

Fishes and Fishing in the Forks of the American River: THEN AND NOW

By Eric Gerstung and updated by Bill Templin

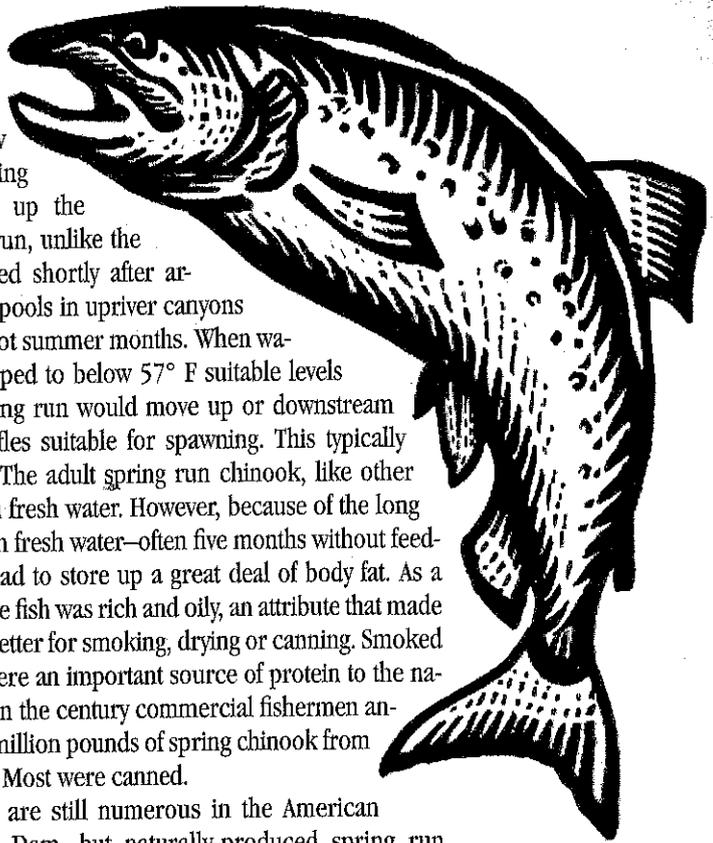
The endemic fish fauna of the American River drainage, prior to the arrival of Europeans, was quite different than that of today. There were no fish in headwater lakes such as the Lochleven Lakes or higher elevation streams like Palisade Creek above impassable barriers (waterfalls over 8 feet high). There were no brown trout, brook trout, or kokanee salmon. There were no bass, sunfish, or catfish. All of the above were introduced from other parts of the world. There were, however, rainbow trout, its seagoing cousin, the steelhead, chinook salmon, white sturgeon, and Sacramento perch. The latter two occurred below Folsom. All but the Sacramento perch remain in the drainage today, though distribution has changed.

Non-game fish found in the American rivers indigenously were Sacramento squawfish, western sucker, hardhead, riffle sculpin, western roach, speckled dace, and Pacific lamprey. All but the lamprey are still present in the forks. Downstream from the forks several other species of non-game fish occupied the river when the Maidu were the only people here, notably Sacramento blackfish, Sacramento hitch, splittail, tule perch, Sacramento tui chub, and the thicketail chub. The thicketail chub is now extinct but all the others are still present in lower river. Europeans introduced carp, goldfish, mosquito fish, golden shiner, threadfin shad, and the fathead minnow to the drainage. These fish occur mostly in Folsom Lake or below it in the Lower American.

Other introduced gamefish including smallmouth bass, green sun-fish, bluegill sunfish, red-ear sunfish, white crappie, channel catfish, white catfish, brown bullhead, black bullhead, striped bass, and American shad. With the exception of the smallmouth bass, these fish are not usually found in the forks, but in Folsom Lake, the Lower American River, or several lakes and ponds tributary to the forks.

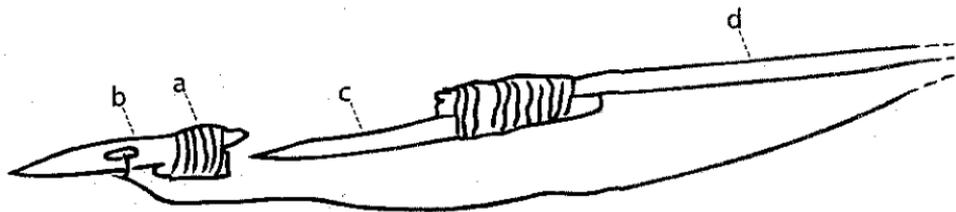
The most important fishery in the American River was that produced by the chinook salmon. Up until the early 1950s chinook salmon lived in the North and Middle Forks of the American River. There were two distinct runs—a fall run which came up after the first rains in November and a spring run which ascended the river during May.

