Nüümü Poyo

The John Muir Trail, August 2024

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To Katie, always and always.

Previous page: Miter Basin and shadow.

Foreward

In August of 2024 I hiked the John Muir Trail, a long distance backpacking route that goes through some of the most dramatic scenery in the Sierra Nevada high country. Due to logistics—permit availability, time to acclimate at the beginning of my trip, and resupply routes—my trip ended up being quite a bit longer than the trail's official length of 211 miles. I started at Olancha Pass, south of Mt. Whitney (the official terminus of the trail) and ended at Happy Isles, in Yosemite Valley. I kept notes on my hike with the intention of turning it into a journal after I completed it, which I worked on for many months after I completed the trail.

The Paiute of the Sierra Nevada have a name for the network of alpine trails that served as trading routes within and across the range, Nüümü Poyo ("the People's Way"). This route largely covers the area now traced by the John Muir Trail. The Paiute, Yokut, Miwuk, Kudzidika, Mono, and other native people lived within and around the Sierra Nevada centuries before John Muir began his efforts to protect and preserve the mountains he loved so much. The beauty and grandeur of the high Sierra was obvious to these first people, obvious to Muir, obvious now, and will remain so in the future. Walking within the range is a way of communing with this timelessness.

I'm grateful for all the people who helped me before and during my hike, particularly my wife Katie and her mom Nancy. I could not have done it without their love and support.

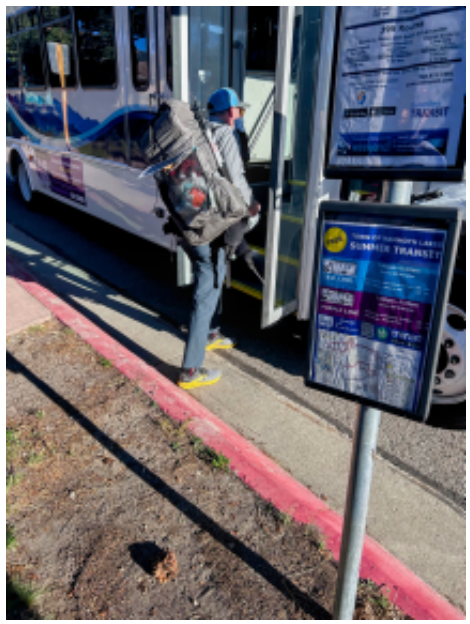
Olancha Pass Trail from midway up. The trailhead is the small cluster of trees far down the canyon next to the dirt road.

Cow Creek, August 5

Miles: 7.51
Elevation gain: 3903' (-59')

Olancha Pass is a hard climb—from 5800' to 9200' in 4.5 miles, on a fairly exposed south facing slope—and doing it late morning on a hot day in early August, with a full bear canister and 3 liters of water basically meant I was doing it in some of the most challenging conditions possible.

I arrived at the trailhead at around 10:30, dropped off by Lone Pine Chuck, one of a couple of people offering shuttle services for backpackers in the Eastern Sierra. Chuck had picked me up from the bus station near the McDonalds in Lone Pine, where I arrived from Mammoth on the Eastern Sierra Transit bus. Katie and I had stayed in Mammoth the night before at the Westin, and she and I got breakfast at a bagel place, and then she waited at the park and ride lot until I was loaded up on the bus. The bus ride down from Mammoth was pretty straightforward, with a bus change in Bishop. I spent most of it staring up at the Sierra crest, a little ecstatic at the thought of seeing all of those peaks up close over the next month. There were several other backpackers on the bus, including a couple I had seen in the Vons grocery store the night before in Mammoth, wearing their full packs, and one of them with a small Swedish flag planted in a side pocket, looking a little lost in the aisle 20 minutes before closing as hordes of people swarmed around them. This morning, they were on the same bus as me, the Swedish flag peeking out of the top of the bag in the baggage area, and like me, the two of them got off at Lone Pine.



I used the bathroom at McDonalds, the last flush toilet for the foreseeable future, and then Chuck and I headed south to Olancha. We chatted about various aspects of this side gig of his. He used to live in Ventura, but moved to Lone Pine because he

felt people in Southern California were too rude, too caught up in material things. He was chummy with some of the other people who had a similar side-business, except the dreaded Eastern Sierra Shuttle company, run by an unreliable and sometimes dangerous (in Chuck's view) man named Paul. Chuck didn't want to spread rumors or cause drama, but he clearly and thoroughly disliked Paul and his business practices, letting slip some stories about stranded hikers, possibly inebriated driving, and a draconian no-refunds policy, even if he didn't show up, that would result in an immediate F from the Better Business Bureau. The road turned to dirt a little while after we turned off Highway 395, and we ascended the shoulders of the valley floor, passing some scattered houses and ranches clustered around the fingers of creeks, marked by green streamside trees and shrubs and draining into Owens Lake. Near the point where the slopes of

the valley end and the mountains rise up is the Olancha Pass trailhead, near a grove of trees and a small parking lot. I unloaded, thanked Chuck, put on my pack, and started up the trail.

I passed what turned out to be the only people I would see for 2 days within the first 10 minutes, a large, mixed-age group of about 12 hikers heading downhill. One of them stopped to give me some intel about the water situation, which was: "It's pretty dry up there, but keep going past the corral at the pass, you'll find some flowing streams."

The sun was relentless on the uphill, and I would move between the occasional shade of juniper trees to rest during the steepest sections —I say "steepest" but it was all very steep. It took real effort to pass up any shade at all, to keep your feet moving, to keep pushing up.

The climb ended up being 3500' of elevation gain, and I added some more after I joined up with the PCT after going over the pass. Once you emerge from the steep canyons the pass itself is a gentle hill that leads to a series of meadows, with no real views down from where you came from.

I passed the corral mentioned by the hiker near the trailhead, and did see a small stream surrounded by some soft green grasses. I met up with the PCT past Summit Meadow, and headed up a canyon with some more extensive shade cover. Fortunately Cow Creek was still flowing, and I stopped for a while to filter some water and rest before pushing on to my campsite, a jumble of boulders on an outcrop surrounded by flat dirt and manzanita at 9700'. The view was to the southwest, overlooking Monache Meadows. In the distance I spotted puffs of smoke from the still burning fires around Lake Isabella and Kennedy Meadows. It was hazy and slightly breezy in the evening. I hoped the flies, who had buzzed annoyingly around my head, would die down as it got towards dusk. A hot and hard first day.

There were no mosquitoes but a lot of big and little flies. They didn't seem bothered by the permethrin I sprayed on my clothes the day before I left. I had hoped to run into Johnny and Alena, two Germans I had messaged with online, who like me had planned on starting their trip from Kennedy Meadows today, and like me had to pivot to Olancha. It turns out they had started up the pass the previous evening, but I wanted to see if I could catch up to them.

Total mileage was 7.51, 3905'. elevation gain, in about 5.5 hours. Slower than I expected, honestly. The climb really took it out of me.

Any ideas I had about putting in some extra miles to find Johnny and Alena were pretty much dashed.

I watched the sun set, bright orange from the smoke, and got into my tent.

Olancha Pass, at the intersection with the Haiwee Pass Trail.

Foxtail Pine and granite boulders, typical of the area around Olancha Peak.

Diaz Meadow, August 6

Miles: 20.2
Elevation gain: 2740' (-2904')

I woke up early after a bad night's sleep. A white rat was crawling around outside my tent starting at 8:30 PM, looking for salt, I guess? I heard the sound of it nibbling on one of my water bottles, so I brought my pack inside the tent, but the rat was persistent, and kept coming back. It started gnawing on my filtered water bladder, which I also then brought inside, and finally my hiking pole grips, which unfortunately are the support poles for the tent. I used my headlamp as a kind of makeshift cudgel to knock it off as it crawled up the poles, but it kept trying, going from one side of the tent to the other.

Eventually it either gave up, or did it quietly enough for me to get some extended sleep, but the period from 8:30 PM to 2:00 AM was just a repeated sequence of me dozing for 10 or 20 minutes, hearing the rat scurry back, and then fighting the rat on one pole then the other a few times before it would leave.

The eastern sky started brightening and I woke up in the pre-dawn. I started packing, made a small breakfast without using the stove, and then finished putting everything in my backpack. After leaving the campsite I stopped by the spring to top up with water, and was on trail at 7:00 AM. My intent was to try to catch up with Johnny and Alena if I could.

The first part of the day was a small uphill, which I did in the shadow of the big mountains I had climbed past yesterday. The air was cool in the open forest, mostly foxtail and lodgepole pines. Eventually I came up a saddle below Olancha Peak, which gave a view of the Upper Kern basin lit up in the morning sun.

Water was my main concern all day. The latest reports on FarOut (a guide app for smartphones where users can add notes on campsites, water sources, etc.) were from three weeks ago, and while I was confident I would find water somewhere, I was also anxious about whether it would be where I needed it. This was one of the driest areas on my hike, so I knew it would get better from here, but I didn't want to have to rely on luck this early in the trip.

As I made my way north, I could trace my progress based on the position of Kern Peak to the west, and Mt. Langley and the high peaks to the north. Those distant peaks would gain detail, and my

angle changed as I saw the bare top of Kern Peak grow and flatten as I made my way north.

Despite being high up in the mountains I could tell it was the middle of a heat wave. Even at 10,000' the air was hot once the sun came up. I stopped for lunch at some rocks and a gnarled grove of pines on my afternoon climb (a bigger one at 2500', but more gradual as it rose over many more miles than yesterday's sharp ascent). The shade provided some coolness. I tried to not stop as much on the inclines, but it was still quite hard. Towards the top there were some window views down to Owen's Lake through large granite boulders, right on the edge of the 6000' drop to the desert floor. The trail curled east for a bit before turning north, and I suddenly found myself looking down canyons stretching a vertical mile below me.

I took a quick doze at one of the little summits, and then kept moving. I saw a promising water source on the map, but it was mostly a trickle, hard to fill my bottle and bladder.

There was a campsite a mile past this stream, which I was aiming for, but I decided to push on to the next one at Diaz Meadow, two and a half miles more up the trail. I had hoped to run into the Germans here but the site was empty. I didn't see anyone on the trail today. The campsite was part of a large flattish arc of open forest and boulders, clearly a favorite spot for horse packers, but today was deserted.

The nearest water was down in the meadow below the campsite, Diaz Creek, and I hiked downhill following a dry bed of decomposing granite until I found the meadow. It was a moderate size creek in a gully with steep sides, running fast over orange colored granite stained by minerals, and I stopped to bathe my feet in the cool stream.

I made veggies with couscous and ate the second bar I forgot to eat in the afternoon. Another gentle sunset with a slight breeze, and I was ready for bed. Altogether, this 20+ mile day felt about as hard as the day before, despite it being three times the length.

View north toward Trail Peak and Mt. Langley from the shoulder west of Olancha Peak.

Below:View west to the peaks around Mineral King. Next page: Kern Peak and Templeton Mountain.

Miter Basin, August 7

Miles: 16.92
Elevation gain: 3084' (-1704')

The plan was to head from Diaz Meadow to Horseshoe Meadows, a high trailhead road-accessible from the Owens Valley, to pick up the small resupply I had left in a bear box the previous week. I would then head up over Cottonwood Pass to Rock Creek and ultimately, Miter Basin. This was a different route than the one a typical NOBO ("northbound", and SOBO is "southbound") JMT hiker would take, which would be to head north on the PCT, skirting the meadows below Soldier Lake further east, and then head up over Guyot Pass to eventually meet up with Crabtree Meadows and the trail to Mt. Whitney.

My route would break from the PCT and head north after entering Sequoia National Park, crossing Rock Creek further up the valley, and then up into Miter Basin, a large bowl southwest of Mt. Whitney. From there I would go over Crabtree Pass, a class 2 cross country pass, and end up in Crabtree Meadows after passing through Crabtree Lakes.

I had another shaded morning climb, up to Dutch Meadow, and then I joined up with the Mulkey Pass trail, which I knew from a day hike the week before, when I had dropped off my resupply.

Horseshoe Meadows is a doubly apt name. There are plenty of horses and horse packers here, and you pass a corral near the trailhead before getting back to the parking lot. But the meadows themselves are U shaped, bisected by a jut of forested hill that splits the sand and grass of the meadows into its namesake shape.

I met my first JMT hiker today, Barbara, who had lost her sun gloves. I met her just past Cottonwood Pass in the early afternoon. She was stopping for the day at Chicken Spring Lake, just up the trail, and taking her time—she intended to finish the JMT on September 15.

There were definitely more people out in this section, even in Miter Basin. I had a feeling there would be even more people out and about as I got to the base of Whitney the next day.

Uphills were still very hard, even after a couple of days of acclimation. Where I felt the results of all my training hikes was slight uphills and even ground, where I was able to up the pace considerably. I could pull back time and not feel like I was going too

slow.

Around a shoulder north of Chicken Spring Lake, you enter Sequoia National Park, and a little further on, the trail to Soldier Lake splits from the PCT. I decided to take the slightly longer route into Miter Basin, descending to Rock Creek below Soldier Lake, and then cutting up on the main Miter Basin trail. While it wasn't exactly gentle terrain before, the dramatic canyons and sheer cliffs of the true high Sierra were suddenly on display here. The meadows along Rock Creek were framed by sharp cliffs of white granite. There was much more water, and I basically didn't worry about water for the rest of the trip from this point on.

Once I was in Miter Basin I found a campsite below Primrose Lake near Rock Creek, a gently sloped area where Rock Creek branched into several cascades that tumbled and split over the flat orange granite slabs.

I felt like my pace and distance were good, ultimately. I was where I expected to be on day 3.

Before going to sleep, a group of 3 guys about my age from San Diego stopped by to say hi. Jeff, Mike, and Matt. They were originally going to go out Sawmill Pass but the flakey shuttle driver Paul from Eastern Sierra Shuttle didn't show up, so they had to pivot, and had been exploring Miter Basin for a few days. Lone Pine Chuck had talked about Paul, how he had become notorious for his no-shows, dangerous driving, and generally shitty behavior. Funny that I had confirmation of it all just a couple of days into my hike.

Previous page: Horseshoe Meadows. Below: Chicken Spring Lake.

Sequoia National Park boundary above Siberian Pass.

Previous: Big Whitney Meadow. Below: Rock Creek in the canyon below Miter Basin.

The opening to Miter Basin. The Miter is the rightmost of the jagged peaks at center.

Cascade on Rock Creek, Miter Basin.

Sunset on the Miter, Miter Basin.

Crabtree Meadows, August 8

Miles: 10.14
Elevation gain: 1702' (-2345')

In the morning I was off by 7:15, and enjoyed the climb into the main amphitheater of Miter Basin, a series of lakes and meadows and plateaus surrounded almost entirely by high white granite peaks and ridges, with Rock Creek making a cut in this circle to the south. I was in no rush, and took my time packing up and heading up the valley (which maybe I paid for later). The sun was rising and the play of sunlight and shadows for 360 degrees was glorious.

Sky Blue Lake is the largest in the basin, a beautiful cirque lake bordered on one side by a grove of Foxtail pine. Various feeder streams cascade into Sky Blue Lake, and a use trail roughly follows the path of the main creek as it moves between lakes. Above Sky Blue Lake, the trail ends, and the best cross country route follows a series of granite ramps to a ridge that hides the upper lakes. The first of these upper lakes was incredibly clear and deep, making the gradient of color from white to blue to green in the morning sun.

The upper section above the lake leading to Crabtree Pass was very challenging, requiring some more serious route finding. Once at the top of the pass, it got more difficult still, with a steep, loose scree hill down the other side, pocked with boulders and slick slabs. Looking across the valley you could see Discovery Pinnacle rising above at the crest just south of Mt. Whitney. Below were the chain of lakes that lead down to Crabtree Meadows on the back side of Whitney. I could see the use trail on the north side of Upper Crabtree Lake, and all along its length it was more sand and scree and talus. I nearly fell when a cluster of rocks gave way on the descent, which made me extra cautious for the rest of the day, and meant getting to camp later than I wanted.

By the time I got to the shore of Upper Crabtree Lake, it had started lightly raining, a surprise because the skies were clear and blue at the top of the pass. The trail came and went, and was more rolling than the map indicated. Several times I lost it, and had to use Gaia (a mapping app) on my phone to orient myself back. On a particularly rocky section, it started to rain and hail, causing me to quickly find a corner between tall boulders to get out my rain jacket.

From then on it would rain or hail on and off, never hard, until I got to Crabtree Meadows.

Sunrise, Miter Basin.

At one point I had lost the trail again, but saw the creek bed was lined with sloping flat granite slabs. So I just walked along the creek, moving way faster than I would have on the trail, which I was pretty sure was winding around on the ledges to my right. I picked up the trail again where the slabs ended, at Middle Crabtree Lake, and from that point on the trail was more obvious.

As I was getting closer to Crabtree Meadows, I accidentally frightened a pair of hikers where the trail split around a large boulder sitting right on the trail. I came around one side as they were about go to the other. They were heading over Crabtree Pass to Miter Basin, and I didn't envy them, knowing my own troubles with the loose rock and scree slope they would have to ascend.

I ran into another group heading towards the lakes, and one of them noticed Little Otter, so I got to explain how Desi gave it to me to bring along. I had asked both Milo and Desi to pick a small item I could bring along on my trip, and Desi gave me one of his small stuffed animals, in this case the backup of his prized Little Otter. I tucked it into the side pocket of my pack, along with my extra water bottles.

By 3:15, I was cocooning in my tent at Crabtree Meadows, having put it up just as the rain started in earnest. It had been threatening for most of the way down from Upper Crabtree Lake, with occasional showers, but now the skies opened up. I wandered into the woods near the creek crossing when I saw that the brewing thunderstorm had legs, found a mostly level spot and got the tent out right quick.

So I listened to the thunder and the rain and hail against the tent, and was happy to be relatively dry and relatively warm. I dozed off for a bit, and the rain petered out after a while. I emerged to a beautiful late afternoon, the skies clearing and the sun hitting the puffy clouds sitting over the crest. A classic Sierra afternoon thunderstorm. I went down to the creek to soak my aching feet and enjoy the light.

As I was headed back, I saw a group of horses galloping along the trail, and heard the banging of pots in the distance. Then a grey horse came over the hill and trotted right through my camp, right next to my tent. Their owner then came over the hill, banging his pot. He apologized for going through my site, saying he's been trying to track them down, and they were looking for him, hungry for dinner.

I made dinner early, and was tucked into bed before the light faded. I had a very early day tomorrow, starting well before dawn to go up Whitney.

Sky Blue Lake, Miter Basin.

Mt. McAdie, Miter Basin.

Upper Crabtree Lake from Crabtree Pass.

Crabtree Meadows in a thunderstorm.

Sunset, Crabtree Meadows.

Needles below Mt. Whitney.

Crabtree Meadows, August 9

Miles: 16.23
Elevation gain: 4199' (-4156')

I got up at 3:30 to get an early start for summiting Whitney. The thunderstorms that started mid morning yesterday on my descent from Crabtree Pass had me worried. As I started off in the dark I realized that my headlamp's red light—used to preserve your night vision—is just too dim to be much use when night hiking.

I hiked past the tents around the ranger station in the dark, finding the trail signs to head up to Whitney. When I passed the last tent, I switched to my headlamp's white light, and that made the hike a lot easier, though I couldn't see the stars as well.

As I made my way past Timberline Lake the dawn sky started slowly brightening, and I saw clouds—not good! I spent a credit for the weather report on my Bivy Stick satellite communicator to see if thunderstorms were forecast for this morning. It had been clear until 10:30 the day before, but these clouds were hovering around the crest before the sun rose. I got a little spooked. The top of Whitney is no place to be if there's even a hint of thunder. But while waiting for the update on the Bivy Stick, I just decided to continue and go at a steady pace. I would check on the weather when it updated, and if I needed to turn around a mile or three up the trail, so be it.

A few minutes later I didn't need the headlamp anymore, and the

predawn lit up the tops of some pillowy clouds, and the white granite ridges all around had a kind of glow, despite sunrise being an hour away. I went up, past Guitar Lake and the smattering of tents set up there, past the small tarns and trickling streams, past the lily covered green slopes, and then to the switchbacks on the back of the Whitney massif.

Once on the switchbacks I found a sort of tired rhythm. At each turn I would drink a little water and occasionally check the elevation. I met a couple more JMT hikers. Tim and Jason were resting at a turn, and Jason was having trouble with the elevation, swaying slightly and with his eyes barely open. Later, the two Swedes I had previously seen at the Vons in Mammoth and on my bus ride down to Lone Pine were heading back down (I would later learn their names were Nick and Fanny). At another switchback I met Liz and Meagan, sisters heading back to Guitar Lake.

I didn't feel I was moving fast, but I did sense that my additional days of acclimation really helped. I passed hikers who had started earlier than me on the climb, and even more hikers, moving slowly and struggling, as I made my way through the upper sections. The views down to the east were incredible by then. The sun had come up, lighting the spires above me, and ridges to the west and north.

The people coming down were elated, the ones ascending blank with suffering. At one switchback I met a group of guys resting and making coffee who were completing their High Sierra Trail trip, not summiting Whitney, but going over Trail Pass to Whitney Portal, the trailhead on the east. One of them had just had his bag tip over and fall down the steep face, but it stopped 15 feet down, a miracle it didn't go further.

