

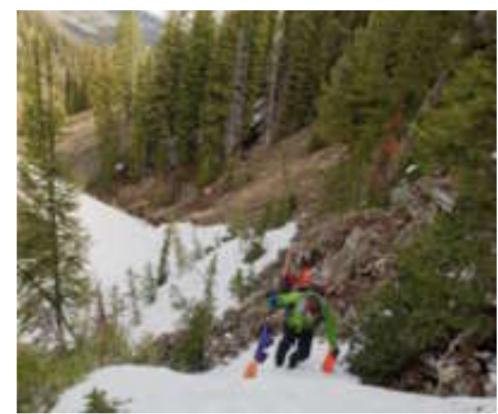
Source to Sea

A JOURNEY ON THE MANY FACES OF THE COLUMBIA

Tyler Williams gets psyched to launch on the first of three rivers in his source to sea journey.

The Columbia River is the largest waterway in western North America, and the most hydroelectrically developed river system in the world. Join adventurer Tyler Williams as he paddles 4 boats, 3 rivers, 970 miles, and 8,300 vertical feet -- from the wild source of the Salmon River, the Columbia's longest free-flowing tributary, into the dam-altered backwaters of Washington and Oregon, and on to the Pacific Ocean.

Words: Tyler Williams
Photography Doug Marshall, Lisa Gelczis



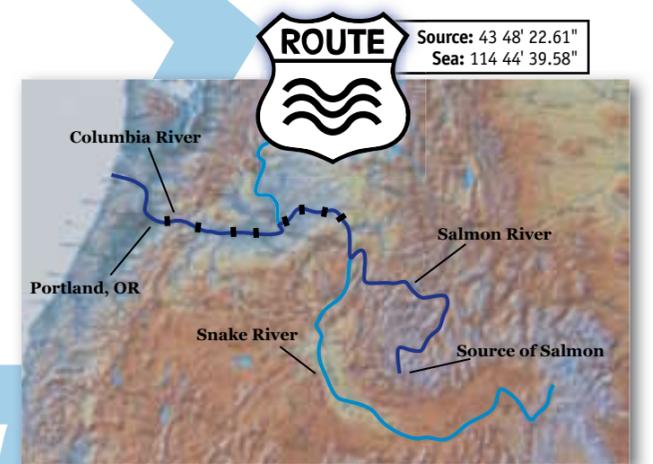
Kicking steps in spring snow en route to the source of the Salmon River in central Idaho



Four hundred miles below its source, the Salmon carves into Hells Canyon, and joins the Snake River.



On the Columbia at last! The author motors across a wide expanse of water at the confluence of the Snake and Columbia Rivers.



