Days of solitude
Enjoy a river trek on the North Fork of the John Day River

1/10 – Looking across the North Fork from our hike. (Paul Hoobyar)

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We were on the second day of our four-day float down the North Fork of the John Day River when we heard a shrieking “honk” and saw a Canada goose running through the tall grass, its wings raised over its body in a fixed “V.”

The goose splashed into the river with enough speed that it water-skied across the surface toward us, its shrill honk piercing the morning’s tranquility. We thought it was attacking us, but then we saw a golden eagle dive-bombing the tall grass on the bank beyond her. Within seconds, two goslings scampered down to the water and joined their mother as the eagle made repeated dives with its talons armed. The mother led her brood away from the bank and ferried them across the river while the eagle perched on a basalt outcropping; its eyes locked on the swimmers.

The gander and her goslings swam downstream along the opposite bank, with the mother continuing to honk and bark in protest. Unlike the gosling nurseries in Alton Baker Park this spring, where scores of furry juveniles are corralled by platoons of adults, that lone goose and her two progeny were left to fend for themselves in the isolated John Day Wilderness.

The North Fork of the John Day River offers a float in Oregon that is unparalleled in its remoteness and solitude. This waterborne treat has been elusive for the past decade, however, because of the decadelong drought that limited the boating season to April or early May — a time of year that hasn’t had much appeal given the risk of inclement weather and the river’s ice-cold temperatures. But this winter’s heavy snowfall made running the North Fork in late spring an option that was too good to pass up.

“How many days are you planning to be on the river?” Butch, our shuttle driver in Dale asked when we stopped by to finalize logistics.

When I said that depended on the weather, since we’d seen a report which showed a chance of showers likely in the next four days, he replied, “You know ... meteorologists are the only people who can be wrong 90 percent of the time and still keep their jobs, right?”
He pointed to the TV in the General Store. A local weather station posted sunny skies for the next week to underscore his point.

“OK,” I said, “we’ll make it a four-day trip, then.”

When we found the single lane Forest Service dirt road that gave access to the river just north of Dale, my wife and I were giddy. The weather was an unseasonable 80 degrees, the river level was more than 2,700 cubic feet per second — a rarity for late May — and we were the only party at the boat ramp that morning.

It had been five years since we’d done a one-boat, multi-day river trip. As I piled more gear into our drift boat, I kept recalculating how heavy the load would be. When yours is the only boat on a multi-day wilderness float, you load everything needed in that one boat — a cooler with food and ice, a table, the kitchen commissary, a tent and sleeping bags, the requisite portable toilet, five gallons of potable water, as well as safety and personal gear. And while discretionary, we seem to make room for a certain amount of wine and beer on our trips.

The five biggest rapids come early on the North Fork, so a boater doesn’t have a chance to warm up, or lighten the load by consuming some of the food and beverages before negotiating the rapids. I found myself repeatedly referring to the scant descriptions in our guidebook that first day. I kept trying to decipher the river’s landmarks as I looked for Grandstand rapids, the first named rapids, and one that the guidebook recommended scouting.

As I’ve gotten older, the first river trip of the season often entails some angst about how well my boating skills are holding up, or how soft my hands are.

And running a new river, one that neither of us had seen, along with the remoteness and the heaviness of our boat, added to my angst as we floated downstream that first morning.
After successfully running a couple of the Class III rapids, though, and maneuvering
the boat without mishap, my confidence began to return. I could spend more time
looking up to enjoy the scenery and beauty of the canyon, instead of keeping a close
eye on the whitewater ahead.

High volcanic plateaus from ancient lava flows hem in the North Fork canyon.
Striations of columnar basalt are exposed at different elevations above the river,
turning the surrounding buttes and peaks into structures reminiscent of ancient
temples and monasteries. And the green lushness of the grassy carpets between
the basalt ramparts this spring were eye candy, with patches of lupine, and wildflowers
highlighting the greenery with red and orange hues.

Winding out of the Blue Mountains, with peaks of more than 9,000 feet, the North
Fork’s water temperatures are bracing, and the lack of dams or other
impoundments mean that its flows are dependent on snow pack. At each camp, I
placed a marker stick at the lap line of the river — the highest point on shore where
the river splashed against the rocks. The following morning, I’d check to see if the
lap line had changed. The first two mornings, the stick I’d placed was no longer on
the lap line. Instead, it poked out of the water, which meant that the river came up
as the temperatures rose.

Our first day, the US Geological Service’s stream-flow gauge at Monument read a
little more than 2,700 cubic feet per second. On the second day, the flow increased
to 3,800 cfs, and on day three, it peaked at 4,500 cfs. So, instead of the river
dropping as the mercury climbed to 90 degrees, the flow increased — in late May
— a clue to just how big a snowpack last winter’s storms had deposited.

To some, a one-boat trip can sound like a lot of schlepping of gear and equipment:
setting up camp, breaking down camp; hauling all the gear out of the boat, only to
pack the boat again the next day. However, in this time of multi-tasking, of
constantly being bombarded by emails, texts, tweets, Snaps and other intrusions of
social media and modern society, it’s nice once in awhile to return to the basics of
living. Boiling water for dishes, washing dishes by hand and letting them air dry in
a net-mesh bag. Setting up a tent and sleeping bags as your domicile for the night.

Sure these can be tedious, monotonous tasks. But they can also become the simple
tasks of daily existence that slow our minds down, that de-rig us from the frenzied
pace of our Internet-cluttered lives.
At our second camp, as we watched the shadows migrate across the canyon with the sun’s march toward the western ridge, Gretchen said, “It’s good to slow down once in awhile.”

“Yes,” I replied as I sipped a gin and tonic.

The river’s flow was so high that we spent only two or three hours floating each day. We decided to go for a hike one afternoon after we’d set up camp.

We climbed out of the canyon and up on the plateau for views of the surrounding wilderness that encompassed miles of open country and endless plains of ancient lava flows. The Blue Mountains cover approximately 4,000 square miles in Eastern Oregon and southeastern Washington, and at 400 million years of age, the Blues are some of the oldest geologic formations in Oregon. Geologists call the Blues a “terrane,” which is a play on the word “terrain” and refers to how plate tectonics have migrated these mountains like checkers across a continental checkerboard.

We had a leisure morning in camp on our third day — another advantage of a one-boat trip: it’s easy to make last-minute decisions about when to break camp, or how many miles to float on a given day. Reading and nurturing a second cup of coffee that morning, instead of loading the boat right after breakfast, underscored our feeling of being on a true vacation.

On our last morning, my gauging stick was high and dry about two feet from the lap line, which meant the river was finally dropping. But by then the weather had changed: a cloud ceiling threatened rain, and the thermometer had dropped to the mid-60s.

As we floated to Monument, the wind couldn’t make up its mind what it wanted to do that final morning. One minute it blew hard upstream, carrying the hint of rain. Ten minutes later it was kicking us downstream. That back and forth went on all morning, with darkening clouds and storm cells unfurling curtains of rain all around us. When we reached the take-out in Monument, we were ready to pack up and head home as a light sprinkle began falling.