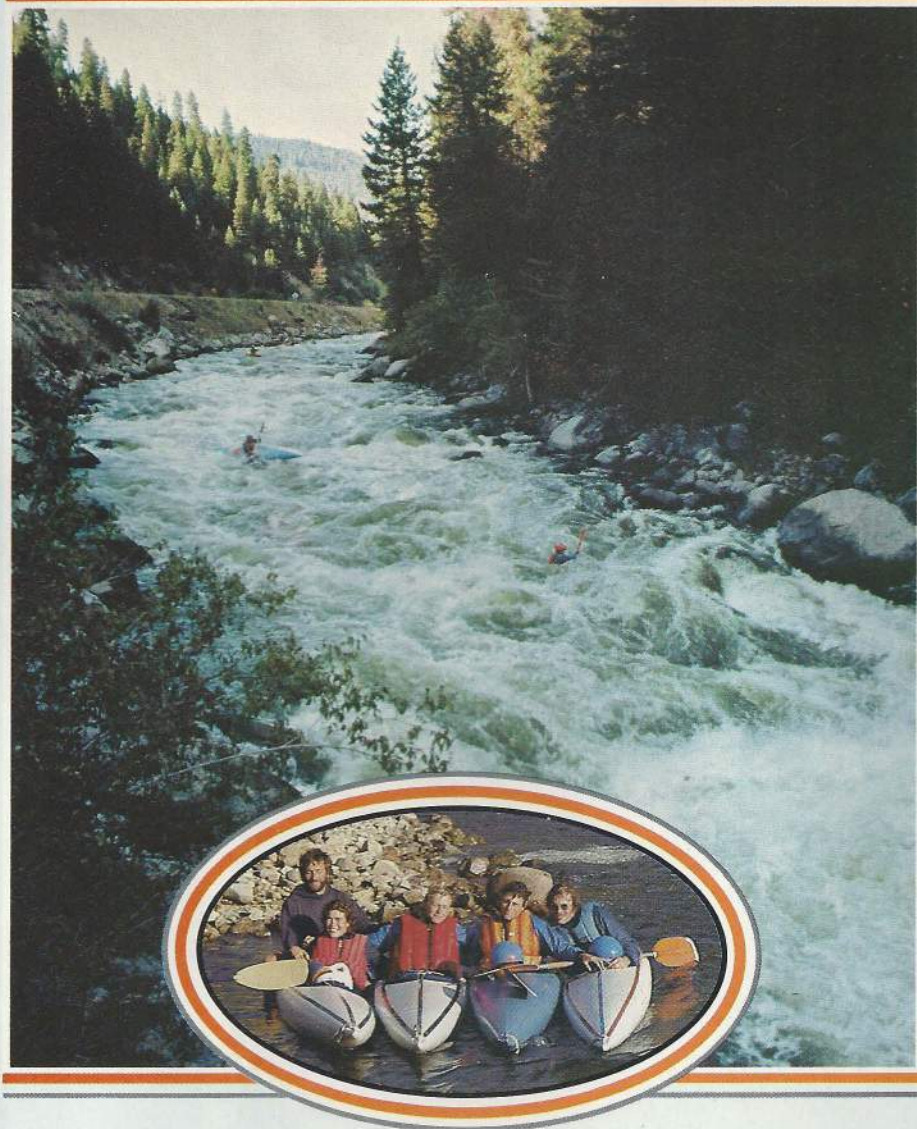


Taking the Payette Plunge



A wild ride down 14 miles of some of the baddest whitewater in the world

Two years ago, author Roderick Nash published a book called *The Big Drops*, profiles of what he felt were the ten most legendary rapids in the West. Nash mentioned the North Fork of Idaho's Payette River, but only in the introduction. The North Fork did not meet his criteria of selection, he explained, because the river fit into the category of whitewater "so difficult that it had seldom if ever been run successfully, and then only with extensive portaging, lining, and specialized shore-based rescue equipment." Rapids like the

ones on the North Fork, Nash wrote, "are left for bolder boatmen of the future whose equipment and technique may well surpass our own by a proportion equal to our distance from the nineteenth-century river explorers."

Here are the boatmen (and woman) of the future: John Wasson, Kathy Blau, Rick Fernald, Don Banducci, and Paul Hoobyar (left to right, preceding page inset). Last year, after all of them tried out sections of the river, Banducci, Fernald, and Hoobyar became the first kayakers to run the entire 14-mile stretch of the Payette between Smith's Ferry and Banks, Idaho, during high water. That part of the river is an extremely narrow funnel through which 2,250 cubic feet of water—nearly 68 tons—roared by every second. Without question, it was some of the whitest water in North America—possibly on earth.



Huge boulders were dumped into the already narrow riverbed years ago during construction of the highway on one side of the river and a branch line of the Union Pacific Railroad on the other (preceding page). In spots the banks narrow from 40 yards apart to only 20, and the effect on the river is like squeezing a bar of wet soap. The water rises and falls in long lines of standing waves, some as high as eight feet. In the worst set of rapids, Jacob's Ladder, Wasson rolled over, lost his paddle, and had to bail out of his kayak. He injured his back and leg and decided to join Blau on the highway as a spotter. Banducci, who avoided the treacherous rocks in Disneyland (above), was knocked unconscious in Jacob's Ladder, but after coming to and resting, he finished the run with Fernald and Hoobyar.

