

# National Geographic

## America's Deepest Canyon

BY: JEFF RENNICKE

ALONG THE OREGON-IDAHO BORDER, THE SNAKE RIVER CARVES OUT A CHASM DEEPER THAN THE GRAND CANYON. YET MANY AMERICANS DON'T KNOW ABOUT THE CANYON NAMED HELLS.

In a moment it will be raining. Storm clouds, dark and steep as canyon walls, are moving quickly downriver. The wind, the smell of wet air, the distant forks of lightning, all speak of rain, and soon. Yet even when the first drops splatter around us, no one moves toward cover. Ric Bailey, Curtis Chang, and David Sears, all boatmen for Northwest Dories, and a few others are sitting in the boats tied up at Salt Creek. Soon we will make camp back in among the trees. For now we just sit, talking quietly about the river, about the canyon and the rapids we ran today, and about how we are shortly going to get very, very wet.

There are few places in the world where even an impending downpour is not enough to send people scurrying for cover. Hells Canyon of the Snake River is such a place. Little known and remote, the canyon is difficult to get to and to get around in. So once in its midst, you are reluctant to look away even for a moment, fearful you may miss something -- a full moon teetering for just an instant on the rim, the quick blur of fur that says "cougar" in the cliffs, the faint shapes of ancient rock art. Or the pounce of a thunderstorm about to soak you to the skin. In Hells Canyon \* is best to keep your eyes open.

Beginning where the Snake River makes an oxbow bend near Homestead Oregon, and ending just south of Lewiston, Idaho the 120 miles of Hells Canyon make up perhaps the most dramatic state border in America, separating Oregon and Idaho. From above, the canyon resembles a harsh gash in the Columbia Plateau, its rim fringed with trees that spill down the side creeks but give way farther below to high temperatures and lack of water. The canyon's heart is almost barren, a place of space and light and heat.

Even human life is scarce. A few archaeological sites dating back as far as 7,000 years are scattered in the canyon. The Nez Perce wintered here until 1877, when a force of 2,000 U. S. Cavalry drove out the 400 Indians in a sad chapter of canyon history -- the start of a chase that ended four months and a thousand miles later with the famous "I will fight no more forever" proclamation of Chief Joseph. By the early 1900's settlers had carved out homesteads, betting on the coming of roads, the gathering of rain clouds, and a little luck. None came. By 1918 just five percent of the original homesteaders were hanging on. Today, few working ranches remain in the canyon -- the Flying H with its 19 miles of telephone line, hand strung for a lonely ranch wife;

Garden Creek Ranch, now owned by the Nature Conservancy. A U. S. Forest Service museum at Kirkwood Ranch, complete with "the first bathtub in Hells Canyon," pays homage to those early, dusty days.

When the dust settled, the wilderness flowed back into Hells Canyon. Today, the canyon is managed by the U. S. Forest Service as part of Hells Canyon National Recreation Area (NRA). At 652,488 acres, it is the second-largest NRA in the lower 48 states, smaller only than Idaho's Sawtooth NRA. It includes parts of three national forests, a mountain range, three rivers in the national Wild and Scenic Rivers system, and the 213,993-acre Hells Canyon Wilderness. But the heart of the NRA is Hells Canyon itself. True to its name, Hells Canyon is a difficult and dramatic landscape. Summer temperatures often exceed 100 ° F. The river is strewn with rapids. Cliffs in places are sheer for hundreds of feet. Rattlesnakes and cactuses live among the rocks.

Over 75 percent of the NRA remains roadless. Not a single bridge crosses the river for 106 miles -- the longest unspanned section of the Snake River. Almost no paved roads reach the river. Access to some of the most spectacular overlooks is by dirt roads rutted enough to rattle teeth. To circle the canyon entirely on pavement is a trip of 400 miles, with no glimpses of the canyon proper. It is an area possessed of "less than Cadillac access," as one visitor put it. "It's not the kind of place you can go exploring by motor home," says Ed Cole, area ranger with the Forest Service.

The unprepared may also end up perplexed. Take the tourist who pulled his boat behind the family station wagon up the tortuous 24-mile Hat Point Road and then, pointing to his gas-station road map, demanded to be shown to the boat launch. An honest mistake -- on some maps Hat Point does look near enough to the river for a boat ramp. But it would be a steep one. At Hat Point the Snake River is 5,632 feet below the canyon rim.

