

**A BOATING TRAIL GUIDE TO THE SOUTH FORK AMERICAN RIVER**

A publication of the California Department of Boating and Waterways

## EL DORADO COUNTY'S MANAGEMENT OF THE SOUTH FORK

The South Fork is like other desirable recreation areas in the West: the increasing number of boaters on the river puts pressure on the area's resources and on everyone's boating enjoyment. Remember that you are one of many who share the use of this river. Please treat your surroundings, the people and the other creatures you encounter with common sense and courtesy.

The following regulations and information will help boaters conduct trips safely, observe private property rights and protect river resources.

### COMMERCIAL RAFTING PERMITS

Commercial rafting outfitters operate under permits issued by El Dorado County, the California Department of Parks and Recreation and the U.S. Bureau of Land Management (BLM). All persons, groups or organizations offering river trips for monetary compensation beyond an equal sharing of expenses are required to hold a permit.

### PRIVATE BOATER REGISTRATION

El Dorado County requires private boaters to obtain an annual registration tag. The tags are provided free of charge and should be displayed on your boat. They may be obtained from the information boards at river access points, local campgrounds and stores. Your signature certifies that your river trips are non-commercial and that you will abide by the boater responsibility code described on the tag.

## RIVER FLOWS



**For the latest flow information for the South Fork:**  
<http://coloma.com/sfam/flow.html>  
**Flow Phone: (530) 621-6616**

Flow levels on the South Fork can fluctuate rapidly because they result from hydroelectric facility releases. Current velocity, wave size, and the difficulty of rapids change with the flow levels.

Summer flows, released from the Chili Bar Dam, are usually 1,000 - 2,000 cfs. The amount and duration of the daily release depends upon yearly water supply conditions. Boatable flows (above 900 cfs) are usually released from 9 am to 1 pm Sundays through Fridays and 7 am to 1 pm on Saturdays. Upstream utilities may release up to 3,600 cfs during midweek evening hours.

Daily boatable releases usually occur through the first weekend of October each year. Boatable flows may continue during the fall, depending on water supply and hydroelectric demand.

## LARGE GROUP REGISTRATION

Beginning in 2002, El Dorado County will require all large non-commercial groups of 18 or more people to register their river trip before launching. Through registration, groups will certify that the river trip is a shared-cost trip and receive information on boating safety and boater responsibilities. Large groups may register at the major boating access points, on-line at [www.co.el-dorado.ca.us/generalservices/parks/](http://www.co.el-dorado.ca.us/generalservices/parks/) or by contacting El Dorado County Parks.

River trips operated as a program of a non-profit organization must register annually. All organized groups should contact El Dorado County Parks for a determination of their status.

## QUIET ZONE

More than 100,000 people float down the South Fork annually, past the back yards of private homes and property. Out of respect for the rights of property owners, a "Quiet Zone" has been designated on the river, starting a half mile above Troublemaker Rapids, and extending to Greenwood Creek (see map). All boaters should comply with the intent of the Quiet Zone by reducing their noise, particularly when homes are within sight along the river.

## SANITATION

**Human waste.** Please use designated public restroom facilities (see map). If you plan to use public lands that do not have facilities, you must carry a portable toilet.

**Litter.** A County ordinance requires that every boat contain a waterproof trash bag. Boat out what you boat in. Please do not boat with empty cans or other items loose on the floor—the waves and rapids will wash them into the river.

Winter and spring flow levels are linked to storms and the amount of snowpack in the Sierra. Extremely high flows are possible after storms and during spring runoff.

Both the upper run (Chili Bar to Coloma) and the lower run (Coloma to Salmon Falls) are rated Class III in difficulty at flows below 6,000 cubic feet per second (cfs). **Caution: At flows above 6,000 cfs, some rapids are rated Class IV, and the river should be run by boaters with advanced skills only.** Inexperienced boaters should raft with a professional outfitter or obtain professional instruction in whitewater boating and safety.

The American Whitewater Affiliation gives the following definition of a Class III river:

**Intermediate.** Rapids with moderate, irregular waves which may be difficult to avoid and can swamp an open canoe. Complex maneuvers in fast current and good boat control in tight passages or around ledges are often required; large waves or strainers may be present but are easily avoided. Strong eddies and powerful current effects can be found, particularly on large-volume rivers. Scouting is advisable for inexperienced parties. Injuries while swimming are rare; self-rescue is usually easy, but group assistance may be required to avoid long swims.