The fall run salmon spawned primarily in the lower river below the forks while the spring run spawned further up the drainage. The spring run, unlike the fall run which spawned shortly after arrival, sought out deep pools in upriver canyons where they spent the hot summer months. When water temperatures dropped to below 57° F suitable levels for spawning, the spring run would move up or downstream seeking out gravel riffles suitable for spawning. This typically occurred in October. The adult spring run chinook, like other salmon, do not feed in fresh water. However, because of the long residence time spent in fresh water—often five months without feeding - the spring run had to store up a great deal of body fat. As a result, the flesh of these fish was rich and oily, an attribute that made the spring run much better for smoking, drying or canning. Smoked or dried spring run were an important source of protein to the native Americans. Early in the century commercial fishermen annually caught several million pounds of spring chinook from the Sacramento River. Most were canned.



Fall run Chinook are still numerous in the American River below Nimbus Dam, but naturally-produced spring run fish no longer live in the American River or in most of the other northern California streams where they were formerly found. Only remnant populations remain in the upper Sacramento River and its Mill and Deer Creek tributaries and in several tributaries of the Klamath River. Surprisingly, Chinook salmon, that the California Department of Fish and Game supposedly sterilized in 2006 before stocking them in Folsom Reservoir, now appear to have spawned and their offspring are now (2010) being caught in the reservoir in the 12 to 14 inch size range.

Gold dredging can still interfere with fishing by making water muddy and by "flouring" the remnant mercury used in the early-day hydraulic mining. Spawning gravels in the American River and its forks were silted over by hydraulic mining that nearly exterminated the salmon and similar silting from gold dredging can adversely impact wild trout spawning today. After hydraulic mining was outlawed, a number of dams were constructed on the river: old Folsom Dam in 1895, the North Fork Ditch Company Dam in 1899, and the North Fork Debris Dam in 1939. The latter did not have a fish ladder, and fish ladders on the other two dams were nonfunctional most of the time. By the time Nimbus and Folsom dams were built in 1955, the



Salmon Harpoon

The bone-pointed harpoons were made with a large quill butt. a) tied to a point, b) with sinew, into which fits the point of the foreshaft, c) the foreshaft point was usually worked from the leg bone of a deer, lashed to the main shaft, d) string was attached to the main shaft and wrapped around it tightly when thrown.

spring-run had dwindled to a few fish. Water temperatures below Nimbus Dam are not suitable for spring run and consequently Nimbus Fish Hatchery was not designed to handle spring run. Spring run fish produced in other rivers occasionally stray into the American, but are not able to repopulate the river.

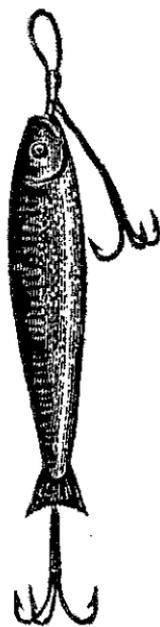
In contrast to the spring run, a small fall run of chinook salmon still exists below Nimbus Dam. The future of this run, however, is threatened by continuing diversions into the Folsom South Canal and releases of water for competing uses. Diversions and releases for competing water uses drastically reduces flows in the river and consequently also reduces the salmon runs.

The North Fork of the American River upstream from Colfax remains one of the few rivers in the northern Sierra Nevada not impaired by major dams or other development. The California Legislature in 1972 recognized this and included the North Fork upstream from Colfax-Iowa Hill Bridge in the State Wild and Scenic Rivers Act. Prior to this event a group of water development promoters had been attempting to persuade the Placer County Water Agency to build a 550 foot high dam on the North Fork at Giant Gap.

Had they been successful, Great Valley and thirteen miles of river would have been buried. Because the state act only applied to private land and did not prevent the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC) from permitting power development on federal lands, conservationists in Placer County, led by Matt Bailey of Dutch Flat, successfully lobbied Congress to add the North Fork to the National Wild and Scenic Rivers system.

Ironically, the congressional effort to protect the North Fork was spearheaded by the late Congressman Harold T. "Bizz" Johnson, an influential proponent of Auburn Dam. Further recognition was given to the North Fork in 1982, when the California Fish and Game Commission designated the North Fork as a Wild Trout Stream. Under this designation the river is managed for wild trout rather than for hatchery trout.

