

July 15, Clover Meadow

It has been a dozen years since I drove the Minarets Road. When I first drove it in 1979, it was not called by the picturesque name “Sierra Vista Scenic Byway.” However, back then it was already paved to the junction with the Beasore Road. I suspect due to Forest Service budget constraints, the road is in worse condition than it was twenty years ago. There are now three one-lane sections caused by pavement falling off into nothingness. It is much cheaper and easier to use barriers and signs to block off a few feet of one-lane section than repair the damaged portions. The road doesn’t receive much traffic despite the colorful name. It does remain a fascinating, often spectacular drive, reminding me of the Mineral King road except this is two-lanes wide with, for the most part, the pavement in better condition. Both roads have a sense of driving up into and through wilderness.

I arrive at the Clover Meadows Ranger Station to pick up my permit at 3:00. A Ranger is getting into his truck as I park the car. Since I am obviously parking here, I assume there is someone else inside. I let the ranger drive off without hailing him. I phoned a couple of days ago and the woman who answered assured me my permit would be left in the night box if the Ranger Station was not open. I walk over to the building and try the door. It’s locked. I check the night box. There is one permit inside, not mine. I want to get my permit today so I can get an early start tomorrow. I walk down the road to where the ranger parked his truck and tell him I was told my permit would be in the night box. While he gets back in his truck, he remarks that the people answering the phone have been unreliable this season.

As he drives back up the road to the office, he passes me walking. Pausing, he mentions that there would be somebody there at 9:30 tomorrow, “but you probably want to get off before then.” At the Ranger Station, he unlocks the door and sits behind a desk. Opening a drawer, he pulls out a folder with tomorrow’s permits. He says the name on three of the permits, and then the fourth.

“That’s me,” I interject.

“Which trailhead?” he asks.

“Fernandez.”

“Oh, that makes sense to go out of here.”

He and I sign the two copies of the permit and he puts the folder back in the drawer. When I mention I plan to camp at Clover Meadow he says a couple of parties left this morning so there should be free campsites. I thank him and go out to my car.

As I drive down the road to the campground, I understand the “high clearance vehicle” notation on the website. By the roadside campground sign is a large, wide hole, as if announcing if you can get past this, you can camp here. I negotiate the Prius V around the hole. The first campsite on the right is unoccupied so I pull in. There’s a grassy tent area next to a bear box with a picnic table nearer to the road. Three other sites are also unoccupied, but I decide to take this one since it is the farthest from the other sites.

After dinner, I walk back down the road to capture the slanting sunlight on Clover Meadow. The man-made discrepancies (fences and stumps) distract from the essence of what one feels while gazing on the golden-tinged meadow. I enjoy the singular beauty even if the resulting photos will fail to convey that feeling. I return to sit at the picnic table at my campsite and contemplate this trip.

I have been apprehensive about almost everything since my cancer diagnosis and kidney-removal surgery in April 2017. I live my life in a state of doubt concerning my ability to succeed in doing what I set out to do. Tomorrow, I find out if I can still do this, still backpack in the Sierra wilderness. Last year, on the first day I abandoned my planned itinerary and improvised a shorter, easier trip. I made the best of the situation and had a great time, but the doubts linger. How many miles a days can I still manage? Tomorrow, will I make it to Rutherford Lake? How will I do getting over Red Peak Pass? Right now, I have no clear idea. I tried to be realistic in my planning while still covering sufficient miles.

Is this a failed dream, a dream foiled by age and health issues? Tomorrow is a big day, a decider day. The subsequent days should be fine if tomorrow goes as planned.

How much living do I have left? That is the underlying nagging result of cancer and surgery. There is *living* in which one is engaged and excited by the small and large joys of daily life. And there is *existing*, in which each day is merely another day, a day not to die. I do not want to be merely *existing*.

July 16, Clover Meadow to Rutherford Lake

When I awake at dawn, the tent is covered with condensation. I lay it out to dry while drinking orange juice, eating blueberry muffins, and beginning to pack. A bull cow makes his way into my campsite. A small group of six females follow, munching their way through the area and disappearing into the woods. As I place the still damp tent in my pack, a couple of cows emerge from the forest to munch on the grass by my campsite. While I am putting my pack in the back of the Prius, one of the cows emits a deafening “moo.” Anyone still asleep is now awake. A couple of minutes later, as I’m about to drive to the trailhead, a woman and her young son emerge from their tent at the campsite across the way, smile and say a cheerful, “Good. morning.”

After returning the “good morning,” I add, “I bet you didn’t expect to get woken up by that,” pointing to the cow. The woman shakes her head and smiles ironically.

I park next to the Ranger Station where the trailhead sign says “Lillian Lake.” Since there is not garbage collection at the campground—the signs say ‘pack it in and pack it out’—I put my garbage in one of the bear boxes behind the Ranger Station, intending to get rid of it on my return. The bear box is filled with other people’s food and trash. Obviously, other hikers have found themselves in similar circumstances where the signs say do not store food or garbage in your car, but there is no garbage receptacle available.

