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Exploring the Mighty Columbia 36

By Tim Cahill





From Portland to the Pacific On the Mighty

CLOCKWISE FROM
LEFT, *in Mount Hood's
shadow, a kayaker plies
the Columbia off Hayden
Island; dodging pilings
in Scappoose Bay; the
river east of Washougal.*

Find pleasure or adventure,
or both, along a new water trail
on the West's greatest river.

You don't even have to paddle,
although of course you could.



Columbia

By Tim Cahill

I actually felt sorry for the guy. Kayaking the Columbia, the nation's second-largest river, can be as easy as a lazy float on the old millstream or as demanding a paddle as any on earth. This should have been the easy part. 🐣 He was trying to enter his kayak from the dock, squeezing into the cockpit of a sleek craft that anyone could see was entirely too small for him. It was just after noon on a sunny Monday, and a couple of dozen people lined the Puffin Cafe, a floating restaurant moored to the Port of Camas-Washougal dock, just east of Portland. 🐣 The Puffin specializes in spicy Caribbean food and rum drinks, so the patrons were primed. The guy wriggled around, getting comfortable, and then what the diners saw was a quick splash and the kayak's hull just floating there, upside down, for the better part of a minute. Presently the would-be

Photography by **Andrea Johnson**

“River people,” said my water-trail guide.

paddler bobbed up from under his craft, sputtering and spitting.

An empathetic person might feel sorry for him, but, really, there's no point in wasting time on self-pity. I pulled myself back onto the pier, righted the kayak, squeezed into it once again, and then paddled quickly out into the river with the heat of 48 eyes on my neck.

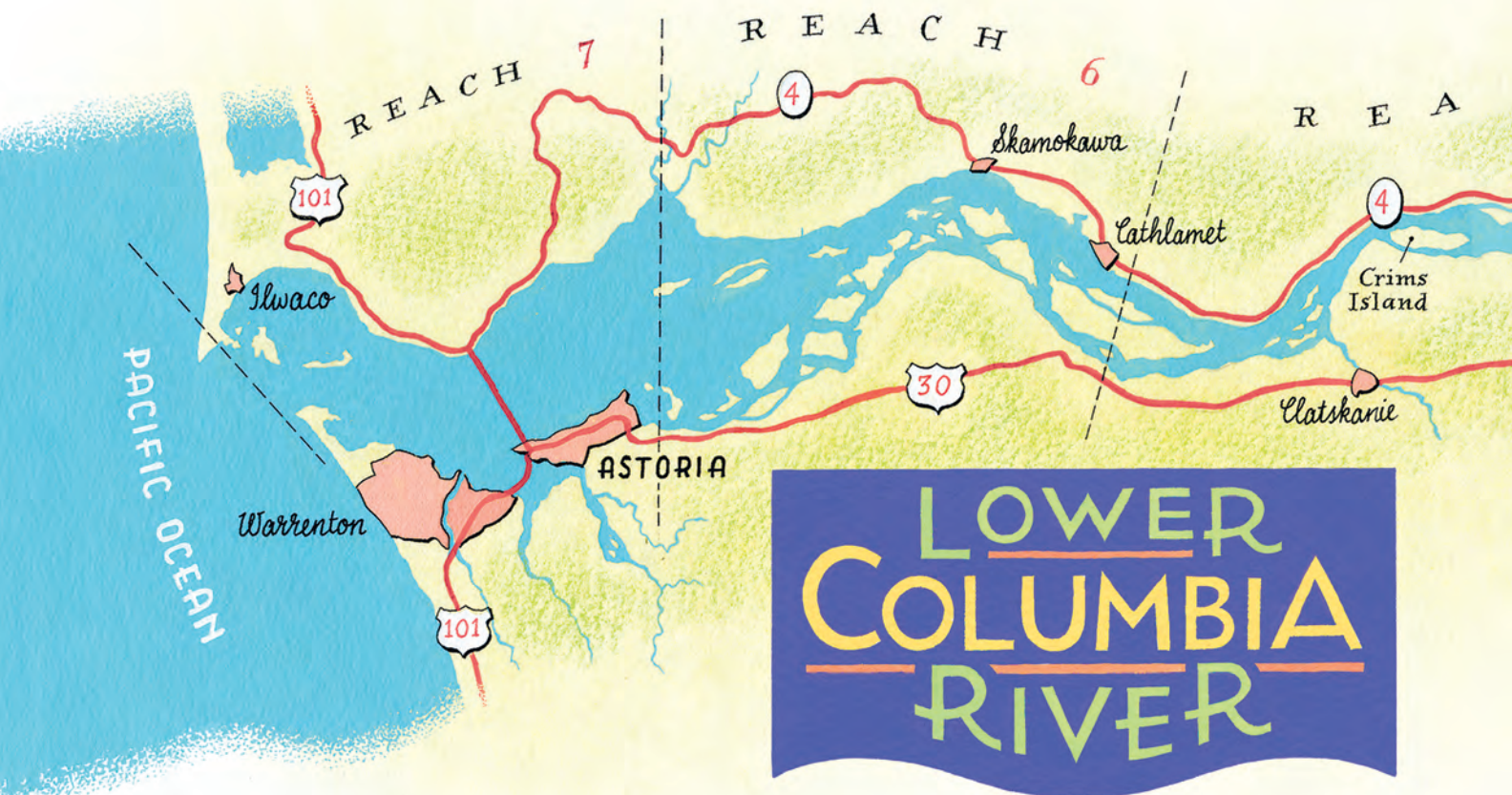
“You OK now?” asked Chris Hathaway, my kayaking partner.

