

The Rubicon River

By Bill Carnazzo

Circa 2012

The Rubicon River is one of the principal rivers in the Upper Middle Fork American River drainage. The headwaters of the Rubicon River are in the Desolation and Granite Chief Wilderness areas of California. The several forks of the river in the headwaters area are full of small trout. I have caught brookies, rainbows, and browns in the tiny brooks that eventually flow into Hell Hole Reservoir. I will leave it to you to use the U.S.F.S. El Dorado and Tahoe Forests maps to find access points, of which there are many. These wonderfully detailed maps are available at retailers such as R.E.I., or at any ranger station.

Once it leaves Hell Hole Reservoir, the Rubicon flows down the canyon, often in steep cataracts, terminating in Oxbow Reservoir. Once released from Oxbow, it becomes the Middle Fork American River which, after being joined by the North Fork of the Middle Fork American River, bullies its way through a tunnel at Horseshoe Bar, and barrels downstream through Rucka-Chucky rapids, through a series of colorfully named bars (Murderer's, Maine, Spanish, Ford's, Rector, Mammoth, Texas, Brown's, Hoosier, Horseshoe, American, Gray Eagle), and joins the North Fork American at a spot near Auburn called "the Confluence." I concentrate on both the lower river just above Oxbow Lake, because access is good and there is very little angler use once the parking area is left behind; and the upper reaches of the river at various access points, including Ellicott's Bridge.

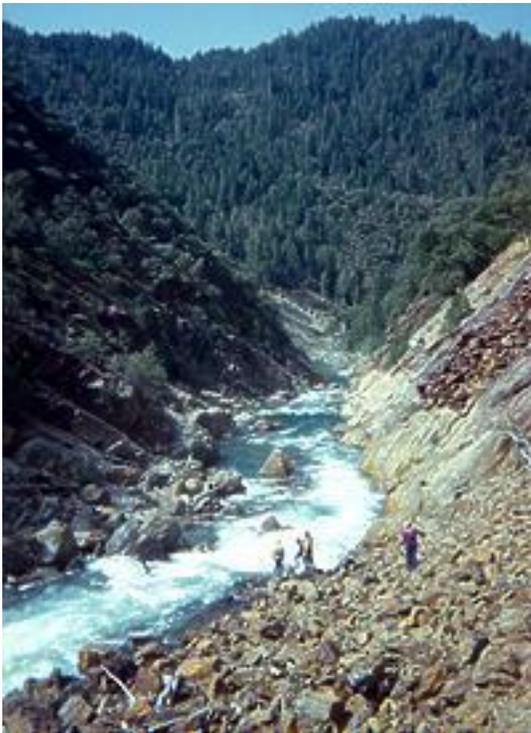


To get to the Rubicon, take the Foresthill exit from Highway 80 just above Auburn, and travel the approximately 15 miles it takes to reach the town of Foresthill. About halfway through the town, Mosquito Ridge Road (USFS Road 96) dives off to the right and down into the first interior divide within the Middle Fork watershed, and then proceeds over a ridge to the second and third interior divides. The Rubicon River drainage occupies the third interior, most southerly divide. It is ten miles down to the bottom of the first interior divide, where the road crosses the North Fork of the Middle Fork of the American. After crossing the bridge, the road rises up the other side of the canyon and onto a long ridge that leads to French Meadows Reservoir. About one mile beyond the bridge there is a sign pointing to USFS Road 23 and Oxbow Lake; this road goes by several local names:

Ralston Ridge Road and Blacksmith Flat Road. The road winds down to the lake, and follows its shore in a southeasterly direction to the inlets of the Rubicon and Middle Fork American. There is a powerhouse at the head of the lake (Ralston Powerhouse) that is fed by a 100' penstock; just past the powerhouse there is a parking area that overlooks the Rubicon. From there, anglers must scramble down the rip-rap rock face to get to the river.

There is a series of small plunge-pools or pockets that, at least in the late spring and early summer, will hold some decent fish that can be enticed with a short-line system using Golden Stonefly nymph imitations, Bill's Stick Caddis, and other large nymphs, coupled with the small "usual suspects" such as Prince Nymphs, Hare's Ear Nymphs, Pheasant Tail Nymphs, Copper Johns in various colors, and at times soft hackle

flies. Above these pools there is a large, deep pool; I used to scramble up onto a bedrock ledge on river right to fish this pool, but in recent years all of the soil has been washed



from the bedrock, and it is dangerously slippery to traverse, especially with studded wading shoes (which I recommend for this river). Instead of using that route past the big pool, I now cross at its tail out, which can be a real adventure when the water is flowing heavily—in fact, I can't make it across at all in high flows.

