

Day 1

The trailhead at North Lake feels like one of the most desolate spots to embark from: two shadeless relatively flat large gravel and dirt fields with an outhouse in between. Many of the “parking spaces” are taken up by fishermen and fisherwomen parked for the day. I park in what I surmise is an actual parking space at the upper edge of the far lot, unload, put on my pack, pick up my trekking pole, and begin the half mile walk to the real trailhead at the far end of the North Lake campground. After the sign for the trailhead, I pass several walk-in campsites, some unoccupied, and come to the Piute Pass trail’s junction with the Lamarck Lakes trail. Trodding up the switchbacks, I meet no one on the climb to Lower Lamarck Lake. Big puffy clouds sit over the Sierra Crest, but they don’t portend a thunderstorm.

On the climb to Upper Lamarck Lake, the switchbacks steepen and the trail is not as well maintained. At the crossing of the outlet creek of Upper Lamarck, I follow a side trail up and after a little effort, come to a campsite and the obvious trail to Lamarck Col as well as a wide trail heading back to a crossing of the outlet creek and the Lamarck Lakes trail. I realize it would have been better to cross the outlet creek below and crossed back here.

No map shows a trail from Upper Lamarck Lake to Lamarck Col, but I hike a clear, easy to follow trail. The climb to the first ridge appears more daunting than it actually is. A series of tight switchbacks zip-zag to the top. Having begun the day at sea level, I’m not acclimated to the altitude; the steepness of the switchbacks leaves me lightheaded and feeling nearly exhausted. As I make my snail’s pace up, the views down to Upper Lamarck and back to North Lake and the Owens Valley distract me from the altitude sickness.

At the top, the trail makes its way around the ridge, again appearing more treacherous than reality proves. I come to a flat area with a few scattered whitebarks. The wind is blowing in swirling near gale force gusts. I hear the trickle of a creek. A campsite sits among a small grove of whitebarks protected from the wind. I look at my watch and realize that if I continue to the Col at my present plodding altitude sickness speed, it will be well past 6:00 before I reach it. The lake below the pass is reputed to be a wind tunnel in the best of conditions. I suspect there is no water between here and that lake and I know that even if I get over the pass, I will end up descending in twilight or darkness. I decide to stop here and spend the night getting better acclimated before going over the Col in the morning.

I gather water from the trickling creek and make dinner sheltered from the wind by the whitebarks. The clouds over Owens Valley and White Mountains morph as the day's light slowly shifts from the valley up to the distant mountains. The half moon rises above the west ridge above me, scattered pink clouds swirling around the bright white half sphere.

Day 2

At dawn, the gusty wind is still blowing. The sun rises over the distant White Mountains. The light reflects off the boulders, rocks, and tufts of grass that cast shadows to their west. As I'm packing up, a couple passes hiking the trail above me. The path climbs over rocky sand that winds in broad curves on a course that seems from this perspective to be not going anywhere in particular, but making its own route in the general direction of the Sierra Crest. A narrow pinnacle stands in the distance as a marker of the trail's general direction. The views from the next plateau extend to the peaks to the north above Piute Pass. Winding to the left, another climb takes me to another relatively flat plateau. In the distance, I get my first good view of the jagged crest around Lamarck Col and its glacial snowfield with a diagonal line going from left to right up to the Col.

The trail's path through the boulders to the lake at the base of the Col is no longer as obvious. Seasonal conditions lead hikers to choose a variety of paths through the rocks and boulders. By the lake below the final climb, the boulders get larger, turning into large talus slabs. A group of seven is starting down from the top. The couple I saw earlier are sitting on one of the talus boulders having a drink and watching the hikers descend. I say hello and remark that I agree it seems best to wait until they descend over the snowfield path before ascending. When the hikers reach the talus below the snowfield, the couple gets up. I tell them I'll let them go ahead since I figure they'll go faster. The group descending hesitates as they try to figure the best way over the final talus pile. We exchange hellos and they descend while the couple and then I head up. One of the leaps from one flat piece of talus to the next is a little longer than I'm comfortable with. I look for another way and find it. The path across the snowfield isn't a singular as it appears from below. Many sets of individual footprints make the trail through the snow; it's a matter of choosing which ones correspond best to one's stride. I enjoy the climb over the snow and the far view; I remind myself not to forget to focus enough on

my steps. The snowfield goes around a rock and then the trail heads up to the left. In a few steps, I see the sign marking the boundary to Kings Canyon National Park and in a few more steps I'm at the top.

