Rain-fed reservoirs will keep most rivers boatable

By TERRY RICHARD
The Oregonian

Terry Richard/The Oregonian via AP

In this July 2014, photo, people paddle through Oak Springs Rapids on the Deschutes River, one of the biggest rapids on the most-used segment of the river in Maupin.

PORTLAND — Rivers are running lower than normal in Oregon, but white-water boating should take place as usual on most of the state's popular rivers for rafting and kayaking.

"Rivers that have reservoir storage will be OK," said David Slover, owner of Portland's largest paddling store, Alder Creek Kayak and Canoe. "That includes the Deschutes, Rogue, Santiam, McKenzie and Umpqua. Rivers without dams storing water will be another story."

Two rivers most affected by lack of dams controlling flow will be the upper Owyhee and the John Day. The Grande Ronde, also in eastern Oregon and without major dam storage, is fed by the largest snow pack in Oregon, though still far below normal.

The Owyhee River at the Rome gauge in Malheur County was running at 219 cubic feet per second during the second week of April, a flow so low it hardly qualifies as a river.

"The boating season is open, but we're advising the use of hard shell craft only," said Larry Moore, Bureau of Land Management Vale District spokesman. The Owyhee runs through a remote canyon and is usually done as a four-day float, so few boaters have the skill and carrying capacity in hard-shell kayaks to attempt such a trip.

The Owyhee has a median flow this time of year of 1,980 cubic feet per second, while minimum occurred in 1991 at 162 cfs. Spring rains could increase the flow of all the state's rivers, but there is little snow to melt and add to the flow.

After the first week of April, Oregon river basins had the following percent of normal snow water equivalent remaining on the ground: Willamette, 9 percent of normal snow water; Hood, Sandy, Deschutes, Crooked, 12 percent; John Day, 8 percent; Malheur, 5 percent; Umatilla, Walla Walla, Willow Creek, 23 percent; Imnaha, Burnt, Powder, Grande Ronde, 36 percent; Owyhee, 17 percent; Harney County, 35 percent; Lake County and Goose Lake, 19 percent; Klamath, 8 percent; and Rogue, Umpqua, 13 percent.

Winter precipitation was 80 to 90 percent of normal across the state, but much of it fell as rain instead of snow in snow accumulation areas between 3,500 and 6,000 feet. Also, the majority of southeast Oregon had already experienced two below normal precipitation winters in a row, exacerbating the drought situation there.

Moderate to extreme drought conditions can be found over most of Oregon, except from the west slopes of the Cascades and Siskiyous to the Pacific Ocean. Much of Malheur, Harney, Lake and Klamath counties are in extreme drought conditions, the fourth most severe level of defined drought with only "exceptional" drought higher on the measuring gauge.

Umatilla river basin is 23 percent of normal snow/water equivalent.

"With 8 percent of normal snow pack, anyone who wants to run the John Day should do it in May," said Heidi Mottl, river manager for the Prineville District of the BLM. "With that said, I've seen years where rain can extend a season even after everyone had been forecasting doom and gloom."

Terry Richard/The Oregonian via AP

In this July 2014, photo, people paddle through Oak Springs Rapids on the Deschutes River.

The Prineville District's other main recreation river, the lower Deschutes River, will hold up for boating this summer, according to Mottl, because much of its summer flow comes from springs high in the Cascades. Water stored behind Round Butte Dam keeps the lower Deschutes running cold and strong all summer.

A look at river flows from the second week of April shows the same pattern, well below normal, but still with enough water for boating where water is stored in reservoirs: Rogue River at Agness, 3,170 current cubic feet per second, compared to a median of 6,420 cfs; McKenzie at Coburg, 3,570 compared to 7,370; Clackamas at Three Linx, 1,470 compared to 2,480; lower Deschutes at Moody, 5,590 compared to 7,020 and John Day at Service Creek, 2,360 compared to 4,260.

Lacking dams and the coming irrigation season, the John Day River flow should drop noticeably in June. The other rivers have flows regulated by dams.

Beyond river recreation, the main affect from lack of snow will be that people can get into the high country earlier than normal. Also, expect an early implementation of fire restrictions, which include campfire bans and more.

"We will be following hikers into the high country with our trail crews," said Amy Tinderholt, recreation team leader for the Deschutes National Forest.

