

August 2, 2017

I pick up my permit in Bishop, drive the familiar road through Aspendell, and turn onto the North Lake Road just beyond the Sabrina trailhead parking. The uphill section is always a bit traumatic due to the one lane width with few pullouts and precipitous drop-off on the right side. I appreciate the “yield to uphill traffic” sign, though I’ve found the downhill traffic does not always adhere to instructions. This time, at the blind curve near the top, a car appears and we manage to slowly squeeze by each other.

At the North Lake campground, the sign posts for walk-in campsites 2 and 3 are vacant with campsite 4 occupied. I pull into 3, walk in, and, since it is actually unoccupied, return to the car for my pack. Campsite 3 is the walk-in site I envisioned staying at simply because it’s never been occupied all the times I’ve hiked out or back from this trailhead. This site does not have creek access except by walking through campsite 4, which remains unoccupied despite the sign on the parking post.

Campsite 3 has four possible tent sites. I choose one farthest from campsite 4. Since it is already almost 6:00, after erecting the tent, I sit at the picnic table, scribble notes, eat dinner, and think about tomorrow.

I am planning to hike to Hutchinson Meadow, Evolution Valley the next day, and then McGee Lakes the following day where I will spend three days exploring the basin. In 2008, I camped for one night between the first and second McGee lake and swore to return to spend more time discovering the entire basin, exiting over the ridge to Sapphire Lake. However, I have trepidations. This is my first long trip since major surgery in April. The previous backpacking trips this year have been relatively easy hikes to Redwood Canyon and Gem Lakes in Little Lakes Valley.

I realize I had cancer (undiagnosed at the time) on my Kaweah Basin trip last year. Maybe that partially explains why I had such a decrease in hiking speed, walking all day on all but two days in order to cover the miles. In the past the same miles took far less time. The first two days this year are similar in terms of planned miles, but much less up and down. Last year I went over Franklin Pass and camped along Rattlesnake Creek, a 3,800 foot climb and steep 2,500 foot descent on a thirteen mile day. Because the climb up is less

at only 2,000 feet and the down is seven gradual miles on a well-maintained trail, I expect hiking the twelve miles to Hutchinson Meadow to be easier.

Dark clouds are above yet sunlight shines to the west so the trees glow in the evening light. I take a stroll down the road. The distance to the trailhead parking area seems longer than in my memory. Nowadays, nearly everything seems longer than in my memory. I appreciate the view back towards the campground with the peaks rising above.

As darkness falls, I return to the campsite and turn on the Luci light to write by. I take in and appreciate the way it feels tonight. I hope the subsequent days, while not the same, will be days to remember and treasure. I now realize and comprehend that this trip is the first of many finales. Now to take in and appreciate the upcoming six nights. I sit in solitude listening to Bishop Creek and feeling the serenity of wilderness. At this moment, part of me is saying stop here. Yet my soul is shouting *do this trip*. I crawl into the tent and blissfully fall asleep.

August 3, 2017

I am awakened by voices and lights shining off the top of the tent. Once I recover from the disorientation, I realize the occupants of campsite 4 have arrived. I look at my watch—almost midnight. Bickering voices, the words largely unintelligible, keep me awake. Once their tent is up, the bickering ceases and volume decreases so I drift back to sleep.

I get up a little before 6:00. I'm nervous this morning, much more than a normal first morning of a backpacking trip. I realize I am worried about today. Will I be able to do it? I need to focus and calm down. I finish packing, put my pack in the bear box, drive to the parking lot, walk back to campsite 3, put on the pack, and head up the trail.

As most Sierra trailheads, the hike begins with a climb. The grade is relatively gradual. I feel like I am making decent enough time. The trail levels off after about a mile. I remember there are a couple of side creek crossings up ahead. At the first, the log is not perfectly flat and a little narrow. I debate my elderly lack of balance and decide to wade. Switching shoes, I quickly splash through the fast current. Switching back to my hiking shoes, I

continue and come to the second crossing. It's long and the wide log is higher above the rushing creek. *Oh, what the hell.* I focus on the log and my steps. In a few seconds I am across.

After a few minutes the trail leaves the forest and begins a series of long switchbacks. The trail heads far from the creek, and then switchbacks nearer. I recall that one believes they are coming to the waterfall below Loch Leven, but actually end up switch-backing away from the creek and climbing farther. I am moving slowly, steadily, but already feeling more weary than I should. A multitude of wildflowers at peak bloom help to ease the climb. Finally, the trail goes around a corner and there are the falls. I pause for a rest and a snack at a spot where I am well off the trail. A large group descends the trail over the rocks and stops for their own snack a few feet away, sitting on the trail. When I am done, I make my way past them and reach Loch Leven.