A strainer of overhanging willows

completely blocked the right side of the narrow channel. I leaped into the tangle of branches, hoping to pivot around them and crash through. Instead, my upstream edge caught the current, and I was over. Using my paddle to roll was out of the question. It was way too tangled. Underwater, I was lost in a surreal state. I looked toward the surface through water so clear that I could see the whole disaster unfolding around me. Above, willows cantilevered over the water, their slender necks curving up to a profusion of spring green leaflets. The gurgling water sounded peaceful, like an automated recording designed to put you to sleep. I could've stayed there and meditated, but I needed air. I reached up with my right hand and grabbed an overhanging branch, fully expecting it to bend ineffectively with my weight. Surprisingly, it held, and I pulled myself upright. With that, the kayak came loose, releasing me to the far side of the willow tunnel where I emerged wearing a coat of sticks, leaves, and cobwebs. It was day two of a month-long journey. I had hoped for a more auspicious start. My plan was to run Idaho's Salmon River from its source to the ocean, a distance of 970 miles; 425 on the Salmon, 110 on the Snake, and 435 on the mighty Columbia. Being the largest of four North American rivers in my source to sea quest, it was the story of the Columbia that I sought most keenly. Author Richard White coined the Columbia as the organic machine, once supporting immense human populations with its salmon runs, and now powering an electric grid through dam turbines. By starting on the Columbia's longest undammed tributary, the Salmon, I hoped to see all phases of the river's life, for better or worse. Photographer Doug Marshall and I drove directly to Idaho's Sawtooth Mountains to seek the Salmon's source. In the morning, we peered out our tent flap to find a coffee pot frozen solid beneath an inch of snow. It was June 11th. Three hours from camp, at 8,300 feet, a pass opened before us. Patches of matted wet grass broke a palette of white where meltwater had eroded the snowpack. At the near side of the meadow, a clear icy cold stream emerged and plunged off the mountain. I walked to the gentle crest of the pass, took a drink of pure snowmelt, and began to follow it downhill. In 970 miles, I hoped to taste salt water. Doug and I glissaded through snowy glades into the Salmon's headwater valley. The stream was only inches deep, but too broad to jump across when I stopped and proclaimed that I was putting in. With full photo documentation and a touch of ceremony, I plopped down in the newly inflated pack raft. And there I sat, unmoving. Thrusting hip gyrations managed to get me a few feet downstream before I stalled, again and again, on the gravels of the riverbed. Stepping into ankle deep water, I shouldered the miniature raft, and began schlepping beside the creek. At least the hiking was downhill. Within a mile, the Salmon's channel deepened, and I was finally able to begin floating. By the following day, I was rolling up the alpaca raft, and methodically packing my 8-foot-long plastic kayak for the next two weeks of travel. I would re-supply food en route, but the clothes and gear I chose to take would have to get me to my equipment cache in Lewiston, Idaho, 417 miles downstream. Once passing the entangling willow thickets that flipped me, miles rolled past on the swift river. By day three, I had left the snow-covered mountains behind for sagebrush desert. Flowing along the eastern margin of Idaho's central mountains, the Salmon traversed a rain-shadow valley where annual precipitation is less than 10 inches. With the vibrancy of springtime in full flower, the arid country was an incongruous mix of imagery. Soils were desert brown and burnt red. Riverside trees burst bright green, and distant mountains glistened glaring white. On a short stroll from camp, I came across a mat of fur from an old animal kill. Nearby was an unmistakable lion track. Even though a rural highway ran along the opposite side of the river, this place was wild. I fell asleep to a full moon illuminating barren slopes above. The river snaked around a ridge, revealing the dramatic Beaverhead Range above the Lemhi Valley. At the base of the peaks, I knew, was the town of Salmon, Idaho. This was home to the Shoshone Tribe, who sold Lewis and Clark two-dozen horses that proved essential in their quest for the Pacific. I drifted into the familiar valley anticipating a reunion with old friends.



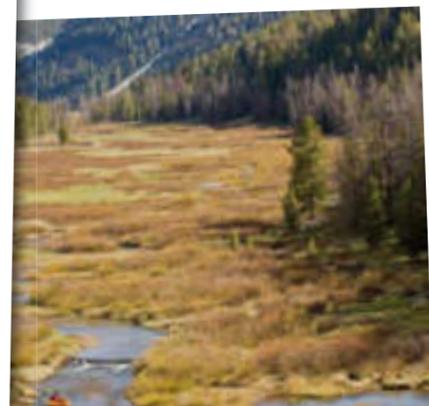
In the Salmon's headwater valley at nearly 8,000 feet, an Alpacka raft is unloaded for the start of a trip that will end at sea level.

My plan was to run Idaho's Salmon River from its source to the ocean, a distance of 970 miles;

425 on the Salmon, 110 on the Snake, and 435 on the mighty Columbia.



Pat Phillips wonders how a line can be found through The Slide rapid on the Lower Salmon River.



Williams passes a beaver dam amidst a mountain meadow near the source of the Salmon.



On June 11th, fresh snow blankets camp, and hot coffee is priority number one.



Waiting out the storm, a game of checkers occupies the first morning of the expedition.



The Columbia River is fed by innumerable mountain streams, making it the largest river in western North America.

By morning, I was prepared to re-enter society. We got out of camp early and joined the dam-riddled unnaturally warm Snake River. One river was behind me. Two more remained. I floated, warmly reflecting on the miles I had just completed, and pensively considering what lay ahead. Part of me wanted to be taking out that afternoon with Pat. But, I told myself, source to sea trips are for seeing all phases of a river's life, and traveling beyond the standard recreational runs. A moderate headwind started, and we each paddled separately, lost in our heads amidst the drudgery.

