

Cataract Creek

Vitals

Locale: Longview, Alberta

What It's Like: A diverse paddle through the foothills of the Rocky Mountains. Cool scenery, fun boogie and some big rapids.

Class: III-V

Scouting/Portaging: Easy/moderate. Easy portaging of the big rapids makes the run suitable for mixed groups.

Level: Accurate online gauge: http://www.wateroffice.ec.gc.ca/graph/graph_e.html?stn=05BL022 - Cataract Creek.

Time: 3-6 hours.

When To Go: Early summer snowmelt, or after rain.

Info From: May 2012.

Other Beta: Paddling ABC guide: http://www.paddlingabc.com/doku.php?id=river_guide:rivers:cataract_creek, Liquid Journal by Mark Basso: <http://liquidbeta.blogspot.ca/2005/06/cataract-creek-ab-canada.html>.

Description

Cataract Creek is a staple run found near Calgary, in the foothills of the eastern slope of the Rockies. It is a diverse run with winding swift water flowing through open mountain country, short but powerful bedrock drops and miles of fun boogie. Easy portaging around most of the biggest rapids make this a good run for groups of mixed ability. Come prepared for a full day on the water well away from any roads to enjoy this Alberta classic.

There is an accurate online gauge for Cataract Creek. Local knowledge suggests that the optimal window for running this river is between 5-10 cms. It can be done lower but it will be really bony. High water runs are very doable due to the open nature of the riverbed. 10-20 cms is acceptable for groups that know the river and go with the expectation that Zig Zag Falls has a difficult throw and go portage. As is often true, the likelihood of portaging the big ones increases with flow. 20+ cms is possible, but only recommended for strong groups with previous experience on the run. This run is fed by early season snowmelt (May-June) in normal years and by unpredictable rainfall later in the summer.

Access to the Cataract is along well maintained paved and dirt roads. The nearest town is Longview, south of Calgary. From Longview, take highway 541 west towards the mountains, following the Highwood River upstream. Just under 40 km from the town you will reach a picnic area just downstream of the confluence of Cataract Creek and the Highwood River - this is the take out. If you reach the junction of the 541 and the 40, you have gone too far. To reach the put in, continue west on the 541 to the junction with the 40 and turn south on to the 940 (dirt). Follow this road for 12-13 km until you drive over Cataract Creek. This is the put in.

From the start, Cataract starts out as swift class II flowing through open mountain country. The first major rapid is located where the valley obviously starts to steepen and narrow. Be careful on the approach to this first set - there are small eddies and a seductive blind corner above it. This first big rapid is actually two drops. The first is called Hercules and the second is called Titan. Hercules is unappealing unless the water is high. Scout/portage on the left. Seal launch in to run Titan, a clean 20-25 foot waterfall. Below Titan the river alternates between small rapids, boogie and a few bigger bedrock drops including Zig Zag Falls, a nice rapid with a long lead in to an 8-10 foot ledge. There is a pocket on the bottom left that sometimes causes problems, and that is hard to set safety for. The last major rapid is a long broken slide called Leviathan - it is obvious from above. A few more rapids will quickly bring you to the confluence with the Highwood, and the take out.

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