

Kayaking Columbia County and Oregon White Water

By Scott Laird

Here in Columbia County we have opportunities to participate in and enjoy all forms of kayaking including white water, flat water or sea kayaking. Kayaking is generally an individual sport but one that is most enjoyed when you have buddy along to share the adventure.

Local enthusiast Dale Webb has been kayaking for about ten years. Webb is a life long Vernonia resident, a member of the Issak Walton League, a board member of the Upper Nehalem Watershed Council, and one of the most knowledgeable locals about the rivers and streams in the Vernonia area.

Webb started out sea kayaking, attending a beginner's weekend at the Skamokawa Center on the Lower Columbia River. Webb was immediately hooked and bought all the equipment he needed and began paddling around Vernonia Lake. "There is only so much you can do there," said Webb. So he started floating his kayak on the Nehalem River.

Webb realized he was more interested in the action that moving water provided and purchased a used "old school whitewater boat." He met some guys from Portland and began paddling some more difficult waters including the White Salmon, Metolius, Sandy and Clackamas Rivers, and Rock Creek in Vernonia. "I really liked the challenge of more difficult runs," said Webb. "You really have to be on your game."

One easy and popular run that would be good for

beginners in Vernonia is putting in at Anderson Park on the Nehalem River and taking out at Big Eddy County Park.

I talked with Webb about equipment and getting started. He recommended buying gear used at first if



possible- paddle, personal flotation device (PFD) ("Wear it!" said Webb), helmet ("Wear it!" said Webb), wet suit, and of course, the boat. "If you look, you can find a good deal," said Webb. He also recommended talking to people active in the sport and looking online for suggestions for gear.

There are many different types of kayaks available for purchase. A recent search online provided a list of over twenty styles available including inflatables, plastic, sit on top, slalom, sprint, surf, touring, flat water, whitewater, river, and sea kayaks. To simplify, there are the two basic styles: flat water, which tends to be longer and built for traveling distances, and white water, which is built for maneuverability. There are also some models that are designed for specific purposes. A person needs to choose the kayak that best fits his or her needs.

One highlight of Webb's kayaking career occurred about four years ago when he and three companions spent four days floating the length of the Nehalem River from Vernonia to the Nehalem Bay at the coast. "We started at river mile 100, so we went about twenty-five miles each day." The trip was based on a manuscript Webb had come across that was from the early 1800's that recounted what was probably the first trip by white men on the Nehalem River.

Whitewater kayaking can be a lifelong sport. The more you do it, the more you want to find harder and more interesting runs to attempt. It can be exciting, adventurous and can even become an obsession. Dale Webb is always talking about getting back out on the water.

Scappoose Bay Kayaking

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If you're looking to try your hand at Kayaking, you won't have to look very far. Steve Gibbons and his wife Bonnie Shoop own Scappoose Bay Kayaking and the brand new St. Helens Outdoor Adventure Center. Gibbons and Shoop put together tours and adventure trips, and rent kayaks by the hour and day. They also own a gallery, The Lofted Liar, in Old Town St. Helens. They just returned from spending the winter in Belize where he and Bonnie were leading outdoor adventure eco-tours.

Steve Gibbons is more interested in flat water kayaking. "We call it 'peaceful kayaking, the way it should be'," said Gibbons when asked about flat water kayaking.

Gibbons and his wife Shoop have been heading down to Belize the last few years, leading adventure tours that consist of kayaking, snorkeling, visits to Mayan ruins, and "anything else we can find that's fun," said Gibbons. "Eco-tourism is very big now, and that's what we are doing. My prior guests are my salespeople. They just keeping telling other people about us or calling up saying they want to go again and do different things in different places. We keep coming up with new ideas."

When not in Belize, Gibbons is running Scappoose Bay Kayaking, in Warren, just outside of St. Helens. Gibbons estimates they have taught over 4,000 people to kayak and have had over 32,000 guests rent from Scappoose Bay. "Scappoose Bay is just beautiful," says Gibbons. "We see eagles, blue herons, Canadian geese. It's a great experience, and it's really close by."

Gibbons says they will take children as young as seven years old in their own boat. Younger kids can go in a tandem boat. "The oldest person we had go was eighty-seven, so I tell people if you're between the ages of zero and ninety you can kayak!" said Gibbons.

Gibbons says Scappoose Bay Kayaking is the only company doing organized guided tours of the Columbia River. Their trips include two day and four day overnight camping trips and include tents, all meals which are prepared for you, all equipment, everything! "We serve wine around the campfire at night and instruct people in stargazing," said Gibbons. "We follow with a pontoon boat that carries all the equipment. It can be a great family trip."

Besides overnight trips, Scappoose Bay offers sixty Kayaks for rent so you can go

out by yourself or with a few friends. They also offer unusual activities like full moon cruises at night through the summer. "If somebody has an idea about something fun they would like to do, we will try to find a way to help them do it," said Gibbons.

Gibbons takes groups of school kids out each year, between 400 and 500 children each season. "When I was thirteen, someone taught me how to canoe," Gibbons told me. "And I have never forgotten that. Working on the water has been my lifelong passion ever since, and I love what I do. If I can make an impression on just a small percentage of the kids I meet, then I feel like will have passed on something special."

Gibbons and Shoop's newest endeavor is the St. Helens Outdoor Adventure Center which is scheduled to open April 1. Gibbons is very enthusiastic about the brand new line of Hobie products they will be featuring that he described as a trimaran- a kayak with two outrigger pontoons and a sail. Gibbons will be taking these out on the Columbia River. "These are just a hoot!" exclaimed Gibbons. "You just zip around up and down the river in them, it's just awesome!"

Gibbons hopes to generate interest in Old Town St. Helens with the new adventure center. "We will push our river trips, tours and overnight trips, as well as exciting day activities that people can do from here. We have some great restaurants and shopping here. We're hoping to encourage more people to visit."

Kayaking is a sport that people can participate in on all levels - all without leaving Columbia County. From exciting white water runs to natural history whitewater tours, to exciting brand new technology and equipment innovations, there is something for everyone. Hope to see you on the water!



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