The stretch from Marshall Gold Discovery State Historic Park to Camp Lotus is rated Class II. This section is considered to be one of the best in the state for beginning whitewater kayakers and canoeists. The American Whitewater Affiliation gives the following definition of Class II:

**Novice.** Straightforward rapids with wide, clear channels which are evident without scouting. Occasional maneuvering may be required, but rocks and medium sized waves are easily missed by trained paddlers. Swimmers are seldom injured and group assistance, while helpful, is seldom needed.

## PERSONAL FLOTATION DEVICE

Under state law, each vessel must carry one Coast Guard-approved PFD for each person on board, and, by law, children under the age of 12 must wear their life jackets in vessels 26 feet or less while underway. Common sense dictates that everyone wear a PFD while on the river.



## FIRE

Use extreme caution during the annual fire season (May through October): **California campfire permits are required on BLM lands.**

## FISHING

Anyone 16 years or older must have a fishing license to take fish. (See current California Sport Fishing Regulations for more information). Catchable-size rainbow trout are released into the South Fork from May to September at various locations.

## RECREATIONAL MINING

The California Department of Fish and Game requires a permit for the use of any vacuum or suction dredge equipment.

## RIVER ACCESS

Land along the river is owned and managed by various public and private entities, but the majority of the land is private property. Please respect the rights of property owners. Do not trespass; get permission from the owner before using private land. If you are not certain that riverside land is public, "keep your feet wet." Please refer to the map for river access areas and riverside lands open to the public.

## BOATING AND WATERWAYS BOATING TRAIL ACCESS

The California Department of Boating and Waterways funded access projects on the South Fork of the American as part of its Boating Trails Program. These projects include improvements at Henningsen-Lotus Park, a new restroom in the gorge and the Skunk Hollow takeout at the Folsom Lake State Recreation Area.

## BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT



This federal agency manages several thousand acres of public lands along the South Fork. Signs, visible along the river, indicate entering and leaving BLM public lands. Boaters are encouraged to use the established lunch/primitive camping areas on river right at Miles 3, 12.3 and

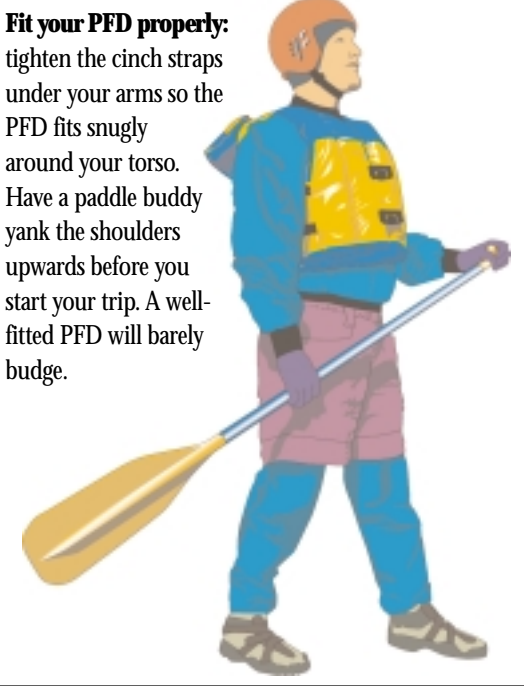
15.3. Toilet facilities are located at these sites. Important features of public lands include the fragile riparian (riverside) forest and wildlife habitat areas, which should not be disturbed.

## THE RIGHT RAFTING GEAR CAN BE A LIFE SAVER

### WHITewater PFD:

Life jackets are now known as personal flotation devices or PFDs. Always wear a PFD that is designed for whitewater boating when you are on the South Fork. A PFD made for general use on lakes is not adequate. Check the label on your PFD. Your PFD should be Coast Guard approved, have a Class III or V rating, and indicate that it is designed for whitewater, canoeing or kayaking use. Remember the main purpose of a PFD is to keep your head above water so you can breathe. Your PFD must have enough flotation for your body weight and also account for river conditions. Wear a high-flotation PFD when the river flows are high.

**Fit your PFD properly:** tighten the cinch straps under your arms so the PFD fits snugly around your torso. Have a paddle buddy yank the shoulders upwards before you start your trip. A well-fitted PFD will barely budge.



### HIGH-WATER SAFETY:

**Wear a wetsuit** if the flows are high - above 4,500 cfs, or if the combined air and water temperature is less than 120 degrees, (usually October through May). Wetsuits will increase your margin of comfort and safety under these conditions. A wetsuit is crucial to prevent the onset of hypothermia caused by a long swim in cold water. It also provides you with added flotation and the padding helps protect you from injury.

