



## July 7, 2025, Cottonwood Lakes Trailhead Campground

I arrive at the Cottonwood Lakes Trailhead Campground at 4:45 after eight hours and fifteen minutes of relatively routine driving. The campsites are fairly close together on the slight hillside to the right of the road. Only three of the campsites are currently occupied. I choose a vacant site as far from the others as possible, erect the tent, and settle in for late afternoon snacks and drinks.

The long drive causes me to consider spending my final night at a Bishop Creek campground to shorten the drive home. Otherwise, I would not arrive home until after 11:00 pm. While in the past, it was normal to hike a few miles and drive for hours, I no longer want to endure such long final days.

A friendly family takes the campsite next door. Their daughter is three years old. We discuss the many pluses of camping with children. We took our son camping beginning at four weeks old and backpacking at two years, nine months. We agree that being out in the natural world provided a unique experience that was developmentally essential.

After dinner, I walk around the area out of curiosity and possible photos. The equestrian campground is closer than I thought; it's far campsites nearly border this campground's road. The mosquitoes would be annoying if the breeze wasn't keeping them away. The moon is lovely amid the tall pines.

As the sun sets and twilight transitions to darkness, I return to the picnic table for my typical contemplations at the end of the day when alone in a campground, my mind wandering hither and yon. I think of Faulkner's *Sound the and Fury* with its title taken from Shakespeare. Maybe life "is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing." Written in 1604, it seems so applicable to the United States and world situation today. Are we are all trapped in a version of that tale, all embroiled in that fate? It is time to seek solace in the wilderness.

## **July 8, 2025, Cottonwood Lakes Trailhead Campground to Cottonwood Lake #5**

I awake at dawn, eat breakfast, pack, walk to the car, and toss the pack into the back. I move the car a hundred yards from the parking spaces above the trailhead campground to a vacant space by the trailhead. That way, future campground trailhead users will hopefully have parking directly by the campground. I begin hiking up the trail at 7:15.

At first, I hike at a good pace until arriving at the Cottonwood Creek crossing. Not trusting my aging balance on the provided log or the rocks, I wade the creek. As I'm putting back on my hiking shoes, two fishermen appear and easily hop the rocks. We play trail leapfrog with each other over the next mile or so as they pause to try likely fishing spots on the creek. After the crossing, my hiking pace slows. There are a couple of easy uphill sections that still seem annoying. A young hiker passes me. I tell myself he moves along like I did ten years ago, lamenting my turtle pace.

At the next creek crossing, a wide log spans the creek. Accepting my current balance, I wade the creek. I figure the junction is not far ahead where the trail divides for New Army Pass or Cottonwood Lakes. Being tired and desiring a snack break, I stop at an off-trail rock by the creek. As I put my pack on the rock, I see the junction sign a hundred feet away. While I eat and change into dry socks, an elderly couple comes up the trail and stops at a rock by the junction sign. They see my white hair and begin a conversation. I learn they are Heidi and Duane. She's 70 and so a near contemporary. They are on a two week trip, planning to hike part of the John Muir Trail after they reach Crabtree Meadow. They point out they are open to improvising and appreciating each moment.

I wish them a great trip before turning right at the junction to Cottonwood Lakes. This is the one actual climb of the trip. The ascent is graded. The biggest problem is that many of the steps are designed for someone taller than my five feet, seven inches. There are a few switchbacks, but mostly it's an uphill slog to the horizon ahead. My turtle-like climb ends

when taking a rest stop and realizing that the break in the sky up ahead signals the end of the climb.

Emerging from the forest, the Muir Lake Trail sign stands pointing right. This is the entry to Cottonwood Lakes basin, an area with confusing nomenclature. Some maps logically designate Cottonwood Lakes from 1 to 5 with the body of water northeast of Lake 3 unnamed. That is the designation of the “official” U.S. Forest Service maps. Another topo map includes a Lake 6 in the cirque a little below The Fin and Mount Langley. Still another designates Lake 3 as Lake 4 and both Lake 4 and Lake 5 as Lake 5. Confused? For this narrative, I will stick to the “official” designations.

A small creek bisects the large meadow up ahead. Crossing the creek, I find an off-trail rock and have lunch. As I sit, three young climbers—two men and one woman—hike past. Their hiking speed and helmets tell me they are not your typical backpackers.

