

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

With Fly Fishing Guidance for the Upper Kern River included

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Permits & Licenses

Before you go, make sure you handle your permits:

California Fire Permit:

<https://www.readyforwildfire.org>

The CA 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.

Application for a 2022 GTW Wilderness Permit:

https://www.fs.usda.gov/detail/sequoia/passes-permits/recreation/?cid=fsbdev3_059517

2022 Golden Trout Wilderness Permits

Under current circumstances with COVID-19, visitor services personnel in Sequoia National Forest will continue issuing wilderness permits virtually through email. Please follow the steps below to obtain your permit at least 30 days prior to travel. Permits will also be issued in person where available, call ahead to make an appointment.

1. Print and completely fill out the [**Application for a Wilderness Visitor's Permit**](#)
2. **Plan your trip accordingly** - The North Road (21S50) will be closed for the 2022 season under a Forest Closure Order. Trailhead closures include Summit, Clicks Creek, and Lewis Camp Trailheads. Foot traffic will not be permitted through the closed area for public safety. Work is ongoing to remove fire killed trees along the roadway that pose an immediate hazard. The area should reopen in 2023.
3. Scan and email your completed application to the Sequoia National Forest to [**SM.FS.SequoiaNF@usda.gov**](mailto:SM.FS.SequoiaNF@usda.gov) (monitored Monday - Friday, 8:00 am - 4:30 pm.)
4. Within a week, you will receive a response to your email, confirming receipt of your application.

Your hard copy application will then take the place of your permit for overnight stay in the Golden Trout Wilderness in the Sequoia National Forest.

Keep a copy with you and share the information with someone at home to anticipate your safe return. The Forest Service will keep an electronic copy of your application on file in case of emergency and for our records. **It is your responsibility to monitor conditions and fire restrictions and provide for your own safety.** Current road conditions and fire restrictions will be posted on this website throughout the summer.

Note:

The forks trail used to require an outdated Golden Trout Wilderness Permit that are still located in places like [here](#) for some reason unbeknownst to me. In 2022 the Western Divide Ranger District changed to the more efficient (email) wilderness permit above and will no longer honor older golden trout wilderness permits for the Forks Trail.

The Wilderness Permit is free. The process is easy to handle in person at the Western Divide Ranger district.

For an update on high water conditions: Call Western Divide Ranger district and ask to talk to a Hydrologist. Ranger Station (559) 539-2607 Virtual Services (559) 483-0408

To deal directly with a friendly ranger on permitting or general help: Call the Western Divide Ranger District. Ranger Station (559) 539-2607 Virtual Services (559) 483-0408

Reasons to call the Western Divide Ranger District:

- Even though technically open, the Roads to the trailhead are closed during the winter and a significant part of the beginning of Spring depending on the snowpack and availability to clear fallen trees on that road. If you want visit the forks in the spring, 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, if not the first one in to secure a rope between two trees at the crossing, but the rope never seems to survive the winter. I believe at the end of the season the rangers pull the rope down. In big snow pack years like 2017 and 2019 it was not safe to make that river crossing 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 my environmentally friendly conscience 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 end of the Johnsondale Bridge Trail which is 4 miles long to the headwaters of the Kern River at Lake South America 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.

I'm no biologist, but because of decades of fly fishing, I am more knowledgeable than most on Ichthyology (fish) and Entomology (bugs), specifically salmonids (salmon, trout, char, whitefish, and grayling) + water born insects and terrestrials. So, to me this California rule is doesn't make sense. I can't think of another

place anywhere in the world where culling the young animal is the rule when the intention is to keep a wild species thriving. Any less than 10" kern river rainbow is a max of 2 years old. More likely just about a year old. I'm a c&r guy and really don't enjoy the taste of trout anyways, but I do backpack and fish with people that do; like my wife. So I don't mind putting it down in writing that I always suggest releasing the young and if a fish is to be harvested try to make it a male rainbow over 16". Great documentation on how to determine the sex of a trout [here](#).

Number of Flies: For the life of me I cannot find the rules in that California State document related to how many flies you can throw. So there must not be a limit. In many states (MT and WY, for instance) you are limited to 2 flies. At the Forks I typically throw 3 flies. See the [Tactics for Fly Fishing below](#) for details on my typical rig.

