

Picket Creek and Kaweah Basins: An Appreciation

Picket Creek and Kaweah Basins remain untarnished by human beings, a one-of-a-kind quintessential wilderness place. The setting is so singularly beautiful it is beyond the limitations of human language; mere words are inadequate. One must respond and absorb with feelings that encompass something larger, grander, and more complex than humans can possibly articulate. We are mere mortals in the presence of what John Muir terms “terrestrial immortality.”

The singular beauty is intensified by an almost overwhelming sense of solitude. I’ve spent seven days in Picket Creek and Kaweah Basins and not seen one person, even in the far distance. The only record of human presence are a few small clear flat places that were obviously used as tent areas. There are no fire rings, no established trails. No sense exists of another person being in this place. One can camp in many other out-of-the-way locations and see or hear no one from one’s campsite, but know someone must be nearby because you passed them or they passed you or you spied a distant silhouette. Even in off-trail places as remote as Lakes Basin, Milestone Basin, or the Upper Kern, I’ve had a sense of human presence even though I’ve seen no one for days. In Kaweah Basin that sense is absent. I feel totally, utterly alone with only the wilderness surrounding me. No filters exist between wilderness and me except those within myself.

The areas inaccessibility helps insure that sense of solitude. It’s too remote to be ravaged by backpackers. The basins run parallel to each other, occupying the area between Nine Lakes Basin, the Kern-Kaweah River, the Big Arroyo, and Kern Canyon. To enter from the west, one must go over Pyraqueen Col or Pants Pass, both difficult, challenging cross-country routes involving steep climbs and descents over talus and scree along with possible snow fields. To the southwest, Kaweah Pass from the Big Arroyo is even more challenging and dangerous by all accounts, frequently described as a nightmare experience even by hikers who are skilled mountaineers. Kern Canyon is lined with sheer 1,000 foot cliffs. From the north and the Kern-Kaweah river there are two possible entry points. One, more challenging route, parallels Kaweah Creek, climbing up into Kaweah Basin. When I gazed down from the top of this route from the waterfall outlet of the last

Kaweah Basin lake (often called “Island Lake”) I thought to myself what a nasty, difficult climb, though people use it, following Phil Arnot’s route described in his book *High Sierra: John Muir’s Range of Light*.

The other route from the north, ascends to “Picket Creek Lake,” one of the most stunning, magical locations in the Sierra. This is the route I’ve used both times I’ve been fortunate enough to visit these basins. By following a diagonal approach up after crossing the Kern-Kaweah from the Colby Pass trail, one can avoid anything treacherous. I crossed the Kern-Kaweah about a mile below Gallats Lake and a mile above Rockslide Lake. Using scattered stepping stones to rock-hop the river, the crossing placed me at the bottom of the diagonal ascent.

During the climb up, there is always that moment of doubt. The lake and Picket Creek Basin are invisible. One peers up to the edge of the ridge, unable to discern exactly what lies beyond. I know I must be close to the lake, but precisely where is it? I believe it is just ahead, slightly above and around the corner, so to speak. The first time, I climbed towards a distinctive stand of trees, arriving at the edge of a gully. I knew the lake had to be nearby. I climbed a little farther to the top of the ridge, turned around, and there, below me, was the lake, down a slope. The second time, I ascended to a different stand of trees. Again, I knew the lake had to be nearby. A jumble of talus separated me from where I wanted to go. After a short climb up to a vantage point to orient myself, I saw the lake sparkling below. I was probably less than a fifty yards from where I was on my first visit.

I walked down the slope and found a route over and around the cliff by the campsite. In a few minutes, I stood in the tent area, walked to the long log at the rear of the campsite, and leaned my pack on the log. I walked to the cliff overlooking the lake and took in the startling view. This truly is one of the most spectacularly beautiful campsites in the world.

Straight cliffs scattered with pines form most of the shoreline. Above the cliffs spanning the horizon stands the Sierra Crest, culminating at Mt. Whitney. A series of 14,000 or nearly 14,000 foot peaks descends three thousand feet to the Bighorn Plateau, then drops down to Kern Canyon another 3,000 feet—a 6,000 vertical feet expanse. “Picket Creek Lake,” which is unnamed on maps, is a near-perfect ellipse except for a small peninsula on the southeast with its picturesque pine growing on the shoreline. One can spend hours leaning against a tree by the cliff and taking in the view.

