South Yuba River in Spring

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOSH MILLER

The South Yuba River is one of the gems of the Sierra foothills. Designated a Wild and Scenic River on October 10, 1999, the Yuba not only provides habitat for several endangered species it also provides recreation opportunities for a multitude of outdoor enthusiasts. As a Wild and Scenic River the areas surrounding the South Yuba River are protected from development and administered as a wilderness area.

While the river is protected it has been changed substantially from its original free-flowing route. The river still begins at its headwaters near Donner Summit and eventually drains into the Feather River in Marysville. But unlike in days long past, the river now passes through a series of reservoirs along its route. The longest free-flowing section of the Yuba runs 39 miles from Spaulding Reservoir to Englebright Reservoir.

During the California Gold Rush the Yuba River watershed was found to have major gold deposits, and during the ensuing years the river was dammed and filled with mining runoff. Once a home to a wild salmon run, today as a result of dams and past mining the river no longer supports these fish throughout their entire run. Though today the Yuba is only mined recreationally and is in much better shape than it was in the past; one can still see the effects of mining and dams when swimming or hiking in the area.
Through the efforts of the Nevada City-based community group, South Yuba River Citizens League (SYRCL), not only is the river designated as Wild and Scenic, but it has also seen major efforts to bring back its natural salmon run. SYRCL monitors water quality, plans restoration efforts, organizes volunteers, and lobbies federal, state, and local governments to help protect the Yuba. In recent years SYRCL has also developed the Wild and Scenic Environmental Film Festival in Nevada City, which is the largest environmental film festival in the country.

After the end of major mining in the area, the Yuba began to gain fame as one of the best swimming rivers in the entire Sierra. With its warm, glorious swimming holes, sandy beaches and jumping rocks it is a wonderful recreational resource during blazing hot foothill summers. It is so popular that often a person has to arrive early or be willing to hike

The covered bridge at South Yuba State Park in Bridgeport was built in 1862 (inset) Nate and Melody Homan enjoy the wildflowers on the Buttermilk trail at Bridgeport (facing page) The Yuba River is one of the best swimming areas in the entire Sierra with its granite boulders, deep pools and cool inviting waters
Sunbathers are often spotted along the sandy shores of the South Yuba River (inset). Building sand castles is only one of the many activities that can be shared across the generations.

Away from roads in order to find solitude. Along with swimming, the area also has several great day hikes among wildflowers and several historic state parks.

While the river has many great places to visit and explore, here are a couple of the popular options. Once you have experienced these go off the beaten track and find your own piece of paradise.

- Hwy 49 crossing. From Nevada City head toward Downieville on Hwy 49. The highway will lead down to the river and there is a parking area on the right.

- Bridgeport. The South Yuba River State Park has one of the longest single-span covered bridges in the world. From Hwy 20 in Penn Valley take Pleasant Valley Road past Lake Wildwood and on to Bridgeport.