River Flow

I like to use the dreamflows site to monitor the river flow. It's designed for the professional kayakers and rafters, but it visualizes the CFS well for us Fly Fishers. It gives a week long, 30 day and historical view. Fairview dam is a few miles upstream from Kernville and there are no dams above it all the way to the headwaters of the Kern River, so this site 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 streams and creeks that enter the Kern like the Little Kern River.

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

The Kern Fishes best below 300 CFS (See the fishing guidance section below). Wading is challenging (and dangerous) when flows are above 500 CFS. There 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 5,000 CFS the little Kern Crossing can be challenging. See the hiking directions below.

Weather

To check the weather by the internet:

- The closest city to the Forks Trailhead is the tiny town of Ponderosa, CA at 7,231 feet.
- Johnsondale, CA is also fairly close and it's altitude is 4,341.
- The Huck site is at: 36°08'28.9"N 118°24'39.5"W

But...

- The altitude at the Trailhead is at 5,325 feet.
- The altitude at the confluence is at 4,284 feet.
- The altitude at the huck site is at 4380 feet.

So, predicting the weather at the Forks is kind of a crapshoot unless you have access to sophisticated weather prediction tools. Because the forks is in a canyon, in general it's typically 10 degrees cooler both

during the day and at night than in Johnsondale which is exposed on a fairly flat part of the mountain. But, it is the Sierras. And the sierras generate its own weather quickly that can be way way outside of a forecast.

Here is the NOAA forecast at the GPS cords of the Huck site:

<https://forecast.weather.gov/MapClick.php?lat=36.1414&lon=-118.4110&lg=english&FcstType=text&TextType=2>

Not bulletproof... because the NOAA forecast does not take the canyon into account. But it should be generally close.

Bugs

I cannot remember ever seeing a mosquito in the first 20 miles of the Upper Kern River up from the Confluence (Forks) in the ~25 years I have been backpacking, fly fishing and camping there. There just is not any standing water for mosquitoes to breed in. It would make sense that in the following 20 upriver miles all the way to the headwaters of the Kern River above 12,000 feet there will be plenty of mosquitoes in Spring and Summer because there are plenty of small lakes and more meadow like terrain where mosquitoes thrive.

But, the Forks trail has an annoying black gnat that will drive you crazy when hiking the trail. They don't bite you. but, they buzz your face trying to get a lick of your sweat. So, I always carry a mosquito head net. Interestingly enough they will not bother you when you are close to or wading in the river.

Primitive Camping Info / Guidance

Warning: The Forks trail is a "Reverse Hike" where you lose a ton of elevation (1,100 feet) hiking in heavy (with food). You have to gain back that elevation when you hike out. But, you will be hiking out lighter. Although not at significant elevation you will lose 1,100 feet hiking into the canyon from the trailhead as you get down to the Little Kern River crossing. Hiking out mid-day when it's hot can be a real physical effort because there are so many non-shaded stretches on the trail exposed to the sun.

There are seemingly hundreds of primitive campsites that line the Upper Kern river for miles. The first one on the Forks trail is just 2.4 miles from the trailhead right at the confluence of the North Fork (main) of the Kern River and the Little Kern River. Typically, the farther you hike up stream the better the fishing gets. If you head to the main fork of the river after making the Little Kern River Crossing on the Forks Trail, going "off trail" for a ¼ mile, you'll run into a number of primitive camp sites lining the river as you walk up river.

Heads up: The American Military pilots practice by zooming through the canyon at Mach speeds and low altitude. It will scare the hell out of you the first time you experience it. They go so fast so low in the canyon that frequently they are way ahead of the actual roaring sound they make.

One of the absolute best things about the forks of the kern trailhead is you can legally have a campfire with a fire permit. That is so rare in the Sierras. It is because it's in the golden trout wilderness, shared by national forest land and between two national parks.

