

Day 1: Onion Valley to Bullfrog Lake overlook

I awake at 4:00 a.m. and am on the road at 4:40, negotiating the familiar drive on I-580 through Richmond, Oakland, the San Ramon Valley, and over Altamont Pass. A line of cars stream west down Highway 120 out of Escalon and Oakdale — the commute now extends that far east. The drive through Yosemite on Tioga Road remains my favorite drive in the world. Going east, the scenery gets more spectacular with every mile, culminating at the crest of Tioga Pass and the view down the canyon to Mono Lake. This year it's especially wondrous due to the snowpack. The Dana Fork gushes in billowing cascades. I get held up at the entrance due to there being so many cars from the other direction they open both lanes for five minutes to ease the backup on the long line extending down for a quarter mile.

There is surprisingly little traffic on 395 down to Bishop. I reach Bishop at 11:20, pick up the permit, and phone home from the pay phone by the movie theater that the ranger said is the only one she knows of still remaining in town. I'm in Onion Valley at 1:15. I organized the car and toss my garbage while eating a roast beef sandwich.

As I'm getting set before embarking, a car drives up with a family inside. The father and mother roll down their windows and the father, with a southern accent, asks "Are you from around here?"

"No."

"Do you know if the road goes up there, the top," gesturing with his right hand to the crest high above.

Suppressing a laugh, I reply, "No, the road ends at the end of the campground right up there," pointing to the campground.

They look mildly disappointed, thank me, and drive off into the campground before exiting.

Now begins the hot, laborious climb up to Kearsarge Pass. There are lots of day hikers descending the trail, mainly families or elderly couples. Some of the children don't seem to appreciate hiking as much as their parents from their expressions and voiced comments, such as "that was pretty when we came up," delivered with whining sarcasm.

I plod along, doing my uphill geezer wattle. I take frequent stops to catch my breath due to the altitude change. At one, this guy hiking back asks if I am doing okay. I don't think it's the usual idle chit-chat; in his eyes, this guy twice his age might expire right there in front of him. I also meet two men who are doing the PCT and taking a resupply break in Independence.

Pothole Lake is still frozen, starkly beautiful with the white and deep blue ice. At the top of the pass, a group of 30 year olds from San Diego are enjoying the view before heading down to Kearsarge Lakes to camp. They are very nice and properly friendly exchanging comments on our respective routes. I get out my watch, see it's 5:20, and send a SPOT. The three men head down and I follow shortly after. I know I should think about a campsite. I cross a couple of creeks, but decide to go further and get a view or reassess at 6:30. On the shelf overlooking Bullfrog there's a small creek with a tiny snowfield. This looks good. I find one campsite too close to the trail, then another further away — perfect.

I set up the tent and make diner, finding a nice spot on the ledge below to sit, eat, and enjoy the view of Bullfrog and the Brewer group. There is a lot of smoke and haze in Bubbs Creek canyon. One bird is especially striking with it's call like a beautiful, a lilting whistle. The Kearsarge Lakes outlet creeks are a low roar below. The shoreline trees reflect in Bullfrog Lake. Jumping fish are creating their expanding circles on the lake surface.

I enjoy traipsing around the ledges to find the best place for photos, passing the time until daylight slowly fades. Gray clouds speckle a pink sky, the pink of smoke haze. Now the only sounds are the wind and the creeks. The birds must have gone to bed. The diminishing light recedes to a level of no longer being able to read what I write. I think about tomorrow's hike. I'm planning on reaching Gardiner Basin.

Day 2: Bullfrog Lake overlook to Sixty Lakes Basin

I awake at dawn, as usual. It's a beautiful sunrise. The smoky haze has dissipated. I spend an hour once more traipsing the ledges for photos. One set of clouds sits above the Brewer group. The light on the Brewer group and reflections on Bullfrog are especially beautiful. When the morning light reaches the meadows and creeks below, there is a luminescence to the water, rocks, and grass. People going by on the trail tell me it's time to finish packing and get going.

I soon cross a large creek. The hike is lovely walk in solitude with birds singing as I pass through a beautiful forest. A note is taped on the sign at the Kearsarge/JMT junction for "[name withheld] your Kearsarge Lake food cache was confiscated. Come to Charlotte Lake Ranger station to retrieve it," signed George Durkee. I chuckle at the note knowing George's feelings regarding people caching their food in the bear boxes. It

never ceases to amaze me how a small percentage of backpackers can be so selfish and inconsiderate. I now find it humorous as well as appalling.

