

2021 Rafting Outlook, Arkansas River Flow Likely Peaked Last Week

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By Zach Dunasta

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During the winter they work at gas stations, liquor stores, and coffee shops. They cut firewood and run dog sled teams. In the summer, they all transform into their profession's best – which is guiding rafting trips down the Arkansas River. The raft guides have many skills – entertaining clients with stories (some of them true) and jokes, describing the Arkansas' flora, fauna, and geology, and making lunch. But their chief skill is reading the river and safely transporting their clients down the most commercially rafted stretch of river in the United States.

The Economic Impact

The 102-mile section of the Arkansas River from Granite to the end of the Royal Gorge near Canon City is among the busiest sections of river for rafting in the country. The commercial impact of rafting this section was nearly \$63 million in 2020 according to the Colorado River Outfitters Association's annual report. This stretch, managed as the Arkansas Headwaters Recreation Area (AHRA), is a carefully regulated collaboration between the Colorado Parks and Wildlife, the Bureau of Land Management, and the U.S. Forest Service. In 2020, AHRA saw a 17 percent

increase in total visitation over 2019 with more than 311,000 people visiting in July alone. Many, though not all, of those visitors came to boat on the Arkansas. Rafting companies are expecting the increased visitation to continue.

Owner of The Adventure Company and long-time raft-guide Mark Hammer said, “I don’t think I’ve ever felt as good of an environment for business as we’re in now. People want to get outside. We feel really good about the season. The limitation this year will be people’s staff ... normally the limit is what marketing will produce. This year, companies’ limitation will be the amount of guides available.”



Browns Canyon is the most popular section of river in the Arkansas Headwaters Recreation Area. It saw over 75,000 commercial rafting clients in 2020. Photo by Bob Wick.

Executive Director of the Arkansas River Outfitters Association (AROA) Bob Hamel agrees, “Outfitters made a special effort this year. Most people are training more guides than they did last year and trying to increase their capacity in that regard.” After a slow start due to a relatively cold, wet May, Hamel says AROA members’ advanced bookings are up.

Hammer was preparing for a down year in 2020 due to unknowns relating to COVID-19. The Adventure Company braced themselves for 60 percent or 80 percent of average. They ended at 113 percent in 2020. This year they’re expecting even more business now that they’re fully staffed.

Last year, the gross receipts for river trips within the AHRA totaled nearly \$15 million, a 7 percent increase over 2019. But due to COVID-19 related restrictions, the total volume of commercial boating was down about 7 percent. Hamel attributes the increased revenue to more individuals rafting in a year when camps and large groups were absent. “There weren’t as many discount groups. The spots on the boats were taken by people paying full-price. People with their pent-up energy pushed the revenue numbers up.”

Of that \$15 million in sales, more than one-third (\$5,240,786) was generated by businesses with Chaffee County addresses. Commercial rafting is an economic driver in the Arkansas Valley. “Like snow to ski resorts, commercial rafting’s viability is tethered to the Arkansas’ flow.

2021 Water Outlook

Water flow on the Arkansas is measured in cubic feet per second (cfs). Picture thousands of basketballs (about one cubic foot) tumbling downstream every second. The highest recorded peak at the Parkdale station was in 1995 at 6,830 cfs – a truly staggering amount of basketballs. And even at that peak, the river was still safely raftable in certain sections.

Some areas actually get easier in high water as rapids get washed out. But overall high water volume makes commercial rafting difficult. This year, the river likely peaked at a modest 2,140 cfs at the Parkdale station on June 10 – well below the historic average, but just right for rafting.

Predicting the river's outlook is a mix of science and measurements, gut instinct, and Rorschach inkblot test – which consists of looking at snowfields in the high Sawatch and comparing their appearance in your mind's eye to previous years. Hamel is considered one of the best river watchers in the state.

Hamel has his own proprietary blend he uses to inform predictions including overnight temperatures and tributary stream volume. Like high water, low river flow is challenging for outfitters. In low flows the river becomes more technical – dodging rocks and maneuvering boats – a real life game of Frogger. During peak tourist season, from July 1 to August 15, low flows are more likely to be an issue than high flows.

Voluntary Flow Management Program

The Voluntary Flow Management Program (VFMP) helps ensure the river stays viable for boating and fishing. The VFMP is a collaborative effort by organizations like Colorado Springs Utilities, Pueblo Board of Water Works, Aurora Water, Bureau of Reclamation (who operate the reservoirs), and the Southeastern Water Conservancy District. They voluntarily augment the Arkansas' flows from July 1 to August 15 – corresponding to the peak of the rafting season. They aim to keep the river at 700 cfs at the Wellsville measuring station.

The collaborative group monitors snowpack in the winter and tracks import water from the Fryingpan-Arkansas project. This project imports water from the Fryingpan River drainage on the west side of the Continental Divide and conveys it through tunnels to the east side of the divide. The water is then stored in reservoirs like Twin Lakes and Turquoise Lake. This year, they expect to import about 38,000 acre-feet through the Fryingpan-Arkansas project and 10,000 acre-feet of that water will be allocated to the VFMP.

For Hamel and the Arkansas River Outfitters Association, the VFPM is critical to their livelihood. “The outfitters can run their trips in the same itineraries they like to run. It gives us flows where everyone can run fun trips, get through everywhere, and have a good experience.”



Rafters in Big Horn Sheep Canyon before the Parkdale measuring station. Image by Good Times Rafting.

The VFMP is expected to operate this season according to Hamel. “We know we’re going to need it this year. It’s a very important piece that separates us from other rivers in Colorado. Other people are at the whim of nature. How it flows is how it goes and it runs out. Having this augmentation is a really important piece for how we survive with adequate flows.”

Like other outdoor pursuits, rafting in 2021 is set for a big year. The scope of its success will rely on the VFMP and the river guides.

With river rapid names like Seidel’s Suck Hole, Raft Ripper, Graveyard, Staircase, Toilet Bowl, and Pinball, it’s no surprise that tens of thousands of people will be thrilled to have experts safely guide them. And when the raft isn’t descending a staircase or swirling in the bowl, the guides can tell stories, jokes, and even make lunch.



The 5.5 mile Boustead Tunnel (bottom middle) transports water from the Fryingpan River drainage underneath the Continental Divide into the Arkansas River by way of Turquoise Lake (top right) as part of the Fryingpan-Arkansas project. Photo courtesy of Klambpatten (with the Bureau of Reclamation).