

# Splish-splash dash down the mighty Rogue

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**By Joel Gorthy**

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The McKenzie, North Umpqua, Deschutes and other waterways are rife with riffles and rapids a bit closer to Eugene, but Southern Oregon's legendary Rogue River has a pull as strong as the hydraulics that churn deep in its stone-walled channels.

The Rogue National Wild and Scenic River is one of the West's most popular for summer recreation, and a destination for whitewater paddlers of all skill levels. Advanced kayakers come to conquer Class III, IV and even V rapids in the federally protected, permit-only Wild Rogue passageway, and many novices come to get their feet wet on guided trips through the Hellgate Recreation Area — easily accessible starting 7 miles west of Grants Pass — which offers 27 river miles of class I-II rapids and smooth but fast-moving waters; the awesomely imposing sheer cliffs of Hellgate Canyon; 11 boat ramps; four campgrounds; and countless places to swim, fish, picnic, watch wildlife and more.

It's a half-day guided float, which starts with lunch at the historic Morrison's Rogue River Lodge in Merlin (a 2½-hour drive from Eugene via I-5 Exit 61), that has lured a small band of far-flung travelers for a splash of adventure on a sultry August day.

## **Fire can't smoke out this fun**

On this early afternoon, some high clouds, humidity and slightly cooler temperatures — as in, just barely triple digits — are good news for thousands of wildland firefighters as they make slow progress against several Rogue Valley blazes.

The paddlers embarking this day from Morrison's are among the first to venture down the river after several weeks of intense fire activity, during which thick smoke reduced visibility (and recreational activity) to almost zero on some days.

Smoke continues to paint the sky and cast its acrid smell across the landscape today, but it doesn't dampen the excitement of those gathered at water's edge below the lodge.

With the well-honed wit of someone who has done this hundreds of times, guide Andrew Pratt of Rogue River Raft Trips Inc., based at Morrison's, has some fun as he goes over water safety tips with his group.

"Now, the reason we have these orange life jackets is to make it easier for us to find you in the water, not to keep you safe," he begins.

"That was a joke. ... Wow, tough crowd!" he adds after a silent pause. "The flotation is to keep you safe," he assures. "If you do find yourself out of your boat during a rapid, you want to remember that your nose and your toes should be in the air, but your feet downstream. That way, if you do hit something, your feet hit and not your head.

"If you have any questions about the rapids when we're on the water, please let me know. If I don't know the answer, I'll just make it up and make it sound good," he quips — this time to a round of laughs.

"OK, everybody make sure your life jackets are on and let's load in the boats!"

## **Sweet stretch of river**

Today's trip — a 7-mile float to Argo Boat Launch — treats paddlers to abundant natural beauty. When it's not churned to white, the river is a blue-green mirror that reflects a simple but ruggedly beautiful landscape of stone canyons, mixed forests and scrubby grasslands.

Wildlife is everywhere. The group spies bald eagles, hawks, great blue herons, great egrets, Canada geese and a variety of ducks, plus turtles, a couple of deer and a river otter. Pratt says it's not uncommon to see black bears, beavers and more along the way, too.

Long languid bands of water offer plenty of time for savoring the sights, but are interrupted by enough rapid action to keep things exciting. This stretch of river offers some of the best whitewater outside of the wilderness area, including Galice Chutes, Widowmaker and Argo (which are rated only Class II because they are not very technically challenging — and yet their rolling waves offer big fun).

Most members of today's group paddle solo in inflatable kayaks, while a couple ride in the large raft piloted by Pratt. For those in kayaks, including siblings Ian and Alesia Halliday from Florida, the day is spent following Pratt's lead through larger rapids, then leisurely playing in riffles and eddies.

A couple of kayakers get dumped in rapids after becoming hung up on rocks or hitting large waves askew rather than head-on, but they heed Pratt's earlier advice and float safely feet-first downstream to reunite with their boats. Pratt uses these opportunities to show those on the raft how to "rescue" people from the water using their life jacket straps.

