

TRAVEL

# Why ‘water walks’ are becoming a trend for California hikers



Nina Gordon-Kirsch of Oakland hikes near the headwaters of the Mokelumne River in Alpine County. Photos by Steve German / Special to The Chronicle

By **Gregory Thomas**

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The last leg of Nina Gordon-Kirsch’s monthlong hiking journey was a 10-mile ascent up the western flank of the Sierra Nevada to a pair of gleaming

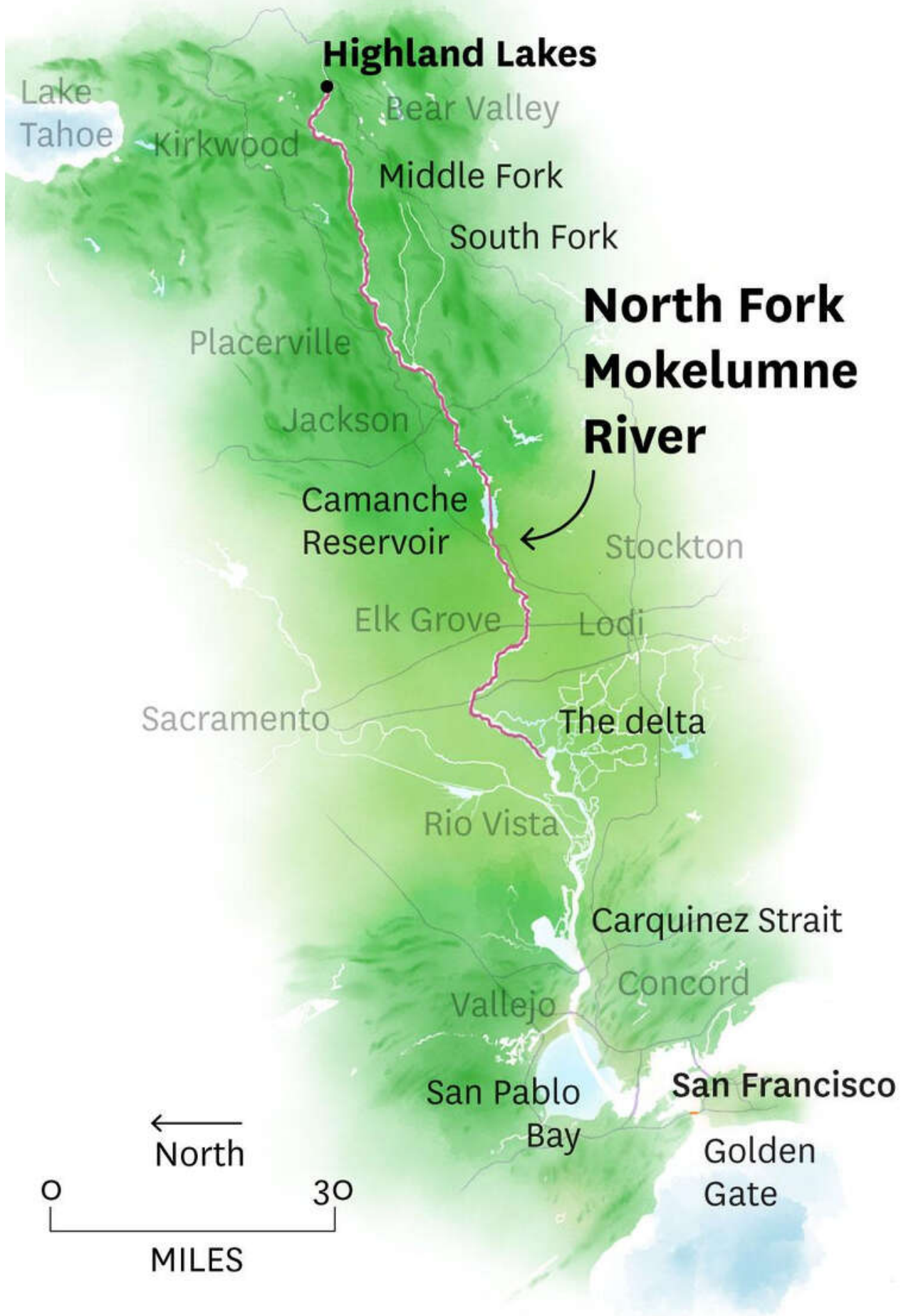
alpine lakes near Ebbetts Pass, about equidistant between [Lake Tahoe](#) and [Yosemite National Park](#).

As she neared one of the lakes, she dropped her pack and sprinted along a drainage until she found a small outflow, then collapsed at the water's edge. That is the point where the lake spills into the headwaters of the North Fork of the Mokelumne River, which supplies drinking water to 1.4 million customers in the East Bay, 180 miles away — including Gordon-Kirsch, a teacher who lives in Oakland.

“After years of this vision and weeks of walking, I finally arrived at this life source,” she said later. “I felt like I was a salmon swimming home upstream.”

The moment capped a 33-day sojourn along the length of the Mokelumne — a river used for hydropower and agriculture as well as drinking — that Gordon-Kirsch had long planned to gain a greater understanding of the water flowing to her tap. She's not alone: California's complicated relationship with water, strained by [historic drought](#), is driving all kinds of people to embark on “water walks.” The practice involves tracing a river or waterway “from sea to source,” or in reverse direction, under one's own power, in an effort to gain perspective on our complex water supply.

