

GOLD FEVER STILL ALIVE WITH LOCAL PROSPECTING GROUPS

Panning is popular again in California, if just for fun's sake

By [Gary Warth \(/staff/gary-warth/\)](#) 12:01 a.m. April 6, 2014

The California Gold Rush never really ended for hundreds of local enthusiasts still looking for treasure in the southland and — with gold prices high and water levels low — more people are discovering the socially enriching hobby.

“It’s a second gold rush, but it’s not the gold rush of 1849,” said Kevin Hoagland, executive director of development at the Gold Prospectors Association of America.

Interest in small-scale mining is growing as the price of the precious metal stays high and a prolonged drought in California has made it easier to pan in rivers, Hoagland said.

The drought has made rivers recede throughout the state, exposing areas that may hold gold and leaving sections that once were too deep to walk through shallow enough to pan, he said.

In Southern California, miners working claims at Lytle Creek and the San Gabriel River in San Bernardino County have reported that it’s easier to find gold at recent outings.

But Hoagland said accounts about easy fortunes have been overblown — the real treasure is enjoying the outdoors together.

“At Lytle Creek, I know a family that found about \$25 or \$30 in gold, but they were together the whole weekend and they enjoyed that more than the gold,” Hoagland said.

That’s not to say heftier finds aren’t happening. A more experienced miner who worked the east fork of the nearby San Gabriel River, around the same time, came away with about \$460.

San Diego County has two organizations devoted to the lore and practice of gold-mining. Both groups said the drought hasn’t affected them because their claims are on land without creeks or other water sources.

“The 49ers got the big stuff out, the fingernail-size, quarter-inch nuggets,” said Chester Nowicki, president of the Escondido-based Treasure Seekers of San Diego, which hosts monthly excursions to sift out what the 19th century miners left behind: gold that’s more the flake than the nugget variety.

At about \$1,300 an ounce, those flakes can eventually add up. Nobody is getting rich, but most amateur miners say the hobby is more about the hunt, the craft and the camaraderie.

R.J. Wingo, president of the Lemon Grove-based Southwestern Prospectors and Miners Association, said the miners are keeping alive a tradition that dates to the 1872 mining laws that allow groups to make claims on public lands.

Southwestern, one of the county's oldest nonprofit organizations, was founded in 1934 and has 250 members. Treasure Seekers of San Diego County has about 300 members and was founded in 2003 as an offshoot of the now-dormant club formed in Vista in the late 1990s.

The groups share some common members but have a few differences. The Escondido organization has no membership fees, is affiliated with the Gold Prospectors Association of America, has 13 claims and focuses on gold, gem, mineral and metal-detector mining.

Southwestern collects annual fees, focuses on gold mining and has 28 claims.

About 10 members of the Southwestern association spent last weekend at the California Potholes, a group of five claims off Interstate 8 just west of the Arizona border.

With news that some miners had taken an ounce of gold from one of the Pothole mines last month, the hobbyists were particularly eager to try their own luck at the site.

Wingo said a small-scale miner who goes out at least once a month for a weekend can expect to take home at least a half-ounce of gold in a year (or about \$650 worth, at today's prices.) Lee Darling, a 30-year mining veteran who organizes outings for the association, said he knows one miner who has found 7.5 ounces in five years.

Claims are not picked by chance, Darling explained. The 160-acre site of last weekend's excursion has a history of mining dating to the 1600s, and a 100-year-old wooden chute still hangs from a cliff, a remnant of a closed commercial operation.

"Even though this area was mined for hundreds of year, there's still gold that was missed by the original miners," he said. "One of our members said there was a time they had a conveyor belt coming through here, and they had people just picking up nuggets. That's all they wanted."

Wingo said members of the association always try to leave an area close to how they found it.

"As a club, if we dig a hole, at the end of the weekend before we go home, we fill that in," he said. "And anything we take out there, we take it back home."

Unlike commercial miners, small-scale miners cannot dig with any machinery, although they can use mechanical devices for sifting.

Using picks and shovels, the miners fill about five buckets of dirt, then sift it with a classifier. What's left is put into a dry washer — variations include a leaf-blower type device, a spinning wired cylinder and a "puffer" that bounces the lighter dirt off — and finally the gold is discovered through pans or other devices that use water.

"You want to use two hands," Michele Sheppard instructed new miner Irene Wetsman as she watched her pan over a bucket. "Swirl it, like in the ocean. Then stop and shake."

Sheppard and her boyfriend Patrick Ashton having been mining since their first experience with panning during an organized outing while on vacation in the Bay Area a year and a half ago.

"Once you find a little bit of gold, you get bit with the gold bug," Sheppard said.

"You meet a lot of new people," Ashton added. "And finding the gold is always fun. You're not here to get rich. It's entertainment. "

Wetsman, who makes jewelry, said she had wanted to try mining for years.

“Just to find something Mother Nature has produced and pull it out of the ground is a thrill,” she said.

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