At the west end of Loch Leven is a distinctive tree just off the trail where I have stopped on previous trips. I put my pack on the tree and eat my deli turkey sandwich. I recall how Barbara, Gordon, and I camped in the trees up to the right on the first night of our first trip to Humphreys Basin twenty-five years ago. I get out my watch. It is already nearly 10:30. I am not making good time. I am already too tired. I begin to realize that I will probably not be able to do my planned trip. I am not as recovered as I thought.

As I make my way up to Piute Lake, I begin running through my mind possible alternatives. My first inclination is to do Humphreys Basin. I'll stay at Muriel Lake tonight and then decide the rest of my course. I recall my last walk on this trail during the inversion storm of 2013 that wiped out portions of the Shepherd Pass Trail. The storm erupted as I was descending Piute Pass, lightening flashing as hail and rain transformed the trail into a creek.

Above Piute Lake, I pass a couple of women resting before the final climb to the pass. We get chatting and end up discussing camping at Muriel Lake. They are doing the classic North Lake to South Lake route. I mention I'll probably end up camping there and hope to camp by the outlet creek since I did that once before; that area contains many campsites and great views down Piute Canyon.

Soon, I reach the snowfield below the pass. There are three different sets of tracks through the snow to the top. I choose the most direct. Since the

snow is mushy, walking up is relatively easy. The entire area around the top of the pass is snow-free. I put my pack on a rock and get out my watch. It reads 12:45. It has taken me five hours to go five miles. In 2013, this climb took me three hours, despite beginning my day at sea level and driving to the trailhead. I send a SPOT with the alternate message of I'm doing fine, but changing my itinerary. I take in the view of Humphreys Basin and the trails descent past Summit Lake down Piute Canyon.

When the SPOT is sent, I follow the use trail to Muriel that branches left from the Piute Pass Trail. At first, the trail is clear. Soon, it reaches a boggy area where the path is obscured. Following that is a slushy snowfield. I follow previous tracks over the snow and end up striking the use trail once again. At Muriel, the campsite by the outlet creek I used in the past is occupied. There is a free site next door. I pass on that one since it is too close to the one already occupied. It would be rude to use simply because it's legally available. For me, consideration for the solitude of fellow backpackers is a decree of backcountry travel. I turn around and head out to the point across the water from the outlet. I find a campsite, set up the tent, and begin more seriously contemplating alternatives since I obviously cannot do my planned trip. The recovery from the surgery is not as far along as I thought. Perhaps (and more likely), this is as "recovered" as I will ever be. This is my new reality. So now what to do?

Possibilities swirl through my thoughts. My first inclination is to wander Humphrey's Basin. This is a trip idea I'd considered for my more elderly future. That future seems to be now. Do I stay here tomorrow and dayhike to Goethe? Go to Mesa Lake? Upper Desolation Lake? Tomahawk Lake? Should I hike down to Hutchinson Meadow and up French Canyon to Royce Lakes? No, French Canyon will be a mosquito factory plus I've hiked it three times and camped at Royce.

I am having to rethink my life. I can no longer backpack as I have in the past, even as I did a year ago. What I looked forward to doing may no longer be possible. I have to radically change expectations. First, I have to make the best of this trip. Take it all in without expectations. Take it one step at a time.

Still contemplating my alternatives, I have dinner then wander around taking photos. The clouds and lights make shifting patterns on the far mountains and canyon. I enjoy the challenge of attempting to capture this constantly

changing show. As the sun descends, the light beyond the clouds sends varying shafts of sunlight and backlight glows. This unique moment transfixes me in this place. This is why I am here. This is the true goal of any backcountry trip. I am immersed in this specific moment in this specific place.

When I finally turn around, humongous black clouds from the east are rushing straight for all of us camped at Muriel Lake. The wind begins swirling. I doublecheck the tent stakes and get into the tent as the first raindrops fall. Gale-force winds howl as if they would simply pick up the tent and blow us to Kansas or even Oz. This is the first all-out storm I've experienced in this MSR Hubba Hubba NX in the two years I've owned it. The tent ceiling does not leak. Due to being extremely tired, I drift off into sleep as the storm rages outside.

August 4, 2017

When I awake at midnight, the rain has stopped. At dawn, gray clouds fill the sky. The weather tells me there's no hope for drying things before packing. The first order of business is to pack up and get to Mesa Lake. A plan has settled in my mind. I will take the Desolation Lake use trail as far as Lower Desolation Lake, then head west. The Tom Harrison Mono Divide map is all I have for navigating Humphreys Basin since the custom maps I made are for the other portions of the trip. I am familiar with Humphreys Basin from previous visits so I'm not particularly concerned. Also, Mt. Humphreys and the Glacier Divide provide obvious navigation indicators.