For me, one of the huge benefits of being able to do a campfire is hiking in a frozen steak or other hunk of meat to bbq the first night. The river is your refrigerator - bring sealable bags. I have a backpacking grill. It's lightweight. A few years back I hiked down a huge heavy professional grill for the Huck 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 some form of a grill in a primitive natural river rock fire ring. In 2020 fires were not permitted for the entire season. So, what I do when you cannot have a camp fire is [Sous Vide](#) a steak, freeze it, then flash fry the outside on my Jetboil with a titanium frying pan.

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 and will sniff it out. I always hike down fresh food and store it in the river. And I always put the food with the booze in a mesh bag with a rock in it to sink it. Well, for the first time ever, in the middle of the night, a critter got into it in the summer of 2020. And for the life of me I'm perplexed on what type of critter it was. The critter did a surgical cut in the bottom of the bag typical of sharp claws or teeth. It didn't eat all the food; only the fat (ie: butter). To pull the bag out of the water from above would take some dexterity and strength... typical of a bear. But, a bear would have eaten everything. To access it from the water would mean the critter stood on the water. I don't know many that would do that. A raccoon? Not likely. A coyote? Not standing in the water. A fox or otter? Most likely. Bigfoot? It's too warm at the forks for him.

The "Huck site" is where I usually set up when I'm with a group. If it's just me and only about fly fishing I hike way farther upriver and camp.

Note: The Huck Site, including all the trees and the swing survived the 2020 fire although it did burn.

I have put hours and hours of work into the Huck site over the years. It has a lot:

- It's not a long hike (4.36 miles) designed for Fly Fishermen that backpack (not the other way around)
- It can "house" a lot of tents so it's perfect for big groups
- 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 deep 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.
- Each year I climb the trees and trim back the branches. I also cut back all the riverside willows. It's a lot of work. Not because I need it, but, because that makes it dramatically easier for beginning fly fishers to cast.
- The site is huge and can suit a bunch of tents and people on flat ground. The record is 9 tents in the huck site
- The site has a primitive fire pit; usually with a bbq grill.
- 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 2 spare tents, a camp table, tools for trimming tree branches and willows, bbq grill, cooking tools, wading boots, etc. I used to put food in the cache but I have found nothing that seals the food in a way that the bears can't get to it. Over the years people visiting the Huck site have improved the cache tremendously (which I am proud of). if you want to use the cache you are welcome to. Email me separately at TimHuckaby@hotmail.com and I'll give you the painstakingly detailed directions on where it is "hidden".

Note: The cache incinerated in the fire of 2020. Everything gone including the 100 foot tree the stuff hung off. The only things that survived were a couple stainless steel blades from the trimming shears and knives. So, the cache is in a rebuilding process.

If you do use the "Huck site" I ask that you try to improve it; even if it is in a simple way. And if I do stumble upon you in the site I may ask...or hint if I can share it with you. there is plenty of room there to stay separate.

Safety and Animals: 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 near the Upper Kern. I just don't know how they survive the winters or not get caught by the rangers (of whom I have never seen on the Upper Kern – maybe that is why). My son did draw his bear spray on a mountain lion a few years back on the forks trail. However, after a stare down, the cat walked away not interested in taking him on. In 2019 I did have to stick bear spray right in the face of a stubborn coyote who wouldn't budge out of the trail. But, I didn't have to spray it. I have been tempted to squirt the rattlesnakes in the trail that won't move. But, a little shooing with a fly rod typically works, although it really pisses them off.

I have seen black bears at the Forks many times. Including right across the river from the Huck Site. 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. We have no grizzly bears in California. We exterminated them 100+ years ago and that is a shame. But, black bears will try to eat your food. And in the Spring they will visit your site, get pissed off you are there, get pissed off your food is hung in a tree they can't get to, and crap in front of your tent in the middle of the night. I speak from experience.

I have seen many signs of Mountain Lions throughout the years and caught a glimpse here and there. The Mountain Lion is the type of animal that sees you. You don't see them.

Deer, snakes, coyotes, squirrels, turkeys, mountain lions, bears...and many other creatures live in the area.

