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## **Day 1 — North Lake to Muriel Lake**

I arrive at the barren gravel North Lake trailhead parking lot about 1:00. Three people are parking their truck in the lower lot. There's room for my Corolla to squeeze in next to them. We exchange pleasantries as each of us unpacks — they their fishing gear and me my pack. One asks the driver if he has a tire pressure gauge. He says no. I offer mine. She checks her tires and asks where I'm going as she returns the gauge. She and her friends know about Merriam Lake, Feather Pass and Bear Lakes Basin and say it sounds like a great trip. I finish putting on my boots and covering the windshield. They head off to fish and I head down the half mile hike to the campground. As I'm doing my ritualistic pause at the sign for the trailhead, one of the campers asks where I'm going. He hasn't heard of Merriam, so I point to the area on the map. "That's quite a hike," he says. I reply I'm only going over Piute Pass today. He wishes me a good trip.

Only a couple of the walk-in campsites are occupied. Thunderheads billow over the crest. With the altitude adjustment from sea level, the first climbing causes me to question whether I'll make it over the pass today. I wonder if I'm overdoing my liquid intake and hike 15 minutes or so before taking another small drink. I start feeling better. I keep the water intake to a normal hiking amount and feel fine the rest of the day.

For the quota being full, very few people are on the trail. On the climb up to Loch Leven, I pass one descending hiker and then two fathers and sons. An elderly couple is at the campsite on Loch Leven where I camped with my wife and son on his first trip to Humphrey's Basin as an 8 year old.

A drizzle begins just below Loch Leven. When it becomes heavier at the far end of Loch Leven I put on my raincoat. The rain slackens so I take it off at Piute Lake. No one is camped here. On the final climb to the pass, one of the fathers passes me on his way to get some fishing in at Goethe Lake before dinner. I pause at the top of Piute Pass to take in the views back towards the Owens Valley and before me of Humphrey's Basin and the peaks to the west. I make my way on the path snaking towards the Glacier Divide. After a few minutes, I spy a beautiful lake far to my left; the south wing of Muriel Lake. I continue on the path a few more minutes and come to the northeast shore of Muriel. As far as I can tell, no one else is camped on the lake. I follow the path above the shoreline towards the outlet creek and find a perfectly situated campsite above a point extending to the outlet.

Storms clouds swell over the Sierra Crest and Glacier Divide. Mt Humphreys dominates the view to the northeast. Long one of my favorite Sierra peaks, I am hoping to get my ultimate Humphreys photo on the trip. On my two previous trips to the basin, I've come close, but felt the final result didn't get it right. I find a good spot for the photo. A half hour later the setting sunlight strikes from the west, shining on Humphreys and the Glacier Divide. For the next 15 minutes the light is especially breathtaking. I scurry around taking the Glacier Divide, the peaks to the far west above Bear Lakes Basin with the outlet creek and the myriad of lakelet pools extending down the valley below Piute Pass.

The sunset light fades a little before 8:30. Ominous black clouds are approaching. I put the camera and tripod in the tent and feel a drizzle. I get in the tent and the drizzle becomes a steady rain. I drift into sleep as I listen to the rain patter on the tent.

## **Day 2 — Muriel Lake to Merriam Lake**

At dawn, black clouds rest over the peaks to the west,. A few scattered ones surge over the crest and Glacier Divide to the east and south. Thunderstorms are already brewing. The clouds create a wonderful opportunity for photos. As I'm leaving, streaks of rain hover over Hutchinson Meadow. I find a rock hop crossing over Piute Creek and head northwest to intersect the trail. I soon find it and head down past Golden Trout Lakes where people are camped. A little further, I see two people at a crossing of one of the side creeks. Above the crossing I take a long pause to appreciate the view before the trail plunges down into forest.

I pass a party of four heading up to Golden Trout. Further down at another crossing is a group of at least six. One asks, "Are you Wayne?" "No. Why'd you ask?" She says a solo hike named Wayne is the object of a search. His description fits me — not that close but close enough. He's 48 with grey hair and blue eyes. I take being mistaken for ten years younger than I am as a compliment.. The next party also asks if I'm Wayne. They relate that a helicopter dropped off a search-and-rescue crew at Hutchinson Meadow this morning.