The clouds are still coming from the southeast, so it remains a monsoonal weather pattern. Yesterday morning, the weather report was uncertain with the monsoonal pattern being the worst-case scenario. There's a sense of mystery in the clouds. The sun is now visible in the eastern sky. The peaks around Bear Lakes basin are in sunlight.

I set off to intersect the main Piute Pass trail. A large snowfield discourages a more direct descent. I am joined by a Sierra Club trip of five women who are also intersecting the trail to head down to Hutchinson Meadow. I met two of them hiking up to Piute Pass yesterday and they had also decided to camp at Muriel. They are very friendly and we get talking

as we walk. They are a tight-knit group who have been taking trips together for many years. I admire their camaraderie and cohesiveness while each individual is obviously given “her space,” so to speak. Later, I wish I’d written down names since my recollections end up fuzzy. I have a terrible memory for names only offered verbally.

We all head down to the outlet of Summit Lake, cross the outlet creek, and then up to intersect the junction. We come across the old Piute Pass trail, still clear and prominent. I recognize it from my first descent from the pass with Barbara and Gordon when we snacked at Summit Lake. We see the newer, more stock-friendly Piute Pass trail up ahead. When we reach the wide path, the group takes a rest stop. We bid each other farewell and great trips.

As expected from past trips, the trail at the crossing of Humphreys Lakes outlet creeks is covered in water. It’s possible to hop the rocks on either side to avoid the water. I still get one foot wet. Someone with longer legs and better leaping ability could stay dry. The two crossings a little further on have two rock hops at the limit of my leaping ability, but I manage them.

After a short climb from the crossings, the trail divides with the left trail heading down to Golden Trout lakes and the right more directly to Hutchinson Meadow. The junction is unsigned. How many people get confused about which way to go, especially since the left fork heads down while the right fork goes slightly up? I go right and quickly leave the trail, heading up to diagonally intersect the Desolation Lake trail. At the top of the short climb, the Desolation trail is a few yards away. This narrow single path worn in the ground, always visible, winds up, down, and around the boulder-strewn landscape of Humphreys Basin.

After several minutes of walking, Lower Desolation Lake appears below to the left. I recall camping at Lower Desolation with Barbara and Gordon when an imminent storm forced us to rush down to the lake, find a campsite, and set up the tent in record time. As we escaped to the safety of the tent, the storm erupted. It’s become one of those memorable backpacking mini-triumphs we like to recall.

I stop for a snack and reconnoiter my route around Lower Desolation to the ridge above and Mesa Lake. I head to the north end of Lower Desolation. The boulder and rock-strewn landscape of Humphreys Basin leads to zig-

zagging through rocks while traveling in one's general intended direction. I enjoy the walk through the rocks and boulders, cross a small creek, and follow the north shoreline to where the Upper Desolation Lake outlet creek empties into Lower Desolation at a picturesque waterfall. The creek is a torrent, not the gentle stream I encountered in 2013. Crossing here is not possible. A clear area between two snowfields appears to be the best route to the ridge. I follow the creek until opposite the clear area and look for a crossing. At one possibility, I get halfway across before the water depth and fast current cause me to turn around. After further searching, I simply wade across at a wide shallow section.

On the other side, I walk up to the ridge. An unnamed tarn/lake is to the immediate left. Consulting the map, I head northwest. Soon, Mesa Lake looms below. Mesa's outlet creek meanders down to Tomahawk Lake to the far left. I zig-zag down to the outlet creek and rock hop across. Melting snowfields around Mesa create a swampy, boggy shoreline. Mosquitos love this landscape. Covering exposed areas with deet repellent becomes a necessity. I head towards the inlet creek waterfall where Barbara, Gordon, and I camped at a lovely campsite with a sandy beach a short way down the shoreline. I pass the beach. What was once a campsite is currently a muddy mess, water an inch deep in the tent area. I explore the area, most of which is boggy. Mesa is not a good place to camp at the moment. It's time to rethink again.

I find a rock above the lake in enough wind to discourage mosquitos, eat lunch, and decide what to do. From the vantage point of the rock, Tomahawk Lake looks like an inviting alternative. I make my way through the snowmelt bogs, cross the outlet creek, and head down to Tomahawk. A decent campsite sits at the near end with a lovely view of the Glacier Divide. Exploring a bit more, I see a likely spot at the near end of the point jutting out beyond the narrows. Yes, this is a perfect campsite with a large level tent area by a larger rock shelf. I lay out the rainfly and footprint on the rock to finish drying. With the wind blowing and sun shining, they are soon dry. I erect the tent. The increasing clouds tell me it will be needed.

I enjoy watching the shifting clouds over the Glacier Divide. When the rain becomes imminent, I cook my home-dried spaghetti dinner. It finishes cooking as the rain hits. I take the pot and retreat to the tent, my feet in the vestibule, as the rain pours down. Soon after I finish eating, the rain stops.

