

Natural Playgrounds of the Northern California Region

These are descriptions of outstanding natural places our family has enjoyed, especially our children Tom and Julie. Most are in Northern California but some are in Nevada or Utah. All are undeveloped, on public land, and free (although there is a general admission fee in a national or state park). Most involve water and a hike to get there. You can expect to find some people but never a crowd. We recommend bringing water sandals since the bottom of a lake or river is inevitably rocky and rough. It's always OK to swim in your clothes, so dress accordingly and don't bother bringing a swimsuit.

Each description ends with driving directions on how to get there from our starting point, Sacramento.

This is an eternal draft. I add to it whenever we find a place worth mentioning. Please let me know if you find something worth sharing with others.

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GOLD COUNTRY

Rivers and streams of the Sierra Foothills (4000' or below)

These are fine spring and winter hikes when the weather is cool. Some, like Natural Bridges and University Falls, are great swimming holes and are perfect on a hot summer day.

Natural Bridges (swim-through cave). (BLM land near New Melones Reservoir) You will float past stalagmites, rock curtains, and small waterfall in a cave. Natural light from the two large entrances is sufficient to see the sights. This swim-through cave is perfect for a hot sunny day. An easy 20 minute walk takes you from the road to the bottom of a small canyon where a stream passes through the cave. The main trail is on the "Natural Bridge" which passes over the top of the cave. The cave can be entered from either upstream or downstream: turn left off the main trail for the downstream entrance; turn right for the upstream entrance.

The cave is about 100 yards long, and is high and wide. The stream is the cave floor, and although the water is over your head in places, the current is so gentle that it's easy to go both upstream and downstream. Outside on the downstream side is a small gravel beach surrounded by wild figs, watercress, mint, and blackberries. The upstream side has intricate water-carved limestone potholes (careful – very slippery!). We were told that about 20 minutes downstream is a second swim-through cave, but have not checked that one out.

To get there: take Hwy. 49 south from Sacramento. Turn east (left) on Hwy 4 at Angel's Camp. At Vallecito turn right on Parrot's Ferry Road. (Signs also say to Moaning Cave and Columbia State Park). Go past entrance to Moaning Cave. About 1-2 miles further you will a large sign for "Natural Bridges Trailhead." Pull off to the right and park on the dirt road. Trailhead is clearly marked. Alternate way to get there: from Sonora, take Hwy. 49 north. After 2.5 miles, following signs to Columbia State Park, turn right onto Parrots Ferry Road. Go through Columbia, cross over an arm of New Melones Reservoir. About a mile further, look for large sign on the left for Natural Bridges, next to a dirt road. Park on the dirt road.

Note: There are other caves in this area. Four are commercially operated and sponsor guided tours: Mercer Caverns, Moaning Cave, California Caverns, and Black Chasm. The best is California Caverns, followed by Black Chasm. More information on both is on the website www.cavernstours.com

University Falls (granite waterslides in UC Berkeley's Blodgett Experimental Forest in the El Dorado National Forest. Also called Pilot Creek Falls) A natural staircase of three smooth granite waterslides, each ending in a deep over-your-head pool. About 50 yards upstream is a smaller slide-and-pool combination which can be used as an introduction. When we first visited in mid-June 2004 there were bright orange newts in the shallow upstream pools. Warning: Do *not* attempt the final steep, dangerous slide just below the third slide. It requires a rope to get out. The person who tried it a week before our visit was air lifted out with major injuries.

To get there: Allow over an hour driving time from Sacramento and 1.5 hours hiking time from the trailhead. Take I-80 to Auburn, 49 south to Cool, left on 193 through Georgetown. Turn left at Georgetown onto Wentworth Springs Road towards Stumpy Meadows Reservoir. About 12 miles out is the hamlet of Quintette. After the town sign, look for the Harmony Lane street sign on your left. The trailhead is the next turnoff, on the left, but the road is closed with a metal gate only a few yards from Wentworth Springs Road. If you reach the turnoff for the Blodgett Experimental Forest (on the left), you have gone too far. Park at the trailhead and walk

down the gated dirt road. It's 2 miles to the falls. Whenever the road forks, choose the more traveled path – look for the path with the most footprints and other signs of use. There are occasional small blue arrows painted on rocks pointing the way. About a quarter mile beyond a left fork, the trail turns sharply right and downhill, then follows a flume full of water. The last leg is a left turn onto a steep downhill trail to the falls on Pilot Creek.

Rubicon Trail (swimming, fishing, mountain biking) (Rubicon River, El Dorado National Forest.) This trail is similar to the South Yuba Trail (see page 6): it runs along a V-shaped canyon, well above the Rubicon River, making for a good walk when the weather is cool to moderate. The 10-mile trail dips and rises, but overall is an easy grade and could be done on a mountain bike. However, the trail allows only occasional access to the river below. On a hot July day, Rosanne and I only did the first two miles, cutting down to the river to cool off when we found a spur trail just beyond a feeder stream. It was part of the trail up the South Fork of the Rubicon – a hike we had no desire to do on such a hot day in such a steep canyon. Bob stayed at the trailhead to fish for trout – fish so lively and smart that he ended up with a broken pole, a broken line, and no fish.

To get there: Take I-80 east to Auburn, Hwy 49 south to Cool, turn left on Rt. 193 to Georgetown. At Georgetown, turn left onto Wentworth Springs Road and go through downtown Georgetown. Pass Stumpy Meadows Reservoir, and after several more miles look for the left turn to Hell Hole Reservoir and Forestville. Take this road down to the Rubicon River, cross the bridge, and take an immediate right onto a rough dirt road down to the river. The trail is on the left, about 50 yards above the end of the road.

Clark's Pool (swimming hole, fishing) (North Fork of the American River, Auburn State Recreation Area). This is a large, deep green pool outside Auburn. It's an easy ¼ mile hike upstream from Hwy 49 along an old gravel road. A small sandy beach is on the southwest side of the pool, and a large flat rock on the opposite side invites sunning and jumping. Trout and small mouth bass may be caught in this stretch of river. When we visited in mid-May 2001, we found dozens of large pollywogs (each 3-4" long) along the bank of the river. The water is always cold, so ease your way into the water. Jumping into cold water during the spring melt can be dangerous! From the beach, look up to the Auburn-Foresthill Bridge and imagine how deep underwater you would be if the Auburn Dam had been built. The sedimentary rocks in this area are from an ancient seabed. Millions of years ago, the seabed was uplifted, tilted towards the west, and streams cut "V" shaped canyons through it. The glaciers did not get to this low elevation to flatten and round the canyon. If you look closely you will see the remains of roads and mines from the Gold Rush period.

To get there: Take I-80 to Auburn, then Hwy 49 south to the bottom of the Auburn Ravine (about 15 minutes' drive beyond Auburn) where the North and Middle Forks of the American join. Hwy 49 turns right (south) over a bridge, but you drive straight ahead and park either before or after the Old Foresthill Bridge crossing the North Fork (the old Auburn-Foresthill road). High above you up the North Fork canyon is the newer Auburn-Foresthill Bridge. Hike upstream along the right side of the North Fork on the old road. After you pass under the new Auburn Foresthill Bridge you will see a short trail on the left down to the river. This leads to Clark's Pool. If too many people are at the pool, you can also walk upstream to a more private spot.

Ruck-A-Chucky to Canyon Creek (hike, fish, swim). (Auburn State Recreation Area -- Middle Fork of the American River, between Auburn and Foresthill). When we visited this deep V-shaped canyon in January 1999 (a very low water period) the river was full of long clear deep emerald pools – enticing for swimming had it been warmer. You could see 20-30 feet down and watch the fish swim. The trail and the sandbars were covered with the prints of deer, coyote, skunk, and raccoon. Some may have been from mountain lion. This is a good trail when the Sierra is snowed in, and also in late summer for swimming and maybe fishing. This trail is nearly level, following an old road that runs above the river. The Middle Fork of the American River is popular for white water rafting in the spring and summer. The trail starts at a campground and popular put in/pull out point for rafters, and continues upstream for 1¼ miles on the Western States Trail. Due to the steep canyon walls, trails descend to the river at only three points: Ruck-A-Chucky campground, Ruck-A-Chucky Falls (rapids located 1 mile upstream), and where Canyon Creek enters from the south (1¼ miles above the campground).

Ruck-A-Chucky was a gold mining camp in the 1800s – you can see the remains of shafts and abandoned equipment. The name is a corruption of “rotten chuck,” a comment on the miners’ culinary skills. A short distance up the trail are bridge abutments on either side of the river. This bridge was wiped out about a decade ago when a dam broke during a heavy spring rain, sending an 80’ wall of water down the canyon. The middle concrete pillars supporting of the bridge now lie in a deep pool, looking like the ruins of a giant Roman temple.

How to get there: Take I-80 east from Sacramento to the Foresthill exit at Auburn. Take the Auburn-Foresthill road for 7.8 miles; then turn right on Drivers Flat Road and follow it 3 miles on a steep downhill to the campground. The road turns to one lane dirt after a few yards. (The road may be impassable due to winter and spring rains. Call 916/885-4527 or 916/988-0205 for current information.) Drive through the campground to the day use area and park where you can. The trail is the continuation of the road.

Foresthill Divide Loop Trail (hike or mt. bike). (Auburn State Recreation Area, along the Auburn-Foresthill Road). This 9.2 mile loop trail circles the ridge known as the “Foresthill Divide” that separates two deep river canyons, the North Fork and the Middle Fork of the American River. The tree-shaded trail stays high on the ridge, avoiding the steep descent into either river canyon. Instead, it winds through oak and pine forests, grassy open meadows, and across steep slopes of chaparral, providing occasional views down into each of the two canyons to their rivers far below. Side trails go to bluffs and overlooks. It offers a varied hike through meadows, chaparral, and forest, crossing a couple of small streams. The trail is on either side of the Auburn-Foresthill Road, and any hike can be shortened as needed. Its pleasant grade also makes it popular with mountain bikes. When we took it in mid-May 2002, the wildflowers were still in bloom, but summer heat was on its way. This is a good winter or spring trail, but will be too hot to enjoy in summer.

How to get there: Take I-80 east from Sacramento to the Foresthill exit, then take the Auburn-Foresthill road over the Foresthill Bridge. There are several places to park alongside the road and join the trail. We parked at the road to Upper Clementine Lake. Other possibilities include a spacious parking area on the south side of the road only a few miles beyond the bridge, and at the junction with Drivers Flat Road.

Olmstead Loop Trail (hike or mt. bike) (Auburn State Recreation Area, near Cool) This trail is a 9-mile loop high above the American River on a rolling plateau of grasslands and

woodlands, at about 1600' elevation. It's exceptionally beautiful in spring, with panoramic vistas of rolling hills of bright green grass, carpets of flowers, and the songs of many birds. A wildflower guide would have been helpful since there were so many varieties. In spots you can see up to the Sierra crest and down into the canyon of the American River. A rock formation called Pointed Rocks is found along the north end of the loop. The best view of the high Sierra is on the south end of the loop. There are many unmarked side trails and we used them to break the loop into several short hikes in March-April 2002. We found the remains of a farm with a walnut orchard and a grape arbor. Near a small pond on Salt Creek there were Indian grinding holes, and there is evidence of long-abandoned mines. An overgrown earthen dam on Knickerbocker Creek created a good-sized pond where locals fish for bass. We saw coyote, wild turkeys, hundreds of polliwogs in a creek, and two cautious rattlesnakes sunning on a pile of rocks on a hilltop. The Olmstead Loop Trail commemorates a mountain biker who died in his 20s of cancer, but who worked to establish this trail before he passed away. Horse riders frequent the area, which includes a portion of the Tevis Cup Trail.

To get there: Take I-80 to Auburn, then south on Hwy 49. The road winds down into the American River Canyon, crosses the river just below the confluence of the North and Middle Forks of the American River, and climbs up the other side to Cool. The main trailhead parking area is directly behind the Cool Fire Station. A sign and map gives you helpful trail information. To explore the Knickerbocker Creek area and the south end of the trail, the best place to park is at Northside School, about a mile further down Hwy 49 (towards Pilot Hill).

Traverse Creek Falls (swim) (El Dorado National Forest, outside Placerville). A 30' waterfall plunges into a deep pool, perfect for swimming. When we arrived in June 2006, several Georgetown teens were jumping from a rock at the top of the falls into the pool beneath. Unlike other streams in that late spring, the water was swim-able. The half-mile hike starts out level and turns increasingly downhill. However, avoid the false trail heading sharply down to the stream after about a quarter of a mile in, and continue straight ahead to the end of the trail at the falls. The most fun part is going hand-over-hand down a knotted rope at the steepest part. After the rope, walk along the stream, which is shaded and with pools. You come out at the top of the falls. A final spur trail with another knotted rope takes you to the bottom of the falls.

Pictures and a good description are at:

<http://www.waterfallswest.com/ca-traverse-creek-falls.html>

To get there: Take Hwy 50 to Placerville, then take Hwy 49 north for 0.7 miles to the junction with Hwy 193. Turn R on Hwy 193 and continue for 7.6 miles, turning R on Spanish Flat Road. Drive 1.4 miles, then turn R on Traverse Creek Road, following it for 0.9 miles to the first bridge over an unnamed tributary to Traverse Creek. Park by the bridge and look for the trail downstream on the south side of the bridge, by the large serpentine boulders.

North Fork American River. (Auburn State Recreation Area) The North Fork has no upstream dams, so its flow is always at its natural level – high and cold in spring, warm and low by late summer. Three adventures are described below: a pleasant day hike to a waterfall on a side stream (best for winter or spring), and two water trips for summer.