Kayakers and cold weather paddlers often favor the wind and waterproof protection of a drysuit. With drysuits, you can vary the kind of insulating layers according to conditions.

**Avoid cotton!** When cotton gets wet it stays wet and is worthless as insulation. Wear synthetic pile/fleece or wool clothing in layers. They dry quickly, wick away moisture and retain body heat, even when wet.

**Cold feet?** Wear a warm hat to reduce the loss of body heat through your head.

**Select your footwear** for warmth and traction. Wear wool or pile socks under your sneakers.

**Neoprene Gloves** prevent cold air and water from sapping strength and flexibility from your hands.

**Wear a river helmet** that provides good coverage of your head, including ears, temple and back of the neck. The helmet size and chinstrap system should allow a snug fit. Wear a fleece hat for additional warmth.

**Bring extra pile/fleece clothing** and quick energy foods on your trip.

## CALIFORNIA STATE PARKS

Marshall Gold Discovery State Park protects the site where James Marshall discovered gold in 1848. Historic buildings, a museum, and interpretive programs on the Gold Rush are featured.

The park's river access policy prohibits all take-outs. Put-ins are allowed at the North Beach River Access Area (see map). Stopping at the park while on a river trip for lunch, to use the restroom facilities or for tours is allowed. Day use fees are charged.

Folsom Lake State Recreation Area offers two river access sites off Salmon Falls Road, which are used for take-outs. Overflow parking is available along Salmon Falls Road (some sections of the road are posted "No Parking"). Toilet facilities are located at both sites. Drinking water is not available.

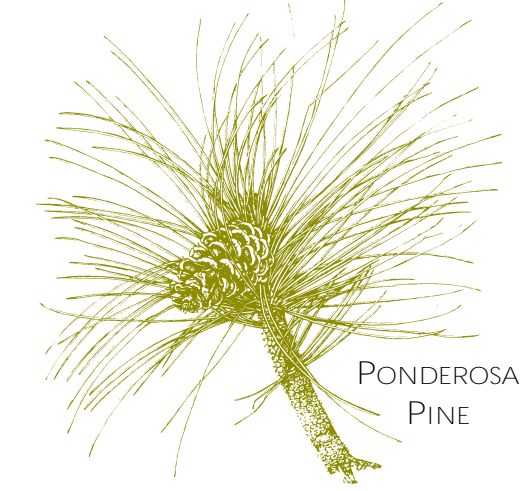
## HENNINGSEN-LOTUS COUNTY PARK

Facilities include a parking lot, restroom facilities, boat launching area, soccer fields, picnic sites, and a pavilion. Boaters are encouraged to use the park for river access in the Coloma area. Day use fees are charged.



## PLANT COMMUNITIES

Every turn in the river seems to reveal a different landscape, and underlines the diversity of life in these canyons; more than a thousand plant species are found between Chili Bar and Folsom. Each plant grows where the climate, soil and topography are favorable. Some, like the yellow pine, can tolerate a wide range of conditions, and are found throughout the West. Others, like the rare El Dorado bedstraw, are believed to exist only on several sites in western El Dorado County. This herb grows solely in rocky soils in the understory of oak woodlands, primarily on north-facing slopes.



PONDEROSA PINE

To understand plants it is helpful to view them as belonging to communities. However, the boundaries between these communities are not always distinct, because relationships among environmental factors are complex.

**Riparian (riverside) plants** require a year-round supply of water, and are found in the moist soils along the riverbanks. They must also be able to withstand the force of the river current during floods and the high water levels from spring runoff. By providing shade and erosion control, these plants are crucial to the viability of the underwater ecosystem.

Button and sandbar willow are among the first plants to take hold on newly formed sand or gravel bars. On slightly higher ground that is not regularly flooded, decaying plant material accumulates, making the soil suitable for other types of plants. Here can be found trees such as white alder, cottonwood, big leaf maple, and Oregon ash. Blackberries, willow and wild grapes form a dense understory, sheltering wildlife.

White alder plays an important role as a provider of nitrogen in riparian ecosystems. Spherical nodules on the roots take free nitrogen from the air and fix it into water-soluble compounds. The decay of alder leaves, roots, and wood releases nitrogen into the soil and water, enhancing their productivity.



