

Malakoff Diggins State Historic Park



Our Mission

The mission of California State Parks is to provide for the health, inspiration and education of the people of California by helping to preserve the state's extraordinary biological diversity, protecting its most valued natural and cultural resources, and creating opportunities for high-quality outdoor recreation.



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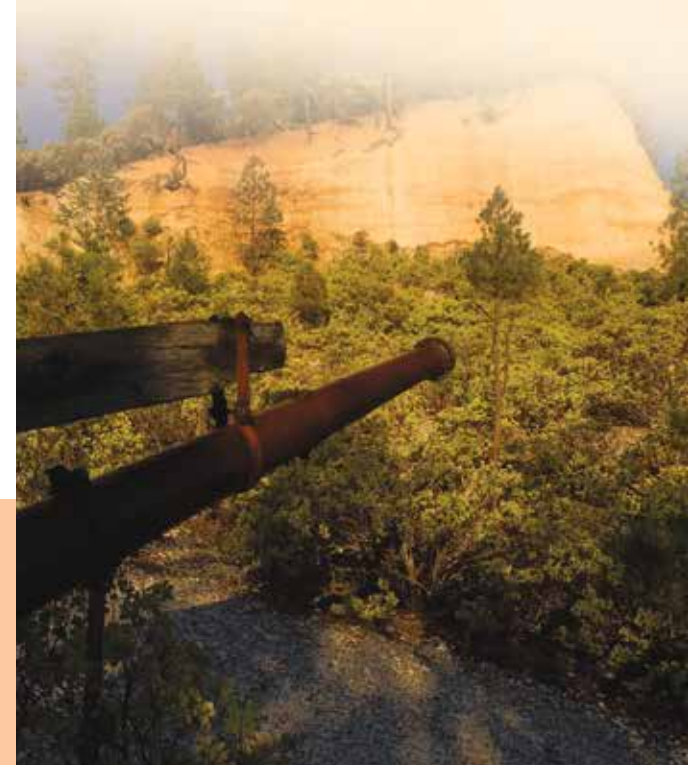
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Nevada City, CA 95959

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*At Malakoff Diggins,
the world's largest
hydraulic gold mine
devastated the
pristine landscape—
leading to the first
environmental law
enacted in the nation.*



Malakoff Diggins State Historic Park preserves and interprets the 1850s-1880s hydraulic mining era, when gold seekers combed the Sierra foothills and washed away entire mountains looking for the precious metal.

PARK HISTORY

Native People

The park lies within the territory of the Hill Nisenan. Nisenan territory once extended from the lower reaches of the Yuba, American, and Feather Rivers to the east bank of the Sacramento River and up to the 10,000-foot Sierra crest.

The Hill Nisenan lived in multi-family villages or in extended-family hamlets. Several hamlets might be grouped together under one leader in the largest village. Villages were located below 3,000 feet elevation, in small valleys and open canyons. The families stayed in these villages during the winter, but spread to smaller camps—often at higher elevations in rough terrain—from spring through fall to collect and hunt food.

The Nisenan's first contact with the Spanish came in 1808, when General Gabriel Moraga passed through the Nisenan territory. The great malaria epidemic of 1833 wiped out many of the Nisenan. The final blow to Nisenan culture came with the 1848 gold rush, when miners overran their territory, bringing new diseases and disrupting Nisenan harvest patterns.

The surviving Nisenan in the Nevada County region seek to have their federal recognition restored as they strive to preserve their ancestral heritage.



Gold miners of the area

Miners Find Gold

Gold panning in Sierra streambeds quickly exhausted the readily available gold. Miners sifted through stream deposits of sand and gravel—a process called placer mining—looking for gold.

Placer mining began here in 1852 after a rich gold deposit was found in Humbug Creek, near the South Yuba River. Each placer miner staked claim to a 30- by 40-foot section of ground. They would scoop and sieve gravel, dirt, and water from a running creek or river into flat-bottomed pans. They agitated these alluvial deposits, then poured off the water. The heavier gold, if present, would gleam as flakes or nuggets in the bottom of the pans.