After lunch, I soon pass the unsigned junction to the side trail to Cottonwood Lakes 1 and 2 with Lake 1 visible ahead to the left. Cirque Peak rises above with its conical shape outlining the horizon. A tin hut appears by a meadow with the unnamed lake-size body of water to the northeast. Cottonwood Lake 3 comes into view to the southwest of the trail with a small ridge separating the trail from the lake. Lake 3 remains largely out of sight until the northwest end when the trail turns left and heads down to the lakeshore. A major camping complex with several unoccupied campsites sits above the northwest end of the lake. I decide to keep going, head down to the lake and turn right at the bottom. Ahead, a lovely waterfall cascades down from Cottonwood Lake 4.

The trail passes a good campsite to the right. Should I stay here? I decide to do the short climb to check out camping at Lakes 4 and 5 since it’s not much farther and may offer more privacy. The trail winds up with a couple of short switchbacks before emerging on the outlet creek from Lake 4. Lake 5, as a sign announces, sits to the right/north of Lake 4. I check the time. It’s 1:30; that’s over six hours to hike seven miles. For years, I would hike fifteen miles with three thousand feet of elevation gain in six hours.

Now my hiking speed is one mile an hour plus I feel more tired on arrival at my destination.

One lone backpacker walks on the trail separating Lake 4 and Lake 5, making his way towards Old Army Pass. A couple of dayhiking fishermen are casting from along the shoreline of Lake 5. I ask the fishermen if they've seen anything that looks like a campsite. "No," one laughs in reply, wishing me good luck in finding one. Following the shoreline trail, I head right to a rock and put down my pack in order to more easily reconnoiter. Soon, I see a stack of rocks creating a wall, indicating a campsite. Further exploration leads to a couple of other sites, but I decide to go with the one by the rock wall due to the easy access to the ridge overlooking Cottonwood Basin. The gale force winds remind me of the final day of my trip last year when camping at Bishop Lake.

After retrieving my pack, I begin putting up the tent. Due to the wind, this becomes a meticulous step-by-step process. Rocks are placed to hold down each corner of the footprint and body of the tent. A huge gust blows out one of the corners. I put on a bigger rock and pound in stakes on each corner. I put in the pole and hook up the tent. A huge gust pulls out a couple of the stakes, indicating that each corner requires reinforcement with rocks.

With the rocks in place, now for the fiasco of attaching the fly to the body of the tent while it is continuously flapping. It takes a couple of attempts to get the fly in the correct position before I can hook up one of the corners to a pole. The wind flutters the rest of the fly. Another corner is attached. From here on, it becomes easier attaching the other two corners. I reinforce the stakes on each of the eight corners with heavier rocks. When a gargantuan gale force gust occurs, the tent stays in place though the windward pole bends to forty-five degrees. I exchange a couple of the rocks for even larger ones in case of an even bigger gust.

I find a place out of the wind to spend the rest of the afternoon. The two fishermen leave so I am now alone taking in my surroundings. Numerous standing snags are scattered in all directions. I have long been drawn to these solitary bare trees and trying to photograph them. As the sunlight begins to fade, it transforms the trees into gold.

The sun disappears behind the Sierra Crest at 6:30. I'm so tired, I feel like going to bed at 7:00. It's still light, but the cold comes as the sun disappears and the wind howls. I just want to crawl into the tent out of the wind. There is more misery than transcendence. I see the nearly full moon rising to the east. Compelled, I walk to the ridge overlooking Cottonwood Lake 3 and its unnamed neighbor lake. The moon shines above Flattop, the immense monolith that dominates the eastern horizon of Cottonwood Basin. Briefly the magical transcendence of solitude in the timberline Sierra warms me.

When the setting sun's light fades on the distant peaks, I return to the campsite. The cold returns and I am soon inside the tent snug in my sleeping bag.

## **July 9, 2025, Cottonwood Lake #5**

The wind shakes the tent all night. At dawn, pink clouds hover over the peaks and ridges. I awaken late so I only see the clouds from the tent while getting dressed. The water on the lakes ripples with the wind. The sunlight strikes the ridge running along on both sides of Old Army Pass before it creeps down the rocks to the trees, my campsite, and the lake.

