



Expert rapids require expert moves—early season river running is best done with an experienced guide.

RiverWISE

As waters rise and the rapids call, it's time to up your Poudre intel. Here, a cheat sheet and safety heads-up for the aspiring river rat. BY RHEA MAZE

COLORADO BOASTS approximately 107,403 miles of river but FoCo-ites have distinct bragging rights. The state's one and only National Wild and Scenic River, the Cache la Poudre, is right in our backyard. But being a river-savvy local takes more than knowing how Coloradans pronounce its French name (you know, *cash-la-poo-der*).

Known simply as “the Poudre” by most, the river has been the lifeblood of Fort Collins, and its corridor has been used as a travel route since prehistoric times. According to an unconfirmed local legend, its name came about in the 1800s after a party of French fur trappers got caught in a snowstorm. To lighten their load, they're said to have buried stashes of gunpowder (*poudre*) in a secret spot (*cache*) near the mouth of the river where it would remain hidden until they returned the following spring.

With its headwaters in the northern part of Rocky Mountain National Park, the 126-mile long Poudre River wends its way down through Roosevelt National Forest in the Poudre Canyon before entering Fort Collins. From here it continues east, eventually merging with the South Platte River near Greeley.

The Poudre was federally designated as a Wild and Scenic River in 1986, a title reserved for the most remarkable, rugged, and pristine natural waterways in the U.S. and held by less than one quarter of one percent of the nation's rivers. This designation protects 76 miles of the Poudre's upper sections, with 30 miles classified as wild and 46 as recreational.

RIVER-RUNNER HEAVEN

The Poudre is a narrow, relatively steep river and opportunities for running class I (easy) to class V (expert) rapids abound on various stretches of the river, depending on water levels. The river running season typically lasts from May through August and the Poudre usually reaches peak flows between late May and mid June.

The river's flow is measured in terms of cubic feet per second (cfs) but the Pine View gauge, a painted rock located in the river above Pine View falls near mile marker 112 on Highway 14, offers locals a more subjective reading of the water level. Levels between two and four feet on the rock generally indicate prime river-running conditions.

The Poudre is the only river in northern Colorado where people can commercially whitewater raft. Advanced runs at high water provide the biggest thrills, as long as the local company you go with holds a permit to run the entire 12-mile section of river that begins at Stevens Gulch. Its biggest class

III and IV rapids include technical Twin Pin rapid, lengthy Mishawaka Falls, and steep Pine View Falls. Bring friends, as boats hold three to seven rafters and nab a spot in the front of the boat for the wettest, wildest ride. Book high water trips early as spots fill up quick.

GET YOUR CAST ON

The Poudre hosts some of the state's best wild trout fly-fishing and attracts serious anglers. Rule number one:



give 'em some space. Fish face upstream to feed, so anglers will typically scope out a fishy area and plan their approach from below, slowly moving and casting upstream. Don't "high hole" them, which means deciding to fish just upstream of where they are, essentially cutting them off. Instead, give him or her a quick nod and head well above or below their spot to find your own.

In early season high water, fish will often stay out of the swift current and can be found closer to the banks. It's also helpful to learn to identify key telltale river features like "riffle/run" transitions. A riffle is a fast moving shallow, rocky area that flows into a deeper, longer, and slower stretch of river (a run), which sometimes leads to a fish jackpot. Eddies, slow pockets of water located behind rocks or against the riverbank, and "seams," which divide fast and slow moving water, are also popular fish hangouts.

Before you go, get a license and some insider intel from a local fishing license dealer and download the current fishing regulations brochure from cpw.state.co.us.

DON'T GET CARRIED AWAY

River currents are deceptively strong so it's important to have an understanding of a few safety basics:

- Watch out for "holes," which are natural water features created by structures on the bottom of the river such as rock formations. Holes create hydraulics that can recirculate swimmers. "Keeper holes" can hold swimmers and prevent them from breaking the surface or getting flushed downstream. River runners must be trained and experienced in order to be able to identify these features on the fly.
- Seasonal high water, storms, and events like the 2012 High Park fire

and the 2013 floods contribute to increased amounts of debris in the river corridor. Logs, branches, and tree root balls can become "strainers." Similar to the one in your kitchen, strainers allow water to pass through but not objects like kayaks, tubes, or swimmers.

- Standing up in fast-moving water can result in your foot or leg becoming lodged in rocks or other submerged debris, resulting in a dangerous foot entrapment situation.

- If you do get swept up or fall out of a boat, assume a seated position with your feet pointed downstream, your toes lifted out of the water, and use your arms to aggressively maneuver toward safety. Self-rescue is imperative as the safest place on a river is on the shore. If your buddy falls in, immediately yank them out of the river or throw them a rope—never jump in after someone.

- Carry a first-aid kit, know its contents, and be comfortable using it. Take a first-aid/CPR course so that you're able to provide basic medical assistance if needed, because the canyon is remote. In an emergency, you may need to flag down a vehicle in order to get to a phone at one of the many residences located throughout the canyon, the Poudre Fire Authority station, or Mishawaka Amphitheater as cell phone reception is notoriously unreliable in the canyon.

- Always run the river with experienced people; don't go alone.

KEEP UP

Pay attention to local river happenings, including the City of Fort Collins' series of Poudre River projects, which aim to improve the river's ecological health and provide expanded community access and recreation opportunities. fcgov.com/riverprojects 



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