



Nisenan Nature and the Waters of Life

The Sierra Foothills beckon sanctuary seekers, intrepid hikers and dilly dalliers alike, especially during the sleeve seasons (spring and fall). Appreciation heightens when we realize that the beauty of the landscape endures partly due to the respect and insights its stewards exercised for the 20 centuries before industrialization. Indigenous Peoples Day in the autumn—or any spring day that shines with the brightness of rebirth—invites a grateful visit to the clear waters of the Nisenan homelands.

One such sunny October in Nevada City, crowds flocked together at the top of Broad Street and Coyote on Indigenous Peoples Day, contrasting with the rows of businesses and churches designed by hard rock mining engineers and their peers in 1850-1870.

Tourists delight in the charm of the 170-year-old historic district, but that commemoration marked a much longer history and a rich culture that preserved the natural beauties of the Sierra foothills. A large number of the town folk had turned out. Drummers throbbed the heartbeat of the dance as stars winked into view, heralding the events of the next three days, including a sunrise salmon run on the big waters. Deer Creek seemed to echo their approval just across the road.

Big rivers border the Nisenan homelands—the Sacramento, the Cosumnes and the Feather. Three forks of the Yuba cut through the middle. Then there are the tributaries. The people of Nevada City—or Ustomah—for centuries enjoyed a version of Deer Creek we may not recognize today for its size, force, and majesty. The waters fed diverse ecosystems that allowed towns and villages to unite and trade unique goods with coastal tribes and with one another. Cooperation reigned.

Greater public awareness has mitigated the confusion about whether the Nisenan were a subgroup of the Maidu. In reality, the Nisenan are a people of distinct heritage and culture with 13 different dialects, who inhabited the areas within the Yuba, Bear and American River watersheds.

Their movement to reclaim their homeland has grown steadily through events, radio shows, dedicated trails, restoration projects, education programs, and now a museum that tells the history of the rancherías, boarding schools and the submerging and reemergence of indigenous culture over time. (The art gallery on Broad Street was eventually converted into a Nisenan museum, tells the story, thanks to the efforts of Shelly Covert, the Tribal Council and unseen supporters.)

Woodrow Wilson created the Nevada City Rancheria in 1913 by executive order. The circumference of the Nisenan Rancheria extended from Sierra City on the northeast to Meadow Vista on the South to Grimes on the Southwest and Oroville on the northwest. Congress terminated all California Rancherías in 1964.

Traditionally, roundhouses, burial grounds and thriving communities centered around the Nevada County region. In fact, traditional Nisenan villages once dotted the Sierra foothills, from the mountainous areas of Downieville on the North to the grassy plains of Penn Valley to the wide waterways of Nevada City, to “Estom Yanim,” the Sacred Buttes of Marysville, on the Southeast.

Friendly trading made the region as peaceful as it was plentiful, for thousands of years. People had little use for the gold that attracted new settlers. Communities had all they needed to thrive. Today, a resurgence of interest in protecting cultural values has emerged, enhanced by the

consistent efforts of the Nisenan Tribal Council in Nevada City, California. (www.NevadaCityRancheria.org).

I hope you begin to experience these trails as the sanctuaries they have represented for so many who have walked these good roads long before we did.



Photograph by John Daly

Hirschman Trail

Directions from downtown Nevada City: From Broad Street, drive west (right at the V) to the stoplight at Highway 49. Turn left. Take the next right onto Cement Hill. Pass the overflow parking area. Watch for the marked trailhead.

You can also reach the trailhead by staying on the 20 freeway's right lane until you the Downieville exit. Turn left onto Highway 49. Pass the first stoplight, at North Bloomfield and the next street, Maidu. Watch for the third street, Cement Hill, and turn right.

This trailhead begins at the bottom of Cement Hill. You will see the sign and empty parking spaces across the road from the county jail complex. At least six cars can park at the trailhead.

A Nisenan Cement Hill burial ground consisted of a burn site where the Nisenan cremated their ancestors, along with all their belongings. The mourners cried and covered themselves with pitch. When it wore off, they moved on with their lives rather than continue to bemoan their loss, for fear of tying the spirit of the loved one to the earth. Each year, they would hold another "big cry" for all those lost and then would move on. Imagine the concept of detachment and the effort to recognize loss and also the need to let go.

