25 Adventures on our wild and scenic rivers
THE CLOSEST WILD AND SCENIC RIVER TO PORTLAND, the Sandy River is a river now of 2005, the forty-seven-foot-tall Marquam Dam—the tallest concrete dam ever removed in the Northwest—was destroyed with 4,000 pounds of explosives to improve fish habitat and river recreation. While most environmentalists welcomed a newly restored section of free-flowing river, there was some controversy among biologists about whether the sediment that had accumulated behind the ninety-five-year-old dam would clog fish habitat downstream once it was removed. Happily, the sediment was washed downstream in months, rather than the years some scientists predicted, and boosters have been relishing the higher water levels ever since (more water means a longer river running season, by a month or two). And with the removal of the smaller Little Sandy Dam in 2008, the Sandy is now completely unharmed. In fact, the river is one of only a handful of Oregon waterways whose entire lengths have been declared navigable—from its headwaters on Mount Hood’s Reid Glacier to its entry into the Columbia River just east of Portland. That means there are fifty-five miles of untamed river just waiting for Portland adventurers.

Access to the Sandy’s most popular section—the seven-hundred-foot-deep canyon just below where Marquam Dam once stood—has been limited in the past, but in 2000 Portland General Electric began donating pieces of it to the Western Rivers Conservancy. Now, the Bureau of Land Management is creating about thirty miles of trails suitable for hikers and cyclists of all ability levels. The trails should be treed-mostly in the next two to four years. In the meantime, get a close-up look at where the Comeback Kid meets the Columbia on the Sandy River Delta, where you’ll also find artist Maya Lin’s newly opened bird blind (see “Living History”). A network of dog-friendly paths circumnavigates the delta’s 4,600 acres, which host cottonwoods, cherry trees, and a near-constant view of Mount Hood.

WITH THE 2007 BREACHING of Marquam Dam, the lower Sandy River joined a growing number of Columbia Basin tributaries given freer flow in the hopes of restoring fish habitat. But the Sandy River is the only one with the distinction of being marked by an artwork: a bird blind completed in 2008. It’s one of seven landscape works designed by renowned artist and architect Maya Lin for her Confluence Project, a meditation on human impact on the Northwest landscape.

A 1.2-mile stroll from the Lewis & Clark State Park parking lot and mere steps away from where the Sandy originally intersected with the Columbia (before man-made levees diverted the flow about a mile west), Lin’s blind sits at tree-bough height, at the end of a curving 150-foot ramp. The softly contoured ellipses is made of wood slats harvested from the invasive black locust trees that spread across the Northwest. The slats are fitted together so closely, you can’t make out much more than the sensual shapes of the landscape outside. But the point is to train your eyes on the information inside, where Lin has deeply rooted each slab with the name of one of the 134 birds, fish, and mammals that Lewis and Clark documented in their journals as they traveled through the area. In addition to the explorers’ often generic and eccentrically spelled labels, Lin has included the species’ official names, plus their current population status (unfortunately, this is “endangered” or “species of concern” in many cases).

Less about viewing birds than pondering how the coming and going of species impact one another, the blind recalls the subtle interplay of words and form in Lin’s other iconic works, namely the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, DC, and the Civil Rights Memorial in Montgomery, Alabama. This slice of art on the banks of the Sandy River is a quintessential Lin monument: rooted in a moment of history, but designed to reach centuries beyond it. —RANDY GRAGG