

Los Angeles Times

Pete Thomas Column, March 4, 2008

WET AND WILD

Whitewater enthusiasts will rollick well into August, and Sierra streams will not go dry, as some nearly did last summer, thanks to a wet winter many forecasters predicted would not materialize.

The California Department of Water Resources released its February snow survey, dated through Jan. 31, and the March survey, expected soon, will paint an even rosier picture.

Statewide, the snowpack was 85% of the April 1 average. April 1 is the normal date for maximum accumulation and, because of February storms, that percentage has undoubtedly climbed closer to or even above 100%.

Unimpaired runoff forecasts were 90% of normal or higher for most of the state -- 95% in the Owens Drainage and 93% in the Mt. Whitney/Kern River drainage.

This bodes extremely well for those carrying paddles.

Rafting and kayaking on the Kern River, which is closest to Los Angeles, will begin in late April or early May. Two-day trips on the Lower Kern, fed by Lake Isabella, will begin the first week of June and will run through the third week of August, predicts Keith "Luther" Stephens of Kern River Outfitters.

The Upper Kern, fed via the Mount Whitney drainage, will boast a mine field of Class IV and Class V rapids, but stretches of river may become too high if runoff occurs too swiftly.

"If we have a spell of really hot weather, the water could rise to levels that would cause us to move elsewhere," Stephens says, adding, "The beauty of the Upper Kern is that, with 20 miles of runnable water, there are always stretches that are runnable."