

FAR FROM THE MADDENING CROWD ...

A FLOAT TRIP ON THE JOHN DAY RIVER



A couple surrenders to the rhythm of the John Day River during a late spring canoe trip.

Story by Peter Stekel
Photos by Carl Gronquist

The John Day River meanders. Fed by rain and snowmelt, the John Day is in no hurry to get to the Columbia River ... time enough for that later. On the map of Oregon you can see it make one right angle turn after another from its source in

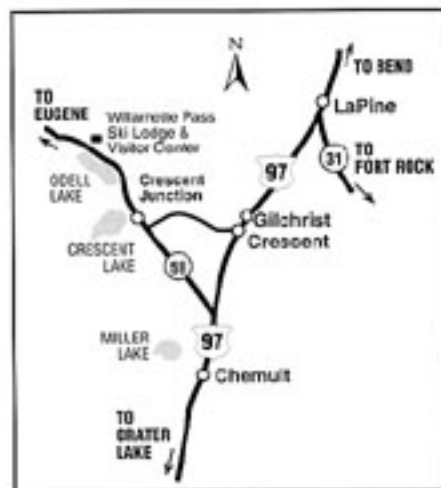


Cathedral Rock is a massive cliff of columnar basalt — a spectacular view looking back upriver.

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the Blue Mountains. This rhythm of the river transfers to its visitors, too. For the people who choose to run this wild and scenic river, there is time enough for everything.

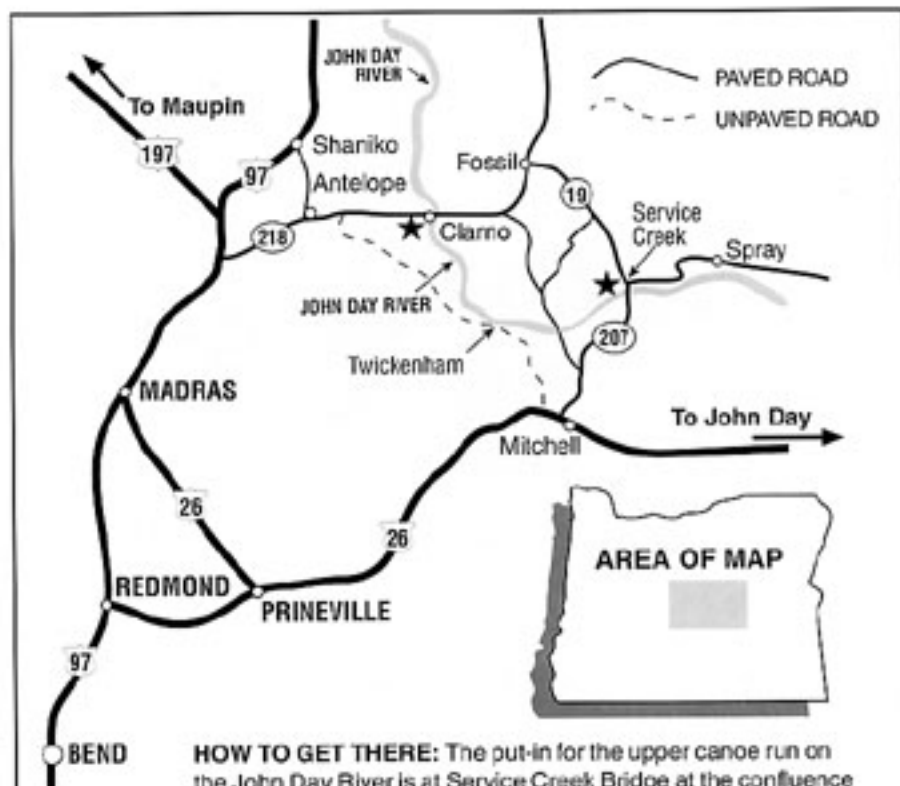
Tired of spring rains and the crush of people in Seattle, my wife, Jennie, and I decided we needed a few days far from the maddening crowd. Our guidebooks described a wild land along the John Day River, where pictographs, abandoned farmhouses, and working ranches line the shores. Reading further we learned of basalt cliffs and lava flows, sagebrush vegetation, wide vistas, good camping spots, and excellent birding. "Perfect!" we both exclaimed.

