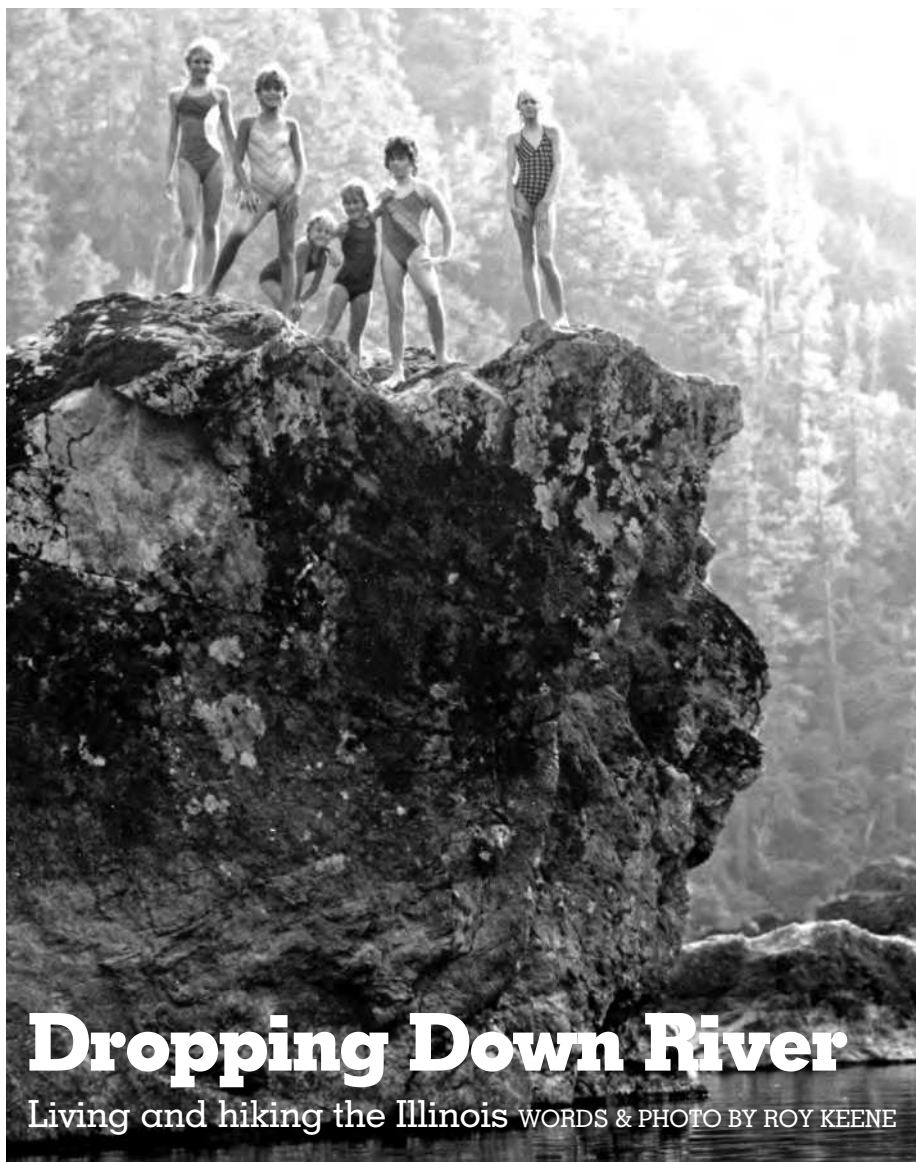




Dropping Down River

Living and hiking the Illinois WORDS & PHOTO BY ROY KEENE

The river spoke to him ... the river was like a god' — from Siddhartha by Herman Hesse

On an early June morning a mist veils the river's purling emerald waters. The first rays pierce the canyon, the mist begins to glow, azaleas warm to add their fragrance. Jays chatter, woodpeckers tap, an osprey cruises low, chirps softly. The sun climbs, transforming dark canyon walls into burnished bronze. Silhouetted, clusters of live oak cling to sheer rock. The river becomes like the ink strokes of a Zen master.

