

Smith River Montana, October 1 - 7, 2023

We thought from the start — February 2023 — that a fall trip on the Smith was a long shot. Smith permits are hard to get — about 1500 permits for 15,000 applications. But that mainly reflects the applications for ‘high season’ paddling — April through mid-July. After that the flows drop dramatically, most boaters disappear, and the river rangers relax. My application for an October 1 launch was optimistically based on a fairly regular bump up of flows in late September and early October.

With no other RMCCers winning lottery permits this year, I had 15 “want to goes” and started a waiting list in April. In September, 10 were just waiting to see if flows bounce back in early September. Later in the month, when flows looked promising, we were all watching the weather. But in mid-September, as flows looked like they would stabilize above 150 cfs (120 cfs was my bottom line), the weather started to look pretty stinky. But on September 28, with acceptable predictions from wunderground.com, windy.com, ventusky.com, and a meteorologist friend-of-a-friend providing a custom prediction for the area, three hardy souls (Janet and Tracy Hays and I) decided to drive the 11+ hours to Camp Baker, MT for our October 1 launch.

Our weather was unsettled, but reasonable. We packed our three solo kayaks under low hanging clouds, scurried through a brief sprinkle as I filed our permit fees (\$60 per person for non-residents) and paperwork at the Camp Baker kiosk. The sprinkle stopped and we never had rain while packing, unpacking, setting-up or taking-down camp, nor as we paddled. We had only a short shower during one of our reconnaissance hikes. Storms generally came and departed very quickly while in camp

and we generally had shelter from a tarp (thanks Tracy and Janet!). But it was cold most nights — in the mid-30s one night — and hand numbing cold with wet gloves the first day. We dealt with short days and cold evenings with two roaring fires thanks to firewood left by other boaters and huddled around a paint can wax fire on two other nights. Janet and Tracy's guitar serenades and Fireball kept us from spending too long in our tents. By our 6th day, it was sunny and warm enough to paddle without jackets, but still chilly at night and before the sun filled our campsite in the morning.

If you are considering a fall Smith River paddle, there are a few differences between high season floats and our fall float:

- Past the high season, boaters can camp at the Camp Baker put-in the night before launch — we did not as it threatened to be cold and rainy. But the nearby White Sulphur Springs Spa Motel (for me) and a town parking lot (Tracy and Janet in their van) worked well.
- Self-registration was first-come-first-serve at the Camp Baker put-in with intended campsites chosen by putting golf tees into a pegboard.
- No ramp time slot was required for packing — we showed up when we wanted and packed on the beach adjacent to one private raft trip of two boaters (Travis and Wes) and one commercial trip of 15, including 2 gear rafts, a couple of fishing rafts and a couple of drift boats.
- Trip length is limited to 4 nights during high season. Our trip was a leisurely 7 days with 2 layover camps. Summer layovers are not permitted in the middle sections of the canyon; we had no restrictions and layed-over at two hiking spots.

- Boaters on the River — the park allows 7 trips of 15 to launch each day during the high season. Over our 7 days, we saw only 18 rafters (groups of 15+2+1 — on days 1 and 2), heard about one canoeist (from Travis and Wes), passed 3 wading fishermen, and talked with a couple of locals on an ATV while we took a short hike looking for a spring. It was glorious to have the canyon to ourselves and there was camaraderie among the few we encountered.

The river at a steady 180 cfs was a class I paddle with lots of channel finding and rock dodging, especially on the first day. Even the biggest rapid, first thing on our last day, was more of the same — rock dodging — but just bigger rocks.

Our layover days gave us ample opportunity for hikes from Sunset Cliffs and Fruenhofer camps – up and out of the canyon to views of the rolling Montana ranchlands and forests. An additional stop for a hike to a cave with petroglyphs was cut short – after a steep trail with two established rope assists – by a precipitous entry to the cave (bring your own rope for that one).

Our fall colors were beautiful — no aspen and few cottonwoods, but beautiful yellows and reds in the shrubs and grasslands contrasting with the grey/white limestone and, eventually, blue skies. We saw few blooming wildflowers, but lots of mushrooms and several white tail and one mule deer, bald and golden eagles, king fishers, dippers, nuthatches, solitaires, mergansers, geese, magpies, crows, bats, chipmunks, a mouse, a swimming snake, and heard great horned owls most nights. There were fewer water birds than we expected. We were prepared for bear with our food in bear vaults and bear spray, but saw no sign of them.

Based on our experience, a fall Smith trip would be a great addition to our RMCC schedule — for the hardy and flexible — and we THINK that you can just show up at the put-in, self register, and launch rather than submit/win a fall launch date for the lottery. Or a trip might at least be more flexible on the actual launch date – depending on the weather. But more on that possibility for next year.

Put-in at Camp Baker - 180 cfs



View of our first night camp



The river



Staying warm with wax pots and fires









View from the top



View from the cave hike



Scramble towards a cave



Rolling hills on the last day



Take out at Eden Bridge