After the junction at Trail Pass, the trail continued past the spires of Mt. Muir, Auguille Junior, Auigille du Paquir, Auguille Extra, Third Needle, and Keeler Needle before it finally curved up to the summit plateau of Whitney. Between each spike, there were views down to the other side, the steep drop down to the lakes and deep canyons that marked the eastern edge of the Sierra as it drops down to Owens Valley. The trail was on the west of these formations, giving a commanding view to valleys and high ridges now far below.

Reaching the summit was just as great of a feeling as I hoped, and I got a nice photo from a guy named Raymond. I got there at 9:00, taking 5 hours from Crabtree Meadows. People were milling around on their phones, as there is cellular signal right on top. I sent the photo Raymond took to Katie and texted the family chat. I had some food and more water, but noticed that the skies—which had completely cleared after sunrise, and remained so when I first got to the top—had started developing pockets of clouds, including a decent sized dark gray one right to the west. I didn't want to get rained on, or worse, get stuck in a lightning storm up high, and so I cut my summit visit short. I quickly signed the register ("JMT+ NOBO, onward!") in front of the stone hut below the summit, and headed down.

Feeling good and making good time, I made sure to encourage people still making their way up as I stopped to let them by (uphill hikers have the right of way). Most of the switchbacks were easy, and I found it faster and easier to not use my poles. Even at 13,000'

the air felt thicker and more replenishing. But the trail below the switchbacks was more irregular, and I started feeling the wear of such steep elevation loss on my feet. The day got hot and I was in a wind protected valley surrounded by peaks 3000' higher on all sides.

I made it back to camp, reset my tent (I had removed the hiking poles for the ascent), and immediately went down to the creek and sat on my rock, soaking my feet. I then stripped down to my boxers and got in the creek, feeling the coolness wash over me. I soaked my sun hoodie, and put it back on to dry in the sun, using a handkerchief to cover my bare legs from the strong UV rays. Then I made some lunch and just basked in the glow of having gone up and down the high point of the hike.

I went back to the tent for a doze, where I discovered that my pillow wouldn't hold any air, and then went back to my rock on the creek for some more feet soaking. Then I ate some dinner and collapsed back into my tent, stuffing my wool buff with extra clothes for a pillow.

Guitar Lake, sunrise.

Above Hitchcock Lakes looking northwest.

Mt. Whitney and the needles.

Lower Hitchcock Lake and the Kaweah Peaks in the distance.

Left: Reflection in Upper Hitchcock Lake. Right: Junction with Whitney Portal trail.

Summit, Mt. Whitney.

Storm clouds developing on the summit of Mt. Whitney.

Window to Wotan's Throne.

Previous page: Upper Kern basin. Below: Diamond Mesa

Tyndall Creek, August 10

Miles: 13.08
Elevation gain: 3396' (-1330')

The day was good, after a somewhat shaky morning in camp. I didn't feel great, like my stomach was acidy, and I was a little down about food and the things that weren't working like I wanted. My pillow wouldn't hold air, and my sleep wasn't great. My nose would plug up during the night, making me breathe through my mouth, which would then dry up. It'd been hard to get comfortable, which isn't usually a problem in my front country life.

Once I got on the trail things got better. I figured on doing a somewhat lighter day, so I could stay on schedule. The climb out of Crabtree to Wallace Creek was not easy but also pleasant in the morning. On the climb, I ran into the Swedes once more. I mentioned that we kept crossing each other's path, first in Mammoth and then the bus, and yesterday on Mt. Whitney. They were Fanny and Nick, and they were also doing the JMT. Nick also had a nice camera, and we chatted a bit about the pros and cons of Sony and Canon bodies and lenses. Nick was having some knee pain, and I dug out my knee brace and offered it to him. My knee was doing well, and I knew how difficult it was to hike with knee pain.

I met some more High Sierra Trail hikers stopped at Wallace, joking around with each other as they rested and ate breakfast.

On the climb up from Wallace, I ran into Tim and Jason (who I had also met on the switchbacks of Whitney), aka Trout and Turtle. They are from San Diego, and Tim is a firefighter for the city of SD but lives in Vista, my hometown.

We began hiking together, and stopped for lunch at Wright Creek, where Shepherd Pass branches off. Not a lot of shade, but the falls coming down the slabs were beautiful. Trout lived up to his name and caught a few golden trout with the pole he had brought. While we were finishing lunch, a mom and her 10 year old daughter heading southbound stopped to rest. They were about to finish their JMT hike, but they were low on food so we gave them some extra snacks and small things. The logistics of resupplying SOBO are harder for this section, so it's not uncommon to be stretched thin on food.

Otter. That is now my trail name. Trout and Turtle gave me the name, as we hiked above the Bighorn Plateau, a place that, to me,

resembles what I imagine Mongolia is like. I also met a couple of PCT hikers who had skipped back to do the Sierra, The Chairman (John) and his girlfriend Neon. They were super nice, and I really enjoyed spending the day with them.

Beyond Bighorn Plateau, the trail keeps moving up along high meadows toward the edge of the large bowl that is the Great Western Divide, the ridge that separates the upper Kern River drainage on the south and the Kings River to the north. This was an area of deep, widespread glaciation, and this is reflected in the landscape. A series of basins and hanging canyons rims the wide arc of the divide, cut by fast flowing creeks.

I kept ascending to the west of Diamond Mesa, staying high above Tyndall Creek and the small lakes below. I approached the sheer wall of the Great Western Divide, with a small notch cut in the top: Forester Pass, the trail blasted out of the face of the wall back in the 1930s. The trail levels off before the approach to Forester, and meets back up with Tyndall Creek as it flows through a shallow boulder maze.

There are campsites here, in a shallow bowl surrounded by ridges on three sides, opening to the south. Tyndall Creek starts just up the canyon, and here it's a branching network of moving water through rocks with tufts of grass scattered here and there. Beyond the creek it's rocky, with some cleared tent sites along a hill. I chose one that was a little wind protected, and set up, first intending to camp out in the open, hoping to see some shooting stars as the Perseid meteor shower was peaking.

As I was soaking my feet in the creek the Chairman and Neon stopped by to get some water and some rest, before reluctantly going over Forester Pass that evening to keep on their schedule. The Chairman is afraid of heights, and Neon gets vertigo, so they were joking around about this is the perfect pass for them.

Trout and Turtle had said they were heading for this site, but the Chairman said they had stopped at one of the lakes below to do some fishing. I took a walk down to the edge of the upper lake to see if I could see them, but couldn't, and headed back to camp.

The wind, pouring down the upper canyon after the sun went over the ridge to the west, and the chilly air at over 12,500', convinced me to abandon my plan to cowboy camp, so I set up my tent, made some dinner quickly, and got inside.

Below: Bighorn Plateau. Next page: Diamond Mesa, Shepherd Pass, and Mount Tyndall.

Spring overlooking Diamond Mesa and Mt. Tyndall.

The Chairman and Neon.

Forester Pass.

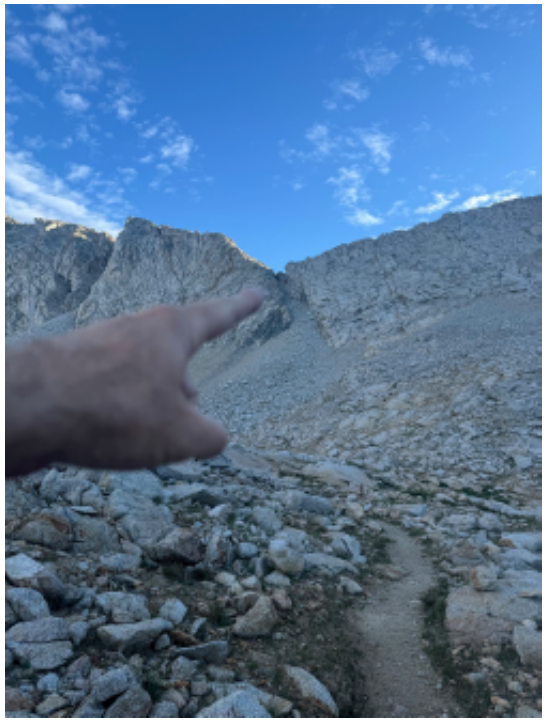
Kearsarge Lakes, August 11

Miles: 12.28
Elevation gain: 2108' (-3686)

Camping so high up meant that Forester Pass—the highest point on the Pacific Crest Trail, at 13,200' and the highest trail pass in the Sierra—was not really that challenging of an ascent, with under 1000' of climbing before I was at the top. I had seen the top of Forester so often in YouTube videos it was odd seeing it in person. At the chute—no snow now, so late in the year—I paused and looked out over the area I had hiked through. While standing there, I heard sobs coming from above.

They were from a woman who had made the pass from the north, and she was overcome with emotion as she sat at the top and looked south.

At the top we chatted, she a little embarrassed that someone had heard her crying. Her hiking partner eventually reached the top. And then more people showed up, as more hikers came up from both sides of the pass. Tom's Tears (her trail name, she lost her toothpaste and broke down) and the Pika Piper (he could apparently attract pikas with his calls). Hailey and Drew from Calgary (I ended up yo-yo-ing with them all day; they were pushing for fish tacos back in Lone Pine so I left them at the turn off for Kearsarge Lakes). It was nice to talk to all these different people, especially after being mostly alone for the week.



The descent from the pass to Vidette Meadow was long, and the trail was occasionally rocky and rooted. At the bottom I stopped at Bubbs Creek and dipped into the river, drying off on a nice flat boulder, and then had lunch. This many days out I felt pretty dirty, all the time, so even a quick dip felt great.

After doing mostly descending to that point, the climb up to Bullfrog and Kearsarge Lakes was

hard. I passed an older hiker going way too slow, and asked him if he was ok. He was not. He had elevation sickness (we were just about 10,000') and said he "needed to get out of here." The issue was that he was barely moving uphill, walking 10 slow paces and then stopping, trying to (I guess) to make it over Kearsarge Pass and down to Onion Valley. That meant going over 2000' higher, and covering 8 miles or so in the heat of the afternoon. He had only a little bit of water, and wouldn't take any of mine. The trail crossed a stream a few times ahead, but he was struggling so much. He wouldn't take any snacks, but said he didn't want to get stuck on the switchbacks. Eventually I left him and pushed on, but stopped a couple hikers coming down and asked them to check on him, and maybe encourage him to descend down the canyon of Bubbs Creek to the west to Roads End, and figure out transportation later.

I continued up to Kearsarge Lakes, taking a use trail down past the upper lake, and then another small trail to a flat set of campsites sitting above the middle lake.

I found a fairly wind protected spot where I could decide whether or not to cowboy camp that night. Last night before Forester Pass it was too cold and windy, but maybe here, a little lower, would be better.

I went down to Lower Kearsarge Lake and found a spot on the eastern shore to soak my feet and sit in the sun. I enjoyed the stillness of the air and the view of the Kearsarge Pinnacles above the lake. Then I headed back to camp to prepare some dinner.

While getting dinner ready I headed down to the middle lake to filter some water, and ran into a man named David, who asked if I had seen a hiker in a blue hoodie. I asked if he was talking about a guy who was struggling with elevation sickness, because if so I had seen him on the climb to Bullfrog Lake. Yes, that was him, it turns out. David was worried about whether he had made it to the lakes here. After I said the guy really should be heading down to Road's End and Cedar Grove, not over Kearsarge, he responded that this guy was pig-headed. David had to convince him to abort his summit attempt and descend down Mt. Whitney a few days prior, as he was in terrible shape from the elevation. I told David that if I saw him I would let him know David was looking for him, and he continued on his search.

I ate dinner, and was determined to see some of the Perseid meteors that night. It was warmer than the previous night below Forester, but I kept my down jacket on as I crawled under my quilt. One nice thing about quilts is that you can moderate your temperature if you are too warm by just sticking out a leg. I lay back and looked up at the sky.

Below: View south to the Upper Kern basin from Forester Pass. Next page: View north to Bubbs Creek Canyon from Forester Pass.

PCT hikers traditionally flash 13 on Forester Pass to signify that they've reached the highest pass on the trail, at 13,200'.

Lake below Forester Pass.

Creek and meadow, Upper Bubbs Creek Canyon.

Below: Glacial valley, Bubbs Creek Canyon. Next page: Lower Kearsarge Lake.

Lenticular cloud, Kearsarge Lakes.

Bishop, August 12

Miles: 5.81
Elevation gain: 828' (-2578')

I did see some meteors cowboy camping that night at Kearsarge Lakes. I woke up, eager for town food and a shower.

I ran into the man David was looking for again—the one struggling with elevation gain and, apparently, blisters—on the lower switchbacks as I headed up to the pass. He still looked miserable, and told me he had made it to Bullfrog Lake the day before and camped there (you are not allowed to camp at Bullfrog Lake). It seemed a miracle he had made it here, but he was probably going to exit at Onion Valley that day.

I crested Kearsarge Pass, and headed down, moving "outside" the Sierra, to use Kim Stanley Robinson's term. In Robinson's book *The High Sierra: A Love Story* he describes the concept of being inside—within the range, and unable to see beyond the ridges and divides to either the Owens Valley or Central Valley—vs. outside the Sierra. The Owens Valley and 395 were visible below. But the creek rushed by into clear blue lakes on the descent, and the steep canyon was lined with towering peaks.

At the trailhead at Onion Valley I ran into Fanny and Nick, who were resupplying from the bear boxes there before heading right back up the pass to continue their hike. They had hired a service that accepted their mailed resupply package and took it to the trailhead. Trout and Turtle had a similar service who took their resupply buckets over the pass and met them on the trail to resupply, which was quite expensive. But for both Fanny and Nick, and Trout and Turtle, time was a big logistical issue in their hikes, so not having to go far off trail into town helped their timeline.

At a promontory high in the canyon below the pass, you could get

mobile phone service, but I had been unable to get a ride from Chuck or the other drivers he had referred me to, and so I looked for a hitch down the mountain. If I could make it to Independence, I'd at least be able to catch the bus to Bishop. For some dumb reason I walked past the last of the cars parked by the creek and began walking down the road. A first car passed me by, but after a long while the second, a somewhat battered minivan, stopped.

The minivan belonged to Wyatt, a USFS seasonal ecologist working on fire restoration habitat for the summer, one week on and one off. He had just finished backpacking around the Upper Kern and had actually met me on Whitney, as I was descending and encouraging the hikers on their way up. After exiting at the Portal, and retrieving his gravel bike, he biked back up 395, stashed his backpack behind some bushes at a ragged campground on the outskirts of Independence, and then biked up Onion Valley Rd. while also attempting to hitchhike up to the trailhead, where he had parked his minivan. As in, he was biking along and stuck out his thumb when he heard a car approaching. This actually worked, and before he got his ride, he stashed his bike behind a random bush nearby. Extraordinary.

His dashboard was covered with interesting lichen and feathers and antlers. I laid my pack in the back, over a shallow layer of gear, grateful for the ride. We then went down the mountain, stopping a few times where he thought his bike might be hidden. The third time proved correct, and he threw his bike into the far back. After retrieving his backpack from the campground, we headed to Bishop.

Wyatt recently graduated from Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo, and we talked about his time there, and his work, and backpacking. He was originally from Washington—the license plate was from there—so he was still getting to know the Sierras. He was headed for Mono Lake, so passing through Bishop was no problem. I gave him $15 after he stopped in the civic park across from my hotel, and he said he might

use it for some McDonalds. I was just grateful for the ride.

The Wayfinder is on the swankier side of the Bishop lodging spectrum, which was both a welcome contrast to my austere time on trail and also a little hard to comprehend for the same reasons. A party ahead of me in line consisted of a woman, her elderly dad, and her somewhat hyper 9 year old son. They were having some issues with their rooms, as their two assigned rooms were not as close to each other as they'd wanted, and her dad needed a ground floor room. I was self-conscious about being a smelly backpacker, still wearing my full backpack, while the front desk tried to figure out a better room arrangement for them.

I was able to check in early for an extra $50, well worth it to avoid having to hang around until 4:00, but my room still wasn't ready. After waiting for a bit, somewhat awkwardly, in the lobby lounge in an overstuffed leather armchair, I finally decided to go get something to eat, then stashed my bag in a store room, and walked down the street to get some coffee and a smoothie. It was hot at midday down in the desert valley, and it felt good to step into the air conditioning of the Looney Bean coffee shop. Before I went in, an older itinerant man was arguing with someone who had asked him to stop yelling a monologue to nobody in particular. After drinking my somewhat disappointing smoothie—I don't think any smoothie could compare to the ideal one I had fixated on in the backcountry, but it was still kind of bland and ice-forward—I wandered back to the Wayfinder.

I checked in, retrieved my backpack, and immediately took a long shower, scrubbing the layers of grime from the previous week off. I then confronted a problem I hadn't really considered before this exact moment: what do I wear in town? I needed to wash my clothes, and there was complimentary self-service laundry in a laundry room on my floor. But I had no clothes to wear while my clothes were being washed. Many through hikers wear their rain pants and jackets while doing laundry, while others stay at hostels that cater to through hikers and therefore have baskets of extra clothes to borrow while doing laundry. I didn't bring any rain pants, though. I decided to stop at the Mammoth Gear Exchange near the brewery after getting some lunch, and then do laundry when I got back. That did mean I had to get back into my dirty clothes after my shower, which was a little sad.

I walked back down to the center of town and stopped at the Mountain Rambler Brewery. I sat at the bar and ordered a burger and side salad plus an extra basket of fries and a pilsner. The stereo was playing early aughts indie rock a la the Strokes, which seemed squarely in the target demo of most of the patrons, 30 something white millennials who went to college and like the outdoors. I tore through my food with a singular focus, luxuriating in the fresh greens in the salad and the fat from the fries and burger. This would be a theme whenever I was back in town: I ate like a rescued castaway.

After lunch, I stopped into the Mammoth Gear Exchange, and bought some inexpensive second hand pale blue board shorts that could equally pass as regular shorts, a burgundy patterned short sleeve button up, and a new pillow. They didn't have CNOC bottles so I could replace my dirty water container, but the guy at the counter said they carried CNOC bags down the street at Sage to Summit, another of the several gear stores nearby. I headed to Sage to Summit, picked up a new (and improved, by the look of it) CNOC bag, and then headed back to the Wayfinder. I stopped for an iced coffee from the Looney Bean on the way back, which was great, and snagged one of the free packets of Tapatio from the condiment caddy —perfect for pepping up a bland back-country meal that would otherwise be a chore to eat.

Back at the hotel, I changed into my new town clothes, and started my laundry. I talked with Katie for a bit, and then went out to the pool for a quick dip, and then read in the shade while my suit/shorts dried in the heat of the afternoon sun.

I decided that I didn't want to pick up my resupply box from the Post Office yet, and would need a backpacker meal so I could reuse its mylar bag for rehydrating my dinners. I stopped at yet another gear store, Eastside Sports, and bought a chicken pasta dinner, a fuel canister, and two bandanas, as I must have dropped my bandana on the way to Onion Valley.

I went to Las Palmas for dinner that night, and ate in the back

overflow room. I was the only customer there, but some family of I assume the owners sat at a table across the room and chatted in Spanish while watching a television in the corner. I had enchiladas and a Negro Modelo, and many refilled baskets of chips. I decided to stop in the Dollar Tree, where I bought a packet of wet wipes but couldn't find any nail clippers. I walked back to the hotel in the pleasant evening air, cool but not cold, eager to sleep on a real mattress.

Bishop, August 13

Zero day

Since I was ahead of schedule, I decided to take an extra day in Bishop. This had consequences later on, but I didn't feel the effects of this decision until much later. The hotel breakfast buffet was nothing special, but I was able to fill up on eggs, potatoes, bacon, croissants, and yogurt. I then walked to the outskirts of town toward the Vons shopping center, stopping off for another mediocre smoothie, this time at Eastside Juice Bar. I got most of what I needed from Vons, and headed back to the Wayfinder.

For lunch, I went to Schaat's Deli next door and brought back an enormous turkey sandwich on shepherd's bread, and a soda, which I ate in the shade on the nice patios lining the South Fork of Bishop Creek, which runs through the Wayfinder grounds. Even though I wasn't salt starved here in town, the dill pickle that came with the sandwich tasted incredible. I called and arranged a ride from Lone Pine Chuck, this time from Independence, where I would take the Eastern Sierra Transit bus the next morning.

Later that afternoon I stopped back into the Dollar Tree for some more snacks, and headed to the Mountain Rambler for another burger. It was more crowded, and I found a seat at the end of the bar next to a slightly older man who also was by himself. On the other side of the man was a loud group who were clearly several beers deep. The man sitting next to me took a phone call from his young adult son, and he proceeded to get into an excruciating, didactic argument with him about responsibility and following rules. He clearly felt that his son was a fuckup, and was cross examining/brow-beating him into agreeing to move out. Maybe the kid was a fuckup, but the disconnection and mean-spiritedness of the man toward his son (who clearly didn't understand why his dad was pushing him to move out) was off putting. That he would have this conversation in the middle of a loud, crowded bar, not even bothering to move to a quieter place, spoke volumes to me about this man's character. After getting off the phone, he ordered another beer, and struck up a drunken conversation with the lit guys to his right. Who was he to talk about being a responsible adult, given this scenario? Fuck that guy.

