

## August 28: Hutchinson Meadow to Granite Park

I fetch the food sacks down with the trekking pole, one function the manufacturer probably did not anticipate. Through the trees, the sunlight shines on the canyon and sparkles on Piute Creek.

For the first mile or so as the trail makes its way up to French Canyon, Pilot Knob blocks the sun, so I walk in shade not yet warmed by the morning light. When I emerge from the trees into the sun-filled wide canyon, the hike becomes enchanting. The creek meanders through a broad green meadow speckled with purple paintbrush, red heather, yellow buttercup, and white phlox. The views expand of Mt. Humphrey's, Glacier Divide, and the peaks above Bear Lakes. I'm amazed to be in solitude on this relatively level stroll up this enthralling canyon. I hop and skip as much as walk up the trail. The falls from Royce Creek plunge hundreds of feet in their cascading drop from the ridge above. Like so many other places in the high country, Royce Creek falls would be a major tourist attraction if a road were nearby.



*French Canyon*

The ascent up to Pine Creek Pass is relatively easy; I gaze on the ever-expanding vistas as I walk among druidic boulders popping up from the alpine grass and sand. There's a tarn at the top of the pass so it's possible to camp here; I bookmark the spot in my mind for the future. The hike down is more scabbly rock and dust courtesy of Pine Creek Pack Trains. Once into forested dirt, the trail improves. The turnoff to Italy Pass is unsigned, but obvious. Though an "unmaintained" trail, it's far preferable to hiking up Piute Creek Canyon. I appreciate being on a path for walking humans, not mules and horses.



*Lake near Pine Creek Pass*

The path winds from one basin to the next. A sparkling creek dances down in small waterfalls between tiny lakes. In one small creekside meadow, the green grass is covered with orange, black, and yellow wings. As I walk through this field of butterflies, some fly a few feet; most sit still on blades of meadowgrass, treating me as another wild creature passing through. Enraptured by this magical reality, I stop and stand among the hundreds of resplendent insects. I don't sit or take a photo so as to not violate this eternal moment.

An indeterminate time later, I proceed to the next bench, where four men sit eating under the last (or first) grove of whitebarks. They warn me there are no trees for several miles. I tell them

I'm going to the upper lake. From their response, I gather they regard camping in such austere surroundings as bizarre if not improper.

Granite Park is one of the most aptly named locations in the Sierra. Rocks and boulders of every size and shape jumble over the landscape. The disappearing trail through the rocks is marked with those structured piles of stones called "ducks." In *Timberline Country*, Steve Roper urges hikers to knock down ducks. I leave them standing. Why should I knock them down? They probably reassure many hikers. If you don't like them, ignore them, which I sometimes do and pick my own route.

These piles of rocks exemplify the contradictions of human nature. Why will hikers construct ducks instead of continuing to walk or pausing to rest and observe the surrounding magnificence? A person will take the time and energy to try helping fellow hikers, an act that is both selfless and vain — this person thinks he or she knows the best route and disturbs the natural surroundings to announce it.

Making my way through the natural and constructed piles of rocks, at the highest lake I find a sandy area at the east end. Large boulders provide shade. To the east, Owens Valley lies between the White Mountains and the Sierra. I climb up a little and try the cell phone. It works, and I talk too long to Barbara and Gordon.



*Granite Park*

What a difference a day makes again. After yesterday's trek following the packers, today was possibly the most sublime hiking of the trip as I ascended from pine forest, up French Canyon, over Pine Creek Pass, and the series of sublime benches of the Italy Pass Trail into this land of rock, sand, snow, and water. Though from a distance it appears to be a wasteland devoid of life, clumps of grass and colorful flowers grow between rocks and boulders. To the immediate west stands the thirteen-thousand foot granite Sierra crest while to the east an ominous red peak designated 12294 slopes down to Pine Creek Canyon; across the Owens Valley, the White Mountains shine on the horizon. To the southeast, distant peaks rise above the massive ridge of Mt. Tom, including one of the most singular summits in the Sierra, Mt. Humphreys. From this sideways angle, Humphreys looms differently than from either the town of Bishop on the east side or from the west, where the peak dominates the skyline of the basin that bears its name.

I feel so insignificant in this vast mountain expanse. Because that realization is so fundamentally real and true, I do not feel any less a person. Indeed, I feel more alive and vital. This is an insignificance felt in relation to the wilderness. It is the awareness of my infinitesimal place in relation to life itself.

As Muir said, we are all linked into some whole. It's a whole, a cosmos, we cannot fathom, so we created gods, goddesses, and a God to explain it to ourselves. We then asserted that these higher beings confirmed humanity's superiority over other living creatures. Instead of seeing our place in the universe, we elevated ourselves to the top of the great chain of being. But this chain has no top or bottom, only a link to the next link and the next link.

As the alpenglow deepens, shadows darken Mt. Humphreys, Mt. Tom, Royce Peak, Mt. Julius Caesar. The silence possesses a stillness so immense it is as if time froze at a single moment. In these mountains, I exist in this timeless moment and the next timeless moment.

There is an ebb and flow to each day here that joins the ebb and flow of life everywhere. Each one of us contributes to our particular ebb and flow and each one of us is affected by and is part of that larger ebb and flow. Individuals may each live a separate life, but no one is disconnected from each and every life.

Each of us considers what we want to be in our separate ebb and flow in relation to the larger. Each individual retains his or her distinctive identity while merging into the greater tide, flowing with the enduring process of life.

Though I am a visitor to this land of rock and sky, I feel part of it. The stars come out one by one until the heavens are covered in their eternal light. Though light years away, the stars abide in this time and place.



*Sunset, Granite Park*