Warning: in typical snow pack years (2017 and 2019 are exceptions), by August, the trout in front of the Huck 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 the South (Carlsbad) where we live. The reason for this document, really, is that last 20 miles and then the directions to hiking the trail and the Huck Site. The total hike to the "Huck site" is only 4.36 miles, but don't underestimate the heat and the ruggedness. It can take up to 2 hours or more to hike it depending on your fitness. You do have to be fit for that hike out. You have to gain back that 1100 feet in the 2 miles that you lost hiking into the canyon.

There are two major driving routes from the South:

1. Hwy 99 through Bakersfield to Kernville.
2. Hwy 395 through 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 might be 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. No matter what, Sherman pass closes for significant parts of the year because of snow.

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.

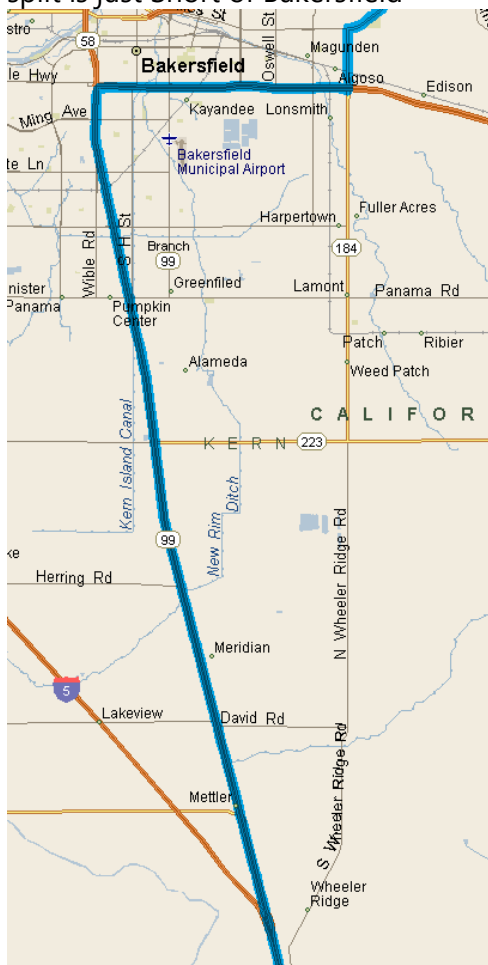
If you want to go from the west then get to Mountain Road 50 by way of Earlimart and Ducor.

