

A Boating Trail Guide to the NORTH and MIDDLE FORKS of the AMERICAN RIVER with Safety Hints and Map

North Fork:
Iowa Hill Bridge to Lake Clementine



Middle Fork:
Oxbow Put-in to Mammoth Bar



THE AMERICAN RIVER!

Scenic beauty with hidden dangers.

The North and Middle Forks of the American River provide boaters with a quality wilderness experience to remember. Yet swift currents and unseen dangers can provide boaters with unwanted emergencies. The North and Middle Forks are not for beginners, and quite often, experienced paddlers have trouble on them. Respect the river and come well prepared when you visit. This brochure will provide you with some helpful safety information.

NORTH FORK

The 9.5 mile river run from the Iowa Hill Bridge to Ponderosa Bridge provides several Class IV-V rapids, most notably: Chamberlin Falls, Staircase Rapids, and Bogus Thunder. Trips down this river are typically made in one day. Boating the North Fork of the river requires a sound background in technical whitewater skills. Channel characteristics change drastically depending on the flow levels. The most desirable flow range is between 1,500 - 3,000 cfs. Higher flows reduce preparatory time between numerous rapids, while low flows present dangerous hazards, sieves of boulders, and strainers that have proven fatal.

Camping on the North Fork is restricted to specific areas. Obtain a Special River Camping Permit (see "Camping" section of this brochure).

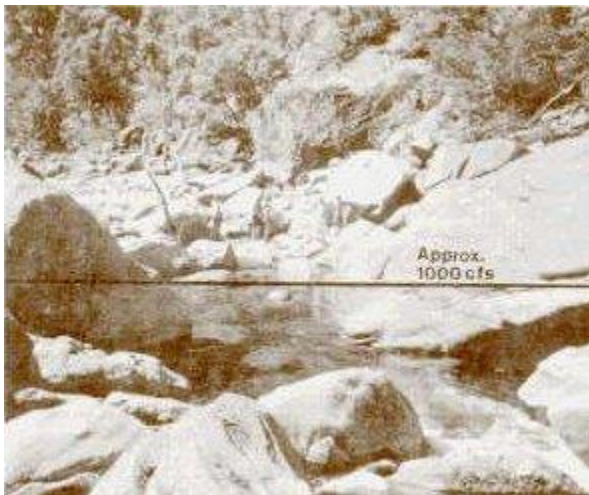
The Chamberlin Falls Gorge, beginning just one fourth of a mile below the Iowa Hill Bridge, holds within its walls breathtaking scenery and several exciting rapids. The Chamberlin Falls Rapid is an 8 to 10 foot sheer vertical drop into a deep pool of violently churning water. At flows below 1500 cfs the rapid runs between large mid-

channel boulders which can "wrap" or flip an unfortunate boat. At higher flows, the violent eddy at the base of the falls can trap a boat. There is a pool above the falls that can be used to scout this dangerous rapid. If you are unsure of your ability, do not attempt to run this one.



Chamberlin Falls Rapid

Bogus Thunder and **Staircase Rapid** are two additional Class IV rapids that demand great respect. Deceptively "easy" in appearance, both have claimed lives in recent years. These ledge-type drops have trapped numerous rafts and kayaks, and are particularly hazardous at flows below 1,000 cfs. There are several other Class III-IV rapids between Iowa Hill Bridge and Shirttail Canyon, each with its own set of surprises for even the skilled boater. When in doubt, take-out and portage. It takes time but it may save your life.



"Staircase Rapid" at low flow There boulders have claimed the lives of experienced rafters at flows below 1,000 cfs.

MIDDLE FORK

One, two, or three day trips are possible on this challenging scenic river. The 15 mile run from Oxbow put-in to Greenwood take-out features several Class IV and V rapids, as well as numerous Class II and III rapids. Most notable are the Tunnel Chute, Kanaka Gulch, and Ruck-A-Chucky. If you are uncertain about your ability to navigate any rapid, PORTAGE! Even expert boaters can become easily injured in swift waters. Allow a minimum of one full day(10-12 hours) for this run. If you choose to continue downstream from Ruck-A-Chucky/Greenwood be sure to take-out at Mammoth Bar, above the unrunnable Murderer's Bar Rapid. The sharp-walled, turbulent setting of Murderer's Gorge has claimed the lives of even experienced boaters.

