

To: Idaho Paddlers Website
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SUBJECT: Paddling the Lower Bruneau River

June 6, 2025 revision

June 28, 2024 original

Write up for submission to **Idaho Paddler's Website** (companion site to *Kath and Ron's Guide to Idaho Paddling* book – which we love, have used extensively and have both editions).

LOWER BRUNEAU RIVER

- Bruneau River: floodplain, below canyon to CJ Strike Reservoir.
- 2025 updates underlined.

Search on 'Bruneau River' and you'll get many hits about an adventurous whitewater raft trip down a remote canyon in extreme southwest Idaho. However this lower Bruneau River float starts just below the canyon run take-out, runs thru the sedate floodplain then the backwaters to CJ Strike Reservoir. My lovely bride and I are huge fans of the most excellent book, *Kath and Ron's Guide to Idaho Paddling*. We've done many of their trips since 2015 all across our beautiful state and have a soft goal of doing them all. **So, based on that experience, we think this Lower Bruneau River trip is the perfect addition to the Kath & Ron paddling canon.**

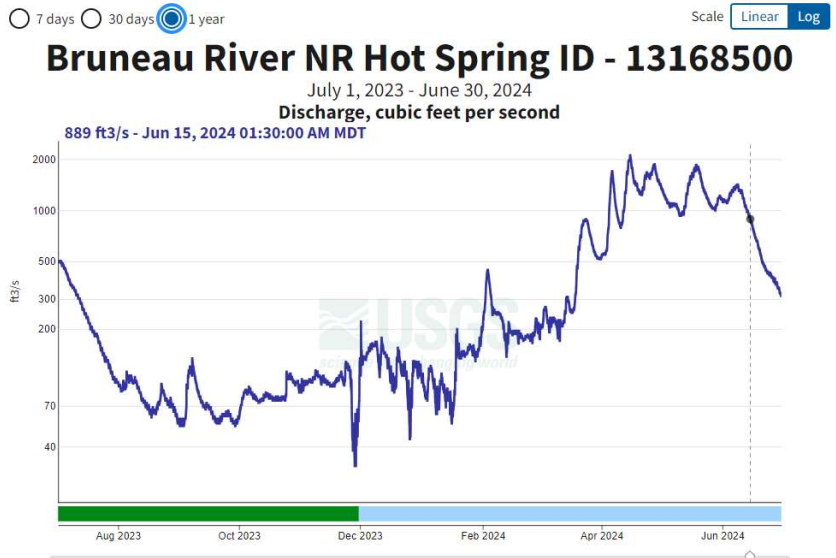
I could find no information on this stretch from a paddler's perspective. I have fished small sections of it and bird hunted along the stretches that border a couple Wildlife Management Areas (WMAs) and could tell it held paddling promise. I finally made good on my goal to explore it for paddling.

- (Can I claim First Descent? Yeah, right, me and John Wesley Powell. Still this is apparently a very undiscovered gem of a stretch for Class I & II paddlers.)



Basic Stats

- **Difficulty:** Class 1 (1.3). Nothing approaching Class II - except for a dangerous Low Head Diversion Dam that ~~can~~ should be portaged.
- **Season:** Late May, June into July
- **USGS Gauge:** Bruneau River NR Hot Spring ID – 1316850
 - **Date Run:** June 28, 2024
 - **Flow on Run Date:** 377 cfs
 - Flow on May 30, 2025: 848 cfs
 - **Gauge Height:** 5.5 feet
 - Gauge Height on May 30, 2025: 6.3 feet
 - **Historical** (July 2023-June 2024):
 - **Peak Flow:** 2000 cfs in April/May.
 - **'Average' Flow:** 200 cfs August thru March.
 - **'Ideal' Flow:** It wasn't bad at just under 400 cfs so, what, anything under 1000 cfs would be safe? Which means a short season, mostly in June. Just a guess.
- **Distance:** 14.1 miles.
- **Time:** I was on a solo scouting mission in an inflatable kayak to see if it would be a suitable canoe trip for my lovely bride and myself. I paddled the entire stretch, stopping for a brief lunch and a couple short water breaks. Took me right at 5 hours.
- **Put-in:** Bridge at Hot Springs Road / Hot Creek Road junction.
 - **Getting there:** turn east onto Hot Springs Road off Highway 51 in downtown Bruneau, travel eight miles to bridge at junction with Hot Creek Road. Parking and put-in just below bridge on river right.
- **Take-out:** Jacks Creek Campground and boat launch (no fee) on CJ Strike Reservoir. Excellent free and accessible parking.
 - **Getting there:** Two miles west of Bruneau on Highway 51 (after crossing the Bruneau River – take a look) Highway 78 splits off and



heads towards Grandview. Take Highway 78 for two miles, turn right at Jacks Creek Campground sign, follow gravel road for another mile to the end where you will find boat launch, parking and a pit toilet on the eastern end of CJ Strike Reservoir.

