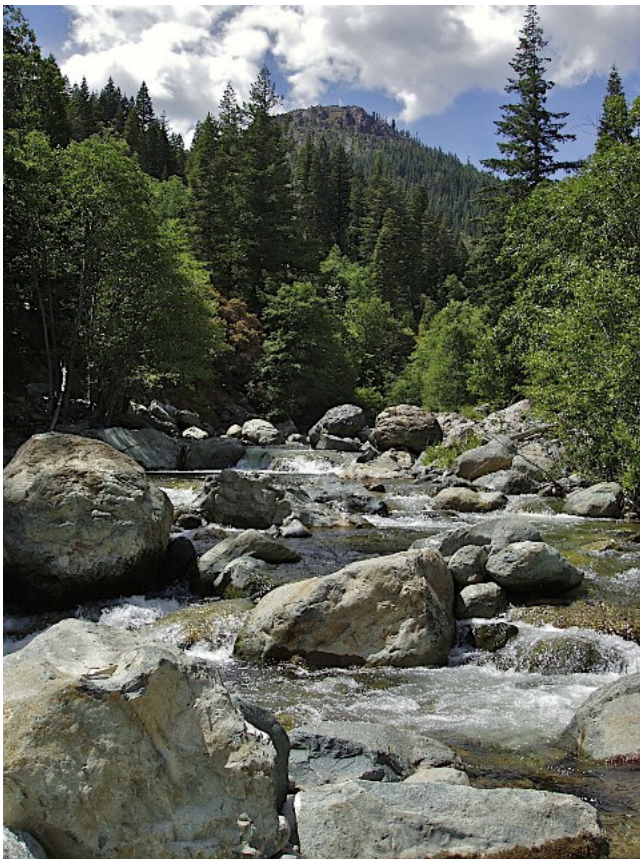


# THE NORTH YUBA RIVER

By Ralph Wood

Along the North Yuba River, the beginning of the spring and summer fly fishing season is signaled by blooming dogwood trees. Their creamy, white blossoms stand out against the light olive green of the new spring leaves and the dark needles of the conifers. The night before there had been light snow above 6000 feet, a not unusual occurrence in mid-May along the North Yuba drainage, and the remnants still dusted the surrounding hills. Between the ivory of the dogwood blossoms and the snow, there was a profusion of white and green as I looked up the creek from the road. The North Yuba River was still too high with snow melt to be easily fly fishable but south facing creeks, like Fiddle Creek, were in perfect shape now with rising water temperatures and sporadic hatches.

After rigging up with a dry Little Black Stone pattern, I made my way toward the creek through the brush and blackberry thickets downstream of a pool I had spotted when I parked the car. The water entered the pool on the left-hand side with hardly any beginning riffle and then



flowed deep along a rock ledge, covered with light green moss and last years leaves. It exited through a smooth, shallow tail-out into the next run. Spotting no fish in the shallows my first casts were made toward the center of the run beside the rock ledge. There was a sipping rise tight along the ledge, the fly disappeared and I quickly landed a nine inch, well conditioned rainbow. After a few more casts, I moved up the creek to the next promising place.

Sierra County contains the most productive of the three forks of the Yuba River—the North Yuba. The North Yuba is a classic western freestone stream that, along with its tributaries, is characterized by deep pools, pocket water, riffles and runs—all amid beautiful Sierra West Slope scenery.

The upper North Yuba is a shallow and brush choked creek from the river's headwaters just below the Yuba Pass to Bassett's Station, a distance of six miles. The upper section, just below the summit, visible from Highway 49, runs through an alpine meadow loaded with small brook trout with a monster

of 10 inches the ultimate prize. Before 1997 there were beaver ponds in the meadow but they washed out in that year's run-off and the beaver have departed for places yet unknown. Walk-in access can be difficult due to boggy ground conditions, downed trees and beaver holes. Take the time to enjoy the tiger lilies, Indian paintbrush, lupine and marsh marigolds that dot this boggy

paradise. The fishing here is typical of small stream Sierra fly fishing; the trout are wary, shy and easily spooked. Much time can be spent by the fly fisher trying to get an unobstructed cast.

The entire stretch below the meadow all the way to Bassett's Station contains beautifully-colored wild rainbow, brook and a few brown trout from seven to ten inches long. Occasionally, you will run into a fish over 13 inches that has taken up residence in one of the deeper pools or runs. Attractor dries and caddis patterns in sizes #14 through #16 work very well in this section.