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

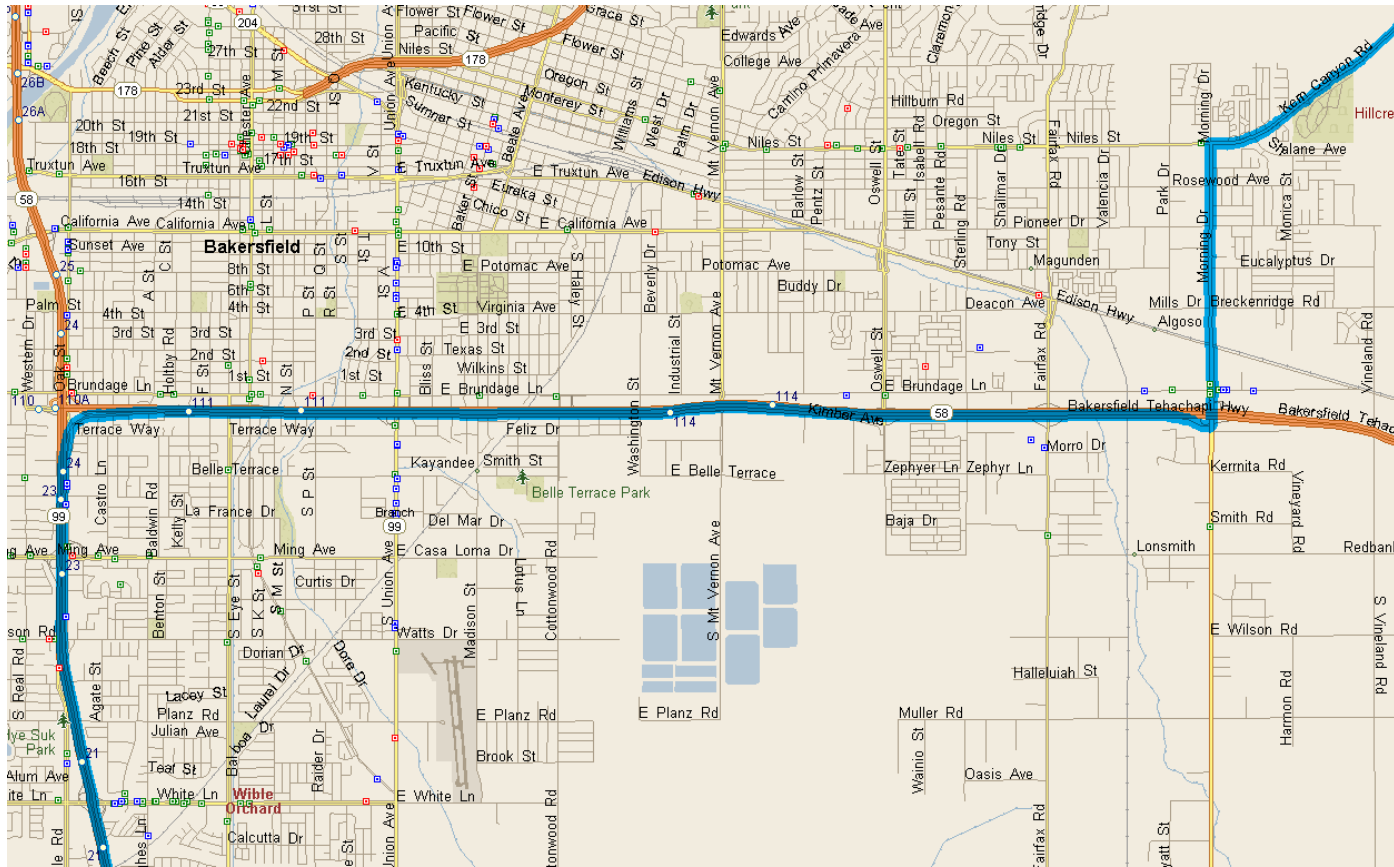
Then pick up the directions with a left turn on NF-2282 (that is the intersection is very close to the tiny city of Johnsondale, CA detailed below).

From Carlsbad (where I live):

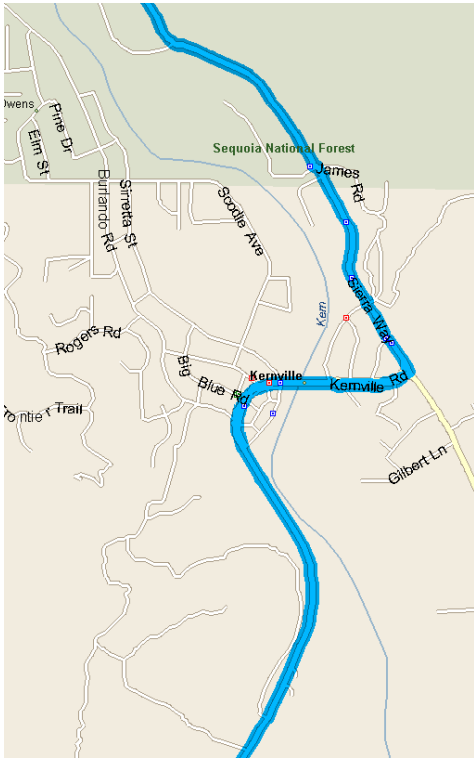
- Aim your GPS / smartphone for Kernville, CA
- Go North on 5 through Los Angeles, pass magic Mountain and veer right on the 99 where the 5/99 split is just Short of Bakersfield



- 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 by 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 you can camp there. there is a port-a-potty close to the trailhead.
- At mile 36.2 you'll see the sign for the turnoff to "George bush tree". I recently was told that every modern president has a giant sequoia named after them and George W Bush actually helicoptered in there and picked one. I have no idea if that is true and doubt I ever will find out or look at that tree with the river so close.
- 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. Warning: in 2019 this sign was knocked down so I propped it up against the trees so it could be seen. But, it can be easy to miss. It has also become faded over the years.



- Its 2.4 miles on the dirt road to the trailhead. When you get to the end by the trailhead you'll naturally go 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 back the dirt road loop.