I exit the tent, wash the pot, and spend the rest of the evening wandering around the area taking photos and watching the shifting light on the Glacier Divide. Mount Humphreys looms to the east, as it does from almost everywhere in the basin. To the west, the sun recedes beyond Pilot Knob. The view to the west of Pilot Knob reflected in the bay at the north end of the lake is especially distinctive. With the coming of darkness, I go inside the tent, crawl into my sleeping bag, and soon drift into sleep.

August 5, 2017

Awaking to a beautiful dawn, I move around the shoreline and point taking photos of the sunrise. The ragged, jagged wall of peaks, ridges, and snow fields of the Glacier Divide span the southern horizon. Geologists can tell us why this stunning wall of granite sprang from the earth to form exactly these collections of granite shapes rising above Piute Canyon. Those physical facts only suggest the stunning magnitude of this horizon. Let this big picture, this grandeur—this is what words like “grandeur” were intended to evoke—let this grandeur create this awesome (another correct use of an overused word) spectacle of wilderness splendor. Don’t think about if living glaciers still remain in the Glacier Divide when so many of the world’s glaciers are shrinking and even disappearing. The Mathes Glacier sits below unnamed peaks and ridges filled with snow and ice. Did it revive this year, with the massive snowfall, visible before me in August? Snowfields still line Tomahawk Lake in the areas that receive the least sunlight.

Three marmots scurry around the area of my campsite. They approach me as if they expect to be fed so they most likely were indulged by previous campers. I shoo them away. Why are marmots so skittish? One will sit contentedly munching on a patch of grass, but every few seconds the head will perk up, nervously look around, then go back to munching. Who are the natural predators for marmots to fear?

I decide to circumnavigate Tomahawk, going clockwise. The wildflowers all around the lake are in full bloom and spectacular. Violet, yellow, white, various shades of red cover the ground. They are especially numerous in the

areas of snowmelt bog. There are at least seven to eight species. They hold themselves as if they know these are the few days they have to show the universe their singular beauty. Along with the snowmelt, yesterday's rain created small pools of water scattered among the bogs and rocks.

I am soon around the small point and circling the bay out of sight from my campsite. The perspective of the surrounding peaks changes as I slowly walk, pausing to stop, look, and take photos. The view west down Piute Canyon expands to the peaks of what I call the "Bear Range" (the mountains surrounding the Bear Lakes basin). From this perspective, the peaks extend forever, an endless Range of Light shining in the morning sun.

At the far end, I make my way through rocks and snowmelt bogs, then up a small snowfield. I walk to the edge overlooking the canyon and pause to take in the view. Packsaddle Lake shines in the bowl below the ridge of the Glacier Divide rising straight up over 1,000 feet. It is a long drop to where the unseen trail continues down to Hutchinson Meadow.

Having reached the far end of the lake, I begin the return trip of my circumnavigation. I walk above the snowfield that extends up from the lakeshore. At the top of the snowfield, I decide to continue up to the low ridge above the lake and see the view. A large solitary boulder becomes a marker so I can return to the same portion of the lake to continue my circumnavigation.

Of course, the top of the ridge is farther than expected. From the top, the Mesa Lake outlet creek continues its picturesque descent through a small valley. Pilot Knob rises above, one of the most aptly named peaks of the Sierra. It stands solitary above French and Piute canyons, visible and distinct for miles around in all directions. I walk around the ridgetop seeking the best vantage points.

Eventually, I head back to the marker boulder and from there down towards the lakeshore. The shoreline is boggy so I remain above it for many yards until the shoreline is better for walking. I reach another snowfield and head over rocks to avoid it until the rocks lead back to the shoreline. I am at the point opposite my campsite at the narrows before the bay at the north end. I walk out to the tip, take in the view of the lake and Glacier Divide. Heading back, I once again intersect a snowfield and walk up and around. Crossing the small outlet creek proves an easy rock hop.

The mosquitoes are especially numerous in the boggy area by the outlet. Following the shoreline, I come to the campsite checked out yesterday. After crossing the bog at the east end of the lake, I am back at my campsite. The storm clouds have been brewing as I wandered for two-and-a-half hours. It's now not a question of if it will rain, but when. Thunderheads portend a storm, possibly a big storm. I can feel the humidity in the air. The breeze blows bursts of strong gusts with less and less time between the bursts.

The clouds continue building, becoming larger with more mass (if a cloud can have mass). Their color becomes light gray, darker gray, darkest gray, than black. Yet the occasional sunbeam shines down, brightening the landscape. The temperature drops at least ten degrees. The wind feels colder. Lighter, whiter clouds billow against the darker gray.