The North Fork begins to come into its own below Bassett's Station, thanks to the water added by Salmon Creek. Salmon Creek drains the Lakes Basin above Bassett's and its pools and riffles extend up toward the basin like ladder steps. Rainbows in the six to ten inch range predominate along the creek but during the early season there are some good-sized brook trout that are washed out of the Lakes Basin during the spring run-off and take residence in the deeper slow moving pools. Brook trout up to 15

inches are a good possibility. Access to Salmon Creek is from Highway 49 where the road crosses the stream about one mile south of Bassett's. The 1997 flood had a great effect on the Salmon Creek drainage. Much of the large riparian vegetation was destroyed leaving a rocky rubble behind but willows are beginning to return. Hiking up the creek is strenuous but the fishing can be rewarding.

Downstream of Salmon Creek, the North Yuba tumbles through a steep, narrow canyon toward the town of Sierra City. This is mainly pocket water interspersed with deep pools and fishes well with attractor dries such as Humpies, Wulffs, Adams Parachutes and Renegades, as well as with nymphs fished as a dropper off the dry fly. The fish here are predominately rainbows with a few browns and during the early season, you may run into some of the same good-sized brooks that dropped down from Salmon Creek during the spring run-off. The scenery is spectacular also, as the river here is in the shadow of the 8000-foot-high Sierra Buttes which dominate the skyline along this section. During the spring, blooming wild flowers and western azaleas delight the eye. If you like solitude and smaller water, this is a terrific area to fish as you are away from the road in a deep ravine surrounded by the sound of rushing water. Excellent access is available from numerous turnouts along Highway 49.

Haypress Creek is the last major tributary before Downieville and joins the North Yuba just above Sierra City. Haypress offers small rainbows and, in its upper stretches, small brook trout. The lower stretches of Haypress Creek (and the North Yuba) can be accessed from Wild Plum Road. The California Department of Fish and Game plants hatchery raised fish at the Wild Plum Campground (planting of hatchery-raised trout will be curtailed until at least 2010 when an environmental impact report, due to be completed by mid-2009, has been analyzed), but wild

fish and the middle sections of Haypress Creek can be gained by a four-mile hike up the Haypress Creek trail. The trailhead is located on the north side of the bridge at Wild Plum Campground.

My favorite section of Haypress Creek, however, is accessed from Forest Road 12 at the Yuba Summit. An eleven mile drive on a good gravel and dirt road will take you to a sign post for Haypress Valley. Turn right and follow the dirt road to two beautiful meadows filled with wild flowers during the summer months. The creek, loaded with little brook trout, is small but deep and winds like a serpent through the high grass meadows. The fishing is sneak and creep with much attention being paid to your back-cast. The fish here aren't large (10 inches is probably the best you can expect) but they are challenging and wary. Small dry flies and 6x tippet is the key to success. Since the brook trout are so numerous, you can even take a few for the frying pan without feeling guilty.

The most heavily fished section of the North Yuba begins below the confluence of Haypress Creek and extends downstream 12 miles to the town of Downieville. Included in this stretch are four miles of special regulation water, which runs from the southern boundary of Sierra City to Ladies Canyon Creek. The special regulations require anglers to use artificials only with barbless hooks, and keep no more than two fish of 10 inches or better. This area is typical freestone water with fast runs, riffles, and pockets interspersed with long deep slow pools. You can wade almost anywhere after the spring run-off. Much of the river here is situated away from Highway 49 and requires some hiking to find the best fishing opportunities for rainbows and a few browns up to 16 inches. Larger fish are not uncommon.

Important hatches along this section of the North Yuba include Golden Stoneflies (Calineuria) during May and June, Little Yellow Stones (Isoperla) during June and July, and Baetis—sporadically—late in the year on the slower sections of the river. Caddis are present from May through the end of the season in mid-November. The most anticipated caddis hatch occurs in October when the appropriately named October Caddis (Dicosmoecus) emerges. Both fish and fly fishers look forward to this hatch. LaFontaine Caddis emergers and Orange Stimulators in sizes #6 through #10 will often take large trout during the October Caddis emergence.

If hatches aren't occurring and you are having no success with attractor dries, try nymphing the pocket water, runs and the heads of the pools. Productive patterns include the Hare's Ear nymph, A.P. Black, Bird's Nest nymph and caddis emergers in sizes #10 through #16. Early in the season, try Golden Stone nymphs in sizes #4 to #8 fished along the banks to imitate the migrating nymphs.

At Downieville, the Downie River, the last major tributary, joins the North Yuba. From Downieville you can gain access to the Downie River and Lavazzola and Pauley Creeks. By taking Main Street through Downieville and crossing the second bridge you will come to Lavazzola Ranch Road. As you cross the bridge you can see the mouth of Pauley Creek on your right; access is available directly at the bridge. Lavazzola Creek is about five miles up Lavazzola Ranch Road; a bridge crosses it near an unimproved campground. Both creeks are loaded with beautifully colored small rainbows that hammer attractor dries in sizes #14 to #16. This is canyon country; for the climb in and out you should be in good physical condition.