Hiking / Backpacking Directions

Here is a great topo map with my site (Huck Site) and the trailhead and crossing bookmarked:
<https://caltopo.com/m/SQDD>

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. Even though it has taken fire damage, It's really hard to miss if you look in a southwestern direction.

The Altitude at the Trailhead is 5,844 feet.

The GPS coordinates of the trailhead are:

36°08'18.7"N 118°27'06.8"W

36.138532, -118.451888

<https://www.google.com/maps/place/36%C2%B008'18.7%22N+118%C2%B027'06.8%22W/@36.138532,-118.4540767,857m/data=!3m2!1e3!4b1!4m13!1m6!3m5!1s0x80c017262bd52671:0xa0ca7edad908ceab!2sForks+of+the+Kern+Trailhead!8m2!3d36.1380727!4d-118.4590118!3m5!1s0x0:0x0!7e2!8m2!3d36.1385319!4d-118.4518879>

The Huck Site

The Huck site is at:

36°08'29.1"N 118°24'39.6"W

36.141421, -118.411003

<https://www.google.com/maps/place/36%C2%B008'29.1%22N+118%C2%B024'39.6%22W/@36.141421,-118.4115502,214m/data=!3m2!1e3!4b1!4m13!1m6!3m5!1s0x80c017262bd52671:0xa0ca7edad908ceab!2sForks+of+the+Kern+Trailhead!8m2!3d36.1380727!4d-118.4590118!3m5!1s0x0:0x0!7e2!8m2!3d36.1414215!4d-118.4110029>

You'll lose 1,100 feet of altitude in the first 2.2 miles down into the canyon to the little Kern River crossing (which is part of the Forks of the Kern Trail). 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 when it's clear. On the way you'll pass the Golden Trout Wilderness sign (vandalized in 2016 and replaced by me and my SDF fly fishing club in 2021). You will get many peeks / pictures opps of the main fork of the Upper Kern River 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 easily 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 with the Kern River) or Left / North (up river) along the Little Kern 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 part of the actual trail). In drought years it's 8" of water; simple crossing. Many do it in bare feet. In big snowpack years in the spring during runoff it can be a challenge at waist high or higher. You'll typically find walking sticks on both sides from prior hikers that will help you cross in bare feet. I bring sandals for the cross. There is frequently a rope strung across the little Kern River 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



My buddy Meredith goes about 5'9" 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 / hot spring like activity bubbling up on the left. There is a lot of that on the Upper Kern River.



The trail parallels the north side of the river for 2.2 more miles before you make it to the "Huck 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 300 yards. And you'll see the remnants of a burnt down cabin with a long cement picnic bench. I have camped here a few times when the Huck site is occupied. (And in 2019 was visited there by 4 different rattlesnakes so I call that "Rattlesnake Camp"). Once the trails rejoin, it's 11 minutes at a normal pace to the "Huckaby" site at gps coords: 36°08'28.9"N 118°24'39.5"W

This is the view to the "huckaby site" looking up stream 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 Huck site is.



- At mile 4.36 you'll hit the "Huck Site" site on your right. You'll see the fire pit I have built up and cleaned over the years 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:



Forks of the Kern Trail Landmarks

I like to take the trail on in sections. I know it's not everyone, but if I'm struggling, I can use the physical landmarks on the trail without staring at my gps to see how far I have to go or how far I have went. These physical landmarks also help first timers or people that don't carry electronics on the trail to help monitor progress.

From the Trailhead:

- ~ .5 miles: Switch back #1

- ~ .75 miles: Switch back #2
- 1.1 miles: "Welcome to the golden trout wilderness sign"
- ~ 1.5 miles: The big overhang rock
- ~ 1.75 miles: Switchback #3
- ~ 2 miles: Little kern crossing
- ~ 2.5 miles: is the old broken water gauge
- ~ 2.8 miles: "Shady point site"
- ~ 3.5 miles: "Tokyo Bay" – you can't miss it. it's a huge 360 degree eddy where you can often see not only trout rising, but huge trout in the water.
- ~ 4.36 miles: The "Huck site"
- ~ 4.5 miles is the awesome run before rattlesnake creek
- ~ 4.75 miles: up the mountain / rattlesnake creek
- ~ 5.5 miles: the awesome dry fly run on the other side of the mountain
- ~ 6 miles: long thin section in low water which would be an easy cross in low CFS and a great place to camp on the other side of the river
- ~ 6.5 miles: sand camp
- ~ 7.5 miles: Burnt down Cabin
- ~ 8.39 miles: The meadow / Kern Flats
- ~ 10 miles: The bridge

