

Jet boats provide family fun on Snake River

By RICH LANDERS
The Spokesman-Review

WHITE BIRD, Idaho — Hells Canyon might be God’s best-kept hideaway if you’re a hiker seeking solitude, a fit hunter pursuing game or an angler hoping to catch smallmouth bass, steelhead and sturgeon until your arms are numb.

Jet boat operators provide the divine intervention to answer your prayers.

The Snake River is the freeway to the canyon experience. Starting from Hells Gate State Park in Lewiston, boaters can navigate 104 miles of wild country upstream to Hells Canyon Dam, built in 1967. They can, that is, if they have the skills to negotiate rapids that range to Class 4-5.

The International Scale of River Difficulty defines Class 5 whitewater as “Extremely long, obstructed, or very violent rapids which expose a paddler to added risk. Drops may contain large, unavoidable waves and holes or steep, congested chutes with complex, demanding routes.”

But in a properly outfitted jet boat with a skilled pilot, Class 4-5 is defined as family fun.

“We just had our first trip of the 2015 season on Thursday,” said Heather Killgore, who started Killgore Adventures with her husband, Les, and son, Kurt, in 2002.

“It was part of a spring break trip for a family that has a goal of exploring the highlights of Idaho,” she said from their lodge in White Bird. “Hells Canyon is definitely one of them.”

The 652,488-acre Hells Canyon National Recreation Area generally straddles the Snake where it forms the boundary between Idaho and Oregon.

The Killgores also raise longhorn cattle, guide deer hunters and host long-range shooting events on their 1,600-yard range. But they focus their outfitting operations in the wilderness core of canyon — the 32.5 river miles from Pittsburg Landing upstream to Hells Canyon Dam, as well as the nearby Salmon River.

They organize a Memorial Day weekend ATV riding tour that attracts about 200 people, but the company is best known for the year-round adventures they deliver by jet boat.

“The whitewater is just part of the experience,” Kurt Killgore said during one of his popular 65-mile round trip tours to the dam and back.

“Elk, deer and even bighorn sheep are especially visible as they winter along the river. The fishing in particular is world-class during summer, and we take care of steelheaders and hunters in fall.”

Sometimes hikers book a jet boat ride upstream so then can follow all or a portion of the trails that run along Snake River from Hells Canyon Dam back downstream. The trail on the Idaho side is well tended. The trail on the Oregon side is more rugged, with a good spur up the Imnaha River.

Jet boat tours might involve stops and historic sites along the river, including Kirkwood Historic Ranch and Museum. Lunch might be at Hells Canyon Dam with a visit to the Forest Service visitor center. Idaho Power’s three Hells Canyon hydropower projects — including Oxbow and Brownlee dams



AP Photo/The Spokesman Review, Rich Landers
A hunter waits for a jet boat pick-up beside the Snake River in Hells Canyon, Wash., Dec. 2014.

upstream — produce 70 percent of the company’s power output.

Kurt Killgore, 35, started taking the controls of a jet boat in Hells Canyon whitewater for the first time in 1999 on practice runs with his family.

“I’d go a little farther up river each weekend,” he said. “It’s shell-shocking the first time you take a wave to the windshield and can’t see. You need time and experience to be comfortable with that.”

About six months of running the rapids both directions is needed to get the river down as a pilot, he said.

“On the other hand, some guys never learn it,” he said. “You have read the river and understand how it changes as the flows go up and down.

About 15 jet-boat operators are licensed to operate on the Snake in Hells Canyon. Most of the guides based in Lewiston come upstream only as far as Dug Bar, since a marathon trip to Hells Canyon Dam would be uncomfortably long.

During summer, jet boats are allowed to run Thursdays-Sundays while the other days are reserved for non-motorized boating, primarily rafters and kayakers heading downstream on multiple-day trips from the dam.

“The jet boat opens the experience to everyone,” Killgore said. “If you can sit down, you can run whitewater.”

Killgore tries to customize the trips to the group and the weather.

“We can stay dry, but we might run one rapid multiple times on a hot day in a way that soaks the passengers if they’re up for it — and they usually are. They dry out in no time.”