[Camping on the Middle Fork](#) is available at many locations. Obtain a Special River Camping Permit and make certain that you are on public property. While there are no developed campsites, the canyon offers many scenic sandbars, some with shade trees, to spend a night. Favorite locations are at Ford's Bar and Cherokee Bar, but, more secluded, less-frequented sites are between Cache Bar and Ford's Bar.

The Tunnel Chute, is a steep, sharp-sided channel that was blasted by miners in the last century. As you approach the bedrock drop before the Tunnel Chute, be aware of other boats in the eddy above the chute; they may be moving into the main channel to set up for the run. While many commercial companies will run this hazardous rapid, it is not recommended. Numerous injuries, ranging from twisted



The "Chute" Running this thrilling rapid can sometimes result in injury. Do not attempt it if you are uncertain



The "Tunnel" The tunnel was blasted by miners in the early 1900's.



Ruck-A-Chucky Rapid." A mandatory portage trail skirts this unrunnable rapid.

ankles to broken bones and head injuries, occur every season. Portaging the chute on the left is easy, and in flows below 2,000 cfs, it is not difficult to return your boat to the water above the tunnel. Climbing atop the tunnel is dangerous, as there are few or no handholds and many places to fall from. Exercise extreme care in negotiating this rapid.

The Ruck-A-Chucky Rapid is an unrunnable sieve of boulders with several dangerously steep drops in gradient. This rapid should not be run under any circumstances. A wide, new portage trail safely skirts this segment of the river. Access it from river right above the falls and put-in again about 1/4 mile below.

Several Class III+ rapids follow the **unrunnable** Ruck-A-Chucky Rapid. Each of these has its own "personality," which changes under different flow conditions. Take your time scouting ahead and navigating safely. About one mile downstream from this rapid is Ruck-A-Chucky take-out at Greenwood Bridge ruins. A new trail constructed by the California Conservation Corps makes this a safe and easy task.

BOATING PERMITS

All commercially operated trips must receive a commercial boating permit from the California Department of Parks and Recreation. contact the American River District Rafting Office located on Highway 49, one mile south of Auburn at (916) 885-5648 for details.

RIVER ACCESS

Public roads that provide access to key river locations are clearly outlined in this guide. Emergency egress is also shown in three locations on the Middle Fork, although some of these roadways are gated or are passable only in a four-wheel drive vehicle. Except in an emergency, it is recommended that vehicular traffic be restricted to public roads for safety reasons. If you, or someone in your group, is injured it is best to hail a passing boat and send for assistance down river, rather than attempt to hike out of the canyon. Much of the Middle Fork is a wilderness, and it is often a several-mile uphill climb to a major roadway.

HIKING

There are many hiking trails in both the North and Middle Fork canyons, with the Western States Trail following much of the Middle Fork corridor. Some areas are steep, so stay on established trails for your own safety. Respect posted private lands by not trespassing. For maps showing trails within the Auburn State Recreation Area (SRA) contact the Ranger Station at (9 1 6) 885-4527.

CAMPING

A Special River Camping Permit must be obtained through the Auburn State Recreation Area (located on *HWY* 49, one mile south of Auburn) for most areas on the North Fork and some areas on the Middle Fork. Private lands do occupy a minor portion of the river corridor, so it is best to check in advance on your planned camping location.

On-river camping fees are \$2.00/person/night. Vehicles parked overnight in designated campgrounds will be charged \$3.00/night. Additional fees for road use through the U.S.F.S. may be necessary at some locations. Contact the Auburn SRA for details at (916) 885-4527.

FIRES

It is best to check with the California Department of Forestry (916) 823-4904 on current fire danger levels before leaving for your trip. During times of extreme fire hazard, fires are not permitted. If conditions do permit a campfire, you must comply with the following requirements:

- Maximum size of campfire is 3 feet in diameter.
- Establish fires in clear areas only (no flammable materials within 10 feet).
- Campfires must be within 15 feet of the river.
- Have a shovel available at all times, and a container of water to extinguish the fire.
- Do not locate fire below overhanging branches that are closer than 15 feet.
- All fires must be completely extinguished with water before leaving.
- Never leave fires unattended. Fire can be Dangerous! Please be careful at all times.

SANITATION

Drinking Water

There are few places in the Sierras where it is safe to drink untreated water. There are numerous waterborne parasites in the river that can destroy your vacation if you don't destroy them first. It is best to bring your own drinking water with you. If you must drink from the river, use recommended treatment for purification (i.e., boiling, and chemical treatment).

