

Pikes Peak River Runners

Idaho Sun and Snow June 2001 Middle Fork of the Salmon river



By Christina King

Our Group:

Pete and Christina King
Jack and Wendy Schneider
Bill and Irene Cooke
Keith Fuqua
Beth Buller
Dave Medel
Tim Henry
Frank Tucker (Jack's uncle) and Toby Cook

Fire Island Camp, Day 1, May 31, Thursday (Flow 2.95 feet):

Launch day had finally arrived. Most of our group had just gotten off the Colorado River at Westwater Canyon after 2 fun-filled days in the sun. We were really looking forward to a fun Middle Fork of the Salmon river trip. The previous day had been hard work, rigging up the boats and sliding them down the ramp. Fortunately, the rangers had been helpful and kept all the other groups "sort of" organized and moving. The day dawned clear, sunny, and warm. Such a nice surprise. Sunscreen was liberally smeared on our exposed skin. After getting our ranger talk before launching, we started off down river at 11 am. Typical of our entire trips start time. (Early starts in Idaho are very cold.).

The water spigots at Boundary Creek were not working except for one. Several of us filled up water jugs and then the ranger's told us the water had not been tested yet. That night at camp we treated those water jugs with chlorine and had no problems the rest of the trip.

The first few river miles involved a lot of rowing in technical rocky water. The river was running at 2.95 feet on the river flow gauge. Idaho had a poor snowpack year (40% of normal) and the peak runoff was low in comparison to previous years. We expected a technical run, especially the first 25 miles, and we got it.



We got a good look at Murphy's Hole (a high-water hazard), but it looked quite insignificant at this level. Sulfur Slide rapid was very rocky. Ramshorn rapid was next, giving us a hint that Velvet Falls was coming up. I slowed down drastically in the left eddy right above the Falls and dropped lightly down the left tongue of the rapid. Such a relief to stay away from the giant boat-eating hole in the middle. We stopped for lunch at the Trail Flat hot springs and realized that on hot sunny days the hot springs is almost too hot! That tells you how many sunny days we have had at hot springs on this river (not many)!



Chigger, the Schneider's dog, loved the hot springs. The Middle Fork allows dogs on the river expecting of course that owners pick up their poop. Chigger even followed regulations by urinating in the river, as per Sarah's ranger people rules. Powerhouse rapids were also rocky. Everyone was tired after our first day rowing and grateful to pull into Fire Island (our first camp on the Middle Fork). We played ["The Weakest Link" \(Idaho version\)](#) in camp that

night while watching deer wander around our camp. Everyone went to bed early after a dinner of grilled hamburgers and entertainment. Wendy and Pete shared the "semi-valuable" prize of a giant bag of M&M's. Wendy rowed her own boat (on the entire trip) for the first time and was relieved that she had run Velvet Falls perfectly. Our group waited to walk up to Sheepeater hot springs in the morning because it was too warm at night.

Pungo Camp, Day 2, June 1, Friday (Flow 2.72 feet):

Most of our group hiked up (0.8 miles) to Sheepeater hot springs for an early morning soak. The weather was so nice that Frank and Toby pumped up the "duckies" (inflatable kayaks) and paddled today. Frank had so many clothes on (wetsuit, paddle jacket and lifejacket) that he said; "I can't bend over to pick up my paddle". Toby asked, "Can anyone see my feet?" They were nervous and after lunch at Dolly Lake we ran Pistol Creek rapid. The duckier's went over the top rocks on the right but Frank said a quick prayer and they were



delivered upright and safe on the bottom end of Pistol Creek rapid. We saw the first evidence of the recent 2000 forest fires just above Pistol Creek. In fact, Pistol Creek was off limits for camping due to the many unstable burned snags. The devastation was quite extensive from here to Indian Creek. I will miss Pistol, one of my favorite camps on any river in the west. We picked up more fresh water at Indian Creek guard station and floated into Pungo Creek to camp that night. (By the way, Pungo means a “pet or horse” in Shoshone.) Jack and Wendy cooked up a great Italian dinner with interesting pasta. Christina, “Looked like figure 8’s to me”. They even brought a small CD player and we had “Mob” music playing in the background during dinner.

Upper Jackass camp, Day 3, June 2, Saturday (Flow 2.6 feet):

The good weather continued, and we all commented on the hot winds last night. We were awakened by helicopters ferrying large construction equipment and even a golf cart into Pistol Creek and Airplane camps (private ranches destroyed by 2000 fires). Bill and Irene cooked up yummy eggs benedict and some of us hiked up the hill to the abandoned fluorspar mine and looked for the old Indian pit house depressions.

