

Boise River Water Trail

By Tom Chelstrom
5th Edition, Revised June 2015

Overview

The Boise River Water Trail was originally published as "Canoeing the Boise River" in 1996, by Tom Chelstrom

The Boise River flows 63 miles from Discovery Park, just below Lucky Peak Dam east of Boise, to its confluence with the Snake River west of Parma. The river provides wonderful paddling opportunities over its entire length. There are many accesses and most are easily reached on major roads, which make for simple shuttles.

Wildlife is abundant. Expect to see deer, beaver, osprey, bald eagles, herons, cormorants, and pelicans. Trout, whitefish, bass, catfish, and carp inhabit the river as well.

On a Saturday afternoon in July, you'll see hundreds of people in tubes and rafts floating the river through Boise. At almost any time on any other stretch of the river, you are unlikely to see anyone. In some places, homes line the river banks. In others, you will feel as if you are surrounded by wilderness.

A Google Earth Tour was also created by Tom Chelstrom with assistance from the Boise River Trails Coalition in 2009 and updated with assistance from Gary O. Grimm, Mountain Visions, and the Boise River Enhancement Network in 2015.

Safety

Paddling on rivers is never safe. Develop your skills on lakes, canoe within your ability, and always wear a properly fitted PFD. An old beat-up life jacket lying in the bottom of the canoe won't save your life! You are responsible for your safety while paddling and only you can judge the suitability of the Boise River for your skill level.

The Boise River would probably be rated at class I (easy) and class II (moderate) on the international river rating scale. Serious whitewater folk would scoff at the notion that any part of the Boise is class III (difficult), yet the definition of class III includes "maneuvering necessary...main current may have dangerous strainers...course not easily recognizable..." and the Boise has all of those characteristics.

Learn to paddle from an expert. Boise State University and Cascade Kayak School offer canoeing classes. Good learning tools include the many books on canoeing and Bill Mason's "Path of the Paddle" video. Before paddling the Boise, you must know how to make your canoe go in every direction – forward, backward and sideways. Eddy turns, forward ferries and back ferries are essential skills that are necessary to avoid hazards.

Rivers and their hazards are always changing. Trees fall, diversions are modified. Idaho State law allows irrigators to construct and modify diversions without regard to other interests on the river. Stay in the main channel. This guide only covers major diversions in the main channel. Side channels often have many down trees and additional diversions, as well as electric and barbed wire fences. Flows go up and down. In 1993, the city of Boise almost passed a law prohibiting floating on the Boise at flows over 1500 cfs. The city attorney advised against it, as a law like that might imply the river was safe at lower flows, which would leave the city open to lawsuits.

The river's flow is determined by the release from three upstream reservoirs and how much is diverted for irrigation. Flow information is published every Thursday in the Idaho Statesman. You can also call the US Bureau of Reclamation at (208) 334-9134 or check the website at: http://waterdata.usgs.gov/nwis/uv/?parameter_cd=00065,00060&site_no=13206000 Flow references in this guide are as measured at the Glenwood Bridge.

There is also a gauge in Parma: http://waterdata.usgs.gov/nwis/uv/?parameter_cd=00065,00060&site_no=13213000

During higher flows, the Boise is extremely dangerous and even expert paddlers stay off. The main hazard at flows above 1500 cfs is from the river widening, putting trees and other vegetation lining the river bank in the river. This creates dangerous strainers and sweepers that can cause serious injury or death to paddlers. At lower flows, the river becomes shallow and rocky.

I have enjoyed paddling the river near Boise at flows of 700-2000 cfs. In summer, there may not be enough water for good paddling in downstream portions of the river. In the fall after the irrigation season, there may be a minimum stream flow and tough paddling near Boise and plenty of water for good paddling below Notus.

Conduct

Future access improvements on the river depend on positive relationships between paddlers and property owners. Smile and say “Hi!” to people on the banks as you float by. Pack out what you take in, and carry a litterbag to remove trash left by others. Tread lightly when you portage around obstructions. Stop in downstream towns, fill your car with gas or have a meal. Be sure to say you were canoeing on the river when you spend your money.