Recreationists must also keep track of where wildfires are burning this summer and adjust their plans accordingly.

BLOOMIN' BLUES

Photo by Bruce Barnes

Fawn lily

Wildflower season comes early this year

By BRUCE BARNES
For The East Oregonian

Name: Fawn Lily, Dogtooth Lily

Scientific name: *Erythronium grandiflorum*

This plant is one I've featured in the past, and is symbolic of this year's wildflower season. The Fawn Lily is always one of the earliest spring wildflowers. It is usually one of only a few species that may or may not be blooming by early April.

This year things are quite different. Even before April 1, lots of plants were blooming. Spring is shaping up to be a spectacular time for wildflowers, with many diverse flowers blooming together earlier than usual. Unfortunately, scientists are saying we will be having a hot, dry summer, with plants drying up early. By July, most wildflowers are likely be dried up below about 4,000 feet.

Over the past two weeks, I have found plants in bloom two to six weeks earlier than "normal." It may be time to think about redefining normal. In the Columbia Gorge, six plant species were blooming four to six weeks early. At the Umatilla Forks Campground upriver, buttercups, violets, waterleaf, Round-leaf Trillium, Gray's Lomatium, and larkspur were blooming about four weeks early. At Deadman's Pass, the Fawn Lily, Blue Waterleaf, and Yellow Bells were about two to four weeks early. There was also Colt's Foot in full bloom, which I have never seen bloom this early (see next week's article).

The Fawn Lily is found throughout the Blue Mountains, from the lowest elevations to timberline. The plants are usually six to ten inches tall, with one or two flowers on a slender leafless stalk, with two broad, smooth leaves attached at ground level. The flowers are nodding over, and the six petals are curved backwards.

The bulbs of the plant were an important food source for some Northwest tribes, though the raw bulbs are not edible. The bulbs had to be dried and steamed in a special way to change an indigestible carbohydrate into edible fructose.

Where to find it: Fawn Lily is along the road bank as you drive out of the north rest stop at Deadman's Pass on the old highway, and in the grass around the camp sites at Umatilla Forks. Look for large yellow flowers 3 inches across near the ground.

— Bruce Barnes writes each summer about wildflowers in the Blue Mountains of Eastern Oregon. Have an idea for him? Email Bruce at flora.id@wtechlink.com.

BRIEFLY

Canoe capsizes on Umpqua River; man presumed drowned

ROSEBURG (AP) — A Sutherlin, Oregon, man is presumed drowned after a canoe overturned in the Umpqua River.

Douglas County Sheriff's spokesman Dwes Hutson says 34-year-old Shaun Laughlin and another man were in a 15-foot canoe that capsized Sunday.

According to Hutson, Laughlin held onto the canoe while the other man swam to shore. After reaching land, the man looked back and didn't see Laughlin. He went to a road and flagged down a passing motorist.

Hutson says searchers could not find Laughlin on Sunday afternoon.

Florida tentatively approves bear hunting

TALLAHASSEE, Fla. (AP) — The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission voted unanimously Wednesday to allow bear hunting as soon as next October, after a 21-year ban.

Commission members took the action after what they said is an increase in dangerous bear-human encounters, including four attacks on people since December 2013.

But they acted over occasionally angry objections from animal protection and environmental groups, who said that killing bears in the woods won't help prevent encounters in suburbs and that not enough is known about the state's bear population to ensure hunting won't damage the species.

Speaking to reporters after the meeting, he dismissed much of the criticism as emotional.

Oldest hotel in Yellowstone designated as historic landmark

BILLINGS, Mont. (AP) — The oldest hotel in Yellowstone National Park has been designated as a National Historic Landmark.

Park officials announced the designation for the Lake Yellowstone Hotel on Thursday.

It was built 124 years ago overlooking the north shore of Yellowstone Lake, and overhauled in the early 20th century as a grand resort hotel in the colonial revival style.

Lake Yellowstone Hotel is owned by the National Park Service and operated by Xanterra Parks and Resorts, a private concessionaire. Xanterra recently completed a $28 million renovation of the hotel.

It's one of more than 2,500 historic sites across the country designated as historic landmarks under a program administered by the U.S. Interior Department.