Having only three days available for paddling, we chose to do the upper segment of the river's main branch. This 45-mile section, between Service Creek Bridge and Clarno, is shorter than the northern stretch from Clarno to Cottonwood Bridge or the more difficult North Fork. There would be only three moderate rapids with the remainder of the river a fine, lazy paddle. Beyond food and safety issues, the only

preparation we made involved contacting the Service Creek Trading Post to arrange a car shuttle to the take-out.

We found plenty of answers to the question of why people love to float the John Day River. Our first day out we camped two miles beyond Twickenham Bridge, about 15 miles below Service Creek. Our canoe floated past volcanic buttes, cliffs, basalt flows, and little roly-polly hills that have eroded from who knows what previous shape. Our eyes feasted on the land's rich terracotta color and the contrasting blue sky. Following the smooth brown river, we were easily fooled into believing that the water blends and disappears into the mountains. Then, around a bend, we'd see more river, and the illusion repeated itself.

Still, we had to be ready for anything. Early that first day, at Russo Rapids (rated class 2), our canoe swamped with the murky water and forced us to shore. A creature called to us, sounding like a semi-truck's "Jake brake," as we bailed. When the canoe was dry, we searched for our companion and found him, a sil-



HOW TO GET THERE: The put-in for the upper canoe run on the John Day River is at Service Creek Bridge at the confluence of Oregon State Route 19 and 207. The lower run begins at Clarno Bridge on State Route 218 between Fossil and Antelope. Overnight accommodations, gas, and supplies can be found in Condon and Fossil. Contact the Service Creek Trading Post, (503) 468-3331, at least one week before your trip if you want to arrange a car shuttle.

ver dollar-sized toad resting within the rocky shoreline. Someone once told me, "The bigger the blow, the smaller the toad," and that was certainly the case this time. The song of these "croakies," as we called them, followed us all the way to the end of our journey.

About this time we became aware of the incredible diversity of birds along the river. Redtail hawks cruised above in endless circles. Common nighthawks bolted from one corner of the sky to the other. White-throated swifts, and three kinds of swallows darted in and out over the river as they nabbed flying insects. Whenever we paddled close to shore, flocks of Brewer's blackbirds would rise up in a cawing chorus and then settle back in the same place once we had passed.

Western meadowlarks sang; their bubbly voices reminded us of water flowing over rocks. The mocking song of the Canyon wren frequently accompanied us during the hot afternoons as we paddled through the basalt flows. The Spotted sandpiper and Killdeer, birds usually of moist environs, stood out by their presence in this arid landscape and reminded us of how desert rivers exist as ribbons of life.

Paddling the John Day seemed to

slow down time, and we began to feel out of place, as if we didn't belong to this century. This characteristic of the outdoors is a good teacher of how to get along with less and appreciate the simpler things in life. For Jennie and me, the biggest events of that first day were Russo Rapid, a Killdeer calling, a toad singing, soaring hawks, and a light breeze blowing. It made me wonder, in a culture that strives to please our every whim, why we were always starved for personal, up-close, experiences.

The second day, I awoke early and went for a swim. The cool water felt nice against my warm skin. I walked through shallow water along the shore, and mud roiled up between my toes. The clouds of silt billowed up and out beneath my feet, and the river carried it away like streamers.

After breakfast and loading up our gear in drybags, we shoved off and proceeded on. Our murky river began to clear up. Jennie, in the stern, paddled and steered. The only excitement of the day involved running the second and third rapids of the trip, both a cinch. We saw some other canoeists "lining" the rapids, pulling their boats along the shore in the shallow water.

We arrived early to our second camp at a bend in the river. An old juniper cast a giant shadow, and we set our deck chairs out under it. A few feet away, someone had built a firepit and filled it with lots of broken glass and beer cans (not everyone respects the beauty of this place). While Jennie read a cheap novel, I pulled out my worn copy of Morton Peck's *Manual of the Higher Plants of Oregon*, and went looking for blooms.