I recalled a pre-trip conversation with Bill Erickson, the last to attempt this source to sea journey. Over the phone, he had conveyed just how dreary it was to paddle on the dam altered lower Snake. In reply to his dire descriptions of relentless headwinds and featureless shorelines, I said somewhat facetiously, "It sounds like motor water." "Heeelllll yeah!" was his response. Later, I learned that non-motorized boats were not allowed through the river locks. That was the clincher. I would take a motor, and I would mount it on the same kind of boat that opened the continent's rivers centuries before—a canoe.

From the Barker River Trip boat yard in Lewiston, Idaho, I pulled out my recently purchased 16-foot Coleman squareback plastic canoe. Stenciled proudly on the side of the boat in bright white letters was the curious title: Scanoes. The capital S was a not-so-subtle reminder from Coleman that this boat was a squareback model. I found the appellation charmingly silly, and immediately took to calling the boat by the one-word title: Scanoes. Thirty miles below Lewiston, Lower Granite Dam appeared, the first of eight dams that I would have to pass. A concrete wall rose from the water with a rope dangling down its side, and a blue and white sign atop the wall read "Pull Cord To Notify Lock Master." My gypsy rig canoe wasn't exactly standard fare for the lock masters, and despite the motor, I wasn't sure if they would let me through. With suffocating trepidation, I pulled the cord. A hideous alarm blared over distant speakers; braaaaaap...braaaaap...braaaaap, then came quiet. A minute passed, two minutes...Were they deciding if they should let the funny looking canoe through? With all the sea-captain tone I could muster, I pulled the intercom

cord again and said, "Requesting permission to lock through." A voice on the other end replied, "Wait for one upstream vessel to pass, then come on in." My heart leapt. I was in.

There was a loud clank, and then steel dams began rising out of the water at both ends of the pool. I was watching the massive steel walls in amazement when I felt moving water. Instinctively, I stabilized and looked for the current. But there was none. The water was going down, eerily dropping from under me like the outwash of a tsunami. Wet concrete walls grew taller as the water continued to steadily plummet. Ominous grinding sounds echoed in the chamber. Water spilled through cracks above, a reminder that the entirety of the Snake River loomed just fifty feet from my stern. A foot gage ran down the wall of the lock, methodically revealing the elevation above sea level; 750...720...690...Scanoes and I floated powerless at the bottom of an ever darkening slot canyon. There were few times that I'd felt so small.

Finally, ninety-eight feet later, the water stopped sinking. A massive steel doorway slowly opened, and light pierced my solitary chamber from the outside. I paddled through the widening gap, pulled the cord on the outboard, and motored away.

Snake River Salmon pass through the same lock on their way downstream, but with more at stake. Genetically programmed to ride springtime's floods to the ocean, juvenile salmon only have a few weeks to make the journey before their physiology changes to accommodate salt water. If they don't make the trip fast enough, they die. My trip was starting to acutely illustrate the salmon's dilemma. For the first 500 miles, I had traveled with ease on the flush of high water. Now, the miles dragged by, even with the aid of my small motor.

Today, salmon smolts are gathered onto specialized barges and raced downstream to mimic the timeless migration. Once below the final dam, they are released into the river to complete the ocean-bound trip on their own.

Several days downstream, one of the fish barges passed me in a wash of mist. We were

Stopping to admire the Sawtooth Mountains one last time before dropping into the deserts of eastern Idaho



Photo: Doug Marshall



The Columbia River drains snow-bound mountain ranges from central British Columbia to northern Nevada. The Salmon, pictured here, is the Columbia's longest free flowing tributary.



Portage anyone? A ban on non-motorized boats in dam locks keeps most paddlers away from the lower Snake River.



Happy to have passed yet another dam, Tyler put-puts away from a guillotine style lock door on the Columbia.

both struggling against the legendary winds of the Columbia Gorge. Where the Columbia River cuts through the Cascade Range, it forms a corridor between the cool marine climate of the coast, and the hot arid prairies of the interior. As the atmosphere tries to equalize these radically different environments, huge winds are produced, funneling straight through the mountain gap created by the river.