Heading up the river, Killgore pointed out numerous landmarks including Rush Creek, Bills and Water Spout rapids as well as Kirby Creek Lodge, Kirkwood Ranch, Temperance Creek Ranch, Sand Creek Fish and Game Cabin and Sheep Creek Ranch — all remote and all but Kirkwood accessible only by boat or trail.

Some attractions are not so obvious to the unacquainted.

Slowing the 30-foot jet boat to a purr on a stretch of smooth deep, dark water, Killgore baits a rod and casts it out with enough weight to knock a black bear silly.

Guests barely have time for a snack before Erika Holmes is summoned to do the heavy lifting. A sturgeon has taken the bait and the fight is on.

About 20 minutes later, Holmes — muscle weary and dampened with sweat — reeled up a 6-foot-long sturgeon.

“Think what it would feel like to land one of the 9 or 10 footers,” Killgore said before they released the gentle giant.

“Our most popular thing with customers is the Sturgeon Bass Trout Trip we do in summer,” he said. “Families come with the kids and grandparents and everybody is happy. We can stop in some areas where the kids can catch a bass almost on every cast and then go after a big sturgeon, enjoy a good boat ride and run the rapids.”

The trip includes seven major rapids that must be negotiated up and downstream, including two Class 4s that can range to Class 5 — Wild Sheep and Granite Creek.

Some rapids require banking around rocks and positioning into the right angles to climb the river stair steps.

Although he has two 550hp engines at his service, Killgore doesn’t just roar up the frothing waves of Granite. He gets partly into the deafening rush of current, eases off the throttle, side slips off a pillow of water and then eases down on the lever to power tons of aluminum and eight guests over the top.

“All of a jet-boat operator’s money is made or lost in the big rapids,” Killgore said. “This boat is so expensive because it has the pumps and motors set up for running the big rapids. Some boats aren’t.”

Hells Canyon is the deepest canyon on the North American continent, about 8,000 feet if measured from the Snake River’s Granite Creek Rapid up to the summit of He Devil Peak, elevation 9,393 feet.

“It’s a funny coincidence that the biggest rapid is at the deepest part of the canyon,” Killgore said.

Wildlife viewing is a major hit with jet boat guests. Depending on the day, they might see a black bear, river otter, bighorn sheep, deer or a number of other critters.

Bald eagles and ducks tracked the boat several times as Killgore cruised downstream.

He cut the power for everyone to enjoy seeing a group of elk on a ridge above.

“There’s something special about a place where you see elk,” said Jeremy Harris, a guest on the trip. “There’s something whole and right about it.”

Hunting bills face survival of the fittest

By GEORGE PLAVEN
East Oregonian

Follow status of bills at:

oregonlegislature.gov
or oregonhunters.org

Saturday marks the first deadline for bills in the Oregon Legislature to either move forward with a hearing, or likely perish in committee.

The Oregon Hunters Association has spent the 2015 session tracking more than two dozen hunting-related bills through the legislative wilderness, setting its sights on everything from ammunition to cougars and drones.

Here’s how a few of the bills have fared so far in Salem:

House bills

HB2049 — Introduced at the request of former Rep. Bob Jenson, R-Pendleton, and sponsored by Rep. Greg Barreto, R-Cove. Allows hunters with a visually impaired license to use battery-powered scopes and laser sighting devices. Referred to House Committee on Agriculture and Natural Resources. No hearings held. OHA and Traditional Archers of Oregon oppose bill.

HB2050/HB2181 — These are the same bill. Would exempt counties from state law prohibiting hunting cougars using hounds if initiative is approved by local voters. A public hearing was held Feb. 17, and a work group met twice in March to find common ground. No other hearings are scheduled. Similar legislation was passed by the House in the 2011 and 2013 sessions, but died in the Senate.

HB2182 — Requires the Oregon Department of Fish & Wildlife to study developing a predator management plan, and report back to an interim committee on or before Sept. 15, 2016. Referred to the House Agriculture and Natural Resources Committee. No hearings held.

