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711

Prospecting on the San Bernardino National Forest

The Lure of Prospecting

Anyone who pans for gold hopes to be rewarded by the glitter of colors in the fine material collected in the bottom of the pan. Although the exercise and outdoor activity experienced in prospecting are rewarding, there are few thrills comparable to finding gold. Even an assay report showing an appreciable content of gold in a sample obtained from a lode deposit is exciting. The would-be prospector hoping for financial gain, however, should carefully consider all the pertinent facts before deciding on a prospecting venture.

History and Background of Prospecting

In recent times, only a few prospectors among the many thousands who searched the western part of the United States ever found a valuable deposit. Most of the gold mining districts in the West were located by pioneers, many of whom were experienced gold miners from the southern Appalachian region, but even in colonial times only a small proportion of the gold seekers were successful. Over the past several centuries the country has been thoroughly searched by prospectors. During the depression of the 1930's, prospectors searched the better known gold-producing areas throughout the Nation, especially in the West, and the little-known areas as well. The results of their activities have never been fully documented, but incomplete records indicate that an extremely small percentage of the total number of active prospectors supported themselves by gold mining. Of the few significant discoveries reported, nearly all were made by prospectors of long experience who were familiar with the regions in which they were working.

Many believe that it is possible to make wages or better by panning gold in the streams of the West, particularly in regions where placer mining formerly flourished. However, most placer deposits have been thoroughly reworked at least twice--first by Chinese laborers, who arrived soon after the initial boom periods and recovered gold from the lower grade deposits and tailings left by the first miners, and later by itinerant miners during the 1930's. Geologists and engineers who systematically investigate remote parts of the country find small placer diggings and old prospect pits whose number and wide distribution imply few, if any, recognizable surface indications of metal-bearing deposits were overlooked by the earlier miners and prospectors.

Prospecting History in Big Bear

The Big Bear Back Country Place is known for its colorful mining history, prehistoric habitations and scenic character. From 1860 until the early 1900s, Holcomb Valley was the location of southern California's largest gold rush and the mining towns of Belleville, Clapboard Town and Union Town were located here. Extractions of gold, silver and copper continued here over a longer period of time than anywhere else in California. The last mining operation of any size concluded in 1958. Holcomb Valley is a

California Historic District, noted for its abundant historic and prehistoric sites. Other historic mining areas are present in Lone Valley and Rattlesnake Canyon. Rose Mine, which housed a mountain community at the turn of the century is now a National Historical Site.

Placer Deposits

A placer deposit is a concentration of a natural material that has accumulated in unconsolidated sediments of a stream bed, beach, or residual deposit. Gold derived by weathering or other process from lode deposits is likely to accumulate in placer deposits because of its weight and resistance to corrosion. In addition, its characteristically sun-yellow color makes it easily and quickly recognizable even in very small quantities. The gold pan or miner's pan is a shallow sheet-iron vessel with sloping sides and flat bottom used to wash gold-bearing gravel or other material containing heavy minerals. The process of washing material in a pan, referred to as "panning," is the simplest and most commonly used and least expensive method for a prospector to separate gold from the silt, sand, and gravel of the stream deposits. It is a tedious, back-breaking job and only with practice does one become proficient in the operation.

Many placer districts in California have been mined on a large scale as recently as the mid-1950's. Streams draining the rich Mother Lode region--the Feather, Mokelumne, American, Cosumnes, Calaveras, and Yuba Rivers--and the Trinity River in northern

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California have concentrated considerable quantities of gold in gravels. In addition, placers associated with gravels that are stream remnants from an older erosion cycle occur in the same general area.

In addition to these localities, placer gold occurs along many of the intermittent and ephemeral streams of arid regions in Nevada, Arizona, New Mexico, and southern California. In many of these places a large reserve of low-grade placer gold may exist, but the lack of a permanent water supply for conventional placer mining operations requires the use of expensive dry or semidry concentrating methods to recover the gold.

Modern Day Prospecting

Today's prospector must determine where prospecting is permitted and be aware of the regulations under which he is allowed to search for gold and other metals. Permission to enter upon privately owned land must be obtained from the land owner. Determination of land ownership and location and contact with the owner can be a time-consuming chore but one which has to be done before prospecting can begin.

Determination of the location and extent of public lands open to mineral entry for prospecting and mining purposes also is a time consuming but necessary requirement. National parks, for example, are closed to prospecting. Certain lands under the jurisdiction of the Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management may be entered for prospecting, but sets of rules and regulations govern entry. The following statement from a pamphlet issued in 1978 by the U.S. Department of the Interior and entitled "Staking a mining claim on Federal Lands" responds to the question "Where May I Prospect?"

There are still areas where you may prospect, and if a discovery of a valuable, locatable mineral is made, you may stake a claim. These areas are mainly in Alaska, Arizona, Arkansas, California, Colorado, Florida, Idaho, Louisiana, Mississippi, Montana, Nebraska, Nevada, New Mexico, North Dakota, Oregon, South Dakota, Utah, Washington, and Wyoming. Such areas are mainly unreserved, unappropriated Federal public lands administered by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) of the U.S. Department of the Interior and in national forests administered by the Forest Service

of the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Public land records in the proper BLM State Office will show you which lands are closed to mineral entry under the mining laws. These offices keep up-to-date land status plats that are available to the public for inspection. BLM is publishing a series of surface and mineral ownership maps that depict the general ownership pattern of public lands. These maps may be purchased at most BLM Offices. For a specific tract of land, it is advisable to check the official land records at the proper BLM State Office.