The storm finally hits as 2:00. Inside the tent I listen to steady rain and some thunder. The rain stops at 5:00 and I go out. Rain starts again. At 5:25 the rain stops. Five minutes later, the rain resumes. The rain lets up then stops. I cook dinner. The sun shines from the west with black clouds to the southeast. I eat and watch the cloud show.

Afterwards, the clouds and sky go wild over the Glacier Divide. The receding sunlight creates a rainbow by Mt. Humphreys with colorful glowing clouds around and beyond Pilot Knob. It's a fitting end to a weird yet wonderful day.

August 6, 2017

I awake to blue sky with patches of puffy white clouds. This morning does not portend rain. It's Sunday morning and I worship . . .

After sunrise photos, it feels right to move on today and further explore the intricate landscape of Humphreys Basin. Though from afar it appears similar, the basin is populated with myriad pockets of tarns, small creeks, and distinct rock formations. I decide to head for the tarns that appear on the map to the east. It's only 8:00 so I have lots of time to sit, observe, write, and pack. Enjoy where I am and what I'm doing. There is no schedule today. I sit in as beautiful a spot one can find in the Sierra.

When I finally pack up and leave after 10:00, the hike starts off with promise. Walking cross-country I am aware of every step—where to place my foot while also looking forward to the next step. Concurrently, my eyes gaze on distant horizons—the top of the ridge before me, the peaks rising beyond. I make my way to the top of the ridge that encircles the lower portion of Humphreys Basin north of the Piute Pass trail and come upon a small unmapped lake/tarn with no outlet.

I take off my pack and walk out to the eastern edge of the ridge to reconnoiter. Below, to the far left sits Lower Desolation Lake and its outlet creek and slightly to the right the tarns on the map. The area around the tarns is a timberline wonderland with the Glacier Divide and Mt. Humphreys forming the eastern and southern horizons. Retrieving my pack, I make my way down to the tarns, heading for what appears to be a campsite. No, it's just rocks and scrubby vegetation. I continue along the shoreline to the next most likely campsite—no. I make a wide circle of all three of the tarns in search of a legal campsite. Nothing; all relatively flat areas have rocks and/or vegetation.

I doubt any ranger will come by, but I feel better following the rules for tent placement. Twenty, thirty years ago, with fewer rules, one set up a tent on any relatively level ground, especially soft, grassy meadows, and so altered the fragile landscape. The newer rules exist for a good reason.

The day is still young. I'll go to the Lower Desolation outlet creek and follow it down. I climb back onto the ridge and then down to where the outlet creek begins and continue my campsite quest. Shortly below Lower Desolation, the creek pools to form a small lake, a likely location—nothing. The sky is beginning to be threatening. I follow the creek as best I can through the bushes and rocks, checking every possible location for a campsite. I come across a couple of pretty tarns that look promising—nothing.

The threatening clouds are now above. A drizzle begins. I put on my rain jacket. A major trail appears, the Piute Pass trail. The wide path crosses the Desolation outlet creek. I have two choices: follow the creek down or cross the creek and head back up. Since I plan to go to Upper Desolation Lake tomorrow, I wade the creek and head back up the other side. Again, there are no campsites, including the small creek-pooled lake, until I reach

Lower Desolation. Below a giant rock/boulder is a flat dirt tent area of a legal campsite. As the drizzle continues, I lay the rainfly over the tent and poles, erect the tent, and crawl inside.

After forty-five minutes or so, the drizzle stops. I exit the tent and better take in my surroundings. The wind has shifted so the weather is coming from the northwest, not the southeast. The monsoonal pattern has finally ended. It turns into a lovely afternoon. I debate whether to repack and head to Upper Desolation or remain here. Personal laziness and the enthralling beauty of this location make the decision.

While conforming to what the lake's name suggests, the views in all directions are magnificent. These views typify Humphrey's Basin. Rocks and boulders are everywhere with brown and green of grass and bushes along with a few scattered small whitebark pines. Lower Desolation Lake is merely a low point in the landscape where the water collects in large enough an area to be considered a lake.

I spend what remains of the afternoon exploring this area, scouting potential photo sites and a crossing of the outlet creek where it exits the lake. After dinner, I head to the small lake where the creek pools and there are shifting views of the Glacier Divide. A mass of clouds to the west covers the sun. Backlit clouds glow as beams of light shoot up into the sky. Another set of clouds skate above and around the summit of Mt. Humphreys. After sunset, the full moon rises to the right of Mount Emerson. I pull the rainfly aside so the moonlight shines inside the tent as I drift into sleep.

August 7, 2017

I awake to a near perfect High Sierra morning, not a cloud in the sky. The sunrise light progresses down the faces of the peaks and ridges of the Glacier Divide. I wander down the creek towards the pooling lake for the reflections.

