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## Minam River, OR

### Exploring Pristine Wilderness Streams

By Grant Richie

**J**uly in northeast Oregon is very predictable. If you wanted a forecast for mid-July two years from now, I'd say it would be dry and hot, probably between 90 and 100 degrees. When I started work at 6 a.m. this past July so I could get in an 8-hour day by midafternoon and escape to the Minam River, I expected soothing water in the midst of another 100-degree day. The plan was to take a two-seat inflatable kayak down an old logging road on a dolly. Once at the Minam River, my friend, Jeff, and I would take turns fishing and paddling to the Minam Store.

I often convince Jeff to go on fishing adventures by withholding unnecessary details, such as the possibility that the road may not go all the way to the creek. But since I expected this to be a tame outing, I'd told him everything: Lottie, my wife, would drop us off at the top of the Minam Grade, make the rough return ride to civilization alone, and we'd pull the kayak to the river and even toss in a six pack to help quell the heat.

I didn't take waders. The lower Minam is usually warm enough that they aren't necessary in midsummer. As we neared the Minam, Jeff noticed dark clouds in the rearview mirror. I assuaged his fears, saying, "They'll probably blow right over."

*The author hooks a fish on the lower Minam on a solo pack-rafting trip that began at Bearwallow Trailhead and ended at the Minam Store.*

We met Lottie at the Minam Store, loaded the inflatable and the dolly, and headed up. By the time we reached the top, it began to rain. "No worries," I said. "It'll probably be over in 15 minutes."

Within 100 yards, the drizzle became heavy rain. I paused under a ponderosa and said, "What do you think? Shall we let the heavy stuff pass?"

Jeff shifted a little closer to the tree. "I don't know."

Hail began to fall. It quickly grew to the size of marbles. I raced to retrieve our helmets and lifejackets. Suddenly, the marbles were golf balls. When it had first started, we'd broken out beers. The hail had seemed humorous and we laughed. But as the hailstones grew, they began to hurt. We hugged the tree as tightly as possible, which must have been quite a sight: two guys, huddled up close, hugging a tree on a logging road in the middle of an eastern Oregon forest.

The hail pelted us for 20 minutes. I half expected my wife

to come back, but when she didn't, we hurried to the river. It wasn't hot anymore. I was wet, chilled, and the water felt cold.

Jeff fished while I paddled to stay warm. He caught quite a few small rainbows, but I was more concerned about being cold and didn't pay much attention.

We'd started on this afternoon jaunt because I wanted to learn the Minam River as well as I knew my other favorite waters and the lower Minam is the only section where I can squeeze in afternoon trips.

Looking at its location and isolation, it should fish better than the nearby Willamette, which offers exceptional rainbows. Based on the Minam's pristine headwaters, its direct connection to larger river systems downstream, and its difficult access, it should rival the nearby Wenaha and Imnaha Rivers as home for bull trout. Targeting bull trout on the Minam is illegal; any incidental catch should be kept in the water and quickly released. Nevertheless, they should be there.





At North Minam Meadows, the stream resembles a spring creek more than a high-mountain freestone river. Brook trout are abundant here, often hiding beneath undercut banks.

## The Lower Minam

My first trips into the Minam were all on the lower river, which runs from Horse Basin Creek, a few miles below Red's Horse Ranch, to the mouth. The river always feels too wide and too shallow, though I've found a few places where water runs into basalt walls and boulders the size of cars, forming runs, pools, or at least deep slots.

Decent-size fish can be found in these prime spots. This spring during the intense stonefly hatch, I cast a large orange Hedgehog under an overhanging bluff and saw the back of an 18-inch trout surface, skim across the top, and torpedo my fly. I've even hooked some 16-inch rainbows in the lower 5 miles of river, but most of the lower Minam is shallow, producing only small fish in wide riffles. If you explore the lower Minam, there are abundant small fish; if you're willing to walk miles, you'll find enough good water to catch larger trout. The best fishing

on the lower river is between Cougar, Trout, and Murphy Creeks, and there are other good sections below Meads Flat and in the lower few miles of river.

Most of the problems—shallow water especially—resulted from logging on the lower Minam in the early

canyon experience extremes as they pass from hot, arid bunchgrass and ponderosa forests of the lower canyon and climb to brisk, barren, open passes. At 8,000 feet, scraggly trees cling to patches of poor soil on steep granite slopes. But the frigid air recharges your legs, lungs, and spirit.

