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Deep snowpack should make for a long, fun summer on the Middle Fork Salmon River in Idaho

STANLEY, Idaho – (March 14, 2017) – Whitewater rafting fans should get pumped up for what promises to be a fabulous river season on the Middle Fork of the Salmon River this summer with deep snowpack in the mountains and excellent streamflows predicted for a long season of summer fun.

“It doesn’t get any better than this!” says Jared Hopkinson, owner of *Rocky Mountain River Tours* in Stanley. “The snowbanks are huge in Stanley, and it’s still snowing.”

Mountain snowpack readings in the Salmon River Basin in Central Idaho are showing about 135 percent of normal snow-water equivalent, meaning that the basin has a robust snowpack in the mountains of Central Idaho. The Middle Fork of the Salmon River is one of the most popular week-long river trips in the United States, flowing 100 miles through the 2.3-million-acre Frank Church-River of No Return Wilderness, the largest forest wilderness area in the lower 48 states.

“When you have a great ski season as we’ve been having, the water cycle continues into the summer, when we should have a great whitewater season,” adds Clint Frank, owner of *Middle Fork River Tours* based in Sandpoint and Salmon.

Some outfitted customers have seen the large amounts of snow, rain and flooding in the western United States, and they are worried about whether river levels will be too high when the Middle Fork summer season starts in June. But Frank is not worried, and neither are other Middle Fork outfitters.

“I’d love to have a year like this every year,” he said. “All of it is super-manageable. You just want to make sure you go with experienced guides who have the skills and equipment to ensure you’ll have a safe trip.”

Overall, a good water year means that the river flows will create fun whitewater rapids, flood waters will clean up and replenish the many beach camp sites on the Middle Fork, the watershed will be recharged for a long summer season, and the flows should make for good fishing trips from July through September. In recent years, the peak flows have occurred in April and May, prior to the beginning of the whitewater season.

This year, it’s unclear exactly when the peak runoff will occur, but the melt has begun. Exactly how high the Middle Fork will be flowing in June will depend on how much more precipitation falls in Central Idaho, and how warm it gets in April and May, says Ron Abramovich, water supply specialist for the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) in Boise.

“Things are good, and they keep getting better,” Abramovich says. “My advice is to be patient, know your limits, and enjoy the summer when it gets here.”

“Looking at the last several years, the trend has been that we lose the bulk of the runoff in the pre-season time frame, and that’s perfect,” adds Steve Zettel, owner of the *Idaho Wilderness Company* in Challis. “Last year, we had a lot of really nice warm days in June.”

Even if the weather gets cold on the river, the Middle Fork outfitters carry wet suits and rain gear for guests, and they have large camp tarps to keep folks out of the rain during the evening. Outfitters also have the latest in high-tech rafting equipment, with light, highly maneuverable self-bailing rafts for negotiating rapids, and all of the safety gear.

If peak flows occur in June, Middle Fork outfitters have safety guidelines for deciding whether to launch a trip at Boundary Creek, or fly in guests to Indian Creek. The river gauge at Boundary Creek is what outfitters watch to determine their course of action.

“People don’t need to have a great fear of booking early June trips,” says Dustin Aherin, owner of *Idaho River Adventures*. “We are professionals at what we do, and the safety of our guests is of paramount consideration.”

Aherin likes to book trips in May, when the Middle Fork canyon is deep green, and all kinds of wildlife are down at low elevations, making them easy to see from the river level. “In May and early June, it’s a totally different feeling down there in the canyon, it’s such a vibrant scene with all of the elk and deer, black bears, bighorn sheep, and mountain goats down by the river. I love to be down there at that time of year.”

Jerry Hughes, owner of *Hughes River Expeditions* in Cambridge, said he likes what he sees in the mountain snowpack. “It looks like a heck of a good water year,” says Hughes, who has been running the Middle Fork since the 1970s. “I’ve seen other years like this, and I think we’re going to be just fine.”

Having the fly-in option to Indian Creek is a bonus, he says. “It’s really nice to have that flexibility.”

During the trip, Diane Yupe of the Shoshone-Bannock Tribes gives river floaters a short orientation on the Native American peoples who resided in the Middle Fork country. Outfitters stop to view pictographs – ancient drawings on rocks that can be viewed as part of the trip. Middle Fork floaters, including outfitted guests, pay daily user fees to fund Yupe’s employment on the Middle Fork each summer. Here’s a [video](#) with information about the cultural history.

To book a trip with a Middle Fork outfitter, go to the [Middle Fork Outfitters Association](#) web site to search for the right outfitter for you. Each outfitter is a little bit different in terms of how they do their trips, food, fishing, hiking, adventure, history, interpretation, and more.

For more information, contact: [Grant Simonds](#), Executive Director, [Middle Fork Outfitters Association](#), 208-867-2138.

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