I decide to layover here today, wandering the area before deciding on where to go over the following four days. After breakfast, coffee, and writing, I head off exploring. Much of the area around Cottonwood Lake 5 does not exactly resemble the specific images of Google Earth or the panoramas from PeakVisor. The trees seem more numerous and the landscape rockier.

The way up to Cottonwood Lake 6 requires a continuous climbing zig-zag between the boulders and trees. Since Lake 6 is in a deep cirque below The Fin and Mount Langley, views in three directions would be nearly non-existent. Going up there to camp is not worth the effort. I decide to head northeast, zig-zagging among the trees and rocks where I discover two lovely tarns. Each has a tenuous campsite, but without the expansive views from near my location on Lake 5.

I wander some more, exploring the ridge overlook until above Cottonwood Lake 3 before heading down to Cottonwood Lake 4. A trail heading to Old Army Pass makes its way over the small causeway-like hump dividing Cottonwood Lake 5 from Lake 4. I follow that use trail until it begins the climb to the pass.

I am now more amazed than ever of Charles Young and his Buffalo Soldiers explorations that created Old Army Pass. Riding horses this far over this route and constructing the trail over the pass is remarkable.

While walking back, I check out an unoccupied campsite by Lake 5. It is more in the open than where I am already camped. Continuing on the lakeshore trail around and down past the end of the lake, I come upon a lovely campsite with far better water access than my current one. I decide to stay where I am since it is much easier getting to the marvelous all-encompassing views from the ridge. Eventually returning to my campsite, I further ponder my options. I've still seen no one since the two fishermen yesterday. Since I remain in solitude, I decide to stay here for the rest of today and tomorrow before deciding on where else to camp.

As I am enjoying my solitude, a young man with a backpack appears and approaches my campsite. I tell him about the site down the lakeside trail. He thinks it's too windy here and so wants to go back down to Lake 3 where the wind is far less and one campsite is already occupied. He remarks about the negatives of being alone with no one around and I reply I've been backpacking solo since 1997, gone five days without seeing another person, and never felt afraid. He is even more surprised I still use a paper map. His only map resides on his phone.

Relying on a phone is an entirely different way of being in the Sierra wilderness than the paper topo maps I have always used. I like seeing the entire surroundings laid out before me. I can figure out where I am *and* where I might want to go. With a tiny screen, unless one zooms out, one only sees the immediate surroundings. When zoomed out, the surrounding peaks, ridges creeks, and lakes become indistinct blobs. Is this one reason that so many people stick to the mapped trail with the route downloaded and laid

out in advance instead of venturing out to the vast land that exists beyond the confines of a distinct trail? When one's perspective is confined to a small screen, one loses the big picture of where one is and where one might venture.

After the young man leaves for Lake 3, except for a couple of distant day-hiking fishermen, I see no one else the rest of the afternoon. I am developing a real love for this place. Each small element comes together to create a greater whole—the causeway-like rocks, sand, grass, and flowers that separates Lakes 4 and 5; the myriad of rocks from pebbles to softball size to gargantuan boulders scattered over the landscape; the whitebark and foxtail pines, especially the snags with their bare branches reaching for the sky; the peaks and ridges that define the western horizon with expansive views east of Cottonwood basin—they all make up this timberline wonderland.

After an early dinner, I wander about looking for photos before the sun disappears behind the crest. I discover a seat/chair discarded in the bushes. It looks new with an REI label. Since it's so large, I surmise the person who left it must have been part of a group with shared gear carrying. It's too big to fit in my pack or even strap on the outside—my shoes, raincoat, and down puffy jacket are already there and besides it's too large to attach to my pack. Was it hand carried here and then considered too annoying to carry back? It's definitely a conundrum.

Instead of fretting about someone else's problems, it's time to appreciate the here-and-now. The last light shines on the peaks and ridges above the lake. The rest is bereft of sunshine, gray cliffs rising a thousand feet or more above the lakes. The wind dissipates to a gentle, quiet breeze.

I wander to the overlook of Lake 3 and its northern neighbor with the view of the vast expanse of Cottonwood Lakes basin. As sunset commences, a magnificent moon rises above Flattop, shining on the land all around. The full moon rising is always a thrill, probably going back to our earliest ancestors. Whether it's in a city surrounded by skyscrapers, suburbia, or a rural open field, the sight of the full moon rising at sunset is one of those instances where humanity pauses in awe. When seen in the High Sierra wilderness, this startling phenomena becomes even grander.