I have seen no one since the second morning. That's three days of solitude although one of the major trails of the Sierra is only a mile or two away. This may be the last morning of total solitude. I had considered heading up to Humphreys Lakes, where I expect I will continue to see no one. If snow fields still surround Tomahawk, Mesa, and Desolation, then

more snow will be at those higher elevation lakes, especially with Mt. Humphreys looming above to impede sunlight. I decide to continue to explore the lower elevation areas of the basin since I've never done more than pass through. Perhaps I mull over possibilities too much. Today will test that since I am going to take things one step at a time.

After oatmeal, Luna bar, and coffee, I diagonal to the Desolation Lake trail. The narrow pathway winds and climbs through rocks and tundra above Lower Desolation Lake. The views back down keep improving as I climb while the angle of view changes as the trail zip-zags up towards the ridge separating Lower Desolation and Upper Desolation. I anticipate seeing a vast body of water stretched out below. I think I'm almost at the crest, but, no, as is typical, there is a bit more to climb. In a few more steps, I glimpse water to my left. A few seconds later, I look down on Upper Desolation Lake stretching from left to right, narrower than I expected from the map representation. In my mind, I enlarged the lake's size due to it being the largest lake in Humphreys Basin.

The lake is well named, even more so than Lower Desolation. Rock, sand, and snow surround an expanse of water filling the lowest point between the ridge where I stand and the peaks and ridges to the north. When I look more closely, I observe how alive this place is. Flowers in full bloom carpet the tundra between the hundreds, perhaps thousands of rocks of all shapes and sizes.

I walk down towards the shoreline, choosing a location with rocks positioned for lakeside sitting. After a few steps, I spy a chunk of folded paper on the ground. Picking up this trash to put in my pocket, I realize it's pages 163 through 170. From the page header, the book's title is *What the Dogs Saw*. How long have these pages lay here, waiting for someone to notice them? Where is the rest of the book? I've come across some strange things walking off-trail in the Sierra, including Mylar balloons. These sheets of paper in this location fall into those strange things.

At the lakeside rocks, I send a SPOT to let Barbara know I made it here and sit down to appreciate the setting. The view extends from the Glacier Divide to Pilot Knob to the ridges around Puppet Pass to the omnipresent Mount Humphreys. From every angle one looks at this massive peak, the

perspective differs and fascinates. I walk up and down the shoreline and take photos. I suspect I will never visit this place again so I take too many so as to preserve the memory.

After about half an hour, I walk back up to the ridge, intersect the trail, and head back to Lower Desolation. Above the lake, I take a different route back to my campsite, exploring near the shoreline. I take down the tent and with everything in its place to go into the pack, eat lunch.

After lunch, the packing is routine except I switch my hiking shoes for wading sneakers and put the hiking shoes over a pack strap. Saying farewell to Lower Desolation, I walk to the rock-hop crossing at the outlet. I am a little nervous about this crossing since it was not possible to scout it out well; a route could be determined for only partway across. I hop rock to rock, knowing that if I miss, it is okay to get my feet wet. Zip-zagging over the rocks, the turf by a bush, and more rocks, I am soon on the other side. It was actually fun, especially now; some small accomplishments become more fun in retrospect. I switch to my hiking shoes and begin following a faint use trail down.

I lose the use trail and wander farther from the creek. I discover more tarns than yesterdays's wanderings. A couple of tarns appear ideal in terms of spectacular open views and camping. I search for a legal campsite, wandering the surrounding area, and find none. All level areas contain vegetation or rocks. One spot has a large rock sticking up in the center of what would be a perfect tent area. A ranger once explained to me the technique of burying a rock at locations they do not want people camping. This looks like such a place.

Eventually, I intersect the Piute Pass trail and explore further to the west, find another likely-looking tarn but no campsite, and head back to the trail. At the crossing, I switch to my wading sneakers, find a better location up the creek, and wade to the other side. As I switch back to my hiking shoes, I contemplate the alternatives. I could take the Golden Trout trail at the junction or head up the creek at the crossing just beyond the junction.

Walking on the main trail, for the first time in three days I see and meet other hikers. One especially friendly couple are heading to Upper Desolation so I direct them to intersect the Desolation trail. At the junction, I whimsically take the fork to Golden Trout lakes. Above the unnamed lake

before Golden Trout lakes, I head cross country down to the water. Exploring along the north side of this lake, I find no campsites. I follow the outlet creek as well as the landscape allows. It divides and find myself walking with creeks on both my right and left. I am enjoying this off-trail exploring on such a perfect High Sierra afternoon.