“Sure,” I said. “Nothing like a big dose of humiliation in the first 60 seconds of a trip.”

Chris nodded. He is director of stewardship programs for the Lower Columbia River Estuary Partnership. In that capacity he manages the Lower Columbia River Water Trail, a project devoted to the river's preservation and restoration. It's not

British Columbia and flows 1,270 miles to the Pacific, at which point it is five miles across. It is a busy, hardworking water-course, as it has been since the 1800s. These days, ships full of cars and trucks made in Asia race upriver to Portland while almost a third of U.S. wheat for export goes out to sea past Astoria, Ore. Maritime industries—shipbuilding, oil transport, seafood processing—employ 40,000 workers in the Portland-Vancouver area alone.

Chris and I planned to kayak a few of the reaches, putting in at small docks where we could park a car and then paddling downstream 10 to 15 miles a day. Friends would shuttle the car to our takeout, where we could fasten our kayaks to the roof and drive to the next launch site. If Columbia kayaking offered the



a trail, exactly, nor is it a line through the Columbia's 146 miles west of Bonneville Dam. It is, instead, a series of seven linked stretches of river—“reaches,” Chris calls them—each with put-in and takeout spots for motorless craft such as kayaks. The trail touches areas of cultural importance and natural beauty, both plentiful here, and connects to roads and trails for biking and hiking (see “Wade in the Water at These Nine Parks,” page 42).

Known during the era of discovery as “the Great River of the West,” the Columbia drains most of Washington, Idaho, and Oregon along with portions of Montana, Wyoming, Nevada, and Utah. It starts as a trickling stream near the glacier fields of

opportunity for acute embarrassment—as at the Puffin—it also promised some wickedly soulful Northwest sightseeing.

WASHOUGAL TO VANCOUVER

Just downstream lay the river's most urban stretch. As any schoolkid in the Northwest knows, the Columbia scribes the border between Oregon and Washington. Entering Portland, Chris and I hugged the Washington bank, letting the current carry us into Vancouver north of Government Island and under the bridge on Interstate 205.

The sun shone on the span's cement-white pillars so that

“We’ve learned to share the water here.”

shadows fell like architectural statements, while above, on the roadway, cars and trucks hissed by invisibly. All we could see was the pleasing shadowed symmetry of those immense columns. We took pains to avoid being swept against them, but when safely past we turned broadside and looked back under the bridge. It neatly framed Mount Hood, far to the east, as the snowcapped summit, 11,239 feet high, glittered in the afternoon sun. A light haze of smoke from a forest fire made the mountain shiver, as if seen through a sheen of water.