The water in the middle of the river was huge—four-foot swells with whitecaps—but in the shelter of projecting headlands, the waves diminished by half. This is where I steered Scano, riding up and over most of the waves beautifully. In the biggest rollers, however, the bow of the canoe pierced directly into the oncoming water, its liquid mass slowing our momentum like a staggering body blow. The biggest waves yet formed off a sinister black buttress that forced me away from shore. Breakers smashed into the black point, spraying water thirty feet into the air. Water poured into the boat, forcing me to bail furiously while the motor bogged under the extra strain. Steering with my left hand, bailing with my right, and closing my eyes rhythmically to match buckets of spray washing over the boat, I made my way into the storm hoping for a shelter cove to magically appear. A quarter-mile farther, I found a protected bay, and pulled in. I'd found my limits.

The next day a calm morning allowed me to make twenty miles before the wind started to rise again near Miller Island. Two hundred and three years previous, Lewis and Clark stopped here to see "Six lodges of natives drying fish." The explorers were approaching Celilo Falls—the Columbia's greatest cataract, and the oldest continually inhabited location on the continent at the time.

Enjoying open water paddling below the city of Portland, with Mt. St. Helens as a backdrop.

The great waterfall consisted of basalt ledges that stretched from shore to distant shore, creating multiple channels of whitewater, from massive wave trains to vertical twenty-foot drops. Salmon naturally collected at the base of the falls on their migrations, and humans gathered there for the easy fishing. People had been coming to Celilo for over 10,000 years before European settlement, when salmon returns on the Columbia exceeded 15,000,000 fish annually. Now less than 10,000 salmon make the journey, and Celilo Falls is completely submerged beneath the backwaters of The Dalles Dam.

I pulled into a floating dock at Celilo State Park. Sacred Celilo Falls was occupied with a power boat dock, grass lawns, camp grills, and when I visited, a bevy of pale sunshine seekers. In the parking lot, I found a single interpretive sign about historic Celilo Falls. The verbiage wrapped up with a sentence about how barges and hatcheries maintain the salmon runs, ending with: "The dams did not destroy the native people's way of life." In an angst-driven quest for accuracy, someone had painstakingly scratched the word "not" from the sentence.

Two more days had me on the edge of Portland, Oregon. On a Monday morning, I motored into the city beneath freeway bridges bustling with commuter traffic. Scano and I putted through row after row of moored sailboats and yachts, wheeling into a humble dock adjacent to Alder Creek Kayak Store.

The following morning my wife, Lisa, and I launched in two sea kayaks. It was a relief to be done with the dams, and the motoring. No more worrying about the motor dying, no more fiddling with the choke switch, no more handling nasty gas cans hourly, life was simpler now. I was back in my element—a kayak.



Lisa Gelczis relaxes on an abandoned train trestle platform. On the lower Columbia, tidal swamps and rain forest shorelines forced the paddlers to seek unique camps like this one



Below Portland, we shared the river with ocean-bound ships. Some of the freighters had hulls rising straight out of the water for over one hundred vertical feet. The massive steel walls sheared through the water dwarfing fifty-foot sailboats, much less our fifteen-foot kayaks.

Our proximity to the sea was soon apparent. Nearly 100 inches of rain falls annually near the coast, and every inch of earth was a growing mat of vegetation. Beneath the overgrown landscape, the river was becoming flat and tidal. Beaches were replaced with marshes, and campsites were scarce. For an entire afternoon we looked for a place to pitch a tent, and found nothing. When an abandoned railroad platform appeared rising from the water, our interests piqued. Atop the platform, there were decks; perfectly flat, dry, and free of vegetation. We'd found camp.

Just past the platform was Tongue Point, the last projection of land before the Columbia opens into a wide bay adjacent to the Pacific. The point is a milepost physically and

symbolically, a portal between sheltered estuaries and the ocean influenced river mouth. Lewis and Clark's party passed Tongue Point during the storms of early winter, and remained stranded there by high seas for ten days. "We proceeded...around a very remarkable point which projects into the river...Below this point the waves became so high we were compelled to land."

An eddyline sliced across the water at the point, and a wide misty expanse spread before us. Dark land mixed with pale blue water, veiled in fuzzy gray atmosphere. An eagle on shore ripped at red flesh, and a seal poked its rounded black head above the surface to look at us. We turned our angle to port, and headed for a colorful cluster of buildings on the next headland west, Astoria, Oregon.

