

## **Day 1, Crescent Meadow to Buck Creek**

My anticipation for this trip is even more intense than usual. I've wanted to visit Kaweah Basin for many years. Now I'll finally do it. I feel I've planned the route with lots of time to appreciate the solitude and unique beauty of this place that seems so special, even for the Sierra.

I am up at 4:00 AM, on the road at 4:35. On I-580 through the Bay Area, half the vehicles on the road are semi-trucks, on the move delivering the stuff American's want. I am able to go 70 mph for a lot of the trip. On 580 most cars are going faster. On Interstate 5, the speed limit is 70 and also on parts of Highway 99. Even on Highway 180 east of Fresno on the two lane portions, I'm able to go at a good pace. I make it to the King's Canyon National Park entrance at 9:20 and Lodgepole Visitor Center at 10:05.

A young woman is picking up her permit in front of me. She seems to be an employee who is also hiking the High Sierra Trail. The ranger fills in my permit; he seems impressed that I am so sure of my itinerary for each day — Buck Creek, Nine Lakes Basin, the island lake in Kaweah Basin, Red Spur, the Picket Creek Lake, upper Kaweah Basin. After getting my permit I phone home.

The drive through Giant Forest is magnificent. I have to come back here with my wife, camp at Lodgepole, and day hike through the sequoias. The drive to Crescent Meadow on the narrow road leads me to want to stop right here. Only my sense of urgency to get on the trail causes me to keep going to the parking lot at Crescent Meadow. I eat half my sandwich at the trailhead, put the last food items that were in the refrigerator at home in the pack, and begin my hike on the High Sierra Trail

The High Sierra Trail climbs gradually through forest for a mile until the world opens up at Eagle View. To the west, the smog shrouded the foothills; to the south glorious peaks and ridges rising out of a forest canyon. The view south continues as I climb the carved out path following the edge of the canyon. I round a bend and the far peaks appear, forming the eastern horizon.

The High Sierra Trail deserves its reputation. It's "magical" as the sign said at the Visitor Center permit desk bulletin board. There are fabulous views of the peaks to the south and the east. The splendid green canyon meanders a couple of thousand feet below. Numerous small side creeks break the monotony of walking the wide, highway-like trail.

I always feel a deep fear on the first day hiking. Yes, there's the exhilaration of getting here and finally being here in the High Sierra, a place that

occupies my thoughts during my daily life in the lowlands. But will I still be able to do it? The hike is always tiring due to the altitude change. I'm not in sync with the pack and its weight; there's the first day of adjusting to that trip's particular way the pack moves and shifts with my steps. I think ahead to the hard parts — climbing to Kaweah Gap from Hamilton Lakes and then over Pyraqueen Col. But now I am here and happy.

The HST passes through pretty and interesting forest—pines, scrub bushes, fir/beach type trees. When the distant views are obscured, the forest prevents boredom while at the same time allowing me to hike at a decent pace.

I meet only one man on the trail who asks if it's about three miles to Crescent Meadow. I say probably fewer since I've been hiking less than an hour. The trail alternates forest and wide open ledges. Small creeks cross the trail on a regular basis. I stop and finish my sandwich at one of the side creeks where I can get my pack well off the trail. I arrive at the Mehrton Creek camping complex, the map on a small bulletin board pointing out the campsites and bearbox. Six miles and it's still only 2:50 — Buck Creek seems more than a good possibility. Though I'm feeling the altitude and a little tired, I think I can make it. When I reach Nine Mile Creek I am convinced to go the last mile. At Nine Mile there's a bearbox and tent areas in the trees by the trail with creek access below and no views of anything except the surrounding forest.

I meet a wrangler with his empty load coming up the trail about a one-third of a mile above Buck Creek. He is friendly and tells me there's another string about five minutes behind. On a relatively steep descent to Buck Creek, I see the second string rounding a bend below. I look for a place to stand off the trail. There isn't a good spot. I ask the wrangler where he wants me to stand so I don't spook the horses. He looks around, points to a spot a little further down the trail, and says, yes, the horses spook easily. I go over to the spot. He tells me the names of the horses and says to talk to them to reassure them. I feel silly standing there talking to horses I don't know and will probably never see again. They pass by and he says thanks and have a good trip. I wonder if the horses really spook easily or if he was just having fun with the lone grey-haired backpacker.

I hear Buck Creek below. The bearbox is clearly visible to the right and below the trail. A sign by the trail says "Food Storage Locker" with an arrow pointing to the bearbox location. Of the two tent sites, I pick the one farthest from the bear box. I take out my gear and place the SPOT messenger on top of the bear box — there is a clear view of the sky there. I erect

the tent, organize things, check the SPOT has sent my message, and head down to the creek for water.

The area below the small footbridge over the creek is a large sloping slap beside the creek. I get water and soak my feet in the soothing waters of the creek, washing the trail dust off my legs and arms. Returning to my campsite, I purify the water with a Steripen — as far as I'm concerned, any site with heavy human and packer traffic requires purifying the water. Since it takes a couple of minutes before the blue wand light turns off, I consider my precaution justified.

I make an early dinner since I know the light will disappear early. As usual, on the first night, the altitude sickness tells me I'm not hungry enough to finish my dinner and, of course, I am actually more than hungry enough to finish every last noodle in the pot.

