

## Swimming Big Falls (South Fork of the Payette)

Below is a story I pieced together from several postings on the KayakIdaho website:

### First Posting that got my attention:

The river-scum raft makes it through Big Falls unscathed. Unfortunately the pilot, I think he said his name was Mike, listened to the shouts of the terrified crowd and jumped out. He then had to swim the entire thing. If he would have stayed in his boat he would have had a first descent, a giant ego and a place in history. Instead he ended up with a nasty bruise on his elbow and a crushed ego and nightmares of the little slot on the bottom right.

Thanks go to the Headwaters Guides: Mike Leeds and Aaron Wydra for being on the spot and getting a throw bag to the swimmer.

In case you are ever faced by the jump-or-swim dilemma consider this: they guy made it through the first drop, though from my point of view it looked as if he was show boating by standing on his head. In reality he got a hell of a kick from the lip. He then made a half-hearted jump into the water while holding onto his boat. He went under at the second drop for a ten count. Between the commercial passengers and private boaters, approximately 50 people held their collective breath. He finally surfaced in the little slot in the rock face on the bottom right. He got quite a beating there. No let's say it was a hell of a beating. That was when I noticed he didn't have a helmet on. When he grabbed on the throw bag he got a good 10 second dunking while Leeds and Wydra hauled like a couple of seasoned baja whalers. He came up and got a second dunking just to school him on the abandoning your ship rule.

Famous words upon reaching shore: "So that was the portage?"

### Posting by a witness (Loganboater) commenting on the swim:

Nice photos Grant, too bad no one got pics of the actual "descent"...oh well. I hadn't heard the quote from the perp upon reaching shore, I guess that means he hadn't been down the Canyon before. That was my big question - did he just screw the pooch trying to reduce the amount of carrying or did he not know where he was? Guess he just didn't know where he was!

In either case, there's a couple points to be made here (aside from the fact that his raft made it through clean w/o him and he would have most likely been just fine if he remained in the boat!).

1. If he had known where he was and was trying to get closer to the drop (laziness) folks should know that there is a POINT OF NO RETURN, and that it's just a little further upstream than you might think. I see quite a few folks pushing it on this drop. If you don't intend to run it taking a few extra steps on shore is not that big of a deal. Don't risk it.
2. My second point is a little more difficult to explain. There is no doubt that this guy is lucky such a big group was there portaging BF and that this group included some pretty seasoned folks and ropes were already at the ready. I have frequently been at BF and been the only group there. If dude would have stumbled over the falls alone or even with a small group ahead of him not set up to get boats through, he almost certainly would have drowned. Having said that, it is possible that the large group there actually contributed to his making the mistake he made. If you consider what the left bank looks like from upstream with a half dozen rafts and 10 other boats scattered all over the place with people standing around everywhere, the big orange "portage here" sign not

withstanding (who really starts the portage there anyway?), you can imagine how someone unfamiliar with that drop might get confused as to exactly where to get out. When I take new folks down the Canyon, especially rafts, I always bust ahead through the last rapid above BF so that I can get out of my boat and stand on shore with a rope.

Anyway, just a few thoughts. Made for a pretty exciting day when I thought we were just going to have a mellow float!

## **Posting by the guy (riverscum) who swam:**

I've debated about sending this message because I'm pretty embarrassed about what happened on Saturday, but I figured a little embarrassment won't kill me and this is probably the only way to reach those involved in pulling me out of Big Falls. I also thought I'd give the blow by blow for anyone interested, plus clear up any mistaken ideas that people may have about exactly what happened.

First off, I'd really like to thank the "Headwaters River Company" guides for their assistance. I must say they were dead on with their throw rope as it was within reach when I surfaced and managed to get a look around. If they're interested, I've got a couple of cases of beer for them if they'll send me an email with their preferred brand (riverscum@hotmail.com). Please pass that along.

I'll start the story by admitting that yes, this was my first time down that stretch. However, I am not a novice rafter, I'd studied the stretch, and my passenger had been down the stretch a few times and was keeping me informed of what was coming. When we came around the last corner after the sign, I was heading for the left bank to portage. Loganboater said it best in his previous statement, "there is a point of no return and that it's just a little further upstream than you might think." This is where my inexperience on this stretch came into play. Although I was attempting to land above the raft that was beached, they probably had banked it up the shore a ways and roped it to that point.