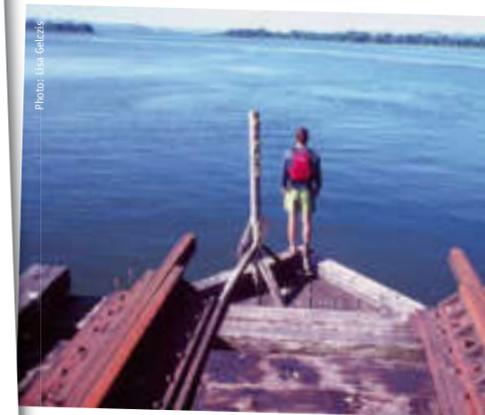
Sitting in one of the town's many coffee shops, I sipped a frothy mug while Lisa conversed with a local patron. Several minutes later, Lisa sat down next to me and said, "So, what's the story with the Bar?" The Columbia River Bar, "The Graveyard of



This two horse power motor propelled the author and his canoe across the dam-riddled lower Snake and Columbia Rivers. Duct-taped driftwood handle extension not included.



Morning routine on the River of No Return Salmon included packing the kayak for whitewater. It all goes inside!



- End of the line. Tyler scouts tidal currents from Train Trestle Camp, within twenty miles of the Columbia River Mouth.

Photo: Lisa Gelczis

Photo: Lisa Gelczis



Scamoe enters Portland, the land of sailboats, and an identity crisis



Carefully balancing in a floating sea kayak, Lisa unloads boat hatches for camp.



Ashore at last. The paddlers celebrate a successful ride through the break onto the beach at Oregon's Clatsop Spit.



Holding his hat on against a steady thirty mile-per-hour wind, Tyler is forced to wait out the weather east of the Columbia River Gorge.



Massive container ships ply the Columbia River below Portland. Special river pilots steer the ships up the dredged channel. Elite bar pilots guide the freighters across the Columbia River Bar - Graveyard of the Pacific.



There are nearly 400 dams on the Columbia River system, making it the most hydroelectrically developed river basin in the world.

the Pacific," the place of 2,000 shipwrecks, the Columbia River Bar was the place where the biggest river in western North America runs into the swells of the Pacific Ocean. It's hard to conjure water forces bigger than that.

"We'll go over the Bar," I paused, "Unless it's too gnarly." Then I tried for a mollifying qualifier, "I think it's just a problem for those big ships. We should be fine." Lisa smirked, bemused at my unjustified confidence. "Uh huh, too rough for the big ships, but no problem for our kayaks. I get it," she said sarcastically, and went back to her morning paper.

A steady coastal breeze was flapping our tent when we awoke to dim gray morning light. We packed up without coffee, nibbled on homemade energy bars, and dragged our boats to the water. The early departure was intended to catch the slack tide, but it was also out of respect for the Bar. If we were going to have an epic, we'd better have all day to deal with it.

Breakers to our left beat a rhythm that pulsed through the quiet gray morning. A buoy passed with a sharp eddyline, revealing a strong current. Was it the ebb tide or was the river gathering itself in a last push of current? The swell began to lift and drop us. Lost in trip's end reverie, I suddenly noticed a jetty at the river mouth drifting past. Sea lions squawked at the end of the rocky point. Beyond, a few fishing boats dotted a watery horizon that led to infinity. The water beneath us was cold and blue and salty. Gentle swells pushed us south. We were now riding the greatest river of them all.

The immensity of the ocean was unsettling, and I turned to look back at comforting blue mountains. Beyond them was the city, and the Cascade Range, and the wind blown deserts, and the high snowfields where I began my journey full of unknowns. And what had I learned?

Only that we all have different expectations from the river, from weekend fisherman, to ranchers who use the river to irrigate, to the aluminum industry that grew from the river's power, to millions of Americans who turn on a light switch every day without thinking about where the electricity comes from, to shipping barges that travel its backed up waters, to salmon smolts that no longer know what it's like to flush downstream on a spring flood, to recreational power boaters, wind surfers, river runners, and me. I used the river as a vehicle to explore this web of landscape and humanity that it connects. I too followed my own agenda, nothing more. Across an ocean expanse to the south, the landmark of Tillamook Head floated. It reminded me of Navajo Mountain that rises over a sea of desert near my home. The swell pushed me in that direction. I took the hint, and paddled toward shore.

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Looking out to sea - "greatest river of them all" - at journeys end.



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