Practical Clues: What to Look for When Gold Prospecting in the Mountains, Streams, or Desert

Simply put, gold comes from rocks. Huge rocks, in the form of mountains, are pushed upward by heat and pressure from deep inside the earth, and then the rocks are worn down by wind and water. Through water erosion, gold often becomes separated from the rocks, forming the rich placer deposits we're all looking for.

The kind of mountains that are most likely to contain gold have been subjected to earthquakes. Earthquakes produce "faults" which are places where the tension of the growing mountain became so great that part of the ground pulled away, leaving a long scar. Locating a fault line or "outcrops" (ordinary soil pockmarked with monoliths and low ridges of sold rock) are important to prospectors because these areas often point to places where minerals were thrust into the rip in the earth during a geological event. Normal erosion washes gold into waterways below, and gold being heavy, settles naturally along the way— on the inside edges of bends in the stream, in whirlpools where two creeks join, in and around natural obstructions such as rock crevices and boulders, in the roots of river plants and trees. Gold is often found mixed with concentrated strata of fine black or red sand. Black sands that are iron oxide are magnetic. Red sand is composed of tiny crushed garnets.

This same characteristic settling action of gold applies in the desert, too, where rivers have long since vanished, but its outline remains. Most deserts are not completely dry all year. When it does rain, often in torrential downpours, water rushes down the gullies or "drywashes." After a heavy rain or flash flood, look along the dry banks as if water is still there—try to visualize how the heavy gold might be carried by the water and where it would naturally deposit, just like in a year-round streambed.

Prospecting for gold is a bit like being a detective. The better we get at reading geologic "clues," hopefully the closer we'll come to not only finding a few flakes and nuggets, but discovering the source of the gold—an exposed vein or rich pocket of the shiny stuff. Good luck and have fun!

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