I see a likely campsite possibility ahead. When I arrive, there is a site, though far from ideal. Looking farther down, I see a couple of other likely sites. I bookmark this location in my mind and continue following the creeks. I rock-hop across the creek on the right to check out a site and succeed in getting my shoes wet. While this is not a good spot, up ahead looks like an excellent possibility. Oops, it's on other side of the creek. The Golden Trout trail is now visible off to the far right with a use trail descending to Upper Golden Trout Lake. I rock-hop back across, this time remaining dry. Yes, this place is ideal. No one is here. I've found my campsite.

After setting up the tent, I make a crystal light lemonade, snack on trail mix, and sit appreciating my fortune to find such a place. This campsite feels like a reward, though for exactly what I'm not sure. It sits on an island, well, more literally a peninsula. The creeks flow on both sides with Lower Golden Trout Lake below. On the south side the creek cascades down in a series of waterfalls. On the north side, the creek is narrower, but I don't see as much of it since it's mainly behind or below me. Further to the north, the Golden Trout trail runs high above the creek. Below, to the west, the two creeks join and flow into Upper Golden Trout. The noise of the creeks and falls prevents me from hearing anyone on the trail and if I sit on the south side facing east or south, the trail is not visible. I lean against giant flat rock overlooking the lake and view of the Glacier Divide. This may be the best campsite so close to a well-traveled trail I've every encountered.

After dinner, I spend the time until it gets dark wandering down to Upper Golden Trout lake and along the creeks. The light on the landscape on the south side creek is especially wondrous, slowly receding down the faces of the Glacier Divide. The moon has not risen when I get in the tent, leaving the rainfly open. As I crawl into the sleeping bag, the moon rises, shining on this campsite. Exiting the tent, I appreciate the moonlight on the creeks, rocks, and trees before crawling back into my sleeping bag and falling asleep to the sound of the creeks.

August 8, 2017

It is a glorious dawn. The sunrise beams cast their light on the far Bear lakes basin peaks and Glacier Divide, the “Bear Range” peaks receiving the day’s first light. The nearly full moon sets below the ridge of the Glacier Divide. I go back and forth between the views west and views south. The sunlight moves down the Glacier Divide until it streaks down to Upper Golden Trout and the area around the campsite.

I rock hop the creek to begin my exploration of Upper Golden Trout Lake. I check out the campsite by the Golden Trout trail that sits across from mine. This would be a good place to spend the night, especially if one arrives late in the day. The well-worn use trail to the lake ends at water’s edge where the creeks join as they spill into Golden Trout Lake. I look across the water and there is a clear, wide trail descending on the other side. In the past, was this the crossing location for either the old Piute Pass trail or a different Golden Trout lakes trail?

I walk to the point jutting out on the lake. At one time, this must have been a prime campsite. A use trail runs along the northeast shoreline of the bay that forms the north side of the lake, intersecting the Golden Trout trail. I follow the Golden Trout trail a short distance, then take another footpath along the north shore that runs literally lakeside. A step to the left would put one in the water. Following the shoreline and squeezing around a pine, I find myself by the waterfall emptying down to Lower Golden Trout Lake, an especially beautiful lake. Shoreline granite slabs, scattered whitebarks, grass, and sand would make for ideal camping. No wonder the 500 foot no camping rule was implemented for this lake. Otherwise the lakeside would be lined with tents and the delicate timberline environment destroyed.

Turning back, I pause to admire the spectacular wildflowers growing in the cliffs above the lake. When I intersect the Golden Trout trail, I follow it for a short distance to see the view up ahead by some rocks. Leaving the trail and walking out to the rocks, one gazes on the Desolation Lake outlet creek descending a waterfall then meandering through a beautiful valley. I pause for a long time to take in the scene. How many people on the trail march on, head down, and miss this sublime location?

Returning to the lakeside use trail, I pause again to admire the view north across the small bay. Soon I am back at my campsite. It's time for lunch and then a swim. I have five days of accumulated dirt to wash off. There's a spot where the northside creek forms a pool, a Sierra bathtub. Though it's in view for a short distance of the trail, I figure anyone who does happen by won't be too traumatized by my skinny dipping. The water is not as cold as I expected though does discourage lingering. I scrub off the dirt with my scarf and dunk my head. As I'm getting out, one hiker passes by, trudging up the trail, head down, paying zero attention to not only me, but the wilderness around him.

After my "bath" I take an afternoon stroll, following the south side creek up to the unnamed lake. Walking is easy as I meander through the quirks of the landscape's rocks and bushes. The view is magnificent as the creek plunges to Upper Golden Trout with the Glacier Divide extending to Pilot Knob, the Bear lakes basin peaks, and beyond. In the sunlight, the water sparkles as it cascades and bubbles down to Upper Golden Trout. The whitebarks, rocks, bushes, and green grass form a perfect timberline scene. This is the landscape of pure joy. I see no sign of humans except a tiny use trail indicating someone passed through here in the past. Who knows how many predecessors have passed through this precious landscape? Right here, right now, I feel I am the only human to walk in this place.