Codfish Falls (hike). This is an easy 3-mile (round trip) hike along the North Fork of the American River in its deep canyon. The narrow trail is narrow clings to the steep canyon wall. On Earth Day (April 2002) there were lots of wildflowers and birds. A school

group had recently made the trail into a put a nature trail, adding markers explaining its natural history. You walk downstream for about one mile to Codfish Creek, then turn up the creek to the falls. The trail is never far above the river, which has many shallow stretches and gravel bars. We saw several places to swim or fish (which we didn't try since it the water was snowmelt). It's popular with rafters in spring. The canyon widens at Codfish Creek and there is a grassy meadow and a broad gravel beach. Previous hikers had created a sculpture garden with fanciful cairns of river rocks. We were inspired to add a few of our own. Next time: return in summer and try some of those pools.

How to get there: Two ways: (1) Take I-80 to the Weimar/Pauli Road exit. Turn right on Ponderosa Way and follow it 3-5 miles down to the North Fork of the American River. It starts out as 2-lane blacktop but narrows and becomes rough dirt. Don't do this in a rainstorm! The trail starts next to the bridge, on the north side of the river. (2) From Auburn, cross the high Foresthill Bridge. About 8 miles after the bridge, turn left onto Ponderosa Way and take it down to the river – about 20 minutes down a narrow winding dirt road.

Ponderosa Way to Upper Lake Clementine (raft, fish). On Labor Day 2003 and in July 2004 we rafted the 4 miles from Ponderosa Way to Upper Lake Clementine, a trip that took 4 hours and involved no whitewater. This is a “wild rive” without any upstream dams, so the water level drops after the snowmelt runs off. By summer the water temperature was perfect for swimming – cool but not cold, and the river was a series of pools of clear water. We floated over trout and surprised ducks at each turn. But we also had to walk the rafts over the stretches of rounded cobbles in between the pools where water was often less than 6” deep...which is why the trip took 4 hours. We had the river all to ourselves, as other rafters were long gone after the spring high water passed. A beautiful, lazy and rewarding day!

How to get there: You need two cars: one at the put-in point at the Ponderosa Way Bridge, and one at the take-out point on Upper Lake Clementine. Driving directions to the put-in at the Ponderosa Way Bridge are given directly above for the hike to Codfish Falls. Driving directions to the take-out at Upper Lake Clementine are given immediately below.

Upper Lake Clementine (kayak, swim, fish). Lake Clementine is in a deep canyon in the Gold Country. (I wonder if its name was inspired by the Gold Rush ballad, “My Darling Clementine.”)

We put in the kayaks at the upper end where it's still more of a river than a lake, but it soon widened. Julie tried out two rope swings near the Upper Clementine day use area and found them challenging but fun. Leaving the day use area, you pass a large, deep stand of bamboo – like Vietnam, Bob said. You can see the bottom, an occasional fish, and hear lots of birds. Below the bamboo we saw ducks, Canadian geese, and several cautious blue herons. Power boats are not allowed in this uppermost stretch of the lake since it is too shallow for them. However, you soon pass a spot where they are allowed, with a 5 mph speed limit. Most are fishermen, and the major fish is bass. After about an hour's pleasant paddle, we came to a boat-in campground. Just below it, near the lake's midpoint, the 5 mph restriction is removed and power boats and water skiers rule. Continuing down the lake, a castle-like rock dominates the upper slope, high above

the water: Lime Rock, also called Robber's Roost, a limestone tower said to contain several caves. According to Indian legend a god living there moaned and howled during windstorms, but it's more likely just the noise of the wind passing over the caves. During the gold rush, a gang of outlaws used it as a hideout with a view.

Another day, we walked upstream to several pools. Tom insisted we bring diving masks and snorkel tubes, and they enabled us to see the trout, bass, perch, and frogs in their own environment. Most fun of all was the finding large numbers of young fingerlings in a quiet side pool – curious and strangely fearless, they swam around us.

How to get to Upper Clementine: From Auburn, take the high Foresthill Bridge and continue for about 6 more miles. Look for the sign to Upper Lake Clementine. Turn left onto the winding dirt road, about 1-2 miles down to the well-used day use area.

Jones Bar (swimming hole). (South Yuba River State Park, outside Nevada City). The South Yuba River lies at the bottom of an impressively large, deep, forested canyon. The rocky river at the bottom has many fine swimming holes and Jones Bar is one of them. The most downstream hole is a large pool. Across the river is a sandy beach. The upstream part of the hole has darker rocks, some good for jumping off. Further upstream are a couple more lovely swimming holes. Explore. On a trip in late September 2009, at least two dozen small rainbow trout were in the lower pool where we swam. Fearlessly curious, they followed us wherever we swam. One even gently nibbled my big toe. What a compliment; I am a fish whisperer.

To get there: The more adventurous way is to hike but you can drive there, too. In either case, take I-80 to Auburn and then take Hwy 49 to Grass Valley. To hike: Stay on Hwy 49 passing both Grass Valley and Nevada City. As you descend into the canyon of the South Yuba, look for the trailhead parking at the Independence Trail. Take the Independence Trail under Hwy 49m (heading west and downstream) and after a short distance and turn right onto the Jones Bar Trail. Although only 0.4 miles long, it's steep downhill...which means steep uphill on the return trip. The other hiking option is gentler but much longer: take the level Independence Trail about 2 miles to its intersection with the dirt Jones Bar Road. There is a trail sign at this point. Turn right on the dirt road and walk down to Jones Bar. Combining these two trails makes it a loop trip, which is what we did – out on Independence Trail + road; return up Jones Bar Trail.

To drive (we haven't done this one yet): Take the Central Grass Valley exit, turn left on South Auburn Street, left on Main Street. West Main becomes Rough and Ready Hwy (in spite of the name, it's really only a 2-lane blacktop). Drive out of Grass Valley and turn right on Bitney Springs Road. Turn right on Newtown Road. Near Newtown turn left on Jones Bar Road. Eventually the pavement ends. Turn right on the dirt road that goes down the hill and follow it to the end.

Peggy's at Edwards Crossing on the South Yuba River (swimming hole). (South Yuba State Park, outside Nevada City). The South Fork of the Yuba River downstream of Edward's Crossing has a series great swimming pools scattered over about half a mile. The last one, called Peggy's, is the biggest. It has a couple of small sandy beaches and jumping rocks over deep parts on both sides of the river. When we were there in June 2002, there were about 25 people at Peggy's, ranging in age from 3 months to 60+, including groups of families and friends, plus several happy dogs. Peggy's has a tradition of skinny dipping, although only a minority exercised their option in 2002. Like most, we stayed clothed. Bob enjoyed watching a dozen

curious golden trout fingerlings swimming around him. This is a good place to come for the day. Bring lunch and a book. People are friendly and we had plenty of chances to chat.

To get there: Take I-80 from Sacramento to Auburn, then go north on Hwy 49 to Nevada City. Hwy 49 takes a sharp left turn towards Downieville. Immediately after, turn right onto North Bloomfield Road at the stoplight and follow it 7.5 miles to Edward's Crossing. Park the car. Take the well-worn "use" trail downstream on the north side of the river (right side as you face downstream). The first pool is at the bridge and other pools are located over the next .5 mile. The trail ends at Peggy's.

Note: The S. Yuba Trail is on the wrong side of the river to visit Peggy's. Don't use it to get to Peggy's, as it's too high up on the steep canyon wall.

South Yuba Trail. (South Yuba River State Park, outside Nevada City). The South Yuba Trail is 15 miles long, extending from Purdon's Crossing up to the town of Washington. You can drive to the trail at three points: Purdon's Crossing, Edward's Crossing, and Washington. All three trailheads are worth exploring! We haven't done it all yet, but here's some notes on two parts. These trail descriptions start from the furthest downstream point (Purdon's Crossing) and go upstream.

Purdon's Crossing to Edwards Crossing (hike, swim, fish). This 4.5 mile stretch of the trail connects two historic bridges over the river. Each crossing site is tantalizing in summer, with use trails leading to emerald green swimming holes. See the write-up of Peggy's above. This portion of the South Yuba Trail is on the south side of the river (right as you face upstream). Although you can start at either crossing, I recommend starting from the Edward's Crossing trailhead only in cooler weather, when you don't want to swim in the river and will be content with spectacular views of the river from above.

Two trails leave the trailhead parking lot at Purdon's Crossing, then join in about one mile. The upper is the S. Yuba Trail, but the wider, well-used lower trail is closer to the river. Take the lower trail, as it is more interesting and has many places to cut down to the water to enjoy the pools, beaches, and rocks. Look for old mines and campsites, and one remaining miner's cabin. Once the two trails have joined, there are only two more side trails down to the river before the trail climbs and stays high above the river. The canyon gets noticeably steeper and rockier, and the trail has been cut out of the steep canyon wall – in some cases, the trail is on a rock shelf blasted out of the canyon's cliffs.

To get to Purdon's Crossing (downstream end of trail): Take I-80 from Sacramento to Auburn, then go north on Hwy 49 to Nevada City, following Hwy 49 through a sharp left turn towards Downieville. Immediately after, turn right onto North Bloomfield Road at the stoplight and follow it 1 mile to the T-intersection. Turn left to Purdon's Crossing. The road narrows, then turns to gravel a couple of miles before Purdon's Crossing. A parking lot is up a short side road before the bridge.

To get to Edward's Crossing (upstream end of trail): See directions above to Peggy's.

S. Yuba Campground to Humbug Trail and Primitive Camp (hike, swim, fish). This part of the South Yuba Trail leaves the BLM Campground near Malakoff Diggins, drops down to the river; then follows the river upstream to Washington. However, we never got that far. This is a really nice day hike – go as far as you want, then turn around and return! Watch for places to cut down to the river to enjoy swimming and playing. One day we found a batch of wild mint along the river and added it to our camp salad that night.

To get there: Follow directions to Edward's Crossing given at the listing for Peggy's, above. Cross the old bridge and continue up the gravel road for about a mile. Look for the turnoff to the campground on the right.

Humbug Trail to South Yuba River (hike, swim). (Malakoff Diggins State Park & South Yuba Recreation Area) This is a steep but unusual 2.5-mile trail down Humbug Creek to the S. Yuba River, where you can hike either upstream or downstream to fine swimming holes. Humbug Creek is playful with waterfalls and large potholes – some as large as bathtubs. If you turn upstream at the river, you will soon reach a primitive campground on a wide gravel bench near a good pool. We were lucky enough to have two cars one day, and spotted one downstream at the BLM South Yuba Campground. We enjoyed the downstream hike, stopping to swim as we saw pools, and we avoided the steep hike UP the Humbug Trail.

To get there: Follow the directions to Edward's Crossing (above), then cross the bridge and continue on the dirt road to Malakoff Diggins State Park. The trailhead is on the south side of the road.

North Yuba River (hike, swim, fish). (Tahoe National Forest, Hwy. 49) . The North Yuba is a cold and clear river in a forested, deep, V-shaped canyon. The sun sets early and rises late due to the high canyon walls. Spacious, tree-shaded National Forest campsites are right next to the water. Best campgrounds are Fiddle Creek and Indian Valley. Deep pools, occasional minor rapids -- good for rafting (main put-in spot is at Goodyear's Bar, near Downieville) and fishing; swimming holes are lovely but water is cold. The area still has many active gold mining claims. Five campgrounds are at 2200' elevation could be used for Memorial Day camping when the higher elevation campgrounds are still uncomfortably cold. On July 4th weekend 1999, there were vacant campsites, little traffic, and the air temperature was pleasant, given the low elevation. After visiting Downieville, Julie announced that she wants to live there when she grows up because it is a perfect little town. [Note: There are several other campgrounds beyond Downieville that also may be good, but we have only been to one, Wild Plum – see the description below.]

Other nearby spots are located where Hwy 49 crosses the South and Middle Yuba Rivers. A favorite local pool with big granite boulders is located just below the Hwy 49 bridge over the South Yuba. This branch of is also the site of the **Independence Trail** – a pleasant level hike along the route of an old flume high above the river. The more interesting half of the trail is to travel west to Rush Creek. In May we found the pool at Rush Creek with nearly a dozen bright orange California newts, easy to catch and fun to hold. A little further along Hwy 49 is the crossing where **Oregon Creek** joins the Middle Yuba at a good picnic and swimming spot.

To get there: Take I-80 to Auburn, then north on Hwy. 49 north through Nevada City. The road crosses all three branches of the Yuba: South Yuba (a few miles after Nevada City),

then over a ridge down to the Middle Yuba. Rising over a third ridge, the road drops down to the North Yuba, which it follows upstream through Downieville to the intersection with Hwy. 89 (north of Truckee). An alternate way is to start at Truckee, go north on Hwy. 89, then south (left) on Hwy. 49.

Spenceville Falls (aka Beale's Falls, Shingle Falls, Dry Creek Falls) –hike, swim.

(Spenceville Wildlife Area). This easy 5-mile round-trip hike on an old dirt road is best taken in March-April, when the grass is lush green, the flowers are blooming, and before the summer heat sets in. The main falls are 60' high with a downstream 30' waterfall only a short walk away. Both falls are in a narrow rocky gorge, each with a pool at its base. Check out this website and pictures to get a sense of the place: (last visited 5/9/04)

<http://www.oro.net/~lindberg/spnvfall.htm>

This is pretty walk along the old dirt Spenceville Road which takes you across rolling meadows, along a stream, and through an oak forest. The flowers in spring are spectacular. The rock at the waterfalls is dark grey with sharp angles and the soil on the trail is often dark red. I found myself wondering about the geology of this place, since it's obviously not Sierra granite.

