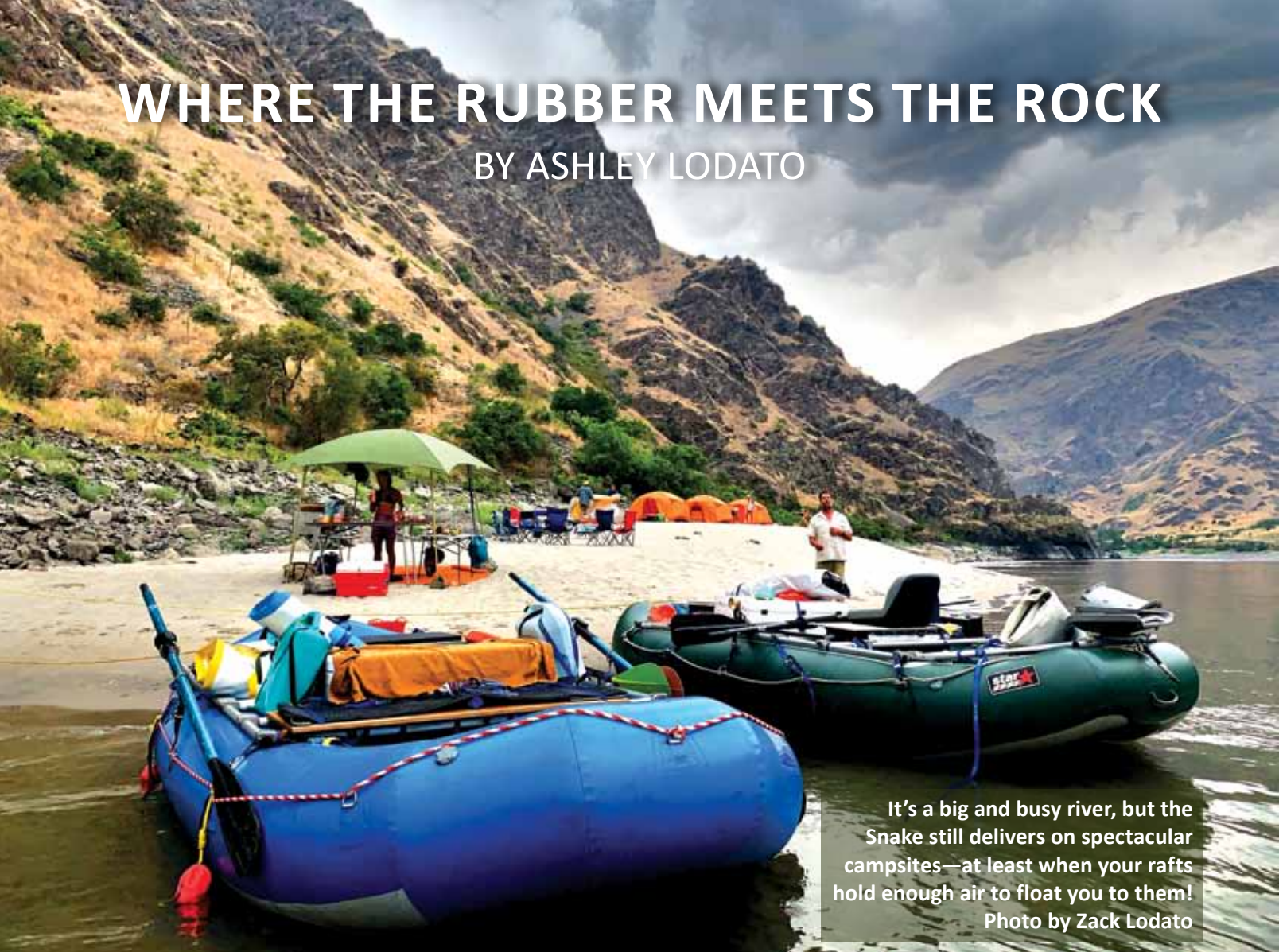


WHERE THE RUBBER MEETS THE ROCK

BY ASHLEY LODATO



It's a big and busy river, but the Snake still delivers on spectacular campsites—at least when your rafts hold enough air to float you to them! Photo by Zack Lodato

PERHAPS WE SHOULD consider ourselves lucky that in something like 130 collective years and thousands of collective river miles, my siblings, our spouses, and I had never before experienced a punctured raft. After all, we'd wrapped canoes, pinned kayaks, and lost paddles. Wasn't popping a raft an inevitable component of river running? Somehow for us, thus far, it had not been.

