

North Fork John Day provides early season exercise

By **TIM TRAINOR**
East Oregonian

If your summer goal is a week-long backpack in the Eagle Caps or the Elkhorns, you may be looking for early season opportunities to stretch your legs and your mileage without having to posthole your way through high country snow.

The North Fork John Day River Trail offers an alternative.

Warm, scenic and mostly flat, the 23-mile trail makes a good choice for a long spring day hike or an overnight backpack trip.

The trail begins with about two miles of easy walking along an old road that skirts alongside the North Fork John Day. It then diverges at a large, open camping spot where Big Creek and its trail pours into the John Day fork. This is where the wilderness area begins, and only horses and hikers can continue along an old mining road route that follows the river. It becomes more narrow and more scenic as it gets more remote.

The trail is classic Eastern Oregon. Hot and dusty midday. Lots of ponderosa and lodgepole pines mixed with Douglas fir and larch. Willows fill the river bottoms. You can catch glimpses of plenty of mule deer rear ends, bounding away into the surrounding hills. The water, where relatively calm, is covered with mergansers. Canadian geese have coupled off and built their nests on river islands.

Yet there are some downsides to this trail that must be mentioned. The first is the near infestation of ticks. Before you head out, liberally apply bug repellent. And be sure to wear pants, a long-sleeved shirt and a hat, bring extra bug spray for future doses and check yourself and your hiking partners closely at the end of the trip.

The second downside is that the angling — one of the main draws of the river during the majority of the year — ranges from poor to impossible during the spring runoff. A kayak would be more useful



Staff photo by Tim Trainor

The North Fork John Day rides high against the banks during spring runoff. Hiking along it can be a fun early-season adventure.



Staff photo by Tim Trainor

Big Creek rushes into the North Fork John Day River, about two miles from the trailhead.

equipment than a fishing rod while the water is at its most turbid.

A third downside is that crossing the river is not possible. A jaunt up Cougar Creek Trail, for instance, requires fording the river. That is not possible until at least mid-May.

Yet there are some positives too.

You can wander off trail for some favorite Eastern Oregon spring outdoor hobbies, as both antler and mushroom hunting can be very good.

About 5.2 miles in, just as the trail crosses Corral Creek, there is

How to get there:

For Umatilla County residents, the trail is best accessed by heading south down Highway 395 to the Grant County line. Turn east when you hit the North Fork John Day River and make your way via Forest Road 55 to Forest Road 5506. It's easy navigating — just keep the river alongside your passenger door. Follow that road to the "Road Closed" sign just past Oriental Campground.

a riverside flat underneath towering ponderosas. Turning around here would make for a good hike of 10.4 miles — a good training day for those double-digit alpine hikes that

await this summer.

Those with greater ambition, or who had a more active winter, can continue for miles more. There are dispersed campsites all along the

river, with very little chance you'll have human company anywhere nearby.

If you plan ahead, you can leave a shuttle vehicle at the other end of the trail at the North Fork John Day Campground, about 23 miles as the river and the trail winds. But even if it is a simple out-and-back, the North Fork John Day Trail has plenty to offer close to home.

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BLOOMIN' BLUES

Dead-nettle blooming early

By **BRUCE BARNES**
For The East Oregonian

Name: Purple Dead-nettle
Scientific Name: *Lamium purpureum*

Last week I said the season was about two weeks earlier than last year. I'm now thinking it may be even earlier. Plant bloom-times are influenced by several factors, including soil temperature, the length of daylight, soil nutrients, the amount and timing of rainfall or presence of ground water, the presence of crowding from other plants, competition for water and nutrients and by which plants, and the presence of direct sunlight or shade. And to complicate things even more, different species seem to respond to different factors and to a different extent. The more I've been out looking around, the more I'm seeing plants in bloom that I'm used to seeing much later.

Purple Dead-nettle is an introduced annual plant from Europe and Asia, which has become established in scattered locations across North America, but is not considered invasive. I have seen it in the River Parkway in Pendleton and at a few places along the river road approaching Umatilla Forks.

The names Dead-nettle and Dumb-nettle were long ago applied to this plant and others of the same genus, because they reminded people of nettles, but without the stinging hairs of real nettles. The genus name, *Lamium*, is the "type" genus of the mint family, the



Photo by Bruce Barnes

Lamium purpureum

Lamiaceae. In plant families, one genus bears the same root name as the family name, and is considered to have the characteristics that set the example for the family. Unlike many members of the mint family, however, this plant has no noticeable odor.

This plant is usually about 6-10 inches high. The lower stem is bare and squared, with the upper third bearing overlapping heart-shaped leaves about an inch long, and with the tips of delicate tiny pink flowers sticking out between the leaves. The upper leaves are a somewhat

dark purplish-brown color that transitions to green on the lower leaves.

In Europe, before they knew better, people would treat measles with this plant. They would boil the roots of the plant in milk and have the patient drink it to "bring out" the measles.

Where to find: In the past I've found it along the edge of the River Parkway near the Little League Park. If you head for Umatilla Forks, it is growing at the base of the rock cliffs on your left about a mile before reaching the campground.



Zach Urness/Statesman-Journal via AP

The North Fork of the Smith River is known for its jade-green water and red-rock canyons. Three rafters navigate through a canyon in April 2015.

Otherworldly: rafting on North Fork Smith

By **ZACH URNESS**
(Salem) Statesman Journal

GASQUET, Calif. — If you've ever wanted to go whitewater rafting on Mars, head southwest to the border of Oregon and California and ask for the man they call Bearfoot Brad.

The bearded resident of this tiny hamlet doesn't hold the keys to a spaceship, but he is the gatekeeper for a section of river so bizarrely beautiful it feels as though you're paddling down a

Martian stream.

The river in question is the North Fork Smith, a blade of jade-green water cutting through the remote heart of the Klamath-Siskiyou Mountains.

Home to a virtual desert of reddish-orange canyons — not to mention insect-eating plants — the North Fork is a pocket of red planet oddness here on Earth.

"The crazy thing about the North Fork is that it's right in the middle of a rain-

forest," said Adam Spencer, co-owner of Redwood Rides, a Gasquet-based outfitter planning to offer North Fork trips this spring and summer. "Yet when you're on the river, it feels almost like you've been transported to the desert."

If you've never heard of the North Fork Smith, you're not alone.

While famous among hard-core kayakers and rafters, it remains generally unknown to the Northwest populace.

Range and field day available for hunter education students

East Oregonian

A range and field day will be conducted April 24 from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. in Milton-Freewater for hunter education students.

Participants are required to complete a hunter education course online or by workbook method to take part.

If you wish to receive the workbook method, you must stop by 920 S. Main Street, Milton-Freewater, for your course material and your workbook.

Students will be required to present their certificate of online training or have

a completed workbook in their possession as a pre-requisite to the class. There will be a \$10 fee collected from each student in the event that you have

not pre-registered.

You can pre-register at www.dfw.state.or.us/education/hunter and sign up for Hunter Education Field Day as well.

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