

## Will Tarantino's Sierra High Route Journal

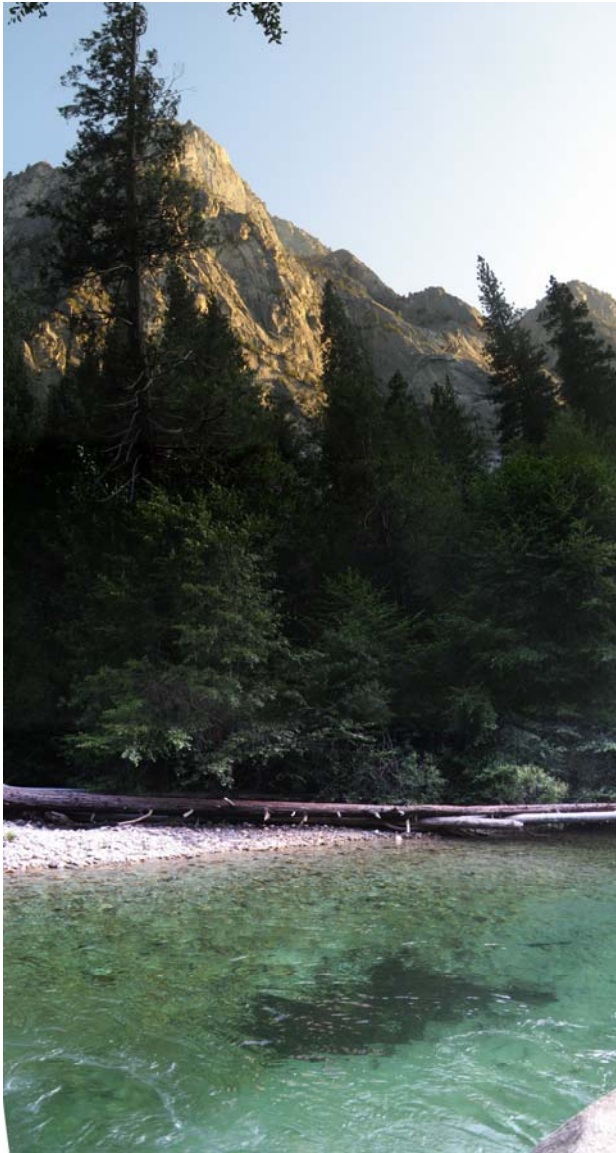
SHR Day 0: 8/15/09

*At present, I'm bivouacked at road's end in King's Canyon National Park (KCNP). I had not planned to camp here, but I made a last minute decision to wait until morning so I can get a permit. Miniature mosquitoes buzz through the warm evening, hovering around me working up the courage to land. Once they do, they quickly perish and are consumed. Sleeping here isn't exactly endorsed by the park...but I don't see any "no camping" signs, besides, no one will ever know I was here, unless they happen to read this.*

This morning, I woke behind my friend Lindsey's cabin at 6:00, in some bushes next to the stream where they set up their experiments. Linds was kind enough to give me a ride to Onion Valley, bless her, and we stopped for a light bite along the way. There was a bit of confusion about which road went to the trailhead, but we soon found it. The drive up switchbacked up a fairly steep slope, and the occasional sense of exposure made Linds so uncomfortable that she would move into the oncoming lane when it was on the inside. Luckily, despite the number of people and cars at the trailhead/campground, traffic was minimal, especially downhill.



One thing about the Eastern Sierra, it isn't coy; the climb up Kearsarge Pass was an abrupt insertion into the alpine environment. A climb up the east side hits you immediately in the gut/soul with the Sierra's brilliant beauty: glowing granite spires, luminous sapphire lakes, and crystal clear skies. Range of light indeed!



From the pass I dropped down to the blindingly blue lakes below. Not paying attention to where I was going, I accidentally wandered off on a minor side-trail. No matter, I just followed the drainage cross-country, playing connect the dots from lake to lake, revealing a truly spectacular landscape by the time I reached the PCT where the hanging valley dropped into Vidette Meadow. I followed the PCT briefly down to the meadow before joining the Bubb's creek trail and following it along the creek as it descended a glacial staircase to King's Canyon, among the most spectacular canyons in the Sierra. There were a large number of tourists at Road's End, playing in the S. Fork King's River and returning from day hikes. The permit station had closed at 3:00 and didn't open until 7:00am, so I quickly hitched down to the visitor center to see if I could grab one there. Unfortunately, the ranger there was unable (or unwilling) to give backcountry permits, so I hitched back up to the road's end for the night. It was a pleasant evening, and I hung out on "Muir Rock" next to the river, watching the sunset through the old-growth conifers that bordered the river, while I cleaned and applied some ointment to the chafing that had developed in my crotch. Eventually, I wandered over to the Copper Creek trail, stashed my food in the bear box, and found this hidden nook in some boulders nearby. I can't wait for tomorrow.

Day 1: 8/16/09

*I don't know why, but my body just seems to like hiking in the evening. All day I felt tired and out of it, and the chafing in my groin was disappointingly persistent. I walked bow-legged for half the day, except when I would accidentally forget to spread wide and would receive a sharp slap of pain of my inattentiveness. However, once I passed the Horseshoe Lakes at about 5:00, I felt almost invincible until I stopped walking, close to 8:30.*

I slept in this morning (I had to wait for the permit office to open anyway), but I was still over by the picnic tables close to 6:30, waiting for the ranger. I ate a breakfast of granola and fresh avocado while I waited. Not many people carry fresh fruit when they hike, but I don't usually cook so I take it as a treat.

Even though I had guessed my mileage conservatively the ranger (as they always do) asked me a few questions and told me she thought my itinerary was overly ambitious. She gave me the permit anyway, though, and I was climbing up toward Grouse Lake by 8:00. Less than an hour after leaving the trailhead, I nearly ran right into a momma bear with two cubs, noticing them when they were perhaps ten yards from me. Mom's first order of business was to shoo her babies up trees, then she turned on me and...*hissed*. The sound was not comforting. By this time I already had my arms in the air, and I was backing away slowly: "You're right, dear, I'm too close to those kids, but don't you worry, I don't mean them any harm. They sure are cute though."

