

The Pueblo Chieftain

Tamer whitewater season to get early start from runoff

By TRACY HARMON | tharmon@chieftain.com | Posted: Wednesday, May 2, 2012
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Arkansas River rafters are gearing up for a season that promises family-friendly flows.

Thanks to a warm spring, the excitement will start as early as mid-May when snowmelt will begin to buoy the river levels.

The river should peak by early June while rafting will continue through mid-August, aided by water releases from reservoirs, said Bob Hamel of Arkansas River Tours in Cotopaxi.

Micah Salazar, operations manager for Noah's Ark Rafting in Buena Vista, said summers seldom produce the exact same conditions on the river.

He has seen everything from rousing 5,000 cubic feet per second flows in 1995 to the dismal trickle of water that came during the drought year of 2002.

One thing is for sure: this year won't be like either one, Salazar said.

"With the current snowpack conditions, we can expect a low-water summer," Salazar said.

"Low-water seasons a lot of times are great for us because they open up rafting for those folks who may be tentative and don't want to try rafting in high water seasons."

Hamel agreed.

"We will have good, floatable and reasonable flows this summer. It will be ideal for family rafting and for those who may have stayed away last year because of high flows," Hamel said.

Thanks to the flow augmentation program, rafting will remain consistent through July and mid-August, Hamel said.

The flow program allows releases of water from upstream reservoirs to keep water levels around 700 cubic feet per second for rafting through Aug. 15.

"The flow program gives us some supplemental water and that is a pretty big deal. It helps us where other rivers may not have that luxury," Hamel said.

Rafting in tamer water has its benefits.

"With low water you can appreciate being on a beautiful river in the outdoors. A lot of times when it is warm weather on the Front Range, people enjoy getting out to the mountains to be where the cool water is," Salazar said.

Outfitters often will move trips to different sections of the river to adapt to flows.

"We are used to uncertainties and can react to provide a positive experience on the river," Salazar said.

For detailed information about Arkansas River outfitters, log onto www.parks.state.co.us/parks/arkansasheadwaters or call 719-539-7289.