When I reach the bottom of the canyon, I follow a couple as they and I negotiate the series of crossings of the French Canyon creeks before they join Piute Creek. Each crossing is a slightly varied rock and/or log hop. After the last one, the man pauses to wait for his wife at the junction sign as she is intercepted by a ranger. The ranger asks her a series of questions about her

trip and tells her what to do if she finds Wayne. The ranger indicates by eye contact he wants to talk to me, too. He is quite young, maybe 25. He is joined by a female ranger who seems as young or younger. Both are very polite and conversational. I surmise they are left at the junction while the rest of the more experienced members of the team are out searching.

I tell them I'm carrying a SPOT messenger and ask if I should hit 911 if I find Wayne. He pauses to think about it and replies no, since that might cause them to think there are now two search and rescues. He advises me to tell Wayne to stay put since they can find him easier if he's not moving. He also says he doubts I'll see Wayne since Merriam isn't on his itinerary. The woman ranger has never seen a SPOT so I get mine out to show her. We talk for a couple of more minutes and then they see another hiker and go off to intercept him.

At the junction I turn right and head up the Pine Creek Pass trail. I hadn't remembered the extent of the gradual climb up to French Canyon. I'm hungry and want to stop for lunch. After fifteen minutes, the trail levels off. When it gets closer to the creek, I head to the right to a pretty spot along the rushing water. The clouds are looking more ominous so I eat quickly. As I pack up lunch, a drizzle begins. Hiking in the trees, I don't bother putting on the raincoat.

The Merriam trail turnoff is obvious. Just before the outlet creek crossing a large duck sits with an arrow of rocks pointing to the trail, which is easy to see from here. It snakes up through the forest, a pleasant path that seems to place the switchbacks well for the climb. I remember Snow Nymph's "the Merriam Lake trail can be steep" comment as I slowly huff and puff up. After awhile it levels off. I use this stretch to catch my breath then lose my breath on the next steep climb. Finally, at another leveling off, I see the light and open space of an upcoming meadow. The rain varies in intensity from a drippy drizzle to a regular patter. The distant thunder slowly fades. Merriam Meadow is one of those timberline marvels with a winding creek, green grass, and bordering whitebarks with an in-your-face view of Pilot Knob to the east.

Near the end of the meadow, I lose the trail. I head over to intersect the Merriam outlet creek. In the trees, I find a trail and follow it until I decide to cross the creek and head in what seems the direction of the lake. I climb to one flat part, wondering if I would see the lake and tell myself it's definitely further on. At the next flat part, I'm a little more hopeful of spying the lake and come to a place where the outlet creek pools. The trail reappears alongside it. Another short climb and then I see the lake at the bottom of a long, slow slope.

A tent sits at the first site. As I make my way towards the next site, a woman smiles and waves as she lies looking out of the tent at the rain. The next site is too close to them and a nearby large site looks more suitable for a group or for someone staggering in late. I put down my pack and reconnoiter down the lake, finding two nice sites. I choose the closer — Merriam's sandy beach is below to the left and the view is great. About fifty yards away, a waterfall plummets down from the lakes above, the route to Feather Pass. So I have to climb up that? Internet research says there's a trail alongside the falls.

The rain lets up a little and I put up the tent, throw everything inside, and crawl in. The rain picks up for a few more minutes and then slows to an uneven patter. I crawl back out to a few sporadic sprinkles. The sun will soon sink behind the western peaks. I take some photos of the lake and the fading light on the whitebarks while preparing my dinner of refried beans, cheese, green onions, and tortillas. I eat my dinner while the camera and tripod stand nearby. A young man, probably in his 20s, arrives and sets up by the large site. He comes my way and sees the tripod. He says he's on his way to take a photo of the waterfall. He's doing Roper's High Route and came over Snow Tongue Pass today. We discuss the High Route and he says the Frozen Lake Pass wasn't that difficult, but Snow Tongue was particularly awful. After a few more minutes exchanging observations, he goes off to photograph the falls and check out his next steps for tomorrow.

As I'm finishing dinner, the couple who waved hello on my arrival come by. They've decided to get a "change of scenery" after being here all day due to the rain and camp at La Salle Lake before going over Feather Pass tomorrow morning. They ask if I've seen a red-haired guy today. They are supposed to rendezvous with his party here, but aren't sure if he wants to go for as long a trip. We talk for a few more minutes and then they head up the falls and out of sight.