Hirschman Pond provides benches, rocks and pondering posts for doing just that. It meanders through a neighborhood toward a still pond where the effects of hydraulic mining sadly remind us of the chapter in history that drove out the Nisenan, but the arc of the wings of the herons and the changing of the seasons and the mirror of the sunset on the pond remind us that every day nature forgives the decay and reinvents spring. Sitting here to read poems by indigenous writers, I have sometimes felt rejuvenated by even a half-mile walk. If you want to continue on, scramble up along the oak-lined trail that parallels the highway as long as you like, and turn back the way you came.

On Hirschman Pond, maintained by the Bear Yuba Land Trust, you can observe waterfowl, hear bird calls, watch for animal tracks, and explore natural rock formations before dipping into oak groves that parallel the highway for a longer there-and-back hike.

As you meditate on a bench and watch a heron stare into its reflection on the mirror of the lake, look up to locate evidence of the area's 31-year romance with hydraulic mining from 1853 – 1884, which stripped the facing hillside of its features but exposed the natural limestone behind it. For the land and the people, feel free to indulge in a big cry and move on.

This trail, if you were to walk it as the entrée to the rancheria, could include a drive to glimpse the forest vistas on the

plateau of Cement Hill, where Nisenan people looked out onto unfenced beauty during the rancheria years.

The beautiful vistas constituted a fitting attempt at restitution when President Woodrow Wilson granted the Nisenan official recognition in 1913 and created a space for those whose homeland had been destroyed during the gold rush. The 78-acre Waukaudok Rancheria was designed as a protection, but in 1958, the US government dissolved its relationships with 44 tribes and sold the land at auction. All but three tribes have had their recognition restored. The Nisenan are still waiting.

Many of the meadow grasses of earlier eras no longer exist, but the latticework of waterways, the fingertipped cedars, the gold-headed autumn oaks, the azure skies joyful with bird calls, the running turkeys, tiptoeing deer herds, scampering rabbit and fox and other soft-walking creatures all remind us of the endurance of the Nisenan way of life in preserving the sanctity of each ecosystem. While history robbed them of their freedom to roam, we now enjoy the freedom of staring into the mystery of a frothy river and knowing we can ever step into it twice. We cannot retract and repeat history, but we can honor the moment, the vastness and capriciousness of nature and the quiet vigilance of the Nisenan, while supporting the restoration of their homeland.

Tribute Trail

Directions: Start in Nevada City. Go up Broad Street until you see the alley beside the Nevada Theater. Turn left and drive to the bottom. This is your starting point. Find parking on Spring Street or follow the directions to move to the trailhead.

Deer Creek runs through Nevada City (Ustomah), once the largest Nisenan settlement in the region. High bridges loom above the creek, now a gentle compared to the splash it made in its heyday. The Angkula Seo, a suspension bridge, pays tribute to the Nisenan people. Markers share information and insights along the way. Further downstream, a Chinese Bridge recalls the sacrifices made by early Chinese settlers to the development of the city during the gold rush.

After a multi-year effort, in 2018, the Nevada City Council acquired a 32-acre property on Deer Creek and returned it to the Nisenan people. The Vice-Chair of the Nisenan's Nevada City Rancheria responded, saying: "This gives our people an opportunity to steward this land, to reengage in cultural practices, and create habitat for the animals of this beautiful creek and woodland property." *

Many options exist for enjoying the Deer Creek trail. You can walk the good from town, starting at the radio station (KVMR), and heading toward the Miner's Foundry, then turning right at the first street to add an extra mile's walk to the short path to the bridge. Or you can drive that same road, watching for the turnoff down a dirt road to a parking pullout on Champion Road. This is where the trailhead and its brief set of switchbacks begin. When you arrive at the dirt road, cross it and look for the Nisenan marker that leads to the suspension bridge. Enjoy the light on the waters from atop the swinging bridge.

You may choose to rest on the benches and return or, instead, move across to explore the full eight miles of trail.

To try another favorite option, walk from the bridge back to the Nisenan marker on the dirt mining road, then turn right. Down the dirt road a quarter mile, you'll find river access and enough solitude for reflection, with rocks as your lounge chair.