And then we were paddling near an enclave of minimansions on the Washington bank, all replete with bay windows and widow’s walks and turrets and gables. It was as if each owner had started with the complete Make-a-Mansion kit and instructed

the architect to use every part. Soon the mansions gave way to a mammoth industrial site: the Kaiser Shipyard. We counted 12 concrete bays, each like a 50-yard section of interstate diving down to the water. During World War II, Chris said, this facility launched troop transports and Liberty ships—140 in all.

The abandoned shipyard now abuts Vancouver’s popular Marine Park. Nearby, children splashed in the water along the riverbank. Tugs and barges chugged by in the distance. The Columbia looked to be well over a mile across. As we soaked up the scene, powerboaters sped by, giving us a wide berth.

“Polite powerboaters?” I asked, incredulous.

“River people,” Chris said. “We’ve all pretty much learned how to share the water here.”

More river people. That’s one of Chris’s goals. The Columbia remains an industrial waterway, and the barges move upriver all the way to Idaho. The land, once dry and unyielding, is now irrigated with water from 250 reservoirs on the Columbia and its tributaries. And while the river now flows through fields of





Chris Hathaway, the author's guide on the river, steers his kayak near Crims Island.

we confronted a full half mile of open water. As we paddled back toward the bank, an unfettered wind kicked up whitecaps as far as the eye could see. The chilly water, the wide river, the fields of chop—it was intimidating.

Meanwhile, huge freighters carrying all manner of goods barreled by at 10 to 14 miles an hour—a snail's pace to a driver but not to a kayaker going just a fourth that speed. The freighters kept to the dredged-out ships' channel plotted on our naviga-

tion charts (don't call them maps). Chris and I planned each day's journey to avoid crossing it, but the few times we did we picked a spot where we could see for a mile or more upstream and down. Then we powered across like prisoners on a jailbreak.

Most often, though, we put an island between our route and the channel. In this sheltered world, lazy creeks emptied into the Columbia. Deer stood in grain fields, while dairy cows grazed on the larger islands. In places were somber reminders of the river's depleted bounty. Abandoned canneries and metal sheds for drying nets dotted the banks. Old wood pilings, the relics of defunct logging operations, jutted out of the water like totems to a dying way of life. On the top of these pilings, mini-jungles of ferns and seedling trees and wildflowers exploded out of the rotting wood in an exuberant display—Northwest rain forests in miniature, rebirth from decay.

That night Chris and I took out on Crims Island, a wooded slice of Oregon big enough to hold a small town. We pitched

“The more people get invested in the river, the more they will want to protect and restore it.”

wheat and barley, dams prevent 95 percent of its salmon from reaching their historic spawning sites. Other fish species are dwindling because the fertilizers spread on crops and lawns cause algae blooms and other disruptions downstream. “Good-hearted folks don't know they're killing the river,” Chris said. The more that people use the river, he feels, the more they'll think about such things and their responsibilities.

We paddled under the I-5 bridge, staying to the Washington side, where we pulled around a large yacht moored at a dock and took out just below Vancouver's Red Lion Hotel. We carried our kayaks up a long flight of stairs, then checked into the hotel, where we ate, showered, and slept on crisp white sheets—that's urban kayaking.

RAINIER TO CRIMS ISLAND

The next day we drove downriver to a decidedly less urban spot, parked in a lot full of pickups, and launched in a misty Northwest drizzle. The river was pewter gray, miles across, and hemmed in on both banks by industrial sites. Perhaps a hundred motorboats lined the Columbia's far side, where fish were running. We paddled out into the rain and kept to the Oregon bank.

We felt comfortable hugging the shore, but around a point the land dropped away from us and

At spots on the Lower Columbia River Water Trail are quiet harbors such as this one at Cathlamet, Wash. The tavern hall dates to 1898.



our tents on the northeast beach, on sand dredged from the river, and ate our camp food hungrily, if not with any discernible delight. I asked Chris about the water trail.

