

Directions & Backpacking Guidance to the “Forks of the Kern”

www.TimHuckaby.com

Permits

Before you go, make sure you handle your permits:

California Fire Permit:

<http://www.preventwildfireca.org/Permits/>

The fire permit is free and easy to obtain online after a simple common sense test.

FYI: In high fire danger periods, The Western Divide Ranger District will suspend fire permits in the area. This will preclude you from having campfires at the site. You'll be advised of suspended fire permits when you apply for your Golden Trout Wilderness Permit.

Wilderness Permit:

https://www.fs.usda.gov/Internet/FSE_DOCUMENTS/fseprd543254.pdf

Note:

The forks trail used to require a Golden Trout Wilderness Permit that is still located [here](#) for some reason unbeknownst to me. In 2018 the Western Divide Ranger District changed to the generic wilderness permit above and will no longer honor golden trout wilderness permits for the Forks Trail.

The Wilderness Permit is free. I would not call the process easy because to handle it in advance remotely. To handle remotely, the “easiest” process is to fax the form to the Western Divide Ranger District and the ranger district will fax back a confirmation. But, sometimes they don't. Sometimes I have to call to get them to complete the process. The process is easy to handle in person at the Western Divide Ranger district.

Western Divide Ranger District 559-539-2607

For an update on high water conditions: Hydrologist at western divide ranger district: Don Kavlosky

Reasons to call the Western Divide Ranger District:

- The Roads to the trailhead are closed during the winter. If you want to hike outside the season (~ mid-April to ~ mid-November), call the Western Divide Ranger District to see if the roads to the forks of the Kern Trailhead are open.
- Another reason to call the Western Divide Ranger District is to get a feel for the flow on the Little Kern River. In the Spring of non-drought years, the Little Kern River may be too dangerous to cross. I have crossed the little Kern when it's raging, but with the help of a rope tied from trees on both sides. Each April, I try to be one of the first ones in to secure a rope between two trees at the crossing, but the rope never seems to survive the winter. In big years like 2017 and 2019 it's not safe to get in there until mid-July.

California Fishing License, Rules and Regs

The upper Kern River is surrounded by both the Golden Trout Wilderness Area and Sequoia National Park and provides a remote wilderness fishing experience. The upper Kern River from the Forks of the Kern upstream to Tyndall Creek is a designated Heritage and Wild Trout Water.

Fishing regulations change; especially in California. It's best to check them for yourself [here](#). This 52 page PDF document representing the CA fishing regulations is extremely complex. Even I have difficulty interpreting the rules, so in many cases I let me conscious dictate my interpretation of the rules.

These rules for the Upper Kern above the confluence are straightforward:

Area: From the point where U.S. Forest Service Trail 33E30 heads east to join the Rincon Trail upstream to the mouth of Tyndall Creek. Translated: from the confluence of the little kern river and the main fork of the Kern for many miles up stream:

Season: Last Saturday in Apr. through Nov. 15. (The Western Divide Ranger District dictates the opening and closing of the roads to the Forks of the Kern trail. They can/will open later or close earlier in heavy snow years).

Flies: Only artificial lures (flies) with barbless hooks may be used.

Take: 2 trout maximum per day. Maximum size limit: 10 inches total length for rainbow trout only.

Number of Flies: For the life of me I cannot find the rules in that document related to how many flies you can throw. In many states (MT and WY, for instance) you are limited to 2 flies. At the Forks I typically throw 3 flies.

So, my typical rig is a 3x leader with a size 2 or 4 Huck Hopper on top, followed by 3 feet of 4X tippet then a large black stonefly nymph imitation (like a rubber legs), followed by another 18 inches of 5x tippet and a size 16 Huck Green Caddis Nymph Cripple.

Now you may be saying to yourself: "that is crazy and asking for disaster." Yes, it is. I lose a lot of flies, but I catch a lot of fish in the upper Kern. I'm an expert. I take the risk. Not only can I tie up a new rig quickly upon losing the entire thing, but I do tie my own flies. But, a long 3 fly rig like that is not only difficult to cast, but also risky.

