Recreational Gold Panners In The Portland Area May Not Be Getting Rich, But They Get Outdoors
Joe Hansen, The Oregonian, 2011

"We know there's gold right here," said Josh Davidson, standing on the banks of the swift, cold Molalla River. "But gold doesn't just get in the pan itself. You've got to dig it."

A week of rain had the river really flowing, and even in the damp chill of a winter morning, the Molalla corridor was an enchanting place: a wide boulevard of turquoise water plunging through green walls draped in lush moss.

Davidson, of Woodburn, and a few gold-seeking companions sought what the recent deluge* had brought with it: freshly deposited bars of black sand.

"Ninety percent of the time when you see black sand, there's gold in it," Davidson said, plunging a shovel into the sediment.

The first Pacific Northwest gold miners pulled nuggets out of the earth. Today, hobbyist prospectors search for the crumbs left behind. They don't seem to mind, though.

"It gets me out of the house," said Davidson's gold-hunting friend, John Brooks of Estacada. "I love the outdoors anyway."

Still, gold has powerful allure, especially in times of economic strife and high gold values. Times like right now, with gold about $1,450 an ounce.

*deluge: a great flood of water
Davidson's prospecting methods were probably much the same as those used by the first gold-seekers who crawled over the Oregon hills and valleys in the mid to late 1800s. Those hardy early prospectors would probably recognize Davidson's gear, too, although they might have marveled at his lightweight plastic gold pan, camouflage waterproof jacket and rubber boots.

No matter the century, though, gold prospecting with a sluice box (a long tray with ridges that catch heavy material like gold when water runs through it) and gold pan is hard work. After 45 minutes of digging, sifting and sorting, Davidson had a few tablespoons of that treasured, fine-grained sediment, which he swirled in his gold pan. Finally, he spied his prize: Several glittering specks of gold set against the black sand backdrop.

"Shoot," Davidson said with a shrug. "I might get five bucks for it."

That's what an hour of gold panning gets you sometimes.

Davidson and his prospecting comrades (Annie Duncan of Woodburn; her daughter Elizabeth, 16; Richard Morgan, 17, of Hubbard; and Brooks) are members of NorthWest Mineral Prospectors Club, a collective of recreational gold miners in Oregon and Southwest Washington.

Eventually all those gold flakes add up, and NWMPC members, who number around 450, will shop their gold on eBay, at auctions or to refiners or NWMPC.

Mostly in the warmer months, club members work NWMPC-owned claims near Sweet Home, Cottage Grove, Cave Junction, Brookings and Mount St. Helens, or their own personal claims scattered around the Pacific Northwest.

"You keep going because there might be a 7-pound nugget behind that rock," said club member Steve Rosenlund.

Sluice and pan prospecting isn't a particularly expensive pastime, but it is tricky to learn.

"My recommendation is to come with somebody that's done it before," Davidson said.

Many regulations also apply, although a 2010 rule change means a permit is no longer required for non-motorized prospecting, provided people follow the rules, said Jim Billings, compliance specialist with the Oregon Department of Environmental Quality.

The rules detail which areas can and cannot be prospected and when, protections for drinking water sources and steps required to prevent the spread of invasive species -- Oregon is no longer part of the anything-goes Wild West, after all.

But for a little while at least as the Molalla prospectors searched for sand grain-sized treasure on a wet morning, one could at least imagine what the first Oregon prospectors must have seen: a stunning, largely untouched wilderness laced with gold.
"If nothing else, it's very beautiful out here," Duncan said. "Part of being up here is its all nature."

"Yeah," Brooks added. "And sometimes you get lucky and make a few bucks."

**Demonstrate Understanding**
1. If you were explaining this article to a friend, what would you say? Include main ideas and supporting details.

**Demonstrate Understanding**
2. In the chart below, list two facts and two opinions from the article.

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Develop an Interpretation
3. Why do you think people prospect for gold when it is so difficult? Use information from the article to support your answer.

Develop an Interpretation
4. Based on your understanding of the article, explain why someone might choose to join the Northwest Mineral Prospectors Club.
Analyze Text
5. Why does the author choose to start the article with the quote by Josh Davidson? What impact does this quote have on the reader?

Analyze Text
6. What is the author's purpose for writing this article? Use evidence from the article to support your answer.