I return to the trailhead, put on my pack, and take the first steps up the trail. After paralleling the campground road, I lose the path a little above the campground at a small, rocky knoll. The only sign says “Clover Meadow” and points back down towards the way I came. I follow one path that disappears. Looking down from the knoll, I see the trail below and head down through the forest to intersect it. (On my return trip, I learn that the trail makes a sharp turn as it crosses the rocks.)

The trail gradually climbs through forest to the dirt and gravel Fernandez Trail parking area. There’s a lone van in the parking lot. A sign nearby says “Walton Trail.” From the map, this seems slightly shorter than the Fernandez Trail. On previous trips, I’ve been coming down the Fernandez Trail and followed the sign for the Fernandez Trail to Clover Meadow. I decide to

take the Walton Trail to see what it's like. Between a couple of up and down climbs, the Walton Trail is sometimes beautiful with views of the distant Minarets and Ritter Range. This is a prettier hike than the Fernandez Trail. A little before the Madera Creek crossing, I meet a group with a leader in the front, five or six teenagers, and a leader in the back, who is quite friendly. They turn out to be the last people I see the entire day.

I reach the major junction with the Fernandez Trail. The sign leading up the trail says "Lillian Lake." I climb for awhile until I reach a junction where straight ahead the sign says "Lillian Lake" and the sign pointing right "Rutherford Lake." Traveling this trail it obviously helps to know the names of specific destinations, even if they are not directly on the Fernandez Trail.

It is a hot day so the climb from the junction is more grueling than expected. The numerous blooming wildflowers provide the most distracting and beautiful feature on the trail. I continue hiking in solitude, bringing on streams of interior thoughts. My plan is to get to the Fernandez Creek crossing and then decide whether to stop there or continue to Rutherford Lake. I reach the trail's apex and then descend down to the crossing. Fernandez Creek is barely more than a trickle. When I pause to get water and evaluate my options, I am covered with mosquitoes. I see a couple of campsites, but don't want to camp amidst the bugs. I push on to Rutherford Lake despite my weariness from the heat.

The smoke from the Ferguson Fire begins billowing into the gaps and valleys as I climb up from the Fernandez Creek crossing. I walk in slow, methodical steps. I try to speed up on the level sections. The steep climb takes me up to the junction with the side trail to Rutherford and Anne Lakes. Soon, that trail divides with a sign pointing left to Rutherford and right to Anne. At this point, the climb is exhausting and I am relieved to see the water of Rutherford Lake. Below, to the left, is a campsite at the south end of Rutherford. It appears there are more possible sites if I follow the right shoreline, but I stop at this first possible place. This will do.

I erect the tent and go down to the lake to wash off the layers of trail dust on my feet and legs. I feel redeemed for having made it this far today, The smoke creates an eerie evening and sunset. The light on the trees perched on the small ridge above is especially striking. As darkness descends, I crawl into the tent and am soon asleep.

July 17, Rutherford Lake to Merced Pass Lake

It is a cloudless morning. The smoke has dissipated. Rutherford Lake is quite beautiful and distinctive. Many trees scatter the shoreline. Merced Peak, Triple Divide Peak, and Post Peak form a backdrop rising 2,000 feet. Merced Peak is the source of the glacier that confirmed Muir's glaciation theory into fact. How much longer will the High Sierra glaciers survive?

At this moment, I appreciate the setting here and now, no past, no future, just a continuous present. The birds rustle in the bushes, searching for breakfast. I finish my coffee and Luna bar before packing up to head up and down the trail over Fernandez Pass to Moraine Meadow and, hopefully, Upper Merced Pass Lake. This is not the most memorable campsite, far from it. However, it is a beautiful lake in the Sierra wilderness. Now I can drift into that spiritual awakening of solitude in the High Sierra.

After rejoining the Fernandez Trail, I descend through a beautiful timberline meadow before switchbacking up. The views of the Minarets and Ritter Range improve as the path climbs the side of the ridge. I lose the trail as it ascends towards the low point on the ridge, which I assume is Fernandez Pass. I back track, still don't find the trail, and get out the GPS, which shows I am on the trail. *So where is the path?* I climb cross country on the GPS track, heading in the direction of the low point on the ridge. I go up a grassy chute, reach a large rock, and look down on the trail. I step back on the trail and it does a right angle turn and heads down, not up. *Is this right?* I walk a few steps, the trail does another right angle, and heads up again. Yes, this is the correct way.

Reaching the top, I take off the pack and enjoy a snack and the view of the Ritter Range and ramparts of the Minarets. About fifty yards below are the distinctive metal signs announcing Yosemite National Park. The signs proclaim my exit from Ansel Adams Wilderness and entrance to Yosemite.

The descent down to Moraine Meadow begins on a steep, winding rocky path. I am glad I am going down, not up; this would be an arduous ascent to Fernandez Pass. The trail becomes less steep about a mile down at the junction with the sign to Breeze Lake. The path enters a dense forest as it descends, meandering down to the more level area of Moraine Meadow.