So, be forewarned—crossing here can be dangerous. I've often thought of using a float tube, but the tail out moves fast and there's always the risk that an unprincipled person will take a liking to my float tube as I'm blissfully hooking trout in the river above the pool. The head of this pool, where the inflow is frothy, can produce some nice rainbows with deeply drifted large flies—that's the good news. The bad news is that you will often hook large suckers instead of trout. In fact, while fishing alone here one day (not really a good idea) I slipped on the bedrock ledge when I set the hook on a take; the rod slipped from my hand and disappeared into the deep slot. Stunned, I watched my Sage XP and Ross G-3 slide into oblivion. When I recovered and was able to think clearly, I remembered that a floating line will bring the tip of the rod to the surface and so I kept watching the tail-out of the pool from atop the bedrock ledge. After about a half hour of anxiety, sure enough the line surfaced down near the deep tail-out on the other side of the river. The difficulty was that I could only get to the other side by swimming. I was dressed for the occasion anyway, so I doffed my shirt and shoes and swam across. By the

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time I got to where I had seen the line, it had disappeared. Sometime later it reappeared and I was able to grab it and the tip of the rod. As it turned out, the reel was stuck in the cleft of a branch on the bottom, necessitating a dive. The sucker that caused this calamity was, of course, long gone. The swim was refreshing, and I was able to fish the rest of the day.

Above the big pool there is a nearly endless variety of pocket water to fish, all of which is accessible during normal summer flows. The best fishing, however, is generally in the spring because of the rainbow spawning migration out of Oxbow. If flows are high, reaching the areas above the big hole is difficult and sometimes impossible;

unfortunately, there are no trails that provide access from Road 23 down to the river beyond the powerhouse, except for one that leads down to the river about 3 miles above the powerhouse, ending at a footbridge across the river. In my experience, most of the migratory fish use the first mile above Oxbow for spawning and do not farther upstream.



To get to the upper portion of the river, follow Road 23 for about 15 miles to a fork, staying to the right. That will be USFS Road 2, which after about another 20 miles reaches Ellicott's Bridge. On the north side of the bridge there is a parking area, and access to a trail called the Hunter Trail. This trail follows the river upstream but stays high on the steep cliff without spur trails down until about 1.75 miles in, where a rather obscure branch goes off to the left and down to the river at the confluence of the main Rubicon and its South Fork. There is about a mile of good fishable water up and downstream of this point. If, instead of taking the spur trail, you stay on the main trail, be prepared to walk another 3 miles before coming to the next defined river access point: Hale's Crossing. The fishing here can be excellent at times, due to its remote location. Past Hales's Crossing, the trail continues all the way to Hell Hole Reservoir; the hike to that point is 10 miles from Ellicott's Bridge. The last few miles before the reservoir are virtually unfishable for lack of access and because of huge piles of debris that remain from the flood caused by the failure of Hell Hole Dam during its construction, in the winter of 1964. For information on and images of this catastrophe see this link: <https://pubs.usgs.gov/pp/0422m/report.pdf>

Caution is needed on this river. A wading staff is essential, both for keeping vertical in the river, and for knocking on rocks and logs when hiking outside of the river. The Rubicon is home to a very healthy population of rattlesnakes; giving them advance warning so you can hear the buzz of the rattles is a good idea. If there is any good news on rattlesnakes, it's that the Rubicon area is inhabited by the Pacific Rattlesnake, which is one of the few species that actually will give a warning before striking. A short story

illustrates the need to be vigilant: I and my guests were hiking the trail back to our vehicles on a late summer evening a few years ago; as we walked I cautioned them that the evening can be "prime time" for rattlers. The words had hardly left my lips, when a small but angry rattler dropped off of a ledge above the trail about 2 feet in front of me. That was a first—a flying rattler! Fortunately, I was able to back away quickly, and the still-upset snake skulked away down toward the river. "QED," as they say.

It is not a good idea to enter this canyon (or any canyon for that matter) alone. At times it is necessary to scale cliffs and other steep terrain (or swim) to get around deep pools that are flanked by rock walls. If you fall and are injured, a companion can go for help. It gets very hot in the canyon, so it pays to have a filter type water bottle to keep hydrated. When the sun leaves the water, mosquitoes and black flies will annoy you, so bring the repellent. And be sure to carry a map and compass, and/or a GPS device. As well, it is a good idea to carry a device called "Spot," which is a satellite communication device that will send a "help needed" or 911 rescue message should the worst happen. Still, despite all of these dangers and annoyances, this river is well worth the effort once you have put some distance between your vehicle and you.



I mentioned the North Fork of the Middle Fork American River earlier. At the south end of the bridge at the bottom of the canyon, there is a sign on the left pointing to a trail that is the access point for this river. If the fishing in the Rubicon is unrewarding, try this stream. It flows mostly in the shade

during late afternoon, and can be good on dries in the evening. I recall fishing the North of the Middle one day in early spring with a couple of friends. On one of her first casts, Jeanne hooked a very nice rainbow of about 16 inches on a Stimulator. What followed was a very good day of small stream rock hopping and fishing. Here again caution must be exercised, as this is a back country area. The trail rises high above the river, necessitating steep descents where it is possible. At times, the trail is narrow and a bit unstable; one should never let the eyes roam from the trail even though the river down below is seductive. The fishing is good near and above the confluence with Eldorado Creek (about 1.5 miles in from the trail head), which comes down from the Foresthill (north) side of the divide.