There is a sense of witnessing something beyond the descriptive power of even our best words, the words that cut to the soul. It is beyond words, the limits of language. One is witness to something that can only be felt deep within our essential being that touches a core extending all the way to the moment of creation.

We don't just witness the circle of moon rising over peaks surrounded by red-pink sky. Along with the Earth's natural white satellite, one sees our own planet in all its singular magnificence untouched by humanity. This is the Earth before a genetic leap resulted in *Homo sapiens*. Here-and-now one witnesses Earth as it truly is.

As the day slowly transitions from twilight to darkness, I return to my campsite, write what thoughts ramble into my mind, and drift into contented sleep.

## July 10, 2025, Cottonwood Lake #5

At dawn, the lake is still, the ridges and peaks of the Sierra Crest mirrored in serene water. After last night's moonrise at sunset, it is a sunrise of unparalleled magnificence. The first golden light strikes the ridge before it slowly moves down, reaching the rocks and then the trees below. The day begins with an exhilarating magic show.

This is what I am here for. It took three days, but now I inhabit wilderness with an indescribable totality. There is only the surrounding wilderness.

Today, I will experience this place as fully as possible. I have reached a pinnacle. Now if one could only sustain it. Today I will inhabit this place and worry about tomorrow when tomorrow comes. Now it's time to experience today. A jet airplane passing overhead reminds me this is only a temporary exhilaration.

To pass the time this morning, I wander to the overlook, down to Lake 4, and over the causeway between Lakes 4 and 5. When I wander back, I only see two distant day-hikers fishing. I revel in a morning of relative solitude. I feel the light touch of the breeze. I listen to the silence. Only the tent

rustling in the breeze is audible. This is the silence of the wild, the silence of wilderness. Appreciate it one more time and hope for many more.

Alas, it is a fleeting moment. By afternoon, the solitude ends. Three male backpackers appear and head towards my campsite. Two of the men seem to be co-leaders with the third lagging behind. I tell them of the abandoned chair/seat; they are not interested. I also tell them of the campsite along the shoreline. They thank me and walk down to the shoreline path heading towards the campsite. A few minutes later, two more men head down the shoreline path. The first group has already set up their green tent while the two men disappear from sight to try something farther down the lake. Another couple of backpackers appear and head to Lake 4. A third couple take the site below the causeway on Lake 5. By late afternoon, a group of four 20-somethings set up on the level place below my campsite. It is getting crowded. I guess the wind kept people away the previous two nights so I had these two lakes to myself.

I decide to pack up tomorrow and see what I find at the unnamed lake north of Cottonwood Lake 3. That area retains the sun an hour after it leaves here. From the ridge above, it looks like a possible campsite may be at the northwest end of the lake. There is no trail there so I hope that means relative solitude. There is a rock garden directly below followed by the open meadow with a scattering of rocks extending to the trees by what I surmise is the campsite.

The four people camped below are not being particularly noisy, but their voices float up to my campsite. When people are in a group, there is nearly always at least one person who won't be quiet and listen to the wilderness, forcing the rest of the group into the conversation.

Except for Heidi and Duane on the first day, no one I've seen is old enough to be past age fifty. Meeting those two told me there are still some of us geezers who want to stay overnight in the wilderness. Every Sierra backpacking excursion, I meet at least one fellow traveler. But now even car camping, I am older than everyone else. Did most people over age sixty-five decide they no longer want to spend the night outside in a tent? Age

should be irrelevant. The mystery, the mystical mystery of the wild is ageless. Every time it is experienced, we learn something new about our planet and ourselves. At dawn and dusk that mystery especially reveals its secrets.

There are no clouds in the sky when I wander out to the overlook, unlike the previous evenings. Gazing down on the vast meadow and the unnamed lake next to Lake 3, the sunlight slowly creeps up. I wonder what that open area will be like tomorrow? At sunset, there is some red/pink on the edges of the vast land to the north, east, and south.