Through the forest, I glimpse nearby slabs and distant ridges. The crossing of the South Fork of the Merced River is simpler than expected. The path winds through spectacular wildflowers. I arrive at a junction. To my left is a sign for Chiquito Pass protruding barely above the height of the foliage. Straight ahead, about twenty feet away is another sign. It says this trail goes to Buck Camp and Wawona. What about Merced Pass? Since Merced Pass heads off this trail, I continue walking west to Wawona.

The trail comes to a small creek. It is shallow, but there is no rock hop across. I look briefly up and down the creek and see no crossing. I decide to wade it barefoot since the creek bottom is mainly mud. In a few steps, I am across. As I am putting my socks and shoes back on, three people appear on the other side, the first people I've seen today. I tell them the wade is okay to do barefoot. One woman asks if I checked for a crossing. I reply "not really." They go off in search of a crossing and reappear on the other side, having found one farther down the creek.

It seems a long way to the Merced Pass trail junction. My judgement of distance while hiking is deteriorating with age. The smoke again appears a little after 2:00, filling the valley of Moraine Meadow. I finally reach the junction and stop for a snack. The bugs are plentiful so camping here would, once again, not be a good idea. I'm not particularly tired so continue walking. The sign says Merced Pass is 1.8 miles. It feels longer as the trail winds through the forest before beginning to climb.

To my surprise, the three people from the creek crossing are taking a break alongside the trail. We exchange greetings as I pass. After a bit more climbing, the trail levels off as it passes by a spectacular marshy meadow filled with wildflowers. Beyond the meadow, the trail does one more climb to the forested ridge of Merced Pass. One only knows this must be the pass when the trail goes down.

The descent feels steeper than the ascent. I detect a break in the trees below and deduce that is Upper Merced Pass Lake. Where is the trail heading to the lake? I come to the junction with the signs indicating trails to Ottoway Lake and Glacier Point. There is no sign for Upper Merced Pass Lake, which must be to the right. I follow the Ottoway trail briefly and realize there will be no signed trail for Upper Merced Pass Lake. Getting out the GPS, my

guess on the location of the lake proves correct. I walk back to the junction and sit on a large log a little beyond the signs to rest and get my bearings. Directly before me, a clear use trail stretches to the northeast, the exact direction of Upper Merced Pass Lake.

I put away the GPS and head up the path, soon spying the water through the trees. When I arrive at the lake, no one is here. There are many tent areas in the level portions above the shoreline. I choose one away from other sites so if anyone comes along, they have something to choose. Once again, I am too weary to do much beyond setting the tent up and cooking my home-dried spaghetti dinner. Once again, I feel justified and redeemed for making it here.

Upper Merced Pass Lake is smaller than I imagined, a secluded pocket. The smoke and haze obliterate any views. It's clearly well used due to the several tent areas. There are at least four separate campsites along with a couple of more sites too close to the water rendered useless with rocks by the rangers.

So far this trip is not a great one. Too much time is spent walking; the smoke is an annoyance. The haze discourages evening and sunset photos, though I take a few anyway. As Rutherford Lake, there is an eerie beauty to the trees and lake through the haze. Tomorrow should begin five days of spectacular locations, including a layover day at Red Devil Lake. I tell myself to appreciate each and every location and each moment. *Don't conjure expectations or some abstract ideal; be here and now.*

July 18, Upper Merced Pass Lake to Lower Ottoway Lake

I awake to a beautiful Sierra morning. There's not a cloud in the sky and the smoke is gone.

Today is the day the real trip begins. For nearly 40 years, I've looked at maps and wondered about Ottoway Lake. In the record snow year of 1982, Barbara and I considered a big loop from Tuolumne Meadows, including Red Peak Pass and Fernandez Pass, but realized that would make the trip far too many miles to cover in our seven day vacation. We decided to do a side trip into the Clark Range for two of the days. We ended up at a fabulous campsite on the Merced Peak Fork discovered in a downpour. The next day we explored and

played in massive snow fields covering the area around Red Peak Pass. Since our 1982 trip, on two other trips I was able to view the Clark Range from the Harriet Lake bench below Blue Lake Pass, implanting the desire to return. This trip was created to revisit the Clark Range and camp at Lower Ottoway Lake.

Now that I've hiked Fernandez Pass and Moraine Meadow, they are mild disappointments, places where the hopes did not live up to reality. The lack of maintenance by the Forest Service and Park Service is obvious. At least two years have passed with no trail maintenance. Dead trees lie across the trail, in some cases impassable unless one goes around them. The use trails around those trees are obviously relatively recent as previous hikers created paths around the impassible trees.

The hike up to Ottoway Lake is a joy. I take my time, appreciating the trailside flowers, pines, rocks, boulders, and ever-changing views of the horizon. The trail climbs up over a ridge from which Red Peak, Ottoway Peak, and Merced Peak dominate the skyline. From the ridge, the pathway winds down to a simple crossing of Ottoway Creek. I suspect in high water years, this crossing is more problematic. The climb from the Ottoway Creek crossing becomes tiring though the trail builders did an excellent job with step construction and the grading; fewer twists and turns seem possible.