Called the "Illinois" by Euro settlers, this river is one of Oregon's wildest. Beginning in the Siskiyou Mountains' highest peaks, it flows north through Cave Junction and Kerby, turns west near Selma, courses 50 desolate miles through a steep canyon and merges with the Wild Rogue at Agness, 25 miles from the ocean. Unlike the Rogue, there are no dams to moderate the Illinois's flow, impede its fish runs or submerge the human history.

The Illinois cuts through ancient serpentine rock, volcanic flows, granitic intrusions and relic alluvial deposits. It was in these gravels that placer gold was discovered in 1851, setting off Oregon's gold rush and bringing waves of prospectors into the valley and canyons. Look into the brushy flats above the river, where tailing piles and flattened remains of old cabins are abundant. For thousands of years before the miners, the Takelma people lived along the river, fishing, grinding acorns and leaving only mortar holes in bedrock and obsidian points to show their passing.

Generations of fire have also swept through this country. The most recent was the half-million acre Biscuit blaze in 2002. Before Biscuit, an equally large fire in 1938 created the bleached white snags still standing along the river canyon. Really old

firs show scarring from periodic fires that burned hot before the 14th century. Most of the recent fire damage along the river road is from Forest Service back burns set (futilely) to ward off Biscuit. The USFS then sold salvage sales along this "Scenic River" corridor, turning "ghost stands" and viewpoints into slash-filled eyesores.

I first explored the wild Illinois in 1966. Fresh out of an infantry outfit, I was fit enough to scramble the canyon's remotest reaches for several weeks while feeding on rice and freshly hooked steelhead. Depression-era miners still lived along the river. Drawn by the wild country or pursued by the law, mountain men, pot growers and desperadoes livened the mix. The canyon wasn't always safe: A few people got ripped off or disappeared, and many who lived downriver packed shooters.

The headwaters were yet unlogged; there was little upstream irrigation, and the river coursed deeper, colder and cleaner. Salmon ran strong; big fish hunkered in deep holes year around, and otters loitered on every beach. Washed out mining roads discouraged hunters, leaving monster bears to feed undisturbed in deserted orchards. There are still no electrical or telephone lines, cell phone reception is sketchy and GPS function is limited.

Intelligently experiencing the wilds of the Illinois requires using a map and compass, and leaving the road. To view the drivable part of the canyon, turn west off Hwy. 199 at Selma and drop down the Illinois River Road (USS 4103) 17 miles, ending at a cluster of cabins at Oak Flat. A little further uphill, a one-mile spur leads to the Briggs Creek trailhead. Depending on weather and road conditions, a high center vehicle may be required. Cross Briggs Creek, and you're officially in the Kalmiopsis Wilderness.

If you have a full day, hike this trail about 5 miles down to Pine Bench, an old homestead near the mouth of Pine Creek. The side trail that drops down to the river is steep, rocky and can hit 100 degrees on a hot day. If you don't want to carry water, take a filter kit for absolute safety. Comfortable boots are better than sandals. Most of the desperadoes are gone, but there's still a few rattlers, bald face hornets and plenty of poison oak. There are some nice solar niches along the bench and many exotic spring blooms. If you leave Fido at home, camp over, rise early and move slowly in the forest edge, you may see elk, bear or cougar.

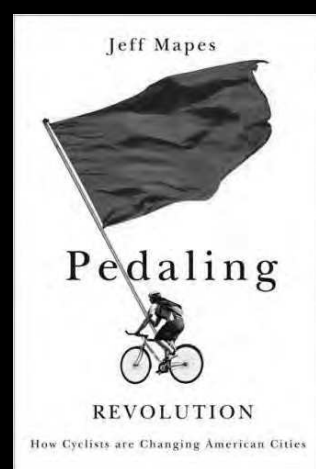
There are shorter off road excursions. About 11 miles west down the River Road from Hwy. 199, take the left spur at the top of the hill down to the swinging bridge or drive over the low water crossing to McCaleb Scout Ranch. An old gated mining road leads up to Chetco Pass and then drops steeply down into the headwaters of the Chetco River. Near the footbridge, a trail goes a half-mile upriver to the mouth of Fall Creek and then upstream to eventually top out on Fiddler Mountain. There are unusual pockets of nearly pure copper up Fall Creek, supposedly discovered by the Spanish in the 1600s.

