



HINTS FOR GOLD PROSPECTORS

The search for gold still offers a special excitement for many people. They hope to “strike it rich” by panning gold. What they do not realize is that most placer deposits have been thoroughly reworked at least twice—first by those who entered immediately after the initial boom periods of the late 19th century to glean the lower grade deposits and tailings and later by prospectors during the Great Depression of the 1930s. During the “rush” of the 1970s and 80s, when the price of gold was at an all-time high, many of these areas were worked once again.

Nevertheless, a chance for success may still remain if you choose favorable areas after a careful study of their geology and mining records. If you are prepared to undergo a certain amount of hardship, possess a vehicle capable of traveling the roughest and steepest roads, and are not discouraged by repeated disappointments, a prospecting trip may prove to be interesting.

The search itself is often its own reward, but there are things you should consider before setting out on a prospecting expedition.

■ It is a conservative estimate that about 1 in 1,000 people who have prospected in the western United States ever made a “strike.” Most of the gold mining districts in the west were located by pioneers, many of whom were experienced gold miners from Alabama and Georgia. Even in those pioneering times however, only a small number of prospectors found valuable deposits. However, the best chances of success are in known productive areas, rather than in unknown areas.

■ Lode gold is gold within solid rock. The areas that are likely to contain valuable lode deposits of gold have already been explored carefully and thoroughly. These days the inexperienced prospector without ample capital has very little chance of discovering a lode rich enough to develop. Such known areas in California are the Mother Lode, Grass Valley-Nevada City, and Alleghany districts.

■ A placer deposit is a concentration of natural material that has accumulated in the unconsolidated sediments of a stream bed. Heaviness and resistance to corrosion make gold an ideal substance to accumulate in placer deposits. Panning is the simplest method of separating the gold from the silt, sand, and gravel of the stream deposits. It is the method most commonly used by the beginning prospector.

■ The gold pan, an indispensable prospecting tool, is versatile, efficient, inexpensive, and portable. With some practice, even an inexperienced panner should be able to recover most of the gold from the sand and gravel. Gold is much heavier than the minerals that make up the sand and gravel; when the water is shaken and swirled, the grains and flakes of gold sink and collect on the bottom of the pan. As the lighter materials are winnowed from the gold, they are removed from the pan.

■ Many placer districts in California were mined on a large scale in the mid-1950s and as recently as the mid-1980s. The streams that drain the rich Mother Lode—the Feather, Mokelumne, Sacramento, American, Cosumnes, Calaveras, Yuba, and Trinity rivers in northern California, have concentrated considerable gold in gravels.

A REMINDER!

You must always obtain permission from the owner to prospect on private property. Before prospecting on federal land, contact the U.S. Bureau of Land Management at (916) 978-4400.

A recommended source of information is U.S. Bureau of Land Management Special Publication 1996, *Location and Patenting of Mining Claims and Mill Sites in California*.



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- B193 *Gold Districts of California, Sesquicentennial Edition: California Gold Discovery to Statehood* (includes new mine list). Scale 1:1,000,000. 1998
- MM009 *Map of California Historic Gold Mines. The California Gold Discovery to Statehood Sesquicentennial (1998-2000) Edition*. Scale 1:1,500,000. 1998
- *The Elephant as They Saw It: A Collection of Contemporary Pictures and Statements on Gold Mining in California (1500-1860)*. 1997
- SP098 *Fluvial Geomorphology and River-Gravel Mining: A Guide for Planners, Case Studies Included*. 1990
- SP103 *Mines and Mineral Producers Active in California (1997-98)*. Scale 1:500,000. 1999
- SP034 *Geology of Placer Deposits*. 1970.
- SP041 *Basic Placer Mining*. 1946
- SP087 *Placer Gold Recovery Methods*. 1986

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