A town called Humbug soon sprang up to house the miners. They began devising more efficient

methods to separate more gold from larger amounts of the deposits. These methods included long, slanted sluice boxes or “rockers.” Miners added liquid mercury (also called quicksilver), which created a gold-mercury amalgam that settled to the bottom of the devices while water, sand, and gravel ran off. Some mercury was inevitably lost from the sluice and flowed downstream with the sediments, but the miners were fairly efficient at using and re-using the valuable mercury to aid in the recovery and concentration of gold.

In 1852, a French-speaking Canadian miner named Anthony Chabot bypassed the need for ditches and flumes by hooking up a canvas hose and directing the water flow at the ore supply. When his partner, Edward Mattison, increased the water pressure by adding a nozzle to the hose, hydraulic mining was born. Discarded dirt and gravel ore, called debris or slickens, was discharged into the rivers.



High-pressure monitors wash gold from ancient river beds.

In 1858, the townspeople decided to change the name from Humbug to the more attractive North Bloomfield. The surrounding area became the Bloomfield Township, which also included Lake City, the village of Malakoff, Derbec, and nearby Relief Hill. Many Chinese immigrants labored in the gold mines and grew vegetables for the town's residents.

Some miners became discouraged at the small return in gold for the amount of effort they had expended; they left to try their luck at richer pickings in Nevada.

In 1866, French immigrant Julius Poquillion and others bought and consolidated many abandoned claims until they had amassed 1,535 acres. The local miners then convinced a group of San Francisco financiers to invest in large-scale hydraulic gold mining, forming the North Bloomfield Gravel Mining Company.

The group purchased the Bowman Ranch and Rudyard Reservoir, constructed dams, and built a huge flume and ditch system to carry water to wash ore at the claim. At capacity, the

resulting water power could work 100,000 tons of gravel per day at the diggings. The North Bloomfield Gravel Mining Company continued to expand and invest in more water supplies and hydraulic mining facilities; they built over 100 miles of canals and ditches that carried water to claim sites for hydroblasting the rock and soil.

The Company began work on a 7,847-foot drainage tunnel through the bedrock from



North Bloomfield today

the Diggins pit to Humbug Creek in 1872. Eight vertical shafts were sunk at 1,000-foot intervals along the tunnel angled toward the creek, which led to the South Yuba River. Two crews would enter each shaft and dig in opposite directions along the tunnel line. This method of tunneling shaved a year from usual tunnel methods,

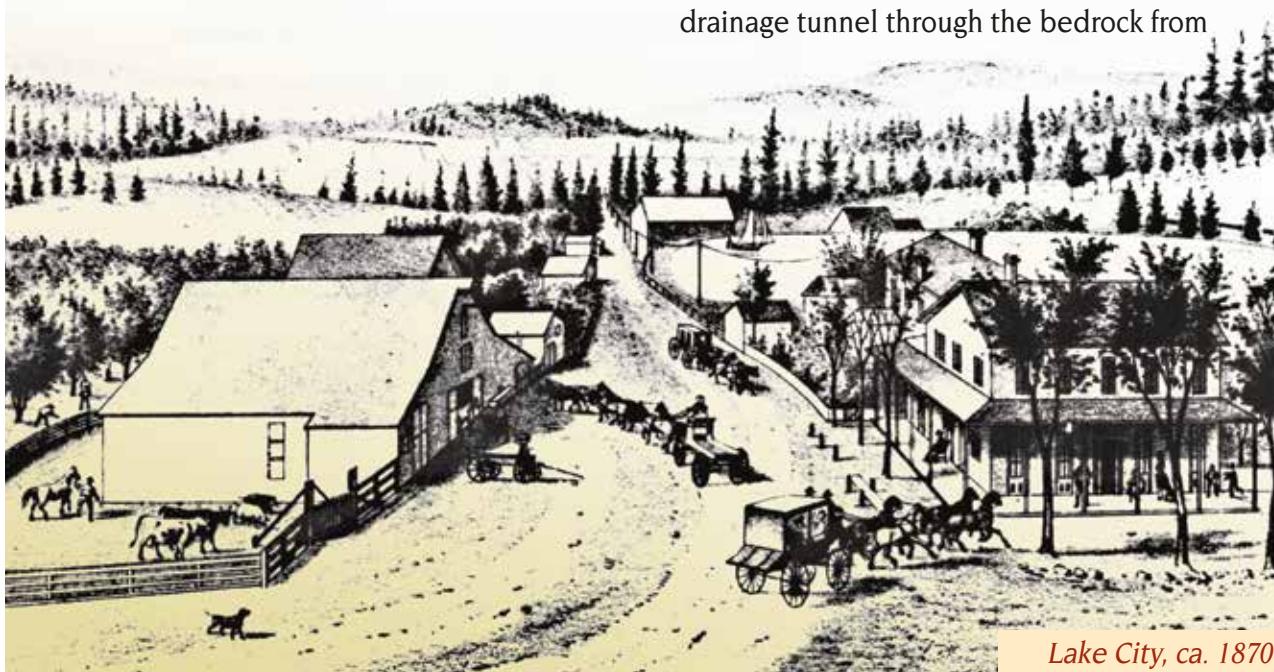
enabling miners to dig into the pit's rich pay dirt and process the material through the tunnel before ejecting debris into the river. Fifteen crews dug simultaneously. On November 15, 1874, the tunnel was completed at a cost of \$498,800.