## Hedgehog



PHOTO BY NORTHWEST FLY FISHING

<b>Hook:</b>	Daiichi 1710, sizes 4–6
<b>Thread:</b>	UNI-Stretch Nylon in orange or yellow or single strand floss
<b>Tail:</b>	Moose body hair
<b>Wing:</b>	Natural deer hair
<b>Legs:</b>	Brown rubber legs

stoneflies with bright orange bellies and latecomers hatch into mid-August. As the last stoneflies disappear, early October caddisflies arrive, their large orange bellies forming an ideal target on the water. The two large, orange-bellied insects prime the trout to annihilate any large dry flies that

20th century. It removed rock outcrops, deadfall, and any other obstructions that might impede floating logs. In short, splash-dam logging removed habitat structure.

## The Wilderness

The Minam River originates high in the Eagle Cap Wilderness of northeast Oregon and flows unobstructed for nearly 46 miles to its confluence with the Wallowa River at Minam, a "town" with a store, motel, and one house. Starting at Blue Lake, elevation 7,703 feet, the Minam grows slowly as lakes, springs, and year-round snow-melt trickle down granite slopes. Eagle Cap Wilderness encloses 37 miles of the Minam River.

Anglers in the upper Minam canyon experience extremes as they pass from hot, arid bunchgrass and ponderosa forests of the lower canyon and climb to brisk, barren, open passes. At 8,000 feet, scraggly trees cling to patches of poor soil on steep granite slopes. But the frigid air recharges your legs, lungs, and spirit. Descending, you drop into beautiful, fertile meadows with water meandering through tall grass. The beauty of white peaks standing guard over unspoiled meadows makes it's hard to remember that your destination is the river that winds through the deep canyon 3,200 feet below.

But remembering the river is worthwhile. It's second to none for habitat and fish population. This is not a spring creek or tailwater, so don't expect big rainbows with huge girths. Trout here run 6 to 12 inches with a few 16-inch trophies. This is a high mountain river, and terrestrial insects make up much of the fish's diet during their relatively short growing season.

Early summer brings large stoneflies with bright orange bellies and latecomers hatch into mid-August. As the last stoneflies disappear, early October caddisflies arrive, their large orange bellies forming an ideal target on the water. The two large, orange-bellied insects prime the trout to annihilate any large dry flies that

come their way, especially Stimulators and Hedgehogs. There are also tiny yellow stoneflies, and size 16 to 20 tungsten beadhead Copper Johns tied on wide-gap hooks work well as droppers.

As summer progresses, chinook spawn and die. Working your way through peaceful meadows with large dry flies yields serene angling and rainbows grown fat during the chinook spawn.

Fishing doesn't need to be complicated on the Minam River. Most of the water moves at a fast pace, so fish have to react fast, too. Although the fish take flies willingly, your catch rate rises significantly if you don't throw your line over the fish. Cast downstream to present your fly first. Many sections of pocket water allow you to fish downstream and work the best pockets repeatedly without casting again. Simply cast, let your fly drift, lift your rod to bring the fly upstream, and drift again. When fishing heavy, deep, pocket water, I've found it takes two or three drifts to make fish surface. The first several drifts may not bring anything up, but once trout see multiple flies going past, you may raise fish on your next five drifts.

## The Minam River Dissected

Between Horse Basin Creek and North Minam River is the middle section of the Minam, above the confluence where the Little Minam contributes as much as one-third of the total flow. The middle Minam has the best access and a good balance between flow, habitat, and fish abundance and size. Whitefish make up some of the catch in this section and you'll occasionally catch (and immediately release) bull trout on nymphs. Fewer rainbows inhabit this stretch, but they're slightly larger.

The middle section has some of the most diverse water with excellent large pools, deep runs, riffles, pocket water, and logjams. It accommodates dry-fly enthusiasts, nymph anglers, and streamer junkies. In short, it's as a mountain river should be.

Between the North Minam and Trail Creek is the Upper Minam. Like the Little Minam, the North Minam

contributes another third of the total flow, so above it, the river is a small mountain river or large creek. This section offers a healthy population of 8- to 10-inch rainbows. Deep pools are less common with more riffles, runs, and pocket water. The farther you go upstream, the more wood—and trout—you encounter. I counted more than 40 logs or logjams between Trail Creek and Elk Creek. That woody 4 miles has some of the most productive water in the whole canyon.

The section from Trail Creek upstream to the lakes can be considered the upper Minam gorge. Above Trail Creek, the banks are granite walls. Small waterfalls are common.

Trail Creek divides species: below it, I've rarely found a brook trout, while upstream, I haven't caught anything else. Introduced Eastern

brook trout grow to 12 inches in the plunge pools. Below Blue and Minam Lake is a beautiful meadow where the Minam is small and shallow in summer, but a surprisingly abundant population of 8- to 10-inch brookies hides under rocks, moss, and undercut banks.