Feeling off kilter from the brewery, I headed back to the hotel, and went back to the pool. I thought about jumping in, but a group of 5 men and a woman were in the pool, working their way through a

case of beer, whose cardboard box was getting soaked through. I went in the hot tub instead.

A father and adult son were talking with a third guy from LA. The LA guy was doing that annoying LA move of casually bragging about some shoots he was involved in nearby. The father and son were in the area from San Diego to do some fishing in the high lakes. I eventually was asked what I was doing in Bishop, and told them about my hike. They were impressed, but the LA guy had trouble wrapping his head around why I was doing it. He was fixated on the potential danger, and asked if I felt like I needed a weapon, for bears, and then was surprised when I told him that firearms weren't allowed in National Parks, and wouldn't really be that effective anyway. After the LA guy left, I chatted a bit with the father (his son mostly kept quiet), who was a very nice man who clearly loved spending this time with his son, a nice tonic to the man from the brewery.

Nevertheless, it was time to get out of town.

Rae Lakes, August 14

Miles: 12.04
Elevation gain: 3742' (-2440')

I was up early for the hotel's breakfast again, and again I loaded up in a way that would have been an instant stomach ache if I wasn't through hiking. I then headed north, walking away from the center of town toward the Vons shopping center, where the southbound bus stops. I stopped by the mediocre smoothie place again, and again received a mediocre smoothie, which I sipped while doing the 10 minute walk to the bus stop.

The shopping center with the Vons has an abandoned K-Mart, probably one of the last ones that remained open in California. Bishop is a bustling town at its center, but quickly frays around the edges. I walked through the Smart & Final parking lot—the storefront resembles an old west building with a wide porch—and through one of the many gaps in the hedge that separates the Vons gas station from the Smart & Final lot.

Then across the extended hot asphalt of the Vons parking lot to the bus stop, sitting in the shade between the empty K-Mart and the Vons. I was a little early, and nobody else was at the stop.

Eventually another backpacker showed up, a young woman in her 20s. She asked me to watch her pack while she went in for some coffee at the Starbucks inside the Vons. A few minutes later, the southbound bus pulled up, before she came back. I tentatively got on the bus to pay for my ticket, telling the driver that another person was coming and that her bag was leaning against the pillar. The ticket was $6, cash-only, and I only had a $20 bill. The driver didn't have change, and said I should just go and get change from Starbucks. So I asked if he could watch her bag while I did this. I headed inside, and ran into her, telling her that the bus was here, and the driver was watching her

bag.

After getting some smaller bills, I came back and got on the bus. I didn't write down the woman's name, but she was finishing up a SOBO section hike of the JMT and heading back down to Lancaster, and eventually LA, to fly back home to Virginia. She was a breezy, optimistic soul, amazed at the sights and experiences of her trip. She showed me some pictures on her phone, and was jealous that I was doing the entire trail. I sat on the left side of the bus, and mostly tried to look at the White and Inyo mountains to the east—my first bus ride down to Lone Pine was spent staring at the wall of the Sierra crest. I tried to imagine hiking in those arid slopes, staring across Owens Valley at the Sierra. I noticed the deep channels cut in the valley by now-dry stream washes that must have been cut by tremendously violent flash floods. I tried to find all the groves of pinyon and bristlecone on the highest slopes.

In Independence, I got off the bus, and found Chuck's minivan waiting for me. We headed up to Onion Valley, and I caught him up with my hike thus far. I told him about the guys in Miter Basin who had been burned by Eastern Sierra Shuttle and the notorious Paul no-showing, and he shook his head. As someone who took his job seriously, maybe too seriously, Paul was a disgrace.

At the trailhead, I used the pit toilet, and then started uphill. While it was again mid-morning in August and I had a climb ahead of me, being at 9500' instead of Olancha Pass's trailhead elevation of 5500' made all the difference. It was warm, but not oppressive. I stopped to top up my water at the end of a switchback that intersected with the creek coming down from the pass, and again saw this trail runner with an enormous 6 foot long carved staff I had seen two days prior on my hike out. The staff clearly held some importance to him, spiritual or otherwise, but it put me in mind of a little kid who found a cool stick and held onto it for totemic purposes.

I had worried that the hike up to the pass would be difficult, but I reached the top fairly quickly, and began my descent down the switchbacks, past the Kearsarge Lakes, and cutting over to the high trail above Bullfrog Lake that heads toward Glen Pass. It was fairly exposed and sunny, but there were two small streams where I stopped for water and a rest. At another break under the shade at a promontory where the trail curved around to the northwest a group of hikers asked about water on the section I just went through, and were happy to hear that about the two flowing streams.

This should have tipped me off. The hike from here up to Glen was very hot and dry. After you pass above Charlotte Lake, the trail continues to curve north before turning east into a narrow, stifling canyon. The two small ponds along the way were almost completely dry, the basin rocks stained dark to show where the water had previously been. The trail became very steep past the first pond, tapered off slightly at a small bench above the second pond, and then steepened again on the final ascent to the pass. The tight switchbacks on the approach were extremely difficult, and I was feeling the effects of the hot afternoon sun and the difficulty of doing two major passes in a single day.

At the top, a group of hikers were taking pictures and shooting the shit. One, trailname Honeybadger, was wearing a bright orange Hawaiian shirt matched by his tinted orange mirrored sunglasses. He asked if I enjoyed the "poop," referring to the ascent but I didn't quite understand at first, thinking there was marmot poop nearby. Honeybadger's group was straight out of central hiker trash casting: mustaches, outrageous beards, Senchi-forward fashion, that odd mix of Frat Boy and Bitchy Queen in some young men that is tough for this Old to clock.

After they left, I lingered a bit to take some pictures and have a snack. The view was lovely: the high, unnamed alpine lakes above the bigger Rae Lakes to the north like puddles of aquamarine. A father and son came to the top. They were headed to the Sixty Lakes Basin and eventually back over Baxter Pass, and we tried to trace a potential cross country route over Rae Col, though they were going to take the trail up from between Upper and Middle Rae.

As much as I didn't enjoy the ascent to Glen, the descent was even less fun. The trail was extremely steep, with large stairstep drops. Halfway down, I felt the grinding pain in my knees that I had thought I had overcome as part of my preparation hikes and new leg strength. I gritted my teeth and kept on, and fixated on a grim joke

about Glen Danzig Pass, imagining Glenn Danzig barking "rock hard pounding!" into a microphone over and over.

It was late afternoon when I got to Upper Rae Lake. I skirted the edge above the lake, then headed across the valley on the north shore. There were more people here, with the whoops of diving and swimming in the lakes audible, and you could very clearly see the impact on this very popular section. The afternoon winds had picked up, and the eastern shore of the lakes had buildups of soap scum from clueless people washing things either in or too close to the lakes. Toilet paper roses bloomed here and there near the sides of the trail. I kept on the trail as it crossed the valley and headed north, aiming for one of the camping spots above Middle Rae Lake. I had hoped to go further, but my knees were in pain, and I was hot and tired. I took a spur trail to the popular camping spots surrounding the bear box at Middle Rae Lake, and found a decent spot with a view toward Fin Dome. I had thought about taking a dip in the lake, but by the time I had my camp set up, the sun had already set over the western ridge, and the wind continued to blow. I settled for soaking my feet.

The bear box was mostly empty when I put my canister and stove in for the night, but did have a large, lone Platypus bag full of whiskey. The Rae Lakes corridor, I thought, is beautiful, but on a knife's edge of being ruined by its popularity.

Bullfrog Lake.

Pond below Glen Pass.

View north from Glen Pass.

Upper Rae Lake and the Painted Lady.

Lake Marjorie.

Lake Marjorie, August 15

Miles: 15.94
Elevation gain: 3607' (-3122')

I woke up to a cold morning, the first of the trip, with patches of ice in the meadows away from the lakes. The sun lit up Fin Dome as I hiked past Lower Rae Lake while I stayed in the shadows from the crest ridge to the east.

I ran into a PCT SOBO hiker who had skipped the fires up north to do the Sierra now. He said he had already had to skip something like 300 miles due to fires. We chatted a little about Rae Lakes and I mentioned the soap scum and TP burial nonsense. He also was annoyed at careless backpackers, and pointed at the group camped just down the trail beyond Dollar Lake, who had literally hiked right by the "Restoration Area: No Camping" sign the NPS rangers put up in the middle of the side trail leading to a lodgepole grove and set up their tents. This was near the junction with the Baxter Pass trail, so presumably they had made the steep descent down to the valley and didn't care. Still pretty crappy behavior from people who should know better.

Beyond Dollar Lake, the trail descended steeply down the South Fork Woods Creek canyon, ultimately losing nearly 2000 vertical feet. This section was deeply cut by avalanches, and the trail would disappear into mazes of downfall and twisted aspen groves. I ran into another hiker, and we navigated through the section together. My knees still hurt from Glen Pass, so it was a difficult descent. Eventually it flattened out as we approached the main stem of Woods Creek, and the Woods Creek Bridge. The bridge is a one-person-at-a-time suspension bridge, with the south side at grade, but the north side meeting a steep stair down to the banks of Woods Creek.

A couple of hikers were stopped at the south side of the bridge, having lunch, and I stopped for a bit to have a snack. Val and Karishma were from San Francisco, lived in the Glen Park neighborhood, and also were doing the JMT NOBO. We chatted for a bit, and then I headed off.

Beyond the bridge, the trail turns northeast and ascends Woods Creek Canyon and passes the waterslides: smooth slabs of flat granite ledges that the creek tumbles over in stair steps of waterfalls and pools. While most of the day thus far was either in the shade of early morning or under the canopy of the lodgepoles, Woods Creek

canyon was more rocky, brushy, and exposed. As I hiked up, I was stopped by a hiker descending the canyon, who told me he had just ran into a bear a half mile up the trail. The bear was moving up-canyon along the creek, and with the wind coming from the west it didn't sense him until he was within 20 feet of it. He was clearly spooked by the encounter, but also admitted the bear didn't give him any thought after registering him, and continued moving along.

I suddenly noticed how dense the head-high brush was, and how the trail twisted around boulders and bends in the creek so it was difficult to see more than 20 feet up or down the trail. I made sure to make a lot of ambient noise, sniffing my nose and giving courtesy coughs, tapping my trekking poles along the ground. At least the wind was at my back, and despite having recently been in town my odor would be unmistakable to a bear.

After regaining all the elevation I lost between Dollar Lake and the Woods Creek crossing, the trail leveled out a bit as the canyon opened up. Mt. Cedric Wright loomed over the southeast side, and there was a series of terraces ahead leading up to Pinchot Pass.

Another relatively steep section led to the first of the terraces, where I peeled off to have lunch beside a shallow, sandy lake. The banks were a little soggy, and my butt got wet sitting there, but it was nice to soak my feet for a bit in the water. I saw Val and Karishma hike by, but wasn't sure if they saw me at the lake.

Beyond the terrace, the trail made a broad curve to the northwest on the approach to Pinchot. The open bowl on this side of Pinchot was lovely, a gentle landscape of low brush and granite cut by Woods Creek and occasionally interrupted by small lakes.

Pinchot Pass was much easier than Glen, and I made good time heading up. For the first time on the trip, I had the pass to myself when I arrived, and took in the views where I had come from, and to the north where I was headed. I could see the steep descent down to Lake Marjorie, a brilliant blue circle in the afternoon light, and tucked right against a steep ridge wall along the west side of the broad, glaciated valley. I headed down, and once again felt the dull ache of each step down in my knees. Lake Marjorie was called out as a highlight spot by other hikers, and it lived up to that reputation. Once I got to the lake, though, I felt like I could go a little further, as none of the camp sites I could see were particularly appealing, and they were already in shadow from the tall ridge.

I continued down to the next lake, still in the sunshine, and with a flat site with space for a couple of tents and bisected by a bushy lodgepole, which would give a little wind protection. I set up my tent, and again soaked my feet along the rocky shore of the lake, feeling the warmth of the sun on the dark brown rocks, mineral stained by the water when the lake was swollen with snowmelt. For dinner, I had my first ramen bomb of the trip—ramen, thickened with instant mashed potatoes—and the immense amount of sodium felt refreshing instead of withering. After the sun dipped over the ridge, I got into my tent and read more of *The Land of Little Rain* by Mary Austin on my Kindle for a bit, before nodding off to a shallow doze.

I was awakened by a call of, "Hello?" from nearby. Still tired, I called back, "Oh, hey, it's totally fine to camp here." I could hear some discussion between whoever called out and another, and after a few minutes I realized I should get out of the tent to find out what was up. I was still getting my wits when I put on my jacket and shoes, and got up.

Outside were two women, around their mid-twenties, wearing their backpacks but also wearing Crocs. I said hi to them, and asked what was up. Kayla and Jessie had set up camp down the canyon earlier that evening, but had once again noticed a creepy guy who had set up camp above them, for the third night in a row, and had been staring at them. They emphasized that they've been erratic with their number of miles and hiking schedule, so the fact that this guy had just appeared every night—they never saw him on trail during the day—and camped near enough to watch them for three straight nights freaked them out enough to quickly pack up their stuff and head further up the trail to find somewhere else to camp, preferably with other people.

I told them that was fucking awful, and that I was very sorry they were dealing with that, and of course they could set up here. I was the first person they had seen since abandoning their spot, and they said they were prepared to go all the way over Pinchot if necessary.

They were doing the JMT SOBO, and I thought about how shitty it was that instead of just enjoying the amazing scenery and the experience of being in nature, they were dealing with the same old crappy harassment they'd had to be on guard with off trail. I told them I was right there and to give a holler if they needed anything, and that I hoped they'd be able to relax and get some sleep. They set up their tents within arms length of each other on the other side of the bushy lodgepole, and I went back to my tent for the night. I reflected on how it would have never even crossed my mind that I would have to deal with that kind of shit when planning for my trip.

Below: Lake below Lake Marjorie. Right: Campsite and moon.

Left: Avalanche maze, South Fork Woods Creek. Right: Woods Creek footbridge.

Fin Dome, Middle Rae Lake.

Sunrise, Rae Lakes.

Left: Fin Dome, Lower Rae Lake. Below: Frosted meadow and deer.

Waterfall, Woods Creek.

Below: Chain of Lakes in Upper Woods Creek. Next pages: Views south and north of Pinchot Pass.

Palisades Crest and Upper Palisades Lake.

Deer Meadow, August 16

Miles:15.79
Elevation gain: 2085' (-4411')

I was up before dawn, and tried to be quiet for Kayla and Jessie, though they were up soon after me. They didn't sleep well, which was understandable. I had my usual sludge breakfast, and while drinking it I saw Val and Karishma on the trail above the campsite. I loaded up my pack, said goodbye to Kayla and Jessie, and that I hoped the rest of their trip was anxiety free.

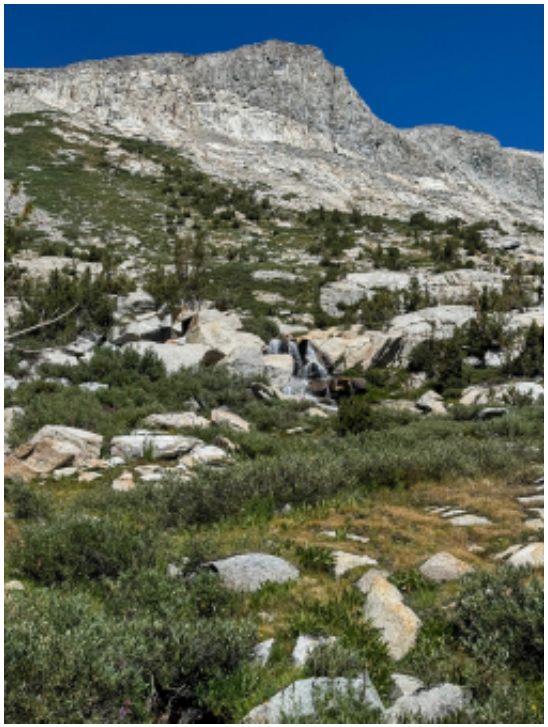
I caught up with Val and Karishma a little ways up the trail. I told them about Kayla and Jessie and their stalker, and they thought they saw the guy. We hiked together on the descent to the South Fork of the Kings, and ended up hitting it off. Val had done parts of the trail before while doing sections of the Sierra High Route, and we talked about the benefits of cross country backpacking. Val is a software engineer, and Karishma also worked in tech at Launch Darkly, a startup I was familiar with from Cockroach Labs, who used their software for managing feature flags. They had read *The High Sierra: A Love Story* by Kim Stanley Robinson, and were excited to see so many of the places he described. Today, in particular, we would go through Upper Basin on the way to Mather Pass, and somewhere along the way would pass the knapping site Robinson described where the ground was covered with obsidian flakes. There's no naturally occurring obsidian deposits in the Sierra Nevada, so any obsidian you find must have been brought here by people, almost certainly the native tribes who spent summers in the high country and traded for obsidian from other tribes from the east in the Basin and Range.

We crossed the creek below Bench Lake, passed the intersection of the Taboose Pass trail, and descended toward the South Fork Kings canyon, losing about 800' of elevation—not nearly as bad as the long descent to Woods Creek. We waded across the river, passed the Muro Blanco trail intersection, then started the ascent to Upper Basin and Mather Pass, a straight shot north that follows the South Fork of the Kings River. The canyon starts out relatively narrow, but then opens up to a wide bowl flanked on the east by Split Mountain, one of the 14ers—14,000' or higher peaks—from the Palisades group.

Upper Basin was one of my favorite areas, very remote, surrounded by 12-13,000' peaks on the west and north, and up to 14,006' Split

Mountain on the east. Red Lake Pass, just north of Split Mountain, from the ground in Upper Basin looks like an inviting gap in the crest, but on the map shows its true nature: it seems like a potentially easy crossing only because of the height and steepness of the mountains around it. Red Lake Pass is 13,000', and is the end of a tilted plateau that careens down from the crest on its eastern side.

But Upper Basin itself was another gentle bowl of lakes, creeks, granite, and meadows. After crossing the South Fork Kings again—here a wide creek in mid August instead of a fast flowing river—the trail continues up a ramp towards the north wall of the basin, on the approach to Mather Pass. Karishma had removed the insoles of her trail runners because they were bothering her, and she was hiking without her left sock as an experiment to see if that would help.



It was windy as we climbed to the top of Mather, and at the top we took shelter from the midday sun and wind around some rocks. The Palisades Basin to the north is much narrower and steeper than Upper Basin, with the Palisades Crest looming over it all, a sawtooth of dark gray spires that emerges from the white granite shoulders of the basin, and curves to the northwest.

We started the descent, making our way toward Upper Palisades Lake. Where Palisades Creek cascades down the granite slabs, we stopped for lunch and a break, finding some relief from the intense sun under a bushy lodgepole. As you descend on the north side of Mather, you can no longer see the Palisades, as the canyon is too narrow even though they are a collection of 14,000' peaks. Knowing they were there but being unable to actually see them was a little disorienting.

The trail drops to Lower Palisades Lake about midway through its length, and there's a short shelf there before it drops down the very steep Golden Staircase to the west-southwest. The view from the shelf is spectacular, the deep U shape of the glacial valley shading from alpine rock and shrubs to forest as it descends, but then abruptly hitting another steep ridge beyond the intersection of Palisades Creek and LeConte Canyon, where the Middle Fork Kings River rushes north. On his High Route trip, Val broke from the trail here and headed north, toward Cirque and Potluck Passes, and eventually Dusy Basin. We would descend, though, making a long curve west then north.

The afternoon sun was warm as we started to descend the Golden Staircase, a twisting series of rock steps that follows Palisades Creek where it can, but usually curves around steep waterfalls and cliffs. The west face of the Golden Staircase augmented the heat of the sun in the afternoon, and I was sweaty. At a promontory about a third of the way down, we met a woman hiking up the Staircase. She was exhausted, and slightly euphoric. "I made it!" she gasped, and we didn't want to crush her high and tell her she still had a long way to go to reach the shelf below Lower Palisades Lake.

The trail stays well above Palisades Creek for most of the Staircase, and the area was pocked by avalanche debris fields and burn scars. Apparently, these two opposite natural phenomena are linked here. The fire burned through the buffer groves of trees that protected the lower canyon from the frequent avalanches, causing more extensive debris and fell fields. When we finally reached the lower canyon and more extensive forest cover, the shade felt like a cool handkerchief on our hot foreheads. We began looking for a place to camp, navigating around the deadfall.

At the first flat campsite we spotted we met a father and daughter hiking SOBO and also looking for a site for the night. They said there were sites they had passed on much further down at the Middle Fork Kings confluence, but nothing in between until here. There were spots on either side of the trail, though, and they took on the ones on the north side, and us on the south side, closer to the creek. We set

up camp, and joked that our camp looked like a Durston ad, as Val and Karishma had the same model of X Mid tent as me. After scoping out a spot, though, I noticed that I had chosen a place directly under a standing dead tree leaning over where I was about to put my tent. We hadn't noticed it before, and Val and I spent some time contemplating where to put our tents to avoid the "widowmaker," though Karishma pointed out the sexism inherent in the term.

We adjusted our tent placement to hopefully avoid being directly in the path of a crashing, rotted tree if worse came to worst, and while setting up I found an obsidian arrowhead. While we had talked about trying to find the knapping site in Upper Basin as we hiked through it earlier, it wasn't really practical to take the time to explore the area, and Karishma was mildly disappointed. I came over while she was unpacking and wordlessly held out the arrowhead to her, and she was at first confused, then excited as she realized what I had found and was giving to her.