In 1876, the company began using seven full-scale Craig monitors—powerful water cannons—to wash the gravel from the mountainside and capture any gold it held. This effective method brought new prosperity and workers to North Bloomfield—as mounds of spent debris choked downstream waters.

The company's records show expenditures of \$3 million for all capital improvements. They had collected only \$3 million in gold before a judge issued an injunction to cease using water cannons and river dumping.

The Sawyer Decision

During the 1850s, concerns emerged about the debris from hydraulic mines. Toward the end of the 1860s, as large-scale hydraulic operations got underway, the debris problem became severe. Farms and towns in the



Lake City, ca. 1870

Central Valley were flooded and destroyed. Silt traveled all the way to San Francisco Bay, impairing marine navigation of the Sacramento River and parts of the bay. River channels were closed to steamboat traffic. Because mining had contributed to valley towns' prosperity, many towns depended on the mines for sustenance. The valley inhabitants simply built their levees higher to hold off floods.

In 1875 the town of Marysville flooded. Because the town was surrounded by high levees, the floodwaters swept in and filled the area as if it were a giant bowl. Many residents lost their property or their lives.

Finally, a petition was submitted to the State Legislature requesting that laws regulating mining operations be passed. Years of skirmishes followed, both in and out of courts. In addition to the lawsuits, injunctions, and appeals, some destruction of



Water cannon display on Humbug Day

property also took place. When the Ruyard Dam on the Yuba River failed in 1883, miners suspected the dam had been dynamited.

On January 7, 1884, after months of testimony and argument, Judge Lorenzo Sawyer handed down his decision in the case of Woodruff (a Marysville property owner) vs. the North Bloomfield Gravel Mining Company. In a 225-page document that described the damage caused by mining debris, Sawyer issued a permanent injunction against dumping tailings into the Yuba River. Attempts were made to keep hydraulic mines profitable, such as impounding the debris, but within a couple of decades, California's environmentally devastating hydraulic-mining era ended.

As a result of the Sawyer decision, North Bloomfield's population had shrunk to half by 1900. Several buildings stood empty and decaying. When the first World War began in 1914, some buildings were demolished for their lumber. Prohibition later closed the town's saloons. The population grew during the Depression era, when former residents returned to North Bloomfield's empty buildings seeking a free place to live.

When World War II started in 1941, people left to find work in other places, and more buildings were razed. By 1950, North Bloomfield's permanent residents numbered fewer than twenty.

The legacy of hydraulic gold mining can still be seen in the gouged hillsides and choked streambeds around Malakoff Diggins. Scientists are investigating the enduring effects of introduced mercury on the ecosystem—evaluating soils, native fauna,

and water quality to understand the extent of biological uptake in areas affected by historical gold mining.

Becoming a State Park

In the 1960s, Nevada County locals initiated a campaign to preserve the history of North Bloomfield and hydraulic mining. The idea caught on, and Malakoff Diggins State Historic Park was created in 1965. Park visitors can see the way miners lived near the remnants of the main Malakoff mine and five other claim sites that were blasted with water to get at the gold thought to lie embedded beneath.

NATURAL HISTORY

Geology and Vegetation

Sedimentary and volcanic rocks are evident in the cliff walls of the Diggins, with alternating layers of conglomerates, white fine-grained clays, and iron-stained siltstones. Landslides and erosion have changed the profile of the pit since the days of hydraulic mining. The pit is about 6,800 feet long from southwest to northeast, and it ranges from 1,000 to 3,800 feet wide from north to south.