USGS Map	River Mile	Description
Lucky Peak	63	Discovery Park Picnic Area Good access, parking, restrooms, and picnic tables. State Park permit or daily vehicle fee required. On Idaho 21 about one mile west of Lucky Peak Dam. This is an ideal place to learn and practice skills you will need on the river- eddy turns, forward and back ferries. At moderate flows, the current is gentle enough for easy upstream paddling. This is a fun place to practice skills at high flows- I’ve enjoyed paddling here at 7000 CFS. There is no other section I would paddle at that high flow.
Lucky Peak	61.2	Diversion Dam Fair access, parking on north side of Idaho 21. Portage on river right. Take out above the buoys, walk up the steep rocky bank, and then portage down the Greenbelt. Put in just past an old cable car on a faint path down the steep bank. Watch for poison ivy at the put in.
Lucky Peak	60	Idaho 21 Bridge Fair access, parking northwest corner. Take the asphalt easement path to the Greenbelt, and then portage down the steep, loose rock bank. Near the river, go east (downstream) to a nice sand beach and big eddy. Stay in the river right channel as you approach Barber Dam. The Barber Pools Conservation Area is above Barber Dam. Signs warning “keep right, portage ahead” are posted starting .5 miles upstream of Barber Dam.
Lucky Peak	58.9	Barber Dam There are many portages on the lower Boise River. Most are unmarked and unmaintained. This is one of two that are well marked and maintained. Take out on river right. The portage starts on an obvious, large wooden staircase on the river right side of the dam.
Boise South	58.3	Diversion - Nampa-Meridian Irrigation District Main Diversion Portage on river right, around the diversion. Put in above Eckert Road Bridge. This portage is on the Harris Ranch Development. Future access depends on favorable relations between paddlers and the developer.
Boise South	58.2	Barber Park Good access, parking, restrooms, picnic tables. Daily vehicle fee required. This is the most heavily used put-in in Idaho and the favorite for thousands of tubers each summer.
Boise South	57.5	Diversion - South Boise Mutual Irrigation Diversion Most tubers float right over this drop. Like many diversions, it can swamp or capsize an open canoe. Portage on river right.
Boise South	57.1	Island Stay in the main channel to the left of this island. If you take the narrow channel on river right, large boulders and concrete slabs block the return to the main channel at the downstream end.
Boise South	xx.x	East Parkcenter Bridge (Bown Crossing) No developed access.
Boise South	56.3	“Damn Dam” - South Boise Water Co. Diversion (Abandoned) Named by the irrigator in the 80’s prior to being abandoned. Portage on either side or run the tongue near center.
Boise South	55.9	“The Weir” - Boise City Canal Co. This diversion, just above Warm Spring’s golf course, is a playground for whitewater kayakers practicing surfing and other tricks. Canoers can run it down the tongue towards river right or portage along the Greenbelt on river left.
Boise South	54.8	Baybrook Court Pedestrian Bridge An orange pedestrian bridge constructed in 2000 spans the river here.
Boise South	54.0	West Parkcenter Bridge Please scout carefully! The current is strong and pushy toward river left. Unsuspecting paddlers could be swept into the bridge piers or shoreline riprap. Keep to river right with a backferry or portage over the gravel bar on river right.
Boise South	52.5	Ann Morrison Park Good access, parking, and restrooms. This is the takeout for thousands of tubers. The best access is the eddy on river left just above the pedestrian bridge over the river.

