

# North Idaho River Trips



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## NORTH IDAHO RIVER TRIPS

These are very brief descriptions to assist new boaters to the Moscow/ Pullman area in selecting local rivers that meet their skill level. Several river guidebooks are available with much greater detail. **Use these description only in selecting an appropriate river for your skill level and seek more detailed information.**

*The activities described in this document are hazardous. It is the reader`s reasonability to insure they have sufficient skill and fitness to participate in the activities safely. The authors or Outdoor Program assumes no liability or responsibility to may person or entity for injuries, death, loss or damages which are caused by the information contained in this article.*

Persons interested in floating the numerous Idaho Rivers need several ingredients to have a successful trip. Picking a river carefully is of foremost importance, then outfitting properly, and finally using common sense while on the river. River hazards can be easily avoided by aware parties. Rivers are seasonal and conditions continually change throughout the year, this can determine the success or failure of a trip. Rivers all have ideal water levels and boaters should plan trips with these levels in mind. High water in the spring claims many lives on rivers because people underestimate the speed and force of the water. Some rivers can be boated at higher levels, and some can only be boated when the water is high, but many cannot, except by experts.

COLD water is a major hazard. Until early July, and sometimes later, wetsuits are mandatory for a safe and enjoyable trip on the river. Even after a person emerges from a dunking they still are in danger if not rewarmed rapidly. Hypothermia, the cooling of the body core, is a major river hazard. Low, rocky streams are far less of a hazard than swimming in 40 degree water without body protection. A general rule for safety is, if the combination of the air and water temperature is less than 100 degrees, a wetsuit is needed. It may be needed in other cases as well, depending on specific conditions and body comfort.

Equipment is a vital part of trip planning. Cheap discount store rafts cannot be expected to handle the strains of whitewater trips like good quality rafts will. Life jackets should be inspected regularly to see that they are still intact. Throw lines should be in each raft to assist persons in the water, although not placed so that people could become entangled should a raft upset. Each party should have a first aid kit, matches to build a fire, and hot drinks on cold days. Bailers are necessary to lighten the water load in the raft between rapids. A fully loaded boat is far more difficult to maneuver. By the same token, ratings on rafts (i.e. 6 man) are for flat water use only and usually these will be reduced by at least two people with gear in the boat. For a long trip a 6 man boat may carry two to three people and gear comfortably.

The Outdoor Program can assist you in planning river trips, equipment suggestions, and rental or trip logistics. The river listings that follow are a general guide only and parties should scout rivers carefully and use caution as rivers change day to day.

Trips and instruction are planned through the Outdoor Program during spring, summer and fall. Check for dates and information.

**Rivers are rated according to their degree of difficulty. Classifications are as follows:**

**CLASS I VERY EASY** - small regular waves and riffles; few or no obstacles; little maneuvering required.

**CLASS II EASY** - small waves with some eddies; low ledges; and slow rock gardens; some maneuvering required.

**CLASS III MEDIUM** - numerous waves that are high and irregular; strong eddies; narrow, but clear passages that require expertise in maneuvering; scouting from the shore necessary.

**CLASS IV DIFFICULT** - long rapids with powerful; irregular waves; dangerous rocks, and boiling eddies; precise maneuvering and scouting from the shore imperative; take all possible safety precautions.

**CLASS V VERY DIFFICULT** - long rapids with wild turbulence and extremely congested routes that require complex maneuvering; a danger to your life and boat and near the limits of navigation.

**CLASS VI THE LIMITS OF NAVIGATION** - rarely run; a definite hazard to your life.

**DAY TRIPS (all driving times from Moscow Idaho)**

**Clearwater River** (driving time: 1 to 2 1/2 hours)

This is a good first river for learning about eddy turns, river currents, or just floating. There are not major rapids, but some fairly good play spots for beginning kayakers. Rafters will find easy drifting on all sections. The water is most interesting in early fall when it is low. At higher levels most everything washes out. There are some kayak play spots near Kamiah, ID, below Six Mile Creek. There is also a short beginning run that begins at the Myrtle Beach resort and goes to Nez Perce part. Class I and II.

**Grande Ronde River** (driving time: 2 to 2 1/2 hours)

This is a good beginning river in the spring and summer, usually too low, except for kayaks, in the fall. There is a one day trip of 18 miles or less along the road between Troy, OR, and Highway 129 in Washington. Another possible trip is from Highway 129 to the mouth of the Grande Ronde, near Heller bar on the Snake River. This trip is 22 miles long and has one major rapid near the end (the narrows). Since there is no road along the river a long shuttle is involved. It is a beautiful canyon and the low elevations keep it warmer in the spring than other rivers.

