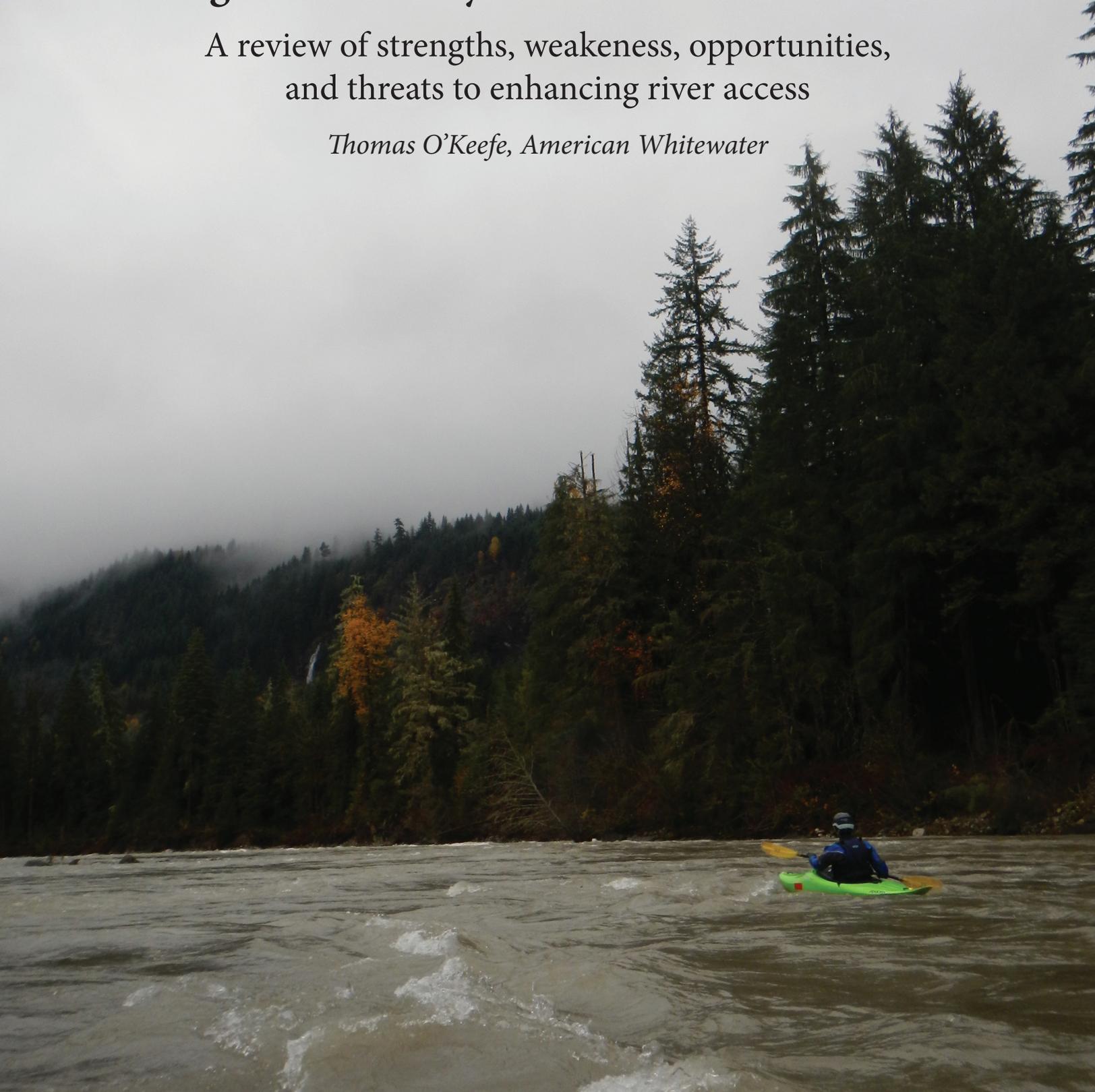




Whitewater Boating and River Recreation in the Stillaguamish Valley and Sauk River Watersheds

A review of strengths, weakness, opportunities,
and threats to enhancing river access

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Rafting down the Wild and Scenic Sauk River on a youth trip with Adventure Cascades. Mt. Pugh is visible in the background.

