

Middle Fork of the Feather River, Bald Rock Canyon

Vitals

Locale: Near Oroville, California.

What It's Like: A classic northern Sierra day trip - a good taste of California.

Class: IV+ to V

Scouting/Portaging: Moderate to difficult.

Level: Online gauge: <http://www.dreamflows.com/graphs/day.054.php> Middle Feather at Milsap Bar

Time: Plan on a full day with a lot of scouting.

When To Go: Early summer.

Info From: June 2008 at 900 cfs - the relevance of this number changes yearly.

Other Beta: None.

Description

Bald Rock Canyon is one of *the* classic day trips in California - years ago its first descent represented one of the milestones in Sierra boating - while this section of river is not class V+ as reported by the California guide book and on American Whitewater, it is a solid class IV+/V river that can't be taken lightly - there are some big, powerful rapids there that are often ridden with sieves or undercuts, including one unrunnable section with a non-trivial portage. That being said, the whitewater and scenery are top quality and shouldn't be passed up if you're ready. This river is a good warm-up run for the longer multiday high Sierra river trips.

Bald Rock runs when most sections of the Feather are either dry or close to drying up. Unfortunately, while the MF Feather gauge is right at the start of the canyon, the reading changes such that the actual flow has to be related to a new gauge reading every spring. AW suggests a range of 500-1200 cfs, which is probably a good range to start from - the best bet would be to check the Boof message board before you go to get the latest on what the gauge reading means. In 2008, a reading of 900 cfs felt like a medium to medium-low flow.

The shuttle for Bald Rock Canyon is a significant undertaking. Milsap Bar, the start of Bald Rock Canyon, is far back into the hills away from Oroville, and the river ends in a reservoir some 13 or 14 miles away from the most convenient access to the lake. The best option is probably to have someone drop you at the start, and arrange a boat to come pick you up at the end of the river. There are some other options available as well that you can figure out with a little leg work. Be careful at Milsap Bar (it's a Forest Service campsite) as theft can be an issue.

From Milsap Bar the river starts out wide and rocky, but it doesn't take long for things to constrict down to some fun class IV rapids leading into the canyon proper. More white granite will appear, eventually giving way to a spectacular canyon full of both boulder rapids and bedrock. The first major challenge is Atom Bomb Falls, an unrunnable cascade that requires (in 2008) first portaging on the right followed by a sketchy ferry to finish the portage on the left. This is a nice campsite if done as a 2 day trip. The portage is the high water limiting factor.

Below Atom Bomb is where the Feather begins to flex its muscle. From here on in the river is a barrage of big, blind boulder pile rapids with not-obvious lines from your boat and tough scouting. These rapids continue right up to the lip of Curtain Falls, a beautiful 30 foot waterfall. The toughest rapids called Three Doors and Four Deaths are immediately after the falls, but good whitewater continues almost right to the lake. You are approaching the end when Feather Falls and Bald Rock Dome come into view.

The Middle Feather ends abruptly in Lake Oroville, and the great whitewater is over all too soon. When we were there, the lake was 70 or 80 feet below full, which made for an unsightly bathtub ring at the edges of the water, but did give us a few extra rapids to paddle. Hopefully there's a boat waiting for you - if not, try to beg your way onto a boat that might be out on the lake for a sail - if not, enjoy the massive flat water paddle back to where you parked your car!

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