Class II to III.

It is also possible to drive up the Snake River road south to Asotin, WA, to the mouth of the Grande Ronde, and follow the road up to near the bottom of the narrows. At the last possible access, put in on State of Washington land and float down to the gentle Snake and go as far as you like. There is one large, but avoidable, rapid on the Snake in low water, just below Heller bar. Class II.

**St. Maries River** (driving time: 1 1/2 hours)

A very scenic intermediate run for small rafts and kayaks at high water in the spring. The run begins about 15 miles south of the town of St. Maries, ID at Mashburn where the highway crosses. (Mashburn consists of a railroad sign only). The river winds through a road less canyon which has poor access once you put in, so parties are committed to the entire run. The shuttle takes about an hour. The trip can be 12 to 20 miles depending on where you take out. This is not a river for open canoes as the length and difficulty of the rapids make recovery of a swamped boat tricky. There is a dirt road coming to the river from the town of St. Maries and along it there are a number of places to take out. The normal take out is just below the railroad bridge (the third one you float under). From there to St. Maries it is mostly flat water with a scenic winding channel, excellent for canoe trips, up or downstream. Class III difficulty for the upper canyon.

**Palouse River** (driving time: 1/2 hour)

This is the closest river to Moscow. A 25 mile stretch from the town of Palouse, ID, to just above the town of Colfax, WA, which winds through a small scenic canyon in the farm country. The drop is 20 feet per mile, creating a fast current, many riffles, and number of straightforward class II rapids. Generally there is only enough water for floating in February to April. It is important to take out at the bridge one mile above Colfax as there is a concrete sluice and weir in the town of Colfax that is dangerous and illegal to run. Class II.

**Priest River** (driving time: 3 to 4 hours)

The Priest is a small river which winds 44 miles from Priest Lake to the Pend Oreille River. The river is most difficult at high water in the spring and October when water is released from the lake. By mid-July it is often too low. Class II.

**St. Joe River** (driving time: 2 to 5 hours)

A variety of options await the novice or experienced boater. Difficulty increases with the spring runoff. Below the town of Avery, ID, it is easiest with short easy rapids and long pools. There are lots of inner tubers here in mid-summer as well as canoes. Above the town of Avery the river changes from easier sections to class IV drops. Skookum canyon is known as an experienced kayakers play spot. Most of the river can be seen from the road so it is easy to scout the various sections. A road less run of 17 miles begins at Heller creek near the headwaters (not accessible until late June usually) and goes to Spruce Tree Campground. The forest Service claims there are falls up to four feet and log jams impossible to avoid here, so you are on your own. There is a trail alongside for scouting. Class I to V.

**Potlatch River** (driving time: 1/2 hour)

There are several options on this small river in the spring, yet it is primarily boated by kayakers as the shallow flow is difficult for rafts or large boats. If you follow the road out of Kendrick, ID, headed toward Dworshak dam. The easiest run begins at the first bridge across the river, ending at the town of Kendrick. A moderately difficult run begins at the second bridge upstream (do not cross the first one) and ends at the first bridge. You can put in about a mile farther up where it is more difficult, yet it is primarily rocky and fast. This stretch can be run several times in one afternoon or combined with runs lower down. There is additional water below Kendrick which is generally not runnable because it drops 150 feet per mile through a road less area. Many individuals have had to carry their wrecked boats out of this area. It is also possible to find fences across parts of the lower river in late season (or left from the previous year), so caution is warranted. The normal season only lasts a few weeks on any part of the river. Class I, II, & V.

**North fork Clearwater River** (driving time: 3 hours)

There is some great water above Dworshak reservoir. The season usually begins in spring and continues most of the summer. The road follows the river so scouting is no problem. This is primarily a river for kayaks and rafts as the big drops are less suitable for open canoes. The river becomes wider, shallower, and generally easier the farther upstream you travel. The lower sections have big drops and intermediate run with pool and drop characteristics of the larger Idaho Rivers. Some rapids are quite long, and only one, called Irish Railroad, and is up to the limits of navigability, being very congested over a long drop. Class IV.

**South Fork Clearwater River** (driving time: 2 to 3 hours)

An intermediate river that increases in difficulty the farther upstream you travel. The rapids are rocky and require much maneuvering, some having large drops. Much more difficult in high water. Rafts should be able to handle the lower sections, 10 to 15 miles upstream from Kooskia, ID. Class III to IV.

