

OUTDOORS

Bright sunshine, lots of fish



Rafting is one of the ways to camp and boat down the John Day River. ZACH URNESS/STATESMAN JOURNAL

New access brings iconic John Day River fishing trips within reach

Zach Urness
Salem Statesman Journal
USA TODAY NETWORK

On the list of Oregon's greatest river trips, the John Day has always ranked high.

The second-longest undammed river in the United States snakes through deep, isolated canyons in Eastern Oregon on a trip that features beautiful camping, great fishing and mellow rapids.

Problem is, the river is so isolated there are few places to access it — especially the most iconic section.

Historically, a 70-mile river trip between Clarno and Cottonwood Bridge was required to experience the John Day's most stunning canyons, typically on a five- or six- day adventure that felt out of reach for people with small children or a lack of vacation days.

But this beautiful stretch got a little more accessible this season after the Bureau of Land Management purchased 11,000 acres from a local ranching family and opened up Thirtymile Creek Boat Access point.

The purchase means it's possible to float the river in three days, down 44 river miles, rather

than five days. And anyone worried the new access will lead to overuse need not fear, because a limited-entry permit system also came online this season, preserving the solitude in one of Oregon's special places.

All of the changes — the new access and permit system — inspired me to head east last week with my 5-year-old daughter, Lucy, and old fishing pal Jim, into the realm of desert canyons, shady campsites and very hungry smallmouth bass.

(The COVID-19 pandemic briefly shut down the John Day, before it reopened in late May. The local counties entered Phase II reopening in June).

Picking the right boat

Even though the new boat access makes for a shorter trip, that doesn't mean this is an easy adventure to pull off.

From permits to shuttles to moveable toilet systems, there are a number of steps to complete before you even get on the river.

The first is a simple question: what type of boat will you float?

The nice thing about the John Day is that it's

probably the easiest among Oregon's iconic rivers, whitewater-wise. The Thirtymile to Cottonwood stretch includes fun Class I rapids that keep you moving, but by rafting standards, it's pretty easy.

I brought our 16-foot raft, frame and oars — the standard whitewater river setup. But other folks do this section in everything from canoes to stand-up paddleboards.

If you pick a canoe or paddleboard, however, do know that it's not flat water. On our trip, we saw multiple groups of over-turned canoes, including one group that lost their camping gear, cell phones and, yes, car keys.

Before you go: Getting a permit, knowing river levels, poop removal and shuttles

There are a number of things to take care of before heading east.

First and most important, you'll need one of a limited number of permits to float the famous sections of the John Day from May 1 to July 15.

Late May and June are the most popular, due

See RIVER, Page 2B

Fishing gene skips a generation



Fishing
Henry Miller
Guest columnist

My dad wasn't much of an angler. But his father, Henry Miller, for whom I'm named, had a passion for the sport and got me addicted at about age 5 and during succeeding summer visits to the grandparents' home in St. Louis.

The gene for fishing fanaticism apparently skips a generation.

Most of my siblings also seem to have it to some degree.

One of the highlights of the year for my grandfather was an annual week-long vacation from his job as an engineer to fish for trout at Bennett Springs, Missouri.

As an aside, if you want to see that fabled, Xanadu of my childhood imagination, do an online search for "Bennett Springs State Park."

A World Cup final has fewer fans, judging by the photos.

Apparently the word has gotten out

about the trout fishing since my formative years.

Anyway, my grandfather taught me to fish using a cane pole, a bobber and a worm on a hook at a park pond in St. Louis.

Most of the fish that we caught were inconsequentially small bluegill and sunfish.

But on one occasion a bass that my 5-year-old self thought was as long as my leg came up and grabbed the panfish on the line, tussled for about 10 seconds, then broke off.

Like Ahab and the white leviathan, I've been obsessed about the pursuit ever since.

As I said, my dad wasn't into fishing. But he was accommodating about providing us with opportunities.

As duty chauffeur, dad would either drop us off, or would stay, sit and read a book while those of us old enough to be trusted near the water, brother, Jim, and sister, Michelle, and later, younger brother, Steve, would fish.

Fishing being an art like all others in which the production is directly related to the effort, we scored with varying de-

grees of success, but always with support from both mom and dad.

Which, looking back, provided a valuable lesson about parenting.

Offer opportunities. Support the successes, bemoan the failures, but don't let either of them define the relationship.

Guide, don't push or pull too hard. My father celebrated his 96th birthday on May 10.

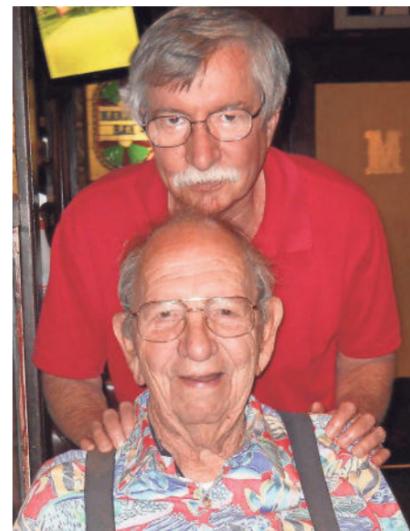
He didn't know it. Dad doesn't recognize any of us in the pictures on the wall of his room at the care home in Santa Barbara, Calif.

I send him about four or five 4-by-6 post cards a week that I make on the ink jet printer, then pen a short message on the back with a Sharpie, the only pen that doesn't smudge on the photo paper.

Most of the pictures are family photos.

Over time, he's lost the ability to identify the people. The only person that he recognizes now is himself.

Because of the no-visitors coronavirus restrictions, a staff member at the home emails Michelle, the designated contact who lives closest, to let us know



Henry Miller and his father, Bill Miller, at Bill's 85th birthday. PHOTO COURTESY OF HENRY MILLER

how appreciative he is for the thoughts. When I last saw him about a year ago, he didn't know who I was, but from the wall of pinned-up postcards, he asked "aren't you the fisherman?"

See MILLER, Page 2B