To get there: From Sacramento, drive east on I-80 then, north on Hwy 65 for 18 miles, passing through Lincoln to Sheridan, where you turn first right then left, onto Camp Far West Road (not Riosa Road). Go about 7 miles to Camp Far West Lake, turning left at the T-intersection when you reach the lake, then turn right after crossing the bridge. The road hugs the lake shore and turns to gravel before it enters Spenceville Wildlife Area. Go down the gravel road for a couple miles and after passing Long Ravine Road. turn right onto Spenceville Road and follow it to the end. Parking is on the right. Walk across the old bridge over Dry Creek and turn right on the old, abandoned dirt Spenceville Road. After about a mile you reach a cross-road barrier and turn right onto a second old road. After crossing a stream and hiking up a short incline you are at a T-intersection. You can either go straight ahead onto one of two trails or a right along a third dirt road. All three choices will take you to the falls, so decide which looks most inviting. (All are pretty; you can't go wrong.) The falls are at the end of the road, on the right. A use trail takes you downstream to the second, smaller falls.

Table Mountain, Oroville (hike, fly kites) (CA Fish & Game; Nature Conservancy). There are at least two "Table Mountains" in northern California, both named for their characteristic shape with steep sides and flat top looming over the Central Valley. This Table Mountain north of Oroville is a basalt lava flow frozen in time. In spring, its gently rolling upper surface is covered with grass, flowers, and cross-cutting streams draining the winter rains to lower levels. As spring progresses, different flowers emerge to replace the fading blossoms. There are also birds, three waterfalls, black basalt rubble and pillars, and a view of the Great Valley beneath. The top, reachable by Cherokee Road (old, narrow, windy but paved), is mostly private and still used for grazing cattle. A portion of this large plateau is now managed by the CA Dept. of Fish and Game and is open it to the public. Best time to visit is March when the air is cool, the streams are running, the grass is green, and the flowers gorgeous. There are few trails, so do your own exploration. ("A process walk," Gayle said.)

Suggestion: After parking the car, head north across the meadow to the left of the huge oak tree and look for a small stream. Follow the stream down west about half a mile, past blankets and clumps of flowers to the waterfall which tumbles through a slot in the dense, dark basalt. The other two waterfalls are on the other side of the plateau. Head north across the

plateau, until you find another stream, about a 15 minute walk, then follow it downstream to the falls. Two waterfalls cascade into the densely-forested Black Canyon.

Sturdy shoes with ankle support are helpful given the uneven footing on the rock. When we visited in early April 2004, the parking lot was nearly full and families and groups were picnicking and flying kites nearby. By March 2005, with news of spectacular flowers, the parking was into overflow and we parked along the roadway. But the people are pleasant and a short walk takes you beyond the crowd. A paperback is available on the wildflowers of Table Mountain, and it also has a map and notes on the geology and wildlife.

To get there: Table Mountain is north of Oroville and east of Lake Oroville. From Sacramento, allow nearly 2 hours. Take Hwy 70 north to Oroville. Take Nelson exit from Hwy 70, right towards Oroville, a brief left jog on Olive Hwy/Table Mt. Blvd. (road changes name) and right onto Cherokee Road. In about five miles, you are at the top of Table Mountain. Best parking area is the last and the largest, on the left, just off the paved road, through a gate. You have gone too far if you crest the summit and start down, reaching the intersection with Derrick Road and the sign to the covered bridge at the small town of Oregon City.

Bear Valley (scenic drive with spring wildflowers). (West of Williams, partly owned by the American Land Conservancy, but most of the land is private) This remote hidden valley is famous for its springtime wildflowers which come as early as March and stay into May. One article calls it “one of the most dazzling wildflower displays in the world.” A Bear Valley wildflower hotline (415/ 403-3850) provides timely information. Unable to wait, I drove there on Feb. 27, 2005. No wildflowers yet, but well worth the trip anyway -- it was so beautiful. The green was nearly iridescent, the valley a jewel, the surrounding hills rugged. By driving a loop, I found a second, smaller valley next to it along Leesville Road. Since then we have returned several times to see the wildflowers. They are generally gone by the end of May.

How to get there: Take I-5 north to Williams, then west on Hwy 20 for 18 miles. The turnoff to the unpaved Bear Valley Road is immediately after Hwy 16 comes in from the left. Watch for the single sign and slow down, since the road is gravel/dirt. The road follows Bear Creek. After a few miles, you pass the road turning left into Wilbur Hot Springs, but you go straight, and finally enter Bear Valley. Eventually it is sort of paved (ancient patched pavement). At the upper end of the valley, I turned right at the fork, following the road to Williams. The left, to Lodoga and Stonyford, looked equally enticing. The road to Williams was a winner, leading over a ridge and alongside another beautiful small valley before heading back down into the Central Valley. Count on 1.5 hours to get to Bear Valley Road, and allow at least 2 hours to drive the loop.

Yet to try:

- o **Hites Cove Trail.** Easy and scenic 4.5 mile trail (9 miles RT) along the South Fork Merced River Trail is known for outstanding spring wildflowers plus river and canyon views. Tom Stienstra gives it a rare “10” rating. Trailhead is at Savage’s Trading Post on Hwy. 140. The bloom is from March-May when 60 different varieties grow in profusion. See page 470 of *California Hiking*.

- o **Seven mile trail from Oregon Bar to Rattlesnake Bar at Folsom Lake.** Take off from the old Auburn Dam Overlook on Pacific Street in Auburn.
 - o **Canyon Creek Falls.** See Leon Turnbull's website:
<http://www.waterfallswest.com/waterfall.php?id=315>
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Other ideas. Books featuring foothills and low elevation hikes:

Robin Donnelly, *Biking and Hiking the American River Parkway*. Carmichael, CA: The American River Natural History Association, 1998.

A mile-by-mile description of the American River Parkway.

Bill McMillon, *Best Hikes with Children Around Sacramento*. Seattle: The Mountaineers, 1993.
65 hikes organized by their distance from downtown Sacto: Within 20 miles, 24-40 miles, and 40-60 miles.

Stephanie Mandel, et al., *The American River: North, Middle, and South Forks*. Auburn, CA: Protect American River Canyons (PARC), 1989

Hiking and bicycle trails; descriptions of river runs; ecology and history.

Tom Stienstra and Ann Marie Brown, *California Hiking*. Emeryville, CA: Foghorn Outdoors, 2003

Leon Turnbull's website: <http://www.waterfallswest.com>. Gold Country waterfalls are at:
http://www.waterfallswest.com/region_ca.html

MOUNTAINS: Sierra Nevada, Lassen & the Modoc Plateau

Rivers, Lakes, and Great Views

Hat Creek Valley, Lassen National Forest. (hike, fish, kayak, float). The Hat Creek area on the Modoc Plateau has much to recommend it: rivers and lakes for swimming, kayaking and fishing, set in a volcanic landscape including lava flows, tube caves, and hot springs. We spent a too-short 4 days camping on Lake Britton in late July 2005 and only began to explore the possibilities. Some highlights:

- *Lower Hat Creek.* Reputedly great trout fishing and a beautiful area. The creek runs wide here, in contrast to the narrower portion along Hwy 89 a few miles south. At the Hat Creek County Park (off Hwy 299), we watched a bald eagle dive into the river, catch a trout, and fly off. Bob had less luck. A ranger also recommended floating or kayaking the approx. 5 miles from the Power House south of Hwy 299 to Lake Britton. (To try next time.)
- *Ahjumawi Hot Springs State Park.* We kayaked across Big Lake to reach this undeveloped, remote park. Paddling into a cove, we startled a golden eagle, and a fawn approached us as we ate lunch. The volcanic features we had hoped to see are inland and awkward to reach given the tules at the lake shore and the dense underbrush beyond. The trails shown on our map did not exist in reality. A local resident told us that the best destination in a kayak was left (west) across the lake to Crystal Springs. He also said that over a thousand baby ducks could be seen in the wetlands beyond Crystal Springs.
- *Subway Cave.* A lava tube cave off Hwy 89. Flashlights are a must.
- *Hat Creek Rim.* A large lava flow to the east of Hwy 89 and Hat Creek Valley. You can drive to a viewpoint at the top by heading east on Hwy 44.
- *Hat Creek Radio Observatory.* UC Berkeley observatory doing deep space research using an array of huge radio dishes. Also looking for extraterrestrial intelligence using a SETI grant.
- *Big Bend Hot Springs.* We didn't check these out. Will try next time. Here's a webpage about them: <http://www.hotspringsenthusiast.com/CA2.htm#BB>
- *Lake Britton.* We had a lakeside campsite on this pretty lake, allowing time to paddle and swim. The water was surprisingly warm compared with Sierra lakes.
- *Fish Hatchery.* Near Cassel and Baum Lake. Multiple types of trout are bred here, including a special salt-tolerant kind for Eagle Lake. Check out the albino trout – note exactly white, more like huge goldfish with red eyes!

To get there: Allow 4.5 hours drive from Sacramento. Take I-5 North to Redding, then east on Hwy 299 to its intersection with Hwy 89. We recommend camping at North Shore Campground (PG&E) on Lake Britton. To get there, turn left (north) on Hwy 89 and drive about 11 miles to the second Clarke's Creek Road crossing (beyond McArthur-Burney Falls State Park and after you have crossed the Pit River bridge). Follow signs to campground. There are also six Forest Service Campgrounds along Upper Hat Creek near Hwy 89.

Summit Lake and Trail, Lassen Volcanic National Park (hike, swim, wade). Summit Lake is a clear, shallow lake at 6700' elevation. Tom has enjoyed wading in the grassy north end and catching pollywogs and garter snakes. Two no-reservation campgrounds are on the lake – we prefer the North Camp. So does a friendly but rare red fox, which visited us nightly in 1999,

sauntering past our campfire and peering into our tents as we slept. The park rangers use an amphitheater for ranger talks on weekend evenings.

A well-marked trail leads from Summit Lake to several other mountain lakes. It is 4 miles round trip to Echo Lake and back, 7 miles round trip if you include Upper Twin, and 8 miles round trip if you also include Lower Twin. If you are willing to backpack you can do a loop trail that also includes Feather Lake, Silver Lake, Cluster Lakes, Big Bear and Little Bear Lakes. (We have never tried this.) Note: Technically, Lassen is not a part of the Sierra Nevada, but I've included it here since it's in a mountainous area just north of the Sierra.

To get there: From Sacramento, allow 4 hours: Take I-5 north to Red Bluff, then east on Hwy. 36 towards Chester and Susanville. Just past Mineral, turn left on Hwy. 89 and follow it into Lassen National Park. There are two campgrounds at Summit Lake, which is along the road in the middle of the park. Trails leave from both the North and South campgrounds. The road is closed in winter; the campgrounds close after Labor Day.

Butt Lake (Butt Valley Reservoir) (kayak, swim, fish). Butt Lake is about 5 miles long and ½ mile wide, with good swimming, boating, and fishing. It is pretty but little used, despite being only a few miles east of Hwy 89 and Lake Almanor. At 4200' it's warmer in summer than in the high Sierra. We recommend Cool Springs Campground, about halfway down the lake on the access road. You may even get to camp right on the water. In July 2004 we kayaked across the lake and saw a tall dead tree, held upright in the water by taut ropes, with 20 large birds' nests on it – one on each branch. The campground host said they were cormorant nests, although no birds were in residence at that time. Fishing tends towards trout and small mouth bass.

To get there: Allow 3.5-4 hours from Sacramento. Take Hwy. 99 north to Chico, then Hwy 32 east towards Lassen. Turn right (east) on 36/89, then right again onto 89 when it parts from 36. Follow Hwy 89 for seven miles, seeing Lake Almanor on your left occasionally. Look for the sign to Butt Lake and turn right onto Butt Valley Road. It's five miles to the camp. The pavement ends at Ponderosa Flat Campground, and the last 2-3 miles are gravel. Campgrounds are run by PG&E.

Sierra Buttes Fire Lookout (hike; great views). (Plumas National Forest) A short hike with a spectacular view at the end! The Sierra Buttes Lookout sits on top of a granite pinnacle. You must climb three steep long metal staircases bolted to the rock to reach the lookout. The metal balcony around the outside of the lookout provides a dramatic 360° view. Not for people with acrophobia. Photos taken here give the impression we were in an airplane. Directly below are three emerald lakes (Upper & Lower Sardine Lakes and Young America Lake) that used to have a mining operation. To the west, you can see the spacious Sierra Valley near the Nevada border. Through a notch, a glimpse of Mt. Rose, 42 miles away. To the south, the large lake is Jackson Meadow Reservoir. The smoky air, hazy from forest fire smoke in 2002 prevented us from seeing Mt. Lassen or Shasta to the north. To the south and east, the balcony looks over the deep long forested gorge carved by the North Fork of the Yuba River. You can also see the Pacific Crest Trail as it climbs steeply out of the Yuba's gorge from Sierra City. Check out the graffiti on the rocks below. Miners carved their names and dates in the 1870's and 1880's.

This hike is 2.6 miles each way. However, since it is a steady uphill climb, allow two hours for the ascent. Julie and I did this on Labor Day 2002.