I arrive at Ottoway Lake at 11:30 and take in the grand view after 36 years of anticipation. Ottoway Peak stands as the background of its namesake lake, Merced Peak to its right. Stepping off the trail, I begin looking for a campsite and appreciating the lakeshore with its rocks, shrubs, and trees. I first check by the outlet creek and find no good sites. I return to the trail, take a few steps, and leave the trail at a small point jutting out. I find three different tent areas and an illegal fire ring along with two other obvious former campsites sitting too close to the water and filled with large rocks in the former tent areas. I choose a campsite on this small point opposite the larger peninsula with magnificent views of Merced Peak, Ottoway Peak, and Red Peak.

The smoke drifts in again a little after 2:00. I take an exploratory walk. Next to the trail, stands a sign announcing "Ottoway Lake 9780 Ft." The trail curves around a small cove and past a small point to the large picturesque peninsula that dominates the lake. To my surprise, I find no obvious use trail to the peninsula. Access is best on the far side. I cross a grassy bog to a small chute

leading up to the slabs that extend far into the lake. I discover two excellent campsites on the way to the end of the peninsula. The smoke has obscured any inspiring views. I can taste the smoke in the air and wonder if it is affecting my health. Since I am here now regardless, I decide to ignore that speculation.

One side of me wants the wind to blow hard enough to chase the smoke away. Another side tells me that high winds will only intensify the fire. It's spooky and eerie to see everything engulfed in a haze. It's as if the trees and rocks are covered with a gray sheen.

The orange sun casts its light later than expected. The ridge and angle permit the sun to remain visible until well after 7:00. The smoke has lessened. I now see Ottoway Peak. It is mysterious and beautiful. The light persists on Ottoway Peak until after 8:00. Little fish, only a couple of inches in size, jump just off the lake shoreline, creating rippling pools across the water. There's something magical, almost mystical in those ripples on the water of High Sierra lakes. Those rings emanate outward in all directions, forming concentric circles extending to the water's farthest edge.

Tomorrow will be the dreaded 1,500 foot climb to the Red Peak Pass. I tell myself to take it one step at a time. A good morning here will spur me to hike over the pass to Red Devil Lake.

I watch the light slowly fade on the water, shoreline, and Ottoway and Merced peaks, appreciating the final moments of my one day at Lower Ottoway Lake.

July 19, Ottoway Lake to Red Devil Lake

It's a beautiful, clear sunrise, the light shining on Ottoway Peak and especially Merced Peak. I indulge in reflection photos of Merced Peak and the lake. The little fish are jumping, creating ripples on the water to disturb the reflections. The sun clears the crest between Red Peak and Ottoway Peak.

It is a warm morning. I finish breakfast wearing only a t-shirt and shorts, a rare occurrence at this altitude. A hiking couple passes by on the trail. The warm morning encourages me to get going and climb the pass. I hope to get into the rhythm of the High Sierra today, resulting in immersion into the surrounding wilderness.

I depart my campsite and commence the climb to Red Peak Pass. At first, I follow the shore I walked yesterday until the trail veers left away from the lake and begins climbing. The trail up to the pass is engineered extremely well. Most steps are set for shorter people instead of difficult stretches up to the next level. The steps are naturally placed and render the long, steep climb as easy as possible. There are also long passages of dirt path between the rocky sections with their strategic steps. The path winds up past timberline. The views back down to Lower Ottoway and beyond get grander, the haze mucking up distant clarity.

Above Upper Ottoway Lake the trail makes a left turn to begin the final climb to the pass. I pause for a rest and snack. While on the map, Upper Ottoway appears to be a more secluded alternative to Lower Ottoway, I see why people prefer the lower lake. It is not simply the proximity to the trail. The upper lake is more hemmed in by the surrounding peaks and ridges and so lacks the expansive views and the wide open environs.

The switchbacks zig-zag up and I speculate exactly where they will lead. The exact correct notch of Red Peak Pass is not obvious from below. The couple who passed me on the trail make their way up the switchbacks ahead. After gaining on them, my frequent pauses on the final switchbacks cause me to progress at a similar slow pace. When I reach the top, I realize the pass location is dictated by the conditions on the other side. The notch of the pass is where the crest plummets least extremely. This leads me to wonder what the first people to walk this area were thinking. How would anyone know exactly which notch was best? Who first built this trail and when did they do it? When he wandered this area, did John Muir follow a trail or his whims?

The couple are taking photos and appreciating the view. They are from Scotland and ended up on this loop route that continues down to Washburn Lake and Merced Canyon because a Yosemite ranger suggested it when the more popular routes were already reserved. I tell them, in many respects, this is the most beautiful and secluded area of the Yosemite wilderness.

When they leave, I eat lunch and enjoy the view in solitude, feeling a wonderful sense of relief for so easily getting up to the top of Red Peak Pass. When Barbara and I were here in the record snow year of 1982, we spent a

day exploring the snowfields and eventually glissading down a long slope from the ridge below Red Peak to a plateau of tarns.