"The idea," he told me, "is to get people out on the river in a safe way so they'll become invested in it and want to protect and restore it. It'll also provide some economic benefits for small towns that have lost a lot of logging and fishing jobs. It's a low-impact, environmentally sensitive way to diversify."

I asked Chris what, exactly, his outfit hoped to restore. "There are still water quality problems," he said. Those include traces of legacy toxics, like DDT, and such modern pollutants as dissolved prescription drugs and flame retardants used in everyday products. "All of them end up in fish and birds," Chris said. "We're trying to help the Environmental Protection Agency meet its 2011 goal of lowering the concentration of 'contaminants of concern' by 10 percent and cleaning up 150 acres of highly contaminated sediments.

"We're also hoping to restore 16,000 acres of wetlands. Some



An arresting sight for river travelers: ospreys nesting on abandoned pilings

work has been done here on Crims Island, making new marsh that will become rearing and feeding areas for young salmon."

In the morning we launched early and hit the water exactly right. The Lower Columbia is swayed by the ocean. The current at high tide may be negligible; it may even run upriver. But this day, in the morning's light winds, we caught the ebb tide.

We made 18 miles in five hours, gliding past the rusting canneries, the drying sheds, the forested pilings—all these things that might be eyesores elsewhere but were history here and part of the appeal.

Soon we were in an area of dark basalt cliffs running with silver waterfalls framed in drooping ferns. As forest closed in, we could see mountains shining through the branches. We had the river to ourselves but for trains clacking on the banks and great highballing freighters and seabirds wheeling overhead.

We decided not to paddle out to the Pacific. There, at the

Like to get out on the river?

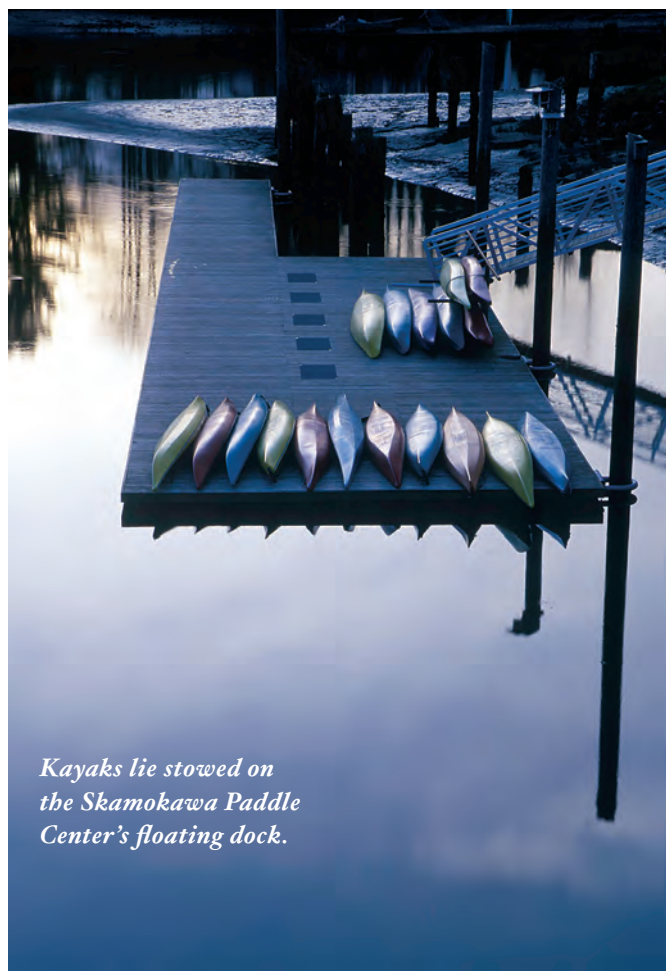
Several Lower Columbia businesses rent boats, offer lessons, book tours, sell gear, provide safety tips, and suggest places to explore at many levels of kayaking skill.