WHITE ALDER

**Oak woodland** is found both as a hot, dry grassland dotted with trees (known as savannah), and in dense groves of oak and pine (on cooler and wetter slopes). The grassy slopes between oaks and shrubs, carpeted with wildflowers in spring, become heat-scorched grassland in summer. Trees of this community include deciduous oaks (blue, black and valley) and evergreen oaks (interior and canyon live oaks) along with western grey pine. Buckeye, which turns golden and lies dormant in summer, is common along the slopes of the upper canyon.

**Chaparral plants** (chamise, manzanita, ceanothus) can survive the hot and dry conditions created by exposure to the sun on south-facing slopes (usually river-right). These deep-rooted plants are "sclerophyllous": having thick evergreen foliage with heavily waxed, densely haired or powdered surfaces which help to conserve water during summer. Chaparral plants germinate best after fire. They are notable for having adapted to serpentine rock soils. Most other plants cannot tolerate the high magnesium and low calcium levels of these soils.

**Yellow pine forests** thrive on the shaded north-facing slopes, which are cooler and wetter than southern exposures. These forests are highly adapted to the fires that regularly sweep the mountain sides. Yellow pine seedlings quickly grow long taproots so they can reach moisture in burned or dry soils. Young pines require the unblocked sunlight provided when the understory has burned away. These pines also develop thick, fire-resistant bark at a relatively young age.



POISON OAK

**Suggestions for further reading**  
 Cassidy, Jim and Calhoun, Fryar  
 California Whitewater: A Guide to the Rivers (North Fork Press, 1984)

The American River: North, Middle, and South Forks (Published by Protect American River Canyons, 1989)

# SOUTH FORK RIVER SAFETY ESSENTIALS

FLOW RANGE (CFS)	TYPICAL RIVER CONDITIONS	GROUP RESPONSIBILITY (EACH LEVEL BUILDS ON PREVIOUS LEVELS)
BELOW 2,000	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Chili Bar Dam controls flows</li> <li>Clear water</li> <li>Rapids rated up to Class III+</li> <li>Flows may increase quickly due to upstream hydroelectric operations</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Class III equipment: multi-chamber raft, Type III white water PFD's, full size paddles, throw ropes, first aid &amp; wrap kits</li> <li>Class III skills - boat in control, allow adequate space between groups in rapids, no loose lines or gear, standard hand signals</li> <li>Be trained in swift water safety / rescue, CPR, first aid</li> </ul>
2,000 - 4,500	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Current speed, wave size &amp; hydraulics increase noticeably</li> <li>Cold snow melt water during winter and spring months</li> <li>Strainer hazards on some river banks</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Wet suits/dry suits recommended</li> <li>Guide has South Fork high flow experience</li> <li>Keep group compact for quick response to swimmers</li> <li>No single boat trips</li> </ul>
4,500 - 8,000	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Large waves &amp; holes can flip boats</li> <li>Water always extremely cold</li> <li>Hypothermia risk from long swims</li> <li>Strainer hazards along entire river</li> <li>Flow may increase rapidly, turn silty during and after storms</li> <li>Some rapids Class IV (above 6000 cfs)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Wet suits/dry suits necessary. Helmets recommended</li> <li>Advanced boating skills required</li> <li>Wear high flotation PFD's</li> <li>Know routes to avoid boat flips - "When in doubt, scout."</li> <li>Rig boat for flips</li> <li>Group fitness: everyone must be able to paddle hard, recover from flips, swim to safety in strong current.</li> </ul>
<b>WARNING: FLOWS ABOVE 8,000 CFS DEMAND THE UTMOST RESPECT AND CAUTION</b>		
8,000 - 12,000	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Winter storm flows and harsh weather</li> <li>Large floating debris</li> <li>Swims are distinct possibility</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Trained safety boaters advised</li> <li>Swims may be life threatening due to strainers</li> <li>Scout all rapids</li> </ul>

• Difficult to avoid boat flipping waves & holes

• Teamed of experts only with trained safety boaters

• Rescue & communication gear necessary

• Boating not recommended due to extreme hazards

• River subject to immediate closure

**Photo & graphic credits:** Rapid Shooters, Coloma, CA; Sierra Shutterbug, Coloma, CA.; FlyingFrog.com

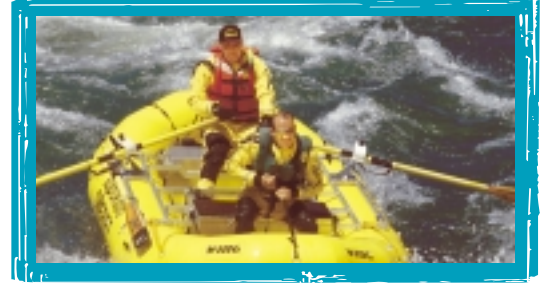
**American River District California Department of Parks and Recreation**  
 501 El Dorado Street,  
 Auburn, CA 95603  
 (530) 885-5648  
[www.parks.ca.gov](http://www.parks.ca.gov)