I descend the snow-free, rocky trail past the tarns. I try to imagine it as it was in 1982 and figure out where we glissaded down. At the point the trail takes a turn directly west, Barbara and I lost the snow-covered path and wandered up to the ridge below the summit of Red Peak. Here at the turn, I also now leave the path. Red Devil Lake shines below, the Sierra Crest rising in the distance. I descend over long slate slabs towards a peninsula that looks promising for views and campsites. The first place I check contains a small site, too close to the water. I circle along the shore to where the peninsula juts farther out and find two sites, one too close to the water, but with a long rock ledge perfect for leaning against, the other site about twenty feet away above the water. I realize I can enjoy the best of both worlds. No one is in sight. This is as close to perfect as possible.

The views to the northeast extend the Yosemite crest from mounts Florence, McClure and Lyell. This is the view I remember when camped at the Merced Peak Fork. It remains one of my favorite views in the Sierra or anywhere. Small rocky islands dot the lake. The peninsula extends back along a bay with a rocky shoreline to the hill I descended. Above that, a ridge extends from Red Peak to Ottoway Peak to Merced Peak, forming the horizon.

This is the Yosemite high sierra where Muir wandered and discovered the Merced glacier. In his journal he writes, “Red Peak has five separate summits.—slatey, zig-zagged like a fence.” This seems to be the true summit and the jagged notches of Red Peak Pass. The journal goes next to an entry “Camp by glacial lake in Upper Illouette Basin between Red and Merced Peaks.” He knows the lake he camps at by “its bays and mossy rock islands.”* Did he camp at Red Devil Lake? What other lake in this area has bays and islands?

There’s a brief afternoon thunderstorm. Once again, in the late afternoon the smoke creeps in so Red Peak and Ottoway Peak are shadows in the haze. The Lyell crest becomes mysterious shapes emerging from gray haze. There are pink clouds to the east, as a normal sunset, haze to the west, south, and north. The light slowly fades on the distant peaks. I go in the tent when it gets dark. Tomorrow is a layover day.

July 20, Red Devil Lake

I awake to the yipping of coyotes and a magnificent clear dawn. The transition from dawn's half light to bright sunlight on the peaks occurs quickly. I enjoy attempting reflection photos in the fast-evolving light.

As a layover day, there's no agenda. As Henry David Thoreau put it, I will attempt to "live one day as deliberately as nature." I understand what that means in terms of feelings, but am not sure how to elucidate exactly what it entails. Is it paying attention to every detail (rock, tree, flower, stick, moss, grass) along with the grandeur all around (peaks, lakes, ridges)? I see from Merced Peak, Ottoway Peak, and Red Peak, to Florence, McClure and Lyell.

Is it also listening, truly listening to the myriad of sounds from the coyotes yipping at sunrise to the rushing water of the distant creek to the shrieks, warbles, whistles, and squeaks of the birds? Is it paying close attention to each and every life form, all life in all its strange, beautiful, fascinating manifestations? How can we humans seek to destroy so much life instead of appreciating our evolutionary luck, and treat all life with respect and care?

We can only speculate where and when *Homo sapiens* began our estrangement from wild nature. We have learned that in the far distant past there were many humanoid species. We were the fortunate and fittest one who survived. Our estrangement from nature was a slow process, an evolution with sidesteps that occurred differently in every ethnic, cultural, and geographic group. Was the split begun when discovering fire, inventing the wheel, or transitioning from being hunter/gatherers to residing in agricultural society? However and whenever, we are here now. We are at a now that may result in a future filled with disasters of our own making. Human-caused climate change and the destruction of habitat put us on the brink of consequences that will alter and possibly destroy aspects of our lives as well as many facets of all life on Earth.

Out here in wilderness, I exist in nature's evolution. Since the glaciers receded and revealed this wonderland, the trees, water, and rocks have moved in geologic and evolutionary time. Here we can discover our true self and comprehend our infinitesimal place in the infinite universe. We require no

codified belief systems to perceive wilderness serenity, discern eternity. That is one of the lessons learned during the transformative experience of my trips for *A Summer in the High Sierra*.

Over the past twenty years I have watched the worst aspects of those codified belief systems plunge our planet down a destructive path. We are destroying the life that sustains us as a species. Concurrently, we are transforming humans with technology. Neurologists have discovered our brains are changing and thus we are evolving, evolving ever more radically in a shorter period of time. We are changing far faster than when we made the transition from nomadic tribes to settled communities, from living in “wilderness” to residing in human civilization.

Are we creating a new species, *Homo techno*? Will the collision of *Homo sapiens* and *Homo techno* destroy our planet? Tribal societies are colliding with technology and reacting with every extreme from fanatical adoption to fanatical rejection. We are on a collision course between technologically advanced societies and those whose rigid cultural and religious doctrines seek to suppress knowledge and maintain ignorance.

I don't see much hope for us anymore. We possess technological brains inside the bodies of our prehistoric ancestors. We possess genetic instincts locked in our biological make-up (flight and fright, suspicion of outsiders, self-preservation, selfishness) as well as an innate altruism that preserves the larger community. We have become the victims and beneficiaries of our evolutionary success and its inherent contradictions.

I do not have answers that beget solutions. I do know that when we are deliberate as nature we are in touch with both our innate instincts and highest aspirations. We perceive our biological composition and awe-inspiring spirituality. We must preserve wilderness and so better understand our human nature and the planet we inhabit. Maybe with understanding can emerge solutions.