*SierraFund.org

Wolf Creek Trail

Directions: Several trail access points exist, but the main trailhead sits at the North Star Mining Museum, at 933 Allison Ranch Road. (Tip: From Grass Valley, start at the Del Oro Theatre on Mill Street and drive away from town, and you will reach the museum within minutes with only two intervening stop signs.)

Imagine a convention for spiritual healers and you will have a sense of the possibilities at a traditional roundhouse, a ceremonial center for social and spiritual renewal. Eighteen centers dotted the area from Chicago Park (Tayi) to Grass Valley (Daspah) in earlier times. When the Nisenan came together, they could attend ceremonies in the same locations where they offered their skills and traded goods such as black oak acorn, deer, antelope, soapstone and even eel. Every few years, people from the smaller villages gathered at the largest ceremonial and trading site, not far from the Nevada County Fairgrounds and the North Star Mining Museum.

Today, the best treasures lie beyond the modern day “trading post” near the museum. The Wolf Creek trailhead overlooks the river, with detours down to its shores, where tall conifers filter the light and a calm sets in that belies any evidence of a marketplace nearby.

Wolf Creek depicts its name well. It slithers through valleys of Southern Nevada County, showing up in expected places, raising its night cry after a winter storm, whispering from

spring to summer, or sometimes becoming silent when its waters dry up.

At the heart of land and water and even future mining disputes, Wolf Creek often inspires the protection efforts of the community. This recently upgraded Wolf Creek Trail itself became a labor of love after a monster storm and subsequent sinkhole led to the construction of dramatic new switchbacks down the slope to access the paved creek-side trail. Now multiple access points make it available to walkers from Grass Valley and Alta Sierra who want the delight of discovering respite beyond a city wall.

Start your sojourn at the North Star Mining Museum parking lot. Cross the first bridge you see, at the back of the parking lot, where the lacy ripples and rapids show best under birch fronds. The pathway follows closely along Wolf Creek then jogs briefly up to the sidewalk and back around again after the first quarter mile. It moves past the animal control center and a water treatment plant. (No worries here; you won't hear a thing nor find an opening in the fence to distract you to adopt a pet before continuing.)

The path continues to parallel the creek, passing behind a shopping development, a housing co-op, and back again. You can stay on the main route and or dip down and explore the restoration area closer to the creek or take the lower loop as a short detour.

Before the developments beyond the trail existed, Nisenan settlements thrived in neighborhoods of wildflowers (lupine, vetch, wild hyacinth, and tall yellow fiddleneck). Mixed

forests enriched the soils with the roots of willows, dogwood, and of course the mighty oak and its shower of acorns. Now, along this creek bed, school children from Grass Valley Charter have participated in a restoration project, along with the Wolf Creek Alliance and the Nisenan Tribal Council, to bring back some of the indigenous species. They have seeded the plants that once provided homes for birds, food for hunter-gatherers and beauty for all who fished or spent hours in contemplation here. Walk with care if you look for these plants along the banks of Wolf Creek. On the high road or the low road, savor the moments you spend getting in touch with all that nature originally intended for this riparian sanctuary.

Western Gateway Park

Directions: From Nevada City, take the 49/20 freeway south. Turn off on the Hwy 20/Marysville-Penn Valley exit and drive west. In about 6 miles, turn left onto Penn Valley Drive. In 0.8 miles, turn right to stay on that drive. Watch for the sign and turn right to your destination. (To take a detour to pasturelands, drive straight before turning onto Penn Valley.)

Penn Valley's open, stream-fed spaces and grasslands, its gentle climate and hallowed sunsets blessed a bevy of Nisenan communities at one time, in an area they called Pan Pakan. A Nisenan leader named Pamlo kept a roundhouse near Lake Wildwood until the early 1900s.

Western Gateway Park is one public venue where you can experience a short reverie to recapture the meditative sunsets that lured centuries of villagers and imagine those towns and what they left us. Embedded among homes and horse pastures and open fields, this park invites you to stop for a walk near a streambed and grassy meadow where you can collect your thoughts.