After eating, I go back down to the creek. The last light in either direction on the Buck Creek gorge is wonderful. The ramparts of the peaks to the north and fading light glowing on the trees to the south make me pause and appreciate being in solitude in the Sierra. I take a few photos until the light fades. I thank Wandering Daisy and Giantbrookie for their sage advice to camp here. As I'm returning to my campsite, a lone hiker descends the trail. It turns out to be the woman who picked up her permit in front of me this morning. She is heading up to Bearpaw Meadow. She's an employee of Panther Ranch in the Grand Canyon so we exchange canyon stories. She heads off in the fading light, hoping to reach Bearpaw before dark.,

After writing for a short time, I go down to the bridge about 8:15. There's just enough light to find my way down. The stars are emerging. I revel in the night sky, then make my way with help from my flashlight back to the campsite. Lying in my sleeping bag, still buzzing from the long day, I watch the stars since I left the rainfly off. I slip into sleep.

## **Day 2: Buck Creek to Nine Lakes Basin**

A new morning. Getting that first night in the Sierra, is always a transformative shift in my consciousness. I slept better than expected. I awoke up at 1:00, sometime in between, 4:20, and finally 5:35. It was a warm night, even at this lower elevation.

I enjoyed twilight, dawn, and sunrise, though no sunrise photos. The light doesn't reach even the visible peaks and ridges until after 7:00. I expect the

rest of the mornings will be different in terms of sunrise views. I pack up and hit the trail before 8:00.

Bearpaw Meadow is a lot different than expected. The High Sierra Camp is perched on a ledge system above the valley below with nice views of the peaks to the north. People are sitting on the outside decks, talking, finishing coffee, and enjoying the view. The guests obviously feel they must ignore passing backpackers — none acknowledge my presence.

I pass through quickly and enter a deep forest on a long descent to Lone Pine Creek. The views became more magnificent with every rounding of a bend. The vale rising to Kaweah Gap dominates the view to the right. The valley below extends to the domes and mountains to the west. The trail passes through bogs where small side creeks cross the path, becoming the path in places. The wildflowers are abundant, though it is obvious the peak bloom was at least two weeks ago. The bends in the trail keeps me moving in anticipation of what's around the next one. I cross the bridge at Lone Pine Creek, the wreckage of the 1930's bridge below. This bridge feels strong enough to withstand almost anything.

A short climb up takes me to the Elizabeth Pass Trail junction. I hear the sound of hammering. A trail crew ahead? Soon I pass one man in dreadlocks pounding metal stakes into the solid rock for support. In about 15 minutes I pass two men who seem to be the authority figures of the crew. We chat briefly.

The trail goes down before ascending to the top of the beautiful waterfall from the Hamilton Lake outlet creek, then pass over the top of the falls to cross the creek. Now it's the final climb to Hamilton Lake. The trail crew's campsite complex is set up along the outlet creek. I see no tents at Hamilton, though I suspect it's because the couple of people I see walking around are camped further off the trail. I cross the outlet creek and look for a place for lunch. I see a pine by the lake offering shade at a pretty spot. I enjoy lunch in the shade by the lake, soaking my feet in the water. The woman from Panther Ranch passes by, remarking, "That's a pretty spot." We talk for a couple of minutes; she's heading to Moraine Lake.

I begin the climb to Kaweah Gap about 12:45. I'm feeling like I'll be at Precipice Lake by 3:00 or so. I go slow and steady up the trail, admiring the magnificent views. I begin to feel a sharp pain in my right big toe. I'm not sure exactly when it began or what caused it. I only know every other step is painful and saps my energy as much as the climb. I'm going quite slowly. I stop for a drink and check my watch in my pack— 2:30 so not that slow.

I figure another half hour or so to Precipice Lake. The pain increases and I choose where I am going to plant my right foot with a deliberateness not normally done on a trail. My pace becomes slower. At the tunnel, the remnants of avalanche rubble spills across the trail. I finally come to the lake below Precipice I hiked down to in 2003 when I camped at Precipice. At a snail's pace, I come to Precipice. It remains singularly magnificent.

I take off my pack on the perfect rock, snack on an energy bar, take a couple of photos, and refill my water bottles at the outlet creek. After an initial burst of energy up the short switchbacking climb above the lake, I slow to a crawl. The fragile beauty of the small meadows and tarns spurs me on to Kaweah Gap.

I take off my pack, enjoying the view down the Big Arroyo. My watch says 5:00. I reconnoiter my route for tomorrow and a campsite for tonight. Tents are scattered along the outlet creek of the heart-shaped lake. There must be at least six tents. Above the lake, I see two waterfalls descending from the lake that was my original destination for today. The creek then meanders down to the Big Arroyo. If I don't find a more private spot at the heart-shaped lake, I'll head up to the creek.

The trail down is refreshingly easy. I can plant my right foot flat, which seems to ease the pain. I come to the outskirts of the tent village. A woman is obviously looking for a place to go to the bathroom as I walk through. She says there are already a lot of people camped here with a tone of "so don't you camp here, too." I reply I'm going up there eventually, pointing towards Kaweah Queen. I continue through the conglomeration of tents, trying to avoid cutting through anyone's campsite on my way to a crossing of the outlet creek. On the other side, none of the sites are good except for one on the other side of the creek from a group of six to eight people who are standing around talking loudly and watching me. I head up to the creek below the waterfall. The incline is easy and avoiding rocks simple. I intersect the creek at a bend. I see a site, but with bad water access. I see what looks like a site on the other side, Hopping the creek, it turns out not to be one. The exhaustion is starting to set in. I gaze back across the creek and see what seems to be a nice site on the other side. I hop back across — yes, this will do just fine.

I unpack, turn on the SPOT, get a pot of water, and get ready to start dinner. The sun is about to go behind Kaweah Gap. The light in the trees around me is beautiful. I take a couple of photos before the sun disappears.

My toes hurts like hell. I take off my boots and socks. Most of the toe nail is varying shades of purple. One spot where the pain seems to emanate

from is nearly black. I put on my camp shoes, a beat up pair of Reeboks. That seems a slight improvement over my hiking boots.

