

WEEKLY

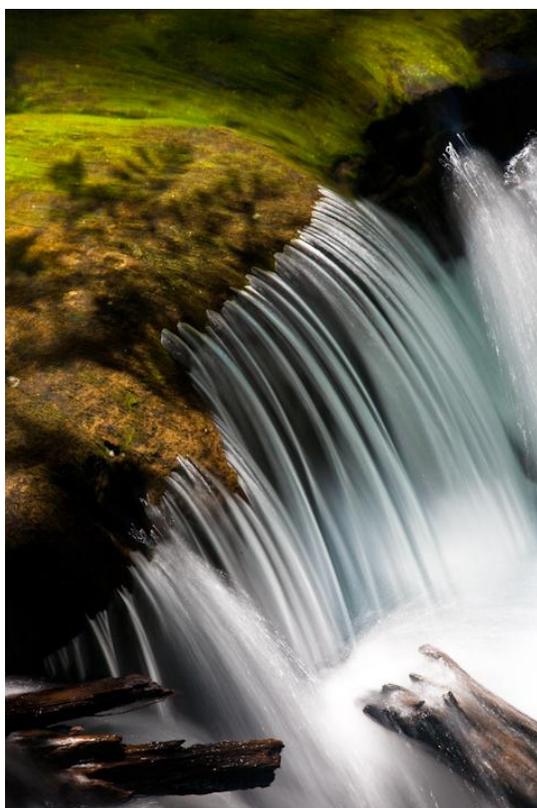
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OUTDOORS

Up the River

RUMINATIONS ON THE SAUK

STORY AND PHOTO BY JOHN D'ONOFRIO · WEDNESDAY, JULY 25, 2012



Wild and Scenic: This “official” designation, bestowed upon some of the Pacific Northwest’s choicest rivers, says it all, don’t you think?

After all, the “scenic” part of the title promises beautiful tumbling water muscling its way beneath banks of luxurious and verdant forest. So far, so good. But it’s the “wild” part that really turns my crank.

The energy, the rip-roaring *joie de vivre* of crashing whitewater, froth airborne in the morning sun—that’s what really gets me going. All those negative ions, that rush of wind off the water and the freshest wind ever. It stimulates the brain.

The Skagit Wild and Scenic River System was established by Congress in 1978. Including the Skagit, Sauk, Suiattle, and Cascade rivers, it encompasses more than 150 river miles of more-or-less untamed watercourses—a veritable fantasyland of aquatic wonders. Swift, turquoise water beneath the forest canopy and milky glacial torrents plunge down from the snowbound heights, engorged by the heat of the summer sun.

It was time to go up the river.

Jesse and I headed up the Mountain Loop Highway, south out of Darrington, beside the blue-green Sauk. The summer sun sparkled on the exuberant water as we drove through shadow-stippled forest, quickly leaving the pavement behind.

We pulled off the road and set up camp beside the wild rumpus of the river in a hidden grove of ancient cedars, branches covered in velvety moss. The Sauk was roaring with snowmelt after a string of hot, sunny days. Mostly foam with swirling eddies, like nebulae, behind the rocks that rose like resolute fangs in the amaranthine flow, it pulsed like the heartbeat of the Earth.

We climbed down the rocks to the river’s edge and plunged ourselves into the torrent with unrestrained whooping, hanging on to rocks in the whipsaw current, enlightened by the icy water (instant ice cream headache).

We dried off on the riverbank in the late afternoon sun and contemplated the landscape. The Sauk River Country is quintessentially Pacific Northwest, with thickly forested slopes rising from the deep, dark river valleys to snow-dappled ramparts.

The river itself is free-spirited, all froth and tumult, dancing through sunshine and shadow. It produces an overpowering sound. When camping

beside the Sauk, one must speak loudly to be heard. It's best to listen anyway.

As evening fell, we sharpened sticks beside the fire to roast our habanera turkey dogs. We ate our dinner beneath the cloudless sky (no tent needed) and reminisced about other camps beside other rivers—so much water under the bridge. We rolled out our sleeping bags beside the fire and lay quietly in the flickering light of the dying embers, listening to the river's nocturne beneath a banquet of stars.