# From source to sea



# Map: John Blanchard / The Chronicle

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These pilgrimages often take weeks.

Some take the form of recreational wilderness expeditions with a conscientious bent. A retired sheriff in Amador County, for instance, recently finished hiking, mountain biking and kayaking down the Mokelumne, through the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta and to the Golden Gate Bridge, in part to raise funds for a conservation nonprofit working on the river.

Other journeys come to fruition as long-distance political demonstrations involving hundreds of activists. Inherent in each undertaking are spiritual qualities that hark back to ancient indigenous practices known by many as “healing walks.”



Nina Gordon-Kirsch (left) of Oakland hikes along Highway 4 in Alpine County, accompanied by Eva Orbuch on her way to the Mokelumne River headwaters. The pilgrimage took her 33 days.

Steve German / Special to The Chronicle

Just recently, on the shores of West Marin County, the Winnemem Wintu tribe completed its seventh annual “prayer journey,” a 300-mile ceremonial excursion that begins in Redding. Participants walk, bike, horseback ride, paddle and boat the route of a traditional salmon run from spawning beds in the waters near Mount Shasta down the Sacramento River and out to the Pacific. They hope to “wake up the waterway” and restore the salmon run, said Winnemem Wintu Tribal Chief Caleen Sisk.

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“Our creation story says that whatever happens to the salmon happens to us,” Sisk said. Pollution, agricultural claims and poor water management stymie salmon on the Sacramento, she said.

Historically, indigenous communities whose lands are around major California water sources have been denied equitable access or outright exploited for the resource, Sisk said. For years, she said, her tribe — which is based in the Shasta Lake area — has been vying for access to sacred sites around the headwaters of the Sacramento River, one of the state’s biggest rivers.



The Run4Salmon “prayer journey” closes at Muir Beach. The event coordinated by the Winnemem Wintu tribe in Northern California is a 300-mile excursion down the Sacramento River to the Pacific Ocean to help restore the river.  
Provided by Run4Salmon / Winnemem Wintu Tribe

The river “has a spirit itself,” she said. “The reason why the water is damaged stems from people owning it.”

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A Sonoma County nonprofit group called [Walking-Water](#) organized a similar demonstration, held incrementally between 2015 and 2017. Dozens of water activists participated in a 600-mile walk from Mono Lake in Mono County to Long Beach designed to raise awareness about the impact to the Paiute people of the Eastern Sierra of diverting water from the region through the Los Angeles Aqueduct.

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Water walks are about “how we restore our relationships to water,” said Kate Bunney, Walking-Water co-founder and coordinator. “For many, it’s about learning where our water comes from and bearing witness to what’s happening with it.”

The hodgepodge of landowners and water rights holders can make navigating a river very difficult.



“The logistics are so much harder than the physical journey,” Gordon-Kirsch said of her Mokolunne hike.





Nina Gordon-Kirsch takes a dip in Lower Highland Lake, the source of the Mokelumne River, at the end of her journey up the river.

Steve German/Special to The Chronicle

Stretches of the Mokelumne, whose name comes from a Miwok term meaning “people of the fishnet,” flow through public forestlands and river canyons. While open to hikers, those areas required off-trail bushwhacking. Elsewhere, the water passes through reservoirs and hydropower plants with strict public access rules. Gordon-Kirsch spent a chunk of time before her hike seeking permission from farmers to cross their lands.

“Farmers were like, ‘Sure, I love what you’re doing. Thanks for teaching people about the water,’” she said.

For several years, Gordon-Kirsch co-taught a class on water resources — rights, agricultural uses and environmental justice issues — at the Urban School in the Haight- Ashbury. She left that position to hike the Mokelumne, and she intends to put together a 25-minute educational documentary film about the river with footage she collected along her journey.



Top: Nina Gordon-Kirsch pumps water from a well at Bloomfield Campground. Above: hikes along California Highway 4 in Alpine County, accompanied by Eva Orbuch on her way to the Mokelumne River headwaters. Photos by Steve German / Special to The Chronicle

“I want to bring it to schools in the East Bay to learn about this precious resource so that kids can put a name to the water that comes out of their tap

and instill a sense of belonging to these resources,” Gordon-Kirsch said.

During her trip, Gordon-Kirsch carried a cloth flag that read, “Where does your water come from?” As she posed the question to people she met along the way, she noticed a clear distinction: In East Bay cities and suburbs, most people weren’t sure. But as she ventured into the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta and past the farms and vineyards of the Central Valley, where water allocations are hotly debated and cutbacks are imminent, the knowledge base is much deeper.

“A big eye-opener has been the privilege we enjoy of having our water coming out of the tap without having to think about it,” she said. “Because, for others, it doesn’t work that way.”



Lower Highland Lake, the source of the North Fork of the Mokelumne River, reflects the afternoon clouds. The river provides water for 1.4 million customers in the East Bay.

Steve German/Special to The Chronicle

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**Correction** : *The last name of Kate Bunney, Walking-Water co-founder and coordinator, was misspelled in a previous version of this story.*

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By **Gregory Thomas**



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Top

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---

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---

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