



CENTRAL SIERRA

Vacation in the Islands

EBBETTS PASS LAKES OFFER STELLAR PADDLE-IN CAMPING

Story by John Coale • Photos by Paul Mariottini

You don't need a 5-hour flight, a thousand bucks and a couple mai tais to enjoy a vacation to the islands. You just need to set your sights higher ... to the Central Sierra.

In the Ebbetts Pass/Highway 4 region near Bear Valley, a concentration of island-dotted alpine lakes await paddlers with an aloha spirit. Swim, fish, paddle, hike and camp under azure Sierra skies and starlit nights. Smooth granite rocks invite sun bathing and clear cool waters make for an energy-restoring dip. And with a kayak or canoe you'll be able to access remote sites with ease, while bringing a few luxuries – like real food and your favorite libations – that would be fool's gold if you were backpacking.

Here John Coale, author of "Paddling the California Highlands: A Quiet Water Guide to Paddler's Paradise," gives you the lowdown on paddling this uncrowded yet easily accessible region of the Sierra.

Lake Alpine, Spicer Meadows, Union & Ulica Reservoirs

DESCRIPTION

This high-mountain area along the Stanislaus River near Bear Valley makes for a great paddling vacation. All these island-dotted, high-mountain lakes sit nestled among the granite peaks of the Sierra Nevada. Water skiing and personal watercraft (the powered kind) are prohibited on all the lakes, making this a haven for paddlers.

Spicer Meadow Reservoir sits at 6,418 feet elevation. At 277 surface acres, Spicer Meadow is the biggest of these lakes and provides the best long-distance paddling for the area. (The lake is much larger than the map indicates.)

Ulica and Union Reservoirs sit right next to each other at 6,850 feet elevation. Both these lakes allow dispersed lake-side camping, as long as you follow the rules posted on the bulletin boards. So, paddle out, find a spot and set up camp.



Spicer Meadows Reservoir



A fine way to spend the dog days of summer.

“This area truly deserves the title of ‘Paddler’s Paradise.’ It’s so pretty here, you’ll have to pinch yourself to make sure you’re not dreaming.”

Lake Alpine, right above Bear Valley, sits at 7,320 feet elevation with 180 surface acres. This is the most developed of these lakes, and the place is often packed in the summer months. There is a strictly enforced 10 mph speed limit on the lake (try not to paddle too fast; you wouldn’t want to get a ticket).

This area truly deserves the title of “Paddler’s Paradise.” It’s so pretty here, you’ll have to pinch yourself to make sure you’re not dreaming.

CAMPING

All these campgrounds or lodges have tables, fireplaces, toilets and piped water for a fee, no reservations: Stanislaus River, 25 sites; Spicer Meadow, 60 sites; Silver Tip, 24 sites, flush toilets; Lake Alpine Lodge, 5 sites, flush toilets, showers; Pine Marten, 33 sites, flush toilets; Silver Valley, 25 sites, flush toilets. Utica and Union Reservoirs allow dispersed camping; follow the posted rules of etiquette.

DIRECTIONS

For Spicer Meadow, Utica and Union reservoirs: take Hwy 49 to the town of Angels Camp, go east on Hwy 4 about 32 miles, go southeast on Spicer Meadow Road (Rd. 7N01), follow the signs to the lakes and campgrounds. For Lake Alpine: continue east on Hwy 4 about 3 miles

past the town of Bear Valley, the lake is right next to the road on the south side.

RESOURCES

Stanislaus National Forest map from USFS, Tamarack and Spicer Meadow topo maps from USGS. Purchase maps online at <http://store.usgs.gov> or www.fs.fed.us/recreation/nationalforeststore/

ADVISORY

Afternoon winds can be very strong, especially on Spicer Meadow Reservoir. Winter snows make this area inaccessible until June. Bring your own water.

INFORMATION

Stanislaus National Forest: 209-795-1381, Lake Alpine Resort: 209-753-6358 Bear Valley Adventure Company: 209-753-2834

John Coale, a chimney sweep who lives in Nevada City, has self-published two books on quiet water paddling, “Paddling the California Highlands” and “Paddling the California Coast.” His books are available from your local paddlesports or REI store, or direct from the author/publisher at Changing Sky Publications, P.O.Box 1390, Cedar Ridge, CA 95924. Email the author at sybook@calis.com.

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