I expounded upon how delightful her cubs were for what seemed like ten minutes, but was probably thirty seconds. When I had about double the distance between us, she got her babies down and sent them up the hill, still hissing at me. I held my ground, and she soon followed her cubs up the hill, disappearing in the brush almost immediately, far too quickly for me to take a picture, anyway. I couldn't believe the sow had *hissed* at me, I didn't even think bears would ever make such a noise, let alone think that I might be lucky enough to hear it.

The rest of the day was relatively uneventful, although the scenery steadily improved; after I left the trail to angle towards Grouse Lake I spent most of the rest of the day off trails. The route followed a minor ridge offshoot from of the main Sierra Crest known as the Cirque Crest, which divides the middle and south forks of the King's River. The afternoon was spent connecting cirque to cirque by way of passes in the ridges between them, or dropping down a bit and going around them on old trails to the lakes below. As I made my way along the crest I passed two groups of backpackers who were traveling from Road's End to Dusy Basin and Bishop Pass. Both had been out for multiple days and were incredulous when I told them I'd started that morning. I resolved to lie whenever the question was posed again. It's better than sounding like a braggart.

By the time I reached Windy Ridge, the sun was on its way down and I was on my high (mentioned previously). The sunlight slowly crept up the cliffs across the valley of the Middle Fork from the large bowl below me. The cool breeze seemed to be infusing me with renewed energy. I felt like I could be trapped forever in this moment, walking through this landscape with this brisk breeze and the marvelous light.

Unfortunately, it was eventually too dark to walk without fear of hurting myself, and I was forced to camp. It was a gorgeous spot beneath Marion Peak next to some lakes on a branch of Cartridge Creek. Still, it was sad to have to end the day.



Day 2: 8/17/09

*"I knew it was a bad idea", I thought to myself as I skittered down the snow, bee-lining toward the rocks below. I had been walking down from Frozen Lake Pass, a pass, which the guidebook had described as quite difficult but which I had found to be no big deal so far, when I noticed a group of hikers slowly making their way down, picking their way through the rocks. My competitive nature and overconfidence due to the ease (so far) of the descent got the best of me. "I'll show them" I'd thought, "I'll cut down to this snow over here, a quick glissade and I'll be down in no time!" It was close to 2:00, the snow looked soft enough, but it was only barely soft enough to kick steps. I was a bit uncomfortable with it, but I decided to try it anyway...*

*Down in the rocks, I lay still, listening to my body. Remarkably, nothing hurt beyond a few simple aches and scrapes (pinkie, knee, and forearm). I turned myself over, sat up to give one of the guys below a thumbs-up, and proceeded to gather the flotsam, which had escaped from the outside pockets of my pack. I then stood up and walked back out onto the snow, which had flattened out and was now gentle enough for easy boot-skiing.*

It was cold when I woke up this morning, and I was slow to get out of my sleeping bag. Still, I was moving about half an hour after sunrise, climbing easily up to White Pass on one of the ridges radiating from Marion Peak.



Roper says to traverse from White to Red Pass, but I found it much easier to drop down a bit into the shallow basin between them. A straightforward sandy descent led to a tarn on the bench above Marion Lake, a blue beauty of a lake on the floor of a short, narrow hanging valley draining two small cirques between Cartridge Creek and Lake Basin. I followed the minor

drainage coming down from Red Pass instead of looking for the chutes to the left of the bench suggested by Roper, this proved to make my decent to Marion Lake a bit more interesting (read: difficult) than the one described.

Connecting up with an abandoned section of the John Muir Trail near the lake's outlet, I climbed up through gorgeous Lake Basin, and up a steepening slope of loose boulder-sized talus to



Frozen Lake Pass. As I got higher, the talus became a bit less stable, so I moved over to a sandy chute that ran up through the larger boulders. It was a bit steeper, and more annoying, but at least I wasn't going to pull an oven-sized block of granite on top of me.

After my misadventures on the way down, I stopped to chat with the three hikers I'd caught up with at the bottom of the snowfield. They were through-hiking as well, and were stunned that it had only taken me till my third (actually second) day to get here. It's always cool to run into other people who are doing these kinds of trips. It gives me hope for humanity.

A brief jaunt across Upper Basin brought me to the modern John Muir Trail (JMT), and suddenly I began to see hikers about every 20 minutes while I climbed up to Mather Pass. I had been on Mather Pass before, in June 2003 while I was hiking the PCT, but now in mid-August it was almost unrecognizable. I was climbing

up a seemingly endless series of switchbacks, with large blue lakes lying below the surrounding peaks instead of straight up a steep snowfield surrounded by seemingly endless ice and snow.

After dropping down to the dazzling Palisade Lakes, I left the JMT to climb up a system of class 3 granite benches to Cirque Pass. The climb was a bit more challenging than I expected, but I was rewarded with a spectacular view of the Palisades. Although I was feeling strong, I decided not to try to make it up another pass today. I hung out on top of Cirque pass until sunset, eating tortillas with cheese, hummus, and apples while the alpenglow slowly disappeared from the top of North Palisade Peak. Finally, with darkness approaching, I dropped down to the unnamed lake between Cirque and Potluck Passes for the night.



Day 3: 8/18/09

*I'm "chilling" at the top of Muir Pass, working on my suntan/burn. I'm hanging out here for a while because the next pass is Snow-Tongue Pass; there is no chance of reaching it today, and after my experience coming down from Frozen Lake Pass I don't want to go over any pass named "Snow-Tongue" in the morning.*

*I picked Muir Pass as my lounging area because I love it up here. Despite the expansive view, there is no one within sight below 11,000 ft. Nothing but rock, snow, tundra, and the omnipresent brilliant blue lakes. Apparently this is not a universal sentiment, however, for the last two people I met on my climb up to the pass both expressed their dissatisfaction with the scenery. One even asked for my reassurance that the rest of the JMT was not like this (if only!); she felt this section of trail was "ugly and tedious". Long and tedious? Ok, granted. Ugly? Not a chance! As I stare out across the shimmering granite and snow, azure sky and sapphire blue lakes ugly is perhaps the last word to come to mind. Austere? Absolutely. Foreboding? Sure. Inhospitable? Obviously. Spectacular? Gorgeous? Beautiful? Definitely. Pretty? Ok, maybe not pretty, but Ugly? Not a chance!*



Today was the day I had my third day jitters. On the 2<sup>nd</sup> to 4<sup>th</sup> day of any big trip I start to have second thoughts...is this really a good idea? Maybe I don't belong out here...is this too much? Then, I always ask myself what else I would be doing. Answer? Wishing I was here.

