

BoatSmith Whitewater Festival a huge success

March 3, 2023



If you drove the 199 corridor President's Day weekend and thought there was a sharp increase in the number of vehicles with brightly colored boats of all shapes and sizes strapped to the top or trailing behind, you were not wrong.

Hundreds of kayakers and rafters traveled from across the West, some from as far as New York, to attend the fifth annual BoatSmith Whitewater Festival, an event quickly gaining a reputation for being one of the best whitewater festivals on the West Coast.

"We really enjoy hosting the whitewater boating community and the positive energy they bring to the area," said Terry McNaught, partner/operator of Patrick Creek Historic Lodge, which hosts the event's non-race festivities.

Terry and his wife Tina, who took over the operation of the lodge in January 2022, said the turnout was even better this year, and the event was a real success with smiles all around. But they were sincerely ready to rest by Sunday. "It's a big weekend," Terry said.

At the lodge, thousands of dollars in raffle prizes were given away on Saturday night, prizes donated by the whitewater gear industry with the largest prize of the night being an 11-foot raft from Merlin-based raft builder SOTAR. After recouping costs, raffle ticket revenue is used to get local students on rivers and other outdoors field trips

"We want to give back to the community, and giving our local kids the opportunity to experience outdoor environments they may have never seen might inspire them to do things they thought they could never do."

said Aaron Babcock, co-organizer of the event. The event was also organized by Donna Peppin, Redwood Rides co-owner Adam Spencer, Christopher Sohl, and Kaylan Wilson.

Local rock band Corner Market kept the crowd moving with nearly three hours of original music between raffle drawings, followed by Gasquet-based DJ Mike Winner to close the night. Thursday, Woodpile rocked the early crowd at the lodge with “Songs from the Woodpile.”

Friday night featured films and presentations about projects on local rivers, with Smith River Alliance highlighting the most recent efforts to block nickel strip-mining in the headwaters of the North Fork Smith River and American Whitewater highlighting the imminent schedule of dam removal on the Klamath River.

On the water, paddlers of various crafts tackled the rapids of the South Fork Smith River, with Surprise Falls being the crux rapid of the class III race and the narrow class IV South Fork gorge being the venue for the more advanced race. Race results can be found on the BoatSmith Whitewater Festival Facebook page.

On Sunday, Smith River Alliance organized a river clean-up with about 400 pounds of trash collected. The organization also provided trash bags to paddlers, encouraging everyone to leave the land better than they found it. The BoatSmith Whitewater Festival was held in the Smith River National Recreation Area, part of Six Rivers National Forest, which has been supportive of the event.