To get there: From Sacramento, take I-80 to Truckee and turn north on Hwy 89. Pass through Sierraville, then turn east (left) on Hwy 49. Go over the pass and then drop down to the

Lakes Basin area. Turn right onto Gold Lake Road at Bassett's and go about 1.3 miles to the road into Packer Lake and Sardine Lakes. The road has good signs -- follow the signs to Sierra Buttes. (You will also pass Packer Lake on the way.) The road becomes Forest Route 93. The last couple hundred feet before the trailhead the road is gravel. A parking area is at the trailhead.

Deer Lake Trail (easy hike, great views) (Plumas National Forest). A 2.5 mile stretch of the Pacific Coast Trail with breathtaking views both east and west. If you don't mind a downhill scramble at the end, Deer Lake provides a refreshing swim. For those who don't want the dusty steep scramble to Deer Lake, stop at Packer Lake as you drive back downhill.

To get there: Same directions as for the Sierra Buttes (hike above). Forest Route 93 makes a sharp left turn before it turns to gravel, and signs mark the trailhead. Park on the right at this turn.

Gold Lakes Basin (hike, swim). (Tahoe/Plumas National Forest Boundary). Glaciers scraped the land leaving dozens of lakes of all sizes in this plateau below the Sutter Buttes at about 6500' elevation. There are many possible hikes connecting the lakes, and the Pacific Crest Trail also runs through this area. We took the Round Lake Loop, a circular hike that passed 7 lakes in 4 miles. Some of the lakes were small, some shallow, some deep. All were clear and inviting, but the cold water kept any swimming brief.

To get there: The Lakes Basin lies along Gold Lake Road, connecting Highways 49 and 89. Take Hwy 89 north from Truckee for 20 miles, then left (south) on Hwy 49 at Sierraville. 10 miles further is Bassett's Store at the intersection with Gold Lake Road. Turn right (north) on Gold Lake Road. The road has about 8 NFS campgrounds – they all look nice. The Round Lake trail is well marked from the road – it's a left turn shortly after you pass Gold Lake. The trailhead is near Gold Lake Lodge.

Haypress Creek hidden waterfall (hike, swim). (Tahoe National Forest, outside Wild Plum Campground, off Hwy 49). This unnamed waterfall is tucked away at the back of a small slot canyon in Haypress Creek above Hwy 49. Although the creek bed is wide and rocky downstream, its canyon becomes narrow and shaded at this point. The waterfall plunges in a zigzag from one rock shelf to another, ending in a pool that covers the canyon floor. In the daylight just outside the canyon another pool has a sandy beach and large rocks for sitting, sunning, and reading. Even though this is the Sierra, there was no granite to be seen – the falls and canyon are a dark gray metamorphic rock with sharp angles and edges. These falls are a short walk from **Wild Plum Campground** (4400') where we camped in early August 2001.

To get there: Take I-80 to Truckee, then north on Hwy 89. At Sierraville, turn left (south) on Hwy 49 towards Downieville, then left on Wild Plum Road. Wild Plum Campground (National Forest Service) is at the end of the 2-mile road. The trail to the falls starts as a dirt road from the upper campground loop (sites 21-47). Walk through the green gate past the last campsite, then left down the access road past the powerhouse. The road turns into a trail at the back of the powerhouse. Although you are only about 250 yards from the falls, the windy V-shaped creek canyon hides them until the last second. The trail follows the bank of Haypress Creek, becoming a little hairy as it traverses a steep dirt slope and crosses a small stream. (Alternately, water levels permitting, you can wear river shoes and walk along the Haypress Creek bed above the powerhouse.)

Mt. Rose (hike; spectacular views). (North Lake Tahoe). This challenging and spectacular hike takes you through several ecological zones ending high on a windswept summit at nearly 11,000' with Tahoe, California, and Nevada at your feet. Even though this is the Sierra, there is no granite. The trail starts easily along a dirt road and rises to great views of Lake Tahoe. At 2.6 miles you can take a rest at a pretty snowmelt lake in a grassy valley. In August 2002 we found the lake full of large pollywogs sprouting legs and fun to catch with your hands. The trail leaves the road and crosses a saddle. We then dropped into a downsloping grassy valley and immediately found a cold clear spring with abundant yellow flowers by the right side of the trail. The icy water of "Mt. Rose Springs" tasted wonderful and we filled all our water bottles. The trail then passes along a slope full of runoff streamlets that nourish beautiful wildflowers. Turning up a dry wash, we found ledges and large boulders of volcanic mud and stone. Looking across to the next mountain, we saw pillars of volcanic rocks (what are these called? hoodoos? Dardanelles? Gargoyle noses?). The trail eventually crosses one last saddle and turns right for the final climb. Switchbacks begin. The trees grow shorter and stop entirely above 10,000 feet. The wind picks up. So do the views. You are looking down on Truckee and Donner Lake, and can see the Sierra Buttes through a notch in the distance. The smoke of forest fires prevented us from seeing Lassen or Shasta. As you near the summit, the rocks change into thick flat broken flagstones that make a brittle crunching sound like broken glass as you walk on them. At the summit, the wind became a roar. We found three shelters made from the heavy stones and quickly dove into the center one. But the view makes it all worthwhile -- a 360° panorama of northern California and Nevada. If I could stand the wind and cold, I would like to spend the night there, seeing both sunset and sunrise from that spot.

This is a strenuous hike: 12 miles round trip, with long uphill stretches. It starts at 8900' and reaches the summit at 10,776'. At that elevation, the air is noticeably thinner! No matter how warm it is at Tahoe, bring a jacket that will warm you and break the wind. (Remember, the summit of Mt. Rose is 5000' above the lake!) In addition to lunch, bring high-energy snacks to keep going.

How to get there: Drive to Incline Village on Hwy 89 at northshore Tahoe. Take the Mt. Rose Highway (431) for about 8 miles to Mt. Rose meadows and the summit of the road. On the right, at the upper end of the meadows, you will pass a parking lot, a visitor's center, and a nature trail. The trailhead is on the north (left) side of the road and starts at a gated dirt road with a P, G&E storage building. The Tahoe Rim Trail and Mt. Rose Trail both use this trailhead, and the two run together for the first 2.6 miles. If you see the entrance to the Mt. Rose Campground, you have gone too far.

Long Lake (hike, swim). (Tahoe National Forest, off I-80). A narrow glacier-carved lake in pines, with open sunny spaces. Granite shelves for sunbathing; a little island in the middle. Clear water, good for swimming (and fishing??). Devil's Peak, the dark plug core of an ancient volcano, rises steeply over the west side of the lake. A walk along the shore takes reveals shallow sandy inlets that invite wading; deep spots have jumping/diving rocks. One inlet has a rope swing over a deep spot. Similar feel to Loch Levens lakes, and in the same vicinity. Elevation: 6600 feet. Easy hike in – 1 mile from trailhead. No elevation gain. This is a good day trip from Sacramento on a hot summer day. Stone fire rings in several flat areas show that it's used as a backpacking campsite.

To get there: Take I-80 East from Sacto. to Soda Springs exit. Turn right off the exit ramp; right down Soda Springs Road and cross the RR tracks; right on Pahatsi Road. Drive past

Royal Gorge XC Ski, then the road turns to dirt. You now have 3.5 miles of dirt road; stay on main track. Continue past entrance roads to Camp Pahatsi (BSA), Camp Winthers, Deer Lake (Girl Scouts), and Kidd Lake group campground (PG&E). Follow signs to Kidd Lake; then continue, passing Kidd Lake on left, and Royal Gorge's Devil's Peak Warming Hut. Park at Palisades Creek Trailhead. Follow the dirt road downhill and walk across the top of the Cascade Lake dam (by PG&E). After a short walk down the trail, take the left fork – don't go to the right to the Palisades Trail and American River. A few more minutes and you're at Long Lake.

Loch Levens and Salmon Lakes (hike, swim, camp) (Tahoe National Forest, off I-80)

A six-mile round trip trail will take you to five mountain lakes, each with a different personality. The first, about a mile in, is a shallow unnamed lake to the left of the trail, lushly green and surrounded by forest. The other lakes are set in granite. Salmon Lake is can be seen from the first overlook, nestled in rocks down below. It can be reached by a short access trail to the right. If you lunch there, a bevy of small, eager, hungry catfish will greet you and track your every movement. The three Loch Levels Lakes are beyond, starting with Lower Loch Levens. The trail approaches it at the forested end. If no one is on its swimming/sunning ledge near its shore, it's fun to stop there. However, a short ¼ mile further down the trail is Middle Loch Levens, my favorite. It's a long slender lake with several tiny islands and a varied shoreline that provide many places to picnic, wade, swim. Almost a mile further is Upper (Higher) Loch Levens at 6900'. It's popular with backpackers and there are many campsites along its southern edge. Bob also likes Fisher Lake, about a mile beyond but without any access trail, so you have to use map and compass. This small, exposed lake sits on the lip of the canyon of the North Fork American.

How to get there: Avoid the popular trail that leaves near the Big Bend Ranger Station. A far better way is to get off I-80 at the Yuba Gap exit. Turn right and follow paved Lake Valley Road towards Lake Valley Reservoir, turning right at the Y intersection to avoid going to Snow Flower Lodge. Turn left onto gravel Forest Road 19 before Lake Valley Reservoir. The sign also mentions Huysink Lake, Mears Meadows, and the Silver Tip Picnic Area. Continue for about 4 miles down this road, passing the Silver Tip Picnic Area on your right. The road takes you along the side of Lake Valley Reservoir, then winds up into the forest at the end of the lake. About 4 miles in, take the well-used (but poorly-marked) dirt road on the left, heading up the hill to Huysink Lake, about 2 miles away. Do not continue FR 19 to Mears Meadows. About half a mile beyond shallow Huysink Lake is the trailhead (on the left) and beyond that, some parking space.

Grouse Ridge Recreation Area (hike, swim). (Tahoe National Forest, Hwy 20) A fire lookout perched on a rock promontory high on Grouse Ridge has a superb view of the Central Valley, Sutter Buttes, and Mts. Lassen, Shasta, Diablo, and even Tamalpais on a clear day. One thousand feet below, the dozen+ lakes basin area provides a variety of camping, hiking, and fishing spots. Some lakes have islands, all have granite rocky benches, some have diving rocks. In 2002 this area is being proposed for wilderness status. The geology is a mixture of pale gray granite and older iron-rich red-brown metamorphic rock formed from ancient marine sediments. On a typical hike, expect to see others -- day hikers, backpackers, fishermen, and a few friendly dogs. In the fall, the Indian summer air is fragrant with the butterscotch/vanilla smell of Ponderosa pine, shrubs turn brilliant reds and yellows, and a stand of big leaf maple at the Bear River makes look like Connecticut.

So far we have taken three hikes in this rich and varied area:

Lakes Basin day hike. This easy day hike starting at Carr Lake can be as long as you wish and can include as many as 7 lakes (Carr, Feeley, Little Island, Island, Long, Round, and Milk Lakes, not counting a little grassy un-named lake between Feeley and Island Lakes) Each lake is lovely; each is different. Long, Round, and Milk Lakes are reached by short spur trails from the main trail. One day we walked totally around the largest lake, Island Lake and found at least a half dozen inviting backpacking campsites tucked away in the trees. By the way, Long Lake isn't very long, Round Lake isn't round, and Milk Lake is clear.

Crooked Lakes Trail to Penner Lake. Leaving the same Carr Lake trailhead, this hike is 6.5 miles and a bit more challenging. Turn north (left) at Island Lake onto the Crooked Lakes Trail. After walking the length of beautiful Island Lake, you eventually come to the series of Crooked Lakes, ranging from stagnant grassy ponds near the trail to two lovely deep lakes reached by spur trails. Penner Lake is a goal reached only after a fairly steep climb up and across an exposed ridge that provides a view of the Crooked Lakes. It is a gem of an alpine lake tucked into a rock basin at 6900.'

Grouse Ridge. Another approach is to drive to the Grouse Ridge Lookout and hike down to Milk and Round Lakes. Although it's more difficult to reach this trailhead, it has a premier view from the now-abandoned lookout. Furthermore, the trailhead parking is on a cliff edge overlooking Milk, Island, and Feeley Lakes and the rest of the lakes basin. If you start from Grouse Ridge, look to the right as you walk downhill into the basin area, and you will see a 500' vertical granite wall above Lake Sanford. This is a spot used by technical climbers, so bring your binoculars and see if you can spot any. Also leaving from this trailhead are the trails to Sanford, Downey, and Glacier Lakes (as yet untried)

To get there: From Sacramento, allow about 2 hours. Take I-80 East to the Hwy 20 exit. Take Hwy 20 for a few miles east, passing the road to the Spaulding Lake Recreation Area and turning right on paved road Forest Route 18, marked by signs to Bowman Lake and the Sierra Discovery Trail. The Sierra Discovery Trail is an easy 0.8 mile nature trail along the Bear River with excellent signs covering a lot of natural and human history about the area. A large number of big leaf maple trees (the only maple native to the Sierra Nevada) reminds me of Connecticut, and bring startling fall color to the spot.

The Grouse Ridge Lookout turnoff is at 6.4 miles down Forest Route 18 at a well-marked right turn. You then have 6 miles of uphill rough dirt road to 7700 feet – but I did it in a 2-wheel drive small sedan, so go for it. Once on Grouse Ridge, follow the signs past the campground to the trailhead parking. The easier but less spectacular approach to the lakes basin area is to proceed to further down Forest Route 18 to the well-marked right turn at 8.5 miles. Follow signs to Feeley and Carr Lakes, 3 miles down the dirt road. During the drive, take the right on each of the two forks you encounter. The trailhead is well marked, at 6700'.