The duckiers elected to boat again and ran left at Marble Creek rapids. Toby almost tipped in his ducky but managed a last-minute brace and righted himself. We ate lunch at Sunflower hot springs, but Chigger had to stay in the boat. Poison ivy was everywhere and we did not want to get it from her. Chigger did enjoy a spray in the hot water Sunflower shower. We floated by the Middle Fork Lodge, which looked quiet as usual but well-taken care of. The mini-hydroelectric power plant was cranking out electricity for the ranch using waterpower.



We passed Hood ranch without visiting the hot springs. The weather was too warm (can you believe it) and Hood ranch hot springs are ridiculously hot (almost burning). We all snuck Upper Jackass rapid on the right to avoid the pour-over rock on the left. Our camp was just below the rapid on the right. Keith replaced his floor pressure relief valve which became clogged (and was leaking air). Wendy is having the same problem. Pete and I carry spares because we have also had this problem. They seem to last about 4 years or so, then need replacing, which is easy if you have the part. Pete’s \$20 part is up on the auction block for \$200. No takers yet.



After a tasty Bratwurst (German) dinner, tonight's entertainment is "Pin the Tail on the Jackass". Semi-valuable prizes were a tattoo that said, "Perfect" (Frank) and a fart whistle (Tim). Tim blew requests on his fart whistle; I am NOT supplying story details for this activity (use your imagination). The toilet (groover) was placed high above camp tonight and Pete and Bill had way too much fun during its placement. Everyone has been warned to plan well in advance if you must use the groover.

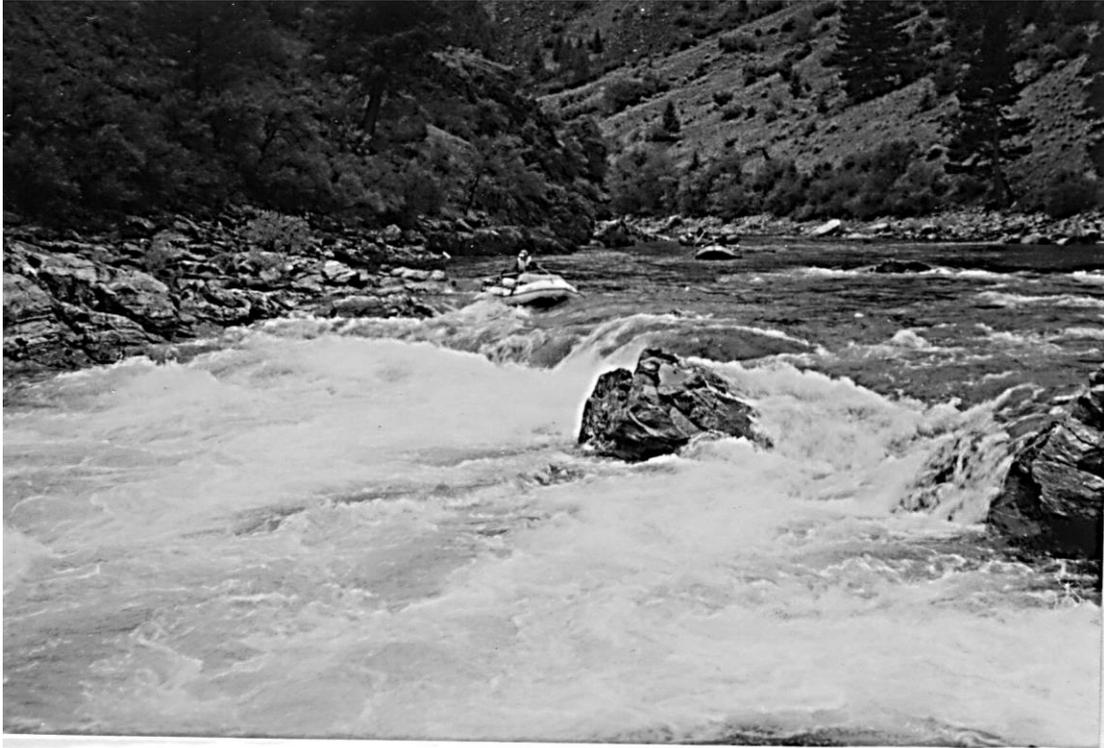
Big Loon camp, Day 4, June 3, Sunday (Flow 2.62 feet):