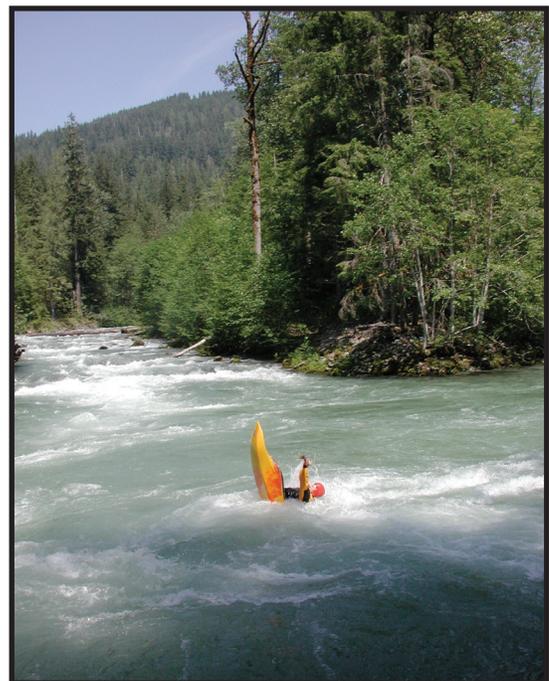
The Stillaguamish Valley and Sauk River Watersheds have provided opportunities for whitewater boating and other forms of river-based recreation for decades. All of the rivers in this region are unique assets for Snohomish County residents and visitors, and some are even nationally recognized as Wild and Scenic Rivers. American Whitewater has prepared this SWOT analysis (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats) of focused efforts to improve and enhance access to rivers in the region. While our primary focus is whitewater paddling, everyone who desires contact access to the water (including fishermen and swimmers) will benefit from this effort.

Overview of Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats

1) Strengths: Characteristics of the project that give it an advantage over others.

a) The Sauk River is a federally-designated Wild and Scenic River.¹ It has exceptional Class III (intermediate) whitewater through a forested river corridor with no significant development. The road that parallels the river is only visible in a few places. Commercial outfitters provide experiences for the general public on the Sauk, which are family friendly at moderate flows. Those with their own gear and the proper training and experience enjoy the river throughout the winter rainy season and through the spring snow melt.

b) The Suiattle River is a federally-designated Wild and Scenic River with great Class II and III whitewater and has one of the longest seasons for any run in the North Cascades.² Paddlers enjoy the run into early summer when other runs have become too low to boat.



Kayaker playing in a Whirlpool Rapid on the Sauk Wild and Scenic River.

¹ Sec 703 of PL 95-625

² Sec 703 of PL 95-625

c) The North Fork Stillaguamish is known as a good run for experienced canoeists. Deer Creek, known as a legendary steelhead river, is also a top expert whitewater run in the region.

d) The South Fork Stillaguamish River has excellent Class III whitewater, but is perhaps best known for the challenging Class V of Robe Canyon, which draws paddlers from across the region and around the country. Robe Canyon has been recognized as one of the 50 Classic Whitewater Runs of North America.³ Many of the paddlers who regularly boat this run, and can be found on the river any day of the week, live in or near Snohomish County because of the long season and quality of whitewater on Robe Canyon.

e) Pilchuck Creek is known for very continuous Class IV whitewater and is a popular local run when winter rains bring flows up.

Collectively these rivers have been known for more than half a century for their exceptionally high quality whitewater in wild and forested settings.⁴ The rivers include runs that are suitable for those just learning the sport and others that challenge the nation's top experts.



The wild whitewater of Robe Canyon. *Photo by Sean Lee*

³ Williams, T. 2004. *Whitewater Classics: Fifty North American Rivers Picked by the Continent's Leading Paddlers*. Funhog Press.

⁴ These rivers were recognized for whitewater recreation in a series of river recreation maps developed by Wolf Bauer and published by Washington Kayak Club from 1950 to 1965. They are also published in guidebooks to whitewater recreation including Werner Furrer's *Water Trails of Washington* (1971 and revised 1979) and Jeff and Tonya Bennett's *A Guide to the Whitewater Rivers of Washington* (1991 and revised in 1998). In addition a National Park Service Inventory and Assessment of River Recreation in Washington published in 1986 documents the value of these rivers for whitewater recreation.