I walk to the east end of the lake in hope of alpenglow photos of Humphreys and the other peaks to the east. I am not disappointed. A trio of hikers arrive as I watch the light fade. In the twilight, I make my way to my campsite. The moon rises over the ridge across the lake, the light reflecting on the still water. I watch the moonlight refracting as I sit and write as darkness falls.

I haven't had much thinking time with the weather and long days. I need to take a long pause and let the High Sierra inside. But I'm here where I set out to be and enjoying this trip. I understand the limitations my aging body

now demands. I don't like how I hike so much slower then when I was a few years younger, limiting how far I can travel each day, but that's something I've accepted and learned to adjust to in trip planning. I try to appreciate each moment and place with the reverence it deserves.

I come here for the insight into myself and the world. Over a lifetime of wilderness experience I have achieved a level of ingrained understanding. As for those big questions, I know total insight will always be out of reach even as I seek it. Each answer only leads to new questions. I have also found many answers in the solitude of the High Sierra.

### **Day 3 — Merriam Lake**

I awake before dawn. I have diarrhea. That convinces me to layover today. I will spend the day getting well and better acquainted with Merriam Lake. It's a cloudless morning with a slight breeze rustling the trees and creating ripples on the lake.

Roper's High Route is certainly popular. The young man I talked to yesterday was up and away by 7:00. The three people who came in at sunset pause on their way by and ask what I've heard about the weather. I repeat what I heard Tuesday, which is a more normal pattern is supposed to return either today or tomorrow. They are also doing the High Route, but are behind schedule due to rainy days; they inquire about exiting by Mono or McGee Pass. I encourage them towards McGee so as not to miss the particularly beautiful section between Second Recess and Fish Creek Basin. Their lack of knowledge about certain aspects of the route tell me not everyone checks out the internet as much as I thought. I tell them about the trail up the falls and the chute to the headwall above La Salle. Also, the people rendezvousing with the couple who went to La Salle came in at some point last night. The red-haired guy comes by and I relay the couple's message. He heads up towards La Salle.

At Merriam Lake all the familiar sights and sounds of the Sierra surround me. A semi-circle of peaks rises above the lake with another semi-circle to the east. The waterfall descends from the lakes above. Scattered groves of whitebarks picturesquely sit above the east and north shores. The south and west shores are jumbles of talus. Patches of snow are scattered on the peaks. Stillness permeates the air. It's the perfect High Sierra summer morning.

I explore along the east lakeshore. A rock point on the north side of the outlet extends out from what seems to be the first campsite of choice with its whitebark grove supplying shade and protection from the wind. The outlet crossing is a series of large rocks and boulders. I suspect in higher water it's not so easy. On the other side, the shoreline of meadow grass and scattered rocks and boulders continues to the talus heaps that form the lake's south shore. To the north, there's a clear view of Feather Peak and Feather Pass. Following the shoreline, I spy fish, some a respectable size.

I slowly make my way back to my campsite. Two women who are with the red-hair guy are sunbathing by the beach. After an early lunch of peanut butter and bread that I hope will settle my stomach, I explore the north and west shore. The waterfall splits into a couple of creeks that meander over meadow grass to the lake. The view to the east from the northwest shore is spectacular; I will return here at sunset.

By 2:30, I have Merriam Lake to myself. The red-haired guy returned and the trio packed up and left, heading back down to French Canyon. Another trio arrived and went up the falls towards La Salle. I take a short swim in the lake; the water is colder than I expected. Clouds have been gathering all day. As I while away the afternoon, the distant thunder gets closer. The storm rolls in at 4:00. At first it seems like it will be a typical short Sierra afternoon thunderstorm. After half an hour it slows and nearly stops. I go outside the tent. Ominous thick black clouds are coming this way. I return to the tent. First there's more rain, light at first, then heavier. Then I hear loud pops on the tent — hail stones bouncing off the fabric. It sounds like popcorn popping on the walls of the tent. It hails on and off (mostly on) for the next hour. The hail pellets bounce under the vestibule and melt, creating puddles. The hail ends, but it continues raining. Finally at 6:45 the rain slackens. I go out in the drippy drizzle and make dinner of Pad Thai and snow peas. My stomach seems to have settled. The drizzle stops. The clouds begin breaking up. The light to the east is gorgeous.