After my morning meditations, I explore my surroundings. I find a location where the peninsula I'm camped on can be hopped over to a small island and then to the other main peninsula. Walking on this trailless jumble of slabs, rocks, and downed trees makes the exploration more interesting. I try to follow granite slabs when possible. I head to the shoreline at

various places to catch the changing views of the lake. I pass a couple of nice campsites, though neither has the same spectacular views as from the peninsula by my campsite. A tree has fallen over a rock extending to a large erratic below, making a narrow passageway under the tree to pass beneath. I spend over an hour wandering and absorbing this peninsula to its far end that juts into the middle of Red Devil Lake.

When I return to the area around my campsite, ominous clouds behind Red Peak tell me this may be the best opportunity to explore the shoreline in the other direction. I weave my way through the trees and rocks far from the lakeshore then make my way down to the shoreline at the south end of the lake. There are several campsites at this end, obviously recently used. On the return journey I follow the shoreline as much as possible, observing the details of rocks and flowers.

This has been a full morning. There is something about this place that takes one inside the mysteries of nature and discover that mystery remains unsolved though better understood,

After lunch, I wait for the thunderstorm to arrive. There are black clouds to the north and south. To the east and west there is some blue sky amidst puffy clouds. Soon, the clouds merge and the rain, thunder, and lightening arrive. I spend the early afternoon going in and out of the tent. There are spurts of rain followed by dry spells. The rain finally stops around 3:00, at least here. To the northeast, Tuolumne Meadows may be getting quite a thunderstorm. Once again, the smoke and haze drift in.

I have a shallow swim before sitting and further taking in this fascinating area. Subtle colors imbue the lichens growing on the rocks. Colorful flowers inhabit the dirt areas between the rocks. Time seems to stand still for moments in an afternoon of everything constantly changing as the peaks and ridges fade in and out of the smoke and haze until the haze mostly dissipates in the evening.

At sunset, pink clouds appear around peak 11,331, the unnamed summit of the ridge extending from Red Peak. The final sunbeams refract through the colorful clouds. A lovely half moon shines over the ridge that extends from Ottoway Peak to Merced Peak. My day lived deliberately as nature concludes as the light fades to darkness. One by one, the stars emerge.

July 21, Red Devil Lake to Lake on Isberg Plateau

It is a gorgeous morning with no clouds or haze. The transition from dawn to sunrise occurs too quickly. I try different photo locations. I feel I did better with reflection photos yesterday.

After packing most of the way, I relax and reflect before heading off into the unknown. Actually, once I find the trail, it won't be completely unknown since I hiked that portion in 1982, but that was 36 years ago. Time goes so fast. Yes, there are these moments on every trip when time seems to stand still. But time now rushes by too fast between those standing still moments.

Here, the sense of solitude is not as deep and profound as Kaweah Basin. There is not that aura of being inside an immense natural cathedral. However, Red Devil Lake is a unique, fascinating, stunning place. Yes, this is why I'm here, to be in solitude and silence in one of the most spectacular locations in all of Yosemite. I feel blessed to be here, to appreciate the stark stillness, sense the serenity. There is *something* about a Sierra shoreline of granite slabs and scattered pines. There's a symmetry, a near perfection, a perfection made more beautiful by its aesthetic idiosyncracies. It is not a perfectly composed collection of objects. It is a scattered aggregation that transforms into a whole far greater than the sum of its parts.

I am gratified to have finally experienced this place. Now it's time to finish packing knowing I will not return. I am blessed with this one visit, a visit I will treasure.

I do not climb out of Red Devil Lake the best way. By map and compass, I surmise the trail is on the other side of the cliffs straight ahead. I get out the GPS to make up for my lack of finding the best route to the trail. I get around the cliffs while maintaining a good enough direction to the trail.

Once on the trail, I make good time to the Merced Peak Fork of the Merced River. They have rerouted the trail since 1982. There is no bridge over the creek. It is now a ford at an entirely different location. Once I rock hop across the creek, there is a long spur alongside the bubbling water that intersects the original trail near the area of the old crossing.

The climb up and through the maze of rocks to the ridge above the crossing is much as I remember. It takes much longer to descend to the Triple

Peak Fork than in my memory. About halfway down, I meet the first people since the couple on Red Peak Pass. I encounter a woman heading up the trail who barely speaks English. After a hello, when I ask where she is headed, all she can blurt out in a French accent is “the pass.”

“Oh, Red Peak Pass?” I reply.

“Yes!”

She seems slightly embarrassed by her limited English so I merely wish her a great trip instead of asking further questions or offering information. Farther down the trail I encounter two men looking tired from the climb. They say nothing, except “Thank you” in a French accent when I move aside to let them pass.