We ate dinner in the darkening twilight, the sound of Palisades Creek swiftly crashing through boulders and pools nearby.

Meadow north of Lake Marjorie.

Upper Basin.

Val and Karishma, Mather Pass.

View of Mather Pass from Upper Palisades Lake.

View west from the Golden Staircase.

Long Lake, August 17

Miles: 16.4
Elevation gain: 4019' (-1913')

In the morning, we packed up and set off before the father and daughter across from us had started breakfast. We made our way further down the canyon, encountering more avalanche deadfall and getting lost for a spell in an aspen grove full of nervous deer.

The Middle Fork Kings canyon is a wonder, a tight U shaped valley lined on each side by a series of hanging valleys with waterfalls pouring down from glacial moraine lakes, and punctuated by granite spires and slabs. We were again in one of the lowest sections of the JMT, at around 8200', and the floor of the valley had thick forests. The river tumbled over cascades and then relaxed where the side creeks fed in, expanding into broad shallows. The morning sun lit up the upper reaches on the west side of the valley, but we were mostly in the cool shadow on the east bank of the river.

We encountered more deer in Grouse Meadows.

Val and Karishma were aiming to get as close to Muir Pass as they could that day, as they intended to resupply at Muir Trail Ranch in a few days. I was going to peel off for Bishop Pass to do another resupply in town. My intent was to head up to Dusy Basin to camp that night, then go over the pass the next day.

At the Bishop Pass trail intersection, we stopped for a mid morning snack, and said our goodbyes. I very much enjoyed getting to know both of them, and I hope to meet back up with them for another trip sometime.

The Dusy Basin/Bishop Pass trail gained elevation quickly, and I was grateful that it was still early. The lower trail switchbacks abut Dusy Branch Creek, which descends from Dusy Basin in a series of slab waterfalls until emptying into the

Middle Fork of the Kings. The shoulder of the valley is forested, and then the trail ascends into manzanita and rock, with the occasional copse of trees. The waterfalls are incredible, perfect straight descents of water over wide granite slabs, cascading over the hinged plates of rock.

As I climbed, getting level with the cascades and lakes on the ridge opposite, the wind picked up, and I was glad I was mostly hiking with it at my back. Eventually the trail levels off in a small valley lined with a series of lakes. I stopped for water, then pushed on. Before the next climb, I came across some guys in their 20s doing a series of poses on a large boulder near the trail while one of them snapped a photo. Compared to their Instagram-ready looks and pristine rock climbing fit, I felt messy and old and wan, a weird guy with an overgrown beard.

The trail kicked up again, making an abrupt left turn to the north and climbing an exposed ridge to get to the heart of Dusy Basin. The wind was howling here, and the harsh midday sun was oppressive. I continued on, looking for a place to stop for a late lunch, but not finding anything that offered both shade and wind protection. I peeled off on a use trail that led to the uppermost lake in Dusy Basin, and eventually found a refuge behind some large rocks and wind-blasted whitebark pines on the west shore of the lake. I sat huddled in the north facing shade footprint right against the side of a boulder, and contemplated my options. This was roughly where I was thinking about camping for the night, but the wind was absolutely whipping through Dusy Basin.

And it is a beautiful place, Dusy. Isosceles Peak punctuates the horizon ridges, making a jagged sawtooth all around you, with the peaks rising above patches of snow and the chaos of granite rock and groves of low-lying pine and oblong lakes. I could see that on a calm day, it would give you the full high Sierra experience in a single basin. But it was not calm, and I was hiding from the sun and wind in a 2 square foot patch of shade with my back to the scenery. I packed up, and resolved to go over Bishop Pass, hoping the wind would be calmer on the lee side of the crest.

As I approached the pass, it got windier and windier. I passed a few backpackers taking refuge from the wind behind some rocks, and said hello. Their group was from Massachusetts, hiking in, and they were waiting just below the pass for the rest of their group. They were struggling with the elevation and thin air, and one of them made a comment about how they preferred the trails on the east coast.

I passed the stragglers from their group at Bishop Pass itself, and instantly understood why Kim Stanley Robinson loves it so much. It is a beautiful pass, with incredible views on either side, with stunning, snow capped peaks towering above you.

After the plateau surrounding the pass, the trail descends in a set of very steep switchbacks cut from the rock. At one switchback, I passed some young women wearing traditional red, green, and gold Nepalese? Tibetan? costumes: another photoshoot. On this side of the pass, the narrow canyon became wind protected, and the heat from the sun radiated from the dark rock, and it became sweltering. This established the pattern of the descent: wind blasted exposed trail eventually leading to protected and oppressively hot nooks and crannies.

I kept hiking, looking for a place to camp that would be out of the wind, but not finding any good candidates. I considered what it would take to go all the way to the trailhead, and then catch a ride into Bishop for the night, but decided against it for a couple of reasons. First, I would be getting into Bishop late on a Saturday evening, so I might not be able to get a room at the Wayfinder. Second, I still remembered the feeling of staying in town too long from my last resupply. Third, it was relatively late in the day, and hiking out would mean pushing the pace on a 20 mile day, arriving at the trailhead where I would then have to hitch a ride. So I resolved to camp that night, and then only have a nearo (“near zero”, a day with minimal hiking mileage in through hiker lingo) day the next day.

I descended past the series of lakes, scanning for campsites. I eventually found one at the upper end of Long Lake, a grove of trees providing some wind protection on a hill above Bishop Creek right at the lake’s inlet. The site had space for 5 or 6 tents, and I chose the

one furthest from the trail and nearest to the creek, a short downhill below me. After I set up my tent, I saw that behind one of the lodgepole clusters on the edge of my tent were a bunch of backpacks, seemingly hidden from view of the trail. I hadn't noticed them when choosing my site. I was 3 miles in from the trailhead, so it seemed a strange place to stash stolen goods. Very odd. I got some water to filter from the creek, ate some dinner, and crawled into my tent to read.

As I was reading, after dusk, I heard some people hiking down approach my tent. "Hey, we're just going to get our bags, we're not weirdos or anything. My buddy's bag is here too, and he's about 45 minutes behind me. We might steal your snacks, though." Without getting out of the tent, I joked that that was fine, and I was wondering about the bags. I heard them walk around my tent and get their bags, and then they hiked down. I figured out that they were rock climbers, who stashed their gear bags here on their way up the pass. A little while later, I heard two more people talking to each other come over and get the remaining bags, but they didn't say anything to me. I was quiet in my tent, as I was drifting off to sleep, but the latecomers continued chatting about the day and their plans for the evening just outside my tent. They were there for 10 or 15 minutes, seemingly oblivious that the tent was occupied, not making any attempt to speak quietly.

Left: Dome above the Middle Fork Kings River. Right: Val and Karishma.

Cascade, Palisades Creek.

Middle Fork Kings River Canyon.

Langille Peak from Dusy Basin Trail.

Slab cascade, Dusy Branch Creek.

Snag, Dusy Basin Trail.

Dusy Basin.

Bishop Pass.

BISHOP PASS
ELEVATION 9,832 FEET
ENTERING KINGS CANYON
NATIONAL PARK

South Fork Bishop Creek, morning.

Bishop, August 18

Miles: 2.76
Elevation gain: 45' (-976')

The wind died down overnight, and the morning was still as I broke camp. I made my way along Long Lake, sitting in shadow with Hurd Peak on the opposite side illuminated by the sun. Being so close to the trailhead meant I encountered many day hikers, many of them doing a morning hike with their dogs, which made me miss Lina and Mutty.

As I approached the South Lake Trailhead, a horse train was setting off up the trail. I moved to the side of the trail, and the lead horseman greeted me and asked me to put my poles down. I misinterpreted this to mean that I should lay my hiking poles down on the ground, but he only meant that I shouldn't raise my poles so as to not spook the horses.

At the trailhead, I emptied my trash, used the pit toilet, and contemplated how to get to Bishop. It was Sunday morning, and I had passed many people out for a morning hike. I figured that the South Lake trailhead parking lot was big and busy enough to give some good opportunities to hitch a ride into town.

This was not the case. I began to road walk down, keeping an ear out for cars coming from behind so I could stick out a thumb, but I only saw cars heading up to the trailhead. By this point, the wind had picked up again, which caused me to often mistake the sound of a gust with an approaching car from behind. I descended, noting how quick walking on asphalt was compared to a twisty, rocky trail, and eventually came to Parchers Resort. Only a single car had passed, and it didn't acknowledge me.

I turned into Parchers, thinking that it might be a good idea to get breakfast here and see if anyone was leaving and would be willing to give me a ride. But I couldn't see a restaurant, only the general store. I went inside, and bought a soda, and then sat on the porch eyeing the traffic on the road and in the parking lot. Despite it being a Sunday morning at a resort, nobody seemed to be getting ready to leave, and the road beyond was similarly empty of cars heading downhill. So I moved on.

I continued walking down the shoulder, occasionally hearing cars (or phantom cars, from the wind) and throwing out a hopeful thumb, with no takers. The rising sun warmed the air in the more protected valleys down canyon, and I was getting hot. I heard the whine of a car engine, stuck my left thumb out, and was excited to see a Kia crossover pull to the shoulder ahead of me. I walked up, but the woman driving the car, every seat occupied, explained that she didn't have any room, but wanted me to know that she would have taken me if she had an opening. Thanks?

Disheartened, I walked on. I had more than doubled my trail mileage of 2.76 miles now, and I wondered if I would have to walk all the way to the Aspendell road before getting a hitch. I passed the Tyee trailhead, and several campgrounds, the aspen groves a riot in the gusts of wind. The very occasional car would pass, and I put out my thumb without ever really expecting anyone to stop. But then a Volkswagen sedan passed me, and pulled over to the shoulder.

Two backpackers from LA who had just completed a trip out of Tyee were kind enough to give me a ride into Bishop. We talked about our trips, and it turns out the man in the passenger seat had just finished his first backpacking trip. They were headed back home that day, but dropped me off at 395 in Bishop, and I again told them how grateful I was that they had stopped.

I walked back to the Wayfinder, and once again my room wasn't ready. I was able to leave my number so they could text me when I could do early check in, and then stash my backpack. Then I headed off to get some lunch. On Karishma's recommendation, I went to the Pupfish Cafe, at the back of Spellbinder Books, and got the breakfast sandwich and a salad (all delicious). I killed some time looking at my phone, then walked back. I stopped in at Antojitos Hippocampos for a mango smoothie. It was significantly better than my previous smoothies, and after I got it I headed back to the Wayfinder to check in.

My room was on the far wing, on the ground floor with a small patio outside beside the path that abuts South Fork Bishop Creek, the same creek I had slept near the night before above Long Lake. I took a shower, did my laundry, arranged for a ride back to South Lake for the next morning, and then decided to get some food at the 1903 Taphouse, an old saloon that had been modernized.

The bartender, younger than me, was playing Green Day and watching football. Unprovoked, he told me that he regretted never seeing Green Day. I almost told him about how I had seen Green Day open for Bad Religion before they were famous, before they had released "Dookie", but decided against it on the grounds of sounding like a dingus. I ordered a kielbasa and a Kolsch, and split my attention between my phone and the football game.

I headed back to the brewery to get more food, because the Hiking Hunger was fierce, and sat down again at the bar. It was more crowded than I expected at 6:00, and the bright sun hovering over the top of the Sierra crest poured into the west facing windows. I ordered another burger and another beer. Beside me was a very loud group of guys, a few rounds deep, with one guy in particular dominating the conversation, which mostly was about his dog doing rude things to people. Great. They weren't as bad as the annoying dad from the last time I was here, but I was hoping for a different vibe. I finished my food and beer, and walked back to the Wayfinder.

I was able to FaceTime with Katie and Desi, and they were eager to show me a large herding ball they got for Lina to chase around in our backyard. It was bright blue, and probably 2 feet in diameter. The idea is that dogs can move it around as if they were herding livestock. Lina would try to tackle it and bite it, and it all seemed on the verge of disaster for someone or something—probably the landscaping—but also very fun for Lina.

Then it was time for bed, and I was instantly asleep.

Long Lake.

Rock Monster, August 19

Miles: 14.46
Elevation gain: 2878' (-3259')

Another morning at the Wayfinder, another large, B- breakfast. Dave, the guy who was driving me and another hiker, Rudy, to South Lake, was going to pick us both up at the Bishop post office just after it opened, as we both had packages we needed to pick up for a resupply. Rudy was anxious about getting on the trail, so he intended to pack in the car on the ride up. Apparently he was driving Dave a little crazy, based on his comments to me on the phone conversations we had had yesterday.

The post office opened at 9:00 AM, and I headed off at 8:30 to make sure I was first in line when it opened, but stopped at the Looney Bean for some coffee for the walk over. After ordering, I saw Jessie and Kayla, the girls who had trouble with the stalker, waiting for their order. I said hi to them, and asked how things were going. They had exited at Kearsarge, and decided to end their hike at that point. They said it was because they were behind schedule. I asked if the guy had showed up again, and unfortunately he had, the same evening after we had last seen each other. They had camped next to some other people, the dude showed up again, and the other people there had told him he couldn't camp there. I again felt bad they had to deal with this bullshit, and couldn't help but pin the early end of their JMT with the presence of this stalker guy. The good news was that they were renting a car that day and headed to Vegas for a couple of days to relax. I hoped they had fun, said goodbye, and headed out to the post office.

I arrived a bit before 9:00, and went inside the lobby to wait. The lobby was stuffy, but it was also pretty warm outside and in the direct sun. A few minutes later, another hiker came in, and I figured it was Rudy. We introduced each other, and chatted about the stress of picking up packages. Rudy, from Montreal, had regularly hiked the JMT, and had only given himself 10 days to finish his SOBO hike. He was nice, but fidgety and seemingly consumed by his compact time, talking about how difficult it was logistically to fly to and from Montreal without taking more time off work. I was grateful I didn't have this overarching time pressure that dominated my trip.

With that said, I had realized the day before that my original rough schedule had a critical error in the dates and miles per day I had

given myself to get to Mammoth in order to meet up with my friends Josh and Chuck. I had not noticed the error despite looking at the schedule for months, and circulating it to others. The section between South Lake and Mammoth is 90 miles, and at my scheduled 14 miles/day pace would take over 6 days. Josh and Chuck were arriving in Mammoth the coming Friday and staying until Sunday. By arriving in Bishop on a Sunday, and having to wait until Monday morning to pick up my resupply package, I had compressed that even more. I now fully regretted taking that extra zero day on my first time in Bishop, as I hadn't realized at that point that my schedule was borked. The full implications of this mistake hadn't revealed themselves fully at this point, either.

In any case, I had 5 days to do 90 miles, an average of 18 miles a day, to meet them in Mammoth on Friday. It wouldn't have been the worst thing in the world to arrive on Saturday, but I was at a point in the trip where seeing familiar faces was not just a nice idea, but a craving, and losing any time I could spend with people I loved and cherished was crushing. I would hike as far as I could to set myself up for Muir Pass the next day, conscious that any miles fewer than 18 were ones I would have to make up on other days.

I picked up my package, and then Rudy did the same. We left the post office, and Dave was waiting in his Volkswagen sedan in the parking lot. He had lived in the Bay Area until about 10 years ago, and then retired to Bishop with his wife after raising their kids. He loved living there, and was an avid hiker, and enjoyed helping out other hikers while making a little extra money. That morning, he had already gone up to the South Lake trailhead twice. The wind was still whipping up at the trailhead, unfortunately, but was supposed to calm down as the week went on. Rudy was focused on packing in the back, but after he had done most of what he could do in the car, he joined in the conversation, talking about his previous trips and reiterating his compressed time schedule.

At the trailhead we got out, and Dave was nice enough to stick around until after I had unpacked my box to take whatever I couldn't fit back. He had a hikers box of extra supplies he kept in the trunk, and I added a fair number of items to it. I always sent myself too much.

After packing up and saying goodbye to Dave, I had a sinking feeling as I realized that my alpha fleece sweater wasn't in my bag. I must have left it at the Wayfinder. I messaged Katie asking her to call them to check my hotel room, where I was sure I had left it on the bed that morning while I packed. The dark blue fleece was similar in color to the bedspread, and I kicked myself for not noticing or doing a final check.

More worrisome was that I had used the fleece consistently, and was briefly anxious about what I would do without it. But at that point, I had barely used my down hoodie, and the August weather had been generally quite warm even at 11,000 feet. This was a specific kind of panic that is probably unique to through hikers. When you carry everything in a pack on your back, that means anything that isn't in that pack is not available to you at all, and that finality is scary. I remembered Tom's Tears weeping at losing her toothpaste, and understood it completely. But I had enough layers between my sun hoodie, shirt, wind jacket, down jacket, and rain jacket to be fine, if it came down to it. I repeated that to myself, as a way of calming down, and headed up the trail.

Similar to the morning before, there were many dogs on the trail, and many day hiking locals. This thinned out as I headed further up trail, past Long Lake and the previous camp site, then up the rocky terraces and higher lakes, and then eventually up to Bishop Pass.

It was still windy, but less so than the previous days. The descent to Dusy Basin went quickly. An NPS work crew was working on repairs to the trail. I had thought I would have encountered more patrol rangers—I ended up never seeing any, and never had my permit checked—and the only rangers I saw were young people performing trail work. The entire hike back to the JMT main trail, I passed individual young hikers in loose fitting NPS ranger button up shirts, moving quickly and purposefully, nodding at me as we passed. I wondered if they were the equivalent of summer interns, seasonal rangers who were given the high labor jobs of trail maintenance.

Back down at the Middle Fork Kings, I turned north and started hiking up, past more cascades and waterfalls, past more granite

domes and steep canyon walls. I caught up with some hikers on the ascent, and at one point was behind a woman making her way up a steeper section where the trail was particularly narrow. I had passed her companion shortly before, and was put in an awkward position where I wanted to pass her, and not startle her with my presence, without being like, "AHEM, coming through!" Her pack was pretty tall on her, so she couldn't really see behind her in her peripheral vision. I was making some coughs and sniffs and other sort of context clue noises as I got nearer to let her know I was there, but I think she must have thought I was her companion. I slowed down to keep some distance so I didn't just suddenly appear behind her, and made a few more noises until she noticed my presence, and stepped off to the side. I made sure to be low-key friendly as I passed, but these kind of situations are awkward at the best of times, and I was still thinking about Jessie and Kayla's shitty experience with men on the trail.

At Big Pete Meadow, the trail makes a 90 degree turn to the west. It was getting toward late afternoon, and after this upper section of the glacial valley the trail became steeper as it ascended towards Muir Pass. I knew I couldn't make the pass, and saw that there were fewer camp sites listed on FarOut, so began looking for places.

I eventually settled on a site a few miles up the trail, which turned out to be right next to the Rock Monster, a large granite boulder that had cracked near its base in a way that resembled a mouth. Hikers had lined the bottom of the crack with rocks so it looked like a jagged set of teeth. There were probably 5 spaces for tents, and two of them were claimed by two packs that sat as placeholders, their owners unseen.

I found the most level of the remaining sites, and began setting up, directly in front of the Rock Monster. I hoped I wasn't in the way of anyone wanting a picture that evening. The two other hikers eventually showed up, Chris and Travis. Chris had quit his job, and was traveling the west in his van. Travis worked for the Midpeninsula Open Space District in the Bay Area, which manages the parks in the Santa Cruz mountains and foothills along the peninsula in Santa Clara and San Mateo counties. They were headed southbound.

I sat beside the river soaking my feet after filtering some water, watching trout dart back and forth. The site was right next to the river, and the tumbling water was a constant rumble. During the mosquito months, it probably was miserable, but there were no bugs now.

Bishop Pass, again.

View of Middle Fork Kings River Canyon from Dusy Basin.

Afternoon, Upper Middle Fork Kings River Canyon.

Big Pete Meadow.

Evolution Meadow, August 20

Miles: 16.88
Elevation gain: 2534' (-2727')

After packing up, I started off further up the canyon as it steepened. The river was smaller here, and was a tumble of twisting cascades and pools as the trail wove back and forth across cliffs and steep, rocky slopes. The air was smokey, which had been somewhat noticeable the day before but was a lot more obvious this morning.

After the steep start, the canyon leveled off somewhat into a series of meadows and lakes with shorter steep rises as you moved from one level to the next. The east walls of the canyon were shadowed and cold, and the grass tinged with frost. Eventually, I was above both treeline and the meadows, and pinkish granite and metamorphic rocks dominated. I hit the first patch of snow on trail here, and the river was now just a cascading creek lined with a ribbon of green grass and wildflowers.

I stopped briefly at an unnamed small lake surrounded by boulders, set in a bowl below Helen Lake. The blue of the water matched the sky, and this section was unlike any of the other passes I had crossed thus far. There was both more water and less vegetation, a strange combination. Helen Lake is very large, a mass of crystal clear water in an austere bowl surrounded by rock and sand. The trail sits above the lake level on the south shore, snaking through and around boulders. At one point I lost the trail, missing a turn as it crossed the dry inlet wash that feeds the lake snowmelt earlier in the summer. This wash was technically the Middle Fork of the Kings, just below its headwaters at the unnamed glacial lake at the head of the canyon.