Harriet Bauer paddling the Sauk River with Whitehorse in the background. The image was used by Wolf Bauer in his 1964 essay on the Concept of River Wilderness. *Photo by Wolf Bauer.*

2) Weaknesses: Characteristics that place the project at a disadvantage relative to others.

a) The whitewater boating season for most of these rivers is in the winter, requiring paddlers to be extensively prepared with drysuits and full cold weather gear. Unlike other areas of the country that offer whitewater boating in the summer months, many of these rivers are too low to boat in the heat of summer. Optimal flows are generally not well matched to what many would consider optimal weather for watersports activities.

b) The closest community to the Sauk and Suiattle Wild and Scenic Rivers is Darrington, which offers limited visitor services such as dining or lodging. Boaters are more likely to be drawn to other communities in the state that are in close proximity to good whitewater, like White Salmon, Cashmere, and Glacier, because these towns have more options for visitor services and they are actively marketing to attract visitors.

3) Opportunities: Elements that the project could exploit to its advantage.

a) Opportunities exist to better connect people to rivers (see Access Needs section below). River access points are generally not well signed and can be difficult to find (though significant progress has been made over the last few years along the Sauk Wild and Scenic River). Access points that serve paddlers during the whitewater boating season could be designed to serve other recreationists throughout the year including swimmers, fishermen, and those who simply desire contact access to the water. Sites need to be more clearly designated and actively managed. This will protect river health, help avoid conflicts with private property owners, and enhance the overall quality of the user experience.

b) Opportunities exist to coordinate development of the Whitehorse Trail with river access needs. Trailheads and parking areas for the trail could be coordinated with sites enjoyed as summer swimming holes or used as access points by boaters.

c) Opportunities exist to better connect visitors to the Pacific Northwest to the rivers of eastern Snohomish County. Visitors come to experience the natural beauty of the region, and expect to see wild rivers, big trees, and glacier-covered peaks. These rivers are easily accessible from the Interstate 5 corridor and the major metropolitan areas, which are the entry point for visitors to the region.



Load and Unload Zone signage for the Wild and Scenic Sauk River at the Whitechuck boat launch.

4) Threats: Elements in the environment that could cause trouble for the project.

a) Community sensitivity regarding public use of the North Fork Stillaguamish River in the area of the Oso slide is an issue to be aware of.

b) Salmon restoration is an important goal for many stakeholders with an interest in these river systems, and increased recreation and public use could impact the success of these efforts. This would be the case especially if any increase in use is not appropriately managed.

c) These rivers can be very hazardous for those without the proper skills and experience. Even among those who are skilled and have the right experience, fatalities have occurred. The rivers are fast, cold, and have significant wood hazards. Actively promoting these rivers for recreation could have the unintended impact of attracting users who do not have the skills or equipment to safely enjoy them.



North Fork Sauk Falls, a scenic attraction on the Darrington Ranger District of the Mt. Baker - Snoqualmie National Forest.

Other Activities

Our primary interest is whitewater recreation but other recreational opportunities exist along these rivers that are compatible with our community's use and enjoyment.

1) Swimming

Swimming in the area's rivers is a summer pastime enjoyed by local residents and visitors. Popular sites include Twin Bridges on the North Fork Stillaguamish at the confluence of Crevice Creek (accessed from Forest Road 38), as well as the Deer Creek confluence at Highway 530 mile 32.7 in Oso and the railroad bridge at Highway 530 mile 28.9. These sites would benefit from management and interpretive and safety information.



2) Fishing

Historically, the North Fork Stillaguamish and Deer Creek represented one of the best runs of wild summer steelhead on the West Coast. Zane Grey first visited the Stillaguamish River in 1919 and journeyed by logging train to Deer Creek where he caught his first steelhead, "savage and beautiful fight in every line of his body."⁵ The North Fork Stillaguamish is known as the oldest flyfishing stream in the country, established as a fly only fishery in 1949. For those targeting hatchery fish, the Fortson Hole has been a favorite spot as it receives the outflow from the Whitehorse Ponds.

Fish populations in the Skagit and Stillaguamish River watersheds have faced challenges, and restoration remains a priority for tribes, resource agencies, non-profit organizations focused on fish recovery. Restoration is all important to local communities that once benefited from a vibrant sportfishing economy. As part of fish recovery, fishing regulations need better enforcement.

3) River Trails

Completion of the Whitehorse Trail along the North Fork Stillaguamish and Robe Canyon Historical Trail along the South Fork Stillaguamish are both compatible with and supported by the whitewater paddling community. The trails offer recreational opportunities for travel companions who may not wish to paddle the rivers. They can also be used for scouting the river, serve as an emergency egress route, and utilized as an off-highway corridor to run a bike shuttle.



Top: Enjoying the swimming hole at Twin Bridges on the North Fork Stillagaumish River.

Middle: Learning to cast a fly rod on the North Fork Sauk Wild and Scenic River.