After seeing no one on the trail, I meet many hikers traveling in both directions. I play trail leap frog from with a couple of groups. When I stop to change film at a rock off the trail on the beautiful overlook of Charlotte Lake, one group of young men stares at me intensely, probably trying to figure out what I'm doing. Before the first lake, I meet one man descending, carrying an ice axe. He was moving too fast to say anything more than "Hello, gorgeous day," and "Have fun." With the ice axe, I wish I could have asked where he'd been.

The first lake below Glenn Pass has someone camped there. There were several short and long snow patches covering the trail, none difficult since deep foot prints are obvious and the snow is slushy. I don't have to pause for rests as much as the climb yesterday, so I guess I'm better acclimated. The second, higher lake is still frozen. The views looking back get more spectacular, which helps make the climb easier.

There's a crowd at the top, at least three separate parties, all in their 20s and 30s. They looked at me with I-see-you-made-it-too, expressions. I pass through them to find a place to set my pack down. I send a SPOT, have a snack, figure I should head down. Thunder echoes all around. Light rain mixed with hail begins falling. A youth group comes across the final large snow field below the top. The last two stragglers are nearing the field on the final switchback. I head across, figuring I'll be almost over by the time they get there. I make my way through the trench-like path in the snow. A man about 40 and a boy about 12 reach the beginning of the trench as I'm taking my final steps. The boy says "You're doing it" with a tone of patronizing encouragement. I resist the urge to say anything more pointed in response and merely smile and say, "Oh yeah."

The rest of the way down alternates rocky trail and small snow patches. Rain is now steadily falling. I splash across on one crossing, figuring it's only a split second and my boots and socks are already wet from the snow and the rain. At the bottom, the rain intensifies. I take the trail to Sixty Lakes Basin at the junction. In a small grove of whitebarks, I stop for lunch. I'm too hungry to keep going without eating. Trying to get some shelter from the rain, I eat a standing lunch of a piece of bread covered with peanut butter and some dried fruit.

In the downpour, it's hard to tell what's runoff and what is the trail. At a small snow patch, I lose the trail. I head up, guessing by the terrain where the trail goes, and within a few minutes intersect the trail. There is a ghostly, mythic quality to the trees and rocks viewed through the veil of rain, mist,

and fog. The rain begins to lessen then let up so I change out of my wet socks. A few minutes later, as I'm nearing the top of the climb, the rain returns in a steady downpour.

At the bottom when I reach the first lake, I know I'm not going over the Col. The rain intensifies and thunder and lightning are all around. I'm slipping and sliding on the wet ground and rocks. I need to find a campsite and get out of the rain. I head towards the next lake to what seems a likely site, but it's no good. Looking back, I see a campsite on a small peninsula of the first lake. Nothing ahead looks good in my limited visibility.

I turn back and make my way over a snowbank to the peninsula. I set up the tent. I keep the inside dry, though the fly won't stay covering the interior while I put the poles in. I raise the tent, attach the fly, and toss the contents of my pack in the tent and the bear can in the vestibule. Once inside I realize I left my notebook inside the pack — damn. I dash out and retrieve it. The heavy rain continues for over two more hours. Sometime after 5:00, the drips on the tent become sporadic and then stop.

I emerge to a sky of gray clouds slowly breaking up. Clouds rest on Mt. Gardiner. Sixty Lakes Col is now visible. Snow covers the top with snowfields of various lengths below. The south shore of this lake is a few yards away. To the north, another larger peninsula juts about partway down the lake.

I find a comfortable dry rock with a good view and enjoy dinner. Afterwards, the light on the pines, lake, and rocks occupies me. The trees on the eastern shore are especially luminescent in the final rays of sunshine. I enjoy finding viewpoints for photos as the light shifts. As darkness falls, I write scattered notes. I decide to postpone any decision on going to Gardiner Basin until tomorrow. I'll let weather and the wilderness help me decide.

Day 3: Sixty Lakes Basin

I awake at dawn to blue sky. The first sunlight shines on Mt. Gardiner and then on Sixty Lakes Col. I can see the Col snowfields quite clearly. It's hard to tell the severity of the slope from down here. Could I do kick steps? Or are crampons or an ice axe required? When the sun hits my campsite, I spread out the wet clothes and rainfly to dry. I doubt the socks will dry in the next hour or so. I still have one dry pair — with the snow, I figured I would bring an extra pair. The clouds are numerous by 8:00. I shift the clothes around to catch the sunny patches.