The approach to Muir Pass is the steepest part, and from Helen Lake it was just a few more relatively easy switchbacks until the Pass and the Muir Hut, a circular structure built entirely of stone, including its concentric roof. The Muir Hut was built by the Sierra Club in the 30s, and has a fireplace, stone benches, a desk, and a window that give a view to the north and into Evolution Basin. Another hiker was resting near the hut as I approached, taking some pictures and selfies. I tried to stay out of her shot, while taking my own photos. I eventually asked her to take my picture in front of the hut, and offered to do the same for her. One of the challenges of being a solo hiker is to get non-selfie photos of yourself on the trail. I

think adding people to landscape shots can humanize the experience, and provide a sense of scale, and it's hard to do when you are hiking alone.

After hiking most of the day without seeing hardly anyone, there were a surprising number of hikers I passed on the descent from the pass. I was asked to give a message from NTS (her trail name, for "not today, Satan") to Cricket, which I dutifully did. I passed a large group of Chinese or Taiwanese hikers, most of whom had umbrellas or near full face coverings, presumably to avoid sunburn.

Wanda Lake is one of the largest alpine lakes in the Sierra Nevada, and the blue and turquoise water contrasts with the near moonscape appearance of Evolution Basin, a place very nearly empty of grass and shrubs. The trail skirts the lake for most of its northeast side, before dropping down to the next set of smaller lakes to the north, and then again down to Sapphire Lake. I found a small copse of stunted lodgepole on a promontory below Sapphire Lake next to creek and had lunch, looking down the canyon to the final lake in the basin, Evolution Lake, a long narrow body of water that curves to the northwest. Just beyond the end of the lake is the trail to Darwin Bench and Darwin Canyon, where my friend Justin and I came down from Lamarck Col the year before.

The drop from Evolution Lake marks the end of the extensive high country I had been passing through since ascending Cottonwood Pass. The peaks are a little lower beyond Evolution Basin, the skyline more open, the valleys a little more broad. I was familiar with Evolution Valley from my previous trip the year before, and it was an interesting experience going through this section once again.

I dropped down to the head of the valley, and took a break at a very large waterfall where Evolution Creek tumbled down into a tangle of downed trees covered in moss, criss-crossed with rivulets and ferns. Once in the valley proper, the trail is relatively flat, and I was able to move quickly, putting in the miles necessary for me to get to Mammoth on schedule. I passed through the dense trees, and skirted the open, grassy meadows as the afternoon passed. Just beyond Evolution Meadow, I decided to find a place to camp on the north side of Evolution Creek, and avoid crossing to the south. The year before, I had seen a crossing point with some downed logs a little further on, and figured I would use those instead of getting my feet wet at the official crossing point.

The campsite was a flat area beside the creek, with boulders scattered around. There was room for 7-8 tents, roughly defined by logs marking the borders, but I was the first one here. Eventually a few other people set up camp closer to dusk. I did my usual foot soak, dinner, and book, and then fell asleep before it was fully dark.

Cascade, Middle Fork Kings River.

Meadow, south of Muir Pass.

Below: Lake below Muir Pass. Next page: Helen Lake.

Muir Hut and Lake McDermand.

Left: Roof from inside Muir Hut. Right: Outside Muir Hut.

Wanda Lake, Evolution Basin.

Sapphire Lake, Evolution Basin.

Sapphire Lake.

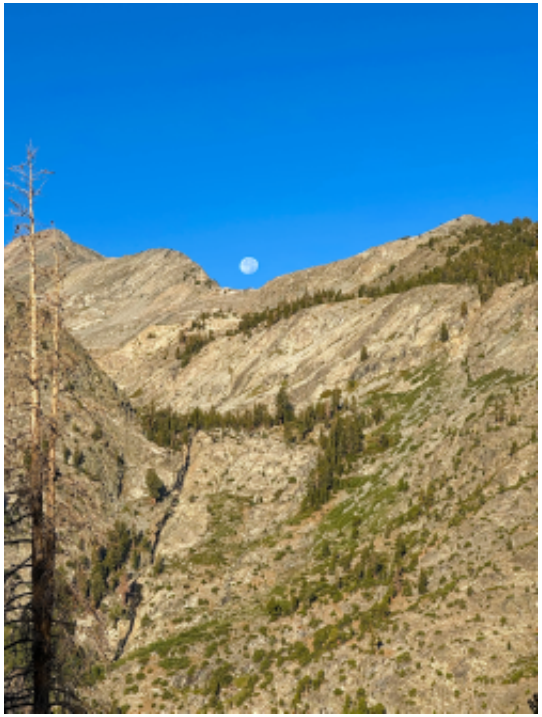
Evolution Lake.

Bear Creek, August 21

Miles: 20.54
Elevation gain: 3134' (-2859')

With most of the highest elevations behind me, and two days into the 5 days I needed to get to Mammoth, today was a day I needed to make up some miles. I had not hit the 18 miles a day average I had calculated I needed thus far, though to be fair I didn't intend to hike that exact number of miles every day. But now, with a descent to Goddard Canyon and into the less rugged terrain of the John Muir Wilderness north of Kings Canyon, I felt like I could pick up the pace. I got up early, and was on trail at dawn.

The waning gibbous moon was setting over the western peaks over Goddard Canyon as I hiked down the switchbacks, the rock lit up with a warm glow from the rising sun but the canyon still shadowed. After the descent, the trail turns north, following the South Fork of the San Joaquin as it shoots through the narrows towards Florence



Lake. When Justin and I did this section the year before, we had to cross to the river's north side by wading across—the bridge had been washed away during the spring melt after the huge winter—but a temporary bridge was in place now for construction of the new bridge, which would be set in place a few weeks later.

The temporary bridge was a set of cables anchored into the rock on both sides of the river, with some wood pieces providing a walkway. I didn't see any workers, but there was evidence of their work scattered around the crossing site, including a spray painted sign informing you that you were crossing the bridge at your own risk. So, I risked.

It was surprisingly sturdy, with little bounce as I walked across, and then on down the trail. Easy, and my feet remained dry. Onward.

I passed John Muir Rock (not as impressive in real life as you'd think, based on topo maps and the name), and then the campsite at the Paiute Creek convergence where Justin and I camped previously before turning up Paiute Canyon and back towards Humphreys Basin. I walked over the bridge, Paiute Creek rushing down below me, and exited Kings Canyon National Park. The trail would continue through the Sierra National Forest and the small part of the John Muir Wilderness that sits west of the Sierra crest.

For many NOBO JMT hikers, the Muir Trail Ranch horse packing station just ahead of me marked their first resupply point, a very long carry considering I had resupplied twice since Cottonwood Pass. And once again I felt relieved I didn't have to do a 10 day food carry to meet a fast schedule, tempered with the thought that I actually did need to pick up the pace to get into Mammoth by Friday evening.

The trail descended below 8000 feet in a relatively dry and shade-rare section of manzanita and open groves of Ponderosa. I reached the Y for Muir Trail Ranch, but headed north, ascending up to Selden Pass. I had been descending almost exclusively since Muir Pass, and this relatively exposed rise was a reminder that ascents are not places to make up time. My trail legs were quite strong, and I knew the rhythms needed to maintain a steady pace as I hiked up, but it felt slow compared to the way I had moved down through Evolution Basin, Evolution Valley, and Goddard Canyon.

I stopped for lunch at the eastern of the Sallie Keyes Lakes, sitting in the shade by the shore and doing a quick foot soak. Beyond Sallie Keyes, the trail emerged from the trees and climbed through rocky and boulder strewn granite, lined with manzanita and other small shrubs, and the canyon narrowed. I yoyo'ed with another backpacker for a while on the narrow trail, with him passing me as I took a short water break and me doing the same a little while later, but eventually I saw that he had dropped far behind, another example, I think, of how my weeks on trail had given me stamina on the uphills that only other through hikers could match.

One group of through hikers I saw on the ascent above Heart Lake were 3 women, all apparently with the same exact model of green backpack. I made it to the top of Selden Pass, where a few other hikers were taking a rest and admiring the views, and the 3 women came along shortly afterward. They were a mom and her two daughters, going northbound on the JMT after one of the daughters had graduated college, and they were known as the Caterpillars, due to their matching backpacks.

The view north from Selden Pass was of lovely Lake Marie. The terrain was more open than what I was used to, even though the pass was still almost 11,000 feet. But the ridges were further apart, with more extensive, rolling forest in the spaces between. I hiked down, past Lake Marie and eventually to the West Fork of Bear Creek. This

relatively dry section was occasionally hot in the wind-sheltered granite bowls. I was happy to stop for a bit to get water when I crossed the creek at a footbridge, and continued the descent to Bear Creek Canyon.

The Bear Creek crossing below the confluence of the West and South Forks is consistently one of the most dangerous water crossings on the JMT/PCT during the melt, but in late August it was not difficult. I continued on the north side of the creek, and started looking at FarOut for potential camping spots. I wanted to hike as far as I could, but not ascend out of the canyon. I eventually found a spot on an outcrop above the creek, with long fins of low granite on each side of a filled in flat spot. I was sweaty, but had made up some time by putting in over 20 miles on the day. I set up camp, filtered my water, and read a bit in the dusk before falling asleep.

South Fork San Joaquin River Canyon above Florence Lake.

Meadow below Sallie Keyes Lakes.

View north to Marie Lake, Selden Pass.

Lake Virginia, August 22

Miles: 20.97
Elevation gain: 5279' (-4012')

I knew I had to do another big day today, and got up and out of camp early. The trail pretty quickly forked to the northwest from the Bear Creek Trail, which continued down the canyon, and started a gradual ascent as it traversed across the face of the ridge that abruptly got steep as it turned north into a series of tight switchbacks. I didn't expect the climb to be this abrupt and steep, though it is obvious on the map as a sort of hockey stick where it starts gently and then rises. This steep section then ended on top of a gently sloped plateau of open forest just below 10,000'.

The widely spaced tall trees here cut off any distant views, but allowed you to see well into the understory all around you, and appeared to be a fractal. I let my mind wander as I moved along the plateau, and the sense of deja vu when my mind snapped back to attention—didn't I just pass

through here? Am I wandering in a circle?—was palpable. Short shrubs and dry needles and empty low swales. My pace was high, and the morning sun was hitting the tops of the canopy but hadn't made it to the forest floor.

Eventually I made it out of the labyrinth of the plateau, and began to descend to Mono Creek. This north face of the canyon was lush, with long, easy switchbacks bordered to the east by a cascading creek. The moisture and dense concentration of dogwood and verdant conifers contrasted greatly with both the open forest of the plateau just before, and more generally my hike up to that point. I had been moving for a while from the relatively drier, but higher, country of the Southern Sierra to the wetter Central Sierra as my hike progressed. But on this descent it came into focus how much different the ecology of this area

is from the places I had hiked through before.

I eventually came out to the valley floor, crossed a dry wash, and then hit Mono Creek. The canyon walls were quite steep here, another Yosemite in miniature with a flat bottom glacial valley with steep rims of granite on both sides. Just below the crossing here is the end of Lake Thomas Edison, where many hikers take a boat ferry to Vermillion Valley Resort (aka VVR), a collection of cabins, a store, and a restaurant accessible by road from Shaver Lake to the west, making it one of the few places on the JMT more or less directly accessible from the western slope of the Sierra. VVR is famous for being a pleasant layover and resupply point, with a free drink for PCT/JMT hikers, wifi, laundry, and a place to send resupply boxes or buckets. I was sorry to not be able to stop at VVR, as many JMT hikers consider it a highlight of their trip, but my previous exits and zeroes made it both unnecessary and impossible if I wanted to get to Mammoth tomorrow.

The morning ferry from VVR to the trail had apparently already dropped off its passengers, as I started seeing more people on the descent and at Mono Creek. I got some more water and a snack on the south side of Mono Creek, and then headed across the bridge and started walking up valley.

The trail follows the creek for a bit before breaking north to a side canyon on the way to Silver Pass. I began to ascend the sandy lower section, rising above the tops of the valley trees, and then into more rocky and steep terrain. A group of backpackers was taking a break under some shade as I approached, and I recognized two of them: Fanny and Nick, the Swedish couple I had originally seen at the Vons in Mammoth and the ESTA bus before my hike, and I had last seen at the Onion Valley trailhead as they resupplied before I first went to Bishop for my own resupply. I hadn't expected to see them again, given my zero day and time spent getting to and from Bishop.

With Fanny and Nick was Iain, an Australian mining engineer from Queensland. They had been on the VVR ferry that morning, and were still in the glow of their time there: the food, the beer, the amenities. At this point, I had already hiked about 9 miles, while they were just starting their day. I decided to continue with them, grateful

for the company.

The climb to Silver Pass was, like Selden Pass before, a little harder than I had thought it would be, even though it was not a particularly difficult pass. There were sections that were very exposed, and, like most of my hike, the temperatures were above normal. Just before the final approach is Silver Pass Lake, an oval surrounded on three sides by white granite walls, and very beautiful.

The strangest part of Silver Pass itself is that the top of the pass is not the top of the climb, a small but cruel joke on us all. The pass sits on a saddle, with views to the northwest to the embarrassingly named Chief Lake, Papoose Lake, and Lake of the Lone Indian. The trail continues to climb the ridge to the north, though, topping out just below 11,000' and overlooking Warrior Lake and (better) Nüümü Hu Hupi Lake. Beyond that, you can see the sweep of the San Joaquin River, and how it makes a gap that funnels storms towards Mammoth and the lower Mammoth Crest, allowing that section of the Eastern Sierra to get much more snow and moisture.

We stopped for a snack and to take pictures on top of the ridge, including a couple of timed group shots. Then we began our descent,

following the trail down a canyon to Fish Creek, where it turned up another canyon toward Tully Hole. Fish Creek canyon was steep, and we quickly lost most of the long views we had seen above Silver Pass from the Silver Divide. After crossing Fish Creek, we passed a series of impressive waterfalls as the trail began to rise, the rushing water white and loud.

I had targeted Tully Hole, a series of meadows near a bend in the creek, as my stopping place for the night. We reached it in the late afternoon, and it looked very inviting to my now-tired legs in the golden light. But the rest of the group were headed for Ruby Lake, and I followed. The ascent from Tully Hole to Ruby Lake is one of the most difficult in this section of the trail, a set of seemingly endless switchbacks lined by occasionally overgrown manzanita. The only positive I can say about this climb was that we were not doing this in the middle of day, which would have made its south facing aspect especially brutal. But it was hard enough.

This ended up being my biggest day in total elevation—almost 5300' in gain and over 4000' in loss—as well as total mileage, with nearly 21. While I was now in full trail shape, where climbs were not particularly challenging, I was numb with the effort by the time we reached the top of the climb. Somewhere along the way up the climb, it had turned cold, as the wind began blowing from the northwest. As we moved over rolling, open granite fields towards Ruby Lake I was chilly for the first time. Granted, normally I was in camp and eating dinner by this time of the evening, but it was still a shock.

But Ruby Lake itself was beautiful. We passed many campsites that had great views of the lake, but were sitting well up from the lake itself with no easy water access. We pushed on, crossing an arm of the lake and getting some wet feet in the boggy terrain. At the north end of the lake, we broke from the trail and headed up to a fin ridge that paralleled the shore, which seemed a likely spot for a good camp site. The wind was now kicking up, so finding a site with a little wind shelter was our priority, and we found a level site with some low, shrubby lodgepoles lining it. We set up our tents, and Fanny and Nick went to go bathe in the lake, an act that Iain and I found both admirable and slightly crazy, given the cold air temperature. Whether it was their Nordic heritage or the shallowness, and therefore relative warmth of the water, of the north arm of Ruby Lake that made it bearable, who can say?

We cooked our dinners and chatted, and then tucked into our tents as the temperature dropped. I fell asleep in no time.

Silver Divide.

View north from Silver Pass.

Nüümü Hu Hupi Lake.

Upper Fish Creek Canyon.

Tully Hole.

Climb up from Tully Hole to Lake Virginia.

Sunset, Lake Virginia.

Clouds being funneled into Middle Fork San Joaquin Canyon.

Mammoth, August 23

Miles 15.56
Elevation gain: 992' (-3660')

I was never truly cold on my hike, which I think was a factor of having a good 20 degree quilt, a well insulated pad, a decent tent, and extra layers I could use as required. But this was one of the coldest nights of my trip, made easily bearable by having gear that was up to the task. But it was windy, and I probably should have staked out my tent fully, instead of my typical 6 shepherd's crook titanium stakes at the corners and vestibules. I woke up in the middle of the night to readjust my quilt, and it took a little bit to fall back asleep due to the sudden wind gusts causing the looser parts of my tent to flap.

In the morning, I quickly packed up, and in the cold air needed my down jacket for the first time. I definitely was missing my alpha fleece, left behind in Bishop and now lost forever, it turns out. But with my remaining layers worn, I was fine. We

overland hiked up from our campsite to catch the trail again, which took a bit of scouring as we had wandered off quite a bit when finding our campsite. Back on trail, we ascended and descended the saddle between Ruby and Purple Lakes, and started on the south facing traverse of the ridge above Fish Creek.

At Duck Lake, we topped up on water, as the next section was one of the longer water carries in the northern part of the JMT. Doing the ascent in the cold morning air made it easy, and we had to shed the layers of clothes we had put on earlier. The views to the west showed tongues of clouds moving in and breaking up as they hit the ridge we were traveling across. The play of sun and clouds was mesmerizing, and occasional banks of fog would hit the trail, which we moved through and then back into the sun. The weather was for

sure changing, and it was really cool to see in person the way weather systems were squeezed into the gap in the crest around Mammoth.

As we were hiking, I thought of a good group name for Fanny, Nick, Iain, and me: The ScandanavIAINS. The rest of them got a chuckle out of it, and I made it our group chat name in WhatsApp.

As we approached Deer Creek—the end of the long waterless stretch—a woman hiking toward us asked where Deer Creek was. We told her she must have just hiked past it, as we were less than a quarter mile away from it. When we got to Deer Creek, there were numerous signs that said "Deer Creek", so it was wild she had not noticed them all.

Past Deer Creek the geology of the area, like the weather, was obviously different: pumice, cinder cones, buttes, red volcanic rock. Iain in particular, being a mining engineer, was interested in seeing this change, and, being Australian, was unused to the extreme geologic contrasts and obvious recent volcanic activity of the area. The trail network became more extensive here, and there were more day hikers and backpackers out than I had seen since Mt. Whitney.

Around Upper Crater Meadow we came upon an older woman walking very oddly, sort of dragging her left foot behind her, almost as if she was marking a line in the sand. Fanny, Nick, Iain, and I looked at each other, silently trying to figure out if she had a disability or if she was hurt. We stopped, and Iain asked if her leg was ok. It turns out that she had sprained her ankle, and was trying to make her way to Reds Meadow. She had taken a bunch of pain reliever, and was hoping to just slowly make her way back. This was a deranged plan, as it looked both difficult and painful to drag your foot for many miles, even on a pretty wide and well groomed trail.

I had an ace bandage that I insisted that she take, though she at first refused. I think she didn't want to be a burden, and was worried that I would need it. I explained that I was heading into town that evening, so it was no problem at all for her to take it, and I really had to insist that she take it, because it would make it possible for her to make it back. Fanny and Nick took her name down, and said they would let the people at Reds know, and look for her later that afternoon. We didn't, however, see her actually put on the ace bandage. I truly hope she used it, because there was no reason to suffer.

Shortly after leaving, for the final time, the John Muir Wilderness, the trail switchbacked down on a long descent toward Reds Meadow and Devils Postpile. The trail, well-used and sandy, kicked up a lot of dust, causing us to cough, and meant we had to space ourselves out far enough that it was hard to talk while hiking. So we made a wordless descent down over 2000 vertical feet, eventually hitting Boundary Creek at the base of the ridge. A set of rolling ups and downs through a fire recovery zone, filled with berry covered shrubs and tall bracken ferns, marked the approach to Reds. We passed some backpackers headed south who asked if we were headed to the resort, and they raved about the food. The thought of town food pushed our pace, and we arrived at the fork, turning to the right to head to Reds.

There were a lot of people here, many waiting for the shuttle bus to Mammoth. We found a table between the store and the restaurant and the (hallelujah!) flush toilets. I recognized a couple other JMT hikers lounging around the shower house, charging their phones with the outlets on the deck, most notably Honey Badger, the guy from the top of Glen Pass. I ordered a double cheeseburger and a shake, and got a text from Chuck and Josh that they were about an hour away. The midday sun was starting to give way to high clouds, and the wind was kicking up again as I chatted with the rest of the

ScandanavIAINS. They were going to camp at Reds that night, and hike out the next morning. I was heading into town for the weekend. So it was truly goodbye, as they would be finishing up their hike by early the next week.

I bought a couple of overpriced tallboy beers from the store, and we all toasted each other. Both Fanny and Nick and Iain were heading to San Francisco after their hike before going home, and I gave them some tips on places to check out. As the sky got darker in the middle afternoon, Chuck and Josh showed up, and it made me so happy to see old familiar faces. I introduced them to my newest friends, wished the ScandanavIANS luck, and got into Chuck's car to drive back to Mammoth as the afternoon got noticeably colder and greyer.