That kind of momentary loss of perspective can be forgiven at Hells Canyon. This is, after all, the deepest river-carved chasm in North America. Hat Point is the deepest section on the Oregon side. But even that is dwarfed by the 8,043-foot drop to the river from He Devil Peak in Idaho's Seven Devils Mountains, on the east rim. By comparison, the Grand Canyon is 6,100 feet deep at Point Imperial. Whole eastern mountain ranges could be hidden in Hells Canyon. Six Empire State Buildings, 47 Niagara Falls would not peek out the top. Step to the rim and all the sense of scale you brought here scatters like so many shards of glass. I know; it happened to me.

'You WON'T BELIEVE IT WHEN WE GET THERE,' Ric Bailey is saying on the drive to Windy Saddle trailhead on the east rim. Bailey, an ex-logger, ex-trucker turned environmentalist, is a river boatman and head of the Hells Canyon Preservation Council. He is dropping me at the trailhead, from where I will hike into the canyon and rejoin him three days later for a week-long trip on the river.

He's right, I can't believe it as we pull up -- mainly because I can't even see it. After a flight to Lewiston, Idaho, a three-hour drive Oh U. S. Route 95 through to Riggins, and another hour across a maze of Forest Roads, my first glimpse of the deepest canyon on the continent is by now cloaked in darkness. Yet I can feel the sense of space behind the blackness. For a long time after Ric drives away, I stare out at the dark canyon. The wind whistles through the granite teeth of the

Seven Devils, towering above me. I pitch my tent and sit weighing my expectations for the canyon and what it would hold. By daybreak, just a few steps down Forest Trail 124, I take all those expectations and toss them aside like so many pebbles.

In some canyons the trails drop as quickly as a stone kicked off the edge. But here a hike starts softly. The first steps into the canyon are not so much like falling out of the sky as stepping into \*. Partly, it is the trees -- ponderosa pine, Western larch, Douglas-fir, aspen -- that shade the upper trail, soften it. Partly, it is the canyon profile. Unlike canyons dizzy with their own sheerness, Hells Canyon descends quietly in waves of ridges and saddles with names like Dry Diggins, Freezeout Saddle, and Barton Heights: stair steps from the sky. "If the Grand Canyon is a cathedral," Ric Bailey is fond of saying, "Hells Canyon is a coliseum."

Another surprise is the snow. Mid-June in a place named for hell itself, and snow still clings to the rim. The forest floor is dotted with drifts, some back in the trees, some sprawled out across the trail, some peppered with pine needles and imprinted with the heart-shaped tracks of elk. Six thousand feet below, on the canyon floor, it is hot enough to burn your hands on the rocks.

This range of climates creates habitats for 332 species of wildlife in the NRA. You can watch one of the largest free-roaming elk herds in the country, or see a peregrine slicing the air. There are mountain goats, mountain lions, and hoary marmots. There are rattlesnakes, golden eagles, and 34 species of fish, including some sturgeon whose length can top ten feet. There have been recent unconfirmed reports of grizzly sightings within the NRA. In my binoculars I catch the silhouette of a bighorn sheep and glimpse a hawk disappearing like a feathered shadow.

My plan is to hike to my first sight of the river and camp there to savor the view. Drawn by the downhill grade and the beauty of the canyon, I let the miles stack up. Still no river. Once, watching for water, I step over a rattlesnake, brown as old rope, before I notice it in the grass. Sixteen miles down from the rim, just over a low rise in the trail at the mouth of Granite Creek, I suddenly find the Snake River practically at my feet -- my first view of it all day. The light has gone orange in the canyon. The water is a swipe of dark green, turning to jade where it braids itself into rapids. But I am too tired to appreciate the beauty. I splash my face in the river, pitch my tent, and crawl into it. Beneath the vanilla-scented breezes among the ponderosa pines, I slip easily into a deep, still sleep, the sleep of stones.

For two days I scramble south, upstream along the river. Few hikers pass this way. I have the canyon and the campsites to myself, all quiet save for an occasional boat and the sound of the river. One night the sky threatens a storm, so I weigh the stakes of my tent with stones. But sometime after midnight I wake instead to gentle winds, and I look out to see a sky filled with stars, sharp as the coyote howls that echo far off in the dark.

At Brush Creek, the sound of the river flowing grows into an avalanche of noise, almost loud enough to drown out the slightly off-key but heartfelt strains of "Happy Birthday" that echo in the dark. I have reached my meeting point with Ric Bailey -- the first night's camp of a white-water trip organized by Northwest Dories. The group of 12 includes Fran Short, a psychiatric nurse from Massachusetts who is celebrating her 54th birthday with a ride on the Snake River. By the light of the tactfully few candles, she sips a Sierra cup full of river-chilled rose and says,

"The worst word in the English language is 'boring.' I never want to be bored, particularly on my birthday." She has nothing to worry about this year.