When the t-shirt and rainfly are dry, I pack up. I head to the neighboring large lake below the Col. I'm contemplating a route up when black thunderheads begin looming behind Mt. Gardiner and on the peaks to the east. I would probably reach the Col when the storm erupts. Getting fried by lightening and making my way over the snow in a downpour are not appealing. Also, I don't know if I can climb the snowfields without an ice axe. I'm going to go the north end of Sixty Lakes Basin instead.

I make my way back to the trail, going a different route. It is fun and interesting. The little lake next door is quite beautiful. I follow Sixty Lakes Basin trail along the lakeshore. It cuts slightly inland to avoid lakeside cliffs. A lovely campsite sits at the end of the lake above the outlet creek. I take off my pack and head over to the site and creek. There is a snow tunnel spanning the creek just below the outlet. After a couple of photos, I return to my pack and make a short, steep descent alongside the creek. I'm sure some years, this is a hot, dry descent by a languid stream. Now it is a roaring creek. The trail cuts left and ends at the creek. There's a snowfield on the other side. I look for the trail and see it further down the creek past the snowfield.

I switch to my other shoes and step into the creek. Though the current is swift, it is shallow. I make my way across and turn right at the snowfield, following the creek for several more yards to where the trail appears. I wish all creek wades were this easy and as much fun.

The trail follows the creek down after passing one picturesque lake. At the next lake, the trail disappears under deep water, an outcropping above. A nearly faded set of footprints go up the rock. The short slope is steep and the snow only slightly softened so I do kicksteps up the rock, attempting to follow the faded footprints except the person who made the footprints was obviously taller than me. At the top, it's free of snow. I make my way back down the other side of the outcropping to intersect the dry trail.

Further along at the next large lakes, the map shows it crossing below the lake at the outlet where it flows into the next lake. It's another simple wade with my running shoes. I hear thunder rolling. The sky behind me is black. Mt. Gardiner is obscured in black clouds. I'm glad I'm not trying to go over Sixty Lakes Col right now.

I need to find a campsite before the storm hits. I've picked out a spot on the map by the last large lake. Soon, I arrive there. On the east side below some slabs is a bog dotted with tiny tarns. By the slabs I find a site, put down my pack and reconnoiter to what looks like a better site. Yes, this is it.

I put up the tent while eating a quick lunch. Soon the rain begins. An hour or so later, the rain stops. I enjoy exploring the area. I'm near the outlet creek of a smaller lake where it flows into the larger lake. A cascade descends into the smaller lake from the lake above it. Mt. Cotter looms above the cascade. On the larger lake I'm camped by, the peaks to the north form a picturesque backdrop with what I guess is aptly named Pyramid Peak reflected in the water. A man carrying a large SLR camera comes down the trail on the other side of the lake and creek. We exchange waves as he continues down the trail. A few minutes later, rain drops speckle the lakes. I take a photo and return to the shelter of the tent as the rain intensifies.

The rain continues the rest of the afternoon. Sometimes it slows to a drizzle and I think it might end, but then the trickle returns to a steady pitter on the tent. I'm hungry and want to cook dinner. At least I got to spend some time exploring 60 Lakes basin. It is as lovely or lovelier than its exalted reputation.

The drips on the tent stop at 6:45. I make dinner and spend the evening exploring the immediate area with tripod and camera. A rainbow appears alongside Fin Dome and remains for at least fifteen minutes. Though I know other backpackers can probably see it, it feels like it's my own private rainbow shining in the sunset light.

Day 4: Sixty Lakes Basin to Rae Lakes

I awake before 5:30. I follow the the right (east) shoreline as well as I can for photos. The rising sun shines its light on the left (west) shoreline and the water reflections are stunning. There are clouds at dawn, not the usual clear, blue sky, making for interesting photo opportunities. The mosquitos are out in force. It seems warm, but then maybe that's because of all the layers I'm wearing to keep the bugs out.

Today I'll try to get down to the John Muir Trail near Arrowhead Lake, then find a spot to camp. I have a couple picked out, but it's going to be farthest from the trail with a view and some solitude that is the determining factor. I haven't been able to wash due to the rain. I take a quick swim in the shallows of the lake. After washing the dirt off, I pack up the final things and am on way.