The open landscape reminds me of a day almost forty years ago when open vistas seemed more plentiful. I had resettled in a new region and wanted my children to bond with its beauties. One night after work, I said, "Let's drive to the wherever the sun sets." We set out on a long stretch of highway and pointed the car west, racing the sprawling rays of light across unfolding hills with wild grasses on either side, until the amber finally melted into indigo. Then we

pulled over to a roadside pasture, admired a white horse, and watched the first stars arise. Serenity seekers could try this today on a slow drive out Highway 20, detouring through pastureland and wending your way over to Western Gateway for a saunter around the park and a final meditative moment on a bench to wait for the gentle rise of a harvest moon. Pardon me for romanticizing, but that is truly the best way I have experienced this park.

Many of the meadow grasses of earlier eras no longer exist in Nisenan country, but as we tour the region through the seasons, the latticework of waterways, the fingertipped cedars, the gold-headed autumn oaks, the azure skies, rippling with bird calls, the running turkeys, tiptoeing deer herds, scampering rabbit and fox and other soft-walking creatures all remind us of the endurance of the Nisenan way of life in preserving the sanctity of these ecosystems.

While history robbed them of their freedom to roam, their culture of regenerative landscapes left a pristine beauty in their footfall for centuries. Hence, we now enjoy the quiet and stare into the mystery of frothy rivers even knowing we can never step into them twice. We cannot retract and repeat history, but we can honor the moment, the vastness and capriciousness of nature and the quiet vigilance of the Nisenan, while supporting their recognition and the restoration of their homelands.

Buttermilk Bend

Directions: Coming from Nevada City or Grass Valley, take Hwy. 20 west towards Marysville. Turn Right on Pleasant Valley Road and go about 8 miles until you reach the covered bridge. Park in the second paid parking lot (across the road from the Covered Bridge). The trail begins at the upper end of the second paid parking lot, nearest the road. The trail is 1.2 miles long, but allow some time to view the river, from above or below.

Beyond Penn Valley, to the north, lies the basin of picturesque farms and fields known as Pleasant Valley, graced by the South Yuba River Park and its beloved landmark, the Buttermilk Bend Trail. This river basin has been fiercely protected from damming and development with good reason: "Pleasant" doesn't begin to describe the place for those who come early in the morning on just the right spring day.

Plant harvesting for meals, food caches and textile construction in this valley enriched the lifestyle of the Nisenan, just as a day here will enhance yours. The park's website lists 32 plant species you may spot in the springtime, especially in a year of just-right temperatures and well-timed rainfall. Interpretive markers along the trail will help you identify the many blossoms. If you wait a minute too long, however, they will wilt away and so might you. If this occurs, return in the fall for a different crop of blooms to inspect.

In either case, you'll still have the Yuba to admire, where we have observed large schools of fish holding conference in their underwater auditorium, as we perched on our rocky lookout point above, from a pullout on the trail. Chinook salmon and rainbow trout would have made this a seasonal paradise for valley residents of earlier centuries, just as the place holds magic for so many locals today.

Before leaving the park, stop to admire the newly reconstructed covered bridge that ultimately made foot travel a viable alternative to ferrying downstream. The barn of antiquated farm equipment also highlights the tilling and traveling choices that emerged when the careful practices of early Nisenan conservationists gave way to the technologies of post-Gold Rush settlers.

Alan Thiesen Trail

Directions: From Highway 20/49, travel south of Nevada City. Take the southernmost Grass Valley exit, to McKnight. Turn east at the top of the ramp, cross the freeway, and veer right (south) onto Dog Bar. Travel approximately four miles to the corner of Alta Sierra and Dog Bar. Look for a bronze deer and a marked trailhead. Parking space is available at the trailhead or down Alta Sierra off the road near the secondary trail.

An impressionistic painter might enjoy creating a “Where’s Wally” style mosaic of Alta Sierra’s autumnal landscape. Velvety brown deer herds twenty deep meld into a canopy of grasses, leaves and acorn piles, motionless but for the swishes of bronzed turkeys, gamboling by the dozens in military procession up the slopes. Dazzling ponds capture the sunlight in the middle. (Spotting a deer who escapes the panorama and leaps across the highway becomes essential when traveling through these parts.)

Now erase the years and imagine this scene as a cornucopia for a Nisenan village. Wanderlust included the task of stalking animals, acorns and waterways from one season to the next.

As your entrée to this part of the territory, the Alan Thiesen Trail offers a patch of public trail within the mosaic of deer-

scapes, developments, pastures, hilltops, ranches, and rapidly shifting habitats modern dwellers know as Alta Sierra.