The wild trout fishery on the North Fork varies in quality from



excellent in the upper half to fair in the lower reaches. The North Fork flows through a deep canyon throughout its length. Upstream from Colfax-Iowa Hill Bridge there is no road access to the river, though a half dozen or so riding and hiking trails provide access to a number of points along the river. Fishing upstream from Humbug Bar is generally excellent. Pan-sized rainbow trout are numerous, and a skilled angler generally has no trouble catching the limit. Brown trout and larger rainbows are also occasionally taken.

Bait and lures can be effective during the early portion of the season while flies—particularly nymphs—are best later in the summer. Downstream from Humbug Bar the river becomes progressively warmer and non-game species and small mouth bass make up an increasingly greater proportion of the fish populations. Water temperatures exceeding 80° F are not uncommon.

Bait and artificial lures can be used between the last Saturday in April and November 15 in all forks of the upper American River and downstream of Highway 49 year around. All reservoirs are open all year but they may not be accessible during winter road closures. The bag limit in reservoirs and during the regular trout and salmon season is five trout (or salmon in combination) and 10 in possession. For bass, the bag limit is 5 per day. Artificial lures with barbless hooks can be used in all waters year around. Anglers can fish with only artificial lures with barbless hooks in the streams above Highway 49 from November 16 to the last Friday preceding the last Saturday in April and the bag limit is 0.

There is some road access to the North Fork downstream from the Colfax-Iowa Hill Bridge. The Colfax-Foresthill road crosses the river below the mouth of Shirrtail Canyon Creek and two jeep roads penetrate the canyon several miles downstream. Fishing for rainbow trout, generally pan-sized fish, is only fair and is typically limited to the early part of the season—before flows drop and the water warms up. Later in the summer a few trout can still be found in well-oxygenated whitewater reaches of streams. Smallmouth bass can be found in boulder-strewn runs and deep rocky pools. Although the average smallmouth is less than 10 inches long, occasionally fish up to 14 inches long are caught. Smallmouth can be easily caught with trout lures. The best fishing can be found by walking up or downstream a mile or so from bridge crossings.

Clementine, a narrow, five mile long reservoir situated on the North Fork two miles upstream from the Highway 49 bridge, is the place to catch a wider variety of warm-water game fish species. Smallmouth bass, typically 8 to 14 inches, bluegill ranging from 4 to 8 inches, and brown bullheads, usually 8 to 14 inches are fairly numerous. Green sunfish, largemouth bass, and white



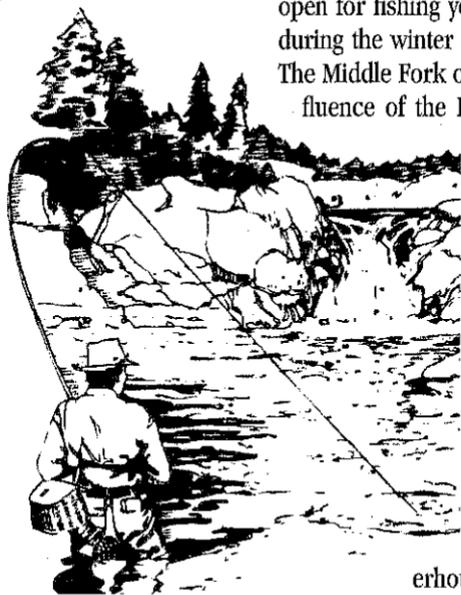
catfish are present but less numerous. Shore fishing is limited to the road terminus near the dam.

Due to heavy aquatic weed beds and a steep brushy shoreline without foot trails, a boat is needed to fish the remainder of the lake. Fishing is best early and late in the day when there are fewer speed-boats on the water. The lake and river downstream from the lake are open to fishing throughout the year.

