

# Northern California Travels

by Gary Sprung



A. Chabot Park

GNURPS

The topographic map on sale at the visitor's center had dotted lines all over the place.

"So, all these trails on the map, they're open for bicycles?" I asked the ranger.

"Well, uh, not really. You'd have to lift your bike over branches and such."

"Oh! well I like that. What I mean is, is there any rule prohibiting bicycles?"

"Not that I know of," she replied.

That 50 cent map was the easiest purchase I've ever made. It was an incredible ticket to adventure.

Thus began our mountain biking exploration of the 51,000-acre Humboldt Redwoods State Park in northern California. Our first discovery was a perfectly groomed trail system. Branches in the way? Heck, there weren't even rocks. Fallen leaves and needles padded the paths and covered the mud and crunched sweetly under our knobby tires. Evidence of our passage was slight.

The trails even have log handrails on huge redwood log bridges over minor streams. That may sound too developed and too easy for hikers but for bicyclists, those bridges present an interesting challenge. Ever tried to ride between handrails over a two-foot wide log without

a foot stomp or waiver of the handlebars?

Perfect trails do not equal an absence of challenge. With over 3000 vertical feet between the South Fork of the Eel River and the top of Grasshopper Peak, our muscles found plenty to grunt over. Steep, abrupt switchbacks interrupt long, smooth flats, necessitating some very tricky maneuvering.

Those three hundred and fifty-foot high coastal redwoods are temples of both earthy and ethereal delight. The trees thrive on fog and create a microclimate of cool, high humidity. The sun's rays filtering down through the canopy of soft green glisten with what seems to be drizzle, yet the precipitation cannot be felt on your skin.

Most of the miles of single-track trails in the park follow the rivers, staying just above the flood level where stand the biggest redwoods. The cycling is just strenuous enough to stimulate, the grades just moderate enough to titillate.

The uplands produce smaller redwoods but add Douglas-fir, California laurel, madrone, and several species of oak to the forest mix. Travels to the higher country are best accomplished via a network of fire roads in the upper Bull

Creek area, a watershed encompassed by the park boundaries. These roads give the rare treat of double-tracks closed to motor vehicles but open to bikes and provide a tremendous variety of backcountry loops. The road up to Grasshopper Peak connects into two single-tracks for whizzing descents back to the river.

One good half-day loop starts with a four-mile climb towards Grasshopper's summit then on to the first single-track. That trail in turn traverses the mountain over to the Johnson Trail Camp, a group of log cabins built by "Tie Hacks" making railroad ties between the 1930s and the 50s. These cabins are now available to campers. They're clean, comfy, and lovely.

The trail down from the cabins, narrow and slightly overgrown with brush, doesn't quite meet the meticulous standards of the riverside routes but there's still none of those obstacles the ranger warned of. A left turn at the bottom yields a final two miles of glorious temple-tripping to close the loop.

The climb to the top of the Grasshopper Peak is twice as long and twice as high. But besides the view from the summit fire lookout, it presents an

Eight-mile single track descent down a different side of the mountain. An excellent loop over this route starts with a long ride up the Bull Creek flats then a climb to an overnight rest at the Masshopper Trail Camp near the top. The second day starts with the eight-mile descent, then a long flat along the Eel River. Gonzo riders could no doubt complete the loop in a day. Since both ends of the trail network are at the paved highways, a car shuttle is another option. Car camping in the park is luxurious. Sites come complete with food locker, barbecue, table, water, and hot showers. You get all that for only \$6! Another camping option is the "hike and bike" camps for the primitive types only.

Just south of the park is the Knights restaurant in the hamlet of Myers Flat. They serve a good array of your regular American fare, cooked superbly with good portions for veggies and several brands of wine made just a hundred miles south in Napa/Sonoma country. Reasonable prices, too.

