

# Gold prospectors take advantage of drought in Placer County

**Richard Chang, Sacramento Bee, 1-26-14**

A small gold rush is taking hold in the foothills of Placer County, where prospectors young and old are taking advantage of record-low water levels to search for precious metal.

The Gold Rush of 1849 it isn't. But the real possibility of finding new gold – even a few flakes – has people giddy. Prospectors say unusually low rivers are opening up areas that haven't been touched by man in decades, if not over a century.

“Stuff that's normally submerged in water is now available. It opens up the possibility for nuggets,” said James Hutchings, Sacramento chapter president of the Gold Prospectors Association of America.

Along Bear River near Colfax on Thursday, a handful of prospectors were trying their luck. Some took the old-fashioned route, shoveling sand into a bucket and sifting through it with bare hands. Others, like John Pearson, employed technology.

Pearson and his dog Wanda spent the early afternoon wading through the river with a long metal detector. An hour of searching yielded some rusted tin and an old bottle cap.

Still, he was undeterred. “It's going to open up a new door for us,” Pearson said of the low water.

The patch of Bear River near Campground Road resembled a creek, containing exposed rocks and small islands. Prospectors in waterproof boots walked through the gentle current with ease.

Nearby, truck driver Michael Albin, 33, was settling down into a spot with his friend and fiancée. Thursday was Albin's second stab at prospecting, but he quickly found a gold chip in his pan about one-fourth the size of a pea.

“When you see the black sand, you'll see the gold,” said Albin, reciting a tip he learned from experienced prospectors.

So far, Albin said he's purchased \$100 worth of equipment, including multiple buckets, pans and a sifter. By summer, when the water falls even more, he expects to shell out \$1,000 more for a sluice box, which can process much more material than a pan.

No one expects to strike it rich. For most, panning is just a hobby and a way to enjoy the outdoors. Professional miners are all but nonexistent in the region because of a moratorium on dredging, the act of using a motorized machine to suck and sort sediment.

Local businesses selling prospecting equipment are cashing in on the uptick of interest. At Pioneer Mining Supplies in Auburn, a steady stream of customers showed up Thursday, several of them first-time prospectors.

“A lot more people are curious,” said Heather Willis, co-owner of the store, noting that business is up by 10 percent.

Inside the High Street store, customers can find a slew of tools, from \$4 gold pans to sluice boxes costing hundreds of dollars. Gold jewelry, instructional DVDs, history books and area maps are available. Willis' starter package, which includes a pan, vial and book, costs about \$20.

Sacramento's Black Sheep Mining also has seen a sudden surge in business, said owner Jerry Butler. He hopes to restart prospecting tours in the next few weeks.

"Normally the rivers are 5 to 10 feet higher than they are right now," Butler said.

The cracks and crevices are ground zero for chunks of gold that have settled after being washed from the mountains, Hutchings said.

Among the areas most frequented are the Bear River Campground in Colfax and the Confluence in Auburn State Recreation Area.

After taking a crash course from Willis, Rick Burner, 50, declared he was ready Thursday.

"I plan on finding gold now," the Rocklin resident said, chuckling, after purchasing a bag of supplies