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Forest Service

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Flip Flop Benefits Tieton Rafter

While western Washington white water rivers are offering up thrills throughout summer months, the Tieton River, in South Central Washington, is just another placid stream where fishermen and campers enjoy friendly waters. In early September, when most state rivers are running at lower levels, the Tieton River becomes a raging giant which attracts white water enthusiasts from around the Northwest.



Thanks to a state fishery agreement instituted in 1991, Yakima Basin reservoirs, managed by the Bureau of Reclamation, release irrigation reservoirs on a cycle called "Flip-Flop". This means that the Tieton Reservoir retains its lake level throughout the summer months while northern reservoirs are draining. After Labor Day the Tieton Reservoir gates are opened, and for one month the Tieton River becomes a unique white water attraction.

What makes the September Tieton flip flop season so unique? The Tieton Canyon offers outstanding fall scenery and the narrow valley bottom results in dynamic river rapids. The basalt bedrock formations are spectacular and camping and picnicking is outstanding. U.S. Highway 12 provides ample access to the river and the white water activities, including rafting and kayaking, can be viewed from many places along this route east of White Pass. Those who simply come to view the activity are as numerous as those floating the rapids.

Peak flows on the Tieton start at around 2,200 cubic feet per second (cfs) and may run up to 2,400 (cfs) at times. These flows gradually scale down to below 1,600 (cfs) by late September. The peak flow equates to a little over 4,000 acre feet of water per day flowing down the narrow Tieton canyon, all from a reservoir which stores almost 200,000 acre feet of water at its maximum capacity.

A challenging white water river requires a steep elevation drop as well as a large volume of water. Many streams which drop at 20 to 30 feet per mile are suitable for canoeing and less experienced rafters. However, the Tieton River ramps at 54 feet per mile, cutting through some drops which are rated as Class 4 rapids for short sections. The Tieton River is also unique because Class 2 and Class 3 rapids continue almost without interruption from the Tieton Reservoir to the Naches River junction. While other white water rivers offer intermittent rapids, many of those challenges are typically segmented between placid waters. During Flip-Flop the Tieton River is a continuous rapid from the reservoir to the river mouth.

Rafting equipment required for Tieton Flip-Flop is as important as the skill of the operator. Those who have floated the placid Yakima River may approach the Tieton unaware of the dangers of its Class 3 and 4 rapids. Innertubes, one to four person rafts, and smaller craft are not adequate for this river, even in the hands of experts. Rafting

with a guide (even for those with experience) will assure the proper safety gear and support for this challenging river.

Because the peak Tieton River flow produces a raging torrent, approximately 50% of visitors during Flip-flop utilize rafting guides. These professionals know the river well, supply safety gear, and shuttle their clients back to their cars at the end of the day. Some guides supply snacks and provide other amenities as well. A typical guided float trip takes approximately three hours. Over 6,000 rafters and many private kayakers float the Tieton River during Flip-flop each season. The season is short, typically running the first two or three weeks of September.

Rafting guides on the Tieton River hold a special use permit issued by the Wenatchee National Forest. Visitors seeking this thrilling experience should hire only guides with a valid river guiding permit. This permit guarantees that guides meet certain qualifications of experience, have insurance, and are authorized to float this particular river. There are presently 12 permitted river guides on the Tieton River during September. A list of guides is available at the Naches Ranger Station.

Recreationists can reserve trips or contact the rafting guides on the Tieton River during season. Guides typically set up shop in the community of "Rimrock Retreat" a week or so before the season begins. Most of the activity on the river takes place during weekends. Those seeking value trips or discounts may approach guides during weekdays when their trips are not heavily booked.

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