River Flow

I like to use the dreamflows site to monitor the river flow. It gives a 3 day, 30 day and historical view. Fairview dam is a few miles upstream from Kernville and there are no dams above it so it will give you a good representation of the flows in the Upper Kern. Just realize the flow will be less upriver on the forks trail because of all the tributaries that enter the Kern like the Little Kern River.

<http://www.dreamflows.com/graphs/mon.681.php>

The Kern Fishes best below 300 CFS. Wading is challenging (and dangerous) when flows are above 300 CFS. The is a reason it's called "The Killer Kern". In 2017, one of the biggest water years ever, 8 lives were lost on the Kern. Close to 300 lives have been lost on the Kern since 1968 so be careful when wading.

The Kern is a wild river. It's lined with trees and willows. There are very few open casts from the banks of the Upper Kern. That means the river fishes best when standing in the river.

In flows above 1,000 the little Kern Crossing can be challenging. See the hiking directions below.

Primitive Camping Info / Guidance

There are hundreds of primitive campsites that line the Upper Kern river for miles. The first one of the Forks trail is just 2.4 miles from the trailhead. Typically the farther you hike up stream the better the fishing gets.

Heads up: The Navy, Air Force and Marine pilots practice my zooming through the canyon at Mach speeds and low altitude. It will scare the hell out of you the first time you experience it.

The absolute best thing about the forks of the kern is because it's in the golden trout wilderness, shared by national forest land and between two national parks. What does that mean? You can have a campfire (with the permit).

One of the huge benefits of being able to do a campfire is hiking in a frozen steak or other hunk of meat and bbq'ing the first night. The river is your refrigerator; bring sealable plastic bags. I have a backpacking grill. It's lightweight. A few years back I hiked down a huge heavy professional grill for the site I developed. And sure enough the next time I went in someone had stolen it. Last time I was in there, there was a cheap grill there. Most of the primitive sites along the river (~15) before mine have a grill.

In this part of the Golden Trout wilderness you are not required to store food in a bear canister. But, you should hang your food in the trees because along with the bears there are lots of critters that love backpacking food.

The "Huckaby site" is where I usually set up. I have put hours and hours of work into that site over the years. It has a lot:

- It's not a long hike (4.2 miles) designed for Fly Fishermen that backpack (not the other way around)
- The 400 yard stretch of river from the site upstream is spectacular fly fishing with a number of tail-outs, a huge slow moving pool, tons of pocket water and seemingly endless good runs.
- The huge slow moving pool in front of the site is suitable for bathing and swimming even in spring runoff conditions
- There is a primitive porta-potty I made from stones and surrounded by trees just about 75 yards upstream from the site.
- The site is huge and can suit a bunch of tents on flat ground.
- The site has a primitive fire pit with a bbq grill I hauled there myself (gone missing in 2016).
- The site has primitive benches to sit on around the fire.
- The site has plenty of large rocks suitable for meal preparation
- The site has plenty of shade by large pines, oaks, etc.
- The site has a nearby cache with tons of extra supplies including a spare tent, tools, food, etc.

If you do use "my site" I ask that you try to improve it in some simple way. And if I do stumble upon you in the site I may ask if I can share it with you.

Safety: I always carry a bear spray into the forks; but, not specifically for the bears. I have run into a few strange humans in there over the years. I'm convinced people live way back in there; like 20 miles upriver. I just don't know how they survive the winters or get caught by the rangers (of whom I have never seen). My son did draw his bear spray on a mountain lion a few years back on the forks trail. However, the cat backed off not interested in taking him on.

I have seen bears there. I have been visited by bears in the site in the middle of the night looking for food. These are just black bears; they are not going to try to eat you. But, they will try to eat your food.

Warning: By August, the trout in front of the site and in that area have seen many artificial flies and fooling them becomes more difficult even for the advanced fly fisherman. In general, by August the farther upstream you go the better the fly-fishing becomes.

Driving Directions to the Trailhead

Technically, there are 3 major routes and multiple dirt road routes to drive the first 280 of the ~300 miles it takes to get to the Forks of the Kern Trailhead from Carlsbad where we live. The reason for this document, really, is that last 20 miles and then the directions to hiking to the Huckaby's favorite Primitive spot on the River. The total hike to the site is only 4.2 miles, but don't underestimate the heat and the ruggedness. It can take up to 2 hours to hike it. You have to be fit for that hike out, gaining back that 1100 feet you lose hiking into the canyon.