This high sierra timberline landscape is one of the main memories that sustained me recovering from surgery. This is one of those precious places and moments that aids humans when they endure suffering, suffering much worse than anything I've encountered. We need to retain wilderness both as a place for non-human life to exist and thrive, as well as a place for humans to find refuge and renewal from the terrors we inflict on each other. We need to be reminded of the beauty and serenity that has existed and endured for millennia without human interference and exploitation. When we set ourselves apart from our inherent connection and dependence on the natural world, we lose our connection to an essence of who and what we are as *Homo sapiens*.

Humans consciously set aside wilderness refuges when enough of us realized we were losing something essential as we inhabited an ever-more urban industrial civilization. While our technology has "advanced"

and become ever more complicated since the visionaries of the nineteenth century, such as Thoreau and Muir, extolled preserving the natural world, the fundamental truth remains. In a world where the velocity of change accelerates daily, the current attempts to “redefine” wilderness ultimately seek to justify human disassociation from and exploitation of the natural world. “Redefining” wilderness also redefines human beings, for without the wild natural world we are no longer *Homo sapiens*.

This perfect high Sierra day passes into a perfect evening. It is a strange but spectacular sunset. In the west, a huge cloud covers the sun so the light only leaks out to certain areas. The leaking light kaleidoscopes across the Glacier Divide. Various shades of pink clouds fill the sky. The last light fades, the conclusion of a marvelous day. I wish all days could be as today. I have this one to remember and treasure.

August 9, 2017

For the final dawn, it is a beautiful, if not spectacular, sunrise. There is totally clear blue sky in every direction. The moon remains high above the Glacier Divide at 6:00 and does not set until well past 7:00. I enjoy taking photos even if none will become keepers.

After breakfast, I sit leaning on the giant rock overlooking Upper Golden Trout Lake. I could spend days in this place. While not the trip I planned so meticulously, this has been a great trip. I adapted to the new me and made the best of it. I can still journey in the High Sierra and enjoy solitude. That is my primary goal: a spectacular place with solitude. The trail may be fifty yards away, but if I don't see it and don't hear anyone, it might as well be fifty miles as fifty yards. I am satisfied with this trip. I wandered through transcendent beauty in solitude. I saw no one for three days. At this campsite for two days, I talked to no one, only seeing distant passers by.

Coffee consumed, now begins the process of leaving. If I wasn't almost out of food and didn't have Barbara to go home to, I would not leave. Right here, right now, this is joy, this is serenity. Reality intrudes and must be obeyed.

Packed up and on the trail I run into two separate pairs of hikers. Both ask if this is the Piute Pass Trail. I explain it goes down to Golden Trout

Lakes and eventually Hutchinson Meadow, but it is longer than the main trail that forked to the right and down to Hutchinson. The first pair continues down. One of the second pair remarks “I thought we should take the other fork.” The other replies, “Does that mean we have to go back?” No, I tell them, you simply head up and hit the main trail. We say farewell, have a great hike, and they head up cross country.

When I reach Piute Pass, I take off my pack, send a SPOT, and enjoy the view. Only one other hiker appears who continues west after a brief pause. I have a snack and take a few photos before turning off the SPOT and heading down the mushy snowfield to hit the trail. I pass by several hikers going up as I descend to Piute Lake. No one is camped at the lake. At the stunning waterfall below Piute Lake, I head past the campsite and find a place to sit, look on the falls, and eat an early lunch.

Back on the trail, I continue down past Loch Leven and the distinctive tree, only pausing this time. On the switchbacks below Loch Leven, I pass an elderly day-hiking couple headed up and another elderly day-hiking couple heading down. I realize they are about my age. I don’t feel quite so decrepit anymore. Entering the forest, I anticipate the two log crossings. *Don’t think about them too much.* At the first one, I keep my eyes focused on my steps and am soon across. At the second one, I forego wading and zip right across. I feel triumphant. A couple of minutes later, I hear something behind me. A young girl and her mother, who is carrying a backpack, apologize for startling me from my reverie as they pass by and zoom down the trail. I don’t feel quite so triumphant anymore as they disappear into the forest.

A large family occupies campsites 3 and 4 at North Lake campground. The walk down the road to the trailhead parking lot seems even longer. I meet a ranger in truck on the downhill of North Lake Road. He is much more adept at these encounters than I am. The first cell phone reception on the Sabrina road occurs at the top of the large curve overlooking Bishop and the Owens Valley. There is a large turnout. I pull in and phone home. As Barbara and I are talking, another car pulls off, gets out a phone, and makes a call. I am back in cell phone civilization.