

The Stevens Trail June 17, 2010

Should the Stevens Trail be considered a trail “that provides a gentle slope suitable for even the most novice hikers” as described by the Mother Lode Office of the



BLM on their Stevens Trail website? Well, yes and no. Some sources describe the trail as easy, some describe it as moderate, and some describe it as difficult. Take your pick. A sign near the trailhead says 4 ½ miles to N. Fork American River. It starts at 2400 ft and ends on the river at 1200 ft. That’s an average grade of about 5%. Coming out is the hard part. It’s uphill all the way. From the river to half way up, the elevation gain is about 400 ft, an easy 3% grade. From the half way point to the

top, the elevation gain increases to 800 ft, a 6.7% grade for a couple of miles or more. Novices might not believe they are ascending a “gentle slope” even on a cool day. When the temperature hits the high 80s and 90s, the novice and even the veteran hikers will be puffing and sweating and getting leg cramps and longing for the cold drinks in the ice chest back at the trailhead. I’ll call it a moderately difficult and move on.

The Stevens Trail was first established in 1859 as a toll road between Colfax and the gold mining town of Iowa Hill and fell into disuse after the turn of the century. One hundred years later it was purportedly rediscovered by a Sacramento boy scout. *We know better*. It was actually rediscovered probably around 1958 by Jim Legue a surveyor from the Marysville office of the California Division of Highway while researching an easement for the new Interstate Highway 80. He followed the old Stevens trail down to the river.

On a Friday in mid June we found a profusion of wildflowers still blooming, the most prevalent being bush monkey flower (a peachy colored flower growing along the hillsides) clarkia (a reddish, purplish flower in several varieties), and penny royal with its pungent odor. Of course this year was a wet one and the small tributary streams were still flowing. We stopped by one of them, ate lunch, and chatted with a couple of fishermen on the way to the river hoping to catch some rainbows. “Using bait or lures?” I asked.

“They don’t hit lures. They’re native trout up here. They only bite on worms. Caught nine big ones down at Windy Point last week,” he added. Then as an afterthought and for reasons unknown he said, “When



Jimmy Carter was president he surveyed the area in a helicopter and shut down all the mining activity.” Maybe that act by President Carter made the river more accessible to fishermen.

Going back up in the afternoon we passed a fair number of people coming down including one young couple with two babies. The mother held one baby in a sling while the father held the other in his bare arms. We wondered how they had crossed a stream where the water flowed down through a cleft in the rocks, a bit difficult for us, but apparently not for them. We avoided that crossing by going back up the bike route instead of the hiker route.

To get there, take Interstate 80 to Colfax, get off at the Canyon Way interchange, and drive down North Canyon Way to the trailhead parking lot.