The climb to the top of the ridge is easy. I made my way up through the trees on what seems to be a use trail. There's a gully on the other side. The use trail continues down it. Everything is going well, maybe too well. I need to be careful in a couple of places, but otherwise it's an easy descent. In one meadow the wildflowers are especially abundant and beautiful. It

starts raining. I see water in the distance. I know this isn't Arrowhead. I've come down too far north. The only thing to do is follow this. In the rain, trying to read the map is no real help. I reached this unnamed lake, but now what to do?

I make my way around the south and east shore. An outlet creek emerges in the southeast corner. At first, navigating is easy, even though the mosquitoes are horrific. I am still following a use trail. I come to a narrowing where the creek goes between higher cliffs and ridges. Trees are down on the semi-path. The rain is falling so hard and the mosquitoes are literally a buzzing cloudy mass so I can't see where I'm going particularly well. I trip on one of the fallen limbs. I know I'm falling and turn to land on my side. My head feels a quick sharp pain. Did I land on a rock? The rest of me feels more prolonged pain. I stand up and make sure my knees and ankles are okay. I turn to continue through the fallen trees. My right eye sees red. Blood is on my glasses and dripping down my face. I place my hand on my head and look at it. It's covered in blood. Okay, I need to deal with this. Don't panic.

A place on the other side of the creek appears a likely place where I might be able to take off my pack and figure out what's happening. I hop the creek and head to the spot about 50 feet above and find a rock to put my pack on. I take off my hat. Blood is dripping on everything — my raincoat, my camera case, my shorts, my legs. I apply my scarf to what seems to be the right place. I get out a water bottle and soak the now bloody scarf with water and press the wet scarf on the wound. I pause to gather my wits and see where I'm possibly going. The visibility is limited to about a hundred yards.

I decide to follow the creek further in the direction of the obvious canyon ahead, hoping to strike a landmark to orient me more exactly. The creek descends into a meadow. The use trail follows the meadow on the right side of the creek. A side creek, larger than the one I'm following, enters from the left up ahead. Slightly before the side creek joins this creek, a talus field begins, covering the right side along the creek. The talus field extends as far as I can see. On the left side, beyond where the second creek joins, is a somewhat wide meadow. I negotiate the wet talus for about 20 feet to point to where the joined creeks are moving more slowly. It is no more than thigh deep. I wade cross to the other side.

The rain has transformed the meadow into a bog. Sloshing through the puddles covering the meadow, the passage narrows. I decide to ascend a rocky outcropping along the narrow gorge. As I'm beginning the climb,

I notice a dead helium balloon lying amidst the dense foliage. Despite my current predicament, I can't help laughing at this outlandish object in the wilderness. In the rain, I don't bother to look more closely to read the writing on the balloon.

At the top of the outcropping I hope to get a better view of where I am. The rain, fog, and low clouds make it impossible to make out anything beyond a couple of hundred yards. The creek does a steep plunge into the canyon ahead. It is obvious I need to get back to the other side of the creek where there is lightly forested terrain, high above the creek. In the gorge ahead, the creek becomes a short series of frothing cascades. There's no crossing there. Straight down looks promising. The creek is only about four feet wide with a strong swift current about thigh deep. I make my way down. Slowly I step in the creek with my right foot, anchor the trekking pole, and step into the creek with my left foot. The current moves the trekking pole parallel to the water as I move it to a new position. Anchoring the trekking pole, I take another step with my right foot, a very short one, to keep my balance. I bring the left foot parallel to the right. I repeat this three more times. For the final two steps, the current decreases. I'm on the other side. My body tension relaxes. I climb up to the sparse forest landscape.

The incessant downpour slows to a steady rain. I find a rock to put the pack on and get out the compass and map. The creek makes a long, direct northeastward route to the canyon below. I know I need to head southeast along this ridge above the creek in hopes of finding the John Muir Trail. At the same time, I ask myself, where the hell am I anyway?

I make my way through the forest along the ridge for a couple of minutes. The ridge drops down before me. Looking down, about fifty feet below a wide trail twists through the pines. It is a major trail, not a use path. The sense of relief is almost overwhelming as I make my way down the hill, turn right (south) on what is obviously the John Muir Trail. But where on the JMT?

