

Seeking a river's source

Shady hike follows an abandoned road along the Grande Ronde River's east fork



JAYSON JACOBY
ON THE TRAIL

Although I have on occasion been asked, while hiking in the mountains, where I'm heading, I have never been confused with Dr. Livingstone, the Scottish physician whose name is forever linked to the interrogative, "I presume?"

But I share with the 19th century missionary a curiosity about where rivers come from, even though I've never sought the source of a waterway so great as the Nile and even though, unlike the famous explorer, I have access to Google Earth.

Among hiking destinations, only the summit of a prominent peak exerts on my legs a similar magnetic pull.

Not every part of our corner of Oregon, richly endowed though it is in mountains, is distinguished by the sorts of precipices that dominate the surrounding terrain and all but beg to be ascended and stood upon in triumph.

Streams, by contrast, are plentiful pretty much everywhere.

Many are middling in volume, to be sure — the innumerable creeks that might briefly turn into a torrent when swollen with spring snowmelt but by mid-summer are brooks barely big enough to babble.

But our region's major rivers are a different matter.

Each has multiple forks, and most of those are themselves fed by tributaries. I find it an endlessly fascinating exercise — physically and otherwise — to track these streams, to see if I can find their precise birthplaces, whether that's a lake or a pond or a spring where frigid water, fresh from an aquifer, gurgles to the surface and surrenders to gravity.

These excursions seem to me especially compelling when I'm able to sample several reaches of a river and so get a sense of its various, and often quite distinct, personalities.

I had occasion to do so on a recent weekend along a river that I'm not particularly familiar with despite its proximity: the Grande Ronde.

I feel a trifle guilty about this, given that the Grande Ronde is one of the great rivers of Northeastern Oregon, and certainly the longest, spanning about 182 miles from Grande Ronde Lake, high in the Elkhorns, to its mouth at the Snake River.

(The John Day River is about 100 miles longer but I'm not



The east fork of the Grande Ronde River flows through a remote, heavily forested canyon.

Jayson Jacoby/Baker City Herald

counting it here because although it begins in Northeastern Oregon, many of its miles are actually in Central Oregon.)

We spent the nights of July 23 and 24 at Spool Cart, the Forest Service campground on the Grande Ronde's east bank south of Starkey. But we had our first look at the Grande Ronde many miles downriver, where it passes below Interstate 84 on the north side of La Grande. The freeway generally mirrors the river's meanders for the next eight miles or so, and although the Grande Ronde's flow varies dramatically through the year, I don't recall ever seeing the river look quite so

sluggish.

This of course is the fate of many rivers during this summer of drought and persistent heat.

As we exited the freeway onto state Highway 244, tracing the Grande Ronde's course into its modest canyon (modest compared with the lower river, anyway, where the Elbow Creek fire has been burning, aided by the treacherous topography), the river continued to be conspicuous more for the dry, smoothly sculpted stones in its bed than for the water desultorily flowing between them.

Our campsite was just 20 feet or so from the Grande Ronde, and there too the river was placid.

When I stepped into the water there was the initial chilly shock — inevitable when the air temperature is in the low 90s — but the sensation was brief. After sitting on a boulder for five minutes in water up to mid-calf, it felt tepid and scarcely cool.

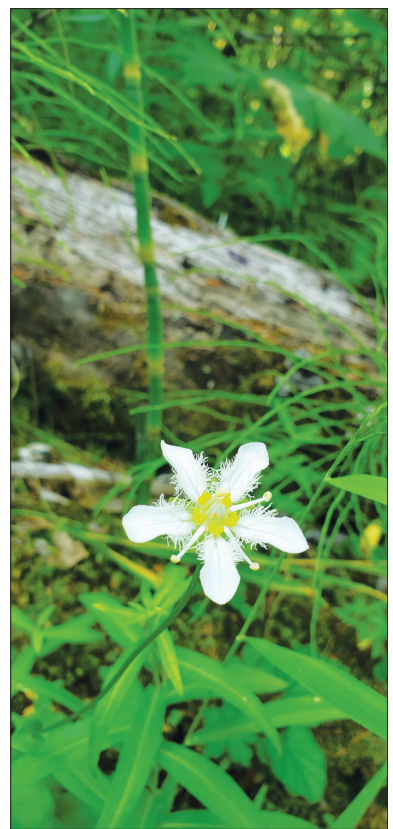
Our destination on Sunday morning, July 25, was what a topographic map depicted as a road — albeit the lowest standard road — that followed the Grande Ronde's east fork for a couple miles upstream from its confluence with the mainstem.

That intersection is in the Camp Carson mining district area east of Vey Meadows.

IF YOU GO

From Interstate 84 at the Hilgard/Ukiah exit, drive Highway 244 for about 11 miles, turning right at a sign for Starkey. Drive south on the paved two-lane road, which becomes Forest Road 51 after it enters the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest. About 12.6 miles from Highway 244, after the road enters the broad expanse of Vey Meadows, turn left onto gravel Road 5125. The road immediately crosses the Grande Ronde River.

Drive Road 5125, which is suitable for passenger cars, for 6.5 miles and turn right onto Road 5138, which is a bit rougher but still passable to regular cars. Follow Road 5138 through piles of mining tailings for about a half a mile, where the road ends at a tank trap.