When I reach the Triple Peak Fork, the mosquitoes enjoy swarming the only warm-blooded creature—me. The creek is low so crossing is a simple rock hop. Only the bottoms of my feet touch the shallow water in between the above-water rocks. It is obvious following the Triple Peak Fork to Turner Lake is out of the question due to the dense forest. I tentatively was considering camping at Turner since it is well off the trail. I wonder if it would be preferable to follow the trail up to the plateau below Isberg Pass and camp by the lakes below the pass. Since the trail for the first half mile is parallel to the creek, I can decide when the trail makes its sharp left turn. When I reach the turn, the forest is still dense. Getting to Turner Lake is probably better if one heads cross country above the forest on the descent to Triple Peak Fork.

I’ve had this fantasy of camping by the lakes on the Isberg plateau ever since I first went over Isberg Pass in 1981. The expanse of the meadow and the view to the west and north enthralled me. My mind is made up. Now it’s a matter of continuing up the trail as it climbs to the junction.

Below, the Merced Canyon is filled with smoke. At the junction with the high trail (one of my favorite trails in Yosemite), I turn right towards Isberg Pass. A trail crew has worked hard to make the climb to the plateau easier. When I hiked this twenty years ago, the trail was not so well engineered.

Reaching the plateau, I continue on the trail until there is a lake to my left. Leaving the trail, I head to the south end and see no campsites. I follow the right shore and then head over to the larger neighbor lake. At the north

end is an inviting sand beach shoreline. Surely, there must be a campsite there. When I arrive there is nothing unless I want to illegally camp on the green grass by the shoreline.

I head back, walking farther from the water, towards the first lake. As I walk across the meadow separating the lakes, I see the obvious camping area. There are several tent sites (at least four) and a scattered collection of upright stumps to use as tables. This will be almost perfect. No one is here. This is an ideal timberline location: a grove of whitebarks, some growing to 20 feet in height, with an open meadow bedecked with wildflowers. There is a being-on-top-of-the-world feeling. This is better than Turner.

I use one of the waist-high stumps to hold the stove to cook dinner, appreciating the opportunity to stand up instead of crouching down to the ground to light the stove and place the pot. The trail passes on the other side of the meadow. At first, I kick myself for not noticing this campsite when coming down the trail until discovering it is not visible from the path.

After eating, I wander around the timberline wonderland of lake, meadow, and trail, appreciating the wildflowers and magnificent views stretching from Long Peak, Isberg Peak, Post Peak, Triple Divide Peak, Ottoway Peak, and the entire Clark Range. The sunset is spectacular with the clouds putting on a show. The final light on the small lake takes on an indescribable magical glow.

The twilight slowly fades to darkness. I meander back to the campsite through the whitebarks. Leaning on a stump, I wait for stars to appear before crawling into the tent and drifting into contented sleep.

July 22, Isberg Plateau to Fernandez Creek

It is a magical morning with a spectacular sunrise on the mountains from Isberg Peak all the way through the Clark Range with picturesque clouds hanging over the peaks and ridges. There is such a top-of-the-world feeling even if the mountains are higher than this plateau. This is a High Sierra ideal.

I don't want to leave. Well, leave I must. I'll enjoy the hike over Post Peak Pass, past Porphyry Lake to Post Creek and Fernandez Creek. I linger, perhaps longer than I should, before taking the trail over the plateau to where it begins ascending Isberg and Post Peak passes.

Wildflowers blanket the area, many in full bloom. There are too many species to count and classify. A field of paintbrush where the trail heads up to the passes is especially striking. I am fortunate to have timed this trip at this particular moment. (One can only hope for such future conditions when planning dates far in advance.)

A short way up the ascent there are trail signs, one directing towards Isberg Pass, the other to Post Peak Pass. I turn right and follow the long switchback. Eventually, the switchback turns left for a longer, gradual ascent. The Isberg Pass Trail is visible below. This switchback continues. I feel as if I will be reaching Isberg Pass, not Post Peak Pass. When the path reaches the ridge, it switchbacks right, following the edge of the ridge.

This is like walking on top of the world. The views stretch from the Minarets and Ritter Range to the Lyell to Florence crest to Vogelsang Peak (I think) to Mount Hoffman, and the Clark Range. This is one of the grandest views in the Sierra and maybe in the world. I'm glad I decided to do Post Peak Pass one more time.

Near a U.S.G.S. marker, I pause for a snack and to appreciate the view. The best views are along this ridge, not at the pass itself. Once again, I long to linger, but force myself to continue following the ridge as it makes its way towards Post Peak. A large group of people is rounding the base of Post Peak. All wear helmets, indicating they are either returning from a climb or about to commence one. I wave hello, then begin the steep descent from the pass summit.

The trail down is a real knee knocker. Until Porphyry Lake, the trail zig-zags, much of the path over baseball size rocks filling the walkway. While this may keep the path dry, it is also annoying to walk over. When possible, I step on the larger boulders lining the path. There are at least three campsites just above Porphyry Lake. At the first campsite, I head down to the lake to fill my water bottle. I admire the large "beachball" rocks, a fascinating geologic phenomenon unique to this location.

After filling the water bottle, I realize I've lost the trail, probably when heading down past the first campsite. Rather than retrace my steps back up, I turn on the GPS and find a way to intersect the trail farther down. No longer a knee-knocker, the trail gradually descends through a meadow into the forest.