The trail leads up into a shady woodland where you can rest and resume on a memorial bench before exploring a maze of trails, canals, bogs, and plant restoration projects maintained by the Bear Yuba Land Trust. You can even cross the golf course to where the riparian trail continues a bit before dissipating on private property.

Most people park in the lot at the corner of Dogbar and Alta Sierra, choosing the route to the left or the heart-pumping trail straight up to the canal. Sometimes I prefer turning onto Alta Sierra Drive and parking along the roadside, to begin by walking the short northwestern slope trail and listening for woodpeckers and bluebirds.

The Forest Service has placed birdhouses along this part of the trail to provide nesting sites for the mountain bluebird, an indigenous species that cannot build its own nest and thus commonly lives in woodpecker holes. In recent years, interloper species have invaded the woodpecker's graciously constructed homes. These birds—the English Sparrow and the European Starling—must also rely on scavenged nesting sites. Consider them European tourists who stayed.

Shakespeare enthusiasts, a century ago, released into Central Park every bird species mentioned in one of the bard's plays. These non-natives quickly multiplied and migrated west in a fit of manifest destiny. Meanwhile, the beautiful indigenous mountain bluebird deserves advocates

in its effort to thrive in its homeland. You may read certain parallels into this story, and not by coincidence.

In our desire to reach out, to explore, and to become one family of living beings, we must take care to *embrace* but not *displace* those who came before us.

Buttes Views

Directions: To walk or ride the Sutter Bike Trail for views of Spirit Mountain (Sutter Buttes), travel along Hooper Road in Yuba City. On a bike, you can go as far as nine miles to Acacia Road, or just walk this good road and turn around again.

Sometimes a mountain is just a mountain, but sometimes there is more to the story. Safe from cars, the Sutter View bike trail showcases what the seasons held for the land of the living: pastoral grasslands in spring, berry harvests in summer, migratory birds in the fall, and a views of Sutter Buttes, or “Estom Yanim,” the bluffs overlooking Peaceful Valley, where evidence of acorn milling still exists.

The rest of the story: In Nisenan legend, spirits entered and exited the world in a roundhouse on that mountaintop. They sometimes tricked people into departing too soon. Consequently, only well-trained spiritual physicians ventured to the top of the Buttes. The stars of the Milky Way represented the eternal souls who departed, making this mountain, literally, a pathway to heaven.

Now that the world’s population has grown and, along with it, our understanding of the unseen galaxies beyond even what the James Web telescope will reveal, it stands to reason that our population of human ancestors may rival the number of available stars—bodies of stardust created

light years ago. Perhaps more than we realized, the metaphorical explanations of the ancestors were grounded in logic.

Your own journey portends breathtaking views of the buttes that still inspire introspection today, with or without a panorama of stars overhead.

Snow Mountain Trail

Directions: From Nevada City, enter Hwy 20 and drive northeast toward Tahoe. After five miles, you will see a market on your left and the old Five-Mile House on the right, at Scotts Flat Road. Turn and look for parking on the road or in any allowable spaces in these parking lots.

Land management questions perplex forest managers today, as they debate preferences of conservation versus preservation. Logging and burn policies have implications for the increasing intensity of wildfire and for the regeneration of forests and their replenishment as carbon sinks.

For 2,000 years, the Nisenan people exhibited an expertise in land management and plant knowledge that maintained the equilibrium of the diverse ecosystems within this region. Their practices supported dense, thriving populations more efficiently than almost any hunter-gatherer society on the continent, through prescribed burns, well-timed pruning, and seasonal gathering. Knowing how to harvest and store nutritious food in years of plenty secured their food cache and trading capacity through the leaner years.

At each elevation, they also varied their construction strategies to match comfort needs with available resources.

When valley dwellers moved up to the foothills in the summer to hunt, fish, or harvest plants, they left their underground, earthen homes and built new “summer homes.” They collected willow limbs to frame these huts and insulated them with grass or tule. At higher elevations, they shingled the frames with slabs of pine or cedar, for extra warmth.

Willow Valley showcases that historic trek from the foothills to the valley, where sun-dappled groves and the murmur of waters hearken back to a time when a woodland called upon all your senses not only to appreciate the serenity but to ensure the sustainability of your people.