Cascade Falls (hike). (Emerald Bay, Lake Tahoe, Hwy. 89) No swimming – this is a spot for wading, sliding, climbing, and playing in the rocky cascades above the waterfall into Cascade

Lake. Water temperature and safety vary with the season; both are best in late summer. The stream drains out of Desolation Wilderness, but the falls are outside the Wilderness area, so you need no wilderness permit for this hike. The trail, which runs about 2 miles, does not involve a serious climb, so it's good for younger children. The trail takes you across a ridge above Cascade Lake, with a wonderful view of Tahoe behind you and the falls ahead of you.

To get there: turn off Hwy. 89 at the Bayview Campground across the road from the Emerald Bay vista point. The trail leaves from the back of the campground.

Horsetail Falls (hike). (El Dorado National Forest, off Hwy 50). Wonderful spring hike when the snowmelt makes Horsetail Falls into a large, long, thundering cascade. It is visible from Hwy 50 between Twin Bridges and Camp Sacramento if you are driving downhill. Hiking to the base of Horsetail Falls is about 1.3 miles each way. On a sunny April Sunday, Bob and I walked to the base of the waterfall, over small fields of snow and across snowmelt feeder streams. The air was fragrant with pine and the water was roaring. A great Sunday afternoon walk in the woods. With more time and if you are very brave, you can make this into a longer trip by ascending the steep canyon all the way into Desolation Wilderness. However, beware – this is dangerous. I tried this once and got too freaked out to make it to the top of the pass. This is also not a good place for swimming.

To get there: Hwy 50 east to Twin Bridges. Park along the north side of the road, facing downhill. The trailhead parking area just beyond the Twin Bridges store may be closed, but that's where the trail leaves from. The trail is on the west side of the roaring creek. Once you start along the trail, however, due to snow and runoff, you may need to find your own way from time to time. But you won't get lost since there is only one canyon and the waterfall and creek are unmistakable. From the Desolation Wilderness boundary on, the best trail is close to the creek.

Bassi Falls. (Crystal Basin, El Dorado National Forest, off Hwy. 50). Gorgeous 100+-foot waterfall in a glacier-scoured granite basin with cascades above and below. This waterfall is *spectacular* in spring with the run-off in late May-early June. Above the falls, cascades surge and thunder over the wide granite open field dotted with glacial erratic boulders. There may even be 6' standing waves of white water. Below the falls, the water streams crystal clear over granite terraces, sometimes in a single torrent, but more often dividing into about six shallow streams sparkling in the sun. Thinking of Tony Hillerman's stories of Navajo culture, the water above the falls is male water; below the falls is female water. I skipped, splashed, sang, and danced.

By July-August the falls have changed dramatically: -- the flow is greatly reduced and the water far warmer. Where once icy water raged, a series of tranquil wading and soaking pools invite play. Dress accordingly and wear water sandals to explore and enjoy.

To get there: Highway 50 to Crystal Basin turnoff. Turn left onto Ice House Road (Forest Road 3) and drive 16.6 miles -- past Ice House Reservoir and campgrounds on Union Valley Reservoir. Cross the bridge over Big Silver Creek and turn right on the dirt road 12N32, directly across from Big Silver Group Camp. Drive 0.2 miles to a junction and turn left at the sign to Bassi Falls. Then drive 0.8 miles to the next junction and turn right. Drive to end of road (0.7 miles) and park. Good, easy mile trail leaves from the end of the parking lot. It's a short and easy hike to get the falls (about .6 miles) on a well-used trail. There is a lesser-used fork of the trail to the top of the falls. As you are emerging from the forest, just before reaching the

spacious granite shelf that leads to the falls, look a dead snag on the left and a diamond-shaped sign, about 3” on a side, with a profile of a hiker. Turn left onto the trail to the top of the falls.

To get a distance view of the falls while driving on Ice House Road, take the marked turn west onto the paved road to Big Hill and follow it 2 miles to the vista point overlooking Crystal Basin. You can see Bassi Falls in the middle distance, beyond Union Valley Reservoir.

Bassi Creek Loop (El Dorado National Forest, off Hwy 50). Several miles above Bassi Falls is a 5-mile loop hike that crosses Tells Creek and then runs along Bassi Creek. The glacier that carved Bassi Falls was at work here, too, creating a broad granite plateau now crossed by Bassi Creek. The stream crosses a wide granite plateau, forming a series of shallow pools and miniature waterfalls. What a gorgeous place! When we got there on Labor Day 2011 I wanted to stay all day. But it was late in the day, so I shed my dusty boots and waded. When I found a rare deep pool I plunged in. What a heavenly place!

To get there: Highway 50 to Crystal Basin turnoff. Turn left onto Ice House Road (Forest Road 3) and drive past Ice House Reservoir and Union Valley Reservoir. Watch for the small paved road on the right. The sign says Van Vleck Bunkhouse, Tells Creek Equestrian Campground, and Desolation Wilderness trailhead. Follow the paved road to the end (about 5-6 miles) and turn right into the Tells Creek Equestrian Campground. There is a hikers’ parking lot. *Note: No need to register for Desolation Wilderness as you will not enter it.*

After parking, proceed further into the campground, slightly downhill and to the left to the trailhead. This will take you on a counter-clockwise loop (recommended). To do the loop clockwise, return to the paved road, turn right, and follow it through the closed gate onto the 4WD road. At 1 mile, turn right at the major intersection towards Reds Peak (signs will help) and after .7 mile right at the trail sign for “Bassi Creek Trail.”

Lake Margaret (El Dorado National Forest, off Hwy 88). Haven’t tried this yet, but it is highly recommended at:

<http://www.localhikes.com/HikeData.asp?DispType=0&ActiveHike=2&GetHikesStateID=1&ID=5577>

Cleo’s Baths (hike, swim). (Stanislaus National Forest, Hwy. 108) An emerald pool carved out of granite by a glacier, set in a high mountain valley. One cascade waterfall fills Cleo’s Baths and another drains it. After high snowfall winters Cleo’s is a raging torrent, very cold and completely unswimmable. After a moderate snowfall winter, the summer water level is safe to swim, but bracing. Low water (as in 2001) reveals a series of small pools and waterfalls in the canyon upstream from Cleo’s.

To get there: take Highway 108 (Sonora Pass) to Pinecrest. Follow Pinecrest Road one mile to the town, then bear to the right of Pinecrest Lake and park at the end of the road. The trail starts here and hugs the shore of the lake for the first 2 miles. At the far end of the Lake there is a fork – go to the right; do not cross the stream. The trail winds uphill and eventually follows the stream. There are many flowers along the trail, as well as a large patch of horse mint (a wild spearmint as high as your waist). The last ¼ mile is a steep a rock scramble uphill as you climb to the basin that is Cleo’s. Look for painted blazes and three-stone ducks. When you are really out of breath you are at Cleo’s Baths. Total round trip distance: 6 miles. In one low water year on the return trip we entered the stream at the base of the cascade and waded/floated almost all the way to Pinecrest Lake through a series of pools.

Waterhouse Lake (hike, swim). (Stanislaus National Forest, Hwy. 108). Located several miles upstream from Cleo's Baths (see above) in the same glacier-carved canyon. This lake is reached by a 1½ mile trail with a spectacular view. The trail starts at a high mountain meadow with lots of flowers, and after about ¾ miles it drops down into the rocky canyon. The last half of the trip is a rock scramble into the canyon. Painted blazes mark the trail. Wear good hiking shoes! Although the trail is short, it is steep – not recommended for children under 10; best for older children or adults. The outlet stream from Waterhouse spills over sheets of smooth granite. When you reach the canyon floor, go left (upstream) to find the lake, which is hidden in a grove of trees. Oddly enough, the water here is warmer than at Cleo's. A faint trail connects Cleo's and Waterhouse.

To get to the trailhead, take Hwy. 108 (Sonora Pass Road) to the turnoff to the Trail of the Gargoyles. The road turns to dirt; pass the entrance to the Trail of the Gargoyles and keep on going. You may need to refer to the Stanislaus National Forest map – I haven't driven this one for awhile.

Sword Lake (hike, swim). (Stanislaus National Forest, Hwy 108). This lake is set in a granite basin scooped out by glaciers at the base of the Dardenelles, a volcanic mesa formation created during the Sierra's violent geologic history. It is warm for a Sierra lake, which makes for pleasant swimming in July-August. On the east side, high rocks rise steeply over deep water and make for great jumping, if you are brave. In July 1999 when we visited, someone had also fastened a rope to an overhanging tree branch so you could swing out over the lake and let go. A rocky peninsula jutting into the lake provides a smooth shallow shelf for a gentle walk-in. A short distance away, over the rocks on the west side, is Lost Lake.

The 5 mile round trip trail is best for adults and older children. The first section is uphill to a vista point. The rest of the trail slopes downhill into the lake, crossing mountain meadows full of wildflowers. Some forested sections are moist and full of mosquitoes. Spray repellent on before you start this hike. You will also cross a dramatic mudslide. Heavy snows and rains in spring 1998 saturated the volcanic ash on the slopes of the Dardenelles, a mesa-like volcanic formation that you will walk beneath on much of the hike. Tons of heavy mud careened down a small creekbed, uprooting and snapping trees like matchsticks and overturning boulders. No vegetation survived. As the mud dried, newly-exposed volcanic ash rocks dried and disintegrated, leaving mounds of pink and white powder.

To get there. Take Hwy 108 (Sonora Pass Hwy) east, turning left on the paved road to the Fence Creek/Clarke's Fork campgrounds. Crossing the bridge, take the left towards Fence Creek campground, but go left at the next fork, away from the campground. Follow the unpaved road for 6 miles to the very end. This is the "County Line" trailhead.

Yosemite. Yosemite Valley is too crowded: the world is loving it to death. But there are still places in the National Park outside the Valley that are not heavily visited and well worth national park status. Each of the first three mentioned below has a lovely stream flowing through it; the fourth and fifth are waterless but spectacular:

Lyell Fork of the Tuolumne River, Tuolumne Meadows Campground. Take Highway 120 (Tioga Pass) to Tuolumne Meadows. The river is on the north side of the

campground. As you walk along the river, you will find smooth granite waterslides and pools in low water years; a foaming icy torrent in high water years. However, there are also sun-warmed natural shallow “hot tubs” in large potholes in the rock. White granite sand; slabs of water-polished rock for sunbathing. The high elevation (9000 ft.) ensures cold nights even in summer, but days are warm. Walk, explore, enjoy.

Also visit the **Soda Springs** in Tuolumne Meadows and bring an empty bottle to enjoy the naturally carbonated water. And check out the shepherd’s hut nearby where John Muir and a publisher friend cooked up a plan to save Yosemite by outlawing commercial development. Their plan was to use Muir’s writing to generate public support for making Yosemite into a national park. Muir agreed to write a series of articles which would then be featured in a prominent national magazine. The strategy worked, making both Muir and Yosemite famous. A few years later, Muir clinched national park status by taking President Teddy Roosevelt camping in the Valley in the spring – just the two of them. They were snowed in for days by a freak storm. Teddy loved it and emerged promising that Yosemite would be the nation’s second national park.

Porcupine Flat. (Hwy. 120 – Tioga Pass Road) This pretty little spot gets an honorable mention. It is especially good for young children, since the stream is shallow and the current gentle. Porcupine Flat is a no-reservation campground on the north side of Hwy. 120, in between White Wolf and Lake Tenaya. The small stream flowing through it was loaded with thousands of fingerlings and surrounded by wildflowers when we stopped there in mid July 1995. Since Yosemite stopped stocking its rivers and lakes about a decade ago, all these fish are natural survivors. The stream is good for wading and exploring nature, but much too small for swimming. In dry years, it’s a trickle by Labor Day. (Note: the **North Dome** trail starts across the road from this campground. The destination of this full-day round-trip hike is a spectacular confrontation with Half Dome, directly across the valley. This hike is too long for young children, but great for adventurous teens or older. See John Muir’s description of dancing on North Dome.)

Sentinel Dome (hike; view). A short and easy 1-mile hike takes you to the top of a granite dome with a spectacular 360° view stretching from the Sierra to the Great Central Valley, with Yosemite Valley at your feet and Half Dome to your right. You are on top of the world. Julie and Brinn danced and shouted for joy as they explored each side of the dome. A famous Ansel Adams photograph features a lone gnarled pine growing in a crack at its summit. Long dead but stout, it stood for decades, finally falling in the winter of 2003-04.

Taft Point (hike, view). A cliff overlooking Yosemite Valley, across from El Capitan. A vertical drop with over 1000’ feet beneath you. I appreciated the railing. Just before Taft Point the trail passes The Fissures, several deep crevasses in the rock. Gaze down them into nothingness.

Not only are the views from Sentinel Dome and Taft Point surprisingly different, but the two places have a very different feel – Taft Point’s abrupt cliff is more stomach-churning. A round-trip trip to both in one day totals 4 miles, and the trails are not difficult. Each one alone is a 2-mile round trip.

To get there: From Hwy 41, turn east onto Glacier Point Road. The parking area at the trailhead is on the left about 2 miles before the end of the road. Both hikes share the same trailhead: turn right onto the Sentinel Dome trail, left onto the Taft Point Trail.

Wawona. (Hwy 41) The South Fork of the Merced River looks much like its sister in Yosemite Valley, but without the spectacular valley walls and their waterfalls. This fork flows through the south part of Yosemite National Park, paralleling Hwy. 41, near the Mariposa Grove of Redwoods. Wawona is at the same elevation as the Valley (4000') but a little cooler due to its greater openness. When we camped there in October 1997, there were expanses of water-smoothed granite and little white sand beaches for sunbathing. Broad stretches of the river near the campground could be good for swimming, wading, and inner-tubing in hot weather.

