

Around the West

News, Views, and Piscatorial Pursuits

Oregon: Upper McKenzie River/Story and photos by Glenn Zinkus



Originating in the lava fields and the forest of Oregon's Central Cascades Range, the McKenzie River emerges from the crystalline waters of Clear Lake before coursing more than 90 miles west to merge with the Willamette River.

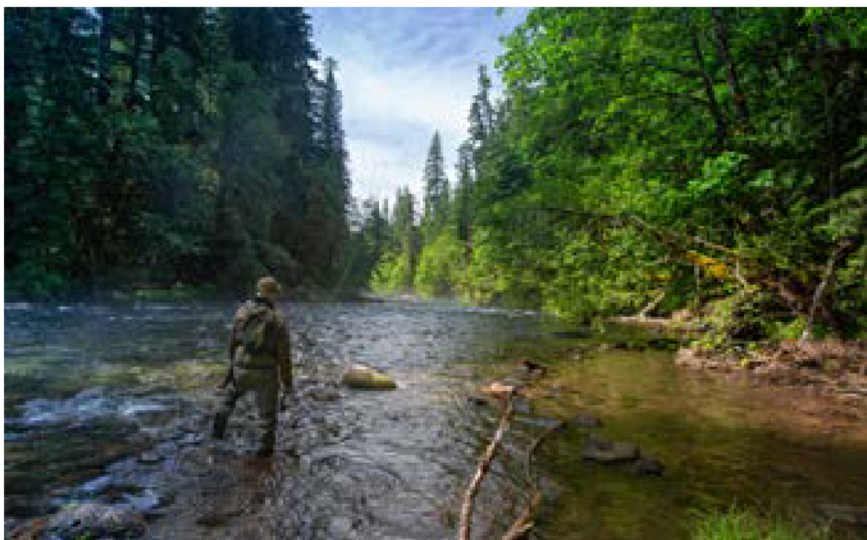
The upper McKenzie, from Sahalie Falls to Blue River, is a rough-and-tumble river flowing over boulders and snaking swiftly through mountainous topography. This 25-odd-mile stretch of river holds wild redband and cutthroat trout in cold-water riffles and pools.

Fish up to 12 inches are typical, but there are pockets with large redbands, and landing a 16-inch fish on the upper McKenzie is distinctly possible.

The upper McKenzie is accessible to boating anglers from seven boat launches between Ollalie Creek and Blue River, and to hiking anglers along the 26.5-mile McKenzie River National Recreation Trail. The trail provides good foot access along the river and is also a popular mountain bike track. The hiker crowd is most concentrated in the Blue Pool, Sahalie Falls, and Koosah Falls areas. Downstream from this upper stretch, people are sparse and the fishing is better. The floatable reach of the upper McKenzie begins at the Olallie boat launch site, 12 miles upriver of McKenzie Bridge.

Easy access to the trail is available from campgrounds, boat ramps, and bridge crossings. At first glance, the trail seems to skirt along miles of fast riffles and rapids. Many of the fishing opportunities are not obvious and require some brief bushwhacking, a scramble down the bank, or even minor canyon traverses to get to the slower edges and numerous hidden pockets. These spots are ideal for intrepid anglers who enjoy the challenge of finding hidden trout habitat.

Throughout this stretch of the McKenzie, anglers often find trout looking up for dry flies during the prime summer and fall season. The river produces near-constant hatches of caddisflies, including robust October Caddis in the autumn, along with hatches of Pale Morning Duns, Pale Evening Duns, Blue-Winged Olives, Golden Stoneflies, and even Green Drakes. The trout are not overly selective, and often when the fish are not keying on some specific large insect, a Parachute Adams or a Purple Haze works well. That said, in these roily waters, I fish dry flies that are more



heavily dressed than usual to get the attention of trout and to ride high through the swift flows. Other essential dry flies include the Foam Elk Hair Caddis, Chubby Chernobyls, Norm Wood Specials, and mayfly patterns to match specific hatches, such as PMDs and Green Drakes. Nymph anglers should carry Golden Stonefly nymphs, Pheasant Tail Nymphs, Perdiggers, Mega Princes, and Possie Buggers.

This is also a fun fishery for anglers who enjoy swinging flies with a 3- or 4-weight trout Spey rod rigged with Scandi-style lines. Try soft hackles, along with nymphs and streamers. In fact, in the many places where you must wade right alongside high, steep banks, trout Spey gear is the more practical for reaching lots of prime water.

To reach the upper McKenzie from Interstate 5 at Eugene, take exit 194A and merge onto Oregon State

Route 126 going east. The west end of the McKenzie River Trail is on your left after you pass through McKenzie Bridge, which is 55 miles east of I-5. From east of the Cascades, follow US Highway 20 westerly from Sisters 26 miles to Santiam Junction; turn left at the junction and continue on US Highway 20 for 3 miles to a left (south) turn onto SR 126. Continue past Clear Lake, and past Sahalie and Koosah Falls. The better fishing along the upper McKenzie is downstream from these attractions. Deer Creek Road is one of the easternmost walk-and-wade access points, and turns right (north) off the highway 1.75 miles south from Olallie Campground. The Frisell boat launch site, another good upper-stretch access site, is 4.5 miles south of Olallie Campground and 7.3 miles east of McKenzie Bridge.





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