The day began with a climb over Potluck Pass into Palisade Basin, in the shadow of North Palisade, where I encountered a large number of gumbies (people in over their heads who ask lots of stupid questions over and over again) who made me glad I had stopped early last night. I played "knock over the cairn" up and over Knapsack Pass in a futile effort to make the trip from Dusy Basin into Palisade Basin more of a route-finding challenge. Unfortunately, the use path over the pass is so easy to follow that the cairns are totally unnecessary. I know I'm acting elitist, but I can't help myself.

I hit the Bishop Pass trail in pleasant but over-used Dusy Basin and slowly dropped down a seemingly endless slope into LeConte Canyon. LeConte is not as deep as King's Canyon, but easily as spectacular. Granite formations that form the walls, like The Citadel and Langille Peak are elegantly carved and their sparkling ivory hue contrasts nicely with the Black divide rising in the background.



Once in LeConte Canyon, I now had to climb out again. The JMT's endless route up to Muir Pass is interesting and beautiful, but eventually became tedious, perhaps because of the hot afternoon sun and the multitudes streaming down from the pass. Some of the people were interesting, though, and I encountered everyone from an old school mountaineer with a wooden Ice Axe and an external frame pack that must have weighed 60 lbs, to a pair of young hippies, a small group of long-acquainted aging urbanites, and a lesbian couple unsure about the wisdom of their choice of vacation.

Soon after leaving Muir Pass I was at home again. I reached that transcendent state that poets and mystics everywhere try to describe, but can not. At peace, in the moment, one with the world, they're all inadequate, all cliché, but all true. I've always loved hiking in the evening, the heat of the day is dying, everybody else has stopped to camp, a slow breeze fills the air . . . and the light! Oh the Light! Everything it touches turn to gold.



It was hard to make myself end the day at Sapphire Lake, but watching the alpenglow reflected from Mt. Huxley made it worth it.

Day 4: 8/19/09

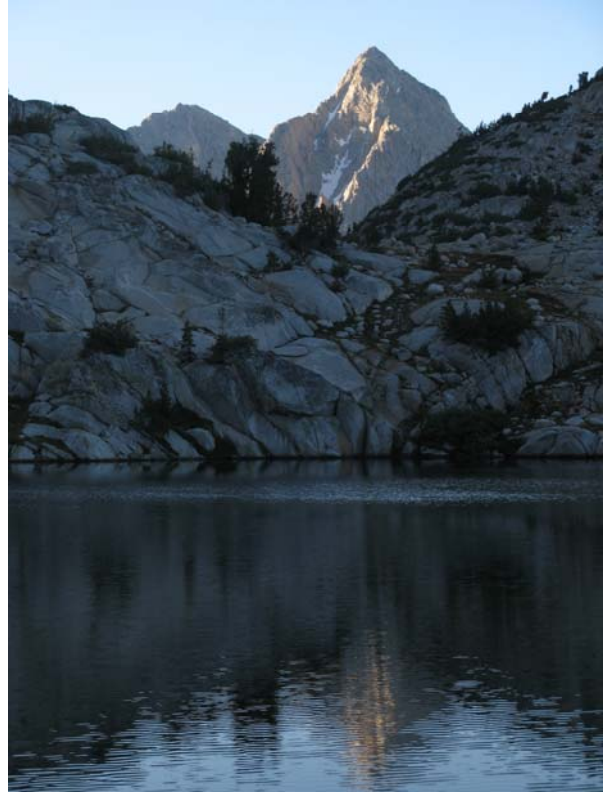
*I sit on a rocky outcrop above Big Bear Lake, eating my tortillas while the day's last light slowly drains out of the sky. A thin layer of red burgundy sits above the horizon, at one end of a rainbow of color that stretches the entire spectrum to the purples and blacks above. This may be the most spectacular place I've ever camped.*

*For a while I was talking myself out of trying to go over Feather Pass this evening. I knew it was far; there was a decent chance I wouldn't make it to Bear Lakes Basin. Wouldn't it be better to stay at Merriam Lake and go over tomorrow? But without a real reason to wait for morning to move on (like potential snow difficulties, in fact, softer snow was an argument for trying to go over tonight) I was unable to force myself to stop early. I have yet to locate the source of this bottomless energy that infects me in the evenings, but not only did it get me over the pass with time to spare, but it got me to this peerless viewpoint for the night. I'm hungry for more!*



I woke this morning to mirror-like reflections on Sapphire Lake and on Evolution Lake just downstream, making the mountains surrounding Evolution Basin doubly beautiful. I passed a large number of camping JMT hikers at the outlet of Evolution Lake; no doubt they had stopped in order to set themselves up for the "climb" over Muir pass. The crowd made me glad that I had forced an early stop last night.

As it dropped into Evolution Valley, I left the trail and began to traverse along the steep valley wall. Soon I intersected a well-formed use path. Leaving my pack, I dropped down the path to its intersection with the JMT. A hand-written note indicated that the path went up to "Darwin Basin and Lamarak Col, Mountaineering Skills required". The sign had been defaced by angry visitors who felt it intruded on the wilderness experience people heading in that direction were looking for. They are right, of course, but I can see why the Park Service would post the sign. I'm sure they want to minimize the chance some JMT hiker will wander the wrong way and find themselves in over their heads.



