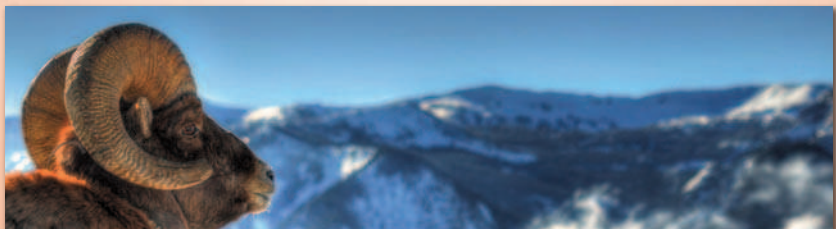




Experience The Wallowas



Zach Mansfield



Zach Mansfield



Cold weather backcountry hiking, and why you should try it

By Kathleen Ellyn
Wallowa County Chieftain

First a warning: this experience is not for the casual hiker.

If, however, you are an experienced outdoorsperson who wants to fully experience all nature has to offer, there's no reason you can't prepare for an adventure in Wallowa County like no other.

This article will focus on a winter hike on the Wenaha River Trail, which follows the Wild and Scenic Wenaha River west into the Wenaha – Tucannon Wilderness.

A properly prepared hiker can find dozens of great winter hikes in Wallowa County. We're choosing the Wenaha River Trail because, according to river guide Grant Richie of Minam River Rafting, you can hike to the bottom of the canyon most any time of year.

And the views in the canyon are gob-smacking.

"Winter time is one of my favorite times to hike the canyon," Richie said. "You can see bighorn sheep at the bottom of the canyon and it's real pretty down there."

The trailhead is not maintained in winter and no one can guarantee you accessibility. It's advisable to call a local guide or the Forest Service in advance of your planned hike.

If the signs are good — drive to Troy.

You will not need a Recreation Pass to park at the Wenaha River Trailhead, which is accessed right at Troy, and you can walk the trail, along the Wenaha River, for 21 miles to the forks of the river at Elk Flat.

Beyond that, you'll climb 3,100 feet in 11 miles from Elk Flat Trail to Timothy Springs and your chance of encountering trail conditions not conducive to hiking increase dramatically.

In warm weather you can access five great trailheads on the south side of the Wenaha River from Forest Service Road 62 with your vehicle: Troy, Hoodoo, Cross Canyon, Elk Flat and Timothy Springs. But in winter, unless you're going to snowmo-

bile in and snowshoe when you get there, you'll need to stick with the Wenaha Trailhead at Troy.

Although the cost of gear can be much less than for snowmobiling, skiing or mountaineering, winter hiking requires the same good preparation and a self-reliant character.

There's no cell service in the canyon and you may be hiking over some snow and ice, so equip yourself appropriately and file an Estimated Time of Arrival (ETA) and a flight plan (hiking plan in this case) with someone who will follow up if you fail to show up at the appointed time — and will know where to look for you.

You may want to camp, there are a number of good campsites along the trail, and Richie, who is a minimalist, has boiled his camp gear needs down to a mountaineering Tee-Pee tent, a hammock, a zero-degree sleeping bag and a Jet Boil stove. Naturally, you'll have your water and lightweight, high-calorie food and other essentials with you and you will be prepared to pack out what you pack in — this is a "leave no trace" area.

A campfire can help keep you warm overnight, but there are other reasons for the fire.

"I always build a fire in camp," Richie said. "It keeps you warm, it's nice to look into, and it keeps the critters away."

There will be critters. That's part of why you came.

The good thing about winter hiking is no snakes, and if you're afraid of bears, no bears. But a cougar has stalked Richie and another river guide observed a winter fisherman being watched by a wolf in late October.

Mostly you will see bighorn sheep, raptors including bald and golden eagles and other shy wildlife. You may also see moose, elk, snowshoe hare and perhaps catch a glimpse of a retreating bobcat or cougar.

"The winter hike, for me, is very meditative," Richie said. "The rock formations, the big Ponderosa pines — they speak to me. It's a connection with something very basic."

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There are a couple of really good reasons to get your behind good and cold rafting or kayaking in the winter months.

For starters, the flow is good to decent as early as October and as late as July on the Grande Ronde and Minam. The Wallowa sometimes freezes over in late November and early December, but the ice is usually gone by February and when floating the Wallowa in winter you are going

to be accessing water (and therefore views) that are hard to reach any other way.

Second, the views are stunning and unique. In addition to seeing layered basalt coming right down to the river, depending on the time of year and which river you take, paddlers may spot mountain goats, bighorn sheep, lions, bears, bald and golden eagles, and deer. The photos you take cannot be matched.

Third, this is the time to see cougar tracks in the snow, mountain goats on the rocks,

and snowflakes melting into the river. No snakes or bears in winter. If you're looking for a way to reconnect with nature in a pristine setting, here it is.

You will have to prepare — but that's part of the fun for backcountry explorers.

You don't need to be a professional kayaker, but basic rowing or paddling skills are essential. "You don't want to swim in February," advises river guide Grant Richie of Minam Raft Rentals.

Fate favors the well-prepared, so Richie recommends, in addition to the usual life vest and helmet, a dry suit or waders, thermal underwear, good parka, hat, gloves and protected change of clothing. If you've got one, take your SAT phone; you're not going to get cell service in the canyons. But that's one of the reasons you go, isn't it?

Even well-dressed, a cold behind is pretty much guaranteed, so plan on getting out and walking on the bank from time to time to get the circulation going. If you're floating during fishing season, you will, anyway. The Minam is closed to fishing in the winter but both steelhead and trout can be fished on the Wallowa and steelhead can be found in the Grande Ronde. Check your fishing regulations.

The key to a safe float trip, Richie said, is "don't get complacent on any water."

Wallowa County rivers are easy going most of the time

and the Wallowa River in particular is a good "starter river" for the beginner. A BLM ranger once told Richie that the Wallowa ought to be rated "Class C for Complacent."

His point was that the river was very paddler-friendly.

So, you should be able to take your eyes off the river and enjoy that scenery as you float.

Winter rafters and kayakers may not want to take the long (39-mile) float from the Minam Store to Wildcat Bridge, Mud Creek or Troy. But there are multiple stops along the way to haul out and hike back to a trailhead where someone will have parked your car. Richie recommends putting in at Lower Diamond Lane and floating down to the Minam Store (10 miles). Another good winter float can be had by driving out to Troy (usually doable in winter) and hiking upstream on the Wenaha whatever distance you like (up to 21 miles to the forks of the Wenaha) and floating back to Troy. Packable rafts weighing from four to 10 pounds are available and Richie has experimented with kayak dollies — check with him for advice on hauling your kayak.

Minam Raft Rentals can be hired to pick you and your gear up (\$35 – \$100) at a trailhead.

Once you're on the river, you pretty much go where the river goes, but for more security and education, pick up a river map (\$12).



Courtesy photo/Grant Richie

A well-prepared hiker/rafter with a packable raft heads into Joseph Canyon. Notice, the hike itself requires a significant fitness level and preparedness. This is not a hike/float recommended for beginners and can be a very cold float for anyone, but shorter combined float/hikes can be had.



Courtesy photo/Grant Richie

Demonstrating the doable nature of the Grande Ronde in February, Brendan and Mason Moore (10 at the time of the photo) push off for a float. They were accompanied by their river guide Dad, Grant Richie.

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