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 potential 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 where you cannot safely stand in the river. The upper Kern is best fished standing in the river. Unfortunately, even in lower flows there are many places you just can't stand in the river; the current is too strong. 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 typically only comes to the experienced.

I'm a pretty good cast.... And I still lose a 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 at the bottom of the river....and then there are the overgrown trees on both sides.... I love to take the risk of making that perfect cast to a 4" square patch of water where I know a fish must be holding. 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 mid cast 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 (indicator) in the Upper Kern. If you are an intermediate or above you really shouldn't throw the bobber...because you don't need to. A big (size 4) huck hopper will stay up all day and are easy to pull out of the trees with heavy test like 1x to 3x if you get them stuck.

European Nymphing will produce results for sure. I would never do it on the Upper Kern. It's just not as fun as always having a dry fly in the mix. And I just love to cast. That's just me. Tenkara is not fly fishing but, you could hook a lot of fish in some of the reachable runs because it's so wildly effective and easy to do. Landing any fish of size with a tenkara rod on the Upper Kern would be very difficult. Breaking a tenkara rod fighting a big fish would be more likely.

The Upper Kern River is typically crystal-clear snow melt runoff. It drains Mount Whitney, the tallest mountain in the contiguous United States and the Sierra Nevada, with an elevation of 14,505 feet.

Flashy attractor nymphs will do well in sunny crystal-clear conditions. I never fail with [size 16 huck-bow warriors](#) or a [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 a crippled wing case and 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.

Lately I have been fishing the perdigon equivalents of the cripples I developed with even more success. You can purchase them off my site [here](#).

My typical fishing prescription for the upper kern is quite simple for the heart of the season: hopper / dropper until the evening hatch. Then I throw size 18 anything.

In general terms, especially later in the season, the farther up river you go the better you will do. It's the first 2 miles from the confluence of the rivers, that gets the most fishing pressure. Just know that the fishing below the confluence is pretty darn good because it rarely gets any pressure. Plus there is no trail that goes downriver.

At 250 CFS there are plenty of places you can cross the river safely. Under 150 CFS (drought year) 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 in that low water. It makes for very effective fly fishing. Just understand The Upper Kern River can approach 20,000 CFS and back all the way down under 300 CFS in a big year. That makes it a dangerous river in high flows.

Hot Tip: Because it's such a tough crossing the river rarely gets fished from the "other side". If you can safely get across the river, and you are comfortable casting from the "left handed side" of the river you will be able to hit spots in the river that are impossible from the other side; spots that rarely get fished.

As you hike the forks trail (even in the shoulder seasons of April and in November) you'll see the quantity of grass hoppers and get a pulse for size and color. I typically throw a [size 4 huck hopper](#) on the upper kern in a dry-dropper configuration. And a smaller Huck (8-10-12) when a dropper is not needed. There have been plenty of times when the hopper fishing is so good I have done a double Huck Hopper config where a size 4 is in front and a much smaller one, like a 12 trails it by 18".

Even the little trout try to get size 4 Huck Hoppers in their mouth. In fact, the smaller 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.

Tim Huckaby's typical rig for the Upper Kern River

My typical rig is a 3x leader with a size 4 Huck Hopper on top, followed by 3 feet of 4X tippet then a size 8 black Beldar stonefly nymph imitation (a rubber legs is a good substitute), followed by another 18 inches of 5x tippet and a size 16 Huck Green Caddis Nymph Cripple.