Dinner is soon ready and I find a perfect rock wall to lean against with a view down the Big Arroyo. After eating, I erect the tent and take a few photos of the day's last light on the Great Western Divide and of Venus shining to the right of Eagle Scout Peak. I write by flashlight, feeling exhausted. I wonder if I'm going to make it over Pyraqueen Col tomorrow. Perhaps my toe will feel better in the morning. I take two IBs and sleep well.

### **Day 3: Nine Lakes Basin outlet creek to lake adjacent to Lake 11,682**

Awake for good at 5:00 after a good night's sleep. I watch the light appear. The peaks above big Arroyo and Kaweah Gap are gorgeous in the dawn light. I appreciate this campsite much more this morning. The view down the Big Arroyo is magnificent. The sunrise pattern is quite interesting. First light falls on the peaks to the south above the Big Arroyo, then makes its way as far as the pinnacle peaks, then next to Eagle Scout Peak above Kaweah Gap and the ones far back above Nine Lakes Basin.

My toe still hurts. I try to ignore it. But I pack up slower than usual. I don't get off until nearly 8:30. I follow a route up the first cliff I reconnoitered last evening. I follow a chute and go up to the next ledge. There I come to a cliff, and try going left and up. This does not look good; I go back to the lower ledge. Following it up to the right, there are the faint impressions of a use trail. It is relatively easy the rest of the way to the top of this first climb.

The meadow before the next waterfall is one of those sublime Sierra landscapes — a creek winding its way through meadow and rock. The next climb isn't as straightforward. I stop for a Power Bar at the bottom and pick out a route. I climb grassy patches and scree; the scree is annoying. There's a lot of zig-zagging as I go from small chute to small chute on my way to the top. I make slow progress up, but steady and so over the top.

The first lake of the chain below Kaweah Queen fills the basin before me. I take off the pack and notice three men about 100 feet away. One waves, I wave back and start walking towards them. They start walking towards me. They are day hikers from the heart-shaped lake, very friendly. We discuss the way to the next lake up the chain. Separately, we had each come to the same conclusion from the terrain. They head up with a friendly good-bye, good luck. I follow after taking some photos. They are almost out of sight when I start.

The ascent is over rocks and ledges. My right big toe is really hurting so I pick my way to avoid steps that will cause even more pain. I finally make it to the next lake, a beautiful body of water in a magnificent setting. I follow the shoreline of the small bay. It's obvious Lake 11,682 is straight over the pile of talus that stretches along the entire east end this lake. The talus is made up of large rocks with many flat ones to hop across. My toe hurts even more so I make an effort to cross on the flat ones. However, it is not always possible. I can see Lake 11,682 beyond the talus pile. This is being much more difficult than it should. Finally I'm standing on the shore of Lake 11,682. Pyraqueen Col rises at the other end. It's time for lunch. Getting out my watch, it says 12:30. So it took me four hours just to get this far.

The toe is throbbing. I take off my boots. A myriad of shades of purple cover the toenail. The toe around it is a deep dark red and swollen. I stretch my legs out in front of me and put my feet side by side. The right big toe is at least a half inch wider than the left. An especially dark red area just below the toenail swells much like a blister. I reach down and touch there — OW! I gaze up to Pyraqueen Col. I decide to eat lunch and reassess.

While eating, my eyes trace a route up the Col. Meanwhile, the toe continues throbbing. I try to rationally think through the situation. It's taken me four hours just to get up to Lake 11,682. At the rate I'm going it probably will take me forty-five minutes to an hour just to get to the other end of the lake over the talus and another three to four hours to climb the Col. Then there's finding my way down, another hour at least. My toe is screaming with pain every step I take. My judgement when I suffer prolonged pain is definitely suspect. Rationally, I realize that right now I would have a difficult time making it back to Crescent Meadow on the High Sierra Trail, let alone climbing the Col to Kaweah Basin. I need to let my toe heal. That means staying off it as much as possible. I will camp at the neighboring lake back across the talus field and then decide my next steps.

I notice the three men stopped down the shoreline where the neighboring lake ends. We exchange waves. I finish my lunch and take two IBs. My course settled, I decide to head to the left of the highest part of the talus pile and try to stay only on flat rocks, even if it is not as direct. Flat ones only hurt every other step. Sloped rocks cause a stab of major pain.

Slowly and carefully, I make my way back over the talus. In about fifteen minutes I'm at the shore of the neighboring lake. After another fifteen minutes, I've made it around the bay and over the outlet creek to what I think is a possible campsite. It's not exactly level, but it will suffice. Taking off the

pack, I sit and look over my surroundings. The shoreline extends to my right. The map shows a small lake a hundred yards or so to the west. Would that be a better place to camp? The view to the west might be spectacular and the view across the lake to the Col is nearly the same as here. I decide to check it out. I see no possible sites along the lakeshore. The small lake to the west looks promising. The view is even more spectacular than I expected. It is a beautiful small lake, more like a very large tarn. It has an intimacy I find charming. But the only possible campsites are by the shoreline, not anywhere near a hundred feet from the water. I realize my judgement is becoming suspect in my search for the perfect campsite. I slowly make my way back to the first site above the outlet creek.

I unpack and erect the tent at a snail's pace. I turn on the SPOT messenger and send the prearranged "I'm changing my itinerary" secondary message. After the tent is up, I send the normal OK message, hoping that it will convey my situation. After forty years together, I maintain a now inbred faith it is understood by my wife.