Chilnaulna Creek and Falls. (hike, swimming holes) (off Hwy 41) The trail and Chilnaulna Falls are described in most guidebooks and also online:

<http://www.localhikes.com/HikeData.asp?DispType=0&ActiveHike=2&GetHikesStateID=1&ID=4278>

There are several swimming holes in the creek below the falls. The granite has "smooth basins and wildly contoured ledges." A fine swimming hole is found by leaving the Chilnaulna Falls Trail about a mile up the trail, well above the steep lower falls at the start of the trail. Turn right down a faint use trail shortly before the main trail opens at a flat spot and veers to the left away from the drainage. The swimming hole is less than a quarter mile down the side trail. Chilnaulna Falls themselves are another 3 miles up the path. We visited on Labor Day 2009 and found the water still bracingly cold.

To get there, turn off Hwy 41 up Chilnaulna Falls Road, drive 2 miles, and park at the end of the road, by the trailhead.

Other ideas: There are many other places to try.

- Bassi Creek Loop in the Crystal Basin. 5 mile loop trail.
- Lyons Creek Trail off the road into Wright's Lake

Here are some books that describe trails of the Sacramento-Sierra Nevada region.

Deborah J. Durkee, *Easy Day Hikes in Yosemite: 20 Enjoyable Trails with Suggestions for Hiking with Children*. Yosemite National Park: Yosemite Association, 1985
Available in stores in Yosemite National Park.

Jeffrey P. Schaffer, *The Tahoe Sierra: A Natural History Guide to 100 Hikes in the Northern Sierra*. Berkeley, CA: Wilderness Press, 1975. (newer edition?)

Organized by four major access highways: Hwy 50, I-80, Hwy 49, and Hwy 70.
Includes on geology, history, and biology.

Karen and Terry Whitehill, *Best Short Hikes in California's Northern Sierra*. Seattle: The Mountaineers, 1990.

74 hikes ranging from Yosemite through Lake Tahoe/Donner Pass. There is a companion volume for the Southern Sierra.

Leon Turnbull, Waterfalls West website: http://www.waterfallswest.com/region_ca.html

DESERT

Basin & Range, Hot Springs

Highway 395 which runs along the eastern edge of the Sierra Nevada. The mountains rise steeply to the west. Nevada's high desert and parallel mountain ranges stretch off to the east. Few year-round roads connect Hwy 395 to the rest of California, since the steep escarpment, high elevation, heavy snowpack, and low population make only summer roads feasible. My favorites are Monitor Pass and Sonora Pass, both of which take you close to 9000 ft. Hwy 395 passes many places worth visiting: the ghost town of Bodie, Mono Lake, Panum Crater, Mono Craters, Mammoth Mountain, Mammoth Hot Creek, Devil's Postpile, Mt. Whitney, a bristle cone pine forest. This area makes for a great geology field trip. A monument of a different kind is the ruins of Manzanar, a detention camp used during World War II for thousands of Japanese-Americans.

Mono Lake Tufa Towers. (Mono Lake State Tufa Preserve) Like the Dead Sea and Great Salt Lake, Mono Lake is a salt water lake in the desert. It is fed by five fresh water streams but has no outlet: water leaves only by evaporation. Today, Mono is three times saltier than the ocean. It was a large lake during the last glacial period, but shrank as the climate changed and the rainfall declined. Mono has tufa towers: fantastic pillars of calcium carbonate, some over 15-20' high. Tufa towers formed underwater in millenia past when the lake level was higher. Underwater springs of mineral-rich water trickling down from the Sierra fed into floor of Mono Lake. In a chemical reaction where the two types of water met, the calcium carbonate precipitated out around the fresh water springs. Walking among the tufa towers is like being in a cave full of stalagmites with the roof torn off. A second form of tufa is "sand tufa" which formed in deep sand deposits – smaller but far more intricate than the tufa towers.

Mono Lake was the center of a recent environmental controversy that was finally decided on behalf of the wildlife. Some decades ago, LA Dept. of Water & Power began to divert fresh water from Mono's largest feeder stream. The lake level dropped and the lake became more saline, exposing land bridges connecting islands to the mainland and supporting a reduced population of two species of insects that birds eat: brine shrimp and brine flies. Since Mono is located at a strategic point on a migratory water bird flyway (79 species of birds, including gulls, plovers, grebes, and phalaropes) these changes had major repercussions on the birds, exposing their rookeries and reducing their food supply. Today, LADWP has ceased diverting the water and the land around Mono Lake is now protected by state law as a natural preserve.

To get there: make your first stop at the Visitor's Center on Hwy 395, just north of the town of Lee Vining. Pick up a brochure at the Visitor's Center with a guide and detailed map. Then go to the tufa tower spots: one on the north side of the lake; the other on the south side. The north tufa area is at Mono Lake County Park – turn off Hwy 395 at Cemetery Road. There is a pretty picnic area along a small stream in a cottonwood grove, with access to a large array of tufa towers. Walk towards the lake from the restrooms, staying to the left of the stream. A boardwalk helps in the most soggy and marshy spots. You can still find tufa towers oozing fresh water – evidence of how they were formed many thousands of years ago. The second site is on the south side of the lake. Take Hwy 395 to Hwy 120 east. Follow Hwy 120 to two beaches – tufa towers at South Tufa Area and sand tufa at Navy Beach. Both beaches are well worth a visit – the tufa towers at South Beach are large and extensive; the waist-high sand tufa at Navy each stimulated our children to imagine fairy castles.

Panum Crater. (Off Highway 120 east of Hwy 395) A doughnut-shaped crater of pumice (rock meringue full of bubbles) with a central plug of obsidian (smoky black natural glass). The pumice crater was formed less than 1000 years ago by a volcanic explosion. After the explosion, thick pasty obsidian oozed up through the volcano's vent and hardened, plugging it. Indians visited Panum Crater regularly to make arrowheads for themselves and to trade with the western tribes. Many shards can still be found around the central plug. Tom even found a part of an Indian arrowhead many miles due east at 9000' in Tuolumne Meadows in Yosemite, while hiking on the old Indian trading route. As you hike up the trail to the obsidian plug, you will hear your footfalls crunching as if you were walking on glass pieces. You are. Pumice and obsidian are different forms of the same chemical compound. Lift a chunk of pumice – it's light! Small pieces float on water.

To get there: Get a map or directions from the Visitors' Center. From Hwy 395 take Hwy 120 east. Look for the sign on the right to Panum Crater. The path is clearly marked at the parking area. You will hike uphill over the lip of the crater, then down to the obsidian plug. *Bring water* – this is one dry hike and you will get thirsty!

Hot Springs. California has many natural hot springs. Ten are near the Nevada border, just off Hwy 395, between Bridgeport and Convict Lake (near Mammoth).

Buckeye Creek, near Bridgeport. As you drive there, the view back over the valley is inspiring. Here's a description on the web – scroll down to find Buckeye
<http://www.hotspingsenthusiast.com/CA.htm#HC>

To get there: The hot springs are on Buckeye Road, a north-south dirt road that follows the edge of the hills between 395 (northwest of Bridgeport) and Twin Lakes Road (southwest of Bridgeport). You can get to the hot springs from either Twin Lakes Road or 395 – it's about equal distance. But the better approach is the first one.

(1) *From Twin Lakes Road, leaving Bridgeport.* Several miles southwest of Bridgeport you can see Buckeye Road climbing up the side of the hills. Look for Roy and Al's Campground, a funky little resort at the intersection of Buckeye and Twin Lakes roads. There is a only little street sign at the intersection. Take a right on Buckeye. Although it's paved at the turnoff, it turns to dirt soon. Follow it along the ridge to Buckeye Creek. The road makes a "V" where it follows the creek up one side and down the other. At the point of the V there is a road heading west to Buckeye Campground. The hot springs parking area is on Buckeye Road about 1/2 mile from this intersection, on the northern segment of the "V."

(2) *From 395, heading south on 395 (towards Bridgeport).* Start watching where 395 comes out of the hills and into the valley NW of Bridgeport. Look for the buildings of an unmarked Forest Service Ranger Station on the left. Just opposite the Ranger Station is Buckeye Road. There is a little street sign at the intersection. Turn right and go several miles. You'll know you're getting close when the road turns west as it heads up the stream valley for a ways, then turns back, making a "V." At the point of the V there is a road heading west to Buckeye Campground. The hot springs parking area is on Buckeye Road about 1/2 mile from this intersection, on the northern segment of the

Buckeye Road V. If you reach the intersection heading towards Buckeye campground, you've gone too far

Travertine Hot Springs, near Bridgeport. Local residents have improved the site by building a cement pool at the first hot springs. However, the great view back over the valley can be found by walking down to the multiple pools below

To get there: leaving Bridgeport headed south on Hwy 395, take the first left before the old ranger station. The road is paved initially. Pass the gravel pit and go straight (left fork) on the dirt road. This road takes you to the springs.

Hot Creek, near Mammoth. (Inyo National Forest, off Hwy. 395) A cold, clear high desert stream widens into a pool at the hot springs. Last time we were there, there were active geysers in a rock basin on both sides of the stream and the pools were closed to all swimming. Major bummer! If you can go in you will find that the main pool is largely cold water with bubbles of hot water seeping up in a variety of places. Fun to walk around finding a variety of hot and cold spots. Here's a website with info:

<http://www.hot springsenthusiast.com/CA.htm#HC>

To get there: the Forest Service information office at Mammoth has a pamphlet with directions. Hot Springs Creek is off Hwy. 395, at the same exit as the local airport and fish hatchery. A dirt road passes the fish hatchery and goes to the hot springs. Park and walk down a short trail to the hot pool. Although the Forest Service officially warns against swimming in the springs, this warning is commonly ignored most of the time. However, the hot springs are in a seismically active area near one of the earthquake faults responsible for creating the Sierra Nevada. Sometimes the hot springs get too active and begin to geyser. Then the Forest Service closes the area until things calm down. Use good judgment! If closed – walk upstream – there is another pool about 100-200 yards away. Still officially off limits but you are less likely to get caught.

Hot springs in the Long Valley Caldera: Shepherds, Crab Cooker, Hilltop, Wild Willeys. All four are in the same area. Shepherd's, Crab Cooker, and Hilltop are on the north side of Benton Crossing Road. Wild Willey's is on the south side. My favorite is Crab Cooker for its temperature (hot!), isolation, and scenic beauty. Plan on spending awhile. Two bonus features: Indian grinding holes at the top of the rise just before you get to Crab Cooker and a cold spring nearby. Those Indians had hot and cold running water.

To get to Crab Cooker: From U.S. 395, turn off onto Benton Crossing Road at the green church south of Mammoth. Pass Whitmore hot springs (now a municipal pool) and take the first graded dirt road on your left, about one mile from 395. This is Forest Service Road 2S07 or Whitmore Tubs Road. Go approx. 2 miles, passing the road to the Hot Tub (nice but too cool and too crowded) and take a right instead just before the lone tree. Follow this road to its end in a circle with rectangular, deep Shepherd's Hot Tub. Park at Shepherds and walk about ½ mile due south, towards Benton Crossing Road, on the very rutted dirt road, skirting the low marshy meadow. Best source for directions to all these hot tubs is the book by Matt Sischoff, *Touring California and Nevada Hot Springs* (Falcon, 1997 & 2006 editions).

Death Valley National Park. Death Valley is a study in extremes. Badwater, a murky salt pool, is the lowest point in the U.S. at 282 feet below sea level. Next door in the Inyo National Forest is the highest point in the contiguous U.S., Mt. Whitney, at 14,494 ft. Death Valley is mostly rock, gravel, sand and salts – geology in the raw -- yet it's the site of wonderful spring wildflowers. The scarcity of temperate moist spring days requires the plants to pollinate quickly or die. We arrived in late March 1996 hoping to see the famous profusion of wildflowers, but were too late. Our trip from Sacramento had taken us through deep snows in the Sierra before plunging us into a windy 95° in the Valley. Climate is vertical in California; altitude is all. Death Valley is best visited in winter and early spring – summer temperatures rise above 125° and you need to protect your hand before touching a doorknob. So much to visit and ponder: Racetrack Rocks that move mysteriously across the playa, Scotty's Castle, Ubehebe Crater, Artists Drive, Golden Canyon, the pupfish of Salt Creek, the warmth of Furnace Creek. My two favorite spots were Devil's Golfcourse and Mosaic Canyon.

Devil's Golfcourse. This formation which covers 200 square miles and yet is only a small portion of the park. As an ancient lake evaporated, it left behind salt and other sediments in a formation 1000' deep. At Devil's Golfcourse you step on the tops of closely spaced salt hummocks that stretch across the valley. The land stretches flat across the valley floor, the walk is easy, the hummocks seem to be only a few inches high. However, they are really the tops of salt pillars that extend deep into the earth. The interstices between the hummocks – each only a few inches wide -- are full of delicate salt crystals. Leave the parking lot and walk for some distance to see the untouched crystals. In March after the winter rains were done and the seasonal evaporation was well underway, the cracks between the pillars were filled with sparkling white salt crystals shaped as fragile webs and delicate leaves. Wear sunglasses.

