

The Humboldt River Basin

By Larry Hyslop



The Humboldt River system stretches across Nevada

Conditions have changed along the Humboldt River since the 1800s. This understatement is especially true regarding travel across Nevada. In the 1800s, the Humboldt provided a route through a dry region. Today, two sets of railroad tracks and an interstate highway travel beside this important river but its water is often out of sight and out of mind.

The river's beginning is generally regarded as a set of springs on the edge of Wells. From there, it flows 310 miles to the Humboldt Sink southwest of Lovelock, dropping 1,675 feet as it does. Actually, 310 miles is map distance, but the river easily flows twice that distance due to the many meanders along its length.

Palisade, west of Carlin, splits the river basin into upper and lower parts. Upstream, tributaries add water to the river, swelling its size as it flows toward Palisade. Downstream, tributaries add little water to the river and evaporation causes it to shrink as it flows toward its end. Above Palisade, the river drops 740 feet in elevation over 92 miles, at a gradient of just over eight feet per mile. Below Palisade, the river drops 940 feet over 218 miles, at a gradient of 4.3 feet per mile.

Ten miles downstream from Wells, Bishop Creek adds water from the northeast and ten miles farther, at Deeth, the Marys River enters from the north. This tributary begins in the Jarbidge Mountains 56 miles away. Marys River is considered the river's true source, since water in its headwaters travels the longest distance to the river's end.

Twelve miles farther down the Humboldt, at Halleck, Lamoille Creek enters from the southeast, rising along the northwestern slopes of the Ruby Mountains. Eight miles farther, the North Fork of the Humboldt enters from the north, rising from the Independence Mountains 70 miles away.

Twenty-four miles farther downstream, after passing through Elko, the South Fork of the Humboldt flows in from the south. This tributary rises from the Diamond Mountains and flows 68 miles, gathering water along the western slopes of the Ruby Mountains.

Sixteen miles downstream, after passing through Carlin Canyon, Susie and Maggie Creeks flow in from the north. Maggie Creek rises from the Independence Mountains and the Tuscarora Mountains. It passes the largest gold mines in North America as it flows toward the Humboldt. Ten miles farther, the Humboldt River is at its largest size at Palisade.

Less than a mile downstream from Palisade, Pine Creek enters from the south after rising from the Roberts Mountains 64 miles away. Forty-six miles downstream, the Humboldt passes through Battle Mountain and the Reese River flows in from the south. This stream drains the largest area of any of the river's tributaries, rising from the Toiyabe Mountains and flowing 150 miles. However, seldom does any

of its water reach the Humboldt, Reese River water usually disappears 10 to 20 miles south of the Humboldt.

Sixty miles downstream, the Little Humboldt River (rarely) enters from the north, rising from the Santa Rosa Mountains 85 miles away. Six miles up the Little Humboldt, sand dunes generally swallow any flowing water. Only during extreme floods does the river top the dunes and enter the Humboldt.

Forty-eight miles farther, the Humboldt flows through Rye Patch Reservoir for nineteen miles. After exiting the dam, water flows through the river channel and a series of canals to Lovelock.

During good water years, water flows on, twelve more miles through the Toulon Drain into Toulon Lake and the Army Drain into Humboldt Lake. Six miles farther to the south, the “river” at this point enters the Humboldt Sink, where evaporation and percolation into the ground claims any remaining water.

During rare extreme flood years, water has overflowed the Sink and extended into the Carson Sink, mixing waters with the Carson River. These rare events form a continuous body of waters from the Jarbidge Mountains to the Sierra Nevada.

The information making up this column came from an interesting series of documents called the Humboldt River Chronology available at <http://water.nv.gov/mapping/chronologies/humboldt/>.

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