Now I will just sit tight for a couple of days. Leaning against a rock, I begin to take in my surroundings and write scattered notes. Pyraqueen Col rises across the lake. To its right, Black Kaweah forms a massive wall rising above Lake 11,682. To the left of the Col, Kaweah Queen tops a more massive ridge extending to Lawson Peak and beyond. This is not where I wanted to be at this moment, but it is a unique, spectacular place.

While snacking on trail mix, I attempt to come up with a new itinerary for the rest of the trip. A side of me still hopes that come tomorrow, my toe will feel better and I will go to Kaweah Basin.

After dinner, I photograph my surroundings. The lake is still; the reflections are incandescent. The outlet creek forms a large pool; the ridge beyond Lawson Peak reflects in the pool's quiet water. On the other side, the small plateau above the lake contains a couple of campsites and an awe-inspiring view of Lawson Peak, the lake below, and the peaks and ridges above the north end of Nine Lakes Basin. The beams of the setting sun shine over the lake below. The Sheep Fire above Kings Canyon creates a smoky sunset, the sunbeams refracting through a haze and the peaks above Nine Lakes Basin obscured.

I make my way back to my campsite, write a few notes, watch the stars emerge, and crawl into the tent. It is hard to find a comfortable sleeping position that does not place my right foot where the pain is too intense. I doze off, wake up, doze off, wake. I get up to pee; the watch says it's 10:15; getting



back in the tent proves difficult. I'm unable to get back to sleep. My disappointment about Kaweah Basin pours out in frustration, longing, and tears. Gazing up at the sky, a bright shooting passes straight above me. Comforted by this sight, I drift into real sleep until 3:30 when my sloping tent, hard, rocky ground, and the cold wake me. I finally get a position when my toe, hips and shoulders are in agreement and sleep soundly for two more hours.

#### **Day 4: Lake adjacent to Lake 11,682.**

Last night in my despair I considered seeing how my toe feels, going over the Col, and skip my layover day in Kaweah Basin. When I awake and start to get dressed, putting my toe in various positions, I have my answer. I'm not going anywhere today.

The smoke has cleared. I take a few photos at sunrise, but keep my movement to the area around my campsite. I spend a day getting to know my immediate area. Rock is everywhere. The area around this lake is nearly lifeless. Some tufts of grass pop up here and there. A few erigeron grow in the cracks. There are no pikas or marmots and only one species of bird (rosy finch?). Otherwise all is water and rock — grey granite, black shale, sandy shale, and Kaweah red with shades in between. The rosy finches flutter above the lake and shoreline, their beating wings unheard. The silence, the stillness on this sunny September morning is a living presence — the stillness of being.

I spend the day observing, absorbing, and writing. I remind myself of the lessons of the wilderness. Forget even my expectations; enjoy each and every moment; revel in the solitude and beauty of where I am now!

After an early dinner, I venture with camera and tripod along the lake-shore to the small neighboring lake to appreciate the views of the Great Western Divide and Big Arroyo from the ridge above the tarn-like lake. There's a wondrous sense of self-containment to this lake. The Big Arroyo seems far away as it stretches out below the ridge. The smoke has returned, rendering any photos an exercise in capturing the view for my memory.

I take my time returning to my campsite, appreciating the perspective of Black Kaweah, Kaweah Queen, Lawson Peak and the ridges reflecting in the lake. The outlet creek creates a small pool before plunging to the lake below. The reflections in the pool occupy me before I cross the outlet. I make my way up to the viewpoint where the Kaweahs and peaks above Nine Lakes

Basin form a near-perfect backdrop to the lake below where the last light shines through Kaweah Gap over the still water reflecting the deep red of the Kaweahs. The smoke obscures the far view, but this evening, it doesn't matter so much.

As the light fades, I make my way back to my campsite. Darkness is falling on a marvelous day. This is why I do this, come to the High Sierra. I come for days like today. The stars slowly fill the sky. I slip back into the tent and into my sleeping bag. I gaze up at the stars for a few minutes and then find a position where my toe allows me to sleep.

## **Day 5: Lake adjacent to Lake 11,682 to unnamed creek**

At dawn, it's another clear morning. I make my way to the adjacent tarn/lake to catch the day's first light. When I reach the ridge on the far side of the lake with the overlook of the Big Arroyo, there is still a smoky haze lingering to the west. The view remains magnificent. I follow the shoreline back to the east side. From here, one of the peaks of the Great Western Divide reflects picturesquely on the water.

I pick a route over the rocks above the lakeshore back to my campsite. I now know where to go to minimize the pain. After breakfast, I sit writing and figuring out what to do. I need a change of scenery. I decide to hike down to the lake below, then over to where the creek from the next lake north empties down. I will follow that outlet down to where there is one of those magical creek/meadow landscapes and find a campsite. I'll set up camp and see how my toe is doing. From there, I'll decide whether to go somewhere else in Nine Lakes Basin or stay put for another day. On Monday, I'll go to Precipice Lake and Tuesday to Lone Pine Creek or Bearpaw Meadow. This will be the Nine Lakes Basin trip. I think of possibly going down the Big Arroyo to where the beautiful lake/pool sits about a half mile or mile down the High Sierra Trail, except it's beside the trail and so lacks privacy.

Now I have semblance of a plan. Let's see what happens.

I pack up slowly. I decide to try descending along the outlet creek. A very faint use trail seems to go that way. The first descent is trial and tribulation. Things are going well though the steep descent leads me to slide down on my rear to avoid the pain. A rock wall blocks further descent. Crossing the creek and going down the other side would possibly be a disaster; I can't see if it ends at a cliff. I go back up; climbing very slowly and carefully. When I

reach the beginning of the steep section, I head a little further west and back down. My toe causes a rather tenuous sense of balance. The scree sections are very unstable. At one, I cause a small landslide. I descend some sections on my butt, others standing but holding rocks for balance. I slowly make my way down to the lake shore. The overland route I came up two days ago was much easier. While this route had obviously been used before, I suspect it was one regretted. My toe throbs.