The rain slows to a steady drizzle. I realize how hungry I am. Putting the pack on a rock by a small tree, I eat piece of bread with peanut butter along with some beef jerky. The visibility is still only a couple of hundred yards. The peaks and other landmarks are covered in gray mist, fog, and clouds. As I'm putting the food away, two figures appear descending the trail. When they approach, I say hello and ask "Do you know where we are?"

They look at me quizzically and say "the John Muir Trail."

“No, I know that. I mean *exactly* were we are. I’ve come down from Sixty Lakes Basin cross country and I wasn’t sure exactly where I hit the JMT.”

“We just passed the lake where you can’t camp and the turn-off for Baxter Pass.”

“Great, now I know where I am. Thanks.”

They stare at me. “Are you okay?”

My hair is matted in blood and there is blood on my face. I must look like something out of a war or horror film.

“Yeah, I’m okay. I fell and hit my head in some downed trees. It looks a lot worse than it is. I hardly felt it but it bled like crazy.” How much of my reassurance is for their benefit and how much for my own is not clear.

I wish them a good trip and head up the trail. The sign for Baxter Pass and Dollar Lake soon come into view. A large group is having lunch. The trail goes above the lake. On a clear day, the view must be gorgeous. At the high point above the lake I meet a young couple. We exchange hellos. The woman pauses, stares at me, and asks, “Are you okay?”

“Oh yeah you mean this,” and take off my hat.

She gasps, “Oh my God, what happened?”

I relate my fall again and reassure the couple. Their concern is quite touching and appreciated.

I soon come to the crossing at the Arrowhead Lake outlet. There is a mass of logs that looks slippery. I am already wet and decide to wade since there is almost no current. One step goes a little deeper than I expect and I find myself in waist deep water. A large rock sticks out above the water. I use it to help steady myself and take a couple of more steps to finish the ford.

The rain stops. The trail passes far from Arrowhead and climbs to a viewpoint. Visibility is steadily improving. The lower part of the Sixty Lakes Basin ridge materializes. The trail continues its gradual climb to the north shore of the first Rae Lake. I head down to the lake to get a better view, but can’t see much. The trail continues above the lake. The bear box campsite is empty. I am thinking of camping between this Rae Lake and the next one. I try to make out the terrain well enough to see a possible site. What looks like a use trail goes off to the right by a snowbank. This looks promising. There are several possible campsites. No one is here. Fin Dome is now visible above the lake. Across the first lake, an amphitheater of peaks materialize. I choose a clear flat sandy area as a tent site.

The sun breaks through the clouds. The amphitheater of peaks across the lake to the south becomes more stunning every minute. Fin Dome now stands

clear of clouds. To the north, a hundred yards away a peninsula with a picture perfect snag extends into the lake. In the distance, a range of peaks appear out of the clouds. This is perfect.

I need to wash the cut on my head. The creek connecting the two lakes is a couple of hundred feet away. At a flat rock by the outlet of the south lake, I lie down and stick my head in the water. The water turns red. Running my comb through my hair, I attempt to unsnarl my matted hair from the dried blood. The cut is still bleeding so I apply my scarf. After five minutes of pressure, it still bleeds. I get an idea. Wadding the wet scarf into a ball, I place it on the cut and put on my hat, holding the scarf in place.

The clouds and peaks continue providing a fascinating, ever-changing show. I enjoy the rest of the afternoon, writing, snacking on trail mix, drinking crystal lite lemonade, and taking photos of the peaks and lakes in both directions. After dinner, I continue enjoying the constantly changing views of the peaks. There is a stark beauty to the snag standing solitary amid the rocks of the peninsula. While taking a photo from the peninsula, I notice a fisherman a couple of hundred yards down the shoreline. We exchange waves. He is the only person I see until the next morning.

This day has been one of extreme contrasts, from the horrific wet descent to the John Muir Trail from Sixty Lakes Basin to this transcendent evening at Rae Lakes.

Day 5: Rae Lakes to Kearsarge Lakes

I awake to a spectacular sunrise. There are pink clouds at dawn with golden light on the encircling peaks above the first Rae Lake. The peaks to the north have their own unique formation of clouds resting just above. The light shines especially magnificently on the encircling peaks. The amphitheater feeling is enhanced with them all rising seemingly straight up from the other opposite shore. The morning light on the shoreline trees and rocks has a wondrous luminosity. This is why this place has enthralled people for so long.