USGS Map	River Mile	Description
Boise North	51	Boise River Recreation Park – Thurman Mill Ditch Co. LTD Diversion Formerly known as the “36 th street wave”, this is a grand example of a public/private partnership. An old, dangerous diversion was replaced with a modern structure that delivers water for irrigation and forms a wonderful surf wave. There is a portage trail on river right. A pedestrian bridge is just downstream.
Boise North	50.8	Rapids - Farmer’s Union Ditch Co. Diversion (Abandoned) The remains of an abandoned diversion form this rapid. Portage over the wooden footbridge on river right, or scout and run it down the middle. At higher flows, sometimes you can sneak this on the far left. At lower flows, you may be able to line it or do a short “liftover” portage on river left. This is a very rocky rapid and a swim would hurt. River runners look forward to phase two of the Boise River Park, to be developed on this site.
Boise North	49.6	45th Street Access From Chinden Blvd. in Garden City, turn northeast on 45 th Street. 45 th Street dead ends at the river. Decent access and parking on State of Idaho land.
Eagle	48.5	Glenwood Bridge Good access, parking on river right upstream from bridge. Look for sportsman access signs off Riverside Drive. Several paddlers have flipped and at least one canoe was pinned on the Glenwood Bridge in recent years. The current is strong and flows from river left to river right. You need to set up properly and use a strong backferry to run this safely. This may be the most technically demanding move on this section of the river. Portaging is a good option. At moderate flows you can portage under the bridge on river left.
Eagle	46.3	Dam - Little Dry Creek Diversion No one claims ownership of this structure, yet it is maintained and the stream course acts as a flood relief channel. The headgate is used to regulate flows in times of high water. The headgate is a large concrete structure on river right. Some years this diversion is an easy 1 foot drop and fun, other years there is a boulder in the middle of the tongue and portaging in necessary.
Eagle	45.8	Eagle Island - South Channel mile 6.8 Splits the river into two channels for about seven miles. The South Channel is measured on USGS maps as a separate river. The upstream end of Eagle Island is South Channel river mile 6.8.
Eagle	45.8	Eagle Island – North vs. South Channel Both the North Channel and South Channel are canoeable. They are similar in technical difficulty. The South Channel is more frequently paddled and has fewer portages. The North Channel has a more intimate feel. The North Channel is only about 0.5 miles longer but takes more time due to the additional portages. Down trees are common in both the North and South Channels. Be prepared to avoid them. A strong back ferry is a reliable way to maneuver your canoe around down trees and other obstructions.
NORTH CHANNEL ROUTE		
Eagle	45.8	Head of Eagle Island Stay to the right of Eagle Island to enter the North Channel. A lot of gravel is deposited here by high flows. Occasionally, it gets removed. The Pioneer Irrigation District-Eagle Island Checks may or may not be visible. Sometime there is an open channel through the checks and sometimes you need to portage over the gravel at the head of the island. About 1.5 miles down from the head of Eagle Island there is a single lane concrete bridge. This is a private road, the access that Monroc Concrete uses to get to their gravel pits on Eagle Island.
Eagle	43.8	Dam - Ballantyne Ditch Diversion There are a couple of liftovers on gravel bars in the half-mile below the Monroc bridge. Gravel bars and vegetation in this area make the actual diversion difficult to see.
Eagle	42.8	Mace Mace Ditch Stay out of this side channel on river right. Down trees block access to this side channel.
Eagle	42.7	Eagle Road Bridge Fair access under bridge on river right. Limited parking under bridge. If you access the river here, be sure you know which channel you are in. Eagle Road crosses the North Channel about 1.5 miles north of Chinden Road.
Star	40.4	Dam - Middleton Irrigation District Diversion This riverwide diversion offers no clear portage trail and no safe passage. Stay clear of the unprotected radial gate on river right. You can bushwhack a portage over the headgate on river right or through the bushes on river left. I have had better luck on river left just a few feet upstream from the dam. At higher flows, it would be much safer to take out well before the dam. There are a couple more gravel liftovers in the next mile. Flow levels really change this stretch. At higher flows, strainers force a portage. At lower flows, strainers may be on the bank out of the way.