The road to Reds Meadow and Devil's Postpile was undergoing construction, and was only open on Friday to Sunday evening. I relaxed in the back of the car as we made our way to town, and caught up with Chuck and Josh. They were also in a great mood, as they had really enjoyed the drive from the Bay Area and over Tioga Pass. It'd been a while since they had no family obligations, and they were practically giddy with the idea of an entire weekend of just hanging out in Mammoth.

The sunlight got dappled as patchy dark clouds moved over the crest. The condo they had rented was in a recently built neighborhood surrounding a golf course a little outside of old Mammoth. It was very nice and spacious, three levels with a very large main bedroom with its own bathroom that they insisted I take. I was eager to take a long shower, which I did, the dirt from my legs making streaks onto the tile and down the drain. I started a load of laundry, and got the bag of clothes Katie had sent up with Chuck and Josh. When I came out, they were working on a large cheese plate, which I dug into with uncharacteristic (for my non-trail life) fury, which may have alarmed them. Acme bread, olives, prosciutto, a bunch of different nice cheeses: heaven. On the high wall of the open kitchen/dining room/lounge was a taxidermied mountain sheep, posed in mid-leap. We opened a bottle of wine, and just shot the shit, while Josh floated through channels on the television, the wind began whipping outside, but I was happy and warm and with friends inside.

But still hungry. We eventually decided to head into town to a brew pub, on the second floor of a strip mall in old Mammoth. I realized I didn't have any extra pants—my board shorts were not going to cut it in the freezing wind—but Josh let me borrow a pair of his, which fortunately fit. After waiting what seemed like a little too long for a table, we were seated, and I got a shepherd's pie, which I concentrated on like it was a sudoku puzzle. Despite my laser focus, though, it was really great talking with Chuck and Josh over dinner, and I kept telling them how much it meant that they were able to

meet up with me. I filled them in on some of the highlights of the trip so far, and how I've adapted to the elevation and long miles and conditions. We finished up, and headed back to the condo.

Plopping back on the couches in the lounge, Josh found a reality show I'd never heard of before, "Bering Sea Gold," a show seemingly related to "Ice Road Truckers" or "The Deadliest Catch" about rival groups mining for gold on the seafloor of the Bering Sea near Fairbanks. They would throw up graphics that tracked how many ounces of gold each group had sluiced up with these specialty vacuums, like it was a score of a game. Everyone on the show was weird in the way Alaskans are weird, but even more so, and every little conflict was edited for maximum drama. It was incredibly stupid, but the mindlessness of it, watching it with my friends, warm inside our place while the wind continued to gust outside, made it a great time.

I fell asleep listening to the gusts and whistles of the cold wind, from my over-pillowed king bed, a little guilty that I was in the lap of luxury while Iain and Fanny and Nick were out in that cold wind, back in their tents at Reds Meadow.

Mammoth, August 24

Zero day

I slept in, relatively speaking, getting up around 7:00. I took another luxurious shower, and headed downstairs. Chuck was up, but Josh slept in. I got some coffee, and Chuck started making some bacon and eggs. The plan was to have a leisurely breakfast at the condo, then head to the post office to pick up my resupply package.

Outside, the peaks were dusted white, and it definitely looked like it had snowed up around Reds. While I appreciated that an anecdote about camping in an August snowstorm was pretty cool, I still was grateful to have threaded the needle just right to avoid it.

After everyone had eaten and showered, we headed to the Mammoth Lakes post office. I looked up the directions on my phone, and felt my heart sink a little when it said "Closed. Opens 9:00 AM Monday." The hell? Why would a post office be closed all day Saturday? We drove over anyway, and everything about the parking lot indicated "CLOSED." I went inside the lobby just in case, thinking maybe by a miracle I might see someone working there who could retrieve my resupply package, but no dice. A handmade sign suggested maybe this was a temporary staffing problem, but regardless. I was not getting my second box.

I immediately started strategizing for this pivot. I would need to go to the grocery store and a drug store and possibly a sporting goods store for a backpacker meal (so I could reuse the mylar pouch for my other meals). I had intended on bouncing some of the supplies to Tuolumne Meadows, because I would have had a longer food carry.

I found a place in town where I could mail a

package to Tuolumne Meadows Post Office. So we hit up Vons, Rite-Aid, and finally Kitteridge Sports, before heading back to the condo so I could do a real inventory, sort out what I was taking vs. mailing, and then headed back to Mammoth Business Essentials, where I had them pack up a box and send it Priority Mail to Tuolumne Meadows. It was a little fraught getting the right post office address, as the guy behind the counter almost sent it to the main post office in Yosemite Valley, but luckily I caught it and corrected it.

With that settled, I headed back to the condo to relax. My friend Andy and his friend Kelly were in town, and texted to see if they could stop by with some beer and snacks. They came over and we all gathered around the kitchen and caught up. Andy and Kelly live in Truckee, where Andy is the city attorney and Kelly is the Nevada County Clerk, but Andy also is the part time city attorney for Mammoth Lakes, and the city was having an anniversary celebration that day at a local park. I've gone hiking with Andy and Kelly a couple of times around the Truckee area, and it was really nice to catch up with them.

After they left, Chuck and Josh took a short nap while I sorted out my gear a bit and called Katie and the boys. Then we decided to take a walk around the neighborhood. The wind was still a little gusty, and the broken clouds created more dappled sunlight that made the area moody and starkly beautiful. The condo's info packet seemed to suggest there was a community pool and sauna, so we tried to find it. The pool and hot tub were easily findable, but no sauna. We continued on our loop, running into a couple of locals walking their dogs. One guy had a particularly friendly dog and we talked with him for a bit. It definitely made me miss Mutty and Lina. When we got back to the condo, we figured out that the info packet just had boilerplate info, so there was no sauna after all.

For dinner, we headed to the Warming Hut, which I had been to before on the recommendation of Andy. It was getting chilly again outside, but the restaurant lived up to its name, and it was really pleasant inside. I had a chicken pot pie, Josh had the Cubano sandwich, and Chuck the Reuben. On the way home, we stopped by Vons again to get some ice cream, and some Carnation Breakfast Essentials—part of my breakfast sludge—that I had forgotten to get earlier (tracking it down was really difficult: is it near the cocoa? the oatmeal?). Similar to my trip to the same Vons the night before I left, the store seemed picked clean, but this being a Saturday night, it was cleared out of Jack Daniels and beer.

Back at the condo, we plopped on the couches and Josh found "Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade" on one of the channels, and then either "The Deadliest Catch" or "50 First Dates" when it went to commercials. We dished out the ice cream, and relaxed into more bullshitting and brainless television for a couple of hours. Another perfect night.

Rosalie Lake, August 25

Miles: 9.02
Elevation gain: 2291' (-612')

The next morning, I took my last luxurious shower, then did some initial packing. We headed off to The Stove for breakfast, a Mammoth institution that was a favorite of Josh and our friend Greg when they were doing summer field study nearby as Earth Science majors at UCSC. After a short wait, we got a booth inside. It was very busy, but the servers were on top of things to a degree that was inspired. Within 3 minutes, we had unmatched mugs of coffee and glasses of water on the table. Josh and I had omelettes, sourdough toast, bacon, and some pancakes. Chuck got the prime rib

hash, which was daunting in the sheer amount of steak. The food came out within 15 minutes of ordering, and the general atmosphere was, "Hey, enjoy your food, and then get the fuck out." There was a sizable number of people waiting for tables when we left.

We stopped by Schaat's Deli, where I picked up a sandwich to take on trail for my lunch/dinner. We headed back to the condo, cleaned up the place, and I did my final pack up, swapping some clothes to send home with Chuck and Josh, and getting back into my trail clothes. The day was

sunny and warmer than the previous two. The drive back to Reds was pleasant. We told the NPS ranger at the gate at Minaret Vista that we were heading to Reds Meadow to drop me off for the JMT,

and she waved us through.

Back at Reds, I dropped off my extra food and sundries in the hiker box at the picnic tables, took a couple of pics with Chuck and Josh, and said goodbye. We'd see each other the next weekend in Yosemite after I completed the trail, so it was a short farewell. I was so happy to have had this break with some of my best friends, and reset my mind back to the final week on trail.

I used the bathroom—flush toilets are such a luxury on the JMT—put on my pack, and headed back down the hill to the trail intersection. In the protected valley bottom near the Middle Fork San Joaquin River at midday, it was quite warm. There were many day hikers and families walking the paved trail to Devil's Postpile from Reds, and I initially missed the trail fork over a bridge to the JMT and had to backtrack on a use trail on the cliffs that line the river, although I could have taken the paved trail past Devil's Postpile and met back up with the JMT further up the valley.

The view of Devil's Postpile from across the river was nice, allowing you to see the entire columnar basalt formation in situ. The steep slopes on the west side gave a little more shade on the climb, and I passed groups of day hikers who were sitting under trees trying to get some relief from the intense August sun. But this was punctuated by large boulder fields and blowdowns.

I was feeling good, though, refreshed through all the calories I had consumed, and the extra sleep. At this point in my hike, uphills were no problem, my legs were strong and my breathing measured. I climbed the rise from Devil's Postpile National Monument past Minaret Falls and Johnson Lake quickly, enjoying the shade in the dense forest.

The podcast "Heavyweight" was recommended to me by Val, and I had downloaded a couple of episodes. After leaving Minaret Creek, the trail was a steady climb up the shoulders of the Middle Fork San Joaquin valley, and I listened to the episode Val had described about

a guy who had lent Moby a CD box set of field recordings from the American South in the early 20th century that Moby heavily sampled on his album "Play," which ended up making Moby extremely famous around the year 2000. He was friends with Moby before Moby had made it, had never gotten the box set back, and this had crystallized into a sort of obsession, and wanted the help of Jonathan Goldstein, the host of "Heavyweight" and an old friend, to help him get those CDs back as a way of solving a mid-life crisis. It was very funny.

Rosalie Lake sits in a bowl below steep granite cliffs in a small valley, and lined on 3 sides with dense lodgepole forest. I had targeted Rosalie as my stopping point for the day, as there were some campsites on the east side of the lake near the exit stream, and it wasn't too far up the trail.

This next week was challenging because I had to limit my daily mileage to avoid getting to Yosemite Valley too early. It was basically the opposite of my previous week, where I had to make up time. I was used to 15-20 mile days, and it was only 60 miles from Reds to Yosemite Valley, which I would cover over the next 6-7 days. I had intended on meeting everyone at Happy Isles in Yosemite Valley the following Saturday morning, as Katie and the boys, Chuck's family (Desiree, Simone, and Charlie), and Josh's family (Nicole, Samara, and Rowan) would arrive at Rush Creek just outside the northern entrance to Yosemite National Park the next Friday afternoon and evening.

So as much as I had rushed to get to Mammoth the previous week, I had to slow down this week. It sounded nice to actually take it easy, but in practice this proved much more difficult, both physically and emotionally. My body was a well tuned hiking machine, capable of tackling big miles and big elevation without much difficulty. My mind was also used to moving through the landscape, enjoying the sights, but focused on seeing what was around the corner up the trail.

My heart had also adjusted to the pace of a through-hike. I missed my family and home life, as much as I loved being on trail. But this mostly manifested in the evenings, after I had set up camp and was killing time before going to sleep. Evenings back home were when I caught up with Milo and Desi, when we talked over dinner. Evenings were when Katie and I would eat dinner together if we didn't eat with the boys, reconnecting after our busy days. They were when I would play with the dogs on the backyard grass during the warmer months. When hiking, I could compartmentalize those feelings of missing my domestic life easily, taking in the beauty and variety of the places along the trail, feeling fully present. But when I stopped, in the twilight, those feelings all came rushing back like an incoming tide.

So I arrived at Rosalie Lake in the late afternoon, stopping before my legs were tired, and with more time to let my mind reset from the hike of the day. I set up camp at a spot near some boulders, with many other sites beside it. There were a couple of people already camped at the lake, and a couple were swimming near the east shore. Some older women I had passed on the climb arrived, and set up in some sites nearby.

To kill some time, I waded into the lake with the intent to swim, but the lake was cold enough that I was fine just dipping in and drying off in the sun on a boulder. I had an early dinner, the Schatt's Deli turkey sandwich on shepherd's bread I had packed in, a little soggy but delicious. I tried dozing a little, but the tent was still warm as the sun hit it in the late afternoon. Eventually I climbed the hill behind my campsite, a jumble of large granite boulders and stunted trees overlooking the Middle Fork San Joaquin canyon and the

volcanic ridge on the opposite side that is the Sierra crest in this section. I realized I could get some cell service from the top of the hill, which ended up being useful because several of the podcast episodes I had thought were downloaded never completed back in Mammoth, so I queued them up to download as I watched the dusk settle over the valley.

Another camper had started a campfire below, and I could smell the campfire smoke. I sat and watched the changing light on the mix of volcanic and granitic rock, the peaks glowing more as the skies grew darker. But sitting there with me was also a feeling of absence and inertia.

Sunset, San Joaquin Mountain.

Rosalie Lake.

Thousand Island Lake, August 26

Next page: Thousand Island Lake.

Miles: 8.22
Elevation gain: 1847' (-1335')

I slept in. Meaning, ultimately, that I didn't get up until about 7:30, instead of 5:45 or first light. Instead of quickly packing up immediately after waking, I dressed and got out of the tent, and made some hot coffee/sludge. I climbed back up to the top of the hill to get another bit of signal and download a few more podcast episodes and audiobooks.

The other people in camp were stirring even though it was late (or "late") for me while I broke camp and packed up. I was aiming for Thousand Island Lake, the name a slight exaggeration, but one of the lakes with the prettiest setting on the entire JMT.

The trail first climbs a short rise out of the nook where Rosalie Lake sits, and then switchbacks steeply down to Shadow Lake before making a left turn and following the stair-step of Shadow Creek as it cascades down to the namesake lake. It was pleasant hiking in the morning air with the sound of cascades behind and in front of you.

I tried to keep myself from hiking too quickly, but this was difficult. I had developed a cadence on trail, a sense of how fast I could hike both uphill and down, and unless I was very intentional about slowing down, I would go back to my natural, quick pace.

After following Shadow Creek for a while, the trail made another right turn and ascended another drainage on a ridge, and then made another 90 degree left turn, following the seasonal creek to the ridge top above Garnet Lake. There were some nice small lakes to the east visible from the trail.

From the crest of the climb, you had a view of Ritter and Banner Peaks towering over the steep canyons leading to Garnet Lake, and Thousand Island Lake the next canyon north. On the descent to Gem Lake, I took a jog to the side to sit a bit and take in the view. The ridge was made up of dark brown boulders covered with orange and yellow lichen. The dark rock of Banner and Ritter was dotted with snow fields and glaciers. Gem Lake was deep blue, and the scene shimmered in the clear sky.

I continued down to the shore of Gem Lake, and skirted the eastern edge. At the outflow point, a log bridge spanned the creek. A group of backpackers were sitting in the shade of the bridge, and they were partially blocking the cut-in steps up. I nodded a hello as I

approached, but they made no move to let me go by. I said, "Hey guys, how's it going?" They replied "Good, good," in a friendly tone, and one of them made a joke about there being a toll, and I gave a half-hearted laugh. But they still didn't move. I squeezed by, annoyed at these literal bridge trolls.

The trail continued around the shore of the lake for a bit before ascending up the ridge separating Gem from Thousand Island Lake in a series of tight switchbacks. As I was making my way up, I ran into a backpacker I had talked to before: David, who had been looking for the altitude-sick hiker in bad shape back at Kearsarge Lakes. David had been camped at Rosalie Lake the previous night, and had made the fire I had seen and smelled. We talked for a bit, me telling him about running into the guy on the ascent to Kearsarge the next morning. I had thought he was part of David's group, but he, like me, had just been concerned about him getting out safely.

He was moving slowly due to a twisted ankle, and didn't have much to treat it with apart from hiking through it. Having picked up a replacement ace bandage in Mammoth, I yet again had a chance to pass one on to a hiker in need. Mike was very appreciative, and also worried I would need it. Just like the woman before Mammoth, I pointed out that it made little sense to keep an ace bandage on the chance it might be needed when there was a definite need for it right now. Hiking with a twisted ankle is painful even if you stabilize it with a bandage, but hiking without one can potentially do way more damage. David took it and wrapped up his ankle, and we talked a bit about our timelines. Like me, he was headed for Thousand Island Lake for the night, but was thinking about ending his hike in Tuolumne Meadows due to the injury. I said I'd probably see him later on, and then continued on.

I passed Ruby Lake (there are several in the Sierra, this one is small and in a low spot along the ridge as the trail descends) and Emerald Lake before finally getting to Thousand Island Lake. There are a bunch of small rocks and islets scattered throughout the lake, but nowhere near 1000. The trail crosses the outlet stream, then meets up with the PCT just beyond. A use trail follows the north shore of the lake, and I took it, keeping an eye out for a nice site to camp. It was 2:00 PM, and it felt strange and wrong to be ending my hike so early.

I saw a flat spot on top of a ridge with a smaller trail up, and followed it, but saw a better spot a little further west, so I bushwhacked across to it. A cluster of boulders provided some privacy and wind protection, but overlooked the lake, with Banner Peak rising from the head of the lake in a perfectly composed scene. I set up my tent, and then took some food and my water bag down to the lake. I skirted the lake looking for a nice spot to eat and wade, and eventually found a small inlet with some low trees for a little shade in the hot afternoon sun.

A few other people were at the lake, swimming or napping, but mostly out of sight. I got some water for my Larq bottle and the water bag for filtering, ate some lunch, and cooled off by wading into the lake for a while before retreating back to the shade.

After that, I headed back to camp to try to take a nap in the mid afternoon, which was difficult because the tent was stifling in the sun, even with the vestibule flaps pulled back. I eventually started listening to an audiobook about world travel ostensibly by Anthony Bourdain.

Except it wasn't. The book was more of an outline of a potential book that was interrupted by Bourdain's death. The concept was a discussion of all the places he had traveled, with descriptions of the things he loved and hated about each location. He and his editor had sketched out this idea, but it remained just an outline at the time of his suicide. His editor, who narrated most of the book, gave a brief overview of each locale and what she and Tony had discussed. Then they included Tony's narration from his television shows on each location, read by either the editor or someone close to Tony (including his brother). It was a nice idea, and likely gave closure to the people Bourdain had worked with, but was deeply unsatisfying as an audiobook. While there were moments you could hear Tony's distinct voice come through, that it was spoken by other people just made it seem odd, particularly when hearing the narration from his shows. I had heard many of these same words spoken by Bourdain himself on "No Reservations" or "Parts Unknown" or "A Cook's

Tour." Because the places in the book were organized alphabetically by country, and were visited by Bourdain throughout his career, the tonal shift from locale to locale was jarring. The places he visited earlier in his career, in particular, had an outdated tone to them, influenced by Tony's need to wear his influences on his sleeve, and make everything he did epic and punk rock.

Dissatisfied, I turned on an episode of the Defector podcast "The Distraction," which was also a strange experience. Hearing about sports stuff was incongruous with my setting, and rather than offer a comfort in a long afternoon, it only made me feel more isolated from the outside world.

I turned back to "Heavyweight," which ended up being the correct choice. Each story is self-contained, and intimate in a way that makes it timeless. As the sun lowered in the western sky, I sat on a boulder and listened. I made an early dinner, and thought about how to handle the upcoming week. These long afternoons were intolerable, but slowing down to a snail's pace was unworkable. No good options presented themselves. Maybe I could take a side trip once I got into Yosemite? It all seemed to be busy-work, and not in the spirit of a through hike. With no great solutions imminent, I decided to take it one day at a time, and drifted off to an uneasy sleep.

Previous Page: Shadow Lake. Below: Pond and Ritter Range.

Mt. Ritter and Banner Peak from Garnet Lake.

Lyell Canyon, August 27

Miles: 11.7
Elevation gain: 1878' (-2784')

I had another "late" morning—whatever my solution to the low mileage blues, it wasn't going to involve leaving first thing in the morning—and my only real regret about that is that I didn't get to see the sunrise hit Banner Peak. But I took my time getting and packing up.

I hiked back to the PCT/JMT junction at the lake's outlet, and turned uphill. The trail ascends the ridge to the north of Thousand Island Lake, and there were some incredible views as you hiked up. At the top of the ridge, it was a plateau with a couple of lakes, and another small rise up to Island Pass, the easiest named pass on the JMT. If it hadn't been labeled, I would not have noted it as anything different than the many crests over ridges I'd followed for the better part of a month.

The descent headed down to the Rush Creek drainage, and I was not far from where my friend Jake and I had camped as part of a loop out of Bloody Canyon back to June Lake. I ran into David again, and asked how his ankle was holding up. It was doing a lot better, and he thanked me again for letting him have the ace bandage. He also said he was glad to run into me again, as he wanted my email address. He wanted to send me a copy of a book he wrote as a thank you. I wrote it down for him, and he told me he was going to end the trip at Tuolumne Meadows. I again wished him luck, and hoped his ankle held up, and then hiked on.

When the trail hit Rush Creek, it turned again uphill to follow Rush Creek, which cascades down from the flanks of the mountains that mark the eastern boundary of Yosemite National Park. Similar to Minaret Creek the day before, the trail weaved in and away from the creek, so the sound of falling water was omnipresent.

As I was rounding a corner, I hiked past a guy who was peeing pretty much right on the trail. Come on, dude. There were plenty of places to go off the trail here, it was so unnecessary.