The sun finally crests over the eastern ridge at 8:00. It didn't matter. It wasn't that cold and it was wondrous watching the light changing from the peaks to Fin Dome, to the rock faces to the pines, and finally the lake. I set out the clothes that are still damp, especially the socks. I sit drinking coffee, writing, and occasionally going down to the shore to take photos of the light on the flowers and pines and their reflection on the water.

When everything is dry, I finish packing and head on my way a little after 10:00. I make my way around the first Rae Lake. They are building a new Ranger Station. The site at the end of the lake with the view of Fin Dome is closed for restoration. The bear box sites — a large area — is unoccupied.

The logs at the crossing at the end of the lake are not to my liking. I picture myself slipping off. A young couple catch up as I'm changing into my other shoes. They manage the logs, though the turn from one set of logs to the other is a bit dicey for them. I wade the first set of logs, using them for balance. After the turn, where it's less precarious, I climb on the logs for the last few steps to the other side.

I meet a group of women in their 50s and 60s. One of them knows the Rae Lakes ranger. They are not carrying packs. I also meet the two men who I met the first day hiking out to Independence for a break on the PCT hike. We remember each other from last Thursday and enjoy a brief conversation.

At the beginning of the steeper climb of Glenn Pass, I see a group crossing the first snowfield behind me. They are hiking faster so I decide to stop for a drink of water and let them pass. Three men in their 20s, they are doing the southern section of the JMT. I let them know I'm a slow climber and to go on ahead. We exchange observations before they move on. I follow them up the switchbacks and over the snowfields, falling further behind as we climb. At one snowfield I allow a group to descend in the snow path before crossing. The three men cross the top trench as I climb the last switchback.

They obviously don't linger at the top since they are gone when I get there. A group of four women in their late 20s or early 30s are just arriving from the other side. "The highest I've ever been" one says when she gets to the top. They ask me to take their photo together and I oblige. Since they are only going to Rae Lakes today, I point out the spot between the two lakes where I camped last night and encourage them to camp there with a florid description of the views. The clouds are beginning to look more ominous so after taking the women's photo and a couple of my own, I head down the switchbacks.

As I zig-zag down, a couple of switchbacks below me, one of the three men is pausing to take a photo of the clouds and the Brewer group. "That's a fabulous unusual view of Brewer," he says. I agree. We exchange a few more comments as we descend the switchbacks, me one series above him. "Have a great trip" I say as I pause for a photo of my own.

When I reach the snowmelt creek above the first lake, I pause for a peanut butter snack and to refill my water bottle. The first scattered raindrops begin so I put on my raincoat and continue descending. As I reach the still icy

lake, the rain turns into hail that becomes torrential, banging on my hat and raincoat and covering the ground. The trail turns into a small stream. There is nowhere to hide from the downpour of hail so I keep walking. It's an odd sensation to cross a snowfield while a deluge of white hail stones covers the snow. After about 15 minutes, the hail stops.

Above Charlotte Lake, I pause to take in the view. Reaching the Kearsarge Pass junction I decide to take the lower route to Kearsarge Lake by Bullfrog since I figure it will be faster with less elevation change. The three men are stopped for a snack at the Charlotte Junction. The sign points to Charlotte Lake, Kearsarge Pass, and Vidette Meadow. I take the trail towards Vidette. When I come to the top of the descent to Vidette, I look for the sign to Kearsarge Pass and trail to Bullfrog Lake. I don't see it. What? I'm sure this is where I took the trail cut off in 2006. The map agrees. The men come up the trail. "Did you see a sign for Kearsarge?"

"Yeah, back there at the Charlotte Junction," one replies

"There used to be a junction sign ion here at the top of the climb from Vidette," I say.

"Yeah, you're right. I remember it," says one of the men.

What appears to be the remains of the trail heads off at the right spot, but it is blocked with debris. Thunder booms to the west and north. I don't want to waste any more time. I bid them farewell and head back to the Charlotte Junction.

Ascending the Kearsarge Pass trail, the rain returns, a light patter. Black clouds cover the sky to the west. I cut off down to Kearsarge Lakes when it looks like a simple descent. A large group is camped at the first site by the trail and new bear box. I say hello and "They've changed this trail." The leader smiles and replies that, yes, they rerouted the trail. She points to the trail heading to the other sites and says "just follow that. That'll take you to the other sites."