Other interesting places along the river road can be accessed by hiking on spurs blocked to motorized access. Thirteen miles downriver from Hwy. 199 is a hand-built road that hooks back sharply and leads eventually to the river. In a meadow below is my late-'60s cabin site, and further down is the Mockingbird Mine, a 1950 chrome strike. I lived there with a couple of old miners for company, a water line that ran a Pelton wheel for electricity, and lots of story telling and prospecting. Though this site burned hard, volatilized black oaks were basal sprouting literally within days of cooling. A variety of plants endemic only to the Siskiyou grow along these serpentine slopes, especially after fire. The big multichannel boulder bar below is a place to see a natural river's transport power and salmon spawning when the fish are running.

The Illinois has always been my family's favorite swimming river, especially before the canyon heats up and water levels drop in late summer. Years ago, my daughters, jumping off rocks into their favorite hole, called the deep elbow in the river above the falls a perfect "10." Pick a good spot, find shade, and you may get no further.

Local folks converge on this river to swim and chill on weekends, making the river road one of the most heavily used in the forest. Over the years, the Forest Service has socialized the river, closing off side roads and limiting camping and parking to prescribed times and places. If you visit on a weekend, try to get down river the night before or early in the morning. In spite of occasional rockslides, the first 11 miles are now paved, making it easier on your car but faster for those going out to Selma for more beer. Drive defensively.

The Illinois River canyon is astoundingly different from the forests and rivers that surround the Willamette Valley. Drier, sunnier, fresher, more diverse, it is also less impacted by humans. I'm a forester tired of looking at roading and logging, and it's salve for my soul. If you have the time and willingness to drive three hours, you'll get a great forest fix for your effort. **EW**



Wheels Up

If you're at all inclined to bicycle riding, *Oregonian* reporter Jeff Mapes' engaging, thoroughly researched new book, *Pedaling Revolution: How Cyclists Are Changing American Cities* (OSU Press, \$19.95), may spur you to new heights of two-wheeled transit. As I read, I kept setting aside the book to scour Craigslist for a new bike, check when Portland's Bridge Pedal takes place or consider how long it would take me to bike to Valley River for a movie. If they can do it in Portland and New York, certainly I can do it here.

Mapes isn't just concerned with the individual details of getting part-time riders like myself onto a bike more often, or with encouraging kids and commuters to feel safe pedaling themselves to school or work, though he does cover those topics. Much of *Pedaling Revolution* is focused on the bigger picture issue of what needs to happen in cities, suburbs and towns to encourage nonautomobile transportation. Mapes visits Amsterdam, Portland (where he lives), New York and Davis, Calif., with planners and bike advocates, investigating (often on a bike) what these cities have done and are doing to make their streets and paths inviting to potential cyclists. Issues of environmental and personal health naturally arise, and Mapes addresses them with an impressive array of statistics, making a case for biking as not just better for riders and the environment, but far safer than it might seem, even in a hectic place like New York City.

But *Pedaling Revolution* isn't all planning officials and Naked Bike Ride enthusiasts (Critical Mass and other aspects of bike culture also get a good look). Somewhere between the two sits the average cyclist, the commuter not invested in transit plans or in being part of a bicycle counterculture. While biking is becoming a more accepted part of the cultural landscape, in less bike-friendly places than Portland (or Eugene), it's still barely a blip on many people's radar. Bike advocates hoping to get more former drivers onto two wheels are up against a car-centric culture that thinks nothing of speeding but berates bicyclists for coasting through stop signs (yes, even in Eugene). Mapes' book, with its careful look at cities that have made great leaps toward bike-friendliness, is example, explanation and exploration; it makes an eloquent case for the environmental and physical benefits of pedaling everywhere, and it's full of interesting characters who do just that. It's as accessible as a good bike path, and a fascinating ride. — Molly Templeton