Bottom: Fly fishing at Hazel Hole on the North Fork Stillaguamish River, one of the region's classic steelhead rivers.

⁵ At page 49: Grey, Z. 1928. Tales of Freshwater Fishing. Harper & Brothers, New York.

River Access Needs



Numerous access needs and opportunities exist throughout the basin, and below we describe those that are priorities for American Whitewater. Our goal is to develop sites so that they are accessible and can be used by a broad constituency in addition to boating, including fishing, swimming, water play, and general use and enjoyment of rivers. We also believe that it is important to focus on stewardship of the river corridor and cleaning up garbage and debris in order to enhance the quality of the user experience.

Darrington Mill Boat Launch improvements made with reconstruction of the Sauk Prairie Bridge.

1) Sauk River

Several access projects have recently been completed on the Wild and Scenic Sauk River since the river management plan was developed. These projects include formalizing several access sites managed by the Forest Service, along with recent improvements by Snohomish County to Backman County Park. Signage is currently being improved, which will enable visitors to locate river access sites more easily. Additional opportunities exist to improve access for drift boats for the lower 20 miles of the river (from the Darrington Mill to the confluence with the Skagit).

Access needs exist on the North Fork Sauk, which is an expert run high in the drainage where dispersed campers typically occupy the put-in. Additionally, kayakers need to be able to safely identify the take-out just above North Fork Falls. We encourage planners to formalize access sites and consider current social trails in use by paddlers.

2) Suiattle River Access

Paddlers are beginning to rediscover the rivers in the Suiattle River drainage, following repairs to the road that was closed for nearly a decade. Here, the boating season extends later into the season than many rivers nearby.

The Wild and Scenic River Management Plan identifies a number of access priorities that need to be addressed.⁶ The top need is the access at Boundary Bridge. According to the

easement for the bridge, USFS management authority extends 33' from the centerline.⁷ The current social trail to the water on the upstream river right side of the bridge should be formalized. Future opportunities to acquire property from willing sellers in the vicinity of the bridge should also be considered.⁸ The river management plan identifies the Conrad Creek confluence, which is a short distance upstream, as a potential alternative to the Boundary Bridge location.



River access at the Boundary Bridge where a social trail provides access to the river that could be improved.

⁶ See Table 12 at Page 22 in River Management Plan, Skagit River, Volume 2, Mt. Baker - Snoqualmie National Forest, 1983.

⁷ An easement (Document No. 567167 in Vol. 295, Page 431, Snohomish County Recording Division) for the bridge was recorded on June 24th, 1958 as “a strip of land 66 feet in width” with “the said strip being 33 feet in width on each side of a center line of the road as now located and constructed or to be constructed on the ground.”

⁸ Several parcels within Suiattle River Forest Sites (Plat No. 4023) have been eroded by the river and may be opportunities for acquisition.

In addition to the access at Boundary Bridge and the Suiattle confluence with the Sauk, the river management plan identified an additional need for an intermediate access point further downstream on lands managed by Department of Natural Resources. Developing this access is particularly important to extend the summer season for business owners who guide commercial trips in the area. When flows become too low to launch trips from Boundary Bridge, it would still be possible to continue offering guided trips if an alternative access were available further downstream. The river management plan identified access at Milepost 5 and/or Tenas Creek, where an old logging road accesses the river, to meet this important need.⁹

An access point upstream of the Boundary Bridge is also desirable. For many years, boaters used a rough social trail at the Buck Creek confluence that the river management plan identified as a proposed access. Others have suggested river access and day use at the Captain Moses Seed Orchard. One of the challenges of access in the area is the river migrates across the floodplain in this segment from year to year; an ideal access site one year may be a ¼ mile from the active channel the next year.

Management direction for developing these sites states that the basic facilities should consist of a beach at least 25' in length for staging and launching, parking for a minimum of 10 cars, an all-season trail of 10 feet in width, and basic sanitation facilities.¹⁰

3) North Fork Stillaguamish River Access

Boaters use a number of sites along the North Fork Stillaguamish River. As the Whitehorse Trail is developed, we encourage the exploration of opportunities to develop access sites along the trail that serve both trail users and river users. User groups have identified a need for parking, bike racks, sanitation, and overall site management. The North Fork Stillaguamish River offers opportunities for a bike shuttle where paddlers could leave a bike at the take-out, drive to the put-in to launch boats, and then bike back to retrieve their car at the end of the river trip (back racks at access points would benefit this constituency).



Access to the North Fork Stillaguamish at river mile 32 near Darrington.

