Minam River, OR
Exploring Pristine Wilderness Streams
By Grant Richie

July in northeast Oregon is very predictable. If you wanted a forecast for mid-July two years from now, I’d say it would be dry and hot, probably between 90 and 100 degrees. When I started work at 6 a.m. this past July so I could get in an 8-hour day by midafternoon and escape to the Minam River, I expected soothing water in the midst of another 100-degree day. The plan was to take a two-seat inflatable kayak down an old logging road on a dolly. Once at the Minam River, my friend, Jeff, and I would take turns fishing and paddling to the Minam Store.

I often convince Jeff to go on fishing adventures by withholding unnecessary details, such as the possibility that the road may not go all the way to the creek. But since I expected this to be a tame outing, I’d told him everything: Lottie, my wife, would drop us off at the top of the Minam Grade, make the rough return ride to civilization alone, and we’d pull the kayak to the river and even toss in a pack to help quell the heat.

I didn’t take waders. The lower Minam is usually warm enough that they aren’t necessary in midsummer. As we neared the Minam, Jeff noticed dark clouds in the rearview mirror. I assured his fears, saying, “They’ll probably blow right over.”

We met Lottie at the Minam Store, loaded the inflatable and the dolly, and headed up. By the time we reached the top, it began to rain. “No worries,” I said. “It’ll probably be over in 15 minutes.”

Within 100 yards, the drizzle became heavy rain. I paused under a ponderosa and said, “What do you think? Shall we let the heavy stuff pass?”

Jeff shifted a little closer to the tree. “I don’t know.”

Hail began to fall. It quickly grew to the size of marbles. I raced to retrieve our helmets and lifejackets. Suddenly, the marbles were golf balls. When it had first started, we’d broken out beers. The hail had seemed humorous and we laughed. But as the hailstones grew, they began to hurt. We hugged the tree as tightly as possible, which must have been quite a sight: two guys, huddled up close, hugging a tree on a logging road in the middle of an eastern Oregon forest.

The hail pelted us for 20 minutes. I half expected my wife to come back, but when she didn’t, we hurried to the river. It wasn’t hot anymore. I was wet, chilled, and the water felt cold.

Jeff fished while I paddled to stay warm. He caught quite a few small rainbows, but I was more concerned about being cold and didn’t pay much attention.

We’d started on this afternoon jaunt because I wanted to learn the Minam River as well as I knew my other favorite waters and the lower Minam is the only section where I can squeeze in afternoon trips.

Looking at its location and isolation, it should fish better than the nearby Wallowa, which offers exceptional rainbows. Based on the Minam’s pristine headwaters, its direct connection to larger river systems downstream, and its difficult access, it should rival the nearby Wenaha and Imnaha Rivers as home for bull trout. Targeting bull trout on the Minam is illegal; any incidental catch should be kept in the water and quickly released. Nevertheless, they should be there.
The Lower Minam

My first trips into the Minam were all on the lower river, which runs from Horse Basin Creek, a few miles below Red’s Horse Ranch, to the mouth. The river always feels too wide and too shallow, though I’ve found a few places where water runs into basalt walls and boulders the size of cars, forming runs, pools, or at least deep slots.

Decent-size fish can be found in these prime spots. This spring during the intense stonewall hatch, I cast a large orange Hedgehog under an overhanging bluff and saw the back of an 18-inch trout surface, skim across the top, and torpedo my fly. I’ve even hooked some 16-inch rainbows in the lower 5 miles of river, but most of the lower Minam is shallow, producing only small fish in wide riffles. If you explore the lower Minam, there are abundant small fish; if you’re willing to walk miles, you’ll find enough good water to catch larger trout. The best fishing on the lower river is between Cougar, Trout, and Murphy Creeks, and there are other good sections below Meads Flat and in the lower few miles of river.

Most of the problems—shallow water especially—resulted from logging in the lower Minam in the early 20th century. It removed rock outcrops, deadfall, and any other obstructions that might impede floating logs. In short, splash-dam logging removed habitat structure.

The Wilderness

The Minam River originates high in the Eagle Cap Wilderness of northeast Oregon and flows unobstructed for nearly 46 miles to its confluence with the Wallowa River at Minam, a “town” with a store, motel, and one house. Starting at Blue Lake, elevation 7,783 feet, the Minam grows slowly as lakes, springs, and year-round snowmelt trickle down granite slopes. Eagle Cap Wilderness encloses 37 miles of the Minam River.

Anglers in the upper Minam can experience extreme as they pass from hot, arid bunchgrass and ponderosa forests of the lower canyon and climb to brisk, barren, open passes. At 8,000 feet, scraggly trees cling to patches of poor soil on steep granite slopes. But the frigid air recharges your legs, lungs, and spirit. Descending, you drop into beautiful, fertile meadows with water meandering through tall grass. The beauty of white peaks standing guard over unspoiled meadows makes it’s hard to remember that your destination is the river that winds through the deep canyon 3,200 feet below.

But remembering the river is worthwhile. It’s second to none for habitat and fish population. This is not a spring creek or tailwater, so don’t expect big rainbows with huge girths. Trout here run to 6 to 12 inches with a few 16-inch trophies. This is a high mountain river, and terrestrial insects make up much of the fish’s diet during their relatively short growing season.

Early summer brings large stonies with bright orange bellies and latecomers hatch into mid-August. As the last stonies disappear, early October caddisflies arrive, their large orange bellies forming an ideal target on the water. The two large, orange-bellied insects prime the trout to annihilate any large dry flies that come their way, especially Stimulators and Hedgehogs. There are also tiny yellow stonies, and size 16 to 20 turnpenny headcases Copper Johns tied on wide-gap hooks work well as droppers.

