

# 11 Places to go Gold Panning in Oregon without a Mining Claim

These are a few locations on public land that have been set aside specifically for recreational use, including gold panning. These are areas that have been withdrawn from mineral entry, meaning that they are not claimed and are open to recreation gold panning. In some places you can only use “hands and pans”, while other areas allow use of larger mining equipment, shovels, etc., but certain permits may be required.

Stay below the water line and do not disturb vegetated areas. You are highly encouraged to call the appropriate land management agency to get the most current information regarding updated rules for the specific area that you intend to visit. Some areas are only open during certain times of the year, and rules and regulations may change at any time.

## 1. Quartzville Recreation Corridor

There is a section of Quartzville Creek that is located just above Green Peter Reservoir that is open to recreational gold prospecting. It starts at the Rocky Top Bridge and goes up to Galena Creek. Within this stretch of Quartzville Creek are the Dogwood and Yellow bottom Recreation sites.

This is a historical mining area that has produced quite a bit of gold, and it is also one of the better areas for people living in the Willamette Valley. It is a relatively short distance from Salem and Eugene.

The section of the creek within the recreation corridor is all public land that cannot be claimed, so it is open for anyone to do some prospecting. I have done a fair amount of prospecting at Quartzville Creek over the years and wrote a more detailed article here about the area. There's still some decent gold to find in this area.

## 2. Hellgate Recreation Area

This is a very large section of the Rogue River, one of southern Oregon's richest gold rivers. It covers a 27-mile stretch of the river between the entrance of the Applegate River and the entrance of Graves Creek and includes tributaries within ¼ mile of the Rogue River itself.

This part of the river has special regulations with strict regulations on the type of equipment you can use. It would be best to contact Medford BLM before doing any prospecting here just to make sure you are within the regulations. My understanding is that this entire section of the Rogue River is “hands & pans” only, meaning that even simple tools like picks and shovels are off-limits.

The access is on the north side of I-5 between Grants Pass and Medford, near the town of **Gold Hill**. Get off at the Gold Hill exit and travel up the Rogue-Umpqua Scenic Byway for about 2 miles. Look for the parking area for the Gold Nugget Wayside.

### 3. Gold Nugget Waysides

There are three places along Highway 234 near Gold Hill that provide more opportunities for gold panning on the Rogue River. They are called the Gold Nugget Waysides, and they are relatively small access points that do not allow mineral claims and are open to anyone who wants to try some gold panning.

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### 4. Applegate River Access

One of Oregon's richest gold-bearing rivers is the Applegate that flows through the far southwest corner of the state. There are two good access points on the river where the public can try a bit of gold panning. They are called the Tunnel Ridge Site and the Little Applegate Recreation Site.

Getting there from Medford is about a 45-minute drive. Head toward Jacksonville and then continue south on Highway 238. Drive through Ruch and turn east onto Little Applegate Road. Continue past Buncom and you'll continue to wind up the road until you finally get there.

The access points each cover about ¼ mile stretches of the Applegate in historically rich mining areas. There was a lot of gold mined from the Applegate River, but most of the smaller tributaries also contain gold.

Both sites are relatively close together but require a small hike to get there. There are many trails in this area that you can use to explore the Tunnel Ridge area including the Sterling Mine Ditch Trail, which was an old ditch that the early miners dug to provide water to a large hydraulic mining operation.

### 5. Sixes River

Approximately 10 miles east of Sixes, Oregon is an access point for gold prospectors. It is called the Sixes River BLM Recreational Mining Site and is roughly 1 mile of the Sixes River that anyone can do some prospecting on without needing a mining claim.

There is also a nice campground here that is open during the summer months so you can do some camping and gold prospecting at the same time in the beautiful part of Oregon.

## 6. Sharps Creek

There is good access about 15 miles southeast of Cottage Grove that allows recreational gold mining on Sharps Creek. This area has seasonal access with different types of mining gear allowed during different times of the year. Contact the Eugene BLM office for the most current information.

## 7. Brice Creek

Another access for gold miners is on Brice Creek near Cottage Grove within the very rich Bohemia Mining District. The access points are on National Forest Lands at Cedar Creek Campground and Lund Park Campground. The Cottage Grove Ranger District can give you the most updated information about gold prospecting at this location.

## 8. Cow Creek Recreation Area

Near Roseburg there is good access for gold prospectors at the Cow Creek Recreation Area. This is a tributary to the Umpqua River and has good gold. There is 1,300 feet of access along the creek that has been withdrawn from mineral entry, meaning that anyone can pan for gold in the gravels without needing to worry about mining claims.

Cow Creek is a tributary to one of Oregon's best gold prospecting rivers, the Umpqua River. This can be a very good spot to do some sniping or crevicing when the water levels drop in late summer.

## 9. Oregon Beaches

The beaches of Southern Oregon offer a very unique gold prospecting opportunity, and most areas are open to prospecting which gives you lots of different areas to explore. No one can file a mining claim on Oregon beaches, which means that most areas are open. There are a few restrictions and closed sections primarily for environmental reasons but in general there is abundant access to prospects here.

The richest areas to pan for gold on Oregon beaches are near the towns of Gold Beach and Coos Bay, but fine placer gold can be found all the way from Florence down to the California border.

One notable area is Whiskey Run Beach about 10 miles north of Bandon. Historically, this was noted as being one of the richest beaches on the entire coastline, and miners worked the sands for many years back during the height of the Oregon Gold Rush. Rumor has it that the beaches were exceedingly rich and profitable, but a large winter storm hit and washed all of the black sand away and took most of the gold with it. The area has never been the same since.

## 10. Molalla River

I was making some updates to this article and realized that I had missed a few great public locations for gold panning.

The Molalla River Recreation Area is another fantastic spot to go to do a little panning. It's a very popular area, but there are many miles of river access, so you'll have no problem getting a spot to yourself. The recreation area is approximately 1-hour south of Portland. The Molalla River is a bit of an anomaly, as it is situated far north of the famous gold mining regions of Southwestern Oregon.

Admittedly, most of the gold here is extremely fine textured. The only real known source of the gold is the Ogle Mine situated at the head of Ogle Creek. You definitely won't make your fortune gold panning on the Molalla River, but it's a beautiful place to enjoy the day.

## 11. Wallowa-Whitman Forest Campgrounds

There are 4 sites that are adjacent to gold-bearing creeks in Eastern Oregon where you can prospect for free.

- **Eagle Forks Campground:** This campground is situated at the confluence of Eagle Creek and Little Eagle Creek approximately 9 miles northwest of Richland.  
McCully Forks Campground: This campground sits on McCully Creek about 2 miles northwest of Sumpter on the road toward Granite. This is a historic mining area that was dredged extensively during the height of the gold rush.
- **Antlers Guard Station:** This site sits on the North Fork Burnt River just south of the Whitney ghost town.
- **Deer Creek Campground:** Deer Creek is a famous gold-bearing creek north of McEwen. Turn north on Deer Creek Road just east of Sumpter.

## Free Places to Pan for Gold in Oregon

Hopefully this article gives you some inspiration to go check out some new locations. In much of my writing, I encourage people to venture out and explore new areas off the beaten path.

However, I do realize that many of you don't have grand ambitions about being the next great gold prospector or filing a mining claim on a million-dollar gold mine. You just want to find an area where you can get outside, enjoy nature and maybe find a little bit of gold without the risk of getting into trouble, trespassing on private land, or accidentally venturing onto someone's mining claim.

These 11 locations will get you started. Each one has gold, and with a little bit of effort you can find it. So, get outside and explore the beautiful country that Oregon has to offer.