As day turns to twilight, the sun fades from the lake's shoreline. The Sierra Crest remains shining in the distance. The land is silent except for the gurgling of Picket Creek. One can hear the silence; it is a palpable presence. The light slowly fades from the far peaks until only a single beam shines on Whitney, the end of a magnificent day, a day to treasure.

The morning is equally magnificent, commencing with dawn twilight and a glow behind the edge of the Whitney Crest. The glow slowly edges up to the crest. One second the campsite area is in twilight shadow and the next shining in sunlight. The trees on the shoreline are especially striking. The shades on the pines continually shift as the sun rises above the crest.

To reach Kaweah Basin from Picket Creek Lake, I walk a short way up the creek to where it forms a small lake ringed with distinctive pines, Red Spur rising beyond to the south. After a few more yards of creek, Picket Creek again pools into a shallow lake with flat slabs protruding above the water. Following near the shoreline, I cross Picket Creek at the inlet of this lake since the south side of the basin offers easier passage. There is not even a use trail. I make my way feeling as if I am the first person to set foot here. It is not until I encounter a small headwall that I notice a semblance of a use trail going up the left side. Previous visitors have used this way up the headwall towards the ridge dividing Picket Creek Basin from Kaweah Basin. At the top of the headwall, the use trail dissolves. Beyond is either upper Picket Creek Basin or Kaweah Basin. Upper Picket Creek Basin is a timberline and alpine wonderland as the creek ascends to below the ridge surrounding Pants Pass. To the south is the ridge separating Picket Creek and Kaweah basins.

Soon, I reach this ridge and gaze on Kaweah Basin. I feel as if I enter a grand outdoor cathedral with the jagged wall of the Kaweah peaks to the west and the Sierra Crest to the east. This is a place where nature, wilderness, are worthy of worship. The lack of any sign of human inhabitants magnifies the sense of pure wilderness. This is a place evolving on its own terms.

The trees here are unlike anywhere else in the Sierra. The mountain hemlocks are especially numerous. Even the spacing of the trees and their height is such that walking among them is a stroll through a spacious, enchanted forest. Each tree stands apart, separate from its neighbors, a distinctive shape and size, shining in the sun, casting shadows on the granite slabs. I have always been fascinated by the snags of the Sierra. Kaweah Basin

is populated by an inordinate number of fascinating snags, still standing despite their lack of foliage through years of snow, rain, and wind.

To the east in Kaweah Basin, one does not see such a wide expanse of the crest as from Picket Creek Lake. However, it is still a spectacular view of the crest from Mt. Tyndal and Mt. Williamson past Mt. Barnard to Tunaboro Peak with the Bighorn Plateau spread below. To the west stands the wall of the Kaweah crest, craggy 13,000 foot peaks and ridges rising abruptly above upper Kaweah Basin. The colors on this western wall shift as the light changes. At dawn, the wall glows in tones of red in the day's first light, reflected in the still waters of the lake. As the sun rises, the colors transform the peaks until they shine in the full light of day.

The moments between the first glow of light on Kaweah Queen and the full Kaweah escapement shining in sunlight passes in what seems slow motion. Time comes to a standstill with each and every instant filled with a multitude of sights, sounds, and emotions. The rays of light make their way to the tops of the peaks and then down the jagged crags and flatter faces that form the spires of Kaweah Basin's western wall fortress. As the sun rises, the ever-changing light on the Kaweahs and Sierra Crest signals the passing of time. One day in Kaweah Basin feels like an eternity.

Picket Creek basin and Kaweah basin are timeless. The wilderness message is unfiltered by human presence. It speaks of the marvelous simplicity and infinite complexity of life on our planet. Each and every repository of life—the water striders on the shallows; the tadpoles scurrying at my footsteps; the tiny yellow, blue, violet, and white flowers; the trees assuming shapes that twist and turn; the gnats, bees, flies, mosquitos; the shining green needles of the pines; the granite slabs and rocks in all shapes and sizes; the craggy cliffs that form one side of the basin and the high mountains that form the other—each encompass wondrous details and magnificent grandeur. I experience something magical, something transcendent under the spell of this place, touching an essence of wilderness and life itself.