**U.S. Bureau of Land Management Folsom Resources Area**  
 63 Natoma Street  
 Folsom, CA 95630  
 (916) 985-4474  
[www.ca.blm.gov](http://www.ca.blm.gov)

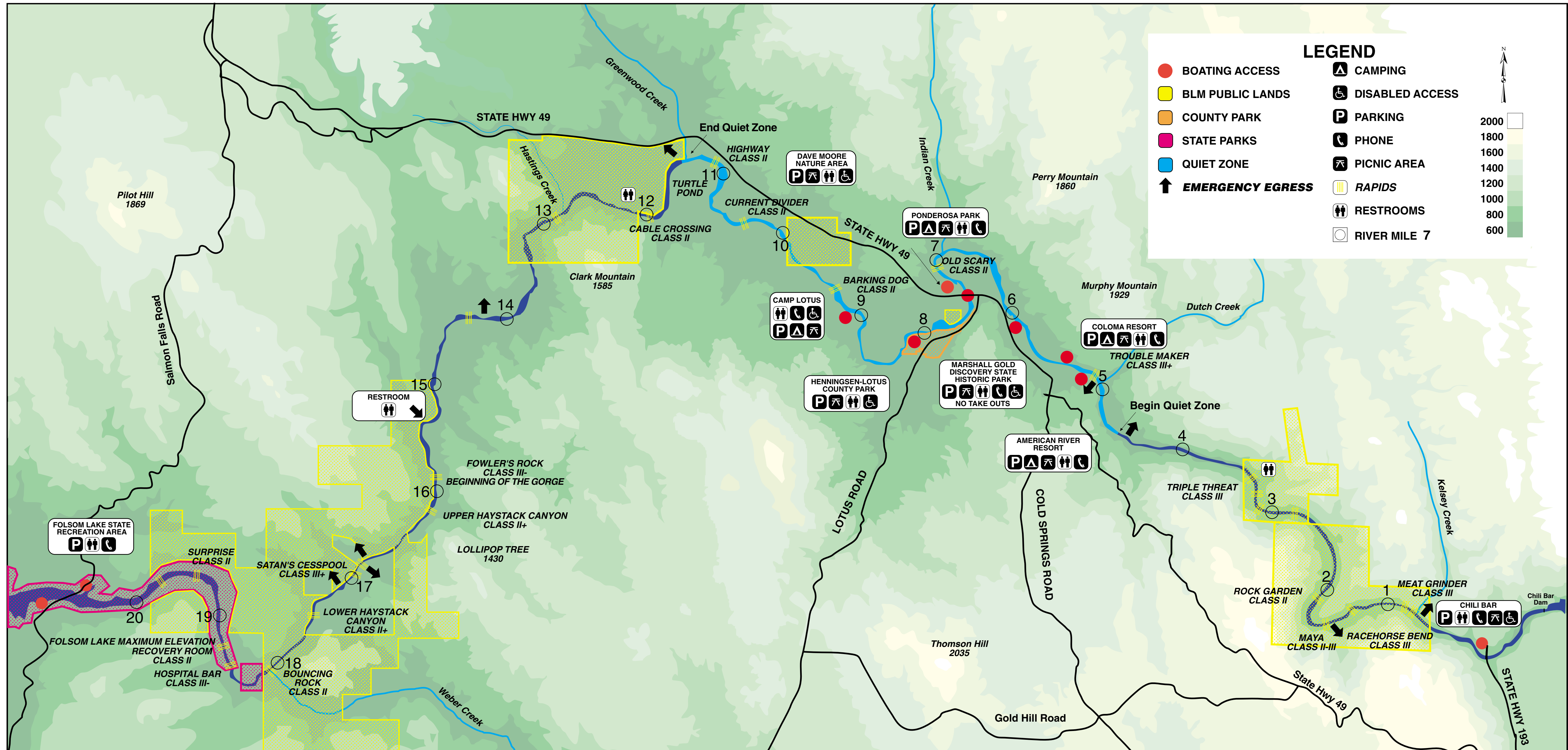
**El Dorado County Parks and Recreation Division**  
 3000 Fairlane Court, Suite 1  
 Placerville, CA 95667  
 (530) 621-5349  
[www.co.el-dorado.ca.us/generalservices/parks/](http://www.co.el-dorado.ca.us/generalservices/parks/)