I'm the only person here. The descending group are specks moving across the plateau beyond the lake. The couple have disappeared beyond the rocks below on their way to Darwin Canyon. The views in all directions are beyond description. I turn on the SPOT messenger to let my wife know I'm at the Col, have a snack, take a few pictures, and mostly just take in the feeling of being in this place.

I look at my watch in the pack. It's already well past 11:00. I guess I climb slower with every year I age. After one more long look in all directions, I make my way down. At first, the trail is obvious. At a rocky jumble, trails diverge into several possibilities. I choose one and head down towards the upper lake of Darwin Canyon. I meet a group climbing up, spread out along one choice of trail down. A couple of them tell me to head straight down for the green patch above the lake and not to go diagonally towards the next lake in the chain.

At the green patch above the lake, the trails down to the lakeshore are loose sand. I head diagonally right over grass and rock, following another trail. I take it down to the end of the next lake and along the lakeshore. About halfway down the second lake, a jumble of talus intervenes. One trail goes up and over. The lakeshore trail continues on the other side of the talus heap with a couple of choices to reach it. My short legs need to stretch a little more than they'd like, but the large rocks above my route provide balance for my hands.

The wind is blowing in large gusts as I hike along the first lake. As I round a curve, one gust literally knocks me off my balance and blows me over. Laughing at the absurdity of being blown off my feet, I get back up and find a place out of the wind to eat lunch.

After lunch, I make my way down to Darwin Bench. Many of the Evolution peaks, Glacier Divide, and especially the Hermit come into view. This hike down is as enchanting as I remember when I was here ten years ago. In solitude, I continue to the top of the bench as the view down Evolution Valley expands and seems to extend into the forested lower elevations and beyond. The trail winds down in short switchbacks, first along the outlet creek with its patches of wildflowers and then through forest until it meets the John Muir Trail. I meet two young women who ask if I came from Darwin Bench. They are trying to decide whether to go over Alpine Col or Lamarck Col for their return to North Lake. I tell them I've heard Alpine Col contains a lot of nasty talus while Lamarck is more an arduous, tedious climb but not particularly

nasty. We wish each other well and I continue up to Evolution Lake. Despite its popularity (or maybe that's why it's so popular) the approach to Evolution Lake is one of those awesome, take-your-breath-away hikes as the trail makes its way up to that first view of the lake with its distinctive peninsula jutting out and the Evolutions rising above.

There are lots of people camped here. I enjoy exploring for a campsite offering a semblance of solitude yet with a great view of the lake. Between the camping complex on the point and the ones further along the shore, amid a small grove of whitebarks, I pick my spot.

I've hiked the Muir Trail along Evolution Lake three other times, never camped here, and always dreamed of it. I'm not disappointed despite the number of people. Everyone keeps to themselves while obviously reveling in this unmatched place. As late afternoon turns to twilight, the whitebarks glow in the fading light and the peaks bask in golden glory. Venus shines straight above the peak at the far end of the lake. The half moon shines to the east.

Day 3

Morning at Evolution Lake. The sunrise light is slow to reach here. I climb the small ridge behind my campsite for photos of the view north and to catch the first light on the peaks to the west beyond Evolution Valley. The sun finally clears the Darwin ridge after 8:00.

I sit with the morning sun warming me. The wind is beginning to pick up. I was hoping for a calmer day. Right now in this moment, I feel tranquil, at peace. May I get through the rest of this day with this tranquility. I am here at each moment. I feel less judgmental of both myself and others. In the high Sierra, I rediscover the sense of peace and acceptance that is so precious.