I get the camera and tripod and walk quickly to the west end of the lake where I explored this afternoon. The light on Humphreys and the colorful clouds are ever changing. I take the last photo on the roll just before the light changes to the tranquility of evening.

## **Day 4 — Merriam Lake to Bear Lakes**

I awake at 5:30. Since I still have the lake to myself, I walk to the east end to catch the sunrise on the western peaks. It's a cloudless morning, the peaks on all sides reflected in the still water. Part of me wants to linger at Merriam Lake, but I finally I pack up and leave at around 8:30.

The climb by the falls is a grind, but not too bad. The trail is relatively easy to follow though there are a couple of alternate paths to choose from. At the top, I pause for photos of the falls and the view down to Merriam. The chain of small lakes above Merriam and below La Salle are idyllic — peaks above and green meadows and scattered rocks around the shoreline with creeks meandering between the small lakes.

The way up to La Salle is easy; stay to the right of the outlet waterfall and let the terrain show me the best route. Snow fields along the shore require staying above La Salle for halfway down the lake and then heading down to the north end. That means slow going as I pick my way through the rocks above the lake. A trail appears at the north end of the lake. I follow it to and then up the chute climbing the headwall. Like the Merriam waterfall path, it's a tough grind made easier by the view. Once at the top of the headwall, there are numerous ways to choose for the final climb up to the pass. I alternate slabs with grassy portions. A large boulder at the top of the pass makes a good beacon. The climb is more tiring than I expected. I let out an inner shout when I reach the top.

The cell phone doesn't get a signal. I get out the SPOT and my watch, which reads 11:45. I eat some peanut butter, bread, dried fruit, and jerky while admiring the magnificent panoramic view. To the east, Royce Peak looms directly opposite. La Salle and Merriam shimmer to the south with peaks rising above. To the west, Bearpaw, Ursa, and Big Bear shine with the colorful rocks and peaks of the basin rising above. The ominous clouds to the east tell me not to linger as long as I wish. I finish taking photos and pack the SPOT, unsure if it has sent a message.

The trail down twists and turns through the cliffs. Some sections are a long drop and a bit of a stretch due to my short legs. At the cliff's bottom is a large snowfield. Various footprints designate different possible routes. I pick what seems to be the most recent. The snow is slippery and the slope steep enough for me to proceed carefully. When the footprints reach a large boulder, I veer to the side to avoid the hollows that sometimes lurk beneath. I go a few steps and my right foot plunges down to my hip. I extract myself



from the hole, my boot threatening to slip off. I decide to follow a different route to the end of the snowfield. Amid some boulders, a semblance of a trail appears and then disappears in a small snow field. I come to a creek that I suspect is the inlet to Bearpaw. Instead of following it, I continue more or less straight in the direction of the lake, pass a pretty tarn, then descend a slope to intersect the creek again. Bearpaw is now straight ahead.

I follow the right hand shore around the lake. I'm not trying to follow the straightest route to Ursa but enjoying exploring the shoreline to the outlet. I follow the outlet and begin looking for a campsite on the north shore or Ursa. I find one, but feel like exploring more. Ursa is an enchanting lake. I decide to go to the south shore and see what that's like. A snowfield covers what is probably one large campsite. At the southwest end is another possibility, which I reject for it's lack of a view and plentiful mosquitoes. I climb up the cliff above and make my way along the ridge with Big Bear below on the left and the Ursa outlet straight ahead. Descending to the outlet, I rock hop across and see *the* campsite to the right of the outlet perched above Big Bear with an awe-inspiring view of Seven Gables.

The black clouds to the east that were forming when I was at the top of the pass now fill the eastern sky and are rapidly extending to the west, north, and south. I put up the tent and feel a drizzle. The last time I camped in site of Seven Gables at Medley Lakes, a storm brewed all afternoon only to fizzle out at about 5:00. Today there are only a few moments of swirling high winds and rain drops. At 5:30, the black clouds begin dissipating and transform into perfect sunset clouds against a blue sky. No one is within sight. The only sounds are the outlet creek. I feel like I can almost touch the tranquility.

