

California drought brings a golden lining

By Peter Hecht
phecht@sacbee.com

Until the search for glittering gold renewed his life, long-haul trucker and Gulf War veteran Gary Shaver was overweight and lacking energy. He had survived four heart attacks, with surgeons ultimately implanting a battery-powered defibrillator in his chest to prevent sudden death from cardiac arrest.

Then, three years ago, the Sacramento resident began combing trickling mountain waters of the Sierra Nevada as a prospector. He rediscovered his vitality in the picturesque wilderness and – to his surprise – started finding a lot of gold.

“I liked it from the start,” said Shaver, 50. “I was getting gold the very first day.”

As California’s prolonged drought dries up irrigation supplies for agriculture and forces cutbacks in urban water deliveries, it also creates opportunities for prospectors and miners panning, sluicing, chiseling and diving for gold.

Across the Mother Lode, gold seekers are wading into formerly deep waterways to harvest flecks from the pea gravel and sediment in long inaccessible crevices. Diminishing flows also have been leaving gold residues, like gilded bathtub rings, amid the cobbled banks of many rivers and streams.

In recent years, [drought-inspired gold seeking](#) has spiked sales of sluice boxes, gold pans and metal detectors at Gold County mining stores from Columbia in Tuolumne County to Auburn in Placer County. While the drought, now in its fourth year, has rendered many creeks too dry for panning, new adventures are opening elsewhere as receding waters reveal more treasures.

Shaver wasn’t one of those looking to exploit the drought for finding gold. In fact, when his son-in-law first coaxed him out to go panning, he considered his weakened heart and thought, “I’m not a person willing to take chances.”

That was then.

Once he found gold that first outing, it has been a life-lifting quest.

He now prospects for gold 200 to 250 days a year. He lays his sluice box in the low currents of the Bear River near Colfax. He pans the gravel “pay dirt” on the river’s edge for gold and uses hand tools to punch holes in once inaccessible bedrock beneath the river in search of more.

“Three years ago, you started to see the advantages of a drought,” said Shaver, who exults over the modest earnings he gets in gold and the priceless benefits he reaps in health. “We started pulling out a minimum of three grams a week. We just collected as much as we could.”

\$1,200 Price for an ounce of gold, down from nearly \$1900 an ounce in 2011

These days, Albert Fausel, a lifelong gold seeker who owns the historic Placerville Hardware store, is having some of the best experiences of his life.

Fausel, 37, sets out to the upper Cosumnes River near Mount Aukum in southern El Dorado County. Once a great spot for swimming and fishing, the river’s weakened flows are revealing sediments with “a lot of gold in ’em.” Because of the drought, he says, “it’s a sad season for fishing – so why not go out and get some gold?”

On newly exposed river edges, he can see mercury balls, vestiges of the dangerous toxin used in 1880s hydraulic

mining that bound to gold and helped capture it in sluice boxes. In those areas, he uses a snuffer bottle, which “sucks up the gold without touching the mercury.” Nearby, he snorkels in once-deep water “looking for material that hasn’t been touched in a while If you look close you can see some flakes of gold.”

Gold prices may have dropped below \$1,200 recently from a high of nearly \$1,900 an ounce in 2011. But two weeks ago, Fausel felt nothing but delight as he worked the river.

He found “a good pair of ‘studded earrings’ – nice little (gold) pickers you could put on your wife’s earrings – and some super fine gold and a mercury gold with probably another picker in there.”

At Placerville Hardware, founded in 1852, four years after James Marshall discovered gold in the American River in nearby Coloma, modern prospectors now drop in to show off flecks they’re harvesting from other high-country creeks. Some bring in old coins and other historic relics found in drying stream beds.

“I see some beautiful gold coming into the store,” Fausel said. “That gets my tourists all excited. You come into the store and somebody’s got gold in their pocket. It’s amazing.”

Two years ago, sales at Pioneer Mining Supplies in downtown Auburn shot up by 25 percent as word spread of the golden lining in the state’s harsh drought. The store’s grizzled owner, veteran miner Frank Sullivan, saw an upsurge in business from both longtime gold seekers and “a lot of vacation people – we call them ‘newbies’ – who were asking how to do it.”

While the newbies bought basic gold panning kits and guide books, more experienced prospectors bought power sluices and bulb sniffers, turkey-baster-like devices that prospectors use to suck up and chamber gold from the river bottoms.

“When we have this low water, it is allowing you to get out into the middle of the water, when before you feared for your life there and wouldn’t do that,” Sullivan said.

Sullivan’s daughter, Heather Willis, the store manager, helped teach Gary Shaver how to seek out likely places for gold. They were friends by the time he set out on his own, mastering the craft from panning to sluicing to bulb sniffing, often returning to the store to buy new supplies.

I see some beautiful gold coming into the store. That gets my tourists all excited. You come into the store and somebody’s has got gold in their pocket. It’s amazing.

Albert Fausel, gold seeker and owner of Placerville Hardware

Still, Willis didn’t tell him when she discovered an untapped spot on the upper Bear River. The river is less affected by the drought than other waterways because of regulated flows from Rollins Lake beneath Grass Valley. But Willis found a river bend with depths “a foot or two lower than normal.”

In a few hours of digging and panning, she got nine grams of gold, worth about \$340. “That’s a very good day,” she said.

Elsewhere, Willis works the edges of the North Fork of the American River and ventures into feeder streams, some of which are “down to a trickle” for panning, “with finger gold (just large enough to pick up with finger tips) right on the sides.”

Auburn resident Ken Blancett, a retired federal law enforcement officer and self-described “casual gold miner/rock hound” explores area creeks for his growing collection of quartz, agate, crystals and other decorative stones. He also looks for long-hidden gold pockets being revealed by the drought, dreaming big as he sets up his miniature highbanker, a water circulating sluice.

“If there’s gold there – boom – I know it hasn’t been worked before, not since 1850,” he said.

Rob Goreham, a commercial miner who runs 49er Mining Supplies and the Columbia Inn Motel in Tuolumne County, said many streams in the region have gone so dry that gold panning or sluicing is impossible. Miners have to turn to alternative, more difficult, methods to get the gold.

Yet at the same time, Goreham explores other backcountry creeks that have fallen to depths ripe for finding gold. He keeps those locations his closely guarded secret.

“If you can’t adapt, you’re not going to make it,” Goreham said. “Areas that folks were commonly working don’t have water now. People are going to have to find another way to mine, whether it’s using a dry washer (a common mining tool for gold extraction in desert conditions) or metal detectors. But there are other areas that weren’t available before because they were too full of water.

“So shift gears. There are some wonderful areas coming available.”

As the drought continues, some miners say diminished waterways are getting picked clean of gold. They count on another extreme weather event – namely, reports of a coming El Niño storm system – to provide help for the hunt. The system would replenish gold supplies by washing down mountainsides, dumping new glistening deposits into creeks and streams and invigorating the search for gold anew.

Shaver, whose quest for gold is as much about his quest for life, said he is finding decidedly less gold than when he started three years ago. Yet the exercise he gets mining has helped him drop 50 pounds to a sturdy frame of 150 pounds. He now leads prospecting tours on the Bear River and teaches gold panning and sluicing.

He has found his life’s journey but is now ready for a turn in the path – from drought conditions to heavy rains, with full creeks and rivers and new gold to find along the shores.

“I think we’re at the end of the drought now and El Niño is brewing up,” Shaver said. “It is going to be a major resupply.”

For Shaver, that would be one more rebirth.

Peter Hecht: [916-326-5539](tel:916-326-5539), [@phecht_sacbee](https://www.instagram.com/phecht_sacbee)