That sense of the beauty in each moment continues with me as I make my way around Evolution Lake. The Muir Trail through Evolution Basin is one of the most sublime hikes on this Earth. I hop across the rock crossing at the end of the lake and make my way above Evolution Creek to Sapphire Lake, often pausing to admire the views and take photos. The wind begins to pick up as I climb alongside and then above Sapphire Lake, my favorite (if I had to pick one) in the chain of lakes that form Evolution Basin.

At Wanda Lake I hop across the outlet creek and find a spot where a large boulder blocks out the wind and have lunch. The climb up to the ridge separating Wanda from Davis Lake is captivating as Wanda's large peninsula

becomes more clearly defined and the views of Muir Pass, Black Giant, Mt. Solomons, and Mt. Goddard get better with each step. At the top of the ridge, I follow the landscape as it leads me to the overlook of Davis Lake. Hiking down, the route seems obvious down a grassy slope to the miles of rock surrounding Davis Lake.

Mt. Goddard looms to the southwest, dominating the skyline. Straight ahead, Mt. McGee looms over the lake with a benevolent grace. I hop over the rocks to the west shore of the lake and follow the shoreline by what seems the best route over the rocks towards the peninsula dividing the lake. Davis Lake seems even larger than it appears on the map. It takes a long time to get around the lake to the peninsula. To distract myself from the tediousness of the endless, relatively flat boulders, I look up at the surrounding magnificence.

The peninsula is larger than I imagined; it is wide enough to legally camp on in many places. At the far end, a narrow stream bisects the way to the other side. The hop across the stream is easy. On the small bay on the other side, there's an obvious campsite, which I hike past to another campsite on the point. I set up the tent and then further take in my surroundings.

Among the rocks and boulders are grasses and flowers; the mountain holly is just blooming. The surrounding peaks rise 3,000 feet. One feels inside the surrounding mountains. It is as if nothing is beyond them. They are the boundary to existence. What lies beyond? Yes, I know what lies beyond — Muir Pass, McGee Lakes, Goddard Canyon, Ionian Basin. From Davis Lake, it's as if those places don't exist. A small group of whitebarks climb the steep hill below Mt. McGee. A larger grove sprouts across the lake. Otherwise all is rock—grey granite, dark red, and the black etched Goddard Divide. From Mt. McGee a long ridge undulates down westward. A single large whitebark stands on the side of the far ridge.

This feels like a different world than the Sierra on the other sides of the ridges. This is vertical rock with only spotted patches of life. This is not a moonscape — the rocks are too colorful and the peaks rise high on all horizons. This is not Mars, though the color of the rock resembles the photos of Mars. I'm not sure if others find it exhilarating or claustrophobic, but I lean to exhilarating. These are the mountains to fear and respect as well as be awed by. Like Ionian Basin just beyond the ridges, it is stark and grandiose. No other part of the Sierra is quite like this.

At twilight the moon shines and the first stars emerge. The stillness of twilight envelops the mountains. What is it about this moment? It's a benediction to a day, the final slow farewell to a single day. I feel I did exactly what I wanted today. I hope the rest of the days are as now.

Day 4

Sunrise at Davis Lake, the sky a perfect Sierra blue, the peaks shimmering reflections in the lake. The first light gleams on the Goddard Divide. I spend a leisurely morning photographing the morning light and taking in the surroundings and leave the campsite about 9:30. The one section of the trail along the lake that looked treacherous from my campsite only requires care on the section of rocks along the lakeshore. I enjoy the hike along the lake, watching the changing details on the opposite shore and along the path. At the far end of the bay, there is a beautiful meadow-like section. I consult the map and continue along the lakeshore towards the outlet creek on the other side of the high ridge above.