The best season for visiting Humboldt Redwoods State Park has to be autumn, just after Labor Day. The crowds and mosquitoes have largely disappeared by then, the trails are dry, and temperatures aren't too hot. The worst time is winter-early season, unless you hit it during a dry period. If you do, then winter can be the best of all times. Absolutely no crowds, wonderful temperatures, and perfect riding. Spring can be muddy but is miraculously joyful with abundant wildflowers.

North of Humboldt Park are several more redwood preserves, but few offer the extensive backcountry of Humboldt. Just west, on the coast, is the King Range National Conservation Area managed by the U.S. Bureau of Land Management. This spectacular coastal wilderness has been largely denuded of its sacred 2000-year-old redwoods but it does have few people and no riding on roads and trails.

Too much of northern California is owned by the big timber companies. These lands are laced everywhere with existing roads suitable for bikes and you can often enter if you get permission from a local company office. Trespassers beware. A serious hazard to watch out for in this region, whether you're on public or private land, are paranoid pot-growers who aggressively covet their privacy, anonymity, and crop. This is not a threat to be lightly treated.

The recreation potential of the redwood region has barely been tapped so far. Most of the recreation economy revolves around roadside attractions, leaving the backcountry largely unused. Would mountain bikers and their kindred non-motorized outdoorsman start spending more dollars there, the locals might find more ways to make a living other than chopping down some of Earth's most magnificent trees.



