

Owyhee Reservoir (SE Oregon)

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A ten hour, 630 mile mostly Interstate drive from Bellingham will take you to the launch at Leslie Gulch, an area that reminded my friend and I southern Utah. Go in May to early June for a full pool and nice weather.

When we were there, mounds of cumulosity obscured the cauldron above and made for cool paddling and fantastic shadows that raced across huge rock faces and sagebrush plains. Light afternoon showers help the sage release its intoxicating fragrance.

Paddle uplake about four miles and camp, shower and soak in a the 103 degree newly named Echo Rock Hot Spring. h silica content. This was the beginning of a pleasant routine we referred to as the Owyhee Spa where we would get hot (in the sun or in the hot spring) and then plunge into the cool water of the reservoir three or four times a day. The hot spring is on the left about an hours paddle south from the launch .

After a repack back at the launch on day two, we paddled slowly down to our next camp at Craig Canyon. We hiked back through the brilliant light gazing upon the mahogany colored iron oxide seeps on white pumice and black volcanic cores thumbing through red and orange cinder fields dotted with pale green bunch grass and intensely violet tiny flowers. Shortly after our dinner eaten huddled under my umbrella during a brief shower, we bedded down upon a grassy bank up canyon. That night hissed with insects (heard, not felt) and an old moon's shadow swept across the canyon walls.

The next day's paddle took us to what became our base camp for the next three nights. At the base of the "Honeycombs" is a tree fringed cove a mile across with sagebrush meadows sloping towards upthrusting red rock. Late that afternoon we hiked up one of it's steep rocky canyon's to the shelter of an overhang and watched a shower make every leaf and rock shimmer. Each step reveled another wonder. Light green velvety mullein gardens grew out of a golden sand wash framed by blood red rough textured rocks. The canyon wrens cascading call and the cliff swallow's air ballet followed us everywhere.

Greg happened to pitch his tent under the branches of a tree that was home to a family of three long eared owls. Their wide eyes stared back through us as we looked at them with our binoculars. They kept Greg awake at night with their constant high pitched squeals and occasional droppings of regurgitated furballs and toenails hitting the roof of his tent. At first light, coyote's would yip and howl just paces away from camp.

The trips climax was the next days hike along the Honeycomb highway; a wide gravelly four mile wash leading into a gnarled Zion-esque canyon whose rock core had partially dissolved and left large and little pockets everywhere. The landscape was constantly interesting, especially the huge intensely red and black rock monoliths jutting up through the smooth sandy slopes looking like earth's monuments to wonder and awe. We saw one female bighorn sheep of a herd reported to number in the hundreds. We agreed that next time we would make a two or three day base camp at the end of this wash and explore the many side canyons.

Later, in the twilight's light rain we sat under the umbrella, a flashlight hanging underneath, and played gin while sipping Port. In the shadows, many small bats cut quick close corners within an arms length of us.

Early the next morning I climbed up a sagebrush slope to drink my coffee and listen to the doves coo. The sun struck the rock pinnacles making them shine like birthday candles and, as the sun's light intensified, trumpet shapes grew larger on the meadows below.

That day we paddled up to the base of the unshapely "Nanny's Nipple" which perhaps was named for its many springs. This was our only paddle in the hot sun and our Spa routine continued. We enjoyed lunch in the shade of one of the few trees in sight. Back in camp after napping in my hammock strung in the shade of the cottonwoods, I watched Western Tanagers and Bullock's Orioles darting from tree to tree while big sucker fish flopped around by the shore.

On our last evening on the water, we watching a lightning storm flash by on one side and then more lightning on the other side of us the next morning. Our four hour paddle back to the launch was mostly shaded by rapidly expanding puffball clouds. We were happy to learn from the sheriff in his boat that the few dozen small cabins on the reservoir are leased and are being removed as the leases expire. Honeycomb Cove, Echo Rock Hot Springs, and the rest of the Owyhee Breaks area may one day gain the National Park status for which it has been proposed and decidedly deserves.