Nearing the end of the lake, I come to a vertical cliff extending into the water. I consider wading the lake, but the depth is difficult to determine since I can't see the bottom. I climb up to see about going above the cliff. About 15-20 feet up, there is a step-wide walkway over scrabbly rock. I can't see what lies beyond and there are no handholds; if I slip I would plummet into the lake. My knees wobble at that thought so I turn back and search for other ways over and around. After a half hour of checking other routes, climbing up and down, I go back to the meadow area at the bay. Crossing the meadow, I come to a beautiful small lake and find a use trail. I emerge onto a grand view overlooking Goddard Creek below Davis Lake.

I make my way down to the creek and have lunch. The creek and meadow with its wildflowers and the surrounding peaks form a perfect Sierra setting. I consider heading down Goddard Creek instead of to Martha Lake, but decide to follow my planned route to Martha. The steep climb to the ridge above Davis offers great views of the lake below. Once at the top, it's an enchanting walk through rocks, meadows, and flowers. I find the three lakelets on the map; so far so good in terms of my route to Martha. I head down when necessary due to cliffs. I try to go south but can't due to more cliffs. I climb a steep chute to a wide ledge area about the size of a football field. A hundred feet or more below to the north I see a flat area that should be a route to Martha Lake. I search for a way down and find nothing that doesn't involve a risky descent. Perhaps I could do it? I decide it's a big if and think of my promise to my wife to avoid anything approaching class 3 descents or climbs; the day is passing.

I head back down the chute and follow a seasonal creek gully. It's a somewhat nasty descent but I can see Goddard Creek below. There's another steep gully up to the left that may lead to the plateau. I'm tired and following another route that might lead nowhere doesn't seem wise. After a short

annoying descent, I reach Goddard Creek. I decide to cross here since the right side seems better terrain. A wise decision; soon the left side becomes a 20 foot vertical cliff.

I walk through fields of flowers, tall grass and shale rock. Except for Stevenson Meadow on the North Fork of the San Joaquin, these are the most abundant and beautiful flowers I've ever seen. When the creek's gorge further narrows, I head up to the ridge above the creek. Following a faint trail, I continue down to Goddard Canyon through the forest. Keeping the creek on my left, I head down more steeply. I hear a waterfall and follow the sound. The overlook of the falls in a narrow gorge is one of those spectacular Sierra backcountry spots that would be a major tourist attraction if there was a nearby road. I pause for photos and to simply enjoy this there's-no-other-place-on-Earth-like-it locations.

Finally, I head down to Goddard Canyon. At the junction with the Martha Lake outlet creek, an obvious campsite sits under the trees. Hoping for more wide-open views, I head down the canyon. A couple of hundred yards later, the place appears. A narrow sandy meadow sits along Goddard Creek below the high ridge dividing Goddard Canyon from McGee Lakes. The ground is rather bumpy, but I pick out a decent enough place far enough from the creek.

This had been a day John Muir would have loved, wandering the High Sierra, discovering sights, sounds, alpine splendor, fields of flowers, and himself, though I suspect he would have risked the cliff at Davis Lake and the nasty descent to the plateau. I am happy and content watching and listening to Goddard Creek and the high ridges above the canyon. The moon shines above the Hell-for-Sure Pass ridge, the light reflecting in Goddard Creek.

I always come to these trips with expectations. This trip I'm not as sure of what they are so I'm not sure how I'm meeting them. Does it really matter? I'm here, but I haven't yet experienced that mystical transcendence I usually find in the High Sierra—what Muir called “transcendental immortality.” I need a short day with a chance to sit and soak in the wilderness.

Day 5

A fitful night due to the uneven ground, though once I found a right spot by rolling around the tent a little I slept fine. The dawn light both up and down the canyon first shines on the distant peaks and ridges. At 8:30, the light is finally in the canyon as I finish packing up.

I leap over the creek and find the trail on the other side. It is good I crossed since cliffs soon begin above the creek, especially on the east side. In parts of the canyon, the creek cuts through a gorge with the trail high above. There are three spectacular waterfalls, each distinctive. I take long pauses for photos and the views. From the higher points above the creek, the view extends for miles up and down the canyon. This solitary hike is one of the most enjoyable and splendid canyon walks I've ever experienced, better than even Kern Canyon in certain respects.