After retrieving my pack I followed the path up and west until it began to curve back to the NE toward Darwin Basin. Leaving the path, I continued traversing above Evolution Valley. After crossing a number of delicious streams the terrain turned to a system of jumbled cliffs and narrow, forested shelves, interspersed with steep, brushy gullies that I could use to connect one bench with another. After about an hour of these discombobulated cliffs I reached a broad, open bench that quickly took me to timberline above a large lake, unnamed on the map, but referred to by Roper as "Lake Francis". A challenging climb brought me to a precipice at the top of Snow-Tongue "Pass".

I wandered around on top of Snow-Tongue for about half an hour, searching for a passable route down to the Wahoo Lakes. Eventually, I found what I assumed to be the workable gully mentioned by Roper, up and to the right (East) from the distinctive notch at the low point. The slope down was comprised of sand and scree mixed with loose talus. The footing was awful, nothing was trustworthy; it was impossible to tell how deep the sand/scree was, where thin it acts like ball bearings on concrete and I sent what seemed like half the boulders tumbling downhill.

Eventually, the slope flattened out and I dropped down a large field of massive talus blocks, passed the Wahoo Lakes and into desolate Humphrey's Basin. The Basin is a brown, massive, monstrosity. Humphrey's Peak, though impressive, was disappointing. On the whole, I was not pleased to have crossed the Glacier Divide, leaving fabulous Evolution Basin for this (relatively) bland desolation. Although, perhaps it was just the hot, dry, and dusty afternoon that was affecting me.

I crossed the basin to Mesa Lake, a reasonably attractive body of water with a pair of fisherman and a very happy dog on the western shore. We chatted for a bit then I climbed up a short steep drainage before coming to a flat table slopping gently up to Puppet Pass. The view from Puppet Pass was fantastic. True, the silver granite of Seven Gables and Bear Creek Spire, combined with an endless cascade dropping from the flanks of Merriam Peak contrasted brilliantly with the

brown dust to the south, but not only was the head of French Canyon far more attractive than Humphrey's Basin, the drop down from Puppet Pass was far less scary than Snow-Tongue had been. Yet another steep talus slope led down to the bench containing Puppet Lake, but this one was relatively stable and much less scary. I was soon dropping easily down passed numerous tarns and lakes to the edge of French Canyon.

An uneventful descent through mixed willow/conifer forest led to the creek in the bottom of French Canyon, just upstream of the previously mentioned waterfall. After crossing a log bridge, I followed a trail in the bottom of the canyon for a few miles before leaving it and angling up an indistinct use-path toward Merriam Lake, taking a short-cut across a meadow-covered bench to climb up a minor ridge instead of the drainage prescribed by Roper. Once above Merriam Lake, I had made up my mind to keep moving. The weather was ideal, the sky was clear, I had my usual boundless energy, and I was out of my afternoon funk, and I was damned if I was going to stop now.

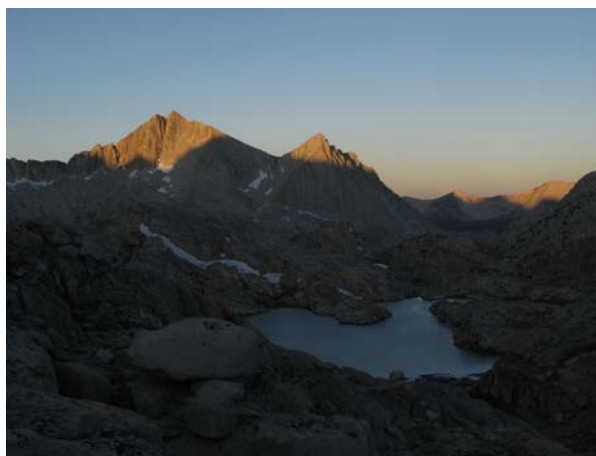


I attacked the valley leading up to Feather Pass, making it up the easy system of granite benches to the saddle SW of Feather Peak just as the light on its serrated North ridge was beginning to turn into an evening glow. The snow on the descent was perfect. Its softness turned the sun-cups into steps I could follow almost all the way to Bear Paw Lake, perhaps the most beautiful lake I'd ever seen until I walked another ¼ mile and saw Ursa Lake, and almost perfect pond. I was disheartened after discovering a couple already camped by the lake, until I continued another ¼ mile to the top of the small ridge where I am now. Mmmm, bliss!

Day 5: 8/20/09

I woke this morning to another gorgeous lightshow on Seven Gables and Bear Lakes Basin. The morning light slowly crept down from the tip of the serrated peak, which could just have easily been called "Shark-Tooth". I was moving before the light had reached me.

I reached White Bear Lake just as I felt the sun's rays for the first time this morning. The small lake seemed almost perfect, it was so pretty. It didn't have the same kind of spectacle that Seven Gables and its neighbors had provided from my campsite, but the intimate setting and the color of the morning light on the granite made it a hard place to leave.





White Bear Pass was perhaps 100ft above the lake, and the “climb” was practically a stroll. An easy descent took me to Brown and Teddy Bear Lakes, kissing cousins that sat at practically the same level in their attractive basin. After an easy contour above the north fork of Bear Creek I came to the Italy Pass trail and Lake Italy, a large lake named for its unique shape. I found that I disagreed with Roper, and thought the environs around Lake Italy were quite pleasant. True, compared to the recently visited Bear Lakes it wasn't what I would call a scenic wonder, but I would not deign to call it ugly, as he had. Had he entered this basin at a particularly unattractive time of day? It seemed the only explanation for his extended discussion of the Lake's lack of appeal. I have noticed myself that my mood and the time of day occasionally get transferred to the quality of the scenery. Or maybe his sense of alpine aesthetics is just that different from mine, though we were both entranced by the Bear Lakes.

Gabbott Pass, a low saddle between the talus mass of Mount Gabb and the precipitous ridge of Mount Abbott. Snow and easy talus led down to a small rock-bound tarn at the toe of Gabb's talus-covered “glacier”/ice-field, where I met a young family of four. They all seemed extremely competent, intelligent, and fit; they reminded me a bit of my family, though we had never done anything quite *this* cool. The parents were, so far, the only people I'd run into who could comprehend what I was doing without being awed by it. I got the sense that if they felt like it they could do the same thing and had in the past. Those two kids are damn lucky.