More than 100 feet of eroded deposits have accumulated on the pit floor, transforming its raw, u-shaped surface into a flat plane. Native vegetation has become established in the once-barren areas.

About 3,200 forested acres in the park surround the pit, at 2,500 to 4,000 feet elevation. The second-growth ponderosa pine forest also has incense cedar, black oak, white and Douglas-fir, and sugar pine growing on its upper slopes.

Whiteleaf manzanita is the park's most profuse woody shrub. Hillsides are covered with ceanothus, including buckbrush and deerbrush. Spectacular wildflowers bloom in the spring.

Wildlife

Nocturnal animals such as black bears, mountain lions, coyotes, and bobcats roam in the dark. Black-tailed deer may be seen during the day.

The park's bird species include the dark-eyed junco, mountain chickadee, California quail, Steller's jay, black-throated gray warbler, and mourning dove.

Climate

From October through April, the western slope of the Sierra receives between 40 and 60 annual inches of rainfall. Snow is common at higher elevations. Spring, summer, and fall temperatures range from the high 50s to the mid-80s.

RECREATION

Camping—Three miner's cabins in North Bloomfield may be reserved. The 30 family campsites at Chute Hill each have tables, food lockers, and fire grates. The group campsite is reservable for 9 to 40 people with no more than 10 vehicles. Reservations are recommended for weekends or summer weekdays. For camping reservations, call (800) 444-7275 or visit www.parks.ca.gov.

Swimming—Blair Lake has a small swimming section near the picnic area. No lifeguard service is available, so please use caution and swim at your own risk.

Fishing—Rainbow and brown trout may be caught in South Yuba River. Blair Lake reservoir holds black bass, bluegill, and rainbows. All anglers 16 and over must possess a valid California fishing license.

Hiking—The park has more than 20 miles of scenic foothill trails with degrees of difficulty varying from easy to strenuous. The renowned South Yuba Trail connects to this trail network.

Programs and events—Gold panning near China Garden and guided tours of historic town buildings are offered during museum hours. Humbug Day takes place each June, and an Ice Cream Social celebrates September. Environmental Living Programs are available to school groups. Call the park museum at (530) 265-2740 or visit www.malakoffdiggingsstatepark.org for a current schedule of events.



The Diggings at Malakoff hydraulic mining pit

NEARBY STATE PARKS

- South Yuba River SP
(Bridgeport crossing)
17660 Pleasant Valley Road
Penn Valley 95946
(530) 432-2546
- Empire Mine State Historic Park
10791 East Empire Street
Grass Valley 95945
(530) 273-8522

ACCESSIBLE FEATURES

The restrooms are accessible. For accessibility updates, visit <http://access.parks.ca.gov>.

