

Miller

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Yes, dad. That's me. Thanks.
Happy Father's Day.

Stop me if you've heard this one

When she was the chairwoman of the Ore-

gon Fish and Wildlife Commission, Marla Rae of Salem used to cite the Oregon Liquor Control Commission and the, at first contradictory, at least mixed message in its mission statement.

To paraphrase, among the OLCC's goals are "to increase revenues ... and promote sobriety."

Not to nit-pick in these times of minimal staffing

and working from home for employees at state agencies, but it seems as if the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife has fallen into a similar contradiction.

Exhibit A: "ODFW is putting the weekly Recreation Report on hiatus for a few weeks."

That's been the boilerplate on the department's website since April 8.

So you can't get the latest information about where fishing is hot or where trout are being stocked.

Exhibit B: "If you do go fishing, stay close to home, keep your social distance, and travel safely," the message continues.

Excellent advice that I'm trying to heed.

But if you don't know

about trout stocking or hot spots, the alternative is to drive to lots of places looking for full parking areas.

Human nature vs. self-preservation ... don't make me choose.

Angling has become a pastime in which you wear a mask, and carry a fishing rod with a minimum length of 6 feet.

FISHING THOUGHT OF THE WEEK: My ex-wife picked up on the old line that "fishing consists of a jerk on one end of a line waiting for a jerk on the other end."

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River

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to the combination of warm weather and river flows high enough to keep you moving. The BLM releases the permits in two batches during the spring onto Recreation.gov, so be prepared and act fast to get the desired date. Overnight permits cost \$26 each and can include up to 16 people.

(There are six different river segments on the John Day that are permit-controlled, so take your pick. I'm focusing on just 44 miles, but there are charms on every section).

It's also important to watch the river's flow. Above 6,000 cfs, and it's dangerously high. Below 1,200, and it's pretty low, slow and rocky. We put on at 2,600 cfs, and that felt about perfect.

A toilet is another consideration. There are no bathrooms at the campsites, meaning Leave No Trace is a must. And yes, that includes your poop. You're required to have a toilet system that travels with you to remove waste. They're easy to find online and at some river gear shops.

Finally, once you've got the right boat, permit and toilet system, the final step is getting a shuttle. Trust me, getting someone to drive your car from the put-in at Thirtymile to the take-out at Cottonwood is well-worth the \$100 it costs.

The shuttle provider I went with was Thirtymile Shuttles — contact them at ritaratray@gmail.com.

Hungry smallmouth bass: Lucy wanted to fish, and she was no longer going to accept any excuses

My 5-year-old daughter had endured a long and rough drive, a long wait as we packed the



Jim Heck fly-fishes for smallmouth bass on the John Day River while Lucy Urness watches on a multi-day rafting trip from Thirtymile Creek fly-access to Cottonwood Canyon State Park in Eastern Oregon. ZACH URNESS / STATESMAN JOURNAL

boat and finally, getting soaked by a thunderstorm on the first river mile.

I rigged a blue fox lure onto her pink fishing rod and helped her toss it into the water, not really expecting her to catch anything right away.

"Dad!" she said a few seconds later. "I think I've got a fish!"

I figured she'd snagged the bottom and grabbed the rod, but instead of the dull pull of a snag, the line was alive. I quickly handed the rod back to her.

"That's your fish!" I said.

She reeled it in, and I helped her bring a diminutive but feisty small-

mouth bass into the raft.

It was our first but nowhere close to our last fish of the trip. I'd heard bass fishing was good on the John Day, but it was downright hot during our float, as we landed a fish about every five casts. My pal Jim, fishing with a popper on a fly rod, caught the biggest of the group — a few maybe in the 16- to 18-inch range. We saw larger ones swimming near the boat.

Lucy caught and landed three fish, and fought many others, establishing fishing's place as her new favorite thing.

"This is a good sign," said Jim, after Lucy pulled in that first fish.