As summer progresses, chinook spawn and die. Working your way through peaceful meadows with large dry flies yields serene angling and rainbows grown fat during the chinook spawn.

Fishing doesn’t need to be complicated on the Minam River. Most of the water moves at a fast pace, so fish have to react fast, too. Although the fish take flies willingly, your catch rate rises significantly if you don’t throw your line over the fish. Cast downstream to present your fly first. Many sections of pocket water allow you to fish down-stream and work the best pockets repeatedly without casting again. Simply cast, let your fly drift, lift your rod to bring the fly upstream, and drift again. When fishing heavy, deep, pocket water, I’ve found it takes two or three drifts to make fish surface. The first several drifts may not bring anything up, but once trout see multiple flies going past, you may raise fish on your next five drifts.

The Minam River Dissected

Between Horse Basin Creek and North Minam River is the middle section of the Minam, above the confluence where the Little Minam contributes as much as one-third of the total flow. The middle Minam has the best access and a good balance between flow, habitat, and fish abundance and size. Whitefish make up some of the catch in this section and you’ll occasionally catch (and immediately release) bull trout on nymphs. Fewer rainbows inhabit this stretch, but they’re slightly larger.

The middle section has some of the most diverse water with excellent large pools, deep runs, riffles, pocket water, and log jams. It accommodates dry-fly enthusiasts, nymph anglers, and summer junkies. In short, it’s as a mountain river should be.

Between the North Minam and Trail Creek is the Upper Minam. Like the Little Minam, the North Minam contributes another third of the total flow, so above it, the river is a small mountain river or large creek. This section offers a healthy population of 8- to 10-inch rainbows. Deep pools are less common with more riffles, runs, and pocket water. The farther you go upstream, the more wood—and trout—you encounter. I counted more than 40 logs or logjams between Trail Creek and Elk Creek. That woody 4 miles has some of the most productive water in the whole canyon.

The section from Trail Creek upstream to the lakes can be considered the upper Minam gorge. Above Trail Creek, the banks are granite walls. Small waterfalls are common. Trail Creek divides species below it. I’ve rarely found a brook trout while upstream, I haven’t caught anything else. Introduced Eastern brook trout grow to 12 inches in the plunge pools. Below Blue and Minam Lake is a beautiful meadow where the Minam is small and shallow in summer, but a surprisingly abundant population of 8- to 10-inch brookies hides under rocks, moss, and undercut banks.

If you fish the upper half of the Minam and are unfamiliar with brook trout and bull trout, thumb through your Oregon fishing regulations to find the picture showing a brook trout and bull trout side by side. Once you’ve caught one of each, you’ll have no trouble distinguishing them. If you catch brook trout in the Minam, keep them for dinner because they can spawn with native bull trout and create sterile hybrids.

The Little Minam and North Minam are the two major tributaries, themselves destinations. A map of the Eagle Cap Wilderness shows a trail from Moss Springs following the Little Minam downstream to its confluence with the main Minam. Two miles of trail leave the Little Minam when it enters a narrow gorge with several waterfalls and the trail returns to the stream at Little Minam Meadows. The falls prevent upstream or downstream migration. Above the waterfall is an excellent population of rainbows, more numerous and brilliant than their downstream brethren, possibly because of their genetic isolation.
In the North Minam Meadows, the North Minam River offers spring-creek style fishing. Unlike the Little Minam with its pure, native fish, the North Minam holds brook trout. Crystal-clear water meanders through tall grass with barely a ripple. Crawl to the edge and make short downstream casts. In early summer, brookies are dispersed throughout the meadow, hiding under overhanging banks and tucked in small holes. Late summer finds these brookies forming large pods. You can spend an enjoyable afternoon stalking them.

By Plane, by Horse, by foot, or by Boat
You can reach the Minam by plane, horse, foot, or boat.

The easiest access is to pay for a plane ride to Red’s Horse Ranch or Minam Lodge (see Notebook). This will put you right in the middle of the Minam River, where you can explore upstream or downstream. You can hike, camp, or use accommodations at Minam Lodge. Red’s Horse Ranch is now owned by the Forest Service. Flying in is a popular way to begin a float trip to the Minam Store.

If you are a competent Class III boater, floating out is one of the most enjoyable ways to experience the Minam. Red’s marks the beginning of a 23-mile Class II -III float. Above Red’s should be left to hardcore whitewater enthusiasts. Fishing from the bank is best at flow rates below 500 cubic feet per second (cfs). Whitewater trips are typically done between 500 and 2,000 cfs. Small, lightweight rafts can be flown in and floated out. Ideal flows for a fishing trip in a small raft are between 700 and 1,500 cfs. Keep your load light and a light fishing pole with a 2-lb. leader.

Minam River
NOTEBOOK

When: June-October; prime mid-July through early October.
Where: NE OR east of La Grande and west of Joseph.
Appropriate gear: 4- to 6-weight rod, floating line, 7 1/2-foot leader, 3X or 4X tippet.
Useful fly patterns: Stimulator (orange, yellow, and royal), Humpy (yellow, orange), Elk Hair Caddis, Black Ant, Wooly Bugger, Prince Nymph, Copper John, Flashback Stonefly, attractors, and other standard dry flies.
Necessary accessories: Moisture-wicking clothes for hiking, lightweight backpacking gear if hiking in.
Nonresident license: $16.75/1 day, $31.50/2 days, $46.25/3 days, $58/4 days, $59.75/5 days, $106.25/annual.

I believe the missing link is the lower Minam. It has been turned into a wide, shallow riffle that warms too easily. It may also have been straightened by the construction of the road running for 6 miles on river right. I hope to see the day when the Lower Minam can be protected and restored to make it viable. I am told that if this bottom section were acquired and protected it would be the longest Oregon river entirely safeguarded. Until then, the upper canyon is a treasure to be appreciated.

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