Waste Disposal

Garbage that is left behind by humans is quickly and easily found by animals. Please carry out any trash to help preserve the wilderness environment for visitors. Waste water must also be disposed of in a safe manner: deposit waste water in a location that is well away from the river.

PRIVATE PROPERTY

Much of the land along the river corridor is privately owned. Boaters who venture beyond the area immediately adjacent to the shoreline may be in violation of state and county trespass laws. Do not enter private lands without express permission of the land owner.

MANAGING AGENCIES

The California Department of Parks and Recreation, under contract with the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, is the primary managing agency for the North and Middle forks of the American River. The U.S. Forest Service offices in Foresthill (Tahoe National Forest) and Georgetown (El Dorado National Forest) manage much of the land above the Ruck-A-Chucky area.

RECOMMENDED RIVER

SAFETY EQUIPMENT

Be familiar with the size and limitations of your craft. Choose a raft or kayak that is appropriate for navigating a Class IV-V river. Innertubes, inexpensive, single-chambered inflatables, and less rigid construction kayaks are not recommended. The following are some essential items to bring:

- 1 helmet per person
- boat repair kit
- air pump
- 1 lifejacket/personal flotation device (PFD) per person (should be worn at all times when on the water)
- extra oars, paddles, PFD'S, helmets
- appropriate river rescue equipment (throw bag, bow line, rescue lines, etc.)
- first aid kit
- drinking water, snacks in a dry bag
- bailing bucket
- flashlight, matches
- tennis shoes, dry clothing in sealed bag
- wetsuits (in cold weather)

- knife

These are only some of the items you should bring. A complete list should be based on the length and duration of the trip you plan. Try to foresee any difficulties and plan accordingly. It is best to be prepared.

EMERGENCY PROCEDURES

Always leave information with someone in advance regarding your travel plans (entry and exit locations, time schedule for your trip, number in your party, etc.). If you become lost or injured, you can be more easily located.

If your boat capsizes, stay on the upstream side, preferably at the end of the craft. This allows better visibility. More importantly, it prevents the possibility of being pinned against obstacles.

If rescue is not imminent and water is intolerably cold or perilous rapids are near, swim with the river current to the nearest landing.

If you find yourself in the water alone, float downstream feet first. This will enable you to fend off from rocks and other obstacles.

When in the water never attempt to stand up in fast-moving water. Your foot could become entrapped on the bottom between obstructions, and the force of the moving water could pull your body under.

In case of Emergency, call 9 -1 -1.

ALCOHOL AND BOATING

Boating and alcohol can be a **deadly mix**. Physical and mental confusion can begin almost immediately after even moderate drinking. Boating skills decline as alcohol begins to reduce depth perception, peripheral, color and night vision, balance and coordination, reaction time, comprehension, and concentration. After only a few drinks, boaters begin to lose the ability to judge their degree of impairment and become overconfident, taking more risks. The effects of alcohol result in the inability to react safely to a dangerous boating situation.

COLD WATER DANGERS

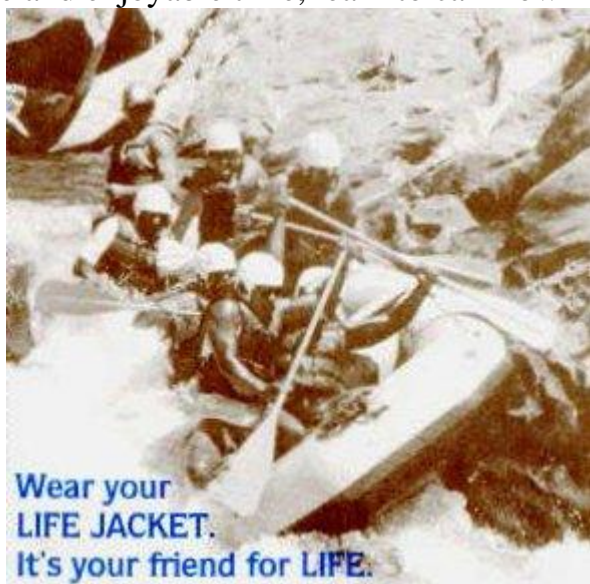
Cold drains your strength, and robs you of the ability to make sound decisions on matters affecting your survival. Cold water immersion, because of the initial shock and the rapid heat loss which follows, is especially dangerous. Dress appropriately for bad weather or sudden immersion in the water. When the water temperature is less than 50 degrees F, a wetsuit or drysuit is essential for protection if you swim. Next best is wool or pile clothing under a waterproof shell. In this case, you should also carry waterproof matches and a change of clothing in a waterproof bag. If, after prolonged exposure, a person experiences uncontrollable shaking, loss of coordination, or difficulty speaking, he or she is hypothermic and needs your assistance.