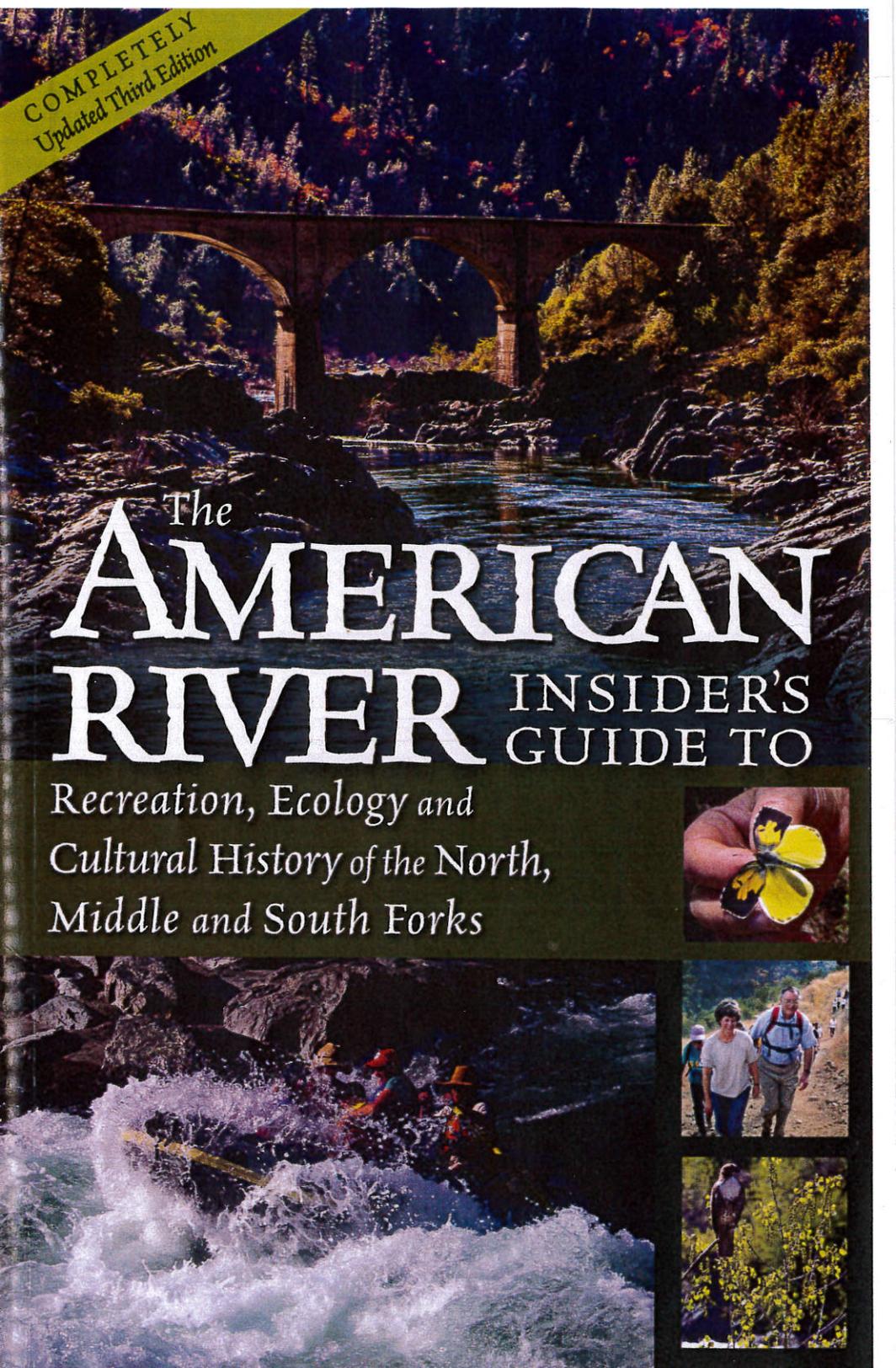
The Middle Fork of the American River above French Meadows Reservoir has a nice population of wild rainbow trout. French Meadows Reservoir and Hell Hole Reservoir are stocked with rainbow and brown trout and kokanee salmon by the California Department of Fish and Game. All reservoirs in this watershed are open for fishing year-round to bait and artificial lures but access during the winter may be prevented by heavy snow on the roads. The Middle Fork of the American River downstream from its confluence of the Rubicon River—like the lower North Fork—had

water temperatures more suitable for smallmouth bass than trout. However, the operation of the Placer County Water Agency hydroelectric project beginning in 1966, reversed the situation. Cold water drawn from the bottom of Hell Hole and French Meadows Reservoirs and released from Ralston Afterbay Powerhouse has made the Middle Fork too cold for smallmouth bass and much better for trout. Hard fighting wild rainbow and brown trout, typically from one to two pounds in size, can be caught by skilled anglers. Good fishing exists in the stream reach between Oxbow Powerhouse and Folsom Lake.

In the "peaking reach" between Oxbow Reservoir and Driver's Flat fishing is difficult during summer afternoons because of the frequency of passing commercial rafts that take over the river. A number of dirt roads provide access to the river in the vicinity of Foresthill. Daily flow fluctuations of several feet occur below Ralston Afterbay Powerhouse. Fishing is usually best when flows are gently rising, and poor during natural high storm flows and during peaking periods in response to high power generation and commercial rafting demands. Artificial flies, natural baits, and lures are generally effective. Fishing pressure is greatest in the more accessible reaches of the Middle Fork, but is not typically very heavy primarily because access is limited, can be difficult, and the existence of the high quality fishery in this area is not well known.



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