Two other parties are camped at the first lake. The area between the two lakes is under water. The site at the second lake I camped at my first night in 2006 is unoccupied. I follow the shoreline trail, hoping the site at the other end of the lake is also unoccupied. When I get within sight of it, I see a tent so turn around and head back. I remember the site from 2006 as private, quiet, and lovely. It still is.

I set up the tent and make dinner. It's already past 5:30. It's a cloudy evening and so not a stunning sunset. I set up the tripod along the shoreline part way down the lake. No one else is around. I enjoy watching the clouds above Kearsarge Pinnacles and hope for better light, but it never comes. Some evenings patience is rewarded and some not. Walking down to the boggy area between the two lakes, I enjoy the wildflowers and watch a family play by the waterside about halfway down the lake. I return to my campsite and write until darkness.

Day 6: Kearsarge Lakes to Onion Valley

I sleep until 6:00. Since the light arrives later on the peaks and lakes here, I'm still up and out of the tent as the sun strikes Kearsarge Pinnacles. The reflections on the water are near pristine. Only jumping fish disturb the still water. I try various angles and views of the reflection. It is a wonderful, near perfect morning. Since it is my last in the High Sierra for probably 11 months or longer, it is a great comfort. I enjoy a final morning with no threat of rain. I don't return to my campsite for breakfast until around 7:30. Kearsarge Lakes are unique in many respects. Since it is more than one lake, people get spread out. I haven't seen or heard anyone this morning.

As I am sitting with a cup of coffee, I see the first signs of fellow campers when a couple finds a place on the shoreline to fish. I pack up slowly, allowing the rainfly, which is wet from condensation, to finish drying. It is hard to leave today. But I know in my heart as the people begin their daily activities, it is time for me to begin mine.

I make my way back to the main trail, checking out the unoccupied sites. The large group is no longer at the first site. The new route of the trail is much less direct; it seems it might have been possible to create a more direct path. I reach the Kearsarge Pass trail. The last time I climbed this, the trail crew was creating the final switchbacks below the pass. The newer route is obviously designed to prevent the erosion caused by pack stock with long switchbacks making for a less steep but longer climb or descent.

A young couple from France is just arriving from Onion Valley when I reach the top of the pass. They are enthralled by the view, taking each other's photo with Kearsarge Lakes and Pinnacles as the background. They ask me to take a photo of them together. We are joined by a day hiker. I notice a water bottle standing about twenty feet to the right of the pass. I ask the couple if it's theirs. No. The day hiker jokes about why would anyone leave it standing there. The couple head down to Vidette Meadow. Looking down the trail to Onion Valley, I see lots of day hikers coming up; it looks like a small convention. "I guess you'll soon have a lot of company," I tell the solitary day hiker. As I leave, the first set of the convention arrives. They are camped at Heart Lake.

I pass several more hikers and lower down begin meeting backpackers climbing up. Some seem to be doing better than others with the climb. When I hiked in last week, no one was camped at Heart, Gilbert, and Flower Lakes. Now several tents occupy campsites at all three. I meet a large youth group in the rocky section overlooking Onion Valley. Some of the children look

miserable and exhausted; I hope they aren't going beyond the lower lakes. At the last (or first) large snowbank by the trail, hikers have scrawled graffiti. I wonder if Elaine and Eva were there to see their admirers profess their undying love that will melt from view in a few days.

The last portion of the trail seems to take forever. I can see the campground and parking lot below, but the trail's switchbacks take a longer route to the bottom. I finally reach my car, open the windows, take out my clean clothes, and dump my garbage on my way down to the creek by the campground. No one is at the creek. I wash off the dirt and dust off and change into clean clothes.

So what about this trip? The weather had a huge effect. It was nice to be sitting in sunshine, not a cloud in the sky for my final morning. I did get great mornings. But Rae Lakes was the only time I got to sit out in the afternoon and enjoy the passing of the day.

Every backcountry trip in the High Sierra is a test. Yes, there's the sheer physical challenge as to whether I can manage to get where I want to go. On this trip, the weather superceded any answer to that question. Anyway, the bigger tests are always the psychological and spiritual ones. Can I stay focused on the wonder in each moment? Can I experience those moments of transcendence? I was able to appreciate the High Sierra in all its wonder, beauty, tranquility, and yes, transcendence. It is always there for me. I take it with me wherever I go. That is true serenity.

