

# Riding the rails in the rain

By JANET HERRING-SHERMAN  
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Wearing a coat of cheerful red and yellow paint, Mendocino County's famous Skunk trains have a lighthearted spirit that warms the hearts of passengers even on rainy days. Undaunted by inclement weather, the California Western Railroad's Skunk trains steam along century-old railroad tracks, through groves of coastal redwoods, all year long.

Passengers who climb aboard in fall witness a special kind of beauty as the trains wind their way through undisturbed forests and meadows preparing for winter. Rain adds yet another layer of quiet to the already peaceful countryside and accentuates the aromatic smell of the evergreens and the wood smoke spiraling from farmhouse and log cabin chimneys.

The Skunk line tracks stretch from Willits to Fort Bragg. Known as the crookedest railroad in the world, the tracks cover 40 miles, rise from sea level to a 1,740-foot summit and round 341 curves.

On a fall day, you'll come within an arm's length of majestic redwoods and groves of broadleaf trees clothed in palomino-colored leaves. From the 31 trestles and bridges that cross Pudding Creek and the Noyo River, you're apt to spy white cranes against an

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emerald-green riverbank or beavers hard at work building a dam.

Emerging from the darkness of one of the tunnels — chiseled out of solid rock decades ago — you may also see horses or cattle grazing on buckskin-colored hills bordered by moss-covered picket fences. Deer are bound to show up en route, thrilling adults and children alike.

On a recent Sunday Skunk train excursion, the conductor pointed out a young stag that had come into view uphill from the tracks, and a child exclaimed, "Look! There's Bambi's father!"

You'll also pass a number of old logging camps. What you won't see is a lot of people. Only 15 families live

along the remote Skunk train route, and they rely on the trains for delivery of groceries, mail and newspapers, especially in the winter months when nearby roads are often impassable. Local children often mix with passengers, traveling the Skunk rails to see friends up the line.

The Skunk line began as a logging railroad in 1885. It was one of the most costly railroads built at the turn of the century because of the great number of curves and bridges. Steam passenger cars were added in 1904. These were replaced by the self-powered yellow Skunk rail cars in 1925. Fueled by gasoline, these early rail cars gave off such an odor that the locals christened them "skunk" trains because they could be smelled coming long before they came into view.

Today's Skunk trains are powered by historic diesel logging locomotives. Surefooted, they move through this land forgotten by time at a pace slow enough to allow maximum enjoyment of the passing sights. It's the kind of scenery you don't want to miss, yet the rhythm of the wheels and the gentle rocking of the train may coax you into a pleasant catnap.

When you awaken to the echo of the train's whistle in a canyon, you'll find you've left your everyday worries

See *Skunk*, back page

JANET HERRING-SHERMAN

A Skunk train goes 'round the bend.





# Skunk

*Continued from Page D1*

behind. For a Skunk train ride casts a spell that insists you relax and drink in nature's handiwork. It's a ride that's a tonic to the soul, even when viewed through a mist of rain with clouds topping the hills.

Window seats, of course, offer the best vantage point, and they're much more readily available in fall and winter when fewer tourists ride the Skunks. The open observation cars offer the best views plus a chance to breathe in the clean air and feel the wind against your face.

Since the passenger cars are not heated, it's important to dress

appropriately for maximum enjoyment of your trip. Thermal underwear and gloves are essential. On extremely cold days, a lap blanket is advisable. A windbreaker or lightweight raincoat with a hood is more convenient than using an umbrella, since it leaves your hands free for picture taking or shopping for souvenirs at the depots in Fort Bragg, Willits and Northspur, the halfway point.

In the fall, a kind of holiday spirit welcomes passengers as they disembark at Northspur, where there is a snack bar that offers a tasty selection of hearty homemade refreshments such as cobbler, muffins, cookies, hot apple cider and hot chocolate. Adorned with fresh flowers in old-fashioned jugs, Northspur's umbrella-topped tables

offer a place to snack and take refuge from the rain. Many passengers pack a picnic to eat on the train. Some bring along a book to read, as well.

A full-day round trip from Fort Bragg to Willits takes about six hours and includes time to lunch at a restaurant in Willits. From Sept. 10 through June 6, Skunk trains run daily, with the exception of Thanksgiving, Christmas and New Year's. They leave Fort Bragg at 9:20 a.m. and return at 3:30 p.m. The cost is \$20 for adults and \$10 for children age 5 to 11.

On Friday and Saturday of Thanksgiving weekend, special half-day trips also will be conducted from Fort Bragg to Northspur and back. The cost for half-day

trips is \$16 for adults and \$8 for children age 5 to 11. Half-day trips and additional full-day trips will resume on June 17 and will run through Sept. 9, departing from both Fort Bragg and Willits. Even during the off season, reservations are suggested. You can contact the California Western Railroad by phoning 964-6371. Several motels and inns in the Fort Bragg area such as the Tradewinds and the Seabird offer special off-season rates for packages that include Skunk train tickets. Many of these facilities have spas for use by their guests, and nothing beats soaking in a warm spa after an invigorating winter day aboard a Skunk!

For more information, contact the Fort Bragg-Mendocino Coast Chamber of Commerce at 964-3153.