Despite months of date negotiations, meal planning, and packing from our separate locations around the Pacific Northwest, each summer my brother and sister and I find ourselves driving to launch sites telling each other that this year's trip is going to be the least organized, most egregious display of dishevelment in rafting history. "We are a total horror show over here," we promise each other, using a slightly different

adjective. Each year we're sure that *this year* will be the one we've forgotten some crucial item—toilet paper, sunscreen, stove fuel; that *this year* we will have to cook over the campfire, navigate the river with no guidebook, or fashion an oar blade out of a piece of driftwood. But never once did it cross our minds (at least, not the forefront of our minds) that *this year* would be the one where we put a hole in a raft.

August 2019, I suppose, marked the end of innocence.

But let's not get ahead of ourselves. The trip started inauspiciously, with my realization that I had forgotten my swimsuit. In retrospect, this was a blip so minor as to be laughable, as was the final casualty of the trip: the broken SCAT machine at the take-out. But at the time, just moments from

launching at Hammer Creek for a six-day trip on the Lower Salmon, realizing I had left my swimsuit at home seemed less of an oversight and more of a foreshadowing. If I couldn't remember my swimsuit, what else might I have forgotten?

There are a lot of things you can't get in White Bird, Idaho, population 91, and typically swimsuits would be one of those things. But the serendipity that seems to accompany river trips with mysterious frequency delivered once again. When Mi'chelle (pronounced MEE-Shell) at All Rivers Shuttle learned of my predicament, she went into her own dresser drawers, and in an unrestrained display of generosity—especially given how many river runners she encounters each year—produced not one but two brand new swimsuits, tags still on, and practically forced them into

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my willing hands. Problem solved. Oh that our next hurdle, presented a mere 48 hours later, were so easily cleared!

The Lower Salmon is not a particularly technical river, with only a few big rapids and fairly decent lines through all of them at most levels. Still, as with any moving water, there are places to get in trouble, and one of our rafts had the misfortune to discover one such place, when the left bow tube of a Star raft proved to be no match for the center rock at the top of Snowhole Rapid. But to bypass the 30 fairly uneventful but magical river miles between the Hammer Creek launch and Snowhole Rapid without a mention would be to neglect to give the river its due.

It takes less than a day to surrender to a river. Once rubber (or vinyl, or urethane) meets water, our internal rhythms succumb to the tempo of the river. The stresses of juggling schedules to sync up, the planning and packing, the shared spreadsheets for gear and food, the last-minute gear orders, and the fierce protection of the ice supply on the long drive—all evaporate from our



River-running cousins perched on a SUP
Photo by Bronwen Lodato

consciousness as the gentle slap of waves on the sides of the boat and silky feeling of sand underfoot become our accepted—

albeit temporary—reality. Once we cast off from the launch ramp, life begins anew.

Despite its reputation as the short straw of the Salmon River runs, outclassed by the more glamorous and lottery-controlled Middle and Upper Main forks of the Salmon, the Lower Salmon never feels like a consolation prize. The river itself is magnificent, the terrain is varied and interesting, the water is warm, and the beaches are remarkably pristine, especially for a stretch of river with very little administrative oversight.