This has been a day I will long treasure. I am here with only expectations of appreciating this place, possibly the only time in my life. I only have three to five years left of being able to deal with class 2 terrain and there are other places I want to go. My knees ache horribly. But tonight I feel contented. I did what I set out to do and enjoyed and appreciated every step, even the ones that ached. Darkness slowly descends over the High Sierra. A deep red glow persists in the far west — probably pollution in the Central Valley, but I ignore that fact from this vantage point. I fall asleep to the trickles and splashes of the outlet creek.

## **Day 4 — Big Bear Lakes Basin**

I awake rather later at 6:00. I slept well despite the aches and pains. Another cloudless morning on this day to explore. Today I don't have an agenda except enjoy.

I follow the trail and climb the cliffs above Big Bear. There's no possible shoreline passage. The cliffs plunge straight down into the water. At the far end of the cliffs bypass, the trail goes down a little and there's an obvious path heading up beside the White Bear Lake outlet creek, the continuation of the High Route and my path tomorrow to Dancing Bear Pass. It looks like a long grind of a steep climb to White Bear.

I continue around the western shore of Big Bear to the outlet creek. The trail route to Vee Lake is obvious here but I want to try following the outlet. The water is low enough to rock hop down to Little Bear. There's a sense of mystery and discovery in the narrow passage between the cliffs. The view of Little Bear at the end of the outlet with its narrow green meadow along the water with cliffs rising above give this small lake a sense of solitude and contentment.

I follow a trail along the east shore of Little Bear until the vale veers slightly left. I continue up a slight climb to a lovely tarn, then a little further to another lovely tarn and small meadow. Crossing the meadow and passing the tarn I emerge on a view of shimmering Claw Lake in the distance and Vee Lake straight below. Looking larger than expected, rocky points jut out and three picturesque islands scatter the lake, making it's shape more than a simple V with its fascinating, changing shoreline. I encounter three men making their way up to the ridge on their own day hike. We pass pleasantries, but it is clear they want to keep the conversation short and sweet and move on. It's interesting how easy it is to suss out the people one encounters in the backcountry.

I reach the shoreline and follow it to the west end where the outlet creek begins its plunge down to the Seven Gables Lakes. Retracing my steps, I pause often for photos and to admire the changing view and shoreline. I make my way out to the end of the V. At the V's top, I stop for a snack. No one is in sight. I follow the other shore of the V. The small lake in the center of the V is especially enthralling. There's something magical about this tiny lake within the large lake.

I finally head back. This time I better notice the diverse wildflowers scattered along the way, especially at the south end of Little Bear. I follow the



main route to Big Bear. I see no one all the way back to my campsite. Bear Lakes Basin is a striking landscape of red, brown, and grey rock stratified into small cliffs. There is little green to see — mostly patches of meadow grass surrounded by rock with a few small bushes and scattered whitebarks on the cliff sides. For the past several hours I've enjoyed a wonderful, quiet, contemplative adventure in solitude — only me and the Sierra wilderness in Bear Lakes Basin.

It's not possible to make any of this sound "exciting." If you're careful in the mountains, there shouldn't be any adventure-like excitement. There will be difficulties, but if you know one's self and accept wild nature, then adventure excitement is not to be. The adventure is inside you in what you feel; all the excitement is internal.

It's a near perfect end to a near perfect day. Like yesterday, today will be another one to treasure. It's too dark to write. And so as darkness rises and day dissolves in a red western horizon, I fall asleep to the sounds of the outlet creek.

## **Day 6 — Dancing Bear Pass, Italy Pass, Royce Lakes**

The sunrise on Seven Gables, the peaks to the west, and the cliffs and ridges about Big Bear creates a kaleidoscope of shadow and light. After photographing the early morning light and a leisurely packing, I'm on my way.. The climb to White Bear is made easier by the trail, which usually picks what seems the best way up the steep slope. The view back down to Bear Lakes is rightly praised as is the spectacular dropping panorama on the northwest side down to Hilgard canyon and far beyond. White Bear is smaller than I imagined. Snow patches scatter the shoreline and one larger snowfield covers the beginning of the High Route path down to Brown Bear Lake. Hikers have chosen various routes from circumnavigating the snow on the rocks to directly heading over and down the icy, slushy mass.