About 2 am, our good weather disappeared. Rain, snow, and cold weather have arrived. The snowline dropped very low. We wake up to frigid temperatures and wear our warm clothes. We took our time launching and had to pack up wet tents in the rain. Toby bagged his ducky and Frank said he would continue paddling. We made a brief stop to look at pictographs at Cameron creek and put on more clothes. Our motto was Big Loon by Noon (did not happen). On our way to camp, every boat stopped to pick up driftwood for a campfire. We quickly pushed to Big Loon camp in the rain and hail. After setting up our wet tents and kitchen tarps we hiked up to soak in the hot springs for a long time. The weather slowed to a sprinkle, but it did not bother us while we soaked in the best hot springs on the river. Keith and Beth cooked a great dinner of Schezwan chicken, and we ate a warm spicy dinner under dry tarps with a roaring campfire. It started raining hard again at 11 PM and continued hard all night.



Driftwood camp, Day 5, June 4, Monday (Flow 2.63 feet):

The last of the duckyies were rolled up today. It is very cold and rainy. None of us were motivated to walk up to the Big Loon hot springs for another warm soak. It was too cold and rainy. The last thing anyone wanted to do was get wet even if it was hot water. The warm Eggs Idaho and dutch oven coffee cake hit the spot for breakfast. A group of commercial boatmen pulled in early to try to pick up their fly-in passengers but did not have any luck until late that day. The planes were not flying. Big Loon is a private ranch with a short backcountry landing strip for exceedingly small planes. We gave the boatmen the rest of our breakfast and firewood to help them warm up. We wore all our warmest river clothes. Jack wrapped Chigger in a plastic garbage bag to help her keep drier and warmer. We look like quite a motley crew as we left Big Loon.



Tappan Falls was the first rapid of the day. I popped my oar as I dropped into the rapid and almost got knocked out of my boat while clipping it back in. Everyone else had great runs. Mine was ugly but I got through okay, guess that is what is important. Chigger got popped into the air about a foot when Jack dropped into the falls. We stopped for a very cold lunch at Camas Creek.



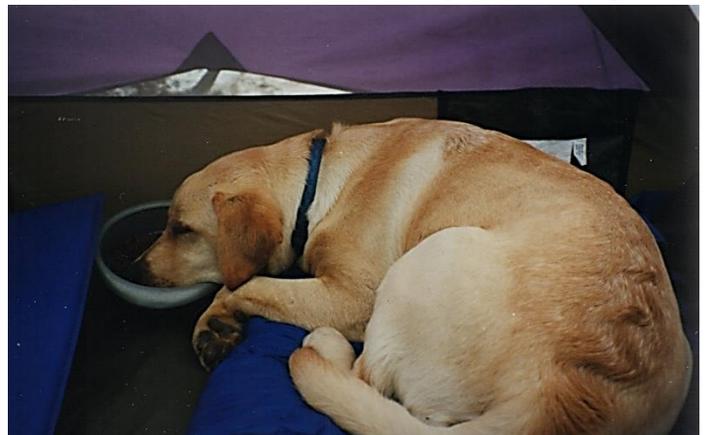
We made another stop at Flying B ranch and were informed that a private group ahead of us had wrapped a boat in Haystack rapid and blocked the river. Flying B also had some recent 2000 fire damage and we waited for the stuck group to clear out of Haystack. We floated down to Haystack and sure enough they were still there. Two people

perched on a rock with their NRS raft completely under water. They had rope lines attached and were running a Z-drag with the river rangers helping them. One of the boaters signaled us to take aim and “shoot”



the raft as we floated by on the right. They had run the rapid right and tried to scoot left around a large boulder and did not make it. We said no to the “shooting the raft tube” idea. I can just imagine headlines reading, “Rafters shoot each other on the Middle Fork”. Besides, we did not have any guns. Their purpose was to deflate a tube to allow the boat to slide off the rock. What a nutty idea! We decided to make the right side run after figuring out that they did not need any of our help. My stomach was fluttering (or festering as Pete says) since I had flipped in this same rapid two years ago. We later heard that the wrapped boat had been there since 1 PM and ended up getting off the rock 6 hours later. We saw their boat (which was fine) the next day. I sure felt sorry for them. At least it all ended well.