HB2401 — Introduced at the request of former Gov. John Kitzhaber. Would create an excise tax on wild bird feed to establish conservation funds for greater sage grouse and other wild birds. Initially referred to House Committee on Rural Communities, Land Use and Water, and subsequently passed along to House Revenue Committee. A hearing has been scheduled for the bill, says OHA lobbyist Al Elkins.

HB2534 — Requires ODFW to adopt rules pro-

hibiting use of drones for hunting and angling. Bill was supported by OHA, and passed the House by a wide margin, 59-1. It is currently in the Senate Committee on Environment and Natural Resources, awaiting hearing.

HB2536 — Would require hunters, trappers and fishermen to consent to inspection of their licenses, tags and permits, as well as any wildlife taken, by ODFW officers. Takes the “right to inspect” language out of big game regulations, and puts it into state law. A work session for the bill was scheduled on Tuesday, April 14.

HB2537 — Would increase fines and penalties for poaching. A work session for the bill was scheduled on Tuesday, April 14.

Senate bills

SB24 — Creates a Task Force on Natural Resource Agency Consolidation. The task force would study benefits of abolishing or consolidating agencies including: ODFW, the Department of State Lands, Land Use Board of Appeals, Water Resources Department, Department of Agriculture and Department of Forestry, among others. Started in the Senate Environment and Natural Resources Committee before bouncing to the Joint Committee on Ways and Means. A hearing was held Feb. 16. No further hearings are scheduled. Similar bills were attempted in 2011, but died in committee.

SB941 — Opposed by OHA and dubbed the “Universal Background Check” bill. Officially named the “Oregon Firearms Safety Act.” Would require police to perform background checks on private transfers of firearms. The bill has passed out of the Senate Judiciary Committee, and headed to the Senate Floor for a vote.

You can follow the status of these bills at www.oregonlegislature.gov, or www.oregonhunters.org.

Contact George Plaven at gplaven@eastoregonian.com or 541-564-4547.

BRIEFLY

50 pheasants bred for hunting released from pens

BEAVERCREEK (AP) — Deputies say they’re investigating the release of 50 ring-neck pheasants from a game-bird farm in Clackamas County and trying to verify a post that claims responsibility.

The Oregonian reports the Estacada Game Farm raises pheasants, quail, ducks and chukars for use by hunters to train their dogs or preserves where hunters pay to shoot them.

Sheriff’s Sgt. Nathan Thompson said somebody cut a lock on one of four pens in March and released birds valued at about \$1,000.

The post on the Animal Liberation Front website is signed “A.L.F.” It said breeding the birds for hunting represents “the height of human arrogance and disregard towards animal life.”

Thompson said investigators don’t know how, or if, the release is related to the loose affiliation of animal rights activists.

Final federal plan for Idaho lake draws local approval

NAMPA, Idaho (AP) — A management plan for a popular southwest Idaho federal wildlife refuge that’s more accommodating for wave-generating boats used by water skiers is

being praised as a good compromise.

“We’re here today with a good resolution to the issue,” U.S. Sen. Mike Crapo, R-Idaho, said at a Wednesday news conference concerning the long-term plan recently finalized for Deer Flat National Wildlife Refuge by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

U.S. Rep. Raul Labrador, R-Idaho, also took part as did Fish and Wildlife officials and Canyon County commissioners, the *Idaho Press-Tribune* reported.

A multi-year process to come up with a final plan grew contentious as Fish and Wildlife attempted to balance its responsibility of managing a wildlife refuge with the recreational desires of local residents.

The 9,000-acre Lake Lowell has become popular for recreational boating and water skiing, but an earlier plan released in February banned the types of boats typically used that generate large waves.

The final plan issued April 3 by Fish and Wildlife allows the boats but puts in place no-wake zones. The plan also says filtering systems in the boats that take on water for ballast can help eliminate invasive species from the lake.

The lake is one of only three places in Idaho, refuge manager Annette de Knijf said, with colonies of Western and Clark’s grebe, a species known for a mating ritual where pairs dash across the water.

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