There are two major driving routes from the South:

1. Hwy 395 way through Kernville
2. Hwy 99 way through Bakersfield to Kernville.

And one route from the West:

- Hwy 99 through Porterville.

And one route from the East:

- Which is a painful 100 miles over the sierras by way of Nine Mile Canyon Road just north of Pearsonville to Kennedy Meadows and over the Sherman Pass popping you out just short of the Johnsondale Bridge. Actually I'm not even sure this is possible because there are a lot of dirt roads involved and all the mapping programs say it is dramatically faster to go south on the 395 all the way to Lake Isabella, through Kernville and back up.

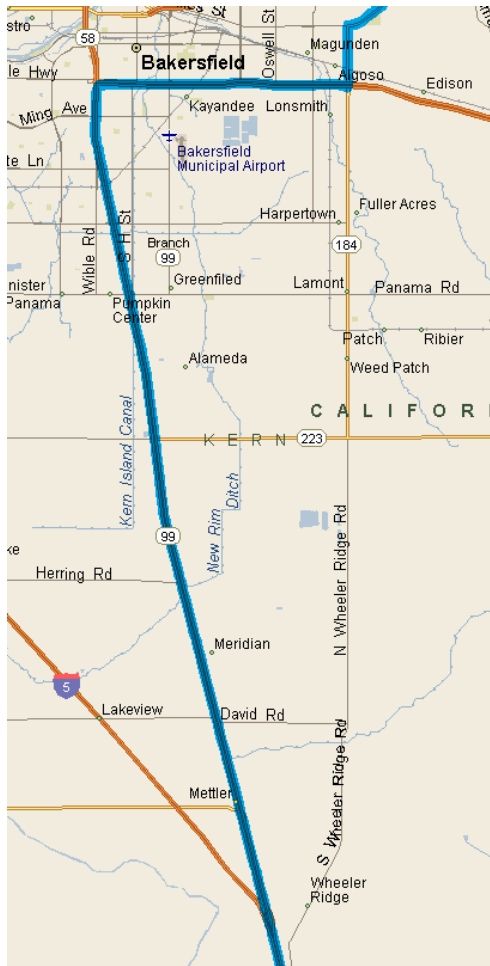
I have taken all (except for the eastern route) of the routes many times, but the easiest way is the 99 through Bakersfield to Kernville. So those are the directions I will detail here.

If you want to go from the west then get to Mountain Road 50 by way of Earlimart and Ducor.
If you want to go from the north then get to Mountain Road 50 by way of Porterville.

