

Bruneau Canyon Ouzel Habitat

By Julie Hall

My most recent trip began at the Bruneau River take-out last Friday, night hawks swooping in their aerial displays as I pitched a late camp to meet up with Twin Falls boating companions arriving at 7 a.m. Saturday (the Ouzel is not an early bird!). The shuttle drive next morning more than lived up to its notorious reputation: boaters trying to get in just the day before had to turn back, & it took us well over 4 hours to bounce across the 40 miles. But the sweeping expanse of southwestern Idaho sagebrush country, snow capped Jarbidge Mountains in the distance, offered plenty of visual distraction. An antelope, separated from his companions, raced out ahead of us to circle back to the herd. And as we passed through range cattle we saw a dead newborn calf, its three coyote predators chased off by our vehicles. The final descent to the river begins to hint of the spectacular turreted rhyolite canyon, & the extremely rocky & precarious road made photography a welcome excuse for insisting on walking down and a good opportunity to enjoy getting acquainted with Ann, the other woman in our group.

Our expeditionary force included my now fairly regular river companions Ted Tomason on Cat & CanoeKen Wiesmore, along with Catr Vince Thompson (of "Vince's Idaho Whitewater Pages" fame), kayaker Gary Pool, his wife Ann as cat crew, Ted's nephew Chad running the gear boat, & myself persuaded to try tandem canoeing for a change of pace & improved photo opportunities.

The put-in moved us quickly from rolling gray-green sage grassland into the rusty-colored vertical walled canyon, and we were in the first named rapid, Kendell's Cave, within a mile. At a flow of close to 1,700 cfs (just over 7 ft.) there was plenty of water for the small boats on the far left, but when Ted ran his cat through the deeper right side he got sucked into the cave & had to come out through a narrow slot under a log, just barely clearing the top of the seats as he and Ann quickly ducked.

Once the excitement was over, I resumed my botanical focus on hanging gardens of white coral bells, delicate ferns and trailing vines along the sheer vertical walls, and on the dark green junipers dotting the river edge, their fibrous scaly bark & wet feet reminding me of bald cypress in Louisiana swamps. & I was delighted to start seeing American dippers (aka water ouzels) as soon as we entered the canyon & continued to see them throughout the entire upper stretch. The afternoon's paddling was a pleasant rhythm of drifting through the canyon and maneuvering class II-III drops. We were soothed into river time & ready to camp a short ways below the Sheep Creek confluence, on a low bench covered by grass & sage, guarded by sculpted stone sentinels, and offering enticing side canyons with hidden gardens to explore.

Sunday morning continued the rhythm of drop & pool, with rapids becoming longer, bigger, and more challenging. In one amphitheater we were treated to a canyon wren's concert performance, repeated cascades of notes echoing through the narrow canyon. Below the East Fork Confluence the canyon becomes the more familiar blocky dark gray basalt & begins widening out to look somewhat like the Murtaugh Canyon of the Snake. Because my canoe rolling skills are nonexistent, I switched over to a raft just above 5-Mile Rapid where the river starts dropping very noticeably. Being in the midst of the fray on that exciting run (on the 2nd cat) I'll quote Vince's more objective:

"Five mile rapid caused some carnage on Sunday. Near the bottom of the first rapid 2 rocks created 3 "doors" to choose. I took the tight left shoot but the SB raft choose the middle which had a couple of hidden rocks slowing him down and causing the other cat to go right and over a rock pour-over.... stick the tubes and flip. The water was extremely fast and with very small eddies. Once the crew was rescued from a top the upside down boat it took a few hundred yards to get the boat under control."

Mostly what I remember is finding myself underwater between the tubes, & thinking the frame looked like a stairway to heaven which I promptly took. Ann was also on that cat & had a somewhat long rocky swim which she handled with calm focus, a challenge for any river runner much less a beginner, & we had another rope throwing rodeo before the other boats finally pushed the cat into an eddy. The cat was flipped back over fairly easily (no z-drag required), we redistributed people & gear, and ran the rest of 5-Mile without mishap though it was fairly challenging ... Vince's words are "fun, tight and technical." Gary's kayak had been tied on the back & the only gear loss, unfortunately, was his paddle; he spent the rest of the trip perched like a figurehead on the "prow" of the raft looking for it. & Chad had to put up with my front-end back-seat driving until Ken finally rescued him by letting me back in the canoe (the only boat I haven't swum out of).

After 5-Mile the river eases up until Wild Burro which gave us one last bucking ride before flattening out in a broader canyon, heavily lined with blooming wild roses and Russian olives wafting their soft perfume. One final stop gave us a warming soak in the Indian Bathtub (& the chance to remove the poison ivy oils we all got into while trying to right the flipped cat), and a rainbow across the river blessed our good company of wilderness adventurers and asked for a promise to return again to these enchanting remote canyons.