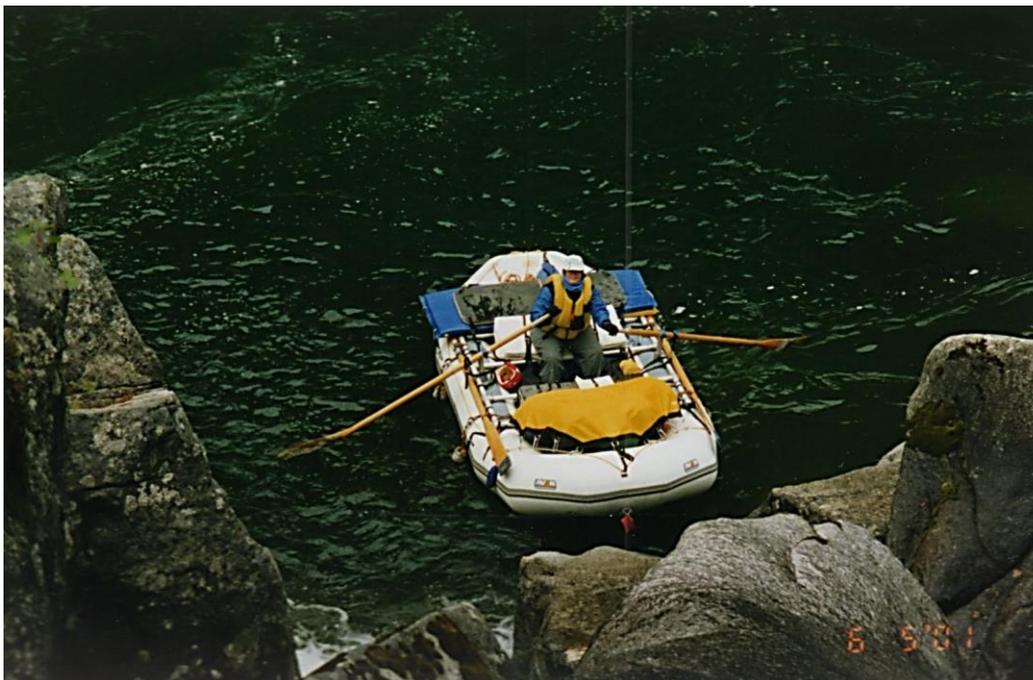
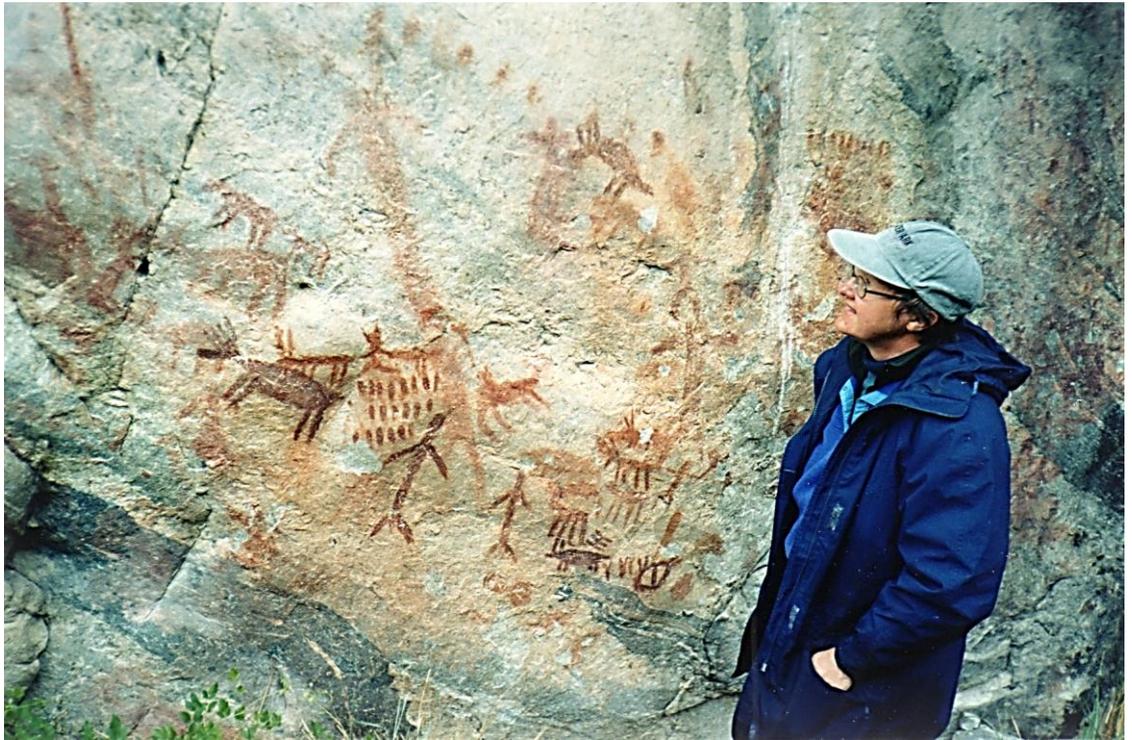
We floated through Jack Creek rapids and enjoyed the wave trains. We pulled into camp late after a 23-mile day (full of adventure) and tried to dry out our wet tents. The skies are trying to clear, and rain has dwindled. The temperature is dropping. Chigger fell