The walk down passed the Mills Lakes was very pleasant, Abbott, Gabb and the Silver Divide (across the canyon containing Mono Creek down below) made for an impressive backdrop. Eventually I had to drop down a steep, fading use-path into the Second Recess of Mono Creek, a deep hanging valley that I found unappealing, probably because the cool morning had turned into a hot and dusty afternoon by then. Reaching Mono Creek, I bush-whacked upstream to a fallen-log “bridge”, crossed, and



strolled through open pine forest to the Mono Creek Trail. The Mono Creek Trail has been turned into a meter-wide sand pit full of horse-shit by the equestrians, and I was glad to finally be rid of it, even though it meant a long, hot climb up the Laurel Lake Trail.



Eventually the trail leveled out for a bit in a pretty meadow, providing a view up to oddly colored, but appropriately named, Red and White Mountain. A hard climb up grassy slots cutting down through granite cliff-bands brought me to Bighorn Pass, a minor saddle east of Rosy Finch Lake. From the top of Bighorn Pass I worked my way across a wandering traverse to "Shout-of-Relief" Pass. The minor saddle north of Rosy Finch was so named by Roper for the cry made by pioneers in this area upon discovering its surprisingly tame descent.

It was an easy descent, indeed, that led me down to an attractive bowl of polished granite slabs scattered with small meadows and sparkling tarns, accompanied by the occasional gnarled body of an ancient Whitebark Pine. Unfortunately, the basin's particular beauty was not of a photogenic nature, at least, not in the obvious manner required for my limited talents.

An enchanting evening stroll across these flat granite benches took me to a small cliff above Lake Izak Walton. After dropping down a system of grassy slots in the rock to the lake, I circled the far shore and follow the lakes outlet down some steep slabs to Horse Haven Meadow, McGee Creek, and the McGee Pass Trail. I was back on the JMT soon afterwards.

Climbing up out of Tully Hull I could see the setting sun's light on Red and White Mountain, Red Slate Mountain, Mount Izak Walton, and other colorful peaks and ridges that make up this region of the Sierra Crest. I am camped under some Lodgepole Pines, on a wide saddle just east of Virginia Lake, by far my dullest campsite so far. Quite the contrast from my home last night.

Day 6: 8/21/09

*This is not where I want to be right now... negotiating a high traverse on loose, steep talus at 7:00 in the evening, with only an hour or so of navigable daylight left. Granted, the sunset is the best I've seen since...well, Ursa Lake a whole 2 nights ago. Still, it is nice.*

*How did I end up here? I'll tell you; I made a mistake. Roper said that Nancy Pass was "the conspicuous saddle west of Red-Top Mountain." Unfortunately, there were at least 4 saddles on the ridgeline west of Red-Top. There was only one I would call "conspicuous", but it was what I would call a "notch", not a "saddle". Also, it happened to be the highest one, farthest to the west, and it had what looked to be a particularly difficult climb to reach it. I decided, against my*

*instincts, that Nancy Pass was probably the low point on the ridge, two saddles closer to Red-Top.*



*A tedious climb got me to the ridge and a spectacular view of the Ritter Range, but there was no way down the north side except falling off. Since the decent from this pass was not described as unusually difficult, I knew I must be in the wrong place. A quick look toward the west told me that my instincts had been right, and the high notch was the correct pass. Thus began my obnoxious, rushed, frightening and simultaneously magnificent and exhilarating traverse. Luckily, my inexplicable evening power burst kicked in, despite the fact that I had let myself get dehydrated.*

I began the day with a stroll along the JMT, passed a number of memorable lakes that I recalled from my PCT hike six years ago. I left the JMT at the Duck Lake Trail and climbed up, above the calm lake's beautiful reflection of its surrounding ridges, before cutting up cross country toward a minor saddle on the Mammoth Crest.

A walk across a small basin and an easy

descent from another small pass brought me to the Deer Lakes. This was my supposed to be the last water for almost ten miles, so I broke to chug a litter and fill up before climbing back up to the Mammoth Crest, passing a pond full of huge tadpoles along the way.

Mammoth Crest is covered by a ten-foot thick carpet of Whitebark Pine krummholz, gnarled ancient trees interspersed with dead, polished snags all twisted and stunted by the relentless west wind. Steep snow-filled chutes separate the small peaks on the edge of the crest, which falls precipitously to the northeast, but rises gently out of Cascade Valley to the southwest. When the trail evened out and began to traverse I cut cross-country through to tangle of pines to the summit of the ridgeline. A seemingly limitless vista of my last two days opened up to the south, and of my next two days to the north. Ritter and Banner were finally close enough to display their impressive selves in all their glory, the twin pinnacles of the Ritter Range will dominate my journey until I reach Yosemite National Park.



From the summit of Mammoth Crest I followed the ridgeline cross-country through the tangled web of Whitebark krummholz to a broad, sparse plateau populated by lone twisted trees and snags. I dropped down from this surreal expanse through a denser, more diverse forest to the top of a steep, sand-filled gully. Easy plunge-stepping brought me rapidly down to Mammoth Pass. I soon picked up the Mammoth Pass trail and wandered through a still-charred section of the massive 1992 Rainbow Fire, reaching Red's Meadow Resort soon afterward.

I had a large lunch in the café with Jeff Zimmerman. He was visiting California from the East Coast to climb Shasta with some friends. He had recognized me as a hiker and invited me to join him, curious as to what I was up to. He had heard of the High Route, but was surprised to run into someone trying to do the whole thing. We chatted for a while, and were soon both surprised to learn that we were each talking to a fellow "triple-crowner" (someone who has hike the three main US long trails, the AT, PCT and CDT). It's not every day that you have lunch with a stranger and find out he's a triple-crowner. We spent almost an hour swapping stories and chatting about other ventures, past and planned.

I left the resort after a quick resupply in the store, essentially a block of cheese and two apples. I munched on a 5 oz bag of chips while I walked to Devil's Postpile, which is a cool geological feature, but was nowhere near as charming as it was this winter, when I had it all to myself. Leaving Devil's Postpile I began and long, tedious climb up the Beck Lakes Trail to miniature

Lake Superior, where I neglected to fill my water bottles, because I failed to anticipate any difficulties climbing over Nancy Pass.