In the lower canyon, I come across a trail crew. There are strung out over a mile or so in small groups, digging and moving rock and boulders. One woman is by herself with a boulder that seems as large as she is, but she seems quite confident in being able to put it in place and is cheerfully chatty. Just before the JMT junction, the crew's tent village sits in the trees to the west of the creek. I cross the bridge and have lunch along the creek by the campsites. I notice my sunscreen has fallen out of its web pocket at the bottom outside of the pack. I search the area, don't find it, and figure it could have fallen out anywhere in the last few miles. I hope someone will find it and make use of it. While eating lunch, three parties cross the bridge, two heading down and one up the JMT.

My memory of the climb to Evolution Valley is of an arduous ascent of graded switchbacks. It turns out to be easier than I remember. The magnificent view back along the canyon of the south fork of the San Joaquin extends for miles. The trail levels off a little as it goes alongside the descending cascades of Evolution Creek. I take a long pause to go out to the creek at an especially picturesque spot.

The crossing of Evolution Creek has been moved to the pack stock crossing. The trail that continues along the right side to the crossing in Evolution Meadow is blocked with branches. Oh well, I guess I'll have to enter Evolution Valley by this more mundane way than crossing Evolution Meadow and wading the creek as I had the last time I was here ten years ago, a moment that is embedded in memory. I change shoes and wade the creek. The water feels wonderful on this hot day.

The trail continues through forest up Evolution Valley. To the right, Evolution Meadow appears. As I continue up the Valley, the trail veers closer and further away from Evolution Creek. There are numerous places to head towards the creek for campsites. I decide to continue to either McClure of Colby Meadow.

I meet no one hiking up the Valley. The solitude is a wonderful surprise as I make my up to each new level. I glimpse McClure Meadow through the

trees. In the campsite complex in the trees on the edge of the meadow, there are at least three different groups ensconced. The rocky outcropping above the campsites I stayed at in 1998 is empty. I decide to camp there.

McClure Meadow is quite dry this year. Where it was green and flooded ten years ago, is now brown and dry. The backcountry ranger passes by. I ask him if he has any sunscreen to sell. He says yes and has some he can give me and to come by the ranger station later. I head down to the creek for a swim. A group of four are in the site in the trees closest to the creek, another group of four further down the creek, and a group of five or six further back in the trees.

The creek is very shallow. I head to the middle where a small pool deep enough to immerse my filthy hair in the slowly moving water. The water feels wonderful, a perfect temperature. After washing the trail dust off, I wade back and dry in the sun before heading to the ranger station. The ranger is friendly and gets friendlier as I ask him the current whereabouts of backcountry rangers I've met on previous trips. Despite my insistence, he refuses payment for the sunscreen.

Back at my campsite, I watch the changing afternoon light and make an early dinner. I want to photograph the light as evening falls on the Valley. I spend an hour traipsing around the meadow and along the creek trying to catch the fading sunlight glimmering in the pines and the meadow grass. After wandering the meadow, I end up a little way down the creek from where I swam to catch the reflections of the Hermit and Mt. Darwin in Evolution Creek. The group of four camped by the creek join me, one woman taking photos. We make small talk about each other's trips and the incomparable beauty of Evolution Valley. I keep adjusting the tripod's position along the shore and in the creek to best capture the reflections. The moon shines above the Hermit. When the sunlight finally fades, I say goodnight to the group, and head back to my campsite.

One can see why this place is so popular. Fortunately, it takes some effort to get here. Lamarck Col is the shortest route and it is still two days except for someone who's acclimated and a fast hiker who might do it in one. Otherwise, one has to go by Dusy Basin or Piute Pass. Piute is two days if one can manage Alpine Col, Snow Tongue Pass, or Packsaddle Pass (well, maybe one if they're really fast). By trail, it's two to three days by Piute Pass and three to four days by Dusy Basin. I'm not sure how long packers take. They are the real threat to Evolution Valley. The meadows for crazing, camping in forest, fishing in the creek, and legal fires are an ideal locale for packers.