Once along the lake, walking the shoreline is an easy meander through rocks and grass. I hop the outlet, find a rock place my pack on, and go reconnoiter. The way down the farther outlet creek appears easy. There is a use trail down, a gradual decent. I suspect those in the know use this versus the way I came up. I suspect this is part of the route to Pants Pass. Soon I am hiking through a meadow, following the creek down. When I round the bend of the large rock formation, I know this is where to look for a campsite. The creekside setting and the view should mean there are at least a couple of sites.

No. I see this one area across the creek which I'm sure is it. No. That area has lots of flat spots, but with rocks and is covered with dying white flowers. I take off my pack and look elsewhere. Finally, in looking for the way down, I find both an easy descent and a possible site except for the flowers on the tent area. I decided to go back to my pack. My new perspective leads to a nice flat area with small rocks, but no flowers to be crushed by a tent. I shove the small rocks aside with my left foot and there's the tent area—a tight squeeze but adequate. I wonder if I should forego the tent and sleep out. I decide to play it safe and put up the tent.

I eat lunch then go to the creek for water and to check out the wildflowers. The narrow creek descends in a series of small waterfalls. I find one with a good place to sit and soak my foot in the rushing water — nature's whirlpool bath. The toe is still swollen; the area below the toe nail remains a dark red and still painful to the touch. My throbbing toe feels better after a long soaking, though I do not really know how much is the healing properties of the cool rushing water or my mind convincing me how much this helps.

Eventually I get hungry and return to what I consider my campsite. I sit leaning on a rock, writing, and enjoying the view. Below is the lovely mini-forest of foxtail pines, the heart-shaped lake, the Big Arroyo stretching to the south with the Great Western Divide rising above. Kaweah Gap is straight across at the same elevation. In the other direction, the creek meanders down through small cliffs and slabs with a few bushes and green meadow grass filled with flowers. A beautifully formed rockface divides this creek from the outlet creek I descended this morning.

Tomorrow I may move a quarter mile down to the trees. I'm tired of being in the open with no shade. Going in a day early crosses my mind, but that would mean spending Labor Day at Lone Pine Creek or Bearpaw Meadow. Also, another easy day will help my toe heal. Maybe tomorrow I'll go up to the lake above the heart-shaped lake or beyond.

After dinner, I photograph the light on my surroundings. I get the two sets of photos I want and then the smoke envelops the views. The haze seems even heavier tonight. The sunset play of light over Kaweah Gap, the basin below, and Big Arroyo is interesting, but I doubt the photos will be any good. Venus shines above Kaweah Gap as the sky turns shifting shades of deep red.

I still have seen noone since Thursday. Kaweah Gap is too far away for me to see people on though I suspect anyone there saw me on the cliff taking pictures. I'm having a good time even if it's not a big discovery trip. But still I'm staying in places in Nine Lakes Basin that are unusual enough not to see anyone else. The last light slowly fades beyond Kaweah Gap. Crimson bands form in the far west as Venus appears above them. The crescent of the new moon appears above the Kaweahs. The multitude of the Milky Way gradually covers the sky. I crawl into the tent and continue star gazing until I drift into sleep.

## **Day 6: Unnamed creek to lake 10,725**

As the sun rises, I study the patterns of varying shades of rock, green pockets within the rock, brown dirt on the faces of the peaks of the Great Western Divide above the Big Arroyo. It seems not as warm as yesterday. There's still not a cloud in the sky. A breeze rustles, unlike the other mornings. I'm not sure what this portends.

I'm not sure what anything portends. The only predictable outcome I wish this morning is for a cup of Tang, oatmeal, and coffee. As yesterday, I spend a leisurely morning before packing up and heading off to further explore Nine Lakes Basin.

It is an easy, leisurely walk down the cliff to the foxtail pines below. I wonder about camping here amidst these resplendent trees. There is a nice site where I suspected one would be, a lovely spot. But it's too similar in view to last night if I climbed back up a few yards. I walk down through the pines a 100 yards or so and then go right to the top of the knoll in the center of the pines. I come on a large set of tracks. By their shape, they are not a hiking boot. I have no idea what they are — there were no clear details except the shape.

Walking in this large stand of trees after being treeless for three days, there's a wonderful sense of the essence of a beautiful, distinct forest with this immense other world showing through from every direction beyond the edge of the trees. The forest feels mysterious, secret inside the brightly lit world beyond.

From the knoll, I hike down through more pines. I check out the pretty little grove above the heart-shaped lake. The trees are more spread out than it appeared from the ridge last night and this morning. There's one site. The view down the Big Arroyo is cut off by the one mound/dome/ridge sitting picturesquely at what seems the head of the Big Arroyo.

I continue up to the next, smaller grove. A decent campsite is not too far from the creek. The view down the Big Arroyo is still limited and there's no place to sit and take it all in while writing. I head up to the next grove of short whitebarks and it's much the same. Heading up and toward the outlet creek I'm able to see to the east around the lake. I spent two nights at this lake in 2003 at a site on this eastern side of the outlet creek. It feels very different this year. I spy a tiny grove of whitebarks across the creek — perfect. There's some semblance of greenery, a little shade and a magnificent view of the outlet creek making its way down to the heart-shaped lake and beyond down the Big Arroyo with another, until now, unseen peak on the left of the Great Western Divide.