Mosaic Canyon. You are walking through a narrow marble hall only a few feet wide and 60' high. All the surfaces are smooth, carved and polished into gentle undulations by thousands of years of violent flooding. Marble beneath your feet, marble walls. Curves, shelves, humps, slides -- all polished by the occasional turbulent flow of rough gravel in water. Look up – above your head on the vertical canyon walls is a "bathtub ring" of mud and pebbles, left by the last rushing flood through the canyon. The road to Mosaic Canyon runs uphill for several miles over the broad alluvial fan built over thousands of years as the silty floodwaters spewed out from the canyon onto the broad valley floor. The massive alluvial fan shows the huge volume of rock and water that has flowed through that narrow marble passage. If you are there on a rainy day in winter and the rangers say not to go into Mosaic Canyon, trust them.

Great Basin National Park, Nevada. Nevada is basin and range country – north-south mountain ranges separated by desert basins. As we drove to this remote park on the Nevada-Utah border, we saw wild mustangs running through a basin, then later found an ancient Indian hunting camp, with petroglyphs carved into the wall by the bored hunters. John McPhee's book, *Basin and Range*, gives the flavor of its vastness and unravels its exciting geology.

Lehman's Caverns is the centerpiece of this park. The marble and limestone cave is highly decorated with stalagmites, stalactites, curtains, and soda straws. After the regular tour of

the cave, Tom and Julie asked for the second one by candle lantern, the way Mr. Lehman used to do it. Both were well worth it. The caves in the Gold Country along Rt. 49 pale next to this one!

A second attraction is the bristle cone pines – the oldest living organisms on earth. More ancient than the California redwoods, and more humble. Look closely at the cross section of a bristle cone pine in the park visitors' center. This particular tree was the oldest bristle cone pine of all – until rangers mistakenly cut it down to retrieve a graduate student's tree-boring instrument that got stuck when he tried to extract a core sample to determine the tree's age. Oops.

Sand Mountain, Nevada. (Hwy 50) On the way to Lehman's Caverns, we split the long drive from Sacramento into two days and camped the first night along at Sand Mountain. This single huge dune stands out against the horizon. Surrounded by perpetual wind, it shifts constantly – grain by grain -- and has caused the re-routing of the highway at least once. Locals say it "sings" – humming sounds made when the wind is just right. Although we did not hear the singing we can vouch for the wind and the movement of the sand. Arriving late at night, we first tried to sleep at the base of the mountain only to be driven away by the flying sand. We withdrew for a few hundred yards and spread out our bags on the desert hardpan. The next morning we found the tracks of small animals and birds around our sleeping bags – quietly curious visitors who had no doubt hoped to find chips and crumbs.

The Narrows, Zion National Park, Utah. As you follow the Virgin River upstream, Zion Canyon gets narrower and narrower until the river bed and the canyon become one at The Narrows. From that point on, the trail is the river. To get there, park at the end of the road, then walk on a paved path to the place where the river converges with the canyon. In the summer and fall, the river is pleasantly cool and shallow enough to walk upstream for miles. However, in the winter and spring, it is too dangerous to walk The Narrows due to the risk of flash floods.

The Narrows contain occasional sand bars where you can stop to rest and have lunch. A lot of ferns, moss, and lush green plants. In some spots, the river is 30' wide and the canyon nearly 1000' tall. We did this trip on a day when it was 108 degrees in the rest of Zion, but due to the water, shade, and gentle breeze in the canyon, we didn't find out how hot the outside world was until we emerged.

Denzil Verardo recommends:

Anza-Borrego Desert State Park in early spring (numerous trails and roads).

NORTHERN CALIFORNIA COAST

Tide pools, beaches, cliffs, and canyons

All these places are located off Hwy 1. For the spots that have tide pools, be sure to arrive close to low tide -- check for the times of low tide in the tide tables published in any local paper in the coastal areas. Wear sturdy water sandals or sneakers. Your feet will get wet! It is usually windy at the coast, so a windbreaker is needed in the cooler months – this includes early summer.

The California Coastal Access Guide is a great source of information on beaches, tide pools, and other things to do along the coast. It is a large paperback (approx. 300 pp.) published by the California Coastal Commission. If you want to identify what you find, an excellent paperback is Pacific Coast by Bayard H. and Evelyn McConnaughey, an Audubon Society Nature Guide. Both these books cost about \$20.

Monterey Bay, Santa Cruz Area

Old Landing Cove Trail, Wilder Ranch State Park. (North of Santa Cruz) An easy, level coastal hike that passes a seal rookery, pocket beaches, and a fern grotto. Leaving the main parking area of Wilder Ranch State Park, the trail first passes some working fields, then follows along the tops of coastal bluffs. Look for seals on huge flat rocks. Past a post numbered “8” a spur trail leads down to a small beach. On the inland side of the beach you will find a shallow cave dripping with water and filled with ferns from floor to ceiling. Total distance is about 2.5 miles.

To get there. Drive north on Hwy 1 from Santa Cruz. One mile past the Western Drive stoplight, turn left into the entrance for Wilder Ranch State Park, and follow the park road to its end in the main parking area. Take the trail signed “Nature Trail” from the SW side of the parking lot. There is an entrance fee for day use at the park. Ask for the free map of the state park.

Natural Bridges State Beach, Santa Cruz. Tide pools are located in weather-worn shale shelves starting at the north end of the beach. The same park also hosts migrating Monarch butterflies during October - February. There is a day use fee for parking and entry (but if you are camping at a local state park, or paid the day use fee for any other state beach, you don't have to pay again here.)

To get there: Follow Route 1 north through Santa Cruz. Look for sign to Natural Bridges at Swift Street. Turn left onto Swift Street; cross railroad tracks, right on Delaware; left on Swanton. You can park on the street on Swanton, or go into the park for better parking.

Berry Creek Falls & Skyline-to-the-Sea Trail, Big Basin State Park. The three waterfalls along Berry Creek are the central experience: first, Berry Creek Falls, the largest waterfall in a lush fern and redwood-filled canyon. Next is Silver Falls, a delicate cascade. Finally, Golden Falls is a cascade over golden sandstone. The trail starts at the Park HQ in a redwood grove, rises up over a forested ridge and down the other side to Berry Creek and its waterfalls. The hike can be done as a loop or a point-to-point. The 11-mile loop is Skyline-to-the-Sea to Berry Creek Falls and a return on Sunset Trail. Alternately, take Skyline to the Sea Trail from the Park HQ to the beach, using a car shuttle to return. Julie and I did the latter in May 2010 as a 3-day

backpack. The latter allows you to follow Waddell Creek to the ocean and experience the change of ecosystems.

To get there: Big Basin Redwood State Park HQ is on Hwy 236. Take Hwy 9 north from Santa Cruz and turn left on Hwy 236. Allow about 45 min. from Santa Cruz. The other trailhead is at Waddell Beach, north of Davenport, on Hwy 1, about 20 min. from Santa Cruz.

We haven't tried the next three, but Patty Anderson recommends them all:

Ocean View Beach, Pacific Grove. Follow Route 1 south as for the Monterey Bay Aquarium. Take Ocean View Blvd (just one block up from the Cannery Row location of the Aquarium), turning right (away from Cannery Row). Go past Lover's Point, keeping right, and you will drive along the coastline. Point Pinos (just across from the golf course) and beyond to Asilomar State Beach and excellent tide pools. *Patty says this has the best tide pools in the Monterey area.*

Point Lobos. Follow Route 1 south past Pacific Grove and Carmel. Point Lobos has many hiking trails and you can see otters and seals. Pack a lunch for this trip -- you can stay all day, but there is no place to buy food.

Zmudowski State Beach. About 30 min from Santa Cruz, south of Aptos; south of the Pajaro River; 20 miles NW of Monterey. Take Struve Rd. and turn to Giberson Road. The road winds way back off the highway to the beach. Leave valuables behind -- it's kind of secluded -- very few people and lots of sand dollars. Strong rip currents -- don't swim. *Patty Anderson recommends this one for shells, but not for tide pools.*

Denzil Verardo recommends:

Ano Nuevo State Reserve elephant seal hike.

Pinnacles National Monument (Hollister side) hike to the caves.

Sonoma Coast.

Gerstle Cove at Salt Point State Park. Great tide pools and a good coastal trail with fascinating rock formations. Check for low tides to enjoy the sea stars, limpets, crabs, anemones, and snails. However, at any time you can enjoy the 1.2 mile bluff trail north to Stump Beach. The coastal bluff is covered with *tafoni* --yellow sandstone characterized by surprising potholes, pedestals, concretions, and -- oddest of all -- honeycombs of lacy hollows. We also found a natural bridge midway along the trail. Best of all, we found why it's called Salt Point:-- above the high tide mark are shallow depressions in level portions of the sandstone where salt water spray lands, collects, and evaporates, leaving behind salt crystals. The Indians of this area collected the salt to trade for obsidian arrowheads from inland tribes. On Memorial Day 2001 the place was full of divers -- scuba divers in the sanctuary of Gerstle Cove and the abalone divers outside it where collecting is legal.

To get there, take Hwy. 1 twenty miles north from the Russian River, past Fort Ross State Park. The left hand turn into Gerstle Cove campground and day use area is well marked with a

large sign. Go to the day use area. Also check out the visitor center perched above Gerstle Cove, which is an underwater marine sanctuary.

Shell Beach & Kortum Trail. Good tide pools at this Sonoma Coast State Beach, located along Hwy. 1 just south of Goat Rock and the mouth of the Russian River, but north of Bodega Bay. A brief trail leads to the beach. Tide pools are to the right; good beach walk to the left. Above the beach, the Kortum Trail follows the coastline for several miles along the plateau.

Pomo Canyon Campground & Trail. Pomo Canyon is a gem tucked away off an easy-to-miss side road near the mouth of the Russian River. It's a small redwood grove in a canyon with a stream running through it. The canyon walls lined with sword ferns and more redwoods. Both children found this place magical: Julie saw all the secret hiding places offered by the lush growth; Tom saw it as the dream site for a multi-day paintball game. A 21-site environmental (i.e. walk-in, primitive) campground is in the valley. Some campsites are along the stream, some are perched up on the canyon walls, and some face the meadow outside the canyon. If you follow the trail past the last campsite and up into the narrow part of the canyon, you come to a rock fall at the end of the canyon.

The 3-mile **Dr. David Joseph Memorial Trail** connects Pomo Canyon with Shell Beach on the coast. It climbs for nearly a mile, first through redwood forest and then through a diverse mixture of bay laurel and pines with a dense under storey of thimble berries, wild cucumber, and many other plants. You cross several small streams (probably dry by July) and eventually emerge on the ridge to views of the Russian River, Jenner, and the coast. At two points a little side trail on the right goes up to a rocky vista point worth visiting. The trail is sunny and open as it winds over the ridge and descends to Shell Beach. Allow two hours each way.

To get there: From Hwy 101, follow the River Road along the Russian River (Rt. 116) to the mouth. Turn left (south) and cross the bridge over the mouth of the river. At the far side of the bridge, on the inland side, is an Indian restaurant. The road to Pomo Canyon is at the restaurant. Another environmental camp (Willow Creek) is located about 1 mile down this same road, with campsites that front along the Russian River. After passing the Willow Creek campground, the road turns inland. A couple of miles further, turn right into Pomo Canyon. No reservations, so it's best to arrive Sunday-Thursday to be assured of a space. The trail leaves from the campground parking lot.

Marin Coast.

The Golden Gate National Recreation Area and Mt. Tamalpais have a wonderful range of micro-environments – quiet dark redwood groves, hidden stream canyons, open windswept grasslands, craggy cliffs, and sandy beaches in sheltered coves. My very first hike in California was in 1973 up the Steep Ravine trail on the side of Mt. Tamalpais, described below.

Steep Ravine Trail. The trail starts from Hwy 1 and follows the narrow stream canyon formed by Webb Creek up the side of Mt. Tam, winding through a lush and shady ravine lined with redwoods, ferns, and moss. Near the Pan Toll campground the trail emerges onto a large grassy plateau overlooking the ocean, with views of the Farallon Islands, San Francisco, and Pt. Reyes (depending on the fog and weather). You can then walk along the hillside for as long as you want and join up with other Mt. Tam trails. There are many wildflowers in spring, with trillium

and waterfalls in the ravine, and lupine and fragrant blue blossom up on the grassy hillside. Note: The trail is about 2-1/2 miles each way and is too steep and long for young children.

To get there: Steep Ravine trail meets Hwy 1 about 1 mile south of Stinson Beach at Rocky Point, well above the ocean, with Rocky Point to the west of the road. An old fire road leads down to several old cabins visible on Rocky Point. There is a small parking area near where Webb Creek emerges from its ravine and runs through grass and willows. Follow the trail uphill. The Dipsea Trail, which starts at Stinson Beach, joins Steep Ravine. The Dipsea Trail is best known for a rugged 6.8 mile foot race from Mill Valley to the sea each August since 1905.

Humboldt Coast.

Tom fell in love with this area while at Humboldt State University. These are all some places he showed us.

Fern Canyon. A winding slot canyon at the coast, about 30' wide with 60' vertical walls richly with ferns, moss, and dripping water. The canyon floor is a gravel streambed with a winding shallow brook called Home Creek. Wear river sandals and enjoy sloshing through the water as you cross the stream many times. A loop trail takes you one way on the canyon floor and the other up on the forested rim above the canyon. However, we chose to stay in the canyon itself, hiking to the end and back – less than a mile each way. Eventually the stream branches, and we had a choice of which small canyon to follow. Tom recommended the left branch as the longer and more interesting. From that point on, the canyon became smaller and narrower, and we slowly rose to meet the canyon rim and the forest floor. On the return leg, we left the canyon behind and walked out to the beach to enjoy the surf and the warm sand. This area is called Gold Bluffs Beach since gold was discovered there in 1950.