As the day goes on, playful skirmishes break out as boaters in this and other groups soak each other with hand-pump water cannons.

Despite this and periodic whitewater spray, everyone eventually gets hot enough to jump in the river and cool down while bobbing alongside the boats.

After a little more than four hours, the ride comes to an end. Boaters stretch their legs and gather their gear as kayaks and rafts are hauled onto a trailer at the rocky Argo beach.

## **The Rogue's unique allure**

On the van ride back to the lodge, today's floaters talk about where they're from and what brought them here. The Hallidays, used to plenty of sun and surf back in Florida, marvel at how different and diverse the landscape is in this part of the West, where they're on a summer trek with their dad through Oregon and California.

"A lot of people come from areas where they just don't have rivers like this," Pratt says, and notes that the bulk of customers on guided Rogue whitewater trips — both day floats and overnight excursions along the lower wilderness

stretches of the river — come from Southern California, the East Coast or foreign countries.

Bill and Eugenia Kronert, from San Diego, say they spent every vacation for 10 years searching the West for a place to retire.

The Kronerts discovered the Rogue Valley thanks in part to Bill's fascination with John Wayne movies and his desire to visit Hellgate Canyon and other nearby locations where "Rooster Cogburn" was filmed.

"We had driven all through Oregon and looked around; we wanted a place with hot summers, pine trees, and a river ... and where it doesn't rain all the time," Kronert says.

After several more trips to Grants Pass and whitewater outings on the Rogue, Kronert says, "we finally decided this is where we're going to retire. It's a great place."

Add two more to the list of people caught in the Rogue's powerful pull.

## Going Rogue

Online BLM resources include information about the Rogue National Wild and Scenic River, with sections on the Hellgate Recreation Area, permits for the wilderness area, the free Rogue River Float Guide, and more: <http://rgne.ws/1tyvXOF>

Morrison's Rogue River Lodge and Rogue River Raft Trips Inc.: 800-826-1963; [morrisonsslodge.com](http://morrisonsslodge.com), [rogueriverraft.com](http://rogueriverraft.com)

Other outfitters include Noah's ([noahsrafting.com](http://noahsrafting.com)), Momentum River Expeditions ([momentumriverexpeditions.com](http://momentumriverexpeditions.com)), Orange Torpedo ([orangetorpedo.com](http://orangetorpedo.com)) and Rogue Wilderness Adventures ([wildrogue.com](http://wildrogue.com)).

Smullin Visitor Center: 14335 Galice Road, Merlin; 541-479-3735 (open 7 p.m. to 3 p.m. daily, May 5-Oct. 15)

Jetboat excursions are another popular way to ride the Rogue. Hellgate Jetboat Excursions ([hellgate.com](http://hellgate.com)) go downriver from Grants Pass; Jerry's Rogue Jets ([roguejets.com](http://roguejets.com)) go upriver from Gold Beach.







*Guide Andrew Pratt of Rogue River Raft Trips positions his boat at the top of a rapid not far from Morrison's Rogue River Lodge. (Collin Andrew/The Register-Guard)*







*Ian Halliday, on vacation from Florida, negotiates his kayak through a set of Class II rapids within the Hellgate Recreation Area on the Rogue River. (Collin Andrew/The Register-Guard)*





*Abundant wildlife is just one of the Rogue River's attractions. (Collin Andrew/The Register-Guard)*







*A Rogue River rafter aims a stream of water from a water gun at a pair of nearby kayakers. (Collin Andrew/The Register-Guard)*





*Bill Kronert, at front, and other kayakers pass between rugged canyon walls on a slower-moving part of the river, where opportunities abound to view wildlife and scenery. (Collin Andrew/The Register-Guard)*







*Jetboat excursions on the Rogue depart from Grants Pass and Gold Beach. (Collin Andrew/The Register-Guard)*



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