I mosey back to my campsite. It has been a good day to do nothing. I'll see about tomorrow. Yesterday and today are why I still do this. It was about as good as it gets. I write until it is too dark to read, crawl in the tent, and fall asleep to the distant chattering muffled voices of my neighbors.

## **July 11, 2025, Cottonwood Lake #5 to Unnamed Lake, Cottonwood Basin**

I awake to another marvelous dawn with the surrounding peaks and ridges reflected in Lake 5 and Lake 4. No one else is awake. I move along the shoreline attempting to photograph the various changing reflections. I have no idea why the other campers remain in the confines of a tent while the world awakens as a new day begins. There's miraculous magic in the dawn and sunrise.

Up here there is a sense of wonder. I think everyone feels it in their own particular way. The singular grandeur of the peaks and ridges; the expansive landscape filled with a myriad of rocks, pines, grass; bubbling creeks; pristine lakes from tiny tarns to bodies of water where the opposite shoreline is faint in the distance. It all creates an immense scene that comes together in an unexplainable whole.

Here in wilderness one can forget the machinations of the human world, a human world that is undergoing chaotic change with unknown consequences. Here one rediscovers peace and serenity. Here, if one has three meals a day, a dry tent, and sleeping bag one has all they require. Everything and anything

else only makes it better: sunshine instead of rain; scattered clouds at sunrise and sunset glowing in pink/red; marmots, chipmunks, squirrels, and pikas; mountain chickadees, rosy finches, and Clark's nutcrackers flitting from tree to tree; bubbling creeks; picturesque lakes and tarns; and magnificent peaks. Each element stands apart yet comes together to create a glorious entirety, a wondrous whole. Now, this wilderness is all of the undeveloped Earth that is left. Humanity, in one of its bursts of wisdom, set this aside so people could still experience what should be instead of what civilization desecrated.

These are the moments that render the rest of the moments tolerable. The minor discomforts like a slight chill, buzzing mosquitoes, the difficult creek crossing, the weariness of a climb serve as reminders that there is no paradise. Paradise is something humans wish for, but we can only attain as an imaginary heaven, not Earth reality. In the end, we are only biological creatures, a single species on a single planet. We may be "evolved" enough to create problems we are incapable of overcoming. We are capable of creating marvels, but fail to recognize the possible consequences. We refuse to recognize our inherent biological being and its limitations.

I take my time making breakfast, writing with morning coffee and Luna bar, before packing up. There is no hurry since I am traveling such a short distance. I leave the seat/chair with a note: "Found in bushes 7/9/25. Left by others. Too large to fit in my pack to carry out. Finders keepers. Enjoy"

I depart at 9:45. The four people camped below are taking photos of each other with their packs on to commemorate their one night in the wilderness. I tell them about the seat/chair, but they don't seem interested. I find the trail and meet a fisherman who asks about the fishing. I reply while I didn't fish, there have been several day-hiking fisherpeople so I assume the fishing is good, wishing him good luck.

A large group is illegally camped by the waterfall, swimming and shouting. At the bottom, the campsite I admired on the way up is occupied. Two large family groups are heading up to Lakes 4 and 5 with children ranging from around age seven to high schoolers. The youngest girl tells the admonishing others the log at the crossing moved as she stepped on it. She

seems pleased when I remark, “They just do that on you.” A couple comes down from the campsites in the complex at the end of the lake. It must have been crowded at the Lake 3 camping complex last night.

When the trail reaches the top and turns right, I head straight through the trees. The rock garden observed from the ridge above is ahead. Zip-zagging through the rocks, I see an opening in the bushes that leads to the vast expanse of rock strewn meadow above the lake. It looks like a straight walk to the west end of the lake with its trees and hopefully a campsite. The straight hike over a meadow becomes a walk though a puddle-strewn bog. I turn around, walking on the high tufts of grass, and go to solid ground that takes me to the trees. A faint use trail begins heading towards the lake. I pass a campsite far from any current water.

Now more distinct, the use trail meanders through sand, rocks, and grass with the water of the lake now on the right and trees to the left. I look left and see the campsite. I turn up to the site and put down the pack. I decide to reconnoiter around the area to see what else is around. Farther down the lake there are a couple of other campsites. Neither is as good as the first one.