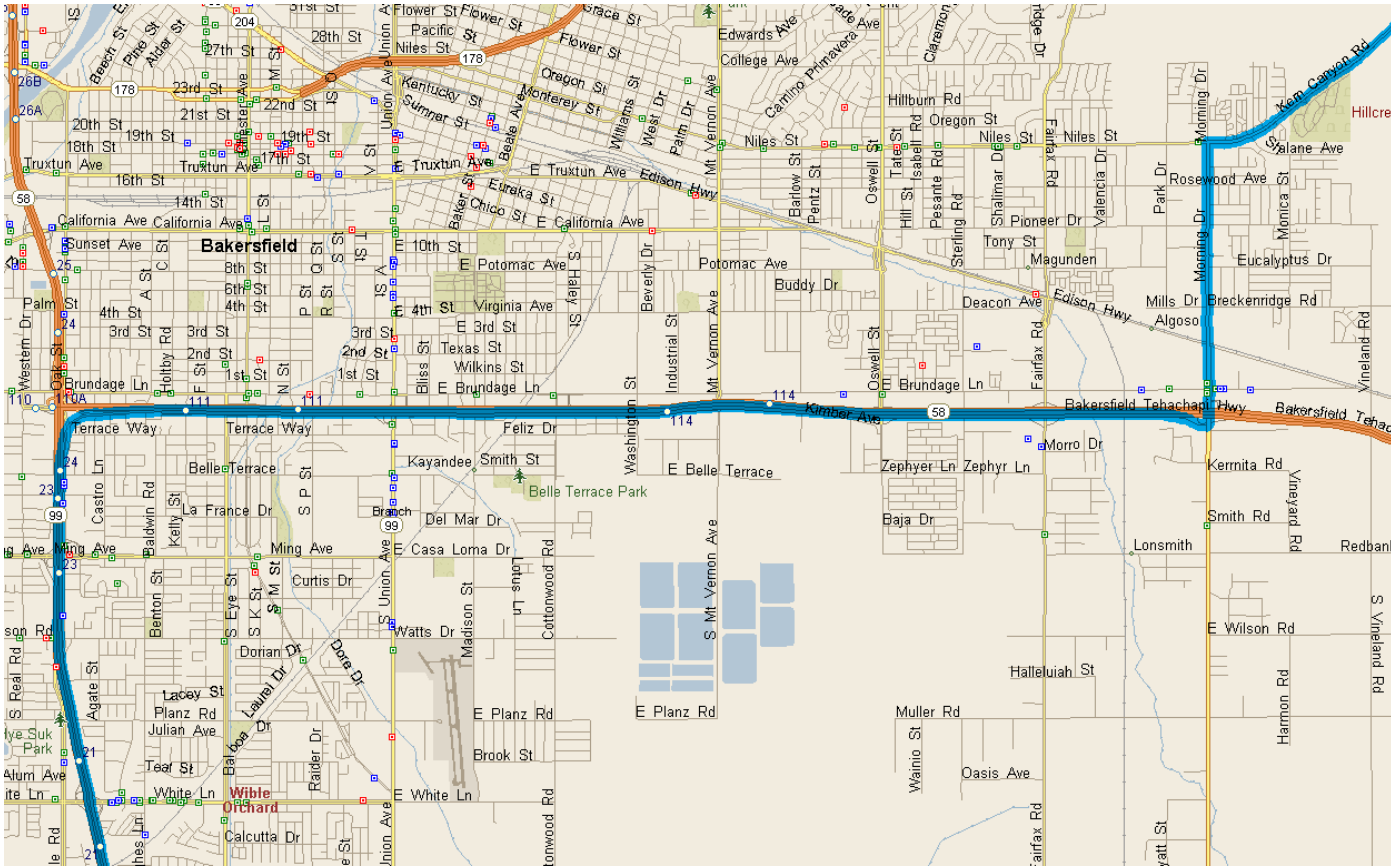
Then pick up the directions with a left turn on NF-2282 (that is the intersection is very close to the tiny city of Johnsondale, CA detailed below).

From Carlsbad (where I live):

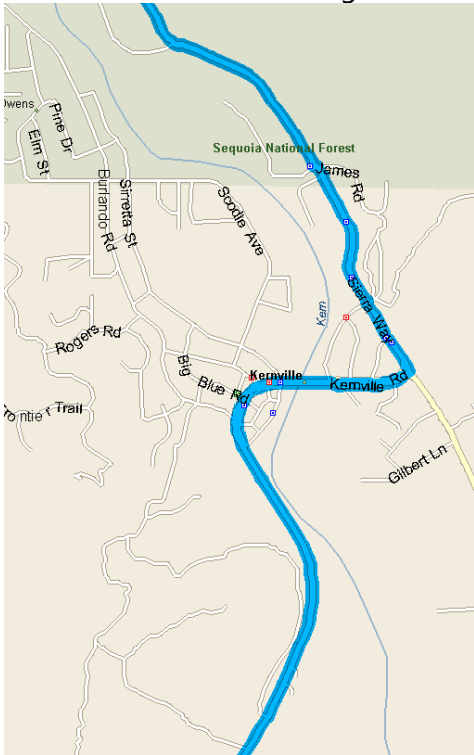
- Aim your GPS for Kernville, CA
- Go North on 5 through Los Angeles, pass magic Mountain and veer right on the 99 where the 5/99 split is just Short of Bakersfield



