

North Fork of the Mokelumne River – Fantasy Falls

Vitals

Locale: Bear Valley, California.

What It's Like: 3 days of rowdy high Sierra gorges and granite.

Class: V (V+)

Scouting/Portaging: Easy to difficult and long.

Level: Visual at the put in.

Time: 3 days.

When To Go: Early summer in a normal snow year.

Info From: Early June 2008 and 2009.

Other Beta: JS Creekin: <http://www.kayakphoto.com/darinmcquoid/fantasyfalls.html>

Description

Fantasy Falls is a great name for a river - for this one it's fitting. Fantasy Falls is the headwaters section of the North Fork of the Mokelumne River, and it is one of the classic California Sierra multi-day river trips. It starts high up in the mountains at about 7000 feet where there will be snow at the put in. The water is icy on the first day as it descends to a large reservoir you'll find three days after you leave the cars behind. This is a challenging but rewarding trip with a wide variety of good whitewater. Though you will have to walk some things, avoiding a portage-fest means running a lot of class V, and there is no shortage of stout rapids there to test anyone willing to take them on.

The shuttle on Fantasy Falls is long. The put in is easy to find - along highway 4 heading up through Bear Valley and over Ebbets Pass you'll find a bridge over the river, which at that point is just a little creek that is well signed. There are several good parking spots by the bridge. The simplest option to reach the take out at Salt Springs Reservoir is to follow the directions linked above. Salt Springs Reservoir is at the end of Ellis Road off of highway 88 - the turn is easy to miss. Follow this well marked road for about 30 miles to reach the reservoir. In the end it's about a 2.5 hour one way trip from put in to take out. The clever and brave can attempt a much shorter shuttle on the river left side through a maze of old logging roads.

Fantasy Falls runs in the early part of the high Sierra river season. Generally speaking it should run after the Royal Gorge is done, and before Upper Cherry comes into play, depending on the weather and snowpack. People will go and check the flow when it's expected to start running, so try and find someone with this beta! The put in bridge has a spray painted gauge on the downstream right side, with the top mark meaning high water. The river is still a decent medium flow at 3 inches below the bottom line. If you don't want to rush, plan on boating for 3 days.

From the put in at the road bridge the river isn't much to write home about - the crystal clear water meanders downstream around a bend and out of sight. After starting out though it doesn't take long for the river to begin producing rapids - unfortunately the first few miles are relatively low volume manky boulder piles - it's combat boating for sure and you'll want to keep your eyes out for wood. You will most likely carry around a couple of short choked up sections but for the most part it's all good to go, if shallow, and there are even some fun boofs to be found amongst the boulders.

The junk eventually gives way to some nice meadow sections with great scenery. Tributaries begin joining the main river and the volume slowly and surely begins to grow, and soon you'll arrive at the first bedrock sections - once it arrives the majority of the whitewater is on granite for the rest of the trip. The difficulty of the rapids build slowly and it's usually later in the day by the time you will reach the first major gorge. Be careful to scout carefully when you reach new gorges on this run - some of them have seductive entrances that really need to be inspected from the bank beforehand. The first gorge is all runnable and everything can be dealt with at water level. It ends with a distinctive backender-slot-to-angled-ledge rapid. There is good camping at the end of this gorge.

After a brief open stretch with a couple of granite rapids the river rolls around a corner and drops into the second gorge - this is a big U-shaped affair that is ultra classic and that is certainly one of the stand-out gorges of the run. Below this gorge is the usual day 2 section which consists of a good mixture of big gorges, open rapids and even some flat meadows with awesome scenery. Expect tough kayaking, scouting and portaging - scout the gorges carefully before dropping in. Late on day 2 or early on day 3 there is a massive rapid/waterfall that is a mandatory portage. If you push hard you can get as far as Fantasy Falls proper on day 2.

The last day of boating starting at Fantasy Falls is all bedrock with some of the biggest rapids on the river. After a mile of good boogie, Fantasy Falls is an incredible 30-15 double drop set in an awe-inspiring mountain amphitheater. If you don't camp here take some time to soak in the surroundings. The last few miles have good rapids right into the lake, including the infamous Island Slide and the "California class III" slide dubbed Show Me Your Tits.

From the last big slide you'll all too soon reach Salt Springs Reservoir. The clean white granite closing rapids are a great way to end off such a classic class V 3 day trip. It's one of the best in California. You do still have a long paddle across the lake and the drive back to the put in, but you'll be so stoked about the river that those few hours will just fly by.

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