A long trip first day

Lucy's first fish was a great moment during a long first day. The road to the new Thirtymile boat access was rough and took forever, leading to a late start. As soon as we started loading the raft, it started to rain.

But once we were on the water, the scenery

John Day River: Thirtymile to Cottonwood

In a nutshell: Multi-day wilderness river float through desert canyons.

Length: 44 miles

Difficulty: Class I rapids, but very remote so a swim could lead to major problems

Boats: Non-motorized (raft, drift boat, kayak, canoe, SUP)

Permits: Required between May 1 and July 15. Must be purchased in advance at Recreation.gov.

Camping: Plenty of established campsites along the river. Campfires not allowed after June 1. Traveling toilet system required to haul out waste.

Shuttles for Thirtymile: Thirtymile Shuttles, ritaratray@gmail.com or 541-980-0328.

Additional information: For more information call the BLM Prineville Office (541-416-6700) or see: <https://www.blm.gov/visit/john-day-wild-scenic-river>.

made up for it. The long road deposits you right in the middle of the John Day's iconic canyonlands, and as the river curved around every new turn, we entered a new and more spectacular wall of layered basalt, enclosing the river in walls that rose thousands of feet high.

Even so, we had to row. On a three-day trip from Thirtymile, you have to make at least 15 miles per day. And while the John Day does move along, with occasional rapids, there are plenty of slow spots where you need to dig in and row.

After the late start, we stayed on the river until around 5 p.m., looking for established campsites that were mostly located below clusters of juniper trees that provided shade in the otherwise barren canyon.

We didn't have to worry about getting baked by the sun on the first day. But that would change with day two.

Bright sunshine, lots of fish and lots of swimming

The second day arrived with bright sunshine and quickly warming desert air. One reason the John Day is such a beloved trip is the weather is typically warmer and drier in the late spring than rivers in Western Oregon.

On our second day, it lived up to the hype. We made a camp breakfast of scrambled eggs and oat-

meal before loading up the boat. As we did, the river ranger stopped in to check our permit.

I'm always happy to see rangers enforcing permit limits, and the ranger who visited us was friendly, checked out paperwork, and headed downstream.

"You're going to enjoy the next few river miles," he said before leaving.

He was right. We floated around a horseshoe turn and below steep canyon walls. When it got too hot, we jumped into the river, and even floated with our lifejackets through the rapids. When clouds covered the sun, we focused on fishing.

Lucy was outraged that we didn't keep the fish to have for dinner, and that might have been a mistake. I've never cleaned or cooked bass. Other boaters we passed said the fish tasted good.

We fished two ways. Jim tossed his floating fly into the slow eddies of marshy water along the river edges, while Lucy kept her spinner in the deeper water, basically trolling as we rowed downstream. Both methods worked well, but the bigger fish were in the marshy water.

That night we camped above a rocky beach, once again, below juniper trees. Campfires aren't allowed on the John Day after June 1, so we roasted marshmallows over the camp stove.

The last day brought more fishing and swimming, and a final 15 miles of rowing. Gradually, power lines become visible on the tops of the canyons and the sensation of civilization closes in.

The take-out is a busy boat ramp full of kayaks, canoes and rafts all trying to get off the water. Not everyone was happy. The canoeists who'd lost their keys were trying to figure out how to start their car. Another person had miscommunicated with his shuttle driver, and had arrived to find his keys locked in his car without a spare.

(Tip: always bring two keys, one for you to keep on the river, and one for the shuttle driver to lock in the car. It helps avoid these calamities).

But mostly, the sad faces were due to having to leave the canyons of the John Day river.

As for the new float between Thirtymile and Cottonwood Bridge, I'd say it presents a nice new option for people with less time and small children, but with only three days, we also felt a bit hurried. Four days and three nights would have allowed for more fishing time.

But such questions are a luxury to consider. Just the chance to enjoy the John Day canyons, whether for three, four or five days is a glorious thing not to be missed.

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