After I finally got down from the pass I reached a small brook cascading through a dense growth of yellow flowers and varied paintbrush. Unfortunately, it was too dark to take a good picture. An undulating stroll took me to a minor rocky ridge just south of Minaret Lake, and I could see no longer. I found a reasonably flat spot to bed down and called it a night.

Day 7: 8/22/09

*Once again I fall asleep watching the day's last glow steadily fade from the sky. Today's show is different, though, for a thin ribbon of red and gold slices between the indigo horizon and the gray clouds, the purple pinnacles of the Clark Range occasionally jutting through it. For the first time on this trip, the sky is truly overcast, and this will be the first night I go to bed before seeing the stars.*



After leaving camp this morning I passed two groups of campers on my way to Minaret Lake, two middle-aged fishermen who thought I was "old school" because I don't carry a GPS and an elderly couple who try to get out for at least a week every month. The elderly couple had chosen an ideal site near Minaret Lake, with views up toward the Minarets that would have the power to awe even after years. Climbing up the lake's inlet stream towards Cecil I met Claus, a past High-Route Hiker now repeating the section from Red's to Tuolumne. We chatted animatedly



about hiking and the High Route, alternatively abusing and praising Roper while we climbed up a minor cliff to spectacular Cecil Lake and made our way down a sandy chute to Iceberg Lake, picking up a faint use-path before cutting cross-country above Lake Ediza to a small tarn in the deep cirque between Mount Ritter and Banner Peak.

We soon ran into a group of three lost gumbies in jeans and “Bubba Gump Shrimp” hats trying to complete the section from Thousand Island Lake to Red’s Meadow as part of what would be a fantastic loop hike, if they were at all competent. As Claus and I tried to explain how to get to Iceberg Lake (not hard at all, you could practically see right where it was, though you couldn’t make out the lake itself) they would interrupt us and say “Ok, so what your saying is...” and then proceed to repeat the directions we had given them incorrectly. This conversation essentially repeated itself about three times before they finally decided they had a grasp on things (they didn’t) and asked us if we needed help getting up to Whitebark Pass (which we were less than 30 minutes from) because the route was “kind of tricky”. We assured them that we would manage and left them to their (hopefully safe, but certainly interesting) adventure.



Claus stopped at Whitebark Pass for breakfast, but I continued on, wishing him a pleasant journey. It had been nice to have a companion for a change, but I prefer to travel by myself. The descent from Whitebark Pass was steep, but not particularly challenging. I was soon walking in Garnet Lake’s basin, enjoying the view east over the massive lake to San Joaquin Ridge and west straight up the cliffs of Banner Peak. A small rise took me from Garnet to Thousand Island Lake which, as its name would suggest, is even more spectacular.



An easy walk up Thousand Island Lake’s charming inlet stream brought me passed a myriad variety of wildflowers to Glacier Pass, a low, narrow, saddle between Banner and Mount Davis. The pass is almost straddled by Lake Catherine, a beautiful lake barely 100ft below the pass. The long glacier coming down along the northwest ridge of Mount Ritter practically falls directly into it. As I circled the lake, a flock of rosy finches flew around me, startling me at first but leaving me with a smile. I climbed to a small tarn just above the lake before working my way down to it’s cascading outlet. Eventually, after connecting the usual system of benches

and narrow gullies, it was possible to traverse across the head of the massive canyon containing the Middle Fork San Joaquin River. A maze with rounded granite walls and paths of narrow

grassy meadows eventually brought me up to the northern Twin Island Lake. The view southeast toward the Ritter Range was awe-inspiring.



An entertaining traverse of the step slabs bordering the two lakes brought me to the southern end of the southern lake, the lone island in the lake giving it a sparse, tranquil quality. I stopped to enjoy the serenity of the place, and my final glimpses of the full Ritter Range while I ate an apple and some cheese.

I eventually left the lake's shore and traversed high above the canyon floor, across narrow ridges and steep slopes, narrow benches and basin meadows before angling down to the verdant slabs of bench

canyon. By now the sky was becoming overcast, and the gloomy light did not do the charming valley justice. As I climbed past the polished granite, interspersed with flower-filled meadows and Whitebark pines, I resolved to return on a day that could present it more adequately. Eventually the canyon terminated in an alpine cirque containing Blue Lake, and an easy climb passed a slightly higher lake took me to Blue Lake Pass and Yosemite National Park. The steadily thickening clouds significantly diminished my elation upon reaching such a spectacular viewpoint. Still, even the prospect of a wet, dreary night could not completely diminish the spectacle of the Clark and Ritter ranges. A short descent in the increasing drizzle and I am at my campsite on the wide bench west of Foerster Peak.

Day 8: 8/23/09

*I'm sitting next to a huge fire ring at the Tuolumne Meadows Lodge hoping, beyond hope, for my stuff to dry. It will not. In the summer the Sierra's only supposed to have short, violent afternoon thunderstorms that last under two hours, followed by clear skies and warm evening sunshine. They do not have long, cold, soaking rains that last all night long for almost 20 hours. Yet it had rained steadily from 6:00 last night until noon today. I had not prepared for such rain, and because of my own stupidity all of my down gear (sleeping bag and parka) is now soaked. At least I was only half a day away from Tuolumne. If I'd been over a day away from civilization, I would probably have had to walk out.*

*Even though the rain has finally stopped, the sky is still grey and all of my gear is drenched. A brief opening in the clouds prompted me to spread my stuff out on the benches around the fire ring. Most of my gear has shown improvement, but the down is hopeless. The bivy I have leaks horribly, and causes the worst condensation that I have ever seen. I even had puddles forming inside during the night. This will definitely be the last time I bring this one.*

I barely slept last night, lying awake while the rain dripped through the hopeless bivy onto me, hoping that it would soon be light so I could get moving before I was thoroughly drenched. I was never cold, or particularly uncomfortable, but I could sense the wet slowly draining my down of its usefulness. Even before there was enough light to see by I was out of my bag. I

knew that packing my gear would force more water into the remaining dry parts of my sleeping bag, but there was nothing to be done about it. I was walking before 6:00, using a headlamp.