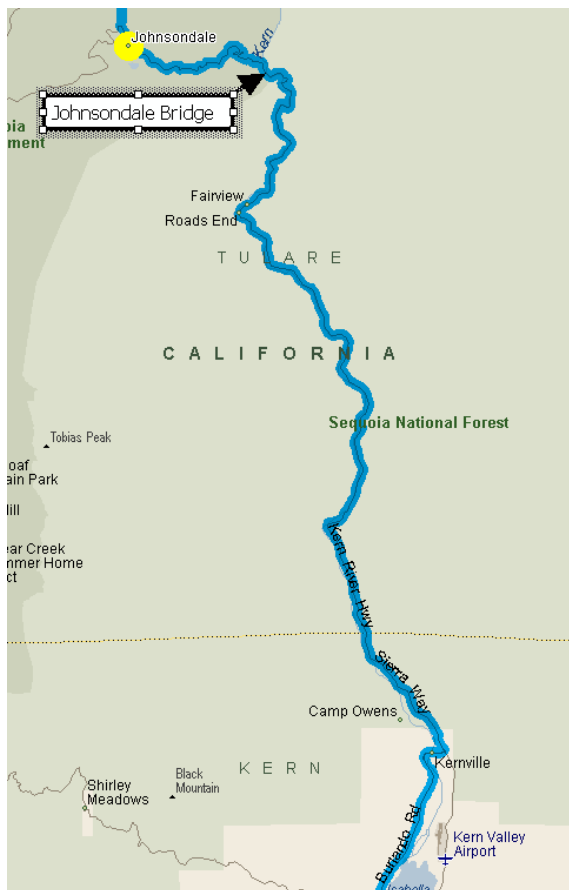
- At exit 24, keep RIGHT onto CA-58 [Bakersfield Tehachapi Hwy]
- Bear LEFT (North) onto CA-184 [Weedpatch Hwy]
- Turn RIGHT (East) onto CA-184 [Kern Canyon Rd]
- Turn RIGHT (East) onto CA-178 [Kern Canyon Rd]



- Go 32 miles towards Lake Isabella
- Turn LEFT (North-West) onto CA-155 [Kernville Rd] towards Kernville
- Turn LEFT (North) onto Sierra Way (after driving through the city of Kernville and crossing the river). You'll lose your cell signal here
- The road name soon changes to the Kern river Highway



- ~18 miles you'll pass Sherman Pass on your right then you'll cross the Johnsondale Bridge.
- After the Johnsondale bridge the road name changes to Mountain Road 99 (MR-99)
- ~3 miles after you cross the bridge you'll drive through the tiny city of Johnsondale



- Right after Johnsondale, you'll pass the Mountain Road 50 (MR-50) junction where the directions from the north or west come in. The road name changes to NF-2282 here
- Here at the MR-50 junction reset your odometer or gps to 0.
- At mile 20.2 the road turns into Lloyd meadow Road and the big sign and gate for camp Whitsett is on your right.
- at mile 28.4 you'll hit the Peppermint campground (this is a good place to spend the night if you come in too late or when it's too hot to hike in and want to sleep before hiking in at dawn. But, you can also just sleep at the trailhead in the parking lot). Peppermint campground has running water and costs a bit of money (self-pay). The trailhead dirt parking lot does not have running water, is free and technically you are probably not supposed to camp there. there is a port-a-potty at the trailhead, though.
- At mile 36.2 you'll see the sign for the turnoff to "George bush tree". I have no idea what the hell that is; and will never know.
- At mile 36.8 turn right on the dirt road, Lloyd flat. There is a sign for the forks of the Kern trailhead there on your right.



- Its 2.4 miles on the dirt road to the trailhead. When you get to the end by the trailhead you'll be forced into a counter clockwise loop into a very large dirt parking lot. The GPS coordinates of the dirt parking lot are: [36.138538, -118.451797](#) There is a porta-potty 150 yards forward in the dirt road loop.

Hiking / Backpacking Directions

From the big dirt parking lot if you look in an eastern direction towards where you entered the dirt parking lot you'll see a large sign marking the actual trailhead. It's really hard to miss.

The Altitude at the Trailhead is 5,844 feet. The GPS coordinates are: [36.138538, -118.451797](#).

You'll lose 1,100 feet of altitude in the first 2.2 miles down into the canyon to the little Kern River. That is why this is a "reverse hike" because you hike in heavy with food downhill and hike out lighter up hill.

