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## Down to the old swimming hole: Dog days of California's South Yuba River

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The South Yuba River with the old Highway 49 bridge (foot traffic only) in the foreground and the new bridge. (ColorWorld / Steve Haggerty)

**NEVADA CITY, CALIF.** -- It was a bright August day when we parked our car near the Old Highway 49 Bridge over the South Yuba River, near Nevada City, and walked down into the canyon to our favorite swimming hole.

The path, dusty and dry in the heat, follows the river, descending slowly to a wide spot where the banks are sandy and the water shallow. During California's Gold Rush, miners panned for nuggets along these gravel bars; nowadays the gold is in the pleasure of an old-fashioned summer's day.

At the water's edge, sunbathers spread out their towels and watched their kids play. Nearby, a group of picnickers claimed a clump of trees, spread a blanket in the shade and lunched on sandwiches and potato chips. Across the river, a half-dozen teenagers -- judging from the way the boys were showing off and the girls were watching admiringly -- took turns leaping off an enormous rock.



The South Yuba Rivers spills over rocks, around boulders and forms... (ColorWorld / Steve Haggerty)

We passed them all and walked to a spot where the river tumbles down over giant boulders into a series of large sky-blue pools. As he always does, our friend Ralph Hitchcock, a Nevada County resident, led the way to our favorite rock.

The first time we swam in the South Yuba River, 22 years ago, we thought it would be our last time. The year before, both the county and a private power company had filed for -- and expected to receive -- permits to build a dam and hydroelectric plant.

But it was not to be. Thanks to the South Yuba River Citizens' League, a grassroots organization founded in 1983 to protect and preserve the river, the plan was derailed. Over the next 15 years commercial developers proposed four more dams on the river, and each time, SYRCL's fund-raising and community programs and legislative expertise, backed by 4,500 supporting members and 500 active volunteers, delayed what seemed inevitable.

Until the breakthrough. On Oct. 10, 1999, former Governor Gray Davis signed a bill that saved the South Yuba, adding 39 miles of the river -- from Lake Spaulding in the Sierra Nevadas west to Englebright Reservoir -- to California's Wild and Scenic River System.

As for our favorite rock, it hasn't moved an inch. The edge of a half-sunk behemoth, it forms an underwater ledge convenient for slipping into or climbing out of deep water. You'll like it if you're a wuss, and hate that first chilly shock. The slow immersion method -- ankles, knees, waist and shoulders -- seems less painful.

Hitchcock, who relishes cold water, wasted no time and plunged in. An active member of SYRCL, he's acted as consulting engineer, picked up trash along the riverbanks, supported fund-raisers, hiked on most of the trails near the river and monitored water temperatures.

"It's just right," he insisted. "It's warm enough so you can keep swimming, but cool enough to stay refreshing."

Though there are plenty of shallow spots for splashing, the place we swim is more like a custom-designed swimming pool. I like to swim a half-dozen "lengths," roll over and float for a while and then climb out onto the rocks to sit and bake in the sun. The canyon is wild and unspoiled, so you bring your own inner tube and make your own fun. If you hope to eat, pack a lunch.

For safety reasons -- river water always moves -- it's a good idea to stick to the places where other people gather and the current is slow. According to the Nevada County Union newspaper, a swimmer drowned near the Highway 39 Bridge on July 4, when the river was cold and unusually fast-running.

"Conditions this year were unusual," confirmed Wendy Thompson, director of SYRCL's river monitoring program. "There was so much spring snowmelt and rain we had lots of cold, fast water until mid-July. Now the levels are quite low and the water's warm."

According to Thompson's monitoring group, temperatures on the first weekend in August were "70 degrees at Edwards crossing (Bloomfield Road), 72 degrees at the Highway 49 Bridge and 80 at Bridgeport, downstream."

Perfect, indeed, for an end-of-summer getaway, a last fling before the weather turns. We generally combine a couple of days in Nevada City with a day at the river and another day hiking in the South Yuba River State Park, presently 2,000 acres and growing along both sides of the river.

Nevada City's Victorian downtown and Gold Rush connections bring in the tourists; the town is authentic and well maintained, with specialty shops, historic buildings, some atmospheric pubs and first-class restaurants. Outside town you can tour the famous Empire Mine, and see the 251-foot-long bridge at Bridgeport, billed as the country's longest single-span covered bridge.

To find the Highway 49 crossing, get a county map, or ask for directions in Nevada City. The two Highway 49 bridges -- the old bridge is for parking and foot traffic; the new bridge is for vehicles -- are probably the most popular places to swim. But there are other easy-to-reach spots along the South Yuba, some at road crossings and others close to one of the hiking trails that follow the riverbanks.

If you're bringing the kids, you might want to try the Bridgeport crossing, downstream from Highway 49. It's about equidistant from Grass Valley and Nevada City. To go upstream (northeast) from Highway 49, look for the Purdon Road crossing, and beyond that, Edwards crossing, at Bloomfield Road.

The Hoyt Trail, on the north side of the river, starts at the Highway 49 Bridge and continues east, climbing up and above the river and dropping to meet it further upstream at an isolated pool. Quiet and unspoiled, this beach is a favorite with nudists.

The Independence Trail, a five-mile-long wheelchair-accessible path, passes the Highway 49 Bridge; you can go

in either direction. Advertised as California's longest wheelchair trail, it's outfitted with ramps and combines smooth dirt paths with long sections of boardwalk.

If you're here on Sept. 16, do your bit for the river by joining other SYRCL volunteers from 9 a.m. to noon in the 8th Annual Great Yuba Cleanup (garbage bags provided free), held on the South Yuba and the Bear Rivers, and Wolf and Deer Creeks. Afterward, head for the old swimming hole.

IF YOU GO:

Nevada City is 63 miles northeast of Sacramento, via I-80 and Highway 49. For lodging, dining, maps and links to related sites, Google "nevada city california," or see www.ncgold.com. For more information about the South Yuba River Citizens' League, see www.syrcl.org. For the South Yuba River State Park, see www.parks.ca.gov.

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