While any wilderness area is unique and provides the spiritual connection/transcendence, the High Sierra is a place apart. There is some-

thing singular about this pace — it's diversity, it's vastness, it's relatively pristine condition. Since the shepherders were banished a century ago, the ecosystems have remained relatively untouched by human interference. Here in the High Sierra one feels so small, a tiny part of the larger whole, a piece of the greater land, life. Here I crawl inside my surroundings, a solitary being among a multitude of other beings.

Despite all the people, it is a quiet, peaceful evening.. There is another group at the far end of the meadow with a fire blazing in the approaching darkness. This place evokes a sense of awe and respect. The setting and how the light moves creates a sense of peace that beckons silence. As darkness falls people dampen down their noise and speak low enough not to break the surrounding stillness. As darkness descends,. it is almost as hushed as Davis Lake.

Day 6

I awake at 6:00 as usual after a restful sleep. Since the good light for photos hasn't reached the Valley yet, I make breakfast. Afterwards, I go down to the meadow and creek, wandering over the meadow as the light emerges. No one else is awake. There are marvelous reflections of the Hermit and Evolution Range in the creek. I hear the distant roar of the creek's cascades further up the Valley.

After the morning light fills McClure Meadow, I head back to my campsite and pack up. I meet several people on the trail. At Colby Meadow I begin looking for the turn off to McGee Lakes. The ranger said there was a pile of rocks marking the McGee Lakes trail. At the south end of Colby Meadow there is a trail going off towards a camping complex and the creek. I think about following it, but don't see any ducks and so figure it is only a side trail to the campsites. I continue up the Valley until I come to the Darwin Bench outlet creek crossing. The Hermit is now directly to the west. After the crossing, I get off the JMT and follow a wide trail down to the campsites along Evolution Creek. This is a beautiful location for camping at the south end of the Valley. I find a place to cross Evolution Creek, managing to keep dry while jumping from rock to rock. I decide to head diagonally back down the Valley and up towards the McGee Lakes outlet creek.

I make my way through the forest in a northwest diagonal, listening for the McGee Lakes outlet creek. After about fifteen minutes, I hear it. When I reach the creek, I follow it up for a little and then cross. After a little while,

I cross back as the forest seems easier to walk through on that side. When I reach an enchanting small meadow, I spy the distinctive thread of a trail on the other side. I find a crossing, intersect the trail, and continue on to McGee Lakes.

The trail is quite clear and obvious as I make my way through scattered pines, veering nearer and farther from the creek. The Hermit is now directly north, shining in the late morning sunlight. I find a wonderful spot along the creek and enjoy an early lunch. Since leaving the JMT, I've seen no one. After lunch, I continue across a level meadow with scattered whitebarks. Before me, McGee Peak and its ridges rise above. The final climb to McGee Lakes sits directly ahead. On the climb, the trail becomes less distinctive, as it steeply ascends to the first lake. In a few places, the trail goes a couple of different ways. I guess seasonal conditions cause hikers to choose different routes.

At the top, the trail disappears in the granite slabs above the first McGee Lake. I stop and take in the view. A couple of campsites sit in the whitebarks above the lake; I guess some hikers feel they've reached the spot, stop and camp right here. I head down to the lake. A picturesque waterfall descends from the next lake above. I cross below the waterfall and continue up to the small groves of whitebarks among the rocks. There are no good campsites so I continue exploring. The second lake is possibly even prettier. I hop across the outlet creek above the falls and then along the shore of the second lake. I see a spot up above. It's a little too close to the water, but further back is a flat, sandy area with a nice flat rock for the stove. There is a view of both the first and second lake as well as a panorama of the Hermit, Mt. McGee, and the Evolution peaks. I decide this is the spot.

McGee Lakes are more beautiful than I imagined. They are large lakes with fascinating bays and peninsulas jutting out, large enough to contain groves of whitebarks and wide enough to legally camp on. High peaks surround one in every direction. One could spend days exploring McGee Lakes basin while discovering new special places. While Mt. McGee towers over the eastern end of the lakes, these also could have been called Hermit Lakes since the lakes are behind the Hermit; it is a more appropriate name due to the solitude.