The Downie River has productive fishing in its upper reaches for both rainbows and browns. The fish are all wild and respond well to attractor dries in sizes #14 to #16. Access to the upper river is from Sailor Ravine Road, which is reached off Main Street in Downieville. I would advise the use of a four wheel vehicle as the road the road turns to dirt and is rough. The easiest access to the lower section is from the bridge at Lavazzola Creek Road.

From Downieville the North Yuba turns west toward the Highway 49 Bridge, a distance of 22 miles. Here the canyon widens and parallels Highway 49. Access points along the road are numerous, and the hatches are similar to those upstream. Goodyear's Creek joins the North Yuba about five miles west of Downieville and offers good early spring fishing for average sized rainbows. Further down Highway 49 Fiddle Creek joins the North Yuba just east of the highway bridge and has small rainbows scattered throughout.

You'll encounter planted fish around the campgrounds (plantings will be curtailed until at least 2010) situated along this part of the North Yuba. To find wild trout, try to fish the sections of the stream away from the road. Basically the further you get from the campgrounds the better the fishing will be.

During late October and November to the close of the regular Sierra fishing season, depending on the weather, read rain fall, this section of the North Yuba below Goodyear's Bar contains a run of spawning brown trout coming up from Bullards Bar Reservoir. Some of these fish will hold over until spring, providing a chance to hook a trophy during the opening weeks of the season. There is also a run of kokanee salmon from Bullards Bar Reservoir during October that reaches as far as Rocky Rest campground on the lower river. They will hit small red streamer patterns and size #16 to #18 orange egg patterns.

Downstream of the Highway 49 bridge, the only access is by hiking or mountain biking. A gated road (closed to cars) at the north side of the bridge provides the easiest walk-in route, leading to Shenanigan Flat. This stretch of the river is most productive during the autumn with attractor dries and nymphs.

I can always tell when the season changes from summer to fall without the benefit of a calendar. There is a subtle change in the light from the harsh, overhead light of summer to the hazy golden, slanted light of fall. The evenings are cooler and when you wet wade, you know that the water temperatures of



summer are gone and it is time to think about wearing waders again. It is a time I look forward to with both sadness and anticipation. Sadness, because I know that winter is coming and I will be forced away from the Sierra's that I love; anticipation, because the trout are starting to bulk up for the winter and the October Caddis emergence is on the way. On this particular fall afternoon, I stepped quietly into one of my favorite pools on the North Yuba having rigged up with a dry October Caddis Cripple and a two foot 5x dropper with a #16 Turkey Bead-Head attached. The riffle leading into the pool gave up a couple of 12 inch rainbows but my attention was fixed on a sheer rock wall across stream where the water deepened and piled up before flowing to the right

and out of the pool. Wading carefully I moved slightly closer and dropped the rig two feet upstream of the overhanging elephant-ears, mended and watched the dry moving along the current alongside the rock wall. The dry disappeared, I set the hook and the fish moved quickly and powerfully downstream. I eventually landed a fine 17 inch rainbow with the nymph firmly planted in the corner of its mouth. That particular spot gave up two more fish between 13 and 16 inches before it was time to move on.

The key to successfully fly fishing the North Yuba is presentation not hatch matching. Since the river is a freestone stream, there are a myriad of micro-habitats and hatches of particular insects don't occur along the entire river all at once. The fish quickly learn to eat anything that looks edible as long as it acts naturally. Naturally, if you are in a section of river where there is a hatch and the fish are working on that bug, go ahead and match it. However, most of the time you will be prospecting.

Nymph fishing is the most productive method of catching larger North Yuba trout. Much of the river is pocket water interspersed with deeper runs. Aggressive wading will put you in the best position to get good dead drifts in pocket water. Most of the time I will use the high stick nymphing method from below the pocket, keeping the rod high and moving the tip to keep contact with a double nymph setup. This requires that you get close which can be done in this type of broken water.

Another rig, which has been proven very successful in pocket water, is to use a dry and dropper setup with an 18 to 24 inch 5X dropper off the dry to the nymph. When I use this method, I will stay close enough so that all that is on the water in pocket is the dry, dropper and no more than two feet of leader material. Sort of high stick dry fly fishing!

## ***Winter Season***

Recent regulation changes establish the North Yuba fishery between the southern boundary of Sierra City and Bullards Bar Reservoir remains open from November 15 to the last Saturday in April (the opening of the regular Sierra trout season) to catch and release fishing, single barbless hooks, artificials only and no bait.

