



Photo courtesy Zan Aslett

It can be hard to stay focused on loading the rafts each morning when surrounded by the stunning John Day Valley.



Photo courtesy Richie Gardner

Scanning the far hills at dusk gives you a good chance to spot a herd of California Bighorn sheep.



Photo courtesy Zan Aslett

Rock and sage-covered hills line much of the John Day River.

Floating the John Day River can be the best way to see the often-scorching scenery

The John Day River's rafting season is short. The scorching temperatures of the desert valley quickly decimate snowpack and siphoning for agricultural production often leaves the river unrunnable by midsummer for all but the lightest of vessels.

So in the few weeks when it is warm enough to sleep outside and the river is still relatively full of water, the John Day gets packed with an array of colorful floaters in search of smallmouth bass and a suntan, a few fun rapids, great stargazing and the opportunity to float lazily down the third-longest undammed river in America.

This Memorial Day Weekend, our six-boat crew (three large rafts, two hard-shell kayaks and one inflatable kayak) navigated the 70-mile Wild & Scenic stretch of river between Clarno Bridge and Cottonwood Canyon. It took five days and four nights, although you could add or subtract a day or two depending on the urgency of your return.

But urgency isn't something that comes naturally along the float, which is marked by cataclysmic geology, astounding wildlife and a roadless and motorless section that leaves thoughts and worries of the workaday world far behind.

This year has been an exceptionally good one for the river, with flows topping out at 10-year highs and pushing through more than 20,000 cubic feet of water per second. But by Memorial Day those high flows were already dropping dramatically, down to 4,000 cfs.

So in order to capitalize on the water while it's in the river, the crowds were substantial.

We were joined by dozens upon dozens of others, camping at picturesque spots along the way and marveling at the valley's remarkable geology and sparse beauty.

Temperatures were in the 90s throughout most of the days, and shade on the river is limited to a few scarce juniper trees. Sunscreen had to be applied liberally and hourly, but even so it prove no match for that much direct sun and the oven-like bare

RAFTING THE DESERT

By TIM TRAINOR ♦ East Oregonian

canyon walls. But one of the joys of floating is the ability to tumble off the side of the raft into the cool water whenever the thought pleases.

Along the way, we were serenaded by western meadowlarks and canyon wrens, and watched curiously by colorful Bullock's orioles and the spying eyes of chukars looking down from their rocky perches. The small-mouth bass fishing is excellent — it's not unreasonable to catch 30 in a day, and because they are plentiful and an introduced species, anglers are welcome to keep and eat them. There is no daily limit and can make for excellent eating.

On successive evenings around a riverside campfire, equipped with binoculars, we were able to watch two different herds of bighorn sheep pick their way across the high ridge, silhouetted against a twilight sky. On another night we watched three peregrine falcons return to their rocky perch to fly bombing runs through the hoodoos and vertical columns like fighter pilots, either looking for a last meal of the day or just showing off for one another. A rattlesnake slithered through the middle of camp the same evening, eliciting a few gasps, and massive elk tracks were found in the riverside sand the next morning.

There are two sets of rapids along the route that require attention. The first is Upper and Lower Clarno, located just five miles from the put-in, and the second is Basalt Rapids, about 12 miles farther downstream. Neither are



More online
For video of the rafting journey down the river visit eastoregonian.com



Photo courtesy Zan Aslett

The leisurely float makes for excellent sightseeing and wildlife watching.

terribly difficult, but both contain holes that could easily flip a watercraft that ventures too close. Scout both before running. We rescued one fisherman caught on rocks and ejected from his catamaran, so even in safe sections you'll want to keep your wits about you. An upstream wind often kicks up in the afternoon, so if you're trying to cover miles you'll want to get an early start.

Being a desert river surrounded by a tinderbox of cheatgrass and dry sage, fire pans are required year round and no fires of any kind are allowed from June 1 to October

1. You are required to have a toilet system to carry out your waste.

Floating permits are required on the Clarno to Cottonwood section during the primary boating season from late May to early July. Currently those permits are unlimited, which means the river and put-ins and take-outs can get very busy.

It's worth it.

Tim Trainor is outdoor page editor of the East Oregonian. Send your outdoor stories and photos his way at ttrainor@eastoregonian.com.



Staff photo by Tim Trainor

The John Day River oxbows often in the 70-mile stretch between Clarno and Cottonwood Canyon.



Photo courtesy Zan Aslett

Rafting and kayaking allows you to get up close and personal with the remarkable geology along the river.