My toe aches and throbs so going to the lake above with a pack seems risky. I'll set up camp, eat lunch and head up to the lakes creating the inlet creek without the burden of a pack. Discouraged by rain when I was here before, I never made it to the lakes above. Now I'll complete my Nine Lakes Basin excursion.

Without a pack, the climb is much easier. I follow a route far to the right of the inlet creek descending to lake 10,725. Beautiful flowers blanket the meadow, especially nearer the creek. I am drawn to climb up a route near the creek until the terrain leads me to stray back to the right. A pretty little waterfall drops down to the last bench before the basin with the three lakes that sit below the Kaweah crest. The first lake is the smallest of the three. It is beginning to dry up. A second adjacent lake is larger and the loveliest of the three. The uppermost is the largest with the Kaweah ridge rising directly above.

I take in the sights and sounds, have a snack, and head back down. The smoke is already causing a haze to hang on the peaks and in the Big Arroyo. I follow the creek as much as possible while descending. The flowers are lovely. When the bushes discourage any further following the creek, I head to my left and down to the lake 10,725 and back to my campsite.

My toe is throbbing; maybe I shouldn't have taken that excursion. Right now, it seems worth it. I sit and write, snacking on trail mix until dinner.

The wind is blowing in strong gusts. The smoke fills the Big Arroyo. It is colder than last night — it's only 7:00 and it feels like 6:00 yesterday. I doubt I'll take many photos unless the glow due to the fire gets interesting at sunset and after. For now, I can look, think, and write.

Wispy, smoky clouds start drifting in from the west, the first clouds I've seen except for the single one on Friday. At 7:30 Venus appears. The sky has almost no colors — a grey sky with a slight tint of red to the grey, quite different than last night. Is it another sign of a change in the weather? It's doing to be a cold night. The wind is heavy; maybe it will calm down at sunset, but this has a feeling of one those all night blows.

I've had a good time these four days. I've made the best of the situation. I've definitely had solitude. I've appreciated the subtle wonders of Nine Lakes Basin. We'll see how the short hike back goes tomorrow and camp at Precipice Lake. I wonder if the smoke is no longer only the Sheep Fire since it's so thick.

I sit and write until the light fades away. An almost bland sunset, though the smoke has dissipated to a large extent. Maybe the wind is so strong it blew the smoke away. And so the day ends. Far from my best day in the High Sierra, but a good day. It is time for the stars to appear then to bed.

## **Day 7: Lake 10,725 to Precipice Lake**

It's another cloudless morning. Awake late — 6:10; no color in the sky. I am able to get dressed and out to take photos well before the light develops. It's a quiet morning, even for timberline. The lack of wildlife is hard to interpret. I can't remember if it was this way the other time I was here. There are a couple of marmots and that's it. Oh—there just went a bird to tell me to shut up about the local wildlife.

I haven't been thinking so much about myself — psychologically that is. And even spiritually, though now that epiphany comes more easily than before 1998. Once I sit still and let the transcendence reawaken, I am always partially in that place of wonder. The psychological ties into the spiritual. Now I don't dwell on my psychology. When I am here, I am at peace with myself. That is why I so easily recovered from the disappointment of the third day. It was beyond my control. So I appreciated these moments, the here

and now of where I am. It helps to locate myself in a jaw dropping location. If I can't move around much, then be where I don't need to move around—and retain the solitude. There is only me in these mountains, meadows, lakes, and creeks —no human distraction from the wilderness. I'm alone in the immense wilderness, hearing it's languages and listening and understanding much of what each language tells.

As I'm packing up to leave, the drone of a helicopter breaks the wilderness silence. The helicopter passes overhead and above the western ridge. It makes a turn back east and drops out of sight, as if it is going to land at Hamilton Lake. I tell myself that I must be mistaken and it actually flew further west.

I leave the campsite at 10:15 and decide to follow the west shore of the heart-shaped lake as a final Nine Lakes Basin exploration. The boulders, meadow, and inlet creek create a wondrous landscape on the north shore. The northwest shore is boggy, so I go further away from the water for a short detour. I don't think many people circumnavigate the lake. The use trail, while clear, is not worn down. I was expecting a well trampled trail. From this shore, there's a unique perspective of the area that begins rising from the lake and continues up in stages to the Kaweah Crest. I see no one camped in the tent village at the south end. I walk through the sand, grass, and boulders, taking in the surrounding landscape from Mt. Stewart and Kaweah Gap south to the Great Western Divide and Big Arroyo. A remembered lone tree serves as a guide to the trail. The climb up is easy. I am careful how I step, the left foot up first on the stair steps. Since I normally do it the other way around, I kept telling myself left foot first.

I reach Kaweah Gap at 11:10. No one is here. I take a photograph of the George Stewart plaque, though the light is such the lettering will not stand out sufficiently. Finally, after the first tarn, I meet five 30-something men. One guy stares at my grey hair and ratty appearance with a quizzical look, letting the lead man do all the talking. He says the trail crew moved up to Hamilton in the overflow section. I wonder about this and ask him if he's sure (the next day it turns out he's mistaken). When I tell him they are the first people I've seen since last Thursday, he says there's a solo hiker ahead.

I continue my descent to Precipice from tarn to tarn. This section of trail has an intimate, almost magical beauty. At the last tarn, it's already been 20 minutes since I left the Gap. I had thought of hiking back up here between dinner and before the wondrous light on Precipice Lake for the view down Big Arroyo. Now I know with my toe, that's not going to happen.

At Precipice, there's no one in sight. Hopping the outlet creek, I make my way to the campsite beneath the large boulder with the view down to

Angel Wings where I camped at in 2003. I set up the tent, take off my boots, and take my lunch to a nice viewpoint of Precipice and the far surroundings.