If you fish the upper half of the Minam and are unfamiliar with brook trout and bull trout, thumb through your Oregon fishing regulations to find the picture showing a brook trout and bull trout side by side. Once you've caught one of

each, you'll have no trouble distinguishing them. If you catch brook trout in the Minam, keep them for dinner because they can spawn with native bull trout and create sterile hybrids.

The Little Minam and North Minam are the two major tributaries, themselves destinations. A map of the Eagle Cap Wilderness shows a trail from Moss Springs following the Little Minam downstream to its confluence with the main Minam. Two miles of trail leave the Little Minam where it enters a narrow gorge with several waterfalls and the trail returns to the stream at Little Minam Meadows. The falls prevent upstream migration. Above the waterfall is an excellent population of rainbows, more numerous and brilliant than their downstream brethren, possibly because of their genetic isolation.







The author searches a pool on the Little Minam River. Above a series of waterfalls and chutes, the rainbows of the Little Minam outshine their downstream cousins in terms of color and brilliance (above). Most brook trout are 10 inches or less in the upper Minam, but an occasional big fish shows up (below).

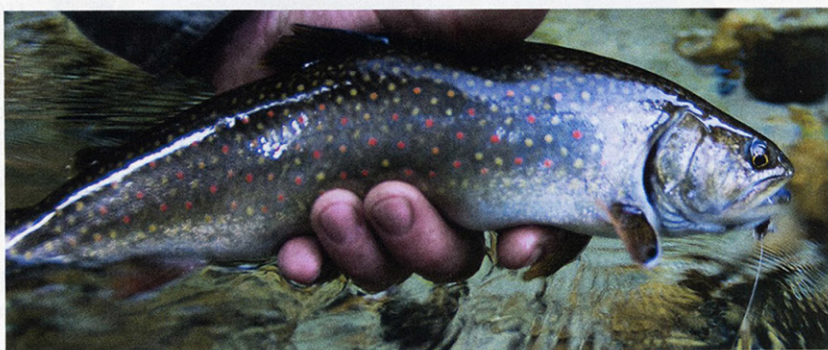
In the North Minam Meadows, the North Minam River offers spring-creek style fishing. Unlike the Little Minam with its pure, native fish, the North Minam holds brook trout. Crystal-clear water meanders through tall grass with barely a ripple. Crawl to the edge and make short downstream casts. In early summer, brookies are dispersed throughout the meadows, hiding under overhanging banks and tucked in small holes. Late summer finds these brookies forming large pods. You can spend an enjoyable afternoon stalking them.

**By Plane, by Horse, by Foot, or by Boat**  
You can reach the Minam by plane, horse, foot, or boat.

The easiest access is to pay for a plane ride to Red's Horse Ranch or Minam Lodge (see Notebook). This will put you right in the middle of the Minam River, where you can explore upstream or downstream. You can hike, camp, or use accommodations at Minam Lodge. Red's Horse Ranch is now owned by the Forest Service. Flying in is a popular way to begin a float trip to the Minam Store.

If you are a competent Class III boater, floating out is

one of the most enjoyable ways to experience the Minam. Red's marks the beginning of a 23-mile Class II - III float. Above Red's should be left to hardcore whitewater enthusiasts. Fishing from the bank is best at flow rates below 500 cubic feet per second (cfs). Whitewater trips are typically done between 500 and 2,000 cfs. Small, lightweight rafts can be flown in and floated out. Ideal flows for a fishing trip in a small raft are between 700 and 1,500 cfs. Keep your load



light because at least a couple of logs or logjams demand portage. Hardshell and inflatable kayaks easily make it in flows as low as 500 cfs, and good quality pack rafts can handle the low 300 cfs range. For the best balance between good fishing and good floating, rent a self-bailing craft from the Minam Store and float out when the river is between 300 and 500 cfs. An inflatable kayak should be flown in, but with a pack raft, you can hike.

There are too many hiking options to list here, but some are better because of where they intersect the river. I often start at one trailhead and hike out a different way, having my wife (Minam Shuttle Service) shuttle my vehicle.

Be sure to call the Minam Store (see Notebook) and get a copy of the Eagle Cap Ranger District topographical map.

For the lower Minam, you might begin at the confluence of the Minam and Wallowa and fish your way upstream. The trail doesn't reach this far, but you can walk the river. One and a half miles upstream on river left is a low-water ford to reach 50 miles of trail clear to Minam Lake.

Between Minam and Elgin, at the top of the Minam Grade, is a locked gate into timber company ground currently open to the public for nonmotorized use. To hike to the lower end of the wilderness without negotiating a steep mountain trail, this is a great spot to begin. To gain access to the lower wilderness—a harder hike with better views—find the Cougar Ridge Trail and follow to the mouth of Trout Creek. This trail's lower end is exposed, steep, and hot in summer. Save it for spring or fall, or if you must hike it in summer, go in the morning or evening.