Step away from the busy highway and listen to the murmur of the waters on your way from the foothills into town as you enjoy the Mountain Ditch Trail, which begins at the top Scotts Valley Road, (near where the market and the former Five-Mile House market the turnoff to the lake). This mile and a half route winds through the Nisenan territory of Willow Valley, from Highway 20 down to Willow Valley Road. You can either ride or walk the route, but if you walk, you may need to step aside for a biker once or twice. At the bottom of the trail, you can cross the street and head into town, to rest at the Pelton Wheel on Coyote Street. It would make sense to park one car in town and drive with a likeminded partner up to the top to begin your sojourn.

Bear River Campground

Directions: Take Highway 20/49 to the Brunswick Road exit. Turn left and drive 3 miles. At the stop sign, merge left onto Highway 174. After nine miles, take Tokayana Way and Milk Ranch Road into the campground at 2500 Campground Road in Colfax. Burn scar areas may be closed to the public, but trails remain open.

Colfax, before the fire of 2021, feared not smoke but water--in the form of a dam. The lovely stretch of river meandering through Nisenan territory held special meaning as an ancestral homeland. A new reservoir would mean displacing residents as well as filling up a canyon laden with history, just as the water of Hetch Hetchy seemed to fill a beautiful canyon with tears, despite the need for water in the growing San Francisco cosmopolis in 1923. Now, almost a century later, with droughts on the rise, conservation was becoming more popular as reservoirs went dry.

By 2015, the frequency of droughts had pushed conservations to question the viability of new reservoirs versus extreme water conservation measures in the West. The big construction projects of the WPA, such as Oroville Dam and Boulder Dam (Hoover Dam) made sense when hydroelectric power was plentiful, but now, after paving over so many natural resources, some of the dams showed crumbling infrastructure or sat nearly empty, without enough

melting snowpack to fill their bellies. What's more, those bellies were sometimes filled with memories of communities, ancestors and sacred places that dwelt there long before any talk of pouring in the concrete.

A drought had recently occurred when plans emerged to build Centennial Dam on the Bear River, a tributary of the Yuba. People wrote letters and lobbied officials. Many walked the good road to pray for preservation. One day they quietly gathered at the Bear River campground to hold a vigil. Women came together in a drum circle. Families raised their cries to protect the river, to honor nearby burial grounds as well as the *new* life it had bequeathed for so long.

Walking the path from the campground parking lot to the shoreline, I breathed in a deep peace and wondered how many others felt the same sensation on this short pathway to the campground. The quiet hush of maples leaning in the water, the delicate wildflowers fervently clutching canyon walls left a catch in my throat.

A few years later, the River Fire would pose another threat to this sanctuary, but hopefully, the mother trees would wield their regenerative power and new nitrogen would reincarnate the wildflowers. Once submerged, however, such a place would be forgotten, just as the Muddy River swallowed the memories of a town 500 miles away that no longer exists. My own ancestors were buried under those waters, with all the cactus flowers that enshrouded them.

For now, at least, the voices of the people have spoken. The reservoir remains an idea. The fire frayed the edges of the park. The Bear River still saunters through the canyon.

Visit the campground to see what new sprouts have pushed up through the cleavage among the stones, to note where the ancient patterns of life still give purpose to the water's flow. Stand on the shores and feel grateful if the rocks remain cool but dry beneath your feet. I will leave you with the words I wrote in in 2017 in the hope of protecting these gentle waters.

Reservoir in a River Town

Bear River, little sister to the Yuba,
For countless generations,
you have washed and wept
over the feet and the fears of ancestors.

You fed the cottonwood,
sang the salmon to their home,
informed the meadows as you pleased
(for rivers have their own rules).

My great aunts' grave lies under a dam
far away where a city's tinsel now replaces stars.
Will they bury you in thrashing light, along with
all whose tombs align your shores?

To whom will you bequeath
your white and gold medallions of

baby's breath, verbena, poppies
when you cease to run free?

Who will catch the mossy arms
of maples who walk with you,
hail you, stand tall,
as the flow submerges them?

Who will trap your teardrops
in a shell of sediment?
Who will close the eyes
of this river? I cannot.