I enjoy a snack, try the cell phone due to the view to the far west to no avail, and take photos. On the right side of the climb up to Dancing Bear Pass an indistinct trail weaves up the steep slope. More solid rock, it makes the climb seem shorter and far easier than the scree scabble to the left. From the top, the view back south is also justly described with purple prose — Bear Lakes, Seven Gables, the peaks around Feather Pass create a stunning panorama.

I say farewell to Bear Lakes Basin and head across the flat top of Dancing Bear. I pass a pretty tarn with rocks jutting out of the shallow, snow melt

water. Beyond the tarn, there is a view of the way to Italy Pass. From here it looks relatively straightforward. I find out differently.

When I reach the lip of the wide bowl high above Jumble Lake that extends to Italy Pass, a large snow field covers the way. The steepness and size don't look particularly safe to cross with only hiking boots and a trekking pole. I climb up about fifty vertical feet to circle the snowfield from above. Once past, I descend to circle another snow field from below. In about twenty minutes I advance about 100 yards in the direction of the Italy Pass. I head straight for the pass again, another snowfield above me. I come to a narrow but long snowfield. The slope is less than the two I circled and it ends at a somewhat flat spot. Instead of circling it, I head carefully over the snow, my feet sliding on the icy slush. I stop my slide with the trekking pole and end up on my butt. I continue on my rear end for the approximately twenty feet to the bottom — the only way to travel. I extend my feet and control the speed of my descent with the trekking pole. I slide into a large rock, stand up, step on the rock, and another step down off the snow.

When I survey where I am, I realize the snowfields have caused me to not be on the best lateral level to head for Italy Pass. I make my way over the boulders to what seems like the correct course. The walking becomes much easier. At one point, I strike a path up a grassy slope. I see a small duck marking the way to the Italy Pass Trail. The last time I was over Italy Pass, the snow was heavy so I only had very vague idea of where the actual trail was. At a wide gully where a small creek runs, the trail is obvious. As I climb, I realize hikers have made at least two trailed routes to the top.

I see a young man walking across the pass summit and head up the final climb. The young man is with what appears to be his father. They are about to head over Dancing Bear. I warn them about the snowfields and describe Bear Lakes Basin with all the conversational purple prose I can muster. They seem unimpressed and are not talkative, heading off down the trail.

I eat lunch and take in the panorama from Italy Pass. Once more Mt. Humphreys is visible to the southeast, the narrowness of its upper peak emphasized from this angle. To the west, another favorite, Mt. Hilgard along with Abbot make an impressive backdrop . To the north, Mt. Julius Caesar stands above the pass. I've often wondered why a Sierra mountain was named for an ancient would-be dictator. I also wonder if it's possible to change the names of Sierra peaks. I think I'd start here and then Whitney. However, I don't think the USGS would necessarily agree.



On the descent of Italy Pass, as on the west side, there is more than one trail to choose. There are a hodgepodge of cut switchbacks and trails to avoid now non-existent snowfields. When I ascended the pass in 1998, it was solid snow from shortly after the first (or last) lake in Granite Park. I visit my campsite by the lake. When I was here then, I met only one party above Honeymoon Lake. Today, as I descend, Granite Park is full of people. I lose count after ten. The last and friendliest couple I meet are doing a version of my route in reverse. I tell them about the snowfields on Dancing Bear. The woman giggles at my telling about sliding down the snowfield on my butt. They are checking their map when we pass so I don't have to get out mine to determine how near I am to the cutoff point for Royce Lakes.

Shortly, I leave the trail and head up diagonally. Treasure Peak serves as a perfect direction marker. I need to bypass a gully and then follow a wide ledge and avoid dropping down further on the way up. As I climb higher, a large pointed rock becomes my beacon between Treasure and peak 12470. Tired from the climb, I arrive at the second Royce lake. Feather Peak and Royce Peak rise above. The shoreline is a jumble of rocks. I figure on camping somewhere by the third lake. I begin making my way through the jumble of rocks on the shoreline. At first it's annoying, but easy. As I reach the shaded areas below Treasure, large snow patches cover much of the rock. To avoid the danger of falling through a crack between the talus blocks, I go closer to the shore, not the easier route over the jumble. At one point, the snow extends to the shoreline. I walk in the lake. The water's drop-off looks more precipitous than what I'm comfortable with. Oh well, what the hell, just don't slip and end up sliding down the indeterminate drop. In a few steps I'm back on the talus and things improve. There's snow, but no longer going over broken piles of boulders; there's solid continuous ground beneath. The snow ends in about thirty more feet and I'm strolling along the south shore of the lake.