The best trailheads for the Middle Minam are Moss Springs, Bearwallow, and Bowman/Francis Lake. Moss Springs is heavily used by horses and hikers, but follows a gentle slope and makes an enjoyable hike. It's also the best trail for the Little Minam River.

Bearwallow begins on the wilderness area's north side and goes to Standley Guard Station, offering spectacular views of the Wallowa Valley and Bear Creek drainage. You reach the Minam River near Wallowa Creek, several miles upstream from Red's.

Bowman/Francis Lake Trail starts on the Lostine River. Hike over the mountain past John Henry Lake, through Wilson Basin, down to North Minam meadows and, eventually, the main stem.

For the upper river, try Buck Creek or Two Pan.

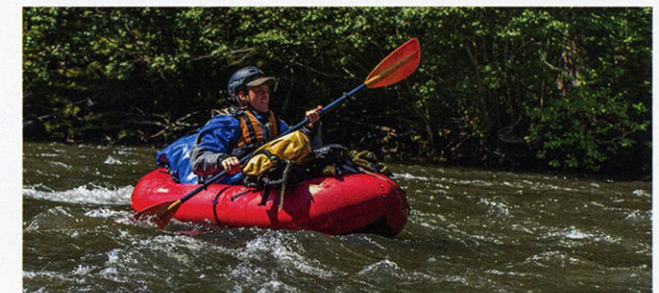
### The Minam: Past, Present, and Future

In the late 1800s, the Minam River was home to fluvial bull trout, steelhead, spring and fall chinook, and coho salmon. Beginning in 1901, migrating fish were blocked by a succession of weirs and dams. The last dam was washed out by high water in 1928, but by then, the coho and fall chinook runs had been wiped out. The upper river was still blocked by the splash dam from the early 1920s, but dynamited in the 1940s, '50s, and '60s, allowing fish to spawn in the upper river. Chinook and steelhead now make it past remnants of the splash dam, but there is some question whether fluvial bulls get past even today.

Knowing the river's history gives you an appreciation for what survived. As I float the Minam today, I'm amazed to see fluvial bull trout in the deep pools. The upper half of the Minam is still excellent habitat for bull trout, salmon, steelhead, and resident rainbows.

At present, it seems rare for a river to be protected as well as the Minam. The Minam is also fortunate in not having farm land on its lower reaches to compete for its water. The Minam has a better chance of remaining whole than many other rivers.

## Minam River NOTEBOOK



**When:** June-October; prime mid-July through early October.

**Where:** NE OR east of La Grande and west of Joseph.

**Headquarters:** La Grande, Elgin, Minam, Wallowa, Lostine, Enterprise, or Joseph. *Information and trip reports:* [www.fishingandhiking.com/category/minam-river](http://www.fishingandhiking.com/category/minam-river). *Lodging:* Minam Lodge, [www.theminamlodge.com](http://www.theminamlodge.com).

**Appropriate gear:** 4- to 6-weight rod, floating line, 7 1/2-foot leader, 3X or 4X tippet.

**Useful fly patterns:** Stimulator (orange, yellow, and royal), Hedgehog (yellow, orange), Elk Hair Caddis, Black Ant, Woolly Bugger, Prince Nymph, Copper John, Flash-back Stonefly, attractors, and other standard dry flies.

**Necessary accessories:** Moisture-wicking clothes for hiking, lightweight backpacking gear if hiking in.

**Nonresident license:** \$16.75/1 day, \$31.50/2 days, \$46.25/3 days, \$58/4 days, \$59.75/7 days, \$106.25/annual.

**Fly shops/guides:** Joseph Fly Shoppe, (541) 432-4343, [www.josephflyshoppe.com](http://www.josephflyshoppe.com); Minam Store, (541) 437-1111, [www.minamraftrentals.com](http://www.minamraftrentals.com); Steens Wilderness Adventures, (541) 432-6545, [www.steenswilderness-adventures.com](http://www.steenswilderness-adventures.com); Spence Air Service, (541) 426-3288.

**Books/maps:** *Into the Minam: The History of a River and Its People* by Jon M. and Donna McDaniel Skovlin. Eagle Cap Ranger District Map; *Oregon Atlas & Gazetteer* by Delorme Mapping.

I believe the missing link is the lower Minam. It has been turned into a wide, shallow riffle that warms too easily. It may also have been straightened by the construction of the road running for 6 miles on river right. I hope to see the day when the Lower Minam can be protected and restored to make it viable. I am told that if this bottom section were acquired and protected it would be the longest Oregon river entirely safeguarded. Until then, the upper canyon is a treasure to be appreciated. 🐟

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