I dropped down slabs to open forest and the recently maintained Isberg Pass trail. No one was on it today except for a large trail crew and me. Eventually I dropped down some seemingly endless switchbacks to Lewis Creek before following the Lewis Creek Trail up to Vogelsang Pass and down to the trashy clutter of the Vogelsang High Sierra Camp.

The main trail connecting the Vogelsang and Tuolumne High Camps, along Rafferty Creek, is an overbuilt monstrosity of annoying cobblestones, deep sand, and omnipresent horseshit. I was actually glad it was raining as I traveled this section, otherwise the dust would have made me even more miserable. Anyone connecting these two camps on foot ought to go by way of Evelyn Lake.

Finally I reached the relatively pleasant John Muir Trail and the Lyell fork of the Tuolumne River, which soon led me to Tuolumne Meadows Campground. I ate a quick lunch at the camp store before resupplying (more cheese, but the apples were sketchy so I got trail-mix and granola instead) and wandering back towards the Lodge, about a mile back up the Tuolumne River. As I drew closer to the Lodge I saw a male black bear sauntering lazily through the parking lot, sniffing at cars and locked food boxes. The tourists were going crazy with their cameras, but to me he had more in common with a mongrel dog digging through trash than a wild bear. He just made me sad.

I made reservations for dinner before trying to dry my gear in the spot of sunshine. When I finally accept the hopelessness of the situation, I pleaded with the young lady at the lodge to let me use their dryer; otherwise I would probably have to spend \$90.00 on a tent-cabin. She took pity on me and showed me the employee dryer. She also encouraged me (after I requested to pay for a shower) to sneak in a shower before dinner. I am much obliged.

I needed two runs on the medium setting (I didn't want to cook my bag) to dry the down adequately for the evening. I'll run it again tomorrow before I leave. Dinner at the lodge was decent, if overpriced. However, the all you can eat salad and rolls with butter and honey made it all worth while. I think I will come back for breakfast!

Now I am lying in an unused group site in the campground. There is a backpacker site, but it doesn't have any bear boxes. I don't have a bear can, and I was definitely not going to risk sleeping with my food *here*. While group sites are reservation only, I don't think anyone is going to randomly show up after 9:30 to start their planned vacation.

Day 9: 8/24/09

*I am sitting by Cascade Lake, watching the clouds build. If they stop building, or slow, I will go up and over Sky Pilot Col today. If they keep building, I'll stop here for the night and hope it doesn't storm. Though, because I should be able to finish tomorrow, another storm wouldn't pose any difficulties, it would still be annoying.*

Will Tarantino's Sierra High Route Journal, 8/15/09 to 8/26/09

*A pika is scurrying around me. He's not terribly interested in me, but not particularly concerned either, maybe because I've been laying here for almost thirty minutes now. The miniature rabbit darts in and out of a narrow crevice, across the small meadow from me. I wonder if that is where he keeps his hay stash?*

*Clouds look like they are thinning. Time to go.*

It didn't rain last night, but I used my bivy anyway. As a result, I woke with a wet sleeping bag due to its poor ventilation. I'd have been dryer without it! This is particularly annoying because it's never given me trouble before, maybe that's because I usually used it in the winter.

I got up early, packed and walked back to the lodge (It's in the right direction anyway. I used the dryer again while I ate the AYCE continental breakfast buffet. It only needed one cycle this morning. Finally, I was on my way walking northeast cross-country, paralleling and then crossing the Tioga road. I started up a minor service road, following it up to a heli-pad. I stopped for a while in the sun to dry all of my gear thoroughly while I had the chance.



The road died out just as it intersected a small trail that led up to the Gaylor Lakes. After reaching the lowest lake, I struck out across yet another beautiful basin toward the upper Gaylor Lake, skirting the cliff-enclosed Granite Lakes along the way. I soon reached a small lake on the Sierra Crest just north of Gaylor Peak, proceeding up along the crest to the ruins of the Great Sierra Mine. Collapsed mine shafts and old cabins litter the area, which is beautiful of course, though I'm not sure how much the miners would have enjoyed living here, especially in the winter.

A short traverse brought me past another abandoned mineshaft to "Mine Shaft Pass", actually just a shallow dip on a minor ridge coming out of the crest. From the "pass" I descended past a few small snowfields before angling down mixed meadows, granite talus, and slate scree to Spuller Lake. Two groups of hikers came by on a nearby trail while I took a brief rest at the lake to watch the gathering clouds. I waved, but not one of them waved back. At least the dogs were friendly.

I left the lake, climbing over a low ridge before dropping between Maul and Green Treble Lakes. After crossing the flat basin to the north, I began the climb up to the east ridge of Conness Peak. Gentle, steady slabs along a small creek and a shallow, tarn-filled, bowl brought me to the precipice on the north side of



the East Ridge. The north face of Conness, North Peak, and the red peaks to the east all provided an almost peerless spectacle. The landscape, combined with a brisk, chill wind, a sheer drop, and interesting (but easy) travel made the climb along the East Ridge one of the more exhilarating portions of the entire route. I was tempted to climb Conness, but decided against it, fearing the gathering clouds would catch me on top of the highest mountain in the vicinity.

A fortuitously located spur ridge provided an unexpectedly simple descent to the Conness Lakes, and an easy stroll over rolling terrain brought me to Cascade Lake. There, I rested and watched the clouds before deciding to climb up to Sky Pilot Col.



The climb up to the col began in earnest after passing Secret Lake, deep sand and scree made the climb annoying, even though it was exceptionally easy by High Route standards.

Roper mentions a field of wildflowers on top, but I found none. I guess it was the wrong time of year. Like the climb, the descent to Shepard Lake was easy, but

tedious. An endless field of sharp, loose slate talus lasted almost the full 1000 feet down to the lake. By the time I got there, almost a half hour from the top, the sky was clear. I'm looking forward to seeing the stars again.