To get there: Take 101 north through Orick (about 30 miles north of Arcata). Turn left on Davison Road, into Prairie Creek Redwoods State Park. Stop at the meadow near 101 and look for Roosevelt elk on both sides of the road. It's better if you have binoculars, as the elk keep their distance. Continue on to the end of the road, 8 miles, following the signs to Fern Canyon and Gold Bluffs Campground on the beach. This leg of the trip takes about half an hour, as you follow a narrow, winding dirt road, steep in places.

Mad River Beach. A long sweeping pristine beach with hypnotizing waves crashing at the shoreline, and huge driftwood logs scattered along the sand from winter storms. Hundreds of sand dollars the farther you walk away from the parking lot.

How to get there: Take 101 north from Arcata and exit at Guintoli Road; left over the freeway, and follow signs to Mad River Beach. You drive through the Arcata Bottoms with its grazing fields and farmhouses, then along the Mad River as it approaches the ocean. Notice the Pacific Coast Trail crossing, which uses an old railroad bridge across the river.

Damnation Creek Trail. (Del Norte Redwoods State Park). Hike through extremely dense old growth redwoods from Hwy 101 to the sea. It's the land that time forgot. The trail crosses a ridge covered with massive redwoods and lots of undergrowth, drops down to the original Redwood Highway (now a hiking trail), then descends steeply to the sea. Tom took us as far as the junction with old Redwood Highway in August 2005 to show us old redwoods with "hollows" where bats live. We went off-trail on the steep slope leaving Hwy 101 and were soon

walking on a lattice of fallen branches above the ground, surrounded by dripping mist from the trees while blue sky could be seen above the canopy so high above. What an experience! This gorgeous forest was a gift to the state park system by the Save-The-Redwoods League in the early 1900's. Well-heeled conservationists raised money from private sources and purchased land which was donated to the park system.

How to get there: Take Hwy 101 north from Orick. Look for the Damnation Trailhead on the left (west side) as you head north. There is a good size turnout and parking, and the trail is well-traveled and well-marked. From the other direction, it's 10 miles south of Crescent City.

Denzil Verardo recommends:

Oat Hill Mine Road to the Palisades (Calistoga, Napa Valley).

Other ideas. Here are books with information about good trails, tidepools, and beaches:

Phil Arnot, *Point Reyes: Secret Places & Magic Moments*. San Carlos, CA: Wide World Publishing, Tetra, 1992.

Many of these hikes are too long for children, so we haven't tried much in this book. They look intriguing, however.

California Coastal Commission, *California Coastal Access Guide*. State of California. Revised in the 1990's.

Step by step down the California Coast. Information on everything you can imagine.

Stephen W. Hinch, *Guide to State Parks of the Sonoma Coast and Russian River*. Santa Rosa, CA: Annadel Press, 1998.

Covers the Sonoma Coast State Beach, Fort Ross, Salt Point, Armstrong Redwoods, and Austin Creek.

Bob Lorentzen and Richard Nichols, *Hiking the California Coastal Trail. Vol. I: Oregon to Monterey*. Mendocino, CA: Bored Feet Press, 2002.

See pages 41-46 about the Damnation Creek Trail and vicinity.

Bill McMillion, *Best Hikes with Children: San Francisco's North Bay*. Seattle: The Mountaineers, 1992. 90 short hikes in Marin and Sonoma.

Dorothy Whitnah, *An Outdoor Guide to the San Francisco Bay Area*. Wilderness Press, 1976.

84 hikes in the Bay Area with emphasis on Marin and Point Reyes, but also including Napa and Sonoma Counties, East Bay, South Bay, and three in San Francisco.

WINTER PLAYGROUNDS

Sledding, Cross Country Skiing, Snowshoeing

China Wall. (Tahoe National Forest). Cross country ski the unplowed Foresthill Divide Road along the ridgeline (elevation 5100'), taking in the 5.6-mile loop down into Humbug Canyon and back up to overlook the canyon of the North Fork American River. Far from any major road, this place is lightly visited, well forested, and open. Snowmobilers use it also, but they are friendly and courteous – and their trucks and trailers ensure the road and parking lot are well plowed.

To get there: Take I-80 to Auburn, taking the Foresthill exit. Cross the high bridge and continue through the town of Foresthill. About 45 minutes from Auburn, the plowed road stops at the China Wall parking area.

An alternate destination is the area around Sugar Pine Reservoir. The road to the Reservoir is clearly marked, about 3 miles before you reach China Wall.

Emigrant Gap. (Tahoe National Forest) Two sledding hills off I-80, only a little more than an hour's drive from Sacramento. One hill is close to the road and well-used. The other is a walk across a meadow to a forested hillside that gets progressively steeper the higher you go. Although you can cross country ski in the meadow, it's very flat and rather boring. The sledding is better. Elevation is only 5300', so the snow may be thin.

To get there: Emigrant Gap is an exit off I-80. The sledding hills are on the south side of the freeway. The first hill is immediately at the bottom of the offramp. The second hill is about ½ mile further east along the old road. Park by the meadow and follow the most trodden path to the sledding area. A stream flows through the meadow and if it's not frozen you will be happier and drier if you cross on the foot bridge – so look for the most well-trodden path across the meadow before starting out.

Nyack Plateau. (Tahoe National Forest) We found this ridge in between Blue Canyon and the North Fork of the American River when we decided to ski in a blinding blizzard after Christmas 2004. Afraid to get far from the plowed road (I-80 was closed later that day) we parked at Nyack and found an unexpected treasure. Heading back along the south side of I-80, we skied along the far side of the shallow lake you can see from the interstate (Putt Lake) and beyond it to an enticing plateau known only by a few. We followed a track that must be a dirt road in summer, beyond the lake, to forks leading in different directions. A couple of weeks later, in sunny weather, we explored further. The track to the left (south) led to the ridge line with views south across the canyon of Fulda Creek to the mountains beyond. The trail then meandered to the Blue Canyon side of the ridge (north side) and allowed choices, such as crossing the upper end of Blue Canyon and heading towards the freeway, or staying on the ridge looking down over Blue Canyon Creek. We decided to stay on the ridge and followed it for some distance until it began to head downhill toward the railroad and the hamlet of Blue Canyon. Another choice was a track that stayed closer to Putt Lake, swerved across the lake's dam, and headed towards a small group of vacation houses near I-80. This is an area that can be explored in sunny or snowy weather.

To get there: Exit I-80 at Nyack and park in front of the Burger King or the adjoining plowed parking lot. Make your way east past the snow play area and into the woods. Bear left to get behind Putt Lake. Explore. Another option is to exit at Blue Canyon, but parking is only allowed at one spot -- the Blue Canyon airstrip (surprise!) on the south side of I-80.

Eagle Lakes. (Tahoe National Forest). These lakes are in a broad high Sierra basin along with many other ponds, streams, forest, and a lot of granite. Actually there are three possible destinations: Eagle Lakes, Pierce Meadow, or the summit of Signal Mountain. This area is used by 4WD clubs in summer, so you can follow their summer tracks. When we were there in January 2005, some hardy drivers had taken their trucks through the deep snow in to Eagle Lakes and up Signal Mountain. All in all, this area is better for snowshoeing than skiing due to the tracks, along with some steep slopes and gullies, heavy forest, and snow-covered boulders.

To get there: Take I-80 east to the Eagle Lakes exit. Turn left at the bottom of the exit ramp and drive under the freeway, following the road towards the cabins and Indian Springs Campground. The trails leave from Indian Springs: the trails to Eagle Lakes and Pierce Meadow start together. Follow the power lines until you see a track veering off to the right into the forest. The two trails diverge later on. The way up the mountain is an uphill track.

Lake Spaulding Area. (Tahoe National Forest) Three areas in this large valley look to be worth exploring on cross country skis: (1) Beyond the end of the plowed road to Lake Spaulding, (2) the forested valley at the headwaters of the Bear River, and (3) the meadow just beyond where the Bear River flows through. Since we have yet to ski here, this note is just a placeholder until we have done so.

How to get there: All three areas are along Hwy 20. You look down on this area from the Vista Point along I-80 near Nyack. Take I-80 east to the Hwy 20 exit. Follow Hwy 20 downhill for all three areas: (1) first, you will see the road to Lake Spaulding in 2-3 miles, on your right. (2) After another couple of miles look for the Forest Route 18 (on your right) to the Sierra Discovery Trail, Grouse Ridge, and Lake Bowman. (3) Continuing downhill to the valley floor, you can park right along Hwy 20 and ski in the large open meadow.

Donner Summit. (Pacific Crest Trail, Tahoe National Forest). In March 2005 Rosanne and I skied south of I-80, across snowy meadows (lakes in summer?), between slopes, along a stream bed to a stunning vista point overlooking Donner Lake. This is an easy XC ski over varied terrain with a big view as the reward at the end. The trail follows a natural path along what I think is a stream bed in the summer and besides what I believe are three small lakes in summer. Keep going, follow your nose, and you will find the great overlook.

To get there: I-80 east to the rest stop just after the Boreal Ski area. Park at the rest stop and look for tracks leading to the south. In March 2005, the heavy snow covered all the Pacific Crest Trail markers, but people do snowshoe and XC ski, so look for tracks.

fate as the other group at Donner Lake. A signed trail at the picnic area tells their sad, desperate story. I tried not to think of them as we skied this gorgeous high Sierra meadow.

To get there: I-80 east to Truckee, then north on Hwy 89 towards Sierraville for about 3 miles. Parking is available in plowed turnoffs at the Alder Creek Picnic Area and the entrance road to two USFS campgrounds on Prosser Reservoir (Lakeside and Prosser).

North Tahoe Regional Park. (Tahoe Vista) This local park has a couple of sledding hills and several cross country ski trails through the pine woods – a couple of which have exciting long downhill runs. One of the trails leaves the back of the park and connects to the housing development of Kings Run; another connects to the adjoining town of Kings Beach. The trails

farthest uphill, towards Kings Run give you an occasional view of the lake. The park grooms its trails and asks for a \$2-3 donation at an “iron ranger” lockbox in the main parking area. Elevation is about 6000’.

To get there: Take Hwy 89 to Tahoe Vista. Turn away from the lake on National Ave. where there is a small sign directing you to the park at the end of the road.

Hwy 89 north of Truckee. There are several good places to snowshoe or XC ski. All these are dirt roads that are unplowed in winter.

Kyburz Flat – Marked turnout on right side of road as you head north. You ski the old Henness Pass Road, taking a possible detour to the Wheeler Sheep Ranch Camp, an old Basque camp.

Independence Lake Loop. Park at the turnout for Sagehen Creek Research Field Station. Ski down the road, taking the far right at the first fork. Go as far as you would like.

Sagehen Campground road. Same as above, but take the middle way at the first fork. In about a mile you are in a beautiful flat wooded area. Now you have another choice – continue down the road towards Independence Lake, or take a left towards the campground.

Penny Pines – Park at the turnout on the left (as you head N on Hwy 89) and ski to the unplowed road that is also a snowmobile track. After about half a mile, take the left at the obvious fork in the road. This is the back way in to Sagehen Creek Field Station.

Mt. Rose Meadows. (Tahoe National Forest). High on the side of Mt. Rose at 9000’ are open meadows and a ½ mile trail that runs gently uphill to a vista point overlooking Lake Tahoe. You can see the entire lake 3000 below. Large granite boulders make good picnic spots if the day is sunny. The return trip is easy, as you glide back downhill through the trees to your car.

To get there: from Incline Village on Tahoe’s north shore, follow the Mt. Rose Hwy (Hwy 431) about 8 miles up the side of the mountain. The meadows are to your right just before the summit of the road. Park here. For sledding, most people go on the uphill side of the road. The cross country ski trail leaves from the Tahoe side of the road. A few years ago the Forest Service began to blaze this popular trail, so look for winter markings on the trees in the forest just before you reach the meadow. Warning: weather at 9000’ is cold and very changeable. When storms come in you may experience a white out. But the view is well worth it.

Yosemite. The park is full of good cross country ski trails -- all free and well described in park literature. Here are two special trails we enjoyed before the children were born:

Dewey Point. The trail winds along a stream through a forest meadow, then climbs uphill to Dewey Point overlooking Yosemite Valley. The trail is 6 miles round trip. (Note: A trail map is available at the cross country ski school at Badger Pass.)

To get there: Park at the Badger Pass ski area and follow the unplowed Glacier Point Road to the *second* trail sign to Dewey Point. The first is for a difficult trail you may want to use on the downhill return trip.

Tuolumne Grove to Hodgdon Meadow. This trail starts in the redwood grove near Crane Flat and runs along the old Big Oak Flat Road. It drops 1600' over its 7-mile length, ending near the Oak Flat Entrance Station.. Near the beginning, you will pass by the Tunnel Tree (the turnoff is on the east side of the trail, directly across from the first large sequoia – 8' diameter – you encounter). This is such an unusual trail giving you a solitary view of a place that is crowded in summer but lightly visited in winter. We saw no one the last 6 miles of the trail. However, two things are needed: an unusually large snowpack and two cars. There is usually little or no snow at the downhill end which is below 5000' elevation. This trail requires having a second car to be parked at Oak Flat to avoid a long walk back.

Other ideas. For a more complete listing of good, free cross country ski trails on public land, see the series of paperback books called *Ski Tours in the Sierra Nevada* by Marcus Libkind (Livermore CA: Bittersweet Publishing Company, 1985). But beware – several of the wonderful XC ski trips described are on land now owned by ski areas, or parking is no longer allowed near the trailheads.

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