

Boating on the Wallowa and Grande Ronde Rivers

The river corridor between Minam, Oregon, and Heller Bar, Washington, includes the lower ten miles of the Wallowa River and the lower 81 miles of the Grande Ronde river. Public lands in the river corridor are managed in part by the Bureau of Land Management, U.S. Forest Service, and the States of Oregon and Washington.

The “upper river” between Minam and Troy consists of evergreen forests and grasslands within a system of deep basalt canyons and steep ridges. Sections of the upper rivers have been designated by Congress as components of the National Wild and Scenic Rivers system in recognition of their unique natural character and outstanding resource values. The “middle river” parallels a country road through the remote community of Troy and surrounding ranches as the canyon gradually widens and forested lands yield to open, exposed ridges and rangelands. Below Boggan’s Oasis, the “lower river” is characterized by rocky, exposed, arid canyons containing the traces of ancient peoples and early homesteads amongst several active ranches. The river corridor is a complex ecosystem rich in unique natural features, spectacular scenery, and a variety of plant and animal life.

Each year the area receives thousands of visitors seeking the beauty and diverse recreation that the rivers offer. Where road and trail access is limited, well-prepared whitewater boaters access the river corridor using a variety of specialized watercraft. A typical river trip often begins at Minam, on the Wallowa River, and last two to three days, although shorter or longer trips are possible with proper planning. Other river access points include Wildcat Bridge, Mud Creek, Troy, Boggan’s Oasis, Shumaker Access, and Heller Bar.

Because the rivers are free-flowing, water level and river character can change dramatically with little or no warning. High, fast water conditions usually occur in the spring and early summer as warming temperatures and rainfall melt mountain snow. Shallow, slower conditions typically occur by late July and remain through the fall and winter months, with less water and more exposed rocks being common. Boaters are strongly advised to obtain up-to-date river conditions and weather information when planning their trip. Boaters wishing to avoid crowding are advised to plan their trip to avoid weekends and holidays between May and July.

Elevation ranges from 2,500 feet at Minam to 825 feet at Heller Bar on the Snake River. Average river gradient is 19 ft. per mile, and numerous rapids are common. Primary rapids are generally rated Class II-III (requiring technical maneuvering), but increase in difficulty as river flows rise or fall. Scouting of all rapids is advised. Because the inaccessible nature of the rivers makes search and rescue assistance difficult and time-consuming, boating parties should take every safety precaution and be prepared for the unexpected. Recommended

watercraft include high-quality inflatable rafts, catarafts, drift boats/dories, and river kayaks. Inexpensive rubber or vinyl rafts and float tubes may be dangerous and are not recommended. Canoes and sea kayaks are not recommended unless designed for whitewater use and operated by boaters with advanced skills.

Primitive river campsites are available on a first-come, first-serve basis. In keeping with the natural character of the river, most campsites are undeveloped and contain no water or garbage services, picnic tables, or restroom facilities. Because one campsite may receive hundreds of visitors during a single season, boaters are required to follow low-impact camping guidelines to minimize the traces of their visit. Firepan and portable toilet use, as well as packing out all garbage and treading lightly on vegetation, helps to keep the campsites clean and healthy for future river users. Bulletin boards at many access points are posted with current equipment requirements, detailed river information, seasonal fire restrictions, and other special notices.

Vehicle shuttle routes vary in length and conditions and may require good map reading skills to follow. Unpaved roads may not be passable to all vehicles at all times of year. Gasoline, food, and other services are not available in most rural areas. Travelers should be informed of current road conditions and be prepared in advance of their trip. Cellular phones may not operate properly in the deep canyons of the river corridor.

In 1987, federal and state land management agencies started a River Program to assist with the management of the river corridor. River employees make float trips throughout the year to fulfill administrative functions, perform various work projects, monitor river conditions and use, and provide information and assistance to visitors. The River Program staff will be glad to answer your questions and provide you with detailed river information.