There are not many anglers taking advantage of the new winter fishery on the North Yuba. Fly fishermen on the west side of the Sierras can see deluges of rain that will bring the river flows up for extended periods. Even when the flows are low (400 to 500 cfs), the water is bitterly cold, usually in the mid-thirties. The trout's metabolism is on idle and they digest food more slowly meaning that they spend less time and effort feeding. To get them to strike, the fly has to be right on their nose.

Hatches are sporadic and are composed of the usual suspects; midges and little black stoneflies (Capnia). Warm afternoons are the time you might find winter stonefly activity but don't look for blizzard activity. Egg-laying flights of these size #16 to #18 stoneflies are irregular.

Many trout will drop back into the deeper pools and slower runs where they don't have to expend much energy. Rising fish are found here and there but the best way to find active fish is to indicator nymph. The real advantage of winter fishing is the solitude. There will be no tourist anglers on the water.

Fishing begins to pick up in late April and early May depending on the runoff. I normally don't spend much time on the North Yuba until the flows get below 800 cfs (see website: [http://waterdata.usgs.gov/nwis/uv/?site\\_no=11413000&PARAMeter\\_cd=00065,00060,00062,72020](http://waterdata.usgs.gov/nwis/uv/?site_no=11413000&PARAMeter_cd=00065,00060,00062,72020) ) and the water temperature approaches 45 degrees. Depending upon what kind of winter we have endured, we can start serious fly fishing anywhere from mid-May to early June.

## **Tackle**

For the majority of the fishing on the North Yuba, I prefer 8-1/2 to 9-foot 4-or 5-weight rods with matching double taper or weight forward floating lines and sink tips. However, I confess that my favorite rod for the creeks is a 7-1/2-foot 3-weight lined with a matching floating double taper. Leaders should range from nine to ten feet with 4X to 6X tippetts depending upon fly size, water and wind conditions. Seven and a half foot leaders with 5x or 6x tippetts are adequate for most creek situations.

Wade cautiously during the early season, especially if crossing the river; current and depth can be deceiving especially since the water is usually clear. Felt soled boots with cleats are helpful and use a wading staff if you are uncomfortable in fast and heavy currents. Beware of dredger holes; they are often deep. During the summer months, wet wading can be very enjoyable just don't forget the felt soled boots!

Although most of the patterns you need have been noted above, I'll reiterate them again so you can organize your fly boxes for a North Yuba excursion. Good stonefly hatches occur on the river; bring weighted golden stone nymph patterns in sizes #4 through #8. I have seen a few giant orange stoneflies over the years but I don't carry any specific patterns for them since the emergences are so sporadic. Productive caddis imitations include green or brown LaFontaine larval and emergent patterns in sizes #10 through #16, green caddis larva in sizes #10 through #14 bead-head caddis pupa in sizes #10 through #16 and olive z-wing caddis in sizes #12 through #14. You will need October Caddis pupa imitations in sizes #6 through #8 in the fall. Other useful nymph patterns include Prince Nymphs, Bird's Nests, Turkey B/H, Biot B/H and Pheasant Tails in sizes #12 through #16.

Dry flies should include Golden Stonefly patterns in sizes #6 through #10 and Little Yellow Stones in sizes #12 through #16. Baetis Parachute or Sparkle Dun patterns in sizes #16 through #18 work well when Blue Wing Olives are on the water. The Orange Stimulator in sizes #6 through #10 will match the October Caddis on the North Yuba (although I find that pupa imitations tend to work better). General dries for the North Yuba and its tributaries should include red and yellow Humpies, Parachute Adams, Parachute Hare's Ear, olive E/C Caddis and the Elk Hair Caddis in olive or tan-all in sizes #12 through #18.

## ***Accommodations***

If you are planning to visit the North Yuba, bed-and-breakfast inns and motels are located in both Downieville and Sierra City. Herrington's Resort (530-862-1151) in Sierra City has good accommodations, a restaurant, and is located at the eastern edge of the special regulation section of the river. As an aside, the restaurant (with a full bar I might add) is extremely good; try the grilled lamb or pork chops. Another quality resort is the Lure Resort (530-289-3465) located just east of Downieville. The Lure sits along side the North Yuba and their remodeled cabins are very comfortable. They also have several less expensive sleeping cabins with barbecues and a communal toilet and shower setup. Further lodging and area information can be found at [www.sierracountygold.com](http://www.sierracountygold.com).



Additional restaurants include the Grubstake Saloon in Downieville good hamburgers along with a tasty French Dip and the Pizza Parlor with what else but----pizza. If you are fishing the upper section of the river try Bassett's for sandwiches and their locally famous milk shakes.

Nevada City Anglers (530-478-9301) in Nevada City is the nearest full-service fly shop. Call them for up-to-date information on the North Yuba. Sierra Hardware in Downieville

carries a limited amount of leaders, floatant and flies tailored for the area.