The following river access points are used by paddlers and would benefit from improvements to enhance the quality of the user experience:

River Mile 0 (Haller Park) Arlington: This access is located at the confluence of the North and South Forks in Arlington at the park located on the upstream river left side of the Highway 9 Bridge, adjacent to the sewage treatment plant. A Land and Water Conservation Fund project has resulted in improvements including a covered activity shelter and restrooms.

River Mile 9.5 (Monty Road): This is the typical take-out for the lower run. From Arlington head east on Highway 530 about 7.5 miles and turn north onto Monty Road at Highway 530 mile 28.8 just before it crosses the river. The access is downstream river left of the Highway 530 Bridge.

River Mile 17.6 (Whitman Road): To reach the popular intermediate access, continue upstream and at Highway 530 mile 35.0 turn north onto Whitman Road. The access is at the Whitman Road Bridge on downstream river left and there is a good trail to the river under the bridge. This site offers an access downstream of the Oso Slide.

River Mile 21.2 (C Post Road): Access here would be a bit of a scramble but it is possible. At Highway 530 mile 37.8 turn north onto C Post Road and 0.4 miles from the highway you'll come to single-lane bridge across the river. This site offers a take-out upstream of the Oso Slide.

⁹ See Table 12 in River Management Plan, Skagit River, Volume 2, Mt. Baker - Snoqualmie National Forest, 1983.

¹⁰ R&S-8 at Page 17 in River Management Plan, Skagit River, Volume 2, Mt. Baker - Snoqualmie National Forest, 1983.

River Mile 22.4 (Hazel Hole): This is more typically used as a fishing access, but it's a convenient pullout right along Highway 530 at mile 38.8. An interpretive kiosk here describes the history of steelhead fishing on this river.

River Mile 30.0 (Swede Heaven Road Bridge): This access is a good put-in option for the upper section when flows are below 1500 cfs. The river is also more open downstream of this bridge with fewer wood hazards. To reach this site, turn north onto Swede Heaven Road at Highway 530 mile 43.7 (directly across from the Shell Station) and continue 0.8 miles to the river. Parking is limited but there is a convenient access to the river on the upstream river left side of the bridge.

River Mile 32.0 (Forest Road Bridge): To reach the put-in for the upper section continue upstream to Highway 530 mile 46.8 and turn onto 435th Ave NE (it's easy to miss this turn). Continue past the Darrington Substation and 1 mile from the highway you'll reach a bridge with convenient access on downstream river left.



Scouting Pilchuck Falls, a popular waterfall for local kayakers.

4) South Fork Stillaguamish

Sites on Forest Service land could be made more user friendly. Currently a number of sites are used at bridge crossings and campgrounds along the Mountain Loop Highway. A formal inventory of these sites should be completed. Accommodations for year-around access (campgrounds are closed in winter) and day use (many campgrounds do not have parking or river access for day users) should be made.

The most popular run on this river is the expert Robe Canyon run. Currently, kayakers have an informal arrangement with a local landowner who allows access across his land. Parking is extremely limited at the site and paddlers have made arrangements with another local landowner for parking. Past attempts have been made to purchase land to serve as a public put-in. The river is one of the most unique whitewater assets in Snohomish County and is well known to expert whitewater paddlers from across the country and around the world. Acquisition and development of a public put-in access should be a priority. We also recommend that the Robe Canyon Historical Trail should be completed with a bridge that connects the trail on the north bank of the river with the trail that continues downstream on the south bank.

5) Pilchuck Creek

Pilchuck Creek is a Class IV whitewater run north of Arlington that is popular during the fall and winter rainy seasons. Two specific access needs exist. The first is at Pilchuck Falls where a road managed by the Department of Natural Resources provides access to the river. Optimal flows for the run upstream and downstream of Pilchuck Falls vary slightly, and this access point is important because it serves as both a take-out for the upper run and a put-in for the run that continues downstream and over Pilchuck Falls. While the road was historically open to paddlers, it has been gated in recent years.

A second access need exists at the Highway 9 Bridge, where the Washington Department of Transportation has built a new bridge over the river. American Whitewater worked with Washington Department of Transportation during the environmental review for construction of the new bridge in order to ensure future access. Snohomish County Parks could develop the site where the former bridge was located as a formal river access point in the future. This access point serves as a take-out for the Class IV section of whitewater and also serves as a put-in for a Class II reach that continues downstream to an access point just west of the Interstate 5 bridges.



Running Pilchuck Falls after a fall rainstorm.