



CHILLS & THRILLS

WINTER PROSPECTING IN THE HIGH ROCKIES

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My federal mining claim in the Colorado mountains sits along a river at just above 8,200 feet elevation. Does that stop me from prospecting year-round? Heck NO! The river continues to flow all year, despite temperatures that routinely drop below zero at night during mid-winter, so I keep digging. Of course, prospecting under these conditions means transcending one challenge after another, but the gold and the adventure are both worth it. This is especially true because parts of the river are only safely accessible when water levels drop to their winter lows.

Our most important strategy is to pick a sunny day. Happily, we have lots of those in Colorado, even in mid-winter! Second, we don't plan to arrive at the claim before about 11 a.m. since that gives the day a chance to warm up. Ideally the forecast will indicate predicted highs in the 40s rather than something colder. Third, we dress for the conditions: lots of neoprene, wool, and fleece. Layers are important because digging in the sun can get hot even when the water is below freezing — sometimes we end up peeled down to just a T-shirt!

My claim is just off a state highway so basic access is easy. However, the state plow operators tend to create a snow wall along the shoulder of the road, so parking does get tricky in win-

ter. During summer we can pull right onto the claim to park in the narrow field between the road and the slope down to the river. In winter, even if there is no "snow wall," the field ends up with several feet of snow in it because of the way the night wind deposits snow there — not a smart place to park, not even with my 4WD F-150.

So, we start the prospecting day with a trek through several feet of snow to the slope down to the river. I did mention the slope, right? It's about a 20-foot steep drop, down through bushes, to the river. In the summer I have a nice trail with rocks in it that make a sort of stairway down the hill. In winter those rocks are invisible and useless too. But, there's good news — in chest waders, 2 to 3 feet of snow is easy to get through and all that snow means the trip down the hill is easier than you'd think as we post-hole down through the dense snow. The need for caution while post-holing does mean we limit our equipment to shovels and light-weight sluices.

Once we are down at the river, the low water makes it easy to find a spot to lay out our gear on the temporarily wide bank of the river. The abundant sunshine in Colorado generally means there is a large, dry cobble beach right at the base of the access



trail. On arriving at the cobble beach, my prospecting buddy and I survey the state of the river. (Yes, I always bring a prospecting buddy; I think that's an especially important safety strategy in winter.) We look over the low water conditions, the ice layers and the boulder-sized rocks that are in a foot or so of moderate water instead of the multiple feet of dangerously fast-moving water we see in summer. At this point we are both getting excited about the fat flakes we are going to see in our pans! We agree on a big boulder that looks safe to dig below and then select a spot nearby to set up our sluices. The dig site and the sluicing site need to be in full sunshine (we avoid the shade from the clumps of tall pine trees along the riverbank) to help us stay warm despite the ice-cold river conditions. We do find that if the mid-day temps are below about 20 degrees, even the sunshine isn't enough to keep water from freezing in our pans and our fingers from freezing in our neoprene gloves!

Generally, the first foot or so of the riverbed is essentially overburden on my claim, but this is different when we can use the winter conditions to get to those big boulders in mid-river. Last winter, on one outing, my very first sample pan of surface material behind an untouched boulder had a big, fat 20-mesh flake in it! I can tell you, I startled my buddy with a few hoots

and hollers when that showed up so quickly! We both got excited, and I started filling a bucket while he set up the sluice. I quickly filled my bucket, and we swapped roles with him filling a bucket while I ran mine through the sluice.

That day we were running my old Angus MacKirk Expedition sluice due to the low water conditions and just took turns running the same sluice. If you have used a plastic molded drop-riffle sluice like an AM or Le Trap, you know it isn't wise to walk away from it when there is gold in the riffles. Any rise in river flows can rob you of your gold. On the other hand, this sort of sluice is incredibly quick to clean out and get back into operation. With all of this in mind, it is easy to understand why we cleaned out the sluice after every bucket rather than just doing a split of the cons at the end.

So, we got into a rhythm, dig a bucket, run a bucket, dump the cons into their container and repeat. The time it took to run a bucket was about the same as it took to dig one, so this worked out well for both of us as we swapped back and forth between digging and sluicing.

Now, despite that fat flake in the first sample, we both knew the best gold would be a couple feet down in the virgin paydirt left behind by the ancient glacial deposits that had washed into the river at the end of the last

ice age. Sharing one dig hole meant we could get deeper faster, and we soon got into that rich layer. It is easy to identify by the gray sticky material mixed with the gravel and cobbles in the glacial layer. Seeing that grayish material coming up on our shovels sure helped keep us warm as we eagerly dug!

Of course, there is a price to pay for digging deeper in the riverbed when the flowing water is below freezing temperatures. We found ourselves standing deeper and deeper in that frigid water. At some point the chill of the water starts to get past all the wool, fleece, and neoprene. That made taking a turn in the full sun, feeding the sluice look pretty good. Anyway, we swapped back and forth, each running about four or five buckets until the sun dropped far enough in the west to mean a large clump of lodgepole pines was casting dense shadow on our hole even though we were in the middle of the river.

At the same time, a cold wind started blowing upstream along the valley. All of a sudden, digging became unbearably chilly and started to feel risky — after all, hypothermia is a real risk in the high Rockies. We had only been digging about three hours, which seemed too short, but it was time for one last clean-out and a hasty exit. We tossed the last of our cons into their containers and did the tired trek back up the hill. By using the same post-hole footprints we had created on the way down the hill, we were able to huff and puff our way through the deep snow to our truck. A short drive to my place

led to warming drinks and big smiles as we swirled our cons for each other one more time, admiring the collection of larger flakes in each pan along with the usual flour gold and such. The winter days are short, and the warmest part of the day is only a few hours long, so our dig day was short, but we still had a great time together and found some amazing gold. It's fair to say I found as much gold on that short winter day as I usually do on the claim on a long summer day and the adventure certainly was more memorable. I sure am glad I have prospecting buddies crazy enough to go digging in January and February with me in the high Rockies! Until next time, folks!

PS: My description of the prospecting conditions on my claim also applies to the GPAA's Arkansas River Group claims. So, if you want to try high-country winter gold prospecting, get some neoprene gloves, a buddy (safety first!), and head to the Arkansas River this winter!

The author, Kevin Singel, has a degree in manufacturing engineering (AES) from Michigan State University, has worked at a couple of mining companies and is, more recently, the author of the "Finding Gold in Colorado" guidebooks available on Amazon.