ALDER CREEK KAYAK & CANOE, PORTLAND At Jantzen Beach on Hayden Island facing the marinas and houseboats of North Portland Harbor. 250 NE Tomahawk Island Dr., (503) 285-0464, www.aldercreek.com/pdx.html.

RIDGEFIELD KAYAK RENTALS, RIDGEFIELD, WASH. Good access to protected Lake River and Bachelor Slough. Many paddlers choose to explore Ridgefield National Wildlife Refuge (restricted shore access). Cathlapotle Plankhouse, a replica of one used by Chinook Indians, is open to visitors. 5 Mill St., Slip A8, (360) 727-4520, www.ridgefieldkayak.com.

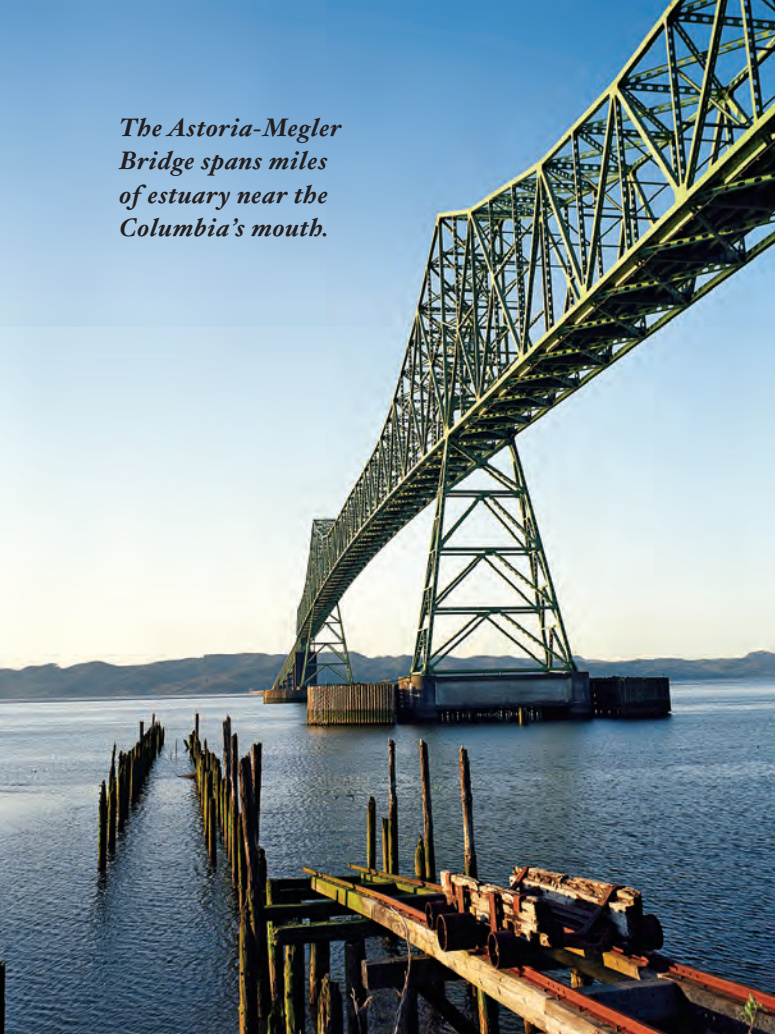
SCAPPOOSE BAY KAYAKING, WARREN, ORE. Great outings for beginners in the protected sloughs and wetlands of Scappoose Bay off Multnomah Channel next to Sauvie Island. 57420 Old Portland Rd., (503) 397-2161, www.scappoosebaykayaking.com.

SKAMOKAWA PADDLE CENTER, SKAMOKAWA, WASH. With its own inn and near a riverfront park with tent or RV sites and yurts. Kayaking nearby includes easy sloughs and creeks as well as waters of the Lewis and Clark and Julia Butler Hansen national wildlife refuges. 1391 W. State Rte. 4, (888) 920-2777, www.skamokawakayak.com.



