



The Hunt for Oregon Gold

An Oregon Prospector's Story

There is something about an Oregon creek that can get a prospector's imagination working.

Maybe it's the sound of water running over the rocks. Maybe it's an old trail disappearing into the timber. Or perhaps it's the thought that somewhere beneath those rocks and gravel, there may be a little piece of yellow that has been waiting there for hundreds—or even thousands—of years.

You never really know.

You step out of your truck, grab your pan and shovel, and head for the water.

Today might be the day.

Where the Gold Has Been

Long before today's prospectors started carrying plastic gold pans into the Oregon woods, men and women were doing much the same thing with iron pans, picks, shovels and sluice boxes.

Oregon's gold rush began in the 1850s. Prospectors moved into southwestern Oregon and later into the rich mining districts of northeastern Oregon. Towns such as Sumpter, Granite, Auburn and Canyon City grew around the search for gold.

Some miners became wealthy.

Many didn't.

But they all shared the same dream.

Find the yellow metal.

Gold was recovered from both hard-rock deposits and the streams that carried gold away from those deposits. Over time, water, weather and erosion broke down the rock and released gold into the surrounding gravels.

And because gold is heavy, the creek became nature's own gold concentrator.

Reading the Creek

An old prospector doesn't simply walk up to a creek and start digging.

First, he looks.

Where has the water been?

Where does it slow down?

Where does it speed up?

Where would a heavy piece of gold have lost enough energy to drop to the bottom?

Those questions can tell you more than a fancy piece of equipment ever will.

Look at the inside bends of the creek. Check behind large rocks and boulders. Examine cracks in exposed bedrock. Look for natural pockets where gravel has collected.

And don't forget the black sand.

Black sand is often made up of heavy minerals that have concentrated along with other heavy material. Finding black sand doesn't guarantee gold, but it can be a good reason to stop and test the area.

Then comes the important part.

Take a sample.

The First Pan

You find a promising spot.

The shovel goes into the gravel.

One scoop.

Then another.

You fill the pan and carry it to the water.

Now the real work begins.

Shake the pan. Wash away the lighter material. Keep the heavier material in the bottom.

At first, it looks like nothing but dirt and rocks.

Then the black sand begins to appear.

You wash a little more.

A little more.

You tilt the pan.

And suddenly—

There it is.

A tiny flash of yellow.

Maybe it's only a speck.

Maybe it's a little picker.

It doesn't matter.

For that moment, you forget about everything else.

You've found gold.

And you found it yourself.

That's What Keeps Us Coming Back

Gold prospecting isn't always about finding a lot of gold.

In fact, most days aren't going to produce a poke full of nuggets.

Some days you might spend hours moving gravel and see only a few tiny colors.

Other days you might hit a good pocket and suddenly find yourself wondering how long that pay streak continues.

That's the gamble—and the fun—of prospecting.

You never know what the next shovel full will bring.

One pan might show nothing.

The next might show color.

The third might make you start digging faster.

And before you know it, you've spent the entire afternoon working a little section of creek because **something told you to keep going.**

Following the Old-Timers

One of the best ways to learn is to pay attention to what the old miners left behind.

Old ditches, tailings, stacked rocks, tunnels, abandoned workings and historic mining areas can all tell a story.

But an old mining site doesn't necessarily mean the gold is gone.

The miners of yesterday didn't have the equipment or technology we have today. More importantly, they often weren't interested in the tiny gold that today's recreational prospector is perfectly happy to recover.

A modern prospector may look at an old pile of gravel and think:

"I wonder what's still in there?"

That's when the shovel comes out.

Gold Is Where You Find It

Every prospector eventually learns one important lesson:

Gold doesn't read maps.

A creek that looks promising may produce nothing.

A spot that doesn't look like much may surprise you.

A little crack in the bedrock can hold gold.

A pocket behind a boulder can hold gold.

A layer of old gravel buried beneath newer material can hold gold.

And sometimes, the best-looking place on the creek produces absolutely nothing.

That's why prospecting is a science, an art, and a little bit of luck.

You observe.

You test.

You learn.

Then you move on—or dig deeper.

The Oregon Adventure

One of the best things about prospecting in Oregon is that the hunt for gold takes you places you might never otherwise see.

Deep forest.

Mountain streams.

Old mining roads.

Rocky river bars.

Canyons where the walls rise above you and the only sounds are the water, the wind and the occasional voice of another prospector calling out:

"Hey! Come look at this!"

And that's when everybody stops what they're doing.

The shovel gets set down.

The pans come over.

Someone takes a closer look.

Maybe it's gold.

Maybe it's just a piece of shiny mica.

Either way, everyone gets a laugh—and then the hunt continues.

The Gold Is Still Out There

Oregon's great gold rushes may be part of history, but the gold didn't disappear when the old miners packed up their tools.

Gold is still being found.

Maybe not in the quantities that brought thousands of miners west in the nineteenth century, but enough to keep today's prospectors searching the creeks and gravel bars.

And perhaps that's the greatest attraction of all.

Every trip starts with a question:

"Will I find gold today?"

You might.

You might not.

But you'll never know until you put the first shovel full into the pan.

So grab your gear.

Find a creek.

Read the water.

Dig the gravel.

Wash the pan.

And keep your eyes open.

Because somewhere out there in the Oregon hills, beneath an ordinary-looking rock or hidden in an ordinary-looking pile of gravel, there may be a tiny piece of yellow waiting for someone to uncover it.

Maybe the old-timers missed it.