

Pikes Peak River Runners

Idaho River and Snow (Main Salmon)

June 1998



By Christina King

This story starts in Vernal, Utah. Pete and I had just completed a three day river trip through the Gates of Lodore canyon on the Green river. The Green river rapids included Hell's Half Mile, Upper and Lower Disaster Falls, and Triplet Falls. Despite the intimidating names of the Green river rapids, our trip had been a delightful experience and we had all run the river safely. Pete and I said goodbye to fellow river runners and embarked on our way to the Middlefork and Main Salmon rivers in Idaho. Our Middlefork of the Salmon river permit launch date was May 29, 1998. Dave Medel, a friend from Kooskia Idaho, assured us that the winter had been dry. Dave predicted that the Boundary Creek road into the Middlefork of the Salmon river, would be clear of snow.

We had heard this prediction before and discovered the road blocked by late season snows. The last time the road was blocked by snow, we ended up running Marsh Creek, a tributary to the Middlefork, at flood stage. Very intimidating. The current flow was 5 feet. High but manageable. Dave, Pete, and I planned on running three self-bailing rafts. Three boats and three boatmen. Perfect. Everyone else we tried to recruit backed out because of the high water potential or other priorities. (Are there any other priorities?) We had previously run the Middlefork at 8.5 feet (extremely high water) and felt 5 feet was manageable.

We called the Middlefork Ranger office and the Idaho car shuttle company. The news looked grim. Fresh snow had fallen and the road opening was delayed. We were already in Vernal, so what was another 500 miles at this point. We had to see for ourselves. Sure enough, we got to Stanley, Idaho and attempted the 25 mile dirt road into Boundary Creek. The snow drifts were 3 feet deep.



Two trucks were already stuck and they had 9 shovels, 9 men and tow straps. We had a 12 foot trailer, no shovel, and one husband and wife team. The situation did not look promising. The trucks came back and said they found a worse section of snow/rock slide further down the road. They decided to camp on the road and shovel all night. The shuttle company was not sure that they could get our truck out, if we got it in. By the way, Dave now assured us from his warm home in Kooskia that he was not coming. We decided not to run Marsh Creek alone. At this point we gave up.

We looked at our options and decided to run the Main Salmon river. The elevation is much lower and the road was open. We bought food in Salmon, Idaho and drove to Corn Creek (the put-in). The Corn Creek put-in was strangely deserted. The river was high (8 feet) but not extreme. We unloaded the trailer and rigged up the boats. The ranger checked us out and off we went. Launching on the Main was a quiet affair with no other boats or people.

Our plan was to run a four day leisurely trip on the Main Salmon River. The first major rapids were Killum and Gunbarrel. The waves were enormous and fun. Later that afternoon we saw the first of only two groups on the river. We guessed that other boaters had been deterred by the high water. They were a friendly group from Nevada and asked if we wanted to camp with them. I think they were surprised to see just the two of us and our two boats. Pete and I thanked them for the hospitality but we politely declined the invitation.



We chose a quiet camp with a huge sandy beach. All day we enjoyed the empty river corridor. What a nice wilderness experience. We managed to see a small black bear scurry up a hillside while we were floating. Occasionally, we saw Big Horn sheep scattered on the canyon slopes licking the natural salt licks. The weather was unusually nice and we boated in warm comfort. Idaho can be notorious for cold weather and rain. On a previous 7 day Idaho river trip, we had experienced a wet trip. During that week long trip we had seen only 2 hours of sunshine and the rest of the time it snowed, rained, and hailed. We were having exceptionally nice weather and considered ourselves lucky.

The high water had drowned Salmon Falls rapid. Salmon Falls is a rapid that changes in difficulty with the water level. Low water levels make the rapid more difficult. Our second day led us to Barth Hotsprings where we enjoyed the best hotsprings on the river. River runners have plastered it with cement walls and have even outfitted the tub with a drain plug and brushes. Better than any conventional hot-tub with a gorgeous view of the river. Pete and I had this magnificent spot to ourselves for the afternoon.

Five Mile, Split Rock, Big Mallard and Elkhorn rapids finished out our day with large waves and holes.

Our last camp was at another lovely beach downriver. We made camp and set up our tent just in the nick of time. The weather came crashing down and we ran to our tent. We ate cereal for dinner and went to bed. For the next 16 hours it rained non-stop. Our 4 day trip was down to 3 days.



The river was flowing so fast that we made a

large number of miles every day without even trying. Chittam rapid was our last major rapid. High water makes this rapid very difficult. Imagine a cliff on river left with a sharp turn to the right. All of the water is charging the left wall with huge holes and waves on the left. The run requires breaking a large lateral wave on the right. By rowing backwards to break the lateral wave on the right, I was able to skirt the biggest of the holes. Our trip was winding down and we were glad to complete our journey safely. Every winter we plot our strategy to obtain an Idaho river permit. We love Idaho rivers and plan to be back next year.