If you are an experienced fly fisher, you may be saying to yourself: "that is crazy and asking for disaster." Yes, it is. Overhead casting that rig is difficult; roll casting even harder. The 3 tungsten beads in the beldar stone don't make it any easier. Without wind it's barely manageable. I typically lose flies two ways: hung up on the bottom or when the wind blows me off course mid cast. I lose flies, but I do catch a lot of fish on the upper Kern. I'm an expert there. I take the risk because I think it's worth it. I respect people that don't. I can tie up a new rig quickly upon losing the entire thing. Yes, that is frustrating. But, IMHO you have to take risks if you want the big rewards. Yes, a long 3 fly rig like the one I do is not only difficult to cast, but also risky to losing flies. Yes, it's deadly the entire season.

Flies that work on the Upper Kern River

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 tens of 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

There is one fly I tie that I don't sell on the www.TimHuckaby.com/shop site. It's the Beldar Stone. It is deadly. It matches the naturals and gets down quickly because of the 3 tungsten beads. Consequently, it drags the bottom fly down quickly with it. The Size 4 Huck Hopper is buoyant enough to keep afloat with the Beldar stone 3-4 feet under it. The Beldar Stone is perfect for the runs of the Upper Kern where the concentration of the fish hunker down.

I'm torn on selling it on the site because:

1. I tie it pretty much exactly like the recipe. There's nothing uniquely mine in it other than coating the tungsten cone with Loon Black Soft Head to make it look "buggier".
2. It's a royal pain in the ass to tie. It's an "advanced tiers only" type fly. It takes forever to tie. There are 3 separate thread cuts and reties, two wing cases and 3 tungsten beads in the process. It is easy to screw up. But, honestly, the screwed-up ones work pretty well too.
3. It's expensive to tie; it includes a tungsten cone and two tungsten beads.

So, as of March of 2020 I have decided to sell it on the site as part of the "Upper Kern River Special". But, not individually because I'd have to charge a lot for it and feel like I couldn't effectively keep up with the demand for it. If interested in buying it separately just email me at TimHuckaby@Hotmail.com

5. The Beldar Stone (Size 8):



The evening hatch: Now, for most of the 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. Any mayfly imitation will work. In June & July you'll typically get about 30-90 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. Trust me. My wife and her girlfriends do just fine and frequently catch fish on a dry fly swing. A trailer of an emerger is killer too. It is at these times where it's best to teach kids or beginners how to fly fish because there are much higher percentages of reward. 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 always carry too many flies and too many lines. I can't help it.

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 trip. 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 in my life. The upper Kern was one of those times. There is nothing more embarrassing for a fly fisherman than chasing his rod down the river.

Wading Staffs & Trekking Poles

I'm that guy who said, "I will never use trekking poles. That is for old people." Then I met Kyle Focht from the TimHuckaby.com site. Kyle is half my age and an excellent fly fisherman. We have now fished the forks together a few times and will for many years. Kyle, again, half my age, is the one that taught me the advantage of using trekking poles when hiking with a backpack. I vividly remember him lecturing me, "It's that surge of power you get from them." Now I can't live without them.

Well, guess who is the guy that said, "I will never use a wading staff. That is for old people." Yep. Me. Historically if I faced a tough cross on the Kern, I'd simply grab a tree branch to help me across. That is before one of my dear friends, much my senior, in the San Diego fly fishing club told me that a wading staff is for much more than just crossing the river safely. He told me the wading staff allows you to move upriver in the water against the current swiftly so that you don't waste time getting to fishing the next run. And now I'm hooked. Having that wading staff so handy at my side allows me to cover miles of water and not wasting any time gingerly in transit up river. It also allows me to plow through current that I normally would skip by getting out of the river, hiking up the bank and then back down a few hundred feet ahead. I will never fish the Upper Kern without a wading staff again. It truly is a god send for that river.

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 that typically goes off in April. 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/November, 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 well 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 end of Spring in smaller sizes like size 8-12. 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...me watching the entire process...from 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 in a drought year or low snowpack year 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 to nymphing. 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.

Know this:

- On November 13-14 of 2019 I had two of the best days of fishing ever on the Upper Kern. But, not a single rise during the day.
- On November 12-15 of 2021 I had two of the best fly fishing days ever on the Upper Kern including multiple rises to huck hoppers.

Have Fun and don't hesitate to contact me. -tim