I pass one campsite and head to the next lake. Interspersed among the rocks and large boulders, numerous flowers bloom, a colorful contrast to the grey and black rock. Exhausted but enthralled by the flowers and stark beauty of the Royce lakes and peaks, I come to a nice campsite, take off my pack, and get out my watch. It's already 5:30. I sure hike slowly these days and that last trip over the boulders must have taken at least twenty minutes to go a few hundred yards.

The light on the peaks to the south and Merriam Peak provide a spectacular backdrop for photos. After dinner, I spend the time traipsing

between the second and third Royce lakes taking photos. The distant peaks of the Glacier Divide seem to float in the sky. The moon rises over the ridge and shines on Merriam and its reflection on the still water. Despite a weariness that would amaze Dylan, I feel happy and contented. I should sleep well tonight if the soreness of my body doesn't keep me awake. It feels good to relax at the end of the day as darkness falls.

## **Day 7 — Royce Lakes to Humphreys Basin**

I thought sunrise would be special here and it is, though I'm not sure photographically. Peaks in morning light reflecting on a lake is rather a cliché. It's a crystal clear morning with the light starting early on the peaks around Royce Lakes. The wind varies so reflection photos are hit and miss. But it is gorgeous and the location of the peaks — Merriam, Royce and Feather along with the ridge of Feather and it's neighbor to the other side rising directly out of the lakes — makes for a miraculous sight and perspective. The sense of solitude here is intense. The Royce peaks form a literal and psychological barrier to the rest of the world. The rock terrain means there are no footprints indicating human visitation. It's as if I am the first and only person to ever be here.

Reluctantly, I leave Royce Lakes about 10:00. The hike across the open alpine expanse feels like a morning walk across the top of the world. There's the fourth Royce Lake, Merriam Peak, the rock-strewn meadow, the peaks above Humphrey's Basin, and Humphreys itself lording over the land. The direct way to Pine Creek Pass is quite clear — from this vantage point head to the high point on the ridge separating French Canyon and Pine Creek Canyon. I more or less follow the outlet creek from the unnamed lakelets on the map down to French Canyon. Flowers bloom everywhere I walk. I see a tent village at the bottom. Nearing French Canyon, I enter forest. The way down through the trees takes me near the tents. From the noise and number of tents, I surmise a trail crew, which means the trail will be there, too.

The trail crew, as always, is friendly. The chief jokes they are trying to find the perfect rock for me to walk on. Sometimes I think they are so friendly to passing hikers so they can pause in their backbreaking work for a couple of minutes of conversation. Upper French Canyon is one of my favorite trails. The trees are scattered small to larger whitebarks. The creek twists and turns through a picturesque meadow carpeted with a variety of



wildflowers. To the west, from the cliffs high above the canyon Royce Falls plummet a thousand feet. If located closer to a road, the falls would be a major tourist destination, referred to in guidebooks. Here these falls are wild and free, a reminder of the natural land before humans.

I stop for lunch at a place by the creek with an unobstructed view of the falls. As the hike down the canyon continues, it descends and reaches lodge-pole forest, and so becomes less wondrous. At the Merriam outlet crossing and trail, someone has knocked down the duck. I rebuild it, though not as high and large as before. This idea that trails shouldn't be marked with ducks (I don't mean large ones but a couple of rocks set atop each other) reeks of elitism. If someone wants to take a use trail off a major trail, why not let them know where it is? Should only those wealthy enough to afford a GPS or who manage to navigate by smarts and luck get to Merriam Lake and other use-trail destinations? While I personally prefer a map and compass and the challenge of finding my way, I don't mind an occasional small duck to help out and provide reassurance.