USGS Map	River Mile	Description
Star	39.2	Linder Road Bridge Fair access, limited parking river right. Linder Road crosses the North Channel about 1.7 miles North of Chinden Blvd.
Star	38.6	Dam - Little Pioneer Diversion The river splits below Linder Bridge. The river right channel of the split leads to the Little Pioneer. This diversion is concrete rubble with exposed rebar. Portage over the island that splits the channel.
Star	38.1	Confluence of North and South Channels No access, next takeout is Star, mile 34. Lots of fun twists and turns and an occasional down tree across the river in the next few miles.
Star	34	Dam - Canyon County Water Co. Star Bridge Diversion Fair access and parking on river right just above the dam. The takeout is steep and rocky. The Star River Walk on river right provides a great opportunity to stretch your legs.
SOUTH CHANNEL ROUTE		
Eagle	45.8	Head of Eagle Island - South Channel Route mile 6.8 Stay to the left of Eagle Island to enter the South Channel.
Eagle	4.5	Diversion - Mace Catlin Ditch Co. Diversion - South Channel mile 4.5 Portage on either side (there is no clear path) or scout and run the tongue on river right. I usually take on water here. I like to run this from right to left and eddy out below the diversion to bail out the canoe.
Eagle	4.1	Eagle Road/ Idaho 55 Bridge - South Channel mile 4.1 Fair access and limited parking on the northeast side of the bridge. If you access the river from Eagle Road, be sure you know which channel you are in. The South Channel is about 0.75 miles north of Chinden Blvd. (US 20/26). The North Channel is about 1.5 miles north of Chinden.
Star	1.8	Diversion - Seven Suckers Ditch Diversion - South Channel Mile 1.8 This is a smaller drop. Run it down the tongue. Watch for down trees in the next couple of miles.
Star	1.5	Hatchery Access - South Channel Mile 1.5 The Idaho Department of Fish and Game (IDFG) maintains this access. Take Linder Road 1.5 miles north of Chinden. Then go east on N. Hatchery Road for 0.5 miles, then straight south on Trout Road 0.5 miles through the hatchery to the end of the road and the parking area.
Star	1.2	Dam - Pioneer Irrigation District-Phyllis Canal Diversion - South Channel Mile 1.2 Portage on river right. There is no clear path or landing, just push through the grasses.
Star	0.9	Linder Bridge - South Channel Mile 0.9 Fair access on the northeast side of the bridge, parking along Artesian Rd. on the north side of the river. Be sure you are in the South Channel (about 0.75 miles north of Chinden) if you access the river here. Avoid the Phyllis Canal 0.1 mile south of the Boise's South Channel. The North Channel is about 1.75 miles north of Chinden.
Star	38.1	West end of Eagle Island The North and South Channels rejoin here. Lots of fun twists and turns and an occasional down tree across the river in the next few miles.
Star	xx.x	Emmett - 10 Mile Road Bridge New bridge constructed in 2014. Access TBD.
Star	34	Dam - Canyon County Water Co. Star Bridge Diversion Portage on river right. The take out above the dam is steep and rocky.
Star	33.9	Star Road Bridge Fair access, parking at the northeast corner below the dam. Stay in the main channel below the bridge. Gravel accumulates in this area; expect to do some lining and liftovers. <u>Do not</u> put in at the southwest corner of the bridge. You will end up in a side channel that leads to an impassable head gate with no clear portage trail and an electric fence.
Middleton	29	Lansing Lane Access IDFG access, parking. Two miles east of Middleton Road and one mile south of US 44.
Middleton	28	Midland Blvd. IDFG access, parking. One mile north of Chinden and one mile east of Middleton Rd. Water quality deteriorates noticeably here.
Middleton	26.5	Middleton Road Bridge Fair access and limited parking on the southeast corner under the railroad bridge.
Caldwell	25.1	Airport Access IDFG access, parking on river left at Hubler Field. From US 20/26, 1.2 miles east of Interstate 84: go north on KCID Road 0.8 miles, east on Marble Front Road 0.2 miles, north on Wells Road 0.2 miles, west on Lincoln Road 0.2 miles, and north on KCID Road one mile to the river.

