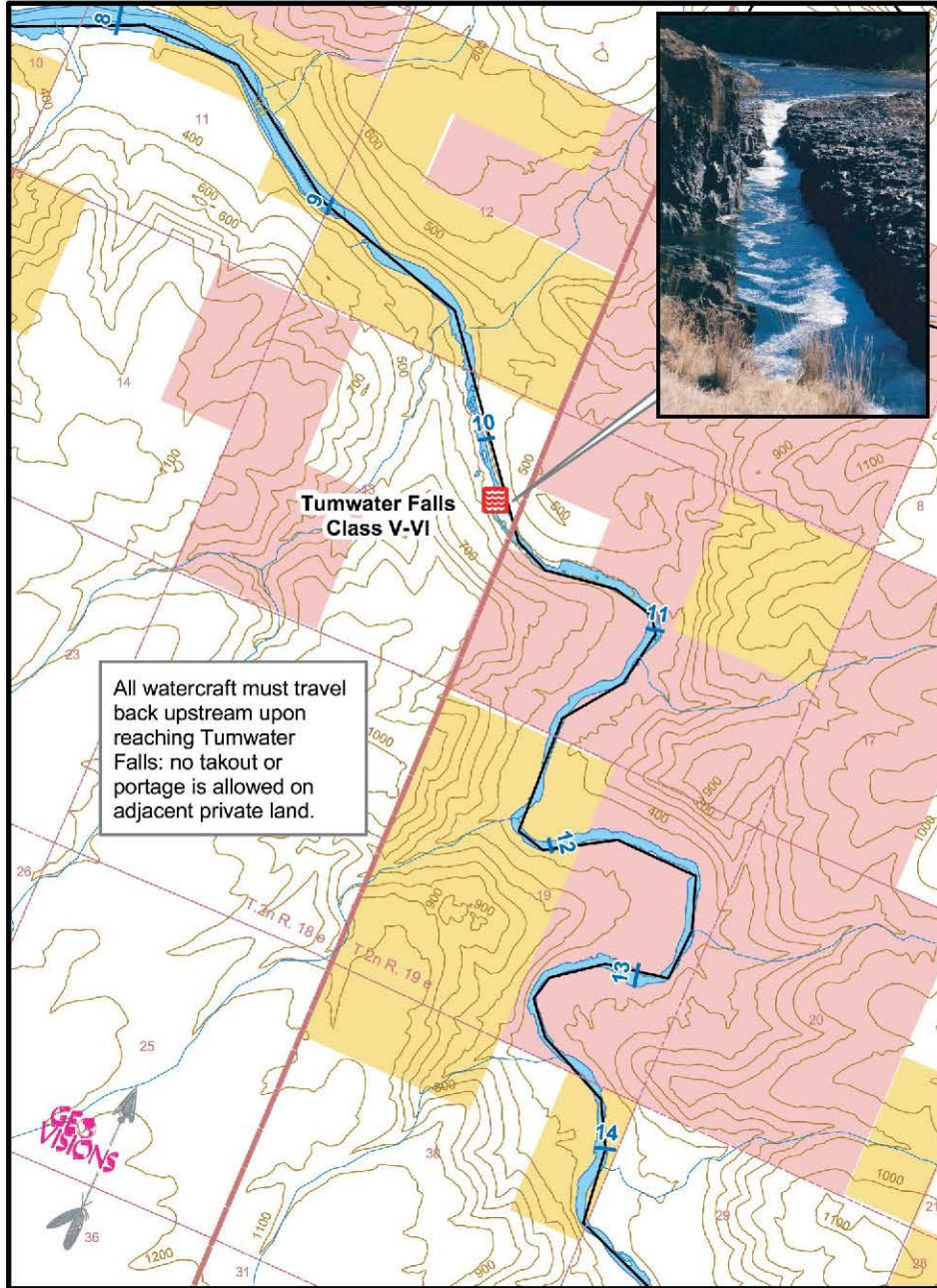


Map 26



Map 27





Map 28

*Way up in Central Oregon toward the northern side,  
there's a river running clear and wide not even God can hide.  
It heads up in the mountains known as the Blues,  
hurries by the foothills, then the ranchin' valleys passes through.  
Now it's a hundred miles of basalt canyon running back and forth,  
then off a mighty falls before she rests in the gorge.  
Why you can't see half a mile before she comes to a bend,  
second longest in all our land,  
300 miles from her beginning to her end...*

from "The Quest"  
by cowboy poet Gerald Moore  
1935 - 2005  
John Day River Ranger for the BLM 1997-2004

Thanks Gerald.





All photographs courtesy of Bureau of Land Management unless otherwise noted. Cover photo: Byrds Point.

**In case of a river or land based emergency, contact 911.**

The following agencies worked cooperatively to produce this Recreation Guide:

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Internet: [www.or.blm.gov/Prineville/JohnDay/home.htm](http://www.or.blm.gov/Prineville/JohnDay/home.htm)



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**Bureau of Indian Affairs**

**John Day River Coalition of Counties**