More than just a special place, though, the Lower Salmon represents for my siblings and our families a bit of an idyll—a distinct swath of time of devoted completely to the pursuit of fun. Framed by rust-colored basalt columns and glittering sandbars, the Lower Salmon is a state of mind. Our kids enjoy being with us (or they put on



Signs of those who passed this way before
Photo by Zack Lodato

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The first rays of sun hit camp in time for breakfast.
Photo by Zack Lodato



a very convincing display of it); the adults get time for intimate connection, as we get into the groove of river time and find that in addition to rowing and paddling and swimming and loading and unloading, we also have time for leisurely conversations, which we drift in and out of throughout the week on the river.

For a time, we're not the parents who embarrass our children or nag at them; instead we are people who jump into the water from cliffs and belt out 80s rock tunes at the top of our lungs around an elevated metal fire pan. Which is to say that we still embarrass the kids, but somehow their humiliation is softened by the suspended reality that is river life.

When we reached Snowhole Rapid on the third day of our trip, we scouted, as we always do. Even though we've run the same line through Snowhole on all of our trips,

and even though another party ran the rapid immediately in front of us, reminding us of the line, old Outward Bound habits die hard, and are indeed still alive and well in our party consisting of five former Outward Bound instructors and the raft passengers at our mercy. So we scouted. Unsurprisingly, we selected the exact same line as years prior and which the raft party ahead of us had just run.

The first two rafts ran through without incident, and my husband and I rowed back up to the base of the rapid to take some photos of the third raft. We watched the raft approach the top of the rapid and begin to drop. Their line was slightly left, but not enough to worry anyone. As the raft gained momentum it got pulled farther left, just enough to glance off the large rock at the top of the rapid and knock the left oar out of the oarlock, and then realigned

and streamed through the rest of the rapid without incident.

Once it was clear that the raft had made it through upright and with all riders still onboard, we hooted at the passengers, pumping our raised fists and laughing at their slightly missed line. Strangely, however, the passengers did not laugh back or shake their heads in chagrin. They sat with gazes fixed forward grimly, like mastheads, as the rower got the oar back in the lock and began pushing forward with dogged determination.

Opposite Top: *Unloading after Snowhole Rapid on a postage stamp beach*
Photo by Bronwen Lodato

Middle: *Examining the damage and trying to keep a positive outlook*
Photo by Piper Lodato

Bottom: *Riverside raft repair*
Photo by Piper Lodato



Just as I was thinking, ungenerously, “What a bunch of babies; they can’t even laugh at themselves for missing a line,” my husband, who rarely worries about anything, said to me “It looks like they’re floating a little low.” It was then that we noticed that the front left tube of the raft was almost entirely under water.

As the raft moved downstream, it slumped further and moved sluggishly. Drifting into the first possible landing site, a tiny patch of sand between two large rocks on river left, the raft moved barge-like, its passengers silent and singularly focused, the front left frame beginning to dip below the surface of the water.



Once we secured the raft onshore, I reached under the water to the limp tube and ran my hands along it, expecting to find a hole.



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Preparing the patch
Photo by Piper Lodato

It took a moment for my tactile sense to register with my brain, that what I was feeling was not the exterior of the tube, but instead the interior. Instead of running my hands along the outside of the tube, I had inserted my hand into what turned out to be a nearly contiguous 17-inch tear running parallel to the tube, a few inches below waterline. I stood up, a little shaky. “Guys,” I said. “It’s a big rip.”

Forming a bucket brigade, we unloaded and derigged the raft, reversing the process that we had gone through at Hammer Creek just three days earlier. Once everything was on shore, we flipped the raft—with some difficulty, because the river

bottom dropped steeply just offshore, so the people at the far end of the raft were working chest-deep in water.

When the raft was overturned with the left tube propped on a rock, we all stood in awestruck horror for a moment, gazing at a rip that was so much bigger than any we had ever imagined that it seemed almost surreal. *This is not us*, we thought to ourselves, *perched on this postage stamp of sand with a popped raft and no place to set up camp. This is not us, with nearly 50 miles of river between us and the take-out. This is not us, with a rented raft with a hole you could put a body through, and no idea of how comprehensive the repair kit is.* We’d

never opened the repair kit for a rented raft before; now the contents of such a kit would determine the future of our trip.