Using a handheld or wearable GPS navigating with these directions will be bulletproof. But, if you got the distance gene you don't need one.

- From the trailhead, its 2.2 miles down the switchbacking trail to the bottom. The views are spectacular. On the way you'll pass the Golden Trout Wilderness sign (vandalized in 2016 and now gone). You will get many peeks / pictures opps of the Kern on the way down into the canyon.
- When you get to the bottom there is an open sandy area. Straight in front of you 100 feet is the little Kern River, but in summer you will not be able to see it from there because of the trees. It's also a tough cross right there. At this point the trail is sandy and goes right / south (down river to the confluence) or Left / North (up river). To the right about 1/2 mile down is the actual confluence where the Little Kern River meets the main fork of the Kern River.
- You want to go Left, upstream on the sandy trail, passing two big pine trees to the third big pine tree. This is the easiest crossing of the little Kern and where you'll typically find the rope to help you cross. In drought years it's 8" of water; simple crossing. In big snowpack years in the spring during runoff it can be a challenge. You'll find walking sticks on both sides from prior hikers that will help you cross in bare feet. There has been a rope strung across the little Kern many years to help make the crossing easy. I have strung that rope in years where it's not there.



View of the Little Kern River Crossing in drought conditions



View of the Little Kern River Crossing in spring conditions with a rope line across to help



Mer goes about 5'10" and you can see she is up to her knees in July using the rope and her trekking poles to cross the Little Kern.



My nephews Sam and Tommy crossing the Little Kern in July of a drought year

Once across the little Kern River you'll be staring at a large open sandy area like a beach about 200 yards wide and long. The trail will be barely discernable in this area. look for footprints.



Keep going straight and you'll soon see where the trail picks up on the other side of the sandy area. Take notice to the geyser like activity bubbling up on the left.



The trail parallels the north side of the river for 2 more miles before you make it to the "Huckaby site". The views of the river are spectacular. If you are a fly fisherman you will say to yourself, "I cannot believe I'm passing up this water and not fishing it."



You'll see many primitive campsites on your right on the river and there are many more you won't see. The rest of the directions take you to the Huckaby's favorite primitive site at GPS coordinates: 36.141421, -118.410793.

- At mile 3.5 you'll see a primitive camp site, looking down, on your right towards the river
- At 3.67 the trail will fork – it doesn't matter which fork you take. They re-join in about 200 yards. Once they rejoin, it's 11 minutes at a normal pace to the "Huckaby" site at gps coords: 36.141421, -118.410793

This is the view to the "huckaby site" where you are going from about 1/3 mile away. Notice the flat water with the rocky face on the other side of the river. That is where the site is.



- At mile 4.17 you'll hit the Huckaby's favorite primitive site on your right. You'll see the fire pit and primitive benches around it made of logs.
- Standing in the 100 foot long site, looking back at the trail from which you came:



- Standing in the site near in one of the many tent locations on the site looking at the river:



- View of fire pit and primitive benches looking back at the trail from which you came:



- View from the fire pit looking down at the river:



- The monster I landed in front of the site on my very first cast in early April, 2015:



Tactics for Fly Fishing

I always bring two rods which always includes a 6 weight to the Upper Kern; not to punch through the wind as much as to even up the battles with big wild Kern River Rainbows. You can get away with a 3, 4 or 5 wt. but, it's just going to take you that much longer to land them....with more risk of losing that big ass wild Kern River Rainbow if you hook into him. I bring 2 rods for many reasons. Firstly, I rig a 6 for hopper/dropper. And I typically bring a 3 or 4 and rig for size 18 dries. It also helps to have two rods because of calamity. Calamities like broken rods always seem to happen back packing.

The wind does come up in the afternoons at certain times of year, but mostly you'll be protected from the wind by the trees. The big rods are mostly needed for the wild hard fighting kern river rainbows.

And speaking of the trees, the Upper Kern is a wild river. You'll have to negotiate willows and trees to get a cast. The upper Kern is best fished standing in the river. Roll casting, side casting, reach casting are all essential to success. There are spots to teach a beginner to cast, especially in low flows. But, at higher flows success using only comes to the experienced.