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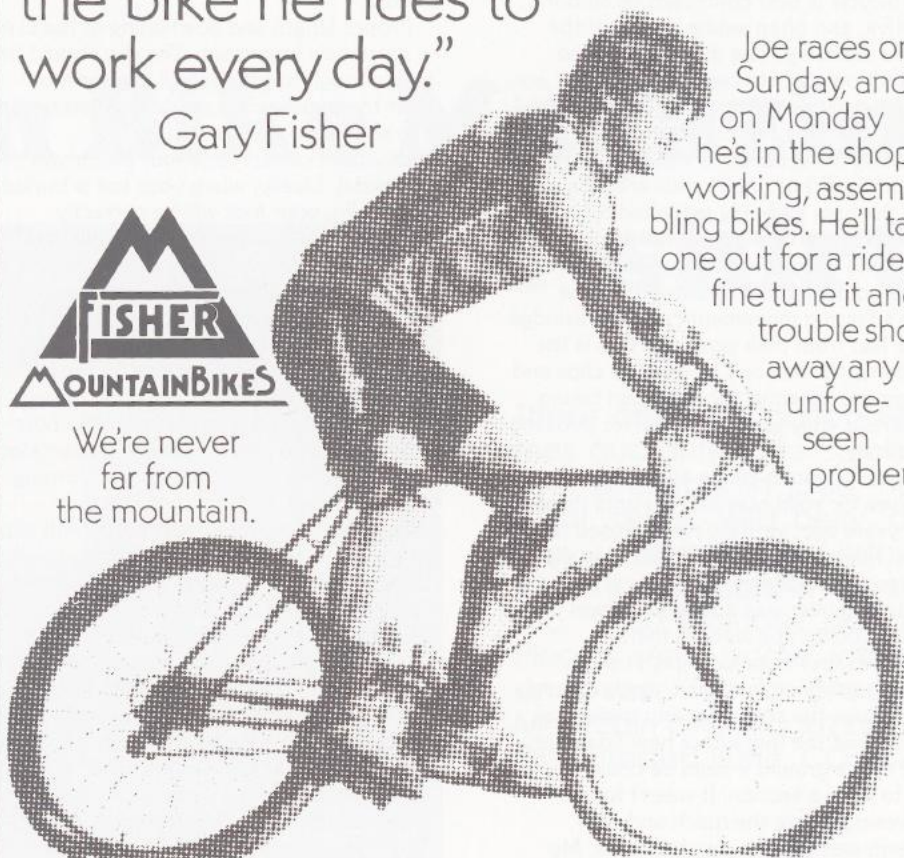
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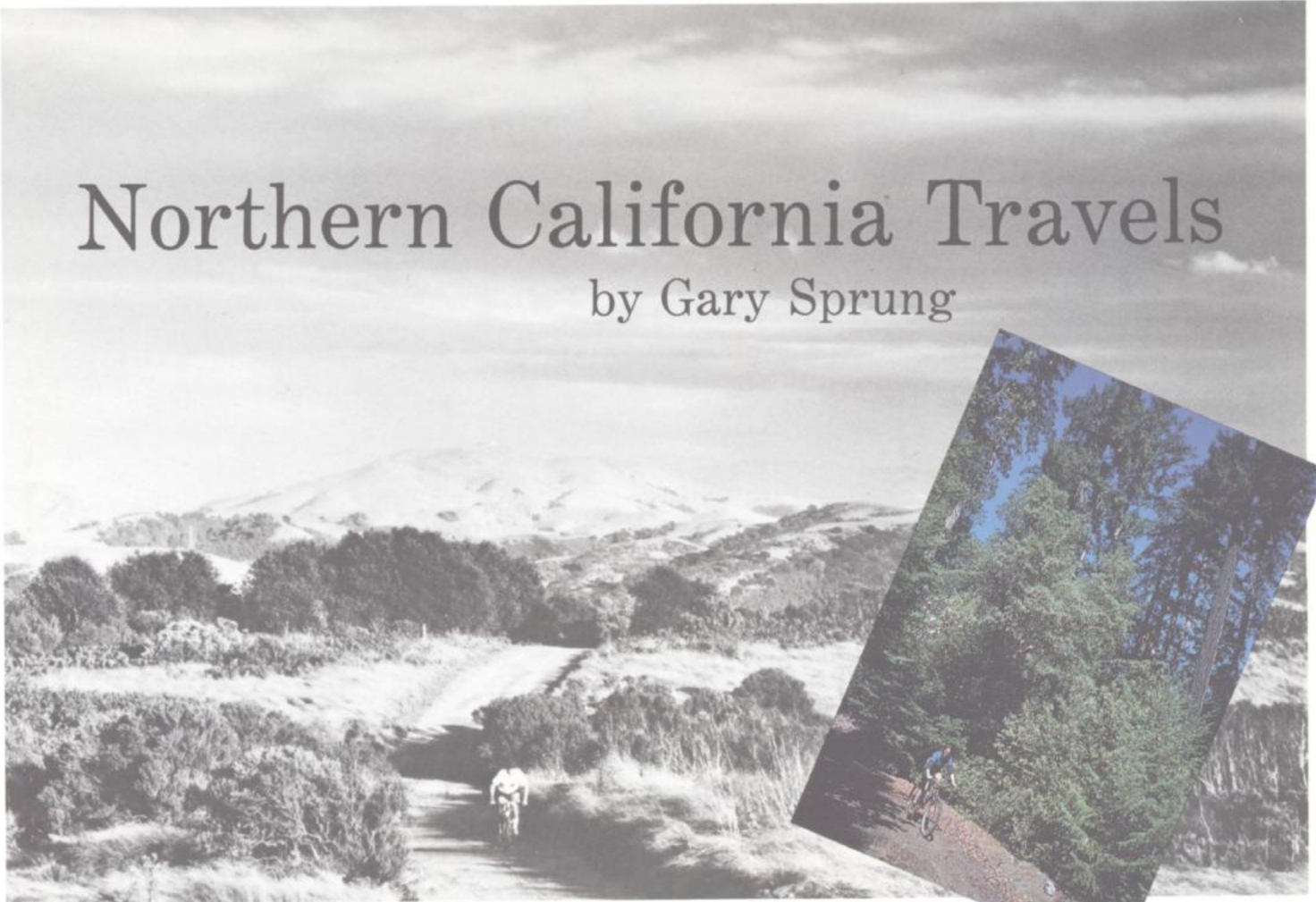
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