Eventually the trail emerged from the trees into a granite bowl with meadows and boulders, before the final approach to Donahue Pass. I filled up on water at one of the small stream crossings, which cut deeply through the grasses of the meadow, showing how boggy and wet this area must have been during the melt.

The approach to Donahue is from the southwest, as the trail makes a turn at the end of the meadows and quickly ascends. Then it curves to the northwest at the actual pass, a low boulder field at a broad flatter section giving wide views of the Mammoth region to the southeast, Mt. Lyell to the south, Donahue Peak immediately to the northwest, and then into Yosemite proper, with the glacial U of Lyell Canyon to the north.

Donahue was the last major pass on my trip. I stopped to take some pictures and get a snack, and there were a couple of others at the crest as well, a larger older group, and two younger women who I had passed on the ascent.

The latter took out their tents and sleeping bags to air out and dry, and were taking an inventory of their food. I overheard one of them say to the other, "Prosciutto, man, that was a BAD idea."

I started descending down. I ran into an older couple, possibly part of the group that was stopped at the top of the pass, also descending. They were being very careful on the down steps, picking their way with their hiking poles and taking their time. I was moving faster than them, and had another case where it became clear that they hadn't heard me approach. After a few strategic coughs they finally noticed me, and moved to the side to let me pass. Again, I felt a little rude, but honestly don't know of a better way to handle passing slow hikers when you're walking alone. I gave a friendly hello and take care, and moved past them.

The trail curves around from the north to the southwest and then hits a hanging valley on the flanks of Mt. Lyell, with a lake and the headwaters of the Lyell Fork of the Tuolumne River. On the steeper sections, the people who built the trail made these sort of mini steps with arrangements of medium sized rocks, nearly ramps. This was presumably to help gain traction, but the granite stones had been worn and polished over the years, making the steps slippery. I'd seen these same kind of ramps/steps throughout Yosemite.

The glaciers on Mt. Lyell shone brightly in the sunlight and reflected in the lake. The Lyell Fork was small here, so late in the season, but still flowing. The trail crossed it just below the lake's outlet, and then another tributary as it turned north. Then it descended along a traverse covered in brush and granite before a set of switchbacks above another lake at the head of Lyell Canyon.

Back in the trees for a bit, I stopped to eat lunch in some shade and soaked my feet in the Lyell Fork. Some day hikers stopped nearby in the shade as a break, and I saw the Bad Idea Prosciutto women pass by on their own descent.

I continued moving down to the valley bottom, which is a sneaky long section, passing through several flat-ish spots before getting steep once more. The final extended drop to the valley starts with some zigzagging switchbacks and then is a long traverse down to the valley bottom near Kuna Creek, just below the 9000' line, meaning a drop of over 2100' from the top of Donahue.

The bottom of Lyell Canyon is nearly flat, and the Lyell Fork makes a lazy meander through meadows and forests from here to Tuolumne Meadows. You can't camp within 5 miles of Tuolumne Meadows, and I wanted to avoid camping right near the edge of that zone to avoid what I'd heard of as possibly crowded and not great sites that marked the boundary. The trail here was remarkably easy, nearly flat and mostly a wide singletrack that skirted the meadows of the valley and river bottom. There was a lot of horse manure on the trail, which was unwelcome. I know that the JMT and PCT are also for horsepacking, and that this accounts for them generally being well graded and less steep compared to the Appalachian Trail, for example. But having to dodge horse poop constantly is not a pleasant memory of hiking the JMT.

I zeroed in on a potential camping spot where the Lyell Fork snaked into a copse of trees just beyond the large meadow at the head of the valley. The trail forked here, and the number of horseshoe prints going to the right suggested that a packer camp was off toward the river this way. But on the left of the trail was a relatively flat and secluded spot in the trees with some large boulders scattered around. A use trail to the right of the trail led to a bend in the river. It seemed a promising place to stop for the day.

It wasn't quite as early in the afternoon as the day before, but was still sunny in the mid afternoon. I followed the small trail to the river and enjoyed the sunlight on the water, the warmth of the sun on the

dark gray granite rocks, and the coolness of the river as it made a broad sweep from left to right. I watched trout dart around from shadows to deeper pools near the banks, and dragonflies drift around on the breeze.

I messaged Katie, and let her know I was getting close. After a few messages back and forth catching her up on the last couple of days, we decided it would be ok if I hiked out on Friday afternoon, instead of waiting until Saturday. Milo wouldn't arrive until sometime Saturday morning, along with Katie's mom, because Friday night was the first home football game of the year, and Milo was performing with the band. Chuck's and Josh's families were likely going to get to Rush Creek (another bad name, this was a different one than I had passed earlier in the day) sometime Friday evening. I'd envisioned finding everyone somewhere along the trail above Happy Isles, but the thought of meeting up with Katie and Desi on Friday afternoon at Happy Isles, and then food and a shower and a bed, was also very, very appealing after the ennui of the recent afternoons. I would finish up on Friday, and not have to hold back nearly so much on these last couple of days.

I listened to some more podcasts, and more of the unsatisfying Bourdain audiobook, making dinner, and then spending some more time at the river bend. It felt good to have a plan that wasn't me sandbagging my own hike.

Banner Peak and Thousand Island Lake.

Pond near Island Pass.

Approach to Donahue Pass.

View of Lyell Canyon from Donahue Pass.

Mt. Lyell.

Lyell Canyon.

Lower Cathedral Lake, August 28

Miles: 14.8
Elevation gain: 1230' (-898')

Sleeping amongst the dense trees meant that I was able to sleep a little later than usual again. The morning was colder than the previous day, probably due to being at the valley bottom and close to the river, and I wished I had some gloves for only the second time on the trip.

I packed up and headed off down the trail, which here was an easy and flat straight shot north towards Tuolumne Meadows. Lyell Canyon is beautiful, a perfect glacial valley with forests opening to meadows on the bottom where the Lyell Fork meandered, with the graceful curves up the shoulders of the mountains on either side covered in a dense carpet of trees. The late summer color palette of gold and green, and then white granite and blue sky.

Once again I ran into David. These were the final miles of his hike, and he was eager to get some food and rest. Again I wished him well, and continued on.

There was more horseshit on the trail that I had to navigate around, and that caused me to reflect on the term, what distinguishes it from bullshit or chickenshit. I think what characterizes horseshit, conceptually, is that it is a distracting annoyance, lacking any substance but proffered by people who expect you to accept it without question. It's ultimately a subgenre of bullshit.

As I got closer to Tuolumne, the day hikers really started showing up in earnest. There seemed to be two basic types. The first were geared up to a strange degree, for someone who had been on trail for over 3 weeks. I obviously was carrying more stuff, with a bulkier backpack, but these day hikers had backpacks about a third as big, with hiking poles and bandanas and often full size boots. Mentally, I would edit what they were carrying, as it seemed so egregious: bulky, heavy gear carried in overbuilt day packs, heavy Nalgene water bottles, full leather boots. All so unnecessary. The second type of day hiker was someone wearing regular shoes (or even sandals or flip flops) and regular clothes and carrying their water bottle in their hands. This second type meant that I was close to both a paved road, and a popular destination.

The trail curved to the west, and suddenly I was at Tuolumne Meadows. I made a slight error in route here, turning to cross the

bridges over the Lyell fork towards the lodge, which led me in a big loop up to the highway and then back towards the post office and store. A quicker way was to stay on the trail and follow the Lyell Fork, and then cut through the main campground. Oh well. I saw volunteers restoring a meadow with native plants, the Dana Fork of the Tuolumne, and views towards the crest in northern Yosemite.

The sun was hot, with very little wind. I walked alongside the highway, with the heat rising from the black asphalt. Eventually, I found the post office and store parking lot, surrounded by various construction projects. The structure was a semi-permanent tent. The post office was a kiosk window opening up from a tiny room. I put my pack down at a picnic table surrounded by trees on one side of the parking lot, and headed over to wait in the short line at the post office.

The guy running the post office was well known among through hikers, a helpful and energetic man in his late 20s, who labeled the packages waiting to be picked up with stylized block letters written in black and red marker. I gave him my name, and he took a quick look, and said, "nope, no package here. Do you have a tracking number?" I found the picture I had taken on my phone, and he looked it up. "Well, I can't tell you where it is, but it might be with today's delivery, which is supposed to get here in the next 45 minutes. I just got a text from the driver. If it doesn't get here, I have a hiker box you can look through, though." I thanked him, but was extremely annoyed.

I went into the store to get some lunch, and to survey the offerings in case I needed to resupply. I got a sandwich and a Caesar salad and a cherry Pepsi, and headed back outside to the picnic bench. A few other backpackers were there, along with some people stopping at the store for ice cream. I chatted with one couple, who were impressed that I had been on trail for so long, and asked questions about the logistics of such a long hike.

There was cell service here, but quite spotty. But I texted with Katie, and queued up some more podcast episodes to download. As I waited, a construction truck pulled up into the parking lot and the workers got out a jackhammer and started opening up a hole in the asphalt, making a godawful racket.

After a little over 45 minutes, I went back to the post office kiosk, and the guy gave me the bad news that my package wasn't with today's deliveries. I went back inside the store to the back entrance, where he had the hiker box. A woman was going through it, so I waited until she was done and looked through. Lots of random bars (I took a couple granola bars), some self-packaged backpacker meals (pass), pouches of tuna (pass), and a couple self-packaged bags of snack mix (which I took). I showed them to the store clerk (I guess to show they weren't items from the store), and then came back to buy some resupplies. I bought a couple of backpacker meals, snacks, some mixed nuts. I found that my lip balm went missing the previous day, but for some reason they didn't sell any. I bought an It's It as well, and headed back to take stock of my food supplies.

It was a little spartan, but I had enough remaining coffee and remaining food to get me to Friday. I packed it all up, and headed off. Looking at the map on my phone, I saw that I could cut through the campground, currently closed for renovations, to get back to the trail more directly, without having to backtrack. I set off, following some small, possibly game trails until I was in the campground itself. All the sites had new picnic tables and fire rings, and the sound of construction echoed around. But nobody was actively working on this area. I walked along the loop roads and through the empty sites, heading uphill to catch the trail, which skirted the campground. From there, I passed the visitor's center turn off, and then hit Budd Creek and the Cathedral Lakes trailhead, before turning south and uphill.

The climb was shaded, which was nice because it was very hot. The trail had a very steep climb on a wide trail, leveled off for a while in between Fairview Dome and North Buttress (popular rock climbing areas), and then headed up steeply again before another level plateau between Medlicott Dome and Eichorn Pinnacle. After crossing the saddle, it dropped slightly, with a trail that forked to the right for Lower Cathedral Lake. I took that trail, and followed it down across blowdowns and granite outcrops to the lake.

I followed the trail around the shoreline, and found a nice spot

tucked in some trees on the north side of the lake. I set up my tent, and then went to the lake and found a spot near the outlet to swim and wade. The water was cool, but in the shallows on this side of the lake, not freezing. I dried out on a pink granite boulder, watching the dragonflies buzzing and chasing each other, and occasionally mating in mid-air.

Lower Cathedral Lake is set in a granite bowl surrounded on three sides by striking domes and horns that rise up steeply around it. Medlicott Dome likely gave the lakes their name, as it rises like a cathedral, with one end like the topmost tower pointed to the heavens.

I did some reading in the late afternoon, and then made dinner. After dinner I took a walk to see the sunset to the west, beyond the outlet around Dozier Dome. From here, you can look down to Tenaya Lake, and see the cars along the highway as they climb towards Tuolumne Meadows. It would not be difficult to hike up to the lake from the highway here, and I wondered how many people knew about this back route. Probably many people.

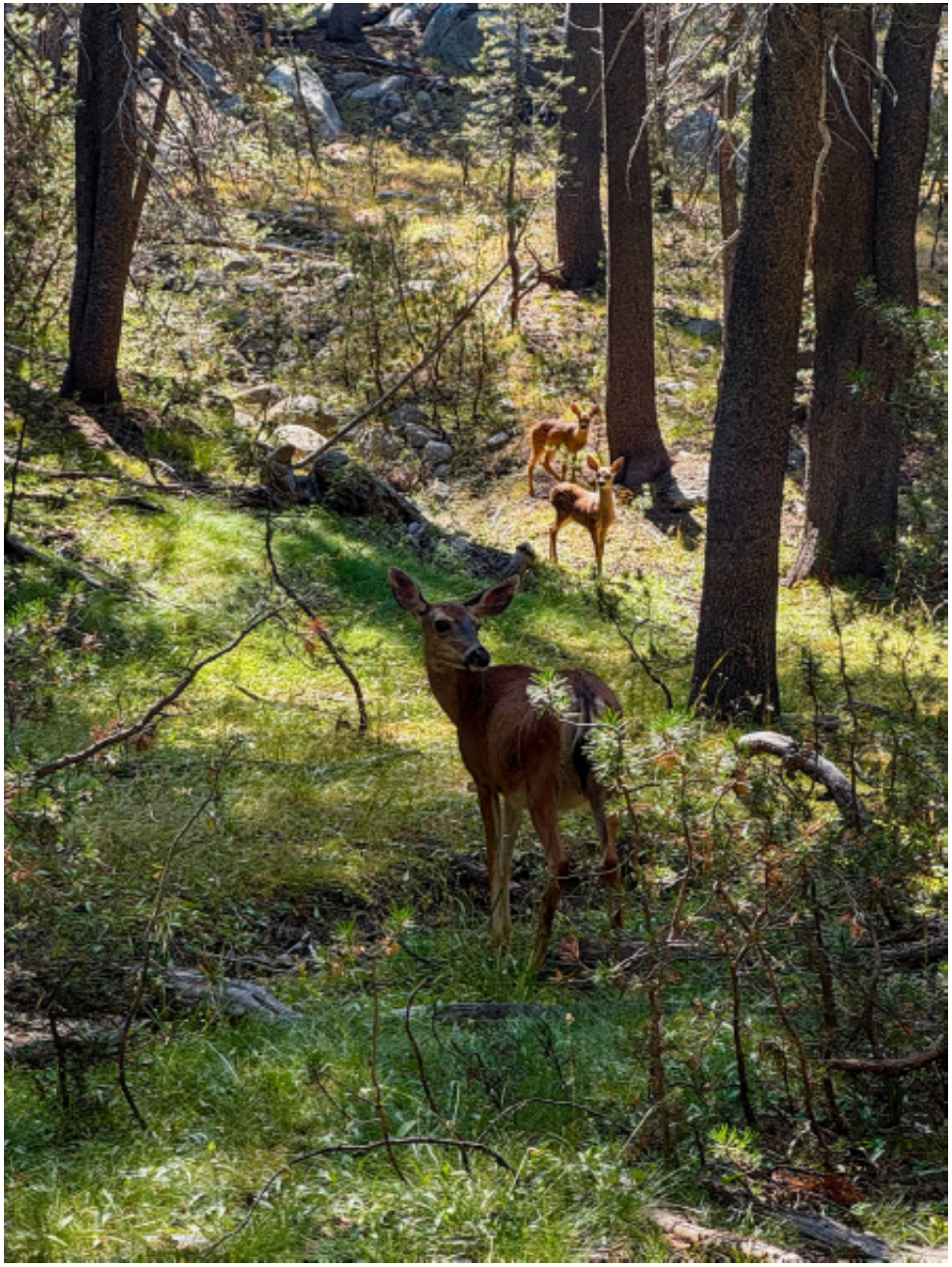
I followed the long finback granite formations along, each wide crack revealing a zen garden of decomposed rock and spindly lodgepole pines. The setting sun bathed it all with golden pink light. At the edge of the dome, someone had forgotten their water bottle. I took a picture of it, to show to anyone I might run into back at the lake in case it was theirs, but leaving it undisturbed in case someone went back for it.

After the sun had set from my location, but with the tops of the spires and higher domes lit up pink and red, I hiked back to the lake, crossing the now-dry outlet, which immediately waterfalls down the steep canyon I was overlooking along the finbacks. I saw a group of younger guys on the southwest shore, and walked over to say hi and see if they were missing a water bottle. They were not, but were friendly enough. They were out for a couple of days, and were impressed that I was finishing up the JMT. One of them asked if I had any insight I could share from my trip. I thought for a second and told them that my world was very small, day to day, and that allowed me to put my focus outward from myself, on the bigger world out there.

I wished them all the best on their trip and good evening, and headed back to my tent. I read for a bit, and then fell asleep.

Meadow and view north, Lyell Canyon.

Left: Deer near trail, Lyell Canyon. Right: Tuolumne Meadows.



Lower Cathedral Lake.

Left: Tresidder Peak. Right: Eichorn Pinnacle.

Tenaya Lake.

Left: Outlet of Lower Cathedral Lake. Right: Tresider Peak, sunset.

Clouds Rest, August 29

Miles: 12.43
Elevation gain: 2339' (-1822')

Another cold morning. I had set up my stove on a shelf of granite on the slope behind my campsite, and fought with my bear canister's security tabs: cold plastic against my cold, clumsy fingers, not wanting to bend. I made my coffee with hot water again, to try to warm up. At this point, there was no danger to using extra fuel. No resupplies were forthcoming, and I didn't have to stretch what I had to cover potential delays. This was the last full day on trail, and tonight the last night of the trip.

I packed up, and headed back on the spur trail to the JMT, moving through cold spots in the protected depressions before climbing up to more light and wind on the hill above the lake. Sun was hitting the tops of the domes and spires, this time shining yellow and lit up from behind. At the junction was one of the metal trail marker signs:

Yosemite Valley 19.6. Less than 20 miles to go, at least nominally. I was going to split from the main trail to head to Clouds Rest.

Once I was back on the JMT, I followed a streambed coming from Upper Cathedral Lake, then skirted the lake and kept climbing. Shortly after passing Upper Cathedral Lake, I went over the last named pass of the trip: Cathedral Pass. But the trail kept climbing, raising questions on why this pass was marked on the trail and on maps. The pass area was a typical open forest of widely spaced trees and decomposed granite. Below was a marshy area, now dry, where the Cathedral Fork of Echo Creek began. But the trail continued a lateral ascent up to the right, heading south through some forest and then out onto bare decomposed granite and rock.

I came up on another hiker, who asked me to

take his picture, which I did. After I gave back his camera, he fumbled it, dropping it on the dirt. I hope his lens was ok. After the climb, the trail descended gradually to the high meadows surrounding Sunrise High Sierra Camp, which was still closed several years after they shut down due to Covid. The Yosemite high sierra camps are a series of camps with tent cabins and staffed with cooks and guides, and you can book trips to hike them, getting a wilderness experience without the need to worry about bringing tents and food. They all have pit toilets and potable water.

The meadows and creek were dry, and the low ground cover was turning scarlet red and bright orange in places, a tangible sign of the changing seasons in the high country. The days were gradually getting shorter, and the light had changed since the start of my trip. This meadow was the first indication in the flora of the upcoming autumn, though.

The bright mid-morning sun was harsh along the path here, with no shade and still air. I came up on Sunrise, and saw the first structures: a raised pit toilet with a staircase up to it. I guess the tanks below are at ground level so the waste can be hauled out on horses or mules. The camp was empty, giving it an eerie feeling. I broke from the JMT here, heading into the camp. After climbing some low steps there was a well pump, and I stopped to top off my water bottles. The cold water felt good in the warm air.

I was on the Sunrise Lakes Trail now, which turned to the northwest. It climbed steeply from the meadow, following a dry drainage that was still shadowed by the steep granite fin beside it. After going over the top of the climb, it descended into a relatively lush, humid forest with dogwoods and ferns lining the trail. Upper Sunrise Lake was below me, and I hiked by its southwest shore and continued to descend. Below the lake is a saddle between Middle Sunrise and Lower Sunrise lakes, which the trail landed on before turning south to go to Lower Sunrise Lake.

At the lake, there were a couple of groups swimming, with audible shocked moans as the swimmers adjusted to the cold water. Some of them just went for it, diving in, while others tried to negotiate a slow advance. I hiked around the west shore of the lake and found a granite outcrop where I could eat a snack in the shade. I then stripped down to my boxers and went out to a boulder near the shore and jumped in. It was cold, numbingly so, but also felt good to get some of the sweat and dirt off me. I jumped out, and sat on the rock to dry off in the sun.

I was always acutely aware of how powerful the sun beat on your bare skin in the thin air of the Sierra. At this point I had been soaking my feet, wading, and swimming in creeks, rivers, ponds, and lakes basically every day. Finding a balance between places where you could quickly dry off and places where I wouldn't immediately get a sunburn was always difficult. I used a small stick of 70 SPF sunscreen for my face, neck, and hands, and was largely successful in not getting sunburned. My lips were consistently mildly chapped, even when I had my UV resistant lip balm, and now that I was without I was applying the sunscreen stick on my lips to keep them from getting burned (which I don't recommend unless you absolutely need it). It felt like if I laid out on a rock long enough to dry my merino wool boxers, I would burn to a crisp, but I also didn't want to wear soggy underwear that would soak through my pants. So I wore my shirt unbuttoned, sitting in the sun for a few minutes, then move to the shade, repeating that cycle until I was feeling mostly dry.