It's a typical perfect Sierra summer afternoon; breezes swirl in the whitebarks, puffy clouds against a blue sky. I go down to the waterfall and take a shower under the rushing water. I linger on the view across the first lake. Returning to an overview of the second lake by my campsite, I sit, write, and mainly absorb the High Sierra. This is the afternoon I've been craving all winter. This is the day that will be the one, the one that sustains me through

next winter. Time seems to stand still. I sit and drift with time, each moment distinct. It is “transcendent immortality.”

Finally, I rouse myself to prepare dinner. No one else is here as far as I can tell. After eating with my eyes more on the view than my food, I revel in the days slowly fading light. The whitebarks gleam green as they shine. The alpenglow reflects in the quiet surface of the lakes.

I write by moonlight at the end of a near perfect day. I should sleep well tonight. It is dark except for the moonlight and emerging stars, the silence broken only by the waterfall.

Day 7

The lakes are perfectly still at sunrise. The newly lit peaks reflect in the still waters of the lakes. The whitebarks glow with the day’s first light on the green needles and brownish-grey bark. Everywhere is the wonder of morning in the High Sierra.

I see possible photos anywhere I look. I try to choose the ones that might capture the essence of this magical morning at McGee Lakes.

I enjoy a leisurely morning, writing and watching. Tomorrow I will be anxious about getting off and climbing Lamarck Col. There are lots of birds — Clarks nutcrackers, I think. They fly from whitebark to whitebark, pecking at the cones and giving a cry that is between a crow’s caw and something gentler, more plaintive. The wind is picking up after being so still. No clouds yet, so hopefully the wind is not a storm herald. The wind encourages me to finally pack up.

I decide to get to Darwin Canyon by hiking back down to Evolution Valley instead of over the ridge to Sapphire Lake. The hike up here was so nice and I want to see where the trail begins from Evolution Valley since I intend to return here in the future and stay for three days or so exploring this fascinating basin. Plus I’m feeling a bit lazy and not like tackling a route around the lakes and up and down the ridge to Sapphire Lake.

The hike down to down to Evolution Valley is fun, especially in the beginning. The trail in the upper portion is beautiful. The Hermit looms above the trail, an awesome presence. Beyond the lower meadow where I intersected the trail yesterday, the trail descends through forest and requires paying attention to where it goes. I lose the trail a couple of times as it goes down diagonally, but refind it easily . It comes out exactly where I thought on

upper Colby Meadow. The marking duck is on this side before the crossing of Evolution Creek. I see the first people since leaving Evolution Valley yesterday. There is a marvelous series of campsites along this side of the creek, two of them occupied.

I have lunch after wading the creek. I follow the side trail I almost took yesterday to the JMT. The hike up Evolution Valley is a wonderful leisurely walk. The climb out of the valley follows graded switchbacks designed for pack stock. I pass several hikers ascending and descending the JMT. I am glad to get to the Darwin Bench trail, which seems more a real trail and not a highway.

There's a big group at the top of Darwin Bench by the outlet creek — four tents at least. That ends my wish for camping at the spot on the other side of the outlet creek where I stayed two nights ten years ago. The group is friendly, but there are just too many people. There are a couple of nice sites further on, but I decide to continue to the first lake in Darwin Canyon. There are numerous campsite possibilities at the end of the upper lake. No one is here, so I have my choice.

After I set up and sit writing and sipping Crystal Light, I see two single hikers and couple pass on their way down; it will be crowded down below with that many parties. It's hard to believe this is my seventh night. The last three days have been perfect, time drifting along, me drifting along with it. It's hard to believe I will be driving home in 24 hours, heading up 395 eating a burger and fries while drinking a Coke.