**California Department of Boating & Waterways**  
 2000 Evergreen Street, Suite 100  
 Sacramento, CA 95815  
 (888) 326-2822 (Tollfree)  
[www.dbw.ca.gov](http://www.dbw.ca.gov)

Gray Davis, Governor  
 State of California  
 Mary D. Nichols, Secretary for Resources  
 Raynor Tsuneyoshi, Director



# SOUTH FORK AMERICAN RIVER PUBLIC ACCESS



### LEGEND

<span style="color: red;">●</span> BOATING ACCESS	CAMPING
<span style="background-color: yellow;">■</span> BLM PUBLIC LANDS	DISABLED ACCESS
<span style="background-color: orange;">■</span> COUNTY PARK	PARKING
<span style="background-color: pink;">■</span> STATE PARKS	PHONE
<span style="background-color: lightblue;">■</span> QUIET ZONE	PICNIC AREA
EMERGENCY EGRESS	RAPIDS
	RESTROOMS
	RIVER MILE 7

2000  
1800  
1600  
1400  
1200  
1000  
800  
600

### CHILI BAR RUN MILE BY MILE GUIDE

- 0 Chili Bar River Access. Fees charged.
- 0.5 BLM public land to mile 3.4.
- 0.6 Meatgrinder Rapid. Class III+.
- 1.3 Racehorse Bend Rapid. Class II+.
- 1.5 Maya Rapid. Class II-III.
- 1.8 Rock Garden Rapid. Class II.
- 2.0 African Queen Rapid. Class II.
- 3.1 Triple Threat Rapid. Class III. Miner's Creek, on river right, is a recommended lunch stop with restroom facilities.
- 4.4 Indian Creek enters river left. Beginning of Quiet Zone.
- 5.2 Troublemaker Rapid. Class III+.
- 5.2 American River Resort River Access and Campground. Fees charged.
- 5.5 Coloma Resort River Access and Campground. Fees charged.
- 5.6 Coloma Bridge, built in 1917.
- 5.7 Sutter's Mill site.
- 6.0 Marshall Gold Discovery State Historic Park - North Beach River Access Area. Fees charged. Picnic and restroom facilities. **Take-outs are prohibited.**
- 7.1 Old Scary Rapid. Class II.
- 7.4 Highway 49 Bridge River Access. Parking under bridge is prohibited.
- 8.0 Henningsen-Lotus County Park River Access. Fees charged.
- 9.0 Camp Lotus River Access and Campground. Fees charged. Barking Dog rapid. Class II.
- 9.7 BLM public land on river right (Dave Moore Nature Area) to mile 9.9.
- 10.6 Current Divider Rapid. Class II+.
- 11.2 Highway Rapid. Class II.
- 11.5 Greenwood Creek on river right. End of the Quiet Zone. BLM lands on river right to mile 13.4.
- 12.0 Cable Crossing Rapid. Class II.
- 12.2 BLM public land on river right is a recommended lunch/camping area with restroom facilities.
- 12.8 There are several lunch/camping sites (no facilities) on BLM public lands between Hastings Creek and mile 13.4.
- 13.9 Gorilla Rock, or Convict Rock on river left.
- 15.0 Indian grinding holes atop large boulder on river right. Lollipop Tree, which marks the beginning of the Gorge, is visible here.
- 15.3 BLM public lands with restroom facilities.
- 15.8 Fowler's Rock Rapid. Beginning of the Gorge. Class III+.
- 16.9 Satan's Cesspool Rapid. Class III+.
- 17.0 Son of Satan's Rapid. Class II+.
- 17.6 Lower Haystack Canyon Rapid. Class II+.
- 17.7 BLM land to mile 18.1. Weber Creek enters river left at mile 18.1.
- 18.2 Bouncing Rock Rapid. Class II+.
- 18.6 Hospital Bar Rapid. Class III.
- 18.7 Recovery Room Rapid. Class II+.
- 18.8 Folsom Lake maximum elevation.
- 19.4 Surprise Rapid. Class II+. Class II rapids continue to mile 20.
- 20.5 Salmon Falls Bridge take-out on the right bank upstream of the bridge.