**Selway River** (driving time: 3 hours)

The river below Selway Falls is fairly easy and scenic. There are small rapids which can be run at most any level. Difficulty increases significantly with higher water. The best trip is the first 10 miles below the falls, here the water is flatter. Watch out for log jams on this section, particularly rock island. The water can be big enough to flip rafts, so beginners should scout rapids from the shore. Class II to III.

**Lochsa River** (driving time: 3 hours or more)

A river for rafts and kayaks and experienced parties. It gets easier in many sections as the water goes down in July, but some sections remain difficult. Water is easiest for the first 10 miles above the confluence with the Selway, east of Lowell. From Eagle Creek pack bridge to the Split Creek pack bridge it is very challenging in all water levels. At the lowest water levels in the fall, two or three rapids are unrunnable. Advanced kayakers often start from Fish Creek and

run to Split Creek pack bridge. There are huge drops in this section and massive holes. Higher water makes this an advanced run for kayakers. Everything can be scouted from the road and camping nearby is excellent in many places. Class IV to V.

**Lower Main Salmon River** (driving time: 3 hours)

Beginning at the City Park in Riggins, ID, from the boat ramp, there is a 4 to 6 mile stretch of river that has several big rapids that are popular in the fall when the water is low. There are pools after each rapid which are handy for picking up floating persons. This is generally not suitable for open canoes because of the size of the waves. Water gets easier below Lucille and could be run in open canoes much of the way. Above Riggins there is also some good water, generally easy from the Lake Creek Bridge to Riggins, and more difficult above, but not much more in lower water flows. Beginners often drive up stream from Spring Bar and float back to there, 7 to 10 miles in a day. Access and camping is fine most of the way, and the best water is usually in the late summer and fall. Class I through IV.

**EXTENDED TRIPS**

**Middle Fork Salmon River** (driving time: 8 hours)

A premier wilderness float trip of 100 miles. Permits are required and tough to get. Lots of challenging rapids and fine camping, usually late June through August. Hot springs. Class IV.

**Main Salmon River** (driving time: 8 hours)

An 80 mile wilderness float. Permits required and many people are turned away. Big water, some good rapids and long flat sections. Good camping. Not very wilderness-like with jet boats and ranches along the way. The shuttle takes nearly 2 days if you do it yourself. Can be combined with the Middle Fork trip. Not good at high water, but can be run in early spring without a permit, or late fall. Class IV.

**Lower Salmon River** (driving time: 2 1/2 hours)

A non-permit section of river with good rapids, great camping, and good swimming. Best at low water levels. A couple of access points, one is the trip from Whitebird, ID, to Heller Bar, is 70 miles, and takes about 4 days. Long flat pools on the Snake River below make this harder work on the last day, but the shuttle is relatively straightforward. Class IV, although I would classify it as an intermediate run, with proper scouting.

**Selway River** (driving time: 7 hours)

A 40 mile stretch of advanced water, reached by road from Darby, MT. Many technical rapids, wilderness isolation, and very difficult at high flows. Permit required and almost impossible to get. Long shuttle. Class IV+.

**Hells Canyon, Snake River** (driving time: 4 to 6 hours)

Another permit river, with some giant rapids, but also lots of flat water. The main trip is 30 miles from the Hells Canyon Dam to Pittsburgh landing. Another section you can run is from Pittsburgh landing to Heller bar which is about 40 miles of easier water (could possibly be open canoed). Camping is marginal because the dam prevents sandbars from forming and there is a nightly surge of high water which steals boats from camp. Can be good in late fall after the permit season ends. Class IV, but not many rapids.

**Owyhee River** (driving time: 8 hours)

A beautiful intermediate wilderness run in SE Oregon. No permits required, yet. 65 mile trip through interesting rock canyons and desert country. Very shallow with a short April-May season, but can be run in March sometimes. The last day you have to cross the reservoir which can be tough with a wind. Class III+.

Inquire at the Outdoor Program Office for additional information on these different sections of the river can be found at:

Resources:

*American Whitewater* -<http://www.americanwhitewater.org/content/Welcome/view/>

Book: *Idaho Whitewater State*, written by Grant Amaral

Book: *Western Whitewater -From the Rockies to the Pacific*, Written by Jim Cassady, Bill Cross, Fayar Calhoun