We made our first landing at what I thought was above the no return point, but when my passenger went to jump out, the river pulled the nose back out into the water. With the raft starting to be pulled back into the main stream I swung the back of the raft towards shore so I would have more power on the oars to beach us. Unfortunately, this was also the wrong thing to do because my shore man was now at the opposite end of the raft and therefore couldn't get out. Realizing this, I swung the front end back towards shore. By this time, the river had pulled us dangerously close to the last stretch of rocks before the falls. Out of luck and out of time, (well maybe not out of luck), he yelled at me to jump for the rocks and let the boat go. I hesitated slightly, thinking I could still save it, then made a jump for the last rock. I managed to grab the rock with one arm, but then made the other bad decision of the day - I grabbed for the raft with my other hand to pull it back.

When you're waist deep above the worst rapid in the river, gripping a slippery rock with three fingertips, do not, I repeat, do not give your boat a second thought. Unfortunately, I had to learn that lesson the hard way. When I grabbed the boat, it tugged me loose from the rock and away we went.

This is the second good point that loganboater made, I should have attempted to pull myself back into the boat right then as it would certainly have been better than taking the run in my life jacket. Whether it would have been physically possible I'm not sure, but instead I decided in that split second to get away from the raft so I didn't get smacked with an oar or tangled up in the rope.

If you've ever jumped into a cold body of water, you're aware that it kind of knocks the breath out

of you. As the river pulled me through, I remember thinking I needed some air soon, but I'd just have to wait until it spit me out. I also vividly recall grabbing for my trunks that had been yanked down around my ankles. It was kind of like when your mom told you to make sure you had on clean underwear in case something happened to you. Anyway, if I didn't make it, I didn't want anyone talking about shrinkage. That's no way to go out.

Since there was so much water around me, I never felt like I was falling as I went over. I do remember seeing my boat on a wave above me, and being pulled underneath of it. My head hit the bottom of the boat, but nothing solid, as I went by. Throughout this whole time, aside from my thoughts, all I could hear was churning water. When I felt my head pop above water, I took a ragged breath of mostly air and tried to get my bearings. I think the river pulled me back under once or twice but I'm not really sure. I do remember hearing whistle blasts and when I popped up again, seeing a bright rescue line right on top of me. I grabbed ahold and they would have had to cut me loose to shake my grip on it.

You've seen the pictures of them pulling me all the way across the river. That must have been a workout. (Sorry about those extra few pounds I've added boys.) They got me over to the opposite wall and I grabbed a hand hold and tried to catch my breath. A kayaker was there and finally convinced me to let go of the rope and swim to him. I was very reluctant to do so, liking the feel of air in my lungs, the great hand hold I had, and not wanting any part of whatever remained of the rapid, but he looked friendly enough so I decided to trust him. After he pulled me in to an eddy, I managed to swim the last little bit and climb out onto the rocks. There really wasn't much to say after that except thank you, and sheepishly admit I missed the portage. I guarantee that won't happen again.

Thanks for everyone who stopped by to check on me at that point, and yes, I do realize how lucky I am to be here. I may joke about it a little bit now, but what else can a guy do? It's over and lesson learned. For those Headwaters guides, I will be on the Payette this weekend and will gladly deliver that beer to wherever you want. Just let me know.

## **Post by the rescuer Mike Leeds**

Hey whats up man? Glad to hear you are doing okay. Thanks for swimming man it was sick I was the one that threw the rope to you and Aaron Wydra assisted in helping me pull you in. I edited your post because you kept saying Bear Valley. We are from Headwaters right there in Banks and my favorite beer is Corona. All you can do is laugh about and learn from your mistakes, sounds like you are already there bro..I will be in Salt Lake at the Outdoor Retail show this weekend, but you can still drop off the Beer if you want bro. I am glad i was there to help you out, i just wish we had a picture of you leaping out of the raft. That would have been sweeeeeet!!!!!!click on the link to view the photos...later, Mike Leeds.....