- **Alternate Put-in / Take-out:** the Highway 51 bridge over the Bruneau River, one mile west of the City of Bruneau, though less than ideal, can be utilized to take-out after the top 10.5 miles or put-in to float the bottom 3.5 miles. The upstream side is private property while the downstream side is Idaho Dept of Fish & Game WMA access. A WMA off-highway parking lot (no fee, year-round access) is located a quarter-mile further to the west. There is a small pull-out at the bridge that can be used for temporary load / unload.

- **Watercraft:**

- Perfect for canoe, kayak, inflatable kayak and stand-up paddleboard.
- Although 90% of this full stretch would comfortably accommodate full-sized rafts and drift boats at 400 cfs I'd guess higher flows would be preferable for those larger craft in a few spots.

- **Major obstructions:**

- Low Head Diversion Dam across entire river 6 miles down from put-in. Approximate 3-foot drop. Easy to see and react to.
- ~~Some paddlers may decide to run it. Does not appear dangerous.~~
Caution! I have since learned that no matter how innocent they may look Low Head Dams are extremely dangerous for paddlers. Learn about the dangers here:
<https://paddling.com/learn/how-to-spot-and-avoid-low-head-dams-when-paddling>



- I portaged on river left / diversion side which was OK. River right looked better both for take-out above the dam and put-in below but I cannot report on the existence or condition of a trail around dam on that side.

- **Minor obstructions:**

- Sweepers exist but are readily seen and negotiated for paddlers with basic skills.
- Plenty of uprooted and floodwater-driven trees piled up along the banks in the upper section but easily avoided and not hazardous.
- In the four miles between the Low Head Diversion Dam and Highway 51 bridge there were four 'fences' (braided rope or single wire)

stretching across the river that are easy to spot and slip under – at least in lower flows. Likely more dicey in higher flows. These are not permanent and may change over the years.



- Not really an obstruction but the last mile or two becomes reservoir backwater so is braided and marshy. Check it out on Google Earth to see what to expect. Pretty much stay left and in what appears to be the main channel in order to paddle all the way to the main reservoir and not get caught in a dead end.
- **Shuttle:** 13 miles. Highways 51 and 78 are not primary routes but always have constant though not heavy mostly local ag truck traffic.
 - Depart Jacks Creek Campground take-out, turn left on Highway 78, merge with Highway 51 eastbound in about two miles.
 - **Option 1:** one-tenth of a mile after merging onto Highway 51, turn right onto Hot Creek Road, then eleven miles - about half of it gravel - to Hot Springs Road junction, bridge and put-in.
 - **Option 2 (Recommended):** Continue on Highway 51, turn right onto Hot Springs Road in downtown Bruneau, eight paved miles to Hot Creek Road junction, bridge and put-in.
 - **Shuttle craft:** suitable for vehicle, motorcycle, bicycle.
- **What to Expect:**
 - (Again, this was late June at just under 400 cfs.)
 - Other than the dangerous Low Head Diversion Dam at 6.1 miles the river is broad and flat. Nothing approaching Class II rapids along the entire 14-mile stretch.
 - Some of the bends will keep you on your toes but nothing daunting.
 - I did have to walk my IK over a few riffles at just under 400 cfs so more of that would be necessary as the flow continues to drop.
 - After going under the Highway 51 bridge just west of Bruneau at about 10.5 miles in the river narrows a bit and curves more but doesn't pick up speed for the final 3.5 miles ultimately turning into to slow, marshy reservoir backwater.

- At full flow, 2000 cfs-ish, it would **not** be possible to go under the Highway 51 bridge (I took a look when I was thru there in April 2024).
 - May 30, 2025: there was only 3-4 foot clearance under the bridge (848 cfs / 6.3 ft gauge height).
- **Wildlife:** Waterfowl, heron, deer, muskrat, carp.

Again, **Thank you** so much, Kath and Ron, for compiling and published *Kath and Ron's Guide to Idaho Paddling*. It is an excellent resource. Your extensive, thorough work has produced an Idaho treasure.

We hope you find this report on the Lower Bruneau River to be helpful and useful and worthy of being included with your paddles. It is our pleasure to contribute in some small way to your fine work from which we have derived so much enjoyment. Contact us anytime with questions or comments.

Sincerely,

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