Afterwards, making my way back to the campsite, I step with the right foot on a rock that partially slides out under the foot. I feel a sharp pain, but don't think it's much to worry about. As I take my next step, blood drips down on the sand and rocks. I hop on my left foot to a rock near my pack for the first aid kit. The blood continues dripping. The bottom of my foot is sliced; I can feel a thin layer of skin flapping off the foot and small pieces of gravel stuck in the cut. Okay, so now what to do? I need to get to the lake to wash my foot off. I get my camp shoes and put one on my left foot and slip the other partially on my right. Taking the first aid kit, I begin hopping with the trekking pole through the sand and boulders down to the lakeshore. I tell myself I can do this while wondering if I can.

At the lakeshore, I find a spot where it's possible to sit while putting my foot in the water. I wave the foot in the cool water; it feels good. I use my scarf to wipe my foot, put it back in the water, wipe it again, and put it back in. Satisfied it's as clean as it will get, I get out the Neosporin, squeeze on a large dose, get out the mepiform bandage and place it across the gash as well as possible. I'll leave it covered like that until I get home.

Part of the trail crew shows up as I am limping down to the lake. One is the guy with the hammer from last Wednesday. They don't notice me. With the bandage on, I put on my shoes and return to my campsite. Since they are federal workers, why are they working on Labor Day? It's a holiday, so they should have the day off.

The smoky haze permeates the sky. It looks like it may come in again this afternoon and evening; oh well, try to make the best of it. Tomorrow I really start home. I'm aiming for Long Pine Creek. Right now I get to enjoy the rest of the afternoon and evening at Precipice while resting my foot.

A little after 4:00 the female trail crew member goes by on her way back to Hamilton. A backpacker struggles on his way up the final stage. There is a good breeze blowing so I am going to move out of the wind. A little later, three men made their way up to the lake. I wave to the last one when I think he looks my way. He either doesn't see or ignores me. He is walking about the way I was on Wednesday. They seem intent on continuing over the Gap. The rest of the trail crew comes down as the hikers head up the switchbacks. It's time for me to start dinner and evening prep. I want everything taken care of well before 6:00 so I can take photos.

It's a beautiful evening and sunset. Yes, last time I was here, it was more dramatic due to a storm; this evening has its own special wondrous qualities.



I have a marvelous time walking, limping around taking pictures, following the light from right to left on the lakeshore and cliffs extending straight up from the lake. Tonight alone makes this trip worth it. There's an incandescent quality to the sunset light as it creeps down Eagle Scout Peak on the cliffs above Precipice and Mount Stewart and Angel Wings.

When I think the light has finally faded, I sit and write in my notebook. The sky to the west, becomes a deep red. I hop the creek back to the overlook by the unoccupied campsite above Precipice for a final picture of the red sky to the west. It's mainly for myself; it will be a reminder of not only tonight, but the whole trip.

I return to my campsite as the light disappears. The stars begin their slow transformation of the night sky. This has been a marvelous, wondrous day I will treasure.

## **Day 8: Precipice Lake to Buck Creek**

I sleep well until 2:00 when I have to pee. I have trouble getting back to sleep due to my foot and sleep in spurts until 5:30. Knowing I will get up now, I lie in my sleeping bag for fifteen minutes, appreciating the comfort before getting dressed. The mepiform band-aid needs to be reattached with adhesive tape so it won't come off while hiking.

Clouds scatter the sky for the first morning of this trip. I hope they add their special quality to the photos. I know I take more because of their presence. There's no wind, so Precipice is a lovely mirror. I'm enjoying the morning so much, I don't send the SPOT message and make breakfast until almost 8:00.

After breakfast, I sit and enjoy this unmatched view of the Kings Kern Divide down the canyon from Mt. Stewart to Angel Wings while I write. I suppose I should be packing up and getting on my way. I can't sit here in perpetuity. I rouse myself and slowly take down the tent and go through the familiar routine of breaking camp.

On the hike down to Hamilton Lake, I meet no hikers on the trail. The solitude is comforting as I make my way with my left foot and trekking pole firmly planted before taking a step with my right. The wildflowers at certain points are lovely. A set of columbine a little below the lake after Precipice are particularly beautiful. At this hour, the light is not conducive for a photo, though I take one anyway. At the places where small creeks cross the trail, the variety of flowers create a colorful contrast to the stark surrounding rock.

A portion of the trail crew is finishing clearing the rubble at the tunnel. As I'm making my way down the long switchback above Hamilton Lake, I hear a helicopter's roar. I recall the helicopter of yesterday morning. It appears over the eastern ridge heading west, then turns back to the east. Dropping down, it heads toward the cliffs, then executes another and heads west back over the lake, dropping down to the water and landing on the large flat rock at the west end of Hamilton. The skill and nerve to pull off the maneuver is astounding.

I continue down the long switchback and follow the trail to above where I had lunch last week. I go to the same spot, get out my lunch, and watch the two rangers from the helicopter. One gets out a fishing pole and casts into the lake. The other checks the helicopter and sits down looking at the view of the amphitheater rising above the lake. A woman camper approaches him and they talk.

After lunch, I cross the outlet creek and get a closer look at the helicopter. The one ranger is still fishing and the other walking along the lake-shore in the opposite direction. Part of me was hoping he'd still be near the trail so I could ask him why he's here. I look more closely at the Hamilton camping complex than on the way up. This is a beautiful place to camp, but unless one is lucky, a sense of solitude would be difficult.