When I come to Post Creek, it is dry. I even check the GPS to confirm that this dry creek bed is Post Creek. This is so different from when Barbara and I camped by a running Post Creek in 1981. Did they also relocate this crossing? Or is the near landscape changed so radically as to be unrecognizable?

Below the dry Post Creek, the path meanders through the forest. The wildflowers, especially the lupine, are a wonderful diversion. Finally, the sounds of a creek are heard. Soon a sign designates a right turn to Slab Lakes and left turn to continue on the Post Peak Pass Trail. I begin looking for a campsite along Fernandez Creek, but nothing on this side of the creek looks promising. Arriving at the junction of the Post Peak and Fernandez Trails, I follow a use trail to the right. A step-across ford leads to the campsite rejected on the first day. No one is here. The mosquitoes are nowhere near as bad as a week ago.

I put down my pack and search for other campsites farther from the trail. At the top of a nearby knoll my eyes go down to a large campsite along Fernandez Creek. When I go down to investigate, I encounter a couple of large tent areas and a wooden sign with a drawing of a horse nailed to a tree. Climbing back up the knoll, I fetch my pack and return to set up the tent. This is the best campsite I've seen since Porphyry Lake.

Black clouds appear to the west, indicating a possible storm. I decide to make dinner a little early. The raindrops begin when I finish eating. I manage to get the stove inside the pack and wash the pot before getting in the tent. The occasional drops become steady rain. For the next half hour, the rain intensity varies from hard rain to drizzle to scattered drops. When the last scattered drops hit the tent, I notice it appears brighter outside. I emerge to puffy white clouds and blue sky.

I appreciate the forest here by Fernandez Creek. I observe the different trees, different pines, especially lodgepoles. I can't remember the last time I camped at this low an altitude on a Sierra backpacking trip. I suppose Paradise Valley, but with the Kings River and the glacier-carved canyon, that felt much different than this. There is something comforting in the forest as day ends. The creek seems to get a little louder, otherwise there is stillness. The trickling of Fernandez Creek is the only sound. The forest darkness leads me to get in the tent earlier than usual.

July 23, Fernandez Creek to Clover Meadow

It is a beautiful morning, to my surprise. This campsite receives early sunlight so it's bright and sunny by 6:30. I'm discovering I like this campsite. No, it's nowhere near as spectacular as Ottoway Lake, Red Devil Lake, or the Isberg plateau. However, the forest is beautiful here, especially if one sits in one place and takes in the view. It's a limited view, maybe a hundred yards to the small knoll above. Within that limited view are a couple of hundred trees of varying shape and size amidst a backdrop of Sierra blue sky.

I listen to the forest. There is such a profound quiet until suddenly shattered by the rat-a-tat-tat of a woodpecker in a distant tree. I prefer the wide open expanse of timberline country, but an evening and morning in this forest has its own rewards. One must appreciate the subtle beauty of one's surroundings, wherever and whatever the location.

I pack up, hop Fernandez Creek, and begin the eight-and-half-mile journey back to Clover Meadow. The wildflowers are not as plentiful and spectacular as a week ago. I better appreciate the subtle beauty of the section between the trail apex and Lillian junction.

I meet no one until the final section on the Walton Trail when I encounter two men who are embarking on much the same trip I am concluding. I tell them about losing the trail below Fernandez Pass along with the beauty and solitude of Red Devil Lake and the Isberg plateau. The climb up to the next ridge leads to spectacular views of the Minarets and Ritter Range. There are now several cars parked at the Fernandez trailhead.

The final two miles become the usual tedious concluding walk of anticipating reaching my car. The anticipation intensifies as the trail parallels the campground road. There are two other cars parked by the Ranger Station. My Prius is covered in dust. Setting down my pack, I take the quart water bottle and fill it from the faucet at the Ranger Station. After slaking my thirst, I use the water in an attempt to clean my windshield so I can see where I'm going.

When I go to fetch the garbage left in the bearbox behind the Ranger Station, I find the box is empty; someone collected the garbage. I load the car and begin the drive back down the "Sierra Vista Scenic Byway."

So how about this trip? I finally camped at and appreciated Lower Ottoway Lake and returned to the incomparable area between Red Peak Pass and the Triple Peak Fork, possibly the most magnificent area for solitude in the Yosemite wilderness. Things have changed over 36 years, at least in terms of trails and foliage. The one constant was the incredible views of the Lyell Crest and the breathtaking view along the ridge to Post Peak Pass. The mountains and wilderness remain, existing in geologic and evolutionary time.

On this trip, I proved to myself I can still do it even if I'm not the same person who once so easily hiked fifteen to twenty mile days. Before this trip, there were doubts, major doubts. Now I have a realistic knowledge of my possibilities and limitations. I may not be the same person I once was, but I can still experience the timeless, wondrous magic of the High Sierra wilderness. Now I experience it with a wiser appreciation of Muir's "terrestrial immortality." I am *living*, not merely *existing*.

* John Muir journal quote is from *John of the Mountains: The Unpublished Journals of John Muir*. Edited by Linnie Marsh Wolfe. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1938.