The High Sierra feels so familiar. I understand its rhythms. I appreciate the similarities and extreme and subtle differences from one place to the next. The light travels up from the rocky lakeshore, shadows on the boulders. Luminescent flowers slowly fade into the shadows. The sunset transforms to alpenglow on the peaks. To the west, as light fades, above the far peaks above Evolution Valley the sky becomes a deep red.. The red glow remains for over 30 minutes past sunset, a reminder of how bad the smog is over the Central Valley.

I see a flashlight across the lake so I guess I'm not the only one here. It is now silent. No birds, not much of a breeze to rustle the trees. One can almost hear the rocks when it gets this quiet.. I guess it is time to stop and go to bed. But there are some days you don't want to end. On this trip, the time has gone by way too fast even though I've been in the moment as much as possible. It's a curse of getting older I guess; time isn't the same anymore. Well, appreciate each moment and keep them in memory. Maybe that will slow time down.

Day 8

The final morning. The sunrise over Evolution Valley is a wonder. The view from here is about as good as you can get. The peaks above Evolution Valley form a majestic western horizon. Some have the black of the Goddard Divide peaks. To the north and east, the Glacier Divide rises, all grey granite. Above and behind to the east and south, rise Mt. Lamarck and Mt. Mendel and their massive ridges.

When I finally have breakfast and begin packing, a large party of seven passes up the trail. A couple also come up the trail and joins the party of seven as they stop and contemplate which way to continue to the Col. As I'm sitting writing and drinking coffee, another couple pass. A few minutes later, a party of five appears climbing up the trail. Is this the Darwin Canyon highway?

After finishing writing, I take in the view, the silence, the feeling one more time. I finish packing, say farewell to my campsite, hop over the outlet creek, and begin the journey to Lamarck Col.

I make my way on the up-and-down of the route around the lake. At the second lake, I try a little different way through the talus, but my legs are too short for one part so I cross the same as on the way down. Scouting out a way above the third lake, I decide to head up before the end of the lake. My diagonal ascent over rock is rather tedious, but simple. I come upon a trail and follow it up. As I climb, more trails offer various choices as the best way to the Col. I choose the one that suits me best at each point and find I'm following a series of ducts.

About two-thirds of the way up, I meet a young woman descending. We exchange greetings, I wish her as good a trip as mine, and continue up. I know when I reach the rocky jumble and there is only one obvious trail, I'll almost be at the top. I'm relieved when I get there and find myself reinvigorated for the final climb.

There's no one at the summit of the Col. A large group are eating by the lake at the bottom. I turn on the SPOT to let my wife know I'm over the Col, take photos, have a snack, and revel in the view. The group finishes their lunch and head across the rocky, sandy plain towards the Owen's Valley and White Mountains.

I realize I need to get going myself and say one last farewell to the Evolutions. The snowfield has shrunk in the past week. I consider following a set of footprints directly down to the lake instead of the

well-worn path over the snowfield, but decide to stick to the path. I do a better job than last time of hopping over the talus beyond the snowfield. At the bottom, I linger for a couple of minutes, appreciating this place one last time.

I head over the rocky, sandy plain, passing between the low boulders. At several points I pause to look at the view and take more photos. When I come to my campsite from the first night, I head down to have a look, then go back to the trail. At the top of the descent from the steep tight switchbacks, the view stops me in my tracks. I notice the large party who were below the pass making their way down the trail at the bottom. I make my way carefully on the scrabbly descent, telling myself to pay attention to where I'm stepping and not the view.

At the bottom, the trail makes its final way around a small tarn, past a campsite, to the Upper Lamarck Lake outlet creek. On the other side, the main trail seems a wide path. I hop over the rocks and after a few yards, begin the final descent to North Lake. Soon, I recross the outlet creek. I'm surprised I have the trail to myself. The switchbacks go down until Lower Lamarck Lake. The trail now seems a wide, well-trodden route. I pass the party I saw from the top of the pass, now strung out in sets of one or two. I recognize the last switchback before the Piute Pass junction. As I pass through the campground, some of the walk-in tent sites are still unoccupied.

There is always a strange feeling on the final hike to my car. There's a combination of relief, anticipation, and regret as I walk on the road from the campground to the trailhead parking lot.