FLOW INFORMATION

Water flows can change quickly. Current velocities, size and difficulty of rapids can quickly change. What may be a safe trip at one level, may become an extremely hazardous voyage at a different level. Check the flows before you embark on your trip downstream. The flow phone number is (916) 653-9647.

When planning a boating trip, you should obtain river flow information and determine how the flow will affect the difficulty of the run. It is imperative to take an honest account of your boating skills and avoid runs that are too difficult. Whitewater accidents often occur because boaters attempt rivers beyond their level of skill. Included in this brochure is the American Whitewater Affiliation rating system for classifying the difficulty of river runs. This system classifies rivers from Class I to Class VI, with Class VI being the most difficult run.

For a safe and enjoyable time, learn to call flow information before you embark on



your trip.

Whitewater Class System

The following classification is based on a guide for rivers established by the American Whitewater Affiliation. The river should be considered one class more difficult than normal if the water temperature is below 50 degrees Fahrenheit, or the trip is in a wilderness.

CLASS I Easy

Fast moving water with riffles and small waves. Few obstructions, all obvious and are missed easily with little training. Risk to swimmers is slight; self-rescue is easy.

CLASS II Novice

Straightforward rapids with wide, clear channels, which are evident without scouting. Occasional maneuvering may be required, but rocks and medium-sized waves are missed easily by trained paddlers. Swimmers are seldom injured and group assistance, while helpful, is seldom needed.

CLASS III Intermediate

Rapids with moderate, irregular waves, which maybe difficult to avoid and which can swamp an open canoe. Complex maneuvers in fast current and good boat control in tight passages or around ledges are often required. Large waves or "strainers" such as fallen trees, bridge pilings and undercut rocks, may be present but are easily avoided. Strong eddies and powerful currents can be found, particularly on large-volume rivers. Scouting is advisable for inexperienced parties. Injuries while swimming are rare; self-rescue is usually easy but group assistance may be required to avoid a long swim.

CLASS IV Advanced

Intense, powerful but predictable rapids requiring precise boat handling in turbulent water. Depending on the character of the river, it may feature large, unavoidable waves and holes or constricted passages demanding fast maneuvers under pressure. A fast, reliable eddy turn may be needed to initiate maneuvers, scout rapids, or rest. Rapids may require "must" moves above dangerous hazards. Scouting is necessary the first time down. Risk of injury to swimmers is moderate to high, and water conditions may make self-rescue difficult. Group assistance for rescue is often essential but requires practiced skills. A strong Eskimo roll is highly recommended.

CLASS V Expert

Extremely long, obstructed, or very violent rapids, which expose a paddler to above-average danger. Drops may contain large unavoidable waves and holes or steep, congested chutes with complex, demanding routes. Rapids may continue for long distances between pools, demanding a high level of fitness. What eddies exist may be small, turbulent, or difficult to reach. At the high end of the rating scale, several of these factors may be combined. Scouting is mandatory but often difficult Swims are dangerous, and rescue is difficult even for experts. A very reliable Eskimo roll, proper equipment, extensive experience, and practiced rescue skills are essential for survival.

CLASS VI Extreme

These runs often exemplify extremes of difficulty, unpredictability and danger. The consequences of errors are very severe and rescue may be impossible. For teams of experts only, at favorable water levels, after close personal inspection and taking of all precautions. This class does not represent drops thought to be unrunnable, but may include rapids that are only occasionally run.

FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT:

Auburn State Recreation Area

California Department of Parks and Recreation
P.O. Box 3266, Auburn, CA 95604
(916) 885-5648

U.S. Forest Service

Tahoe National Forest
22830 Foresthill Road
Foresthill, CA 95631
(916) 367-2224

U.S. Forest Service

El Dorado National forest
7600 Wentworth Springs Road
Georgetown, CA 95634
(916) 333-4312

California Division of Boating and Waterways

One Capitol Mall, Suite 410
Sacramento, CA 95814
(888) 326-2822

IN CASE OF EMERGENCY, CALL 9-1-1

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[North Fork](#)

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Photos courtesy of Sierra Shutterbug and Rapid Shooters

This Boating Trail Guide and others are available in a printed pocket size version from California Boating and Waterways.