Day 10: 8/25/09

*I'm lying in a flower-filled meadow at the bottom of an ancient, glacier-carved canyon, surrounded by lupine, cinquefoil, paintbrush, and a brilliant blue sky. I've only been here 30 minutes, but it feels like all day. Only a lone mosquito interrupted my sense of peace. Well, she (the mosquito) and another hiker on the High Route who just left after a pleasant ten minute conversation. I'm trying to decide what to do with the rest of the day. Do I drop down Twin Lakes and finish? Do I wander into Tuolumne via the PCT? Do I lie here all afternoon? Such decisions it is my privilege to have to make. Where's my lucky quarter?*





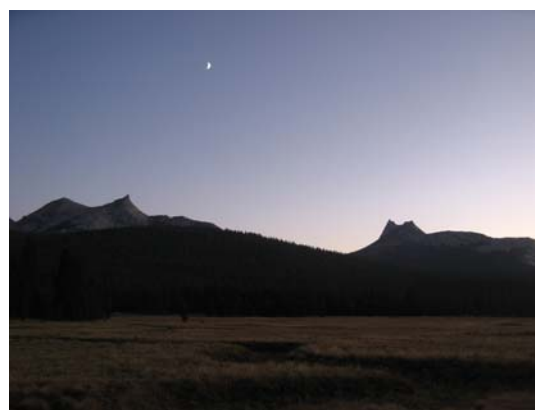
I woke and left early in order to get moving in the cool, damp morning. An easy walk through mixed forest brought me to Virginia Canyon, a fairly unimpressive feature this far upstream. I crossed a few small streams in the bottom before climbing up towards Grey Butte. I briefly got disoriented during the climb, and unsure which knob was Grey Butte. It had snuck up on me; I couldn't believe I'd already climbed this high. I checked my map, though, and I was right on target. I was soon at Soldier Lake. I took a break at the lake to dry my gear and get water before climbing up to the Saddle west of Grey Butte. A short traverse along

granite slabs under a few small snowfields and above a few small tarns brought me to Stanton Pass, the last major obstacle of the High Route. The climb up was steep granite, requiring some class 3 moves, but the climb down looked heinous. Nearly vertical cliffs dropped down about 100 feet from the pass. Luckily, Roper had recommended climbing above the pass itself, on the flanks of Stanton Peak.

I lowered myself down a bit before making my way over to a slab that came a little out of the main slope. Alternatively dropping down the class 3 slab and the bordering scree-filled gullies I made my way, slowly to the talus below. Though the talus was unstable, I was relieved to reach it. I slowly picked my way down it until I reached a meadow. One more small cliff band and I was at the bottom of Spiller Creek Canyon. I climbed up along Spiller Creek until I was just below Horse Creek Pass. The High Route continued down Horse Creek to Twin Lakes, but I wasn't quite sure I was done yet.



After my lovely lunch in the flower-filled meadow below Horse Creek Pass and Matterhorn Peak I finally decided to walk back to Mammoth by way of the PCT, with the goal of reaching Tuolumne tonight. I strolled lazily down Spiller Creek Canyon, enjoying the scenery. This last trail-less section was very pleasant, but once I reached the PCT the hike became much less interesting. I went into turbo mode... "Kick the tires, light the fires", I walked the 8 miles from Virginia Canyon to Glen Aulin in two hours. I relaxed a bit walking up the Tuolumne River to the Meadows, enjoying view down the Grand Canyon of the Tuolumne, the waterfalls along



the river, and the granite domes and spires of the Cathedral Range. I made it to Tuolumne Meadows just as the store was closing, I had enough time to resupply, grab some juice and a bag of chips before I made my way back to the group sites of the campground.

Day10: 1 8/26/09

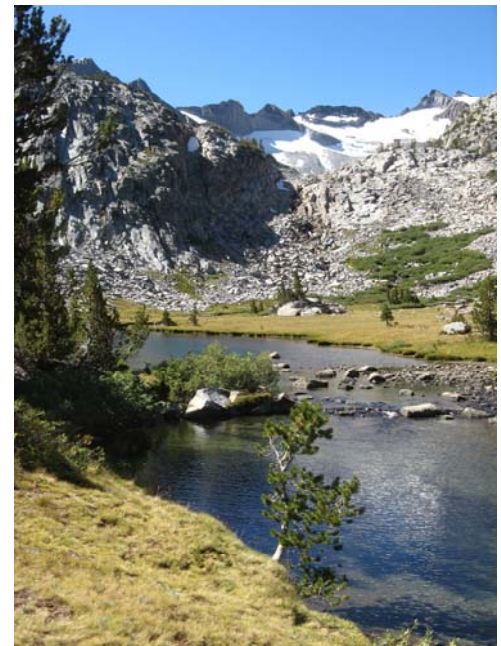


Today was mostly uneventful; all I had to do was follow the PCT from Tuolumne Meadows to Agnes Meadows in Devil's Postpile. I started very early, in order to avoid the hot, dusty, crowded oppression that was sure to infiltrate Lyell Canyon during the heat of the day. It worked. The morning frost and the rising sun made my morning almost magical. By the time it had warmed up enough for the frost to evaporate and the JMT hikers to emerge, I was climbing out of the canyon, enjoying the climb up and over Donahue Pass.

The views up towards Lyell Peak and (again) the Ritter Range from the pass were enjoyable, despite the crowd on top (three people). From the pass, the JMT dropped down slowly, winding below Donahue Peak into a minor drainage. After a couple intersections with side trails it climbed briefly out to Island Pass before dropping down again to Thousand Island Lake.

Thousand Island was much more attractive today than when I'd seen it last. Not only was the backdrop of Banner Peak much more impressive than the San Joaquin Ridge, but the light was better too. The sky before was overcast, but today the sun was bright, and it glittered on the water.

A long walk underneath San Joaquin Peak brought me down to Agnes Meadows and the Devil's Postpile Road. I hitched up out to Mammoth, got a meal at a local burrito joint and grabbed some snacks before calling Linds. She was coming home from Massachusetts tonight, and she agreed to pick me up at the highway this evening.



I grabbed some cherries and wandered down toward 395, cutting cross country to avoid walking along the road. I got to the intersection and hung out watching the stars come out until Lindsey came by.

My trip was ending . . .with a whimper.