I'm a pretty good cast.... And I still lose a ton of flies in there. It's a wild river. If you are drifting the nymphs correctly and they are bumping off the bottom they will get stuck... it's a wild river and there are a ton of branches and sticks in the river....and then there are the overgrown trees on both sides.... I love to take the risk of making that perfect cast. I risk losing flies for that perfect cast that makes it through a 2-foot window from 40 feet...and ultimately screw up or the wind blows and I get flies stuck in the trees. To me it is worth the gamble. The best / biggest fish are hiding where it is tough to make a good cast or get a good drift or both.

Beginners can do well with the bobber in the Upper Kern. If you are an intermediate or above you should not throw the bobber. A big (size 2-6) huck hopper will stay up all day (I soak them in a special floatant for 24 hours) and are easy to pull out of the trees if you get them stuck.

The Upper Kern River is typically crystal clear snow melt runoff. Flashy nymphs do well in sunny crystal clear conditions. I never fail with size 16 huck-bow warriors and size 16 Huck Green Caddis Nymphs. I tie both of these in a "cripple format" with a pronounced holographic wing case and stunted wings. I know that doesn't make sense: a nymph with wings. But, over the years I have modified these two flies to the point where they just work in almost all conditions. My theory is that throughout nature the predators prey on the weak and the crippled. The flies I tie are not pretty. They are guide flies, not shop flies. If you are an advanced fly angler you'll understand what that means.

The fishing prescription for the upper kern is quite simple for the heart of the season: hopper / dropper until the evening hatch.

In general terms, especially later in the season, the farther up river you go the better you will do.

At 250 CFS there are plenty of places you can cross the river safely. Under 150 CFS there are multiple places to cross. When you can cross the river and if you can cast there are not many places for the fish to hide. It makes for very effective fly fishing.

As you hike the forks (even in april and in October) you'll see how the quantity of grass hoppers around and get a pulse for size and color. I typically throw size 2 or 4 huck hopper on the upper kern. Even the little trout try to get them in their mouth. In fact, the little Kern River rainbows are so aggressive they will frequently rise to bite a leg to pull the hopper down to drown it. I thought I was just missing sets until I started noticing the legs disappearing from my huck hoppers.

The dropper should be as long as you can get away with to get the nymph down. Any flashy non natural looking nymphs will work because of the clear water. Especially when there is bright sun. I tie a couple killer flies for the upper kern (a green caddis nymph/cripple I created and a version of a rainbow warrior I created. both available off www.timhuckaby.com/shop) and I drop those from a "huck hopper" . although I believe any big terrestrial pattern will work though.

if you are an advanced fly fisher capable of dealing with the frustration of 3 flies I'd go big huck hopper (sometimes I think color just doesn't matter. I have thrown pink and done well), 3-4 feet to a black stonefly nymph, another foot to a flashy nymph.

From above in rules and regs: my typical rig is a 3x leader with a size 2 or 4 Huck Hopper on top, followed by 3 feet of 4X tippet then a large black stonefly nymph imitation (like a rubber legs), followed by another 18 inches of 5x tippet and a size 16 Huck Green Caddis Nymph Cripple. It's deadly the entire season, but it's also risky.

The 4 flies I have specifically developed for the Upper Kern River and that fish extremely well on the Upper Kern (after years of testing and thousands of casts and drifts) are:

1. The Huck Hopper (Sizes 4-10):



2. The Huck Green Caddis Nymph Cripple (Sizes 16-18):



3. The Huck-bow Warrior (Sizes 16-18):



4. The Huck Midge Cripple (Sizes 16-18):



You can get all these flies from www.TimHuckaby.com/shop

The evening hatch: Now, for most of the heart of the season as the sun goes down the hatch goes off and you should throw a size 16/18 dry anything. Through experience, I can tell you it just does not matter. In June & July you'll typically get about 90 minutes of crazy good dry fly fishing at the end of the day until it gets too dark to fish....and even then it's good. At times, drift will not even matter. A trailer of any emerger is killer too. It is at these times where it's best to teach kids or beginners how to fly fish. Even my wife Kelly has railed a number of nice Kern River Rainbows during end evening hatch.