asleep with her head in her food bowl. We almost fell asleep in our dinner plates during Dave and Tim's Mexican dutch oven meal.

Otter camp, Day 6, June 5, Monday (Flow 2.63 feet):

Today is our pictograph day. We awoke to partly cloudy skies and some sun. We started with sunscreen and high hopes, but the weather deteriorated. Soon we had all our warm clothes back on. While we were packing up to leave camp, a string of 30 pack horses with cowboys came through our camp along the Middle Fork trail. We took pictures of them and they took pictures of us.



Our first pictograph stop was at Rattlesnake cave and then we enjoyed spectacular Waterfall Creek. The falls were thunderous and covered me in the eddy below with a fine cold mist. Usually in early spring the pack bridge will be covered with whitewater from the creek. Lunch was at Elk Bar where we enjoyed the sandy beach. We stopped to hike up at Veil Falls and see more pictographs. Redside and Weber rapids were easy pool and drop rapids at this level. We made sure to hug

the left wall at Lower Cliffside rapids to stay away from the holes and boulders on the right.

We had a dangerous mishap while stopping at Stoddard creek pictographs. Bill tried to eddy out and Irene jumped ashore to hold the raft. The raft line got wrapped around Irene's leg and started to drag her in the river. Pete alerted us to the situation and yelled cut the rope as he floated by. Keith quickly scampered over the boulders on shore and cut the line around Irene's leg. Good thing Keith and Pete reacted so quickly! I was looking upriver at the rest of our group coming in and would not have noticed if Pete were not yelling. All was okay and we walked up to the most spectacular pictographs we have seen yet. We floated down to Otter Bar camp and quickly set up our tents to beat the rain, again.... Keith and Dave have been the kitchen tarp guru's and have made every camp nice and dry (under the tarps that is). Toby and Frank cooked a nice brisket for dinner, and we looked for otters but did not see any. In fact, we noticed an utter lack of wildlife on this trip, compared to other trips. We wondered if the wildfires of 2000, changed the sheep, deer, etc.... territory habits.

Cache Bar takeout, Day 7, June 6, Tuesday (Flow 2.62 feet):

Partly cloudy with rain, off and on throughout the day. We packed up the tents and gear (very wet). Rubber rapid was an easy drop and Hancock rapid was long and rocky. Devils Tooth, House Rock, and Jump Off rapids all blended together. We threaded the boats through tight boulder choked channels and drops. We reached the confluence early and noticed that the Main Salmon river looked low (unusual for this time of year) and siltier (typical) than the Middle Fork. We were the first group to the takeout and had it all by ourselves. We de-rigged all the boats quickly and stopped at the SCAT machine on the way out. We were way too excited about the cleanliness and efficiency of the (human waste sanitizing system). The SCAT machine is like a large high powered dishwashing machine that cleans and sanitizes our groovers. I wish other rivers in the West (such as Fruita and Split Mountain) used this kind of system. It really makes disposing and cleaning of 12 people's waste (for 7 days) more civilized.

On the road out, we saw plenty of wildlife (big horn sheep, elk, blue herons, and golden eagle). Guess you must reach civilization to see wildlife. We had a late lunch at the North Fork café and split our separate ways. A wonderful return from the "River of No Return".



The Middle Fork of the Salmon is a great multi-day river trip. Private permits are hard to come by, but do not give up. About 10,000 people a year (private and commercial) are lucky enough to travel down this river canyon and hopefully future boaters will continue to appreciate this special wilderness trip. The hot springs, scenery and rapids make this a great Western river experience.