Meadow edged with pines and firs, where Nez Perce Indians may once have camped, welcomes backcountry adventurers. In areas designated wilderness -- about a third of the Hells Canyon recreation area -- visitors may ride on horseback, hike, and camp, but they may not drive a car.

THE SNAKE, ONCE CALLED "THE CURSED MAD" BY French trappers, is the tenth longest river in the United States. Beginning in Yellowstone National Park and joining the Columbia River in southeastern Washington, the 1,056-mile river drains 109,000 square miles, an area larger than the state of Idaho, and carries two and a half times the volume of the Colorado. Its force is evident in the sculptured black rock of its cliffs, in driftwood jammed in cracks high above our heads, and in the roar of the rapids. In the 30-mile section we will run, the Snake bellows through 34 rapids rated from Class II to Class IV. (Rapids are rated I to VI, with the higher numbers denoting more difficulty.) Tomorrow we will begin our run of rapids -- Wild Sheep, Granite, and Waterspout. All night, a rumble of water echoes through our sleep.

Early the next morning, lead boatman David Sears, a college professor and a sculptor of bronzes, stands on his boat for a safety talk. "Life jackets should be buckled tight whenever you are even near the boats," he says. The boats, in this case, are dories. Even tethered in an eddy, a dory is a beautiful craft, its lines graceful and sleek. Nearly 18 feet long, swept up bow and stern, V-shaped hull and flat bottom, a dory rides on the water as easily as light reflecting off a canyon wall. Whether made of wood, fiberglass, or aluminum, dories are the perfect craft for big rivers. They can carry enough gear for a comfortable trip, and plenty of food, including the grilled salmon and steaks we had with birthday cake last night. A dory is quicker and more responsive than a rubber raft. "It's the difference between riding in a sports car and a '65 Buick," David Sears says.

Few boatmen bother to name a rubber raft, which is mostly air, but a dory is an individual creation with individual character, deserving of a name. The boats of Northwest Dories, beautiful as they are, carry bittersweet names: Music Temple, Hetch Hetchy, Condor -- places and creatures threatened or destroyed by humans. One, Copper Ledge Falls, is named for a rapid stilled by Hells Canyon Dam, just upstream.

It is another, still flowing rapid that has our attention this morning. An hour downstream from camp, at river mile 241.2, we discover that the river seems to drop off the edge of the world: Wild Sheep Rapids. We pull to the left bank to scout.

I have run scores of rapids in several countries, rapids with names like Skull, Hell's-Half-Mile, Widomaker, Snaggletooth. Still, each time there is a flutter deep in the pit of the stomach. Fear, awe, anticipation. A recognition of the fallacy of immortality, of the power inherent in moving water. I see the same feelings etched on the face of David Sears, who has been down this river "40 to 60 times." It never goes away.

Wild Sheep Rapids, at this water level, is a jumble of elephant-size boulders churning the river into a tangle of waves. To the practiced eye there is a slot on the left, a run that requires a quick,

midstream move to avoid a hole the boatmen call the Green Room. It is a complex run. Sears stands for a long time, watching each wave, judging its strength and intent. Only when the route is cast in his mind do we go.

The current catches the bow, spins it, and points us downstream, on line. The bow rises suddenly on the first wave. We are in it: white water.

Inside a rapid things happen fast, too fast. I have always wished it could be slowed down, giving us time to watch the waves build into mountain ranges, or to memorize the patterns in the spray. You can sit and watch a rapid all day, but from shore it's a two-dimensional show. On the river, with waves dancing all around you, it is like being inside a diamond.

Sears makes the cut. The boat breaks the wave, skirting the edge of the Green Room. A wall of water crashes into the boat. There is a scream, of cold and of adrenaline, from the passengers. And then we are out, floating easily in the calm water below. "I love it, I love it," someone in the bow is saying over and over to no one in particular. We drift in the eddy, watching the other boats come safely through, listening to their screams. Finally, the oars dig in again. The current catches us and we move off downstream.

THE TRAILS AND OVERLOOKS CAN GIVE YOU THE scenery of Hells Canyon, but only the river can give you a feeling for the process that created it -- that is still creating it. It is easy to think of our highest mountains and deepest canyons as finished landscapes, but nothing is ever finished in nature. Beneath the roar of rapids the river is chiseling deeper. Near a stretch of quiet water, the thunder of a rockslide startles us. Such boulders, big as the dories, help carve out the canyon walls. Yet most erosion is as silent as the passage of time. Drifting quietly, we listen to that silence and try to imagine the ages needed for wind, rain, and river to have carved such an abyss.