Lisa Britton/Baker City Herald

A blossom of grass of Parnassus growing beside the east fork of the Grande Ronde River on July 25, 2021.

The road — 5138-010, according to the map — was blocked to vehicles, and thoroughly, by a tank trap and several multi-ton boulders that might cause the driver of an Abrams tank to brake.

But I could see what seemed to be a well-beaten trail on one side of the old road bed. More promisingly, I noticed several logs that had been sawed, evidence that someone thought this route important enough to spend time keeping it somewhat clear of the obstacles that can quickly turn an enjoyable hike into a skin-slashing ordeal.

The day was turning hot even at 10 a.m. — which day during this summer has not? — but the

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Youth pheasant hunts planned this fall

Hunt locations include Ladd Marsh, Irrigon, John Day Valley

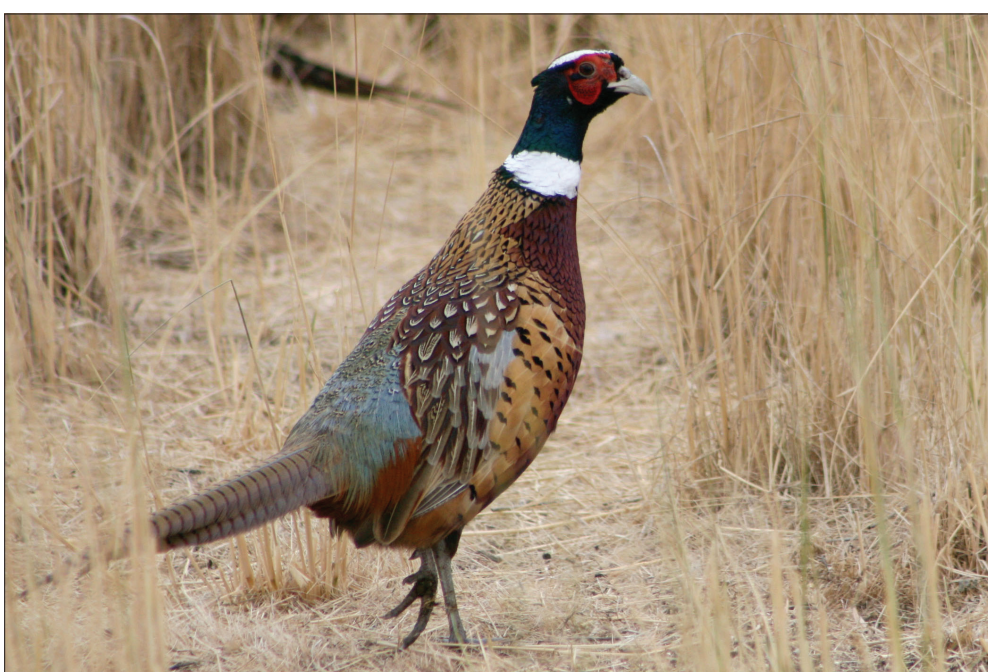
EO Media Group

SALEM — Hunters 17 and younger can sign up for free pheasant hunts happening around the state this fall, including events near La Grande, Irrigon, Ontario and the John Day Valley.

The Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife (ODFW) and its partners stock pheasants at these special hunts that give youth a head start on regular pheasant seasons, which start in October.

Most hunts are at ODFW wildlife areas in September, with some scheduled for October.

Register by logging in



Rick Swart/Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife

Hunters 17 and younger can sign up for free pheasant hunts happening around the state this fall.

to the youth's account at MyODFW's Licensing page. Then go to "Purchase from the Catalog" and look

under the Category/ Class/ Workshop / Outdoor Skills. Hunts are listed alphabetically by city name. Regis-

tration is only online; it is not available at license sale agents.

These events are open

only to youth who have passed hunter education. Volunteers bring their trained hunting dogs to some events to hunt with participants. Some events also host a shooting skills session before the hunt.

The hunts are free, though participants need a valid hunting license (\$10 for youth 12 and older, free for age 11 and under) to hunt.

Youth hunters age 12-17 also need an upland game bird validation (\$4). Purchase before the event, online or at a license sales agent (reminder that ODFW offices remain closed to public access until Sept. 1, 2021.) Licenses and validations will not be sold at the events.

Some areas will host the event both Saturday and Sunday. Youth who register for one day may hunt stand by on the other day.

"Youth pheasant hunts are a great chance for young hunters to find early success and put the lessons learned in hunter education to work in the field," said Jered Goodwin, ODFW hunter education coordinator.

For help signing up, contact Myrna Britton at 503-947-6028 or by email, Myrna.B.Britton@odfw.oregon.gov.

Event dates and locations:

- Irrigon Wildlife Area (between Irrigon and Umatilla), Sept. 25 and Sept. 26. Sign up for morning or evening hunt (morning only on Sunday).
- John Day Valley, Sept. 18 and Sept. 19.
- La Grande, Ladd Marsh Wildlife Area, Sept. 18 and Sept. 19. No advance registration required.
- Ontario (on city property), Oct. 16 and 17.