

The **Payette River** is a [river](#) in southwestern [Idaho](#), and is a major [tributary](#) of the [Snake River](#).



Rafters prepare for rapids on the North Fork Payette River near Banks, Idaho

Its headwaters originate in the [Sawtooth](#) and [Salmon River](#) mountains at elevations over 10,000 feet (3,000 m). The drainage flows in a southwesterly direction for over 175 miles (280 km) where it empties into the Snake River near the city of [Payette](#) at an elevation of 2125 feet (648 m). The Payette River Basin comprises about 3240 square miles (8390 km<sup>2</sup>) and is a physiographic section of the [Columbia Plateau](#) province, which in turn is part of the larger [Intermontane Plateaus](#) physiographic division.

## François Payette

The river is named for François [Payette](#) (1793-18xx), a [French-Canadian fur trapper](#) and one of the first of [European](#) descent to settle in the area. Payette ventured east from [Astoria, Oregon](#) in 1818 and later headed the old [Fort Boise](#) trading post near [Parma](#) for the [British Hudson's Bay Company](#) from 1835-44. A large and amiable man, he was highly regarded for his helpful assistance to the many travelers who came through the fort. After his retirement in 1844, Mr. Payette returned to [Montreal](#), but the rest of his life is a mystery.

## Tributaries

Principal tributaries are the North and South Forks of the Payette River. The North Fork drains about 950 square miles (2460 km<sup>2</sup>), beginning north of [McCall](#), and the South Fork about 1200 square miles (3100 km<sup>2</sup>), starting on the west side of the [Sawtooths](#) beneath the 10,211 feet (3112 m) Mount Payette, flowing past Grandjean, and down to [Lowman](#). The shorter Middle Fork parallels the lower North Fork ten miles to the east, flowing south through Crouch and into the South Fork. Further east, the Deadwood River parallels the Middle Fork and runs into the South Fork just west of Lowman. The North and South Forks merge at Banks at an elevation of 2790 feet (850 m). This junction is the beginning of the main Payette River, which flows 15 miles south to [Horseshoe Bend](#), then west into Black Canyon Reservoir. Below the dam, the river flows past [Emmett](#) and [Payette](#), then empties into the [Snake River](#) at the [Oregon](#) border. The Payette River has

an average annual discharge into the Snake River of 2,192,000 acre-feet (2.7 km<sup>3</sup>) of water (over 700 billion gallons).

## Fish & Reservoirs

Due to the wide range in elevation, the Payette River has a variety of fish and fish habitats. [Salmon](#) and [steelhead](#) were eliminated in the drainage by Black Canyon Dam, which was first completed in [1924](#)<sup>[1]</sup>. From its mouth upstream to Black Canyon Dam, the river supports a mixed fishery for coldwater and warm water species. [Mountain whitefish](#) make up the bulk of game fish in this section of river, with [smallmouth bass](#), [largemouth bass](#), [channel catfish](#), [black crappie](#), [rainbow trout](#), and [brown trout](#) making significant contributions. Upstream from Black Canyon Dam, the gradient of the river increases with coldwater species increasing in abundance. The South Fork of the Payette River supports excellent populations of wild [rainbow trout](#). The North Fork of the Payette River has been severely altered by railroad and highway construction and provides only a marginal fishery for salmonids. However, in unaltered sections such as the Cabarton reach, the North Fork is very productive for salmonids.

There are five major impoundments in the Payette basin: Black Canyon, Sage Hen, Paddock, [Cascade](#), and Deadwood reservoirs. There are also several small impoundments and natural lakes with increased storage, such as the three Payette Lakes. Black Canyon, on the mainstem, provides only marginal fish habitat. Sand from upstream land disturbances has covered most of the habitat. Paddock Reservoir, on Big Willow Creek, has one of the better populations of [black crappie](#) in the state and a good fishery for [largemouth bass](#). Cascade Reservoir on the North Fork is one of the most heavily fished waters in the state. Cascade has an abundance of [yellow perch](#), [coho salmon](#), and [rainbow trout](#). Deadwood Reservoir, completed in [1931](#) <sup>[2]</sup>, contains [kokanee](#) and [cutthroat trout](#).

Alpine lakes within the Payette River drainage are stocked with [rainbow trout](#), [cutthroat trout](#), rainbow-cutthroat hybrids, [golden trout](#), and [arctic grayling](#). [Brook trout](#) are also present in a number of lakes.

## Whitewater

The Payette River is famous for its [whitewater](#). Experts call the North Fork Class V run one of the most challenging river reaches in North America, if not the world.<sup>[1]</sup> [Kayaking](#) on the lower North Fork from Smith's Ferry to Banks is world-class, easily viewed from state highway #55, which closely hugs its bank, primarily on the west side. The lower North Fork narrows and drops 1700 feet (518 m) in the 16 miles (26 km) above Banks, providing nearly endless Class V rapids (see [International Scale of River Difficulty](#)). The average gradient is 110 feet per mile (21 m/km) with a maximum gradient of 200 ft/mile (38 m/km). The North Fork's flow rate is controlled through the Cascade Dam, completed in [1948](#) <sup>[3]</sup>, providing relatively warm water from the shallow Cascade Reservoir (a.k.a. "Lake Cascade").

To the east of Banks, the South Fork's Canyon, west of [Lowman](#), is a challenging Class IV run for [rafting](#). Along this trip is a 40 foot (13 m) Class VI waterfall (Big Falls), which is portaged. The North Fork and South Fork merge at Banks to form the Payette River (main), providing a float trip with numerous Class III rapids. The highway on this lower stretch of the river is on the east bank and a scenic railroad, the Thunder Mountain Line [\[4\]](#), runs above the west side.