I ate some lunch and read a little on my Kindle. I didn't have a lot of miles to go before Clouds Rest, where I was planning on camping tonight, and I wanted to avoid the in-camp blues by not getting there too early. I packed up, and headed on, doing a short climb and then descent to a cool, berry lined seasonal creek that was still flowing, and some small ponds.

Then it was the final climb of my trip. The trails in this section were wide, despite being in the Yosemite Wilderness. This is a reflection of their popularity, and it was true that I was consistently running into more people here than anyplace besides Mammoth. The wide trails seemed to be in lieu of switchbacks, as they more or less went straight up or down whatever feature they sat on top of, so I would make bespoke switchbacks on the steepest parts, or to avoid slipping on the dirt and pebbles.

I was passing many hikers who looked utterly defeated by the

climbs, but my heart too was racing and I was breathing hard with the effort. The last climb was not going to be one of the easiest. The trail skirted the top of a steep canyon to the south, the John Muir Trail sitting over 1000' below. After reaching a small plateau, it zig zagged up onto the spine of granite that is Clouds Rest, both sides dropping quickly away until you were walking along a knife edge as you emerged from the shrubs and trees. At just below timberline I noted some small rectangles of decomposed granite sand marked by stones, campsites in little flat spots between boulders and right off the trail. One had a tent set up that filled up this footprint exactly. I continued climbing until I hit the fork, where the right trail climbed up on the fin of the summit of Clouds Rest, and the left trail descended down if you needed to avoid the exposure of the summit trail. Right there were two of the campsites, and I chose one, shedding my pack. I took my water bottle and camera, and then climbed up to the summit.

The top of Clouds Rest has one of the most spectacular views in all of the Sierra. You have a 360 degree view of Yosemite, looking down on Half Dome and El Capitan and the rest of Yosemite Valley to the west, Twin Peaks and the northern Yosemite crest, The Lyell Crest to the east, Mt. Merced to the south. And leading up to all of these boundaries curves of white gray granite and rounded plateaus of dense forest. You are on a thin fin of granite boulders that drops away steeply on all sides, but the very top is relatively flat. Several people were on the summit with me, looking off and down, filming or taking pictures. One woman was filming herself dancing with the view of Half Dome behind her.

I saw some thin curls of smoke from a small wildfire smouldering on the slopes across to the southeast above Merced Lake. The air was hazy with smoke, though it didn't seem possible that it all could have come from this small fire.

I hiked back down along the spine to my little nook, and set it up for the night. I would cowboy camp for the last night, under the sky and stars. I put down my emergency blanket footprint, and then my air mattress and quilt. The late afternoon shadows already covered this side of Clouds Rest. I found a spot to sit and read and listen to music while the shadows grew and the mountains started catching the sun as it descended. The owners of the tent I had passed before came back, seemingly exhausted, coming up from the summit bypass trail. I ate some dinner before climbing back up to the top for sunset.

The crowds were now gone. I was alone on top with the exception of a red tent that was pitched just below the southern approach. This was where Hannah and Harry were camping for the night. There was some mobile phone signal on the very top of the summit, and I heard them chatting with someone on speakerphone for a bit, before they came up to the top to take some pictures of each other in the golden hour light. I offered to take a picture of them both, and they accepted, and returned the favor to me. They were here from Ireland, and we chatted as the sun set. The sun was setting over the northern rim of Yosemite Valley, keeping the top of Half Dome lit as well as the high peaks around Mt. Merced and the rest of the crest behind. The haze turned the sunset dark orange, and lit up even more of the sky as the light hit each particle of smoke. The air was still warm in the slight breeze, and the very slight noise emphasized the overall stillness of the scene. The horizon glowed yellow and orange and red as the red disc of the sun slowly disappeared.

A little while after the alpenglow faded, I said goodbye to Hannah and Harry and hiked back to my nook. The wildfire to the southeast glowed bright orange in a small pocket, but otherwise the rest of the land was dark against the indigo of the night sky. The stars emerged slowly, until there was a thick blanket of them, only slightly dulled by the haze of the air. I brushed my teeth and got under my quilt, staring up at the sky. The brightest shooting star of the trip blazed off above Twin Peaks to the north, and several more followed as I slowly drifted off to sleep.

Cathedral Pass.

Meadow near Sunrise High Sierra Camp.

Lower Sunrise Lake.

Clouds Rest.

Knife's edge, Clouds Rest.

Cowboy camping, Clouds Rest.

View southeast to Merced River Canyon and Lyell Crest.

Previous pages: Panorama views, sunset, Clouds Rest. Below: Sunset, Half Dome and Yosemite Valley.

Yosemite Valley, August 30

Miles: 10.36
Elevation gain: 111' (-5840')

I woke up to the sound of people hiking past me a few feet away, their labored breathing and the crunch of their hiking poles. It was well before dawn, and I turned and fell back into a light snooze before another hiker and then another passed again. The dawn patrol up to Clouds Rest, I thought. I still lay under my quilt, enjoying the warmth. The outside air was cold, but I was not uncomfortable with my face exposed. I could see the eastern sky lined with orange and blue in the predawn. The crescent moon shone bright in the eastern sky in the deep blue above the skyline.

The fire still glowed orange across the valley through the haze that was now close to the ground, and a single smoke plume rose in the air and drifted to the south.

I got up, and found a discreet spot to pee just off the other side of the trail in the manzanita growth before the steepest dropoff, hoping that no more hikers would emerge. I changed into my day clothes, got my camera, and headed back up to the top to watch the sunrise. By the time I was heading up, the light was growing, and I had no trouble finding my footing as I climbed and jumped from boulder

to boulder along the apex of the fin of granite.

At the top was the group of 6 or 7 that had hiked past me earlier, drinking coffee and sitting on one of the boulders, chatting. They were wrapping up their own JMT hike, and had camped on the saddle below Clouds Rest. A mixed gender group about my age, they were JMT veterans, hiking it every couple of years. It was a way of reconnecting, as they had all lived in the Bay Area but now many had scattered across the country. They generously offered to take pictures of me, which as a solo hiker was always welcome. And I was happy to take a couple of their cameras to get some group shots in.

To the west, the horizon was brightening to a pastel gradient in the predawn. Far to the west, the haze was denser over the foothills, but it was a bit clearer around Yosemite Valley. One of the group mentioned that we'd be able to see the Dawn Wall light up here, referring to the edge of El Capitan famous among climbers for catching the first rays of the sun. First light hit the tops of the tallest mountains on the crest, and then Mt. Merced. Moments later the sun emerged from the crest, turning the green shrubs and white boulders orange. Clouds Rest is taller than Half Dome, so we watched as the light line began touching the tops of the other peaks and then eventually the very top of Half Dome.

As the sun rose, more of the granite lit up. The sun was angled such that only Half Dome was illuminated, and then just the very tips of the ridges around the rim. Just perfectly framing the isolation of Half Dome. We all sat mesmerized by the changing light. Eventually, the sun covered almost everything we could see, apart from Yosemite Valley itself and the long shadow of Clouds Rest, a dark spot stretching down the canyon. I headed back to my nook, and made breakfast and coffee.

Then I packed up. The final pack up. I stuffed my quilt in the white roll top dry bag. I folded my down jacket into its own pocket. I deflated the air mattress, pulling the valve while lying on it, forcing most of the air out in a loud whoosh. I carefully folded the pad into long thirds, and then rolled it up. I deflated my pillow, and rolled it up. I removed the fuel canister from my stove, a quick whiff of gas before the valve shut as the final threads unscrewed. I folded up my stove, and put it in its red plastic case. I rinsed my titanium cup with some water, swallowed it, and then rinsed it once more and tossed the water into the manzanita. Then I folded the handles of the cup in, and the handles of my titanium pot, and stacked the pot into the cup, the stove case into the pot along with my blue Bic lighter, and then the pot lid upside down. All of it went into a black stuff sack. The black stuff sack went into the space in my now mostly empty bear canister. My nighttime clothes and other pairs of socks and underwear went into another dry bag, which I rolled up. I gathered all my Lifewater bottles together, and my white metal Larq bottle.

I started with the air mattress and jacket, pushing them to the bottom of the main pouch of my backpack. Then my clothes bag. Then my tent, still in its bag. Then my quilt. My Kindle was tucked underneath these soft items, as was my headlamp. Then the bear canister sat on top of it, at the top of the main pouch. Finally, a bubble pack Amazon envelope that I used as a sitting pad and food insulator. I rolled up the extra, folded it over, and snapped the buckles together. I tucked my water bottles into the side pocket. I

connected my battery to the small solar panel that hung above the exterior mesh pouch, put the battery in its sack, then tucked the sack into the pouch. I put my toilet kit into the pouch, and my spade into one of the side pockets. I shook and then folded the emergency blanket/ground cloth into a small rectangle and tucked it into another side of the pouch. I attached my camera to the clip on my shoulder strap. I took off my untied shoes, and then slipped my gaiters over my feet, then put my shoes back on. I tightened up my shoelaces, then attached the gaiters to the shoes, first clipping the front hook on one of the laces, and then pulling up the velcro cover on the heel of my shoe. I looked around to see that I had everything, grabbed my hiking poles, and headed down.

I went left at the Y just up from where I camped, and started the steep, short switchbacks down through the manzanita and granite boulders. I kept on past where the summit track met back with the bypass, and then more switchbacks down, longer this time. The views were still spectacular at outcroppings along the way, but as I made my way down the forest became thicker, and still in shadow. Eventually it met up with the JMT, near Sunrise Creek. I drank an entire bottle, and topped up again, as I had dry camped on Clouds Rest.

Just beyond the JMT junction is another Y, with a trail heading north: the Half Dome Trail. And I started running into the Half Dome hikers. So many of them. Most seemed to be struggling with their climb up. One asked, “are we almost there??”, assuming that I had completed my ascent already. There was a palpable change with these hikers. Most of the time I would say hello and sometimes have a small chat with people I passed, but this was impossible with the volume of groups. I eventually came to resent them and the trophy hunt of a hike to the top of Half Dome. Why would you be out here unless you were going to climb Half Dome? The trail was heavily trafficked, and showed it. So much dust. So many switchbacks with shortcuts. They weren’t even a little friendly, just focused on their goal of getting up on top on the day of their reservation.

It was just a relentless tide of day hikers heading up to Half Dome for most of the rest of my hike. I had expected more people on the trail this last day, but I wasn’t prepared for there to be so many people this far from the valley floor. So many of them looked spent by their climb, and they had over 2500’ more to go, including the dreaded cables.

At Little Yosemite Valley, the trail evened out, and the flat path was a welcome change. I turned off to use the pit toilets at the campground, and then headed back to the trail, which follows the Merced River here. Wanting to kill a little time and relax, I found a section of river with boulders and shade, and stopped for a break. I ate the last of my scavenged snack mix while soaking my feet in the cool river water. I decided to stay there until the shade I was under moved on from where I was sitting as the sun progressed across the sky.

I then headed down to Nevada Falls, a short hike down the trail. I headed to the viewing area at the top of the falls, and watched as the water poured out through the gap in the boulders and fell down the apron of granite. There were handrails set up to keep people from getting too close to the edge, and several dudes climbed over them to peer over the edge, or get selfies closer to the water. The main viewing area sat at the top, but there was a lower area with fewer people, so I headed there.

Katie and Desi were meeting me at Happy Isles around 4:00, and I was ahead of schedule. I found a bit of shade in the overhang of a huge boulder, and had some more food, finishing up the macadamia nuts and dried fruit. People would come, look at the falls, get photos,

and leave. I tried to take a nap, letting the drone of the waterfall lull me to sleep, but it didn't take. I put on another podcast, and moved under a small tree. A squirrel was trying to get into people's bags and backpacks, and I would shoo it away if it got close to me or the bags of a group nearby. It was very aggressive.

The afternoon shadows moved across the canyon as I sat at the top of the falls. It was warmer here, lower than I had been since Bishop at a little under 6000'. I had intermittent cell service, and confirmed that Katie and Desi were on their way from Rush Creek Lodge. A little after 2:00, I decided to head down to Vernal Falls.

The trail was split here. I could backtrack and follow the lower trail along the Merced, or continue on the upper trail that stayed high on the canyon before dropping down to Emerald Pool, where the trails joined up again. I decided to take the upper trail, to get better views of the waterfall and Liberty Cap, and also because it was shaded in the afternoon.

At Clark Point, another trail split had switchbacks down to Silver Apron (another cascade) and Emerald Pool. As I was descending the switchbacks I ran into a young couple, the man with white dreads, and the woman with thick framed fashion glasses. The trail was pretty exposed and steep here, and the man asked me if there was anywhere they could just sit and hangout with a view, a hilarious question to ask in Yosemite National Park. They were looking for a place to smoke a joint. I told him that it was pretty rocky and steep above me, so their best bet was probably back where they came from. The man asked how long I was out, and I told him that I'd been on trail since August 5. He'd read about backpacking, and it was something he wanted to get into. He asked me specific, basic questions about my gear, "So, you have, like, a stove? And pots and pans and stuff?" Sure do, man. They were sincere questions, and both of them were sweetly stoned, but there was also an element of them not quite picking up on the social cues of a random conversation dragging out way, way too long. Eventually, I extracted myself, hoped they found a nice spot to enjoy the view, and kept going.

Down at Emerald Pool, I took another break. The Silver Apron is a small waterfall and slab cascade that empties into the Emerald Pool, a deep and vivid green wide spot of the Merced before it drops over Vernal Falls. The banks were lined with black oaks, and I enjoyed the novelty of being surrounded by deciduous trees instead of conifers. I felt like the Emerald Pool was my green room, the waiting area before entering back into my normal life.

I filled my water bottle, and sat watching the water tumble down into Emerald Pool. A blue jay was jumping around nearby, keeping an eye on me. My mom believes my dad's spirit appears to us as a blue jay, and I made a note to tell her about this one. I don't share my mom's belief, but I did feel a kinship with my dad during my hike. He imparted to me a love of the outdoors, a curiosity about nature and fauna and geology and flora. I would not have done this trip without his influence, I'm certain.

At Vernal Falls, a larger crowd was on top watching the vertical drop of the falls. The reality of Yosemite over Labor Day was setting in. Lots and lots of people crowded the trails. I found a spot to see the falls, but quickly moved on. The trail down was a twisting series of stairs cut into the rock, narrow and slippery. The people ascending were moving slowly, creating bottlenecks. The descenders were moving at all different speeds. Younger people jumped ahead if they saw space, squeezing past you like you were an obstacle. Older and out of shape people carefully trying to get down, but flustered by the people passing them. I was trying to be polite, but so many people were impatient and selfish in how they moved through these spaces.

The bottlenecks surprised me, and I was suddenly worried that I'd be late in meeting up with Katie and Desi. Which would have been incredibly silly, considering how much time I had killed that day at Nevada Falls. Eventually I reached the Vernal Falls Footbridge, and the path widened. It was now asphalt, and the air was hot. I could move quickly now, moving past large families and groups and kids running around climbing every boulder on the side of the trail.

And then, I saw a road. The end. There was a kid on a bike that looked like he was wearing a shirt similar to Desi's, but the bike threw me a bit. Then, he waved at me. He had apparently rented a bike at Curry Village. I was so happy to see him. Up the road, I saw

Katie hustling up on foot, trying to catch up. Almost perfect timing. I gave them both long hugs and we took some pictures. Katie had brought some cans of prosecco, but I didn't really feel much like bubbly.

We walked down the road, closed to all traffic except buses, back toward Curry Village. The final stretch. We returned the bike, dropped my gear off at the car, and headed into the store, where I bought a root beer, Powerade, and an It's It. The sodium in the Powerade was just as delicious as the sugar in the root beer and It's It. I'd been drinking the freshest spring water in the world for 25 days, but I drank both beverages within seconds of each other.

We then headed to Rush Creek Lodge, just beyond the Big Oak Flat entrance on 120, on the northern border of Yosemite. We were staying in one of the townhouses below the big pool, with hillsides on either side that were lined with zip lines and tunnels and other games for kids. I took a long shower, and headed up to the pool. A barbecue buffet was set up near the pool, and I saw Chuck and Desiree and Simone and Charlie there. I got a cocktail and some food and sat down to eat, having trouble following the conversations because I was so focused on my food. It would take me a couple of weeks to drop this feral behavior when it came to meal times.

A little later, Josh and Nicole and Samara and Rowan arrived, we sat outside catching up. A fire pit above had smores for the kids, and there were fire tables and couches. At one point, one of the kids saw a skunk nosing around where the buffet tables had been set up, causing everyone to scatter. The staff did not seem concerned. "Yeah, we get skunks a lot. They're part of the natural environment around here."

The main lodge had a game room with bumper pool, foosball, and dome hockey. Rowan, in particular, was obsessed with dome hockey, something Josh and Chuck also love. We played for a long while, Rowan spinning the handles like a madman. Other kids were lining up to play, so I ceded my handles to one of them, and headed off for bed.

My 49 year old frame was gaunt and wiry, my greying beard and hair unruly. 25 days. 318 miles. Over 60,000' of elevation gain. I thought about how so many people do the John Muir Trail to have a revelation, to find a purpose in their life. But that's not how I felt, and that was not why I did it, though I think those are worthy reasons. I just wanted to see these places with my own eyes, on foot.

Moments before sunrise, Clouds Rest.

Sunrise on top of Clouds Rest.

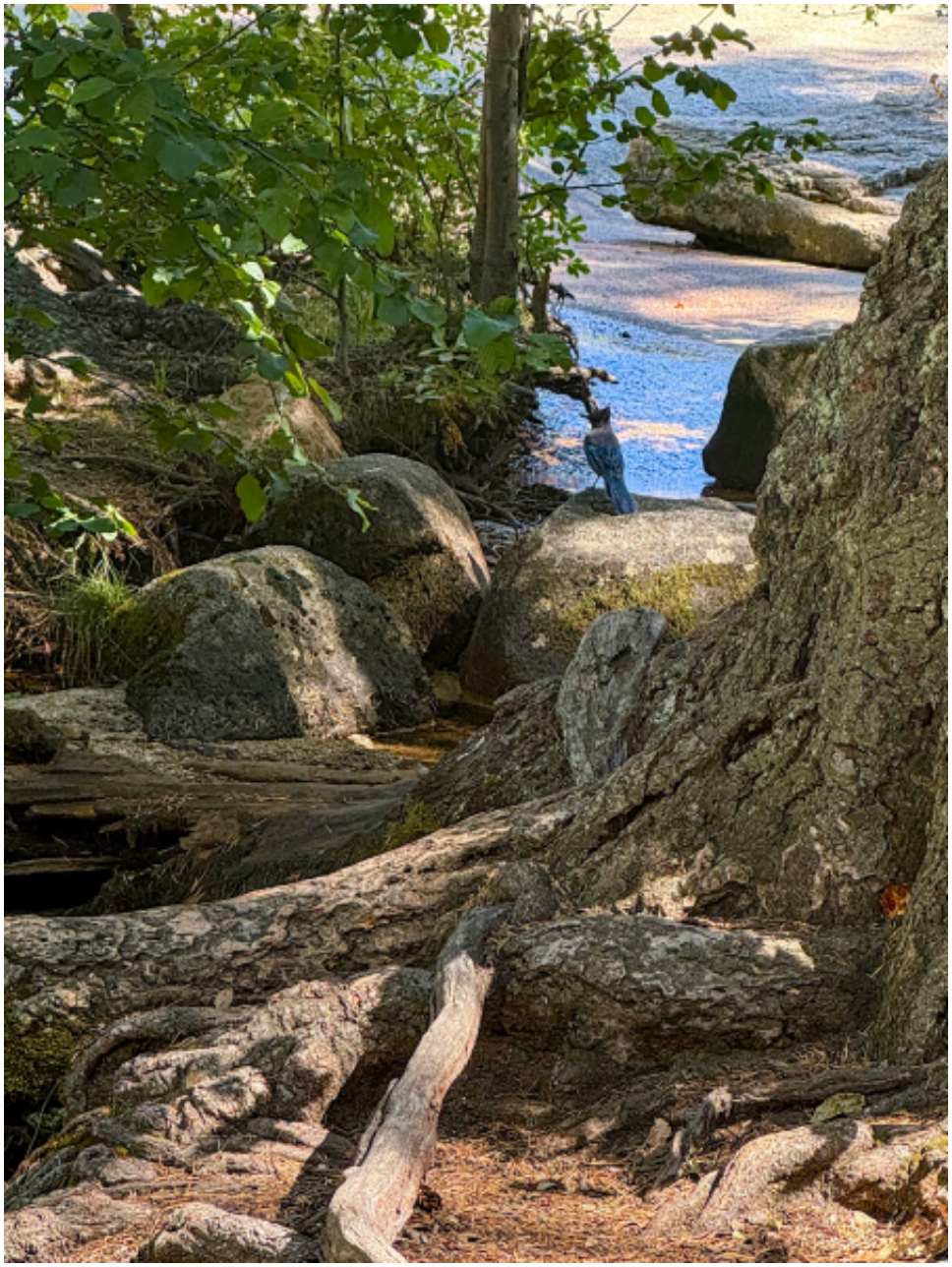
First light on Half Dome.

Sunrise, knife's edge, Clouds Rest.

Top of Nevada Falls.

Liberty Cap and Nevada Falls.

Left: Bluejay, Emerald Pool. Right: Final hike out.



Left: Vernal Falls.
Next page: Sunrise panorama, Clouds Rest.

Colophon

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