

South Fork American River Trail Revisited

May 31, 2011



Ken, Gerri, Bill

at Magnolia Ranch. I would guess the distance was about 8 miles. Had we started at the Magnolia Ranch trailhead the distance would have been, at most, 11 miles.

The weather forecast for the last day of May was iffy, cool with a chance of rain showers in the valley and snow in the higher elevations. Strange weather for late spring in Northern California, but mere showers are never an excuse to cancel. As it turned out the rain came down on and off in the

valley most of the day. In the foothills it was a different story---sunshine. The jacket I carried in my day pack stayed there all day.

We could imagine the movie cameras whirring and directors shouting instructions to actors as we paused to investigate an old movie set with a beat-up ranch house, barn, and corral. Beyond the movie set, the trail makes a slow descent with views of the South Fork of the American River. On this day it was running high and fast with no sign of river rafters, maybe just because it was mid week. The trail continues downhill as it bends around nearly 180 degrees to the north and crosses a small creek in Norton Ravine. From here it passes through a dense, damp forest sprinkled with globe lilies and a small blue and white flowers named Chinese houses, because the blooms are stacked vertically like, well, little houses on a cliffside. The best display of wild flowers is yet to come.



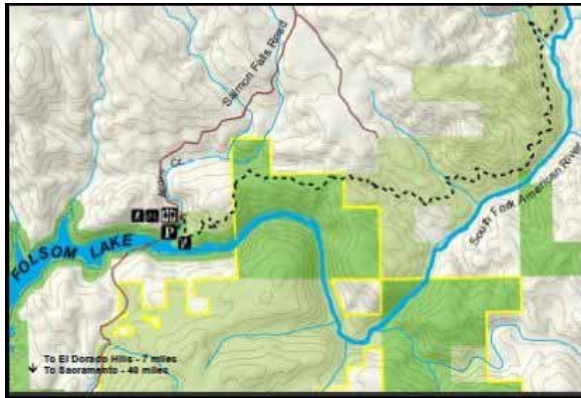
South Fork Trail---north end



Ken and Gerri bird watching

When hiking in the foothills of California the big picture of expansive oak woodlands, pine forested hillsides, and distant views of churning white rapids is only part of the scene. One must

pause to examine the small things, the wild flowers, the birds and the critters, but I like to know



their names. I could carry a bunch of field guides, but having the experts with you is even better. Bill is the resident wild flower mentor. Ken and Gerri have traveled the world in search of bird sightings. When a bird is spotted, their 8x35 binoculars swing into action like radar tracking the smallest finch. Ken sings out its name and sex. Likewise, a wildflower sighting was reason enough for all of us to gather around while Bill gave it a name and explained its habitat and growing season.

South Fork Trail----south end

Most of the area dedicated to the River Trail was acquired by the American River Conservancy during the past decade except for a couple of parcels already in public ownership and managed by the BLM. The upper part of the Trail has good river access mainly because of the facilities for rafters who can park their boats and use the picnic tables and porta-poties. The last river access is about a quarter mile past the Norton Ravine creek crossing. From that point on the trail begins a long, gradual climb. Southbound, for the next five miles, hikers, mountain bikers, and equestrians will enjoy only occasional views of the river and no river access until the very end.

A couple of miles before reaching the Salmon Falls parking lot a locked gate marks the end of the line for riders on horseback with a sign prohibiting equestrians. Where the horses go from there is unclear, back to their horse trailers, I suppose. The apparent reason for restricting horses seems to be the protection of endangered plants, because just



Earl



California Buckeye in bloom

beyond the locked gate is a bench, a pair of big shoe brushes, and a sign asking hikers to please take the time to brush the soles of their boots, their trousers, and their packs in order to prevent the spread of non-native plants into the area beyond the sign. Of course being responsible hikers, we all brushed vigorously. Although the brushes are chained to the bench, one wonders how many hikers and bikers will heed the sign and how often the brushes will need replacing.

California Buckeye was blooming, it's white and pale rose flowers, like lighted candles, throwing off a faint fragrance. But we stumbled on the best display of wildflower at less than a mile to go, a garden of blue bordering both sides of the trail that continued almost to the end of our journey. Bill calls the flowers late blooming brodiaea. I'll settle for that and for a satisfying day hike.