Heading down the High Sierra Trail, the sights, sounds, and smells occupy my attention along with the careful placement of my right foot on the well-used trail. At the Elizabeth Pass junction, I follow the trail looking for a possible campsite. The one I see is not to my liking and it's still early in the day. I meet one party heading toward Hamilton before the bridge over Lone Pine Creek. They want reassurance of how much further it is to Hamilton.

On the rest of the hike to Bearpaw Meadow, no other hikers break the solitude. Even the Lodge is relatively quiet and unpopulated. I follow the signs to the Bearpaw Meadow backpacker's camp. The campground is nowhere near any meadow. No one else is camped here. It's in a lovely forest, but the entire area is dirt except for a few rocks and gigantic fire rings. What happens when it rains? This is dirt, stumps, big fireplaces, and campsites on top of each other. The thought of spending the night and morning here is revolting. This is not backcountry camping in a beautiful setting. Compared to the Yosemite High Sierra Camp backpackers campgrounds, this is an abomination. At least in places like Paradise Valley you can be separated from other campers and the setting is more beautiful.

Heading down to Buck Creek, I soon run into lots of people who will be camped at Bearpaw tonight. First there's a group of at least five followed by one of seven, then two more. Leading the first group is a young woman

carrying a parasol talking a mile a minute. One would think she was strolling through Hyde Park discussing the latest London fashions, not hiking in the Sierra. At the final bend before Buck Creek, the view to the west through the trees is especially lovely. I tell myself to come back here for sunset. As I descend I look for a tent and see none. Crossing the bridge, I realize that no one else is here — they've all gone up to Bearpaw.

I appreciate for the second time my good fortune of camping at this lovely place in solitude. Once again, I thank Wandering Daisy and Giantbrookie. After setting up camp, I go down to the creek, wash off the trail dust, cool my left foot in invigorating water, and sit in the warm sun. When the sun heads west, reluctantly I make my way to the campsite, get a pot, return to the creek, fill it with water, and return to the secluded spot under the trees where there is a perfect rock for the stove next to the fire ring.

After dinner, I walk down to the creek and up to the bend with the view west. It's not the best light or sunset; nonetheless, it's beautiful. I set up the tripod and enjoy the fire-stained glow of sunset. Back at the campsite, I write and think about tomorrow. I'll get up, make breakfast, pack and go. Maybe there will be morning light photos along the trail. That would put me at Crescent Meadows at 12:30-1:00, allowing for photo dallying, and on the road back home by 3:00 with washing and eating at Lodgepole. Maybe I could even buy a sandwich at the store to take on the road. Sitting on the Bear Box, the light is still enough to write by unlike under the trees at my campsite.

As it gets dark, I lie on my back on the large flat rock by the creek and watch the stars emerge one by one. In the tent a few minutes later, I continue my stargazing with the vestibule off before drifting into sleep to the sounds of Buck Creek.

## **Day 9: Buck Creek to Crescent Meadow**

I awake at dawn, get water to boil, and while it's getting ready, begin taking down the tent. I eat my last morning double portion of oatmeal, and finish packing as the light increases on the far ridges. There are clouds in the sky and the temperatures are cooler. As the High Sierra winds in and out along the side of the ridge, I begin looking for a nice overlook. I remember there was one a little after Nine Mile Creek. No one is on the trail except the birds fluttering about. I come to the overlook — yes, this is the spot I remember. Sugarloaf Dome is straight ahead with Castle Rock on the other side of the canyon. Heading down the slanting rock face past an unoccupied campsite, I find a nice place to sit.

I enjoy a final cup of coffee and a Luna bar while sitting in the sun and writing. This place is perfect — way off the trail on a giant sloping rock. On my left to the east there's a set of peaks in the distance, but the light is too bright in that direction to make them out clearly. Still it's nice to seek a peak on my last morning.

Despite my toe, this had been a wonderful trip. I saw places I'll never see again, beautiful places, spectacular views. Yes, I've definitely made the best of things on this trip. Two nights by Lake 11,682, great views of the Kaweahs without having to move, the overlook on the creek, the climb up to that chain of upper lakes and the view down the Big Arroyo at sunrise, and Precipice to top it off. I have a final swig of coffee to celebrate.

Now I'm on my way home. The trail remains empty except for a couple packing up at Nine Mile Creek. I enjoy the solitude. More clouds begin appearing to the west. As I'm having a snack above the trail, the couple passes heading west. I wait to let them get far ahead of me. On the well-used trail, it's easy to avoid stepping in a way that increases the pain. At Merhton Creek the couple is stopped for their own break, enjoying the view and the rushing water. The flowers are especially abundant at the creek crossing.

A lone hiker moving quickly and with determination passes by heading up the trail. He nods hello and smiles when I tell him to have a great trip. The hike begins to drag on. I am relieved when I come to Eagle View — only a mile to go. My foot is telling me it will be happier when we reach the car. At the Crescent Meadow loop trail, the population begins increasing. Here are people in clean clothes, hair neatly coiffed or combed. I am definitely seen as a curiosity. Reaching the car, I lean my pack on the side and get out the keys. The first thing I do is power down a couple of windows and unlatch the trunk. I turn on the SPOT and leave it on the hood of the car. I get my shoes from the trunk and the first aid kit from the pack. There's a convenient stump in front of the car for sitting on and removing my boots and socks. My throbbing toe is its familiar shades of purple and the bandage remains secure on the gash on the bottom of my foot. I take a couple of IBs and put on clean socks and comfortable shoes. Now to finally get rid of my garbage, the ritual that declares the end of any trip.

The clouds are thicker and the temperature is dropping. I put the pack in the car and finish getting the things out of the trunk so I have music for the long haul up Highway 99 and I-5. It's time to drive through the sequoias to Lodgepole, a telephone call, a double cheeseburger, and home.