Kayaks lie stowed on the Skamokawa Paddle Center's floating dock.

The Astoria-Megler Bridge spans miles of estuary near the Columbia's mouth.

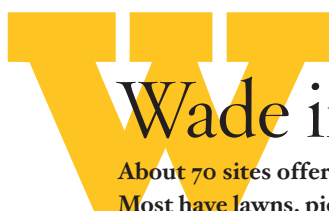


Columbia River Bar, an average of 123 million gallons of river water each minute—half the Mississippi's volume—collides with the ocean, creating a crashing maelstrom with waves as high as 40 feet. Since 1792, over 2,000 vessels have sunk or run aground at the bar—"the Graveyard of the Pacific," it's been called. Charles Wilkes, a U.S. Navy commander, branded it "one of the most fearful sights that could possibly meet the eye of a sailor."

Chris and I were content to study it through binoculars from a hotel balcony in Astoria. It was a fine bright morning, free of the gray that grips Astoria 200 days a year. The Columbia is like that. It will welcome you with sun one day, spit rain in your face the next, and then charm you with forests on pilings, laughing children swimming in protected coves, ospreys soaring in the sky, and deer gazing from the bank. It is a compendium of beauties and terrors, and it will even cough up moments of mortification such as mine at the Puffin. Still, I thought, staring out at the Graveyard of the Pacific, better there than here. ●

TIM CAHILL is a founding editor of *Outside* magazine and the author of eight books, including *Lost in My Own Backyard: A Walk in Yellowstone National Park*. He has kayaked on bodies of water from Alaska to South Georgia Island off Antarctica.

» Travel the Columbia River with AAA, October 10–19. Spend seven nights aboard a coastal steamer on a Cruise West food and wine tour from Portland to Hanford Reach National Monument and back by way of Astoria. For details, visit your local AAA Travel Agency or AAA.com/travel.



Wade in the water at these nine parks

About 70 sites offer easy land access to the lower river. Below are some favorites, arranged alphabetically. Most have lawns, picnic tables, beaches, trails, boat ramps, restrooms, and other amenities. For more ideas, see *The Lewis and Clark Columbia River Water Trail* by Keith G. Hay or visit www.columbiawatertrail.org.

CHINOOK LANDING MARINE PARK, FAIRVIEW, ORE. 67 acres with wetlands and wildlife adjacent to Blue Lake Regional Park on Marine Drive near I-84. www.metro-region.org/article.cfm?articleid=155.

FORT COLUMBIA STATE PARK, CHINOOK, WASH. 593 acres with 6,400 feet of river shore, interpretive center, historical museum, forest trails, and a splendid pocket beach. www.parks.wa.gov/parks.

FORT STEVENS STATE PARK, WARRENTON, ORE. Both estuary and ocean beaches at a historic military site. www.oregonstateparks.org/park_179.php.

FRENCHMAN'S BAR REGIONAL PARK, VANCOUVER, WASH. 120 acres with a huge beach across the river from Sauvie Island on NW Lower River Road west of I-5. www.ci.vancouver.wa.us/parks-recreation.

RIVERFRONT PARK, RAINIER, ORE. New lawns, easy access from Highway 30. www.cityofrainier.com.

ROOSTER ROCK STATE PARK, CORBETT, ORE. 872 acres along the river at the mouth of the Columbia Gorge. www.oregonstateparks.org/park_175.php.

SKAMOKAWA VISTA PARK, SKAMOKAWA, WASH. Sweeping Columbia views on a long walking beach. www.welcometowabkiakum.com/drivingtour.shtml.

WILLOW GROVE PARK, COWLITZ COUNTY, WASH. 60 acres, large beach. On Willow Grove Road off Highway 4. www.co.cowlitz.wa.us/publicworks/parks.

WINTLER COMMUNITY PARK, VANCOUVER, WASH. 12.5 acres, no boat ramp. 6400 Beach Dr. off Highway 14. www.ci.vancouver.wa.us/parks-recreation.