



For many years I'd hoped to bicycle into the Owyhee backcountry, fording the river at least once, but after researching maps and air photos I came to the conclusion that my route was simply too much both physically and logistically. When I switched to motorcycles, it seemed time to try it.

With gas prices over \$4, I decided that rather than trucking the bike to southeast Oregon in my Tacoma, I'd ride there. As it turned out, it was almost 2,000 miles of highway for the round trip.



*Climbing up out of the Columbia on the Oregon side. Wind farms and Mount Hood and Adams in the background.*

The trip down was very nice. I crossed the Cascades at White Pass and then took Satus Pass down to the Columbia River at Goldendale. Then I climbed back up on the Oregon side, passing through the extensive wind farms with great views back

to the west with Mount Hood, Adams, and St. Helens in the distance. Then up the John Day River valley, and south across the Blue Mountains to Burns. Then the country becomes really remote going west a hundred miles across the desert and low hills to the Owyhee River crossing at Rome. About 30 miles farther east is the town of Jordon Valley, my last chance for gas before leaving the pavement.

While filling my tank and auxiliary gas can, a muddy Owyhee County Sheriff's pickup carrying an equally muddy ATV pulled in to fill up. The sheriff was a Wilford Brimley character complete with handlebar mustache and big hat. I asked him whether I'd be able to get over Juniper Mountain as I'd planned and down to Crutcher Crossing at the river, where I'd hoped to ford it. Too much snow, he said, and if I tried to go around the mountain there was private land where I'd need to get permission. And, this was a bad time for going out there. With all the rain they'd had I'd "be knee-deep in mud."

Thus discouraged from that route, I decided to go down to Three Forks, which was also on my planned route, and then decide what to do. The first twenty miles was good gravel road on the beginning of the Scenic Byway that crosses the backcountry east into Idaho.

That changed when I turned off onto the Fenwick Ranch Road. Although it hadn't rained for a day or so, there were deep ruts full of mud and water, but with dried ridges between them with lots of edge traps for my tires. For twenty more miles it was slow going in first and second gear carefully following the ridges and avoiding the ruts. At several points there were groups of cows blocking the road. A few stared at me

belligerently before running off in a panic when I got close and honked the horn. Finally I reached the Three Forks road, which was much better, and I soon arrived at the top of the grade down to the river.



*Top of grade into Three Forks. The Owyhee River comes out of the canyon at center.*

Three Forks is a popular camping spot for hikers, birders and hunters and is usually accessible for most cars. There was a Land Rover pulling a tent trailer set up there. Also river rafters put in or take out here for the sections of river above and below there. I set up my camp on the gravel

bar where the North Fork meets the main stem of the Owyhee. The next morning I stripped off the camping load and the windshield for a day trip south out of the canyon.



*River rafters at Three Forks finishing a week-long trip on the upper river. My camp by the river at right.*



As I was about to leave, five motorcycles came down. These were much bigger dual-sport bikes – two KLR's, a GS 1100, and a VStrom. They were heading back out again after a short look around. As it turns out, that was a very wise decision.



After crossing the North Fork on a rickety bridge and fording the Middle Fork, the road became 4WD, with lots of big rocks. Some of the grades were quite steep, with rock ledges up to a foot high. I took them standing up in first gear going as slow as possible, and the bike bounded up over everything easily. It was very tiring for my arms since I was standing leaning backward on the climbs. I found it difficult to work the clutch in that position, so the engine was lugged down more than I'd prefer. I think this would have been very difficult with the camping gear and that the engine probably would have

bogged down without slipping the clutch to keep the rpm's up.

Finally I reached the plateau and the road was easy going again, at least for a while. There hadn't been any vehicle traffic on it, just cows. Their hoof prints had dried into a very rough surface which kept me in second gear or below. After about five miles of this I arrived at the top of the river gorge at Five Bar. Somewhere below was the stone building remnants of the Five Bar ranch. There was a steep trail descending to the river



that had been used by ATV's, but I was happy to stay at the top. A road continues on from the other side of the river, but the ford would have been too much in the high water.

Soon I noticed a thunderstorm approaching from Nevada, so I headed back. I made it as far as the descent back into Three Forks before it caught me. While about half way down I saw a bolt of lightning strike the cliffs less than a quarter mile away across the canyon. It struck more than half way down and actually below me. For a second afterward the rock glowed orange.



### *Five Bar*

Back in camp I waited out the rain and soon it was sunny and warm again. Slowly I packed up and was about ready when another thunderstorm came over. This one had a lot more rain in it, so I covered the bike with a tarp and sat it out under there.

About then the Land Rover and trailer headed out up the grade and I followed soon after. The road was fine climbing up and for the first twenty miles on top (staying on the main Three Forks road this time). Then the surface changed to dirt without gravel, and the storms had dropped more rain here. Now the road was incredibly slick mud.



Before long I crashed, breaking one of my pannier mounts (which I was able to jury-rig). With difficulty I managed to right the bike without unloading and went on in first gear. Within a half mile I lost it again, but got a foot down. Unfortunately it was too far off balance, my foot slid in the mud, and down it went again. This time I had to

partially unload in order to pick the bike up. It was now about 7:30 in the evening, and I had many miles to go before reaching the highway. I didn't see how I was going to make it with the load of gear before dark, and would probably have to camp in the mud between the sage brush alongside the road and hope it would dry out in the morning. My bike was choked with mud, the tires looked like slicks, and there were softball size clumps hanging off the disk brakes and engine.

Fortunately a Subaru came along, a man from Boise who had been doing bird counts in Three Forks. He agreed to take my big yellow bag and panniers out to the highway and leave them there. That made the difference – I was able to slither out the remaining ten miles or so, mostly in first gear, and needing to put a leg down many times to prevent a spill. I thought about the group of five bigger bikes, also carrying camping gear, who would have had an even harder time. The only advantage would be having each other to help pick the bikes up.

Loaded up and back on the highway at dusk, I headed for Jordan Valley, mud flying everywhere as I tentatively picked up speed. I checked into a motel and cleaned my gear. In the morning the owner of the gas station let me use his pressure hose to clean off the bike, and I was ready to travel again.



*Along the road to Hells Canyon near Halfway, OR*

Now I headed north to Ontario, ID and then side roads near the interstate back to Baker City, OR. Then I headed north along the Snake River past Halfway, intending to take the road up to Joseph and Enterprise. Unfortunately it would not be plowed out for another week so I crossed the river at the upper end of Hells Canyon and went back into Idaho. That day it rained steadily all day as I followed 95 north to Lewiston. Then I took the road going down the Snake to Wawawai to camp at the county park there. By morning it had cleared and I headed west to Othello, Ellensburg, Swauk Pass, and Stevens Pass. A long day – fourteen hours of riding with just a few breaks.

1,950 miles total.

*Taking a break in Othello*