But Mi’chelle came through with the repair kit just as she had with the swimsuit, and we soon located a long strip of grey vinyl that seemed custom cut in anticipation of exactly this tear. All we had to do was round the edges.

Thus commenced an afternoon of routine river activities for most of us—eating lunch, swimming, even using the groover—while the three guys busied themselves with Raft Repair 101, complete with reading instructions for the various glues and solvents (written in 6-point font, necessitating the borrowing of the reading glasses of one of the elders on the trip), drying, sanding, measuring, cutting, gluing, waiting, inflating. When the tube held air, we all cheered, then quickly uttered a silent prayer as we flipped the raft back over. *No bubbles, no bubbles, no bubbles*, we begged.

There were bubbles. Flip, dry, glue, wait, inflate.

Bubbles.

The word “duct tape” was uttered, but the urge was swiftly squelched. We were not Barbarians; we would conduct riverside raft repair in a civilized manner. The Tear Aid tape included in the repair kit, however, was at that point deemed to be not only a perfectly legitimate repair material, but also strategically necessary—as in, “our last hope”—and it was applied with loving care, as well as more silent prayers.

Inflate. Flip. Wait. Cautiously apply pressure to the tube. One tiny bubble rose to the surface. With almost comical complicit denial, we all studiously ignored it and proclaimed the raft ready to reload, which we did with haste, as thunder and darkening skies made Snowhole Canyon feel even more ominous than it had three hours before, when we were faced with



Feeling for bubbles
Photo by Piper Lodato

a sinking ship. The lightning storm and accompanying downpour held off just long enough for us to reach a larger spit of sand at the far end of the canyon, and we hopped on to dry land to wait out the storm on shore.

But we lucked out with an empty beach, and after dinner and a round of impromptu glow-in-the-dark poi ball performances, we fell asleep.

After disaster is narrowly averted, life, for a time, shifts into sharper focus. The first spears of sunrise glowing golden on cliff tops. Waking up to the spiraling trill of the canyon wren. A nimbus of water droplets dancing back to the river's surface with each stroke of the oars. Chukkar pheasant chortling busily on shore. In *Gift from the Sea*, author Anne Morrow Lindbergh writes about life rushing "back into the void, richer, more vivid, fuller than before." Lindbergh's context is the experience of being alone, but the same thing happens after one has glimpsed potential calamity, and emerged on the other side. Life, we remember with renewed vigor, is beautiful. On the heels of Snowhole Rapid, we were reanimated, infused with a fulfillment

Riverside celebration
Photo by Zack Lodato

that would have seemed almost arrogant, were we not still so shaky considering what might have been.

Sure, we were the scrappy party with a 15-year-old perched on the tube of the stricken raft, pump in hand, giving the boat a hit of life support every 20 minutes. But hey, at least we weren't a forlorn group of stragglers crammed on a single raft with another piled high with the frame, boxes, and shrunken tubes of the third. Beyond relieved, we were, in fact, slightly jaunty.



As we tend to do with any experiences involving necessity being the mother of invention, we learned a lot about riverside raft repair: chiefly, that we will never head downriver without first confirming the presence of a beefy repair kit for each raft, and will bring extra materials just in case. But with the raft puncture now well behind us, I suspect the incident will, for the younger kids at least, just become one more river trip memory for the anthology that we're building, one tributary at a time.

Our Salmon River trips are punctuated by reminders of trips past. "Oh!" someone will exclaim, pointing to a beach, "There's where we saw the dead sturgeon!" or "Hey, that's where Mike got stung by the bee." Even the kids, some of whom started floating these rivers when they were just toddlers, remember remarkably specific things about various places on the river. "That's where Owen got ejected from the boat," or "We had costume night on that beach." We now can rightfully claim, "That's where we popped the raft." And this memory, like all the rest, will be affixed as if with a vinyl adhesive to the consciousness of everyone in our group. The river has woven itself into our collective memory, a tight fabric binding us to these moments, this river, these people, this life.