As for flies, you are just going to lose them. It's just part of the deal. Make sure and plan for that. Flies are practically weightless. Fly boxes are not.

Nymphing, Dry flies, Streamers – yes and yes and yes. Since backpacking is all about weight you will probably make tough choices about flies, sinking lines, multiple rods and reels.

I seem to always bring an extra spool with a medium sink line and streamers and never seem to use them. The dry fly and nymphing is just so good. But, one of these days I'm going to do streamer only. Dragging a streamer through the deep pools on a swing is wildly effective. I have had the fly rod ripped out of my hands a handful of times streamer fishing and the upper Kern was one of those times.

Seasons

The hatches in the upper kern match the type and season of many of the rivers of the sierras. There are many internet resources where you can find hatch charts. The most prolific hatches in the Upper Kern River are Midges, Caddis, May flies, & Stone flies. There is a short salmon fly season at the Upper Kern. I have only stumbled into it twice (at the end of June), and, of course I didn't have any salmon fly imitations with me. So, stick a huge salmon fly imitation in your backpack just in case. I would not call the Upper Kern a "buggy river". However, there are plenty of short and small quantity hatches; especially in Spring.

In the beginning of the season, April/May, and in the end of the season, October, I typically backpack in lightweight inexpensive breathable waders. Simply because the weather and the water is so cold. For the balance of the season, I wet wade because it gets so warm and sunny in the canyon. I have tried wet wading in water shoes like keens and tevas and such. But, nothing replaces a good pair of felt bottomed wading boots. Btw, I did try titanium spiked felt bottomed wading boots one trip and the experience was not good. The only thing I have found that works on the polished granite in the kern is felt.

I break up the components of the Upper Kern fishing season (last Saturday in April through November 15th) into 3 parts:

1. Mid-April through May

In drought years, this will be the absolute best time to fish the Upper Kern. In normal and high water years this will be the most challenging time to get a cast. In either case, the trout will have come out of almost six months of resting in really cold water, not seeing much food, let alone artificial flies. My absolute best and absolute worst fly-fishing has been in this period. The Upper Kern is not apt to "blow out", but you can get browner water in this time. I have only seen it off colored a few times. If the water is big and colored up it will force the fish to the banks. In that case you can really be successful by pounding the banks...if you can get in position safely to make those casts and strip back quickly. You will see plenty of grass hopper naturals on the trail and riverside on at this time of year in size 8-14. I still throw a size 4 Huck Hopper and it works. I have caught huge Kern River Rainbows in April on Huck Hoppers that come up from more than 10 feet in deep pools. Don't be afraid to drift big dries in the current at the head of deep pools. It is an absolute hoot to see a big kern river rainbow shoot up from the depths to explode on a fly on top.

2. June through August

This is the prime fishing time of the Upper Kern River. It is also the time of year where you are watching the river flow and praying it goes under 350 CFS, but stays above 175 CFS. It is typically the best period of the year to fish. Typically you will fish hopper/dropper until the evening hatch and then you'll throw anything size 18. The river fishes best under 250 CFS. And a big reason for that is you can cross the river in stretches under 250 CFS.

3. September through Mid-November

In big winter years this will be the absolute best period to fish because the river will hang around 250 CFS. Hopper / Dropper will be deadly effective. In general terms, especially later in the season, the farther up river you go the better you will do.

When/if the river slips below 150 CFS in hot weather the mid-day fishing can be challenging because of the warmer water temps. Of course you can mitigate this by fishing from many places in the river and drifting over deeper pools and runs that hold the cold water.

In normal and drought years, you may find tough fishing from the confluence to my site because the flows will get below 150CFS and the river will warm. In those times, the mornings and nights will be effective, but it can get really slow mid-day. In these times, you may want to fish as far up river as possible. River flows here: <http://www.dreamflows.com/graphs/day.681.php>

As long as the nights stay warm the grasshoppers (naturals) on the riverbanks and trails will be huge (size 2-4) and the hopper/dropper fishing will be great. As soon as the nights get cold, the grasshoppers will disappear and your tactics will have to change making it a lot more challenging. I don't ever fish a bobber in the Upper Kern, but at this time my son Mark does with 4 feet to his first nymph and 2 feet to his 2nd and he does very well.