USGS Map	River Mile	Description
Caldwell	22.4	Abutments You'll see the concrete abutments that once supported the Boise Valley Railroad Bridge. Stay out of the channel on river left, which leads to the Riverside Irrigation District Canal. The river slows and turns due south for the next 0.5 miles as you approach the dam.
Caldwell	21.8	River Gates Dam/Access - <i>Farmer's Co-Op Ditch Co. Diversion</i> Stay to the right of the island in the river. Take out on the island above the dam and portage over the steel footbridge that crosses the dam. Access the river here at Emigrant Crossing Municipal Park. Parking is available off River Road on river left just below the Highway Bridge. Watch for the Caldwell Campground on river right 0.25 miles downstream.
Notus	13.8	Notus Road Bridge Access the river on the northeast corner and park next to the bridge or park in Notus one block north.
Wilder	10	Dixie Access IDFG access and parking. Follow US 95, 0.5 miles south of the river. Then go east on Boise River Road. Stay on this paved road for 1.8 miles through several sharp turns. Then go north on a gravel road for 0.1 miles to the river.
Wilder	8	US 95 Bridge Fair access at the northwest corner. At low water, river right is shallow and rocky, requiring some lining to put in or take out.
Wilder	7.8	Portage (?) A gravel bar on river left presents a challenge. The outside bend on river right is choked with down trees. If you decide to run this instead of portaging over the gravel bar, stay tight to the left bank with a strong back ferry.
Parma	5.9	Diversion – <i>Island Highland Ditch Co. Diversion</i> Portage on river right (there is no clear path), or scout and pick a line to run. Avoid the headgates on river left. Watch out for a willow sweeper just below the diversion on river right.
Parma	5	Roswell Rd./Wamstad Road Bridge Access, limited parking northeast corner.
Parma	3.8	Diversion - <i>McConnell Island Ditch Diversion</i> Portage river right or scout and pick a line to run. At low flows, portage river right.
Parma	3.6	Hexon Road Bridge You could access the river here. There is no good put-in or parking. The McConnell Island Ditch Diversion is visible just upstream.
Parma	2	Takatori Access To reach this IDFG access from US 95 at the west end of Parma: take Roswell Road south 0.1 miles. Turn right (northwest) before the railroad tracks on Apple Valley Road for 1.4 miles. Turn west and cross the tracks on Sharp Lane. Follow Sharp Lane for one mile. Just past Bar Diamond, Inc., turn south for 0.1 miles to the river and turn right to the access.
Owyhee, Oregon	1	Almost Done! The Boise River slows and widens as it approaches the Snake River. Lots of down trees and logjams keep things interesting.
Owyhee, Oregon	0	Confluence - Snake River mile 395.4 Snake River confluence. Stay to river right around every island so you don't miss the takeout.
Owyhee, Oregon	Snake River mile 394.5	Fort Boise Wildlife Management Area Good access, parking, and camping. Take US 95 north out of Parma. Watch for the sportsman access sign two miles out of town. Turn left and head straight west for three miles on Old Fort Boise Road. The road goes from paved to gravel (ignore the dead end sign) to paved as you enter the W.M.A. From the entrance it's 0.5 miles on a gravel road to campsites and the Snake River Landing.

River Terms

ABOVE: Upstream from an object in or across the river.

BELOW: Downstream from an object in or across the river.

CFS (cfs): Cubic feet per second. Used to measure the river's flow.

DIVERSION: A dam or partial dam created by gravel, concrete, old cars, etc. that diverts some of the river water for irrigation. Some are very dangerous and must be portaged. Others are barely noticeable and/or have drops that are fun to paddle over.

EDDY: An upstream current found below obstructions in the river. You must learn to identify eddies and get your canoe into and out of them before paddling on the Boise or any other river.

FERRY: To paddle across a river without being swept downstream by the current. The forward and back ferries must be learned before paddling on the Boise or any other river.

HEADGATE: A structure at the entrance to a canal or ditch that controls flow. Can be concrete and big enough to walk over or small. Can be a dangerous strainer when open.

LINING: To maneuver a canoe downstream with ropes (called "painters") attached to bow and stern. A useful shallow water technique that can save a portage. When done upstream, it's called "tracking".

PORTAGE: To carry a canoe and gear around an obstruction in the river, or from one body of water to the next.

RIVER LEFT: The left bank of the river as you are headed downstream.

RIVER RIGHT: The right bank of the river as you are headed downstream.

SCOUT: To look at a rapid or obstruction from shore to help decide whether to paddle it or portage it.

SNEAK: (Sneak route). A narrow opening, usually right next to a river bank that offers clear passage around rapids or an obstruction in the river.

STRAINER: An object in the river, usually a fallen tree that allows water to flow through, but will "strain" boats and paddlers. The current will trap you in the strainer. Strainers are extremely dangerous. You must learn to recognize and avoid them.

SWAMP: To fill or partially fill a canoe with water. The canoe becomes very unstable and hard to control.

SWEEPER: A tree with branches or trunk above the river, but not high enough to paddle under. If you do not avoid a sweeper, you may be swept out of your boat.