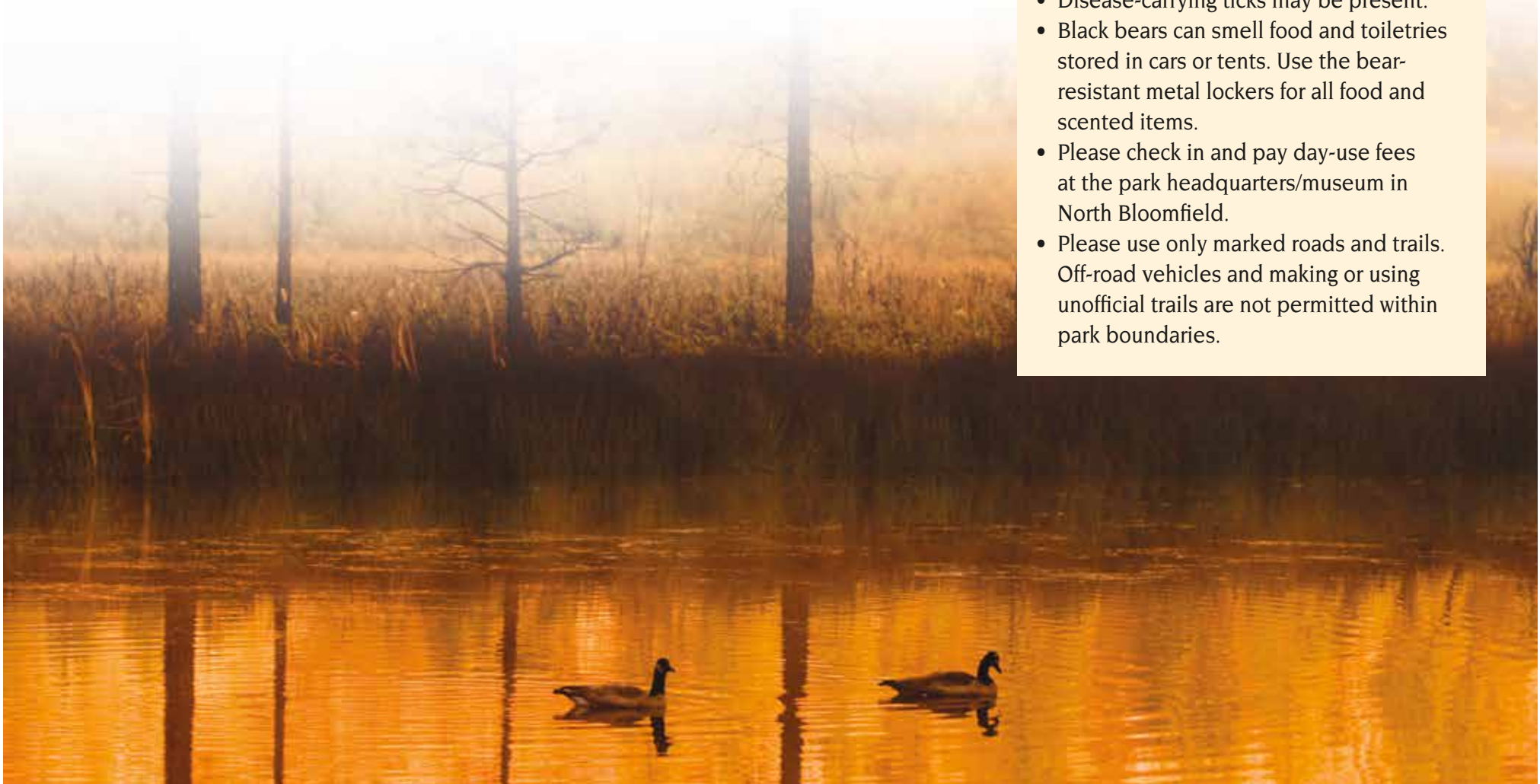
This park receives support in part from a nonprofit association. For more information, contact Friends of North Bloomfield & Malakoff Diggins (affiliated with South Yuba River Park Association) • (530) 265-2740
www.malakoffdigginsstatepark.org

PLEASE REMEMBER

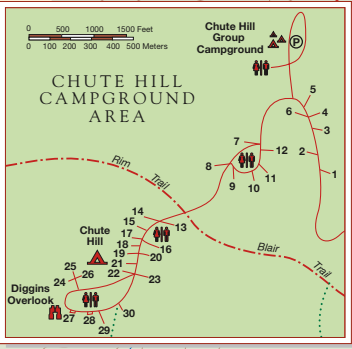
- Dogs must be on a leash no more than six feet long and must be under control at all times. They must be confined to a tent or vehicle at night.
- All natural and cultural park features are protected by law and may not be disturbed or removed.
- Step with caution. Watch for rattlesnakes and poison oak in many parts of the park.
- Disease-carrying ticks may be present.
- Black bears can smell food and toiletries stored in cars or tents. Use the bear-resistant metal lockers for all food and scented items.
- Please check in and pay day-use fees at the park headquarters/museum in North Bloomfield.
- Please use only marked roads and trails. Off-road vehicles and making or using unofficial trails are not permitted within park boundaries.



Poison oak



Malakoff Diggins State Historic Park



- Legend**
- Major Road
 - Paved Road
 - Unpaved Road
 - Trail: Hike
 - Trail: Hike & Bike
 - Intermittent Stream
 - Accessible Feature
 - Cabins
 - Campground
 - Campground: Group
 - 1-30 Campsites
 - Dogs On Leash
 - Exhibit
 - Fishing
 - Locked Gate
 - Park Headquarters
 - Parking
 - Picnic Area
 - Restrooms
 - Swimming
 - Telephone
 - Viewpoint
 - Waterfall