What are the rules for prospecting for gold and staking claims in the National Forest?

Prospecting, mining and claim staking activities are permitted on National Forest system unappropriated land. Claimants have an express and implied right to access their claims when permitted under Forest Service surface use regulations (36 CFR;228). Check with the Bureau of Land Management Office for land status pertaining to mining claims and the Ranger Station for land appropriation status.

An Administrative Pass is a temporary authorization issued at no charge for prospectors and miners who have a statutory right to enter and prospect on public lands sanctioned under the General Mining Act of 1872, as amended.

Other visitors using the forest for recreation are required to purchase an Adventure Pass for a fee, which is required to park their vehicles while recreating in certain recreation sites.

An Administrative pass may be issued for a 14 day period for members of a mining club and other prospectors at no charge. If they require a longer period, we request them to submit a **Notice of Intent** for the District Ranger's review to determine if the proposed activity causes a significant surface disturbance. If the proposed activity does not cause a significant surface disturbance, then the District Ranger may issue an Administrative Pass for up to one year at no cost.

The **Notice of Intent** requires your name, address, telephone number, a claim map or the approximate location of the proposed activity, the number of samples, the depth of the sample site, the beneficiation method and need for water.

If the District Ranger determines that if the proposed activity may cause a significant surface disturbance, the claimant, prospector and the mining clubs will be required to submit a Plan of Operation. This will require substantive information about the mining, beneficiation, reclamation methods and a substantial reclamation performance bond will be required.

Prospecting does not require a mining claim or an exact location of the activity, an

approximate location will suffice.

A **Notice of Intent** is required if the proposed activity is located in an environmentally sensitive area (1-e, Holcomb Valley, Lytle Creek, Horse Thief Canyon, Cactus Flats, Santa Ana wash and Rose Mine). This includes panning for gold, dry washing, high banking, metal detecting and suction dredging. Call the Ranger Station if you are not sure about the sensitivity of the area involving the proposed activity. Members of mining clubs are encouraged to follow this procedure.

There are several hundred abandoned mines on the forest. The public is prohibited from entering any of these openings. If any of these of openings are causing a clear and present danger to the public, report the location to the local Ranger Station for signing or fencing.

To stake a mining claim, you need to follow Bureau of Land Management guidelines as they are the lead agency for minerals management. The Forest Service administers the surface use regulations in accordance with the Code of Federal Regulations, Title 36, part 228.

Mining claimants are not allowed to drive off National Forest Designated Routes to access their claims. They are required to have an approved Plan of Operation from the District Ranger for access.

For the Use of Metal Detectors on the National Forest

The allowable use of metal detectors on National Forest system lands takes a number of different forms. Detectors are used in searching for treasure trove, locating historical and pre historical artifacts and features, prospecting for minerals, and searching for recent coins and lost metal objects. Of these four types of uses for metal detectors, the first three are covered by existing regulations that require special authorization, i.e. special use permits, **notice of intent**, or plan of operation.

The search for treasure trove, which is defined as money, un mounted gems, or precious metals in the form of coin, plate, or bullion that has been deliberately hidden with the intention of recovering it later, is an activity which is regulated by the Forest Service. Searching for treasure trove has the potential of causing considerable disturbance and damage to resources and thus requires a Special Use Permit from the US Forest Service. Methods utilized in searching for treasure trove must be specified in the permits issued. Permits may not be granted in each and every case, but applications will be reviewed with attention being paid to the justification given and guarantees for the restoration of any damage that might occur to other resources. The use of metal detectors in searching for treasure trove is permissible when under this type of permit, but must be kept within the conditions of the permit.

The use of a metal detector to locate objects of historic or archaeological value is permissible subject to the provisions of the Antiquities Act of 1906, the Archaeological Resources Preservation Act 1979, and the Secretary of Agriculture's regulations. Such use requires a Special Use Permit covering the exploration, excavation, appropriation, or removal of historic and archaeological materials and information. Such permits are available for legitimate historical and pre historical research activities by qualified individuals. Unauthorized use of metal detectors in the search for and collection of historic and archaeological artifacts is a violation of existing regulations and statutes.

The use of a metal detector to locate mineral deposits such as gold, and silver on National Forest System lands is considered prospecting and is subject to the provisions of the General Mining Law of 1872.

Searching for coins of recent vintage (less than 50 years) and small objects having no historical value, as a recreational pursuit, using a hand-held metal detector, does not currently require a Special Use Permit as long as the use of the equipment is confined to areas which do not posses historic or prehistoric resources.

Important Mining & Recreational Tips

Pick/shovel excavations may only be done in conjunction with gold panning and metal detecting and must be made below the high water mark of the stream channel. All excavations must be filled in before leaving the area. Prospectors in the Holcomb Valley and Lytle Creek areas need to submit a "**Notice of Intent**" to the local Ranger Station.

Do not cut trees, limbs or brush, do not dig up ground cover or dig under tree roots.

Pack out everything you brought into the area, especially trash.

Do not wash yourself or your dishes in the creeks. All wash water is to be contained and disposed of, off of National Forest Land

Bury human waste 4 to 6 inches deep and at least 100 feet from the stream channel.

Vehicles must remain on designated routes, unless approved by the District Ranger.

Check local conditions and fire restrictions by calling the local Ranger Station.

For More Information or To submit a "**Notice of Intent**" or "Plan of Operation" please contact:

Minerals Program Manager  
San Bernardino National Forest  
602 S. Tippecanoe Avenue  
San Bernardino, CA 92408

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