Between here and the Hutchinson Meadow junction and crossings, I see no one. After negotiating the crossings, which seem a lot easier this time, I meet a party about a half mile up the Piute Pass trail. I remember the Piute Pass trail divides with one part going to Golden Trout Lakes. I don't see the divide as I take the direct route up to Humphrey's Basin. I suppose if I was looking harder for it, I would have seen it. In the distance to the right I spy Golden Trout Lakes through the trees. When I emerge from the climb into the open expanse of Humphrey's Basin, I head off to the left. Fields of violet lupine stretch out over the land. Rather than trying to find a particular place such as Tomahawk Lake, I wander in the general direction of Mt. Humphreys looking for a campsite. I soon find one at a lovely tarn with an awe-inspiring view of Humphreys and Emerson dead ahead and the Glacier Divide filling the southern skyline. My guess is that I'm at one of the small tarns between Tomahawk and Lower Desolation Lake. The SPOT location will tell me where I am.

I get out my watch. It says 5:30, so that's nearly five hours since lunch. I seem to hike slower each day. The evening is incandescent. The whitebarks, meadow grass, wildflowers, rocks, and peaks seem to glow from within instead of merely reflecting the last light of day. I take a couple of photos of Humphreys reflecting in the tarn by my campsite, then hike down to another tarn below. A coyote circles the tarn, walking quickly, too quickly for me to get a photo of him silhouetted against the evening light. At this tarn, not only

Humphreys is reflected; as I walk around the tiny lake, the deepening alpenglow of Mt. Emerson and the Glacier Divide along with the whitebarks and the moon rising above the peaks above Piute Pass are mirrored in the pristine still water. The clouds dance through shades of pink, red and orange, and, as the sun sets, become a fiery glow covering the sky.

When I walk back to my campsite, I need to get my bearings in the approaching darkness to find the exact spot. The moonlight reflecting on the tiny tarn is my beacon. As I'm falling asleep, I am serenaded by several coyotes howling at the full moon.

## **Day 8 — Humphreys Basin to North Lake**

What a strange morning; it's cloudy, windy, and it feels like it might rain. Instead of my usual morning of running around taking photos, I have breakfast before 7:00. I am packed up and ready to go soon after. I linger enjoying a quiet moment of contemplation with coffee and writing before I set off on my way back to the civilized modern world. Except for the food, I think I prefer this one. I've had a week of being me, no one else to please or impress. Except for the trail crew and the couple in Granite Park, I haven't had a conversation since Merriam Lake. I've been able to listen to the High Sierra without distractions. Serenity is all-encompassing.

As yesterday morning, there's the wondrous sensation of walking across the top of the world — no trail or people in sight, only Humphreys, Emerson, the Glacier Divide, the Bear Lakes peaks and wildflowers, scattered rocks, and meadow grass. I hike through fields of lupine and other wildflowers. After several minutes of wonderment, I intersect the Piute Pass trail. I see no one until the final ascent to the pass. A smiling couple passes me on the knoll with the panoramic view westward. They stop and take in the view before continuing their descent at the same viewpoint where I had just taken a long pause before heading up to the pass. I recall how the trail used to go closer to Summit Lake before it was rerouted here.

The wind is blowing in gale-like gusts at the top of the pass. No one is here. I take advantage of the solitude despite the wind and stop for a few minutes before beginning my descent into civilization. A large group is taking a rest stop at the lovely tarn below the final climb to the pass. I pass another group at Piute Lake. In a spot sheltered from the wind, I pause for lunch at Loch Leven. The gusts blow with enough force to create whitecaps on the water.



On the descent from Loch Leven, I feel I'm on the last lap. At the end of a trip, the final couple of miles are often hiked with impatience and anticipation. Today I tell myself to enjoy and appreciate them. Though it isn't as wondrous as French Canyon, Bear Lakes basin, or Granite Park, this is a beautiful trail. Blooming wildflowers still line the path. I meet a family with two children and I recall my son's first trip up this trail to Humphreys Basin. Just after the final creek crossing, three teenage girls pass me on their day hike, their clothes impeccably neat and clean. They stare at my disheveled state. The father passes me shortly, puffing from the climb from the campground. More of the walk-in sites are occupied than a week ago, but some remain empty.

I reach the dirt road to the parking lot and meet a camper with a fishing pole walking back to his campsite. "Did you have a good trip?" he asks with a smile. I smile back and reply, "Fabulous!"