There weren't many. Either I was too early or too late, and most of the vegetation beyond the river's boundary was dried up. I found the plant life to be a monotonous mix of pinyon pine, juniper, and sagebrush. Yet, I found a simple pleasure in the lack of biological diversity, because the lazy-

*Continued on page 37
(after Food & Fun insert)*



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ness of the John Day River had seized me, and I didn't have any interest in identifying every flower in the world.

That evening we shared our camp with Brian and Krista, two other canoeists bent on escaping the crush of urban life. We discussed the merits of foot versus paddle travel in the wilderness.

"I like how river trips move so fast," said Brian. "You float through the scenery like that," and he snapped his fingers, "and then you move on."

I argued with him, "I don't see the speed of the trip as a blessing." We had come 15 miles that day and could have easily done more. Being an avid backpacker, I had to add, "I miss having access to my gear. It's always tied down in the boat and in a drybag." Brian reminded me that I should adapt by keeping a "purse" with essentials nearby.

One thing on which we could all agree was how easy it was to stay clean on the river. There was one other facet of river trips in a canoe that I soon appreciated, as Brian retrieved a cold drink from his ice chest.

Our third morning started with a chorus of meadowlarks. One landed on the gunwales of the canoe and inspected things. We watched as the flock descended upon the boat and "discussed" the contents. They seemed to approve, because they didn't rearrange anything before flying off.

This last day out was heavy with the smell of hay as more and more working ranches were encountered. We had left BLM land and entered private property. Water pumps hummed, feeding the rain birds that irrigated the fields. Cows came down to the river, stood in the tepid water, and drank. We were glad we brought the water filter.

At a long curve in the river, we passed a massive cliff of columnar basalt known as Cathedral Rock. That was our cue that we were approaching some Indian pictographs. The pictographs were so faint that they were

difficult to find, but the time was worth it. We could make out pictures of a dead tree, a hand print, and a man running with feathers in hand. Jennie and I laughed, contemplating how this Indian rock art anticipated abstract art, not only by centuries, but civilizations.

Though the current became stronger, an upstream breeze made us work hard during the last eight miles to the Clarno Bridge take-out. After three peaceful days, we suddenly encountered a tiny urban village. Where the road crossed the river, dozens of cars were parked every which-way in the 90°F heat. Our biggest challenge of the trip became getting our canoe out of the water, across the dirt parking lot, and onto the van.

Across the river we saw an aban-

doned school house, its wooden walls splintered and weathering into the ground. Hard to believe that this dry, desolate land once sustained enough people to support a one-room school. I couldn't imagine those people enjoying the change today; it was far and away too noisy and busy for country folk.

In retrospect, Clarno seemed like an unfitting end to the trip, but it had its purpose too. Put-in and take-out served as bookends. They were the punctuation that gave the river journey meaning and form. Every expedition carries with it the element of risk, the possibility that you may learn something about yourself, your surroundings, your environment. In contrast to the past lazy days, the carnival atmosphere at Clarno reminded us why we needed to get away.

We loaded up the boat and fled the craziness. But we weren't prepared for what happened next. Leaving the river, the road went straight up, as out of a grave, until we reached a corpulent land of green farms and black highways. Looking out across the hills one would have never guessed a river lay below. But the John Day was there, out of sight and out of time; an anachronism among anachronisms in the waning 20th century. **CE**



TOP: Russo Rapid is one of three moderate rapids of the river's upper segment.

BOTTOM: The Indian pictographs are faint but worth the effort to find.

WHEN YOU GO: Administered by the Bureau of Land Management, the John Day River is fed solely by run-off from the Blue Mountains. Because weather and water levels are always in flux, the best times to run the John Day are March through June. Recommended flows are between 2,000 and 6,000 cubic feet per second (cfs). Rapids and campsite conditions change, because water levels vary. Check before leaving! This is high, arid country, so nights can be quite cool even though the days are warm. Be prepared with plenty of drinking water, jackets, hats, and sunblock. Always wear a PFD (personal flotation device)!

Peter Stekel lives in Seattle and is a reporter for The Highline Times and Des Moines News. He has taught high school science, been an elementary school principal, and worked as a research biologist for the BLM and Veteran's Administration. He is currently at work on a novel.