Days later, just below Sheep Creek, our silence is shattered. A jetboat roars into sight from downstream, a long, low, canopied thing with a flat bottom and inboard waterjet engines -- a combination made for charging at high speed through shallow, rocky river water. Here, below most of the big rapids, the jetboats come up in droves from Lewiston. For a moment, dory and jetboat face off in the current, before Bailey pulls on his oars to let the jetboat pass. The two craft represent different styles of experiencing the canyon. One, a quiet, slow pace attuned to the flow of the river; the other a blast of steel and power that shoves against the river, paced for seeing as much as possible as quickly as possible.

After the silence of my solo hike and the quiet dance of the dories, there is an almost surreal, carnival-like quality about a 38-foot, 1,300-horsepower, canopied jetboat bucking its way up through the rapids in a ride that seems a mixture of water-skiing and four-wheeling. "Will this ride mess up my hair?" I recall having heard a woman ask a jetboat pilot as she boarded. "Miss," the pilot had replied, when we finish it will look like you combed your hair with a hand grenade."

Jetboat tours do offer speed and convenience for those who just want a glimpse of the canyon. Yet much about Hells Canyon has little to do with speed or convenience. Like the wails of the

coyotes that begin after the jetboat passes. Or like the first rumble of that rainstorm that gathered above the canyon, back when we were sitting in the boats at Salt Creek, midway through our trip.

We were still sitting in them when the rain came, each drop feeling like a sliver of ice after the day's heat. Still, no one dived for cover. We stayed in the dories, lost in our thoughts, the rain drumming off our bodies.

In the veil of the rain, I sorted through the images I had collected already during my time in the canyon. Hells Canyon is too big to come to know in a few days or weeks. An understanding, if it is gained at all, is pieced together out of small things, like colorful rocks we collect along the shore. I mentally retraced my way back upstream, thinking of the spear point I cupped in my hands at an archaeological dig on Tryon Creek, of the silence around the pictographs below Wild Sheep Rapids, of flame-red Indian paintbrush against the fire scars on Dry Diggins Ridge, of the way dawn sunlight lit up the stone face of Barton Heights like a candle, and of the jet-black raven feather I carried on my pack two days for luck. Each of these was, in its own way, as much a part of Hells Canyon as the view from any overlook.

"I can see how you can fall in love with a place like this," I said finally to Ric Bailey.

"It is not even so much what you see," he answered, "but how it makes you feel in here." Turning to see his fingers laid across his heart, I noticed that his eyes were still far off upriver, looking to where the light had just gone silver with the last moments of the rain.

## **Our Next National Park?**

Views of Hells Canyon and the Seven Devils Mountains can be as awe-inspiring as anything in Yellowstone. The Snake River has all the power and excitement of the Colorado River in the Grand Canyon. But Hells Canyon is not a crown jewel of our national park system. It is not a national park at all.

Since 1975 it has been part of the Hells Canyon National Recreation Area, managed by the U. S. Forest Service. NRA status means that the Forest Service is to "assure that the natural beauty, and historical and archaeological values of the Hells Canyon area...are preserved for this and future generations." But questions linger over loopholes in the law. Logging and livestock grazing, critics say, although reduced from pre-1975 levels, still endanger the canyon ecosystem. They feel the area should be designated a national park.

The regional, thousand member Hells Canyon Preservation Council has recommended study of a possible 1.5-million-acre Hells Canyon/Chief Joseph National Park and Preserve. Its boundaries would include Hells Canyon NRA, the nearby Wallowa Mountains, and the Eagle Cap Wilderness Area, creating a national park second in size in the lower 48 states only to Yellowstone.

"I don't think there is any question that the place is of national park character," says David Simon of the National Parks and Conservation Association. "This is the park that should have been and the park that still should be." Such a park would protect one of the nation's largest elk herds, halt

logging, and curtail grazing. "Using the deepest canyon in North America as a feedlot for livestock is like using the Mona Lisa to wrap hamburger," says Ric Bailey of the Preservation Council.

Many local people, though, prefer Forest Service management, as it allows resource-based activities such as logging. "In my eyes we are meeting the intent of the legislation," says Ed Cole, area ranger for the Forest Service. And Brian Carper, a mill worker fearful of "a pretty big hit" on the local economy, argues that the Park Service "can't even take care of what it has now. Go to any national park, and you'll see that they are run down pretty good."

Still, the idea has gained important supporters, including local newspapers and business leaders who see it as a potential economic boost, the Audubon Society, and several members of Congress, who are awaiting the final Hells Canyon Preservation

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