So far, this is working out the way I imagined it. There was an interesting off-trail walk with no other people after getting off the trail. There was a campsite where I thought it should be. There is solitude from the streaming hordes on the trail to Cottonwood Lakes 3, 4, and 5. If one gets off the main trail more than a quarter mile, one can discover bliss.

Journeying off the main trail provided solitude on every trip I’ve undertaken in the Sierra, even on sections of the John Muir Trail (JMT). Hikers seem to be intimidated by off-trail travel even when it’s a class 1 stroll. Humphreys and Dusy basins offer definitive examples of this phenomenon. Even if one sees distant hikers, it’s possible to camp in solitude. The people who do venture off the main trail seem to prize their solitude as much as I do. We each commune with wilderness in our own way.

Looking across the lake, I can view the columns of day hikers and backpackers moving up and down the main trail of upper Cottonwood Basin. Being Friday, by later in the afternoon, the number of hikers increase

as people either make their way back down to the trailhead or hike up to Cottonwood Lake 3, 4, or 5 for a weekend sojourn.

This is in many ways an ideal location for Cottonwood Lakes. The crest from Cirque Peak to Mount Tyndal forms the backdrop, but unlike Cottonwood Lakes 4 and 5, the sun does not disappear at 6:30. Here, far from the crest, the meadow/bog and lake retain the light until after 7:30. The slanting sunrays illuminate the trees, rocks, meadow, and lake with that entralling combination of half-light and shadow that seems to glow as if illuminated from within. These are the moments when time seems to stop, the moments that convey a meaning beyond mere existence. Whether it's the meaning of life itself or a momentary insight into something beyond our limited imagination is, to some extent, irrelevant.

I revel in this moment, taking in the grandeur as the last day's light shines on Mount Tyndal. The four summits along the ridge across the lake with Cirque Peak at the apex retain radiant beams of light until 8:10. I can't quite believe how today transpired. It reminds me of the day last year spent at Dusy Creek when I conjured it in my imagination and discovered the reality was even better.

As the end of the day's light commences its creeping transition to darkness, I return to my campsite, write what flashes through my mind, and adjourn to the tent for the night.

## **July 12, 2025, Unnamed Cottonwood Lake**

I awake to an unparalleled morning. I walk down to the lake to witness the full moon setting above the peaks reflected in still water. Walking on the boggy shoreline, I try to set the tripod to capture the moon's reflection, attempting to find the best composition of the moon, water, rocks, and grass. The first light strikes Mount Tyndal and the rest of the crest glows in sunrise gold. The light gradually discovers the meadow/bog, trees, grass, and rocks. It's an incomparable magical morning.

There is nowhere to go and nothing to do today except appreciate my surroundings. There are moments of wild silence with enough of a tingling

breeze to keep the mosquitoes away. At this point, I never know if this is my last backcountry layover day in the High Sierra. I will treat it as such and hope for many more.

No one else is on this side of the lake. On the opposite shore, as the day begins in earnest, single individuals, couples, and groups make their way up and down the trail to and from Lakes 3, 4, and 5. I invent scenarios about each person's journey. Most are potential characters for at least a short story if not a novel.

The last two Sierra backpacking trips have been a revelation in my acceptance of my current physical limitations and coming up with excellent alternatives. I no longer need to be going somewhere in particular. The destination itself is not the goal. The goal is to experience wild silence while inhabiting wilderness. It's reconnecting with life's essence with no separation from the all-encompassing wilderness.

I take a one hour stroll up to a little beyond where yesterday I crossed over from the main trail to this side past the bog/meadow to the trees, absorbing the wilderness and allowing it to permeate inside me. It is the wild silence where the only audible sounds are the breeze in the air; the chirping of marmots; the myriad calls, cries, and piping of birds.

I eventually return and sit leaning against a big rock in the area of my campsite. I realize that the island on the lake on the topo map is the peninsula that juts out opposite of where I sit. The meadow/bog is a shallow lake in a higher water year. The campsite I passed yesterday sits near the lake when the water is higher. A tarn sits near the main trail on the other side of the bog. At certain times that must be the far shore of the larger lake, not a stand-alone tarn.

I try to visualize tomorrow's hike and drive. While I am visualizing, I see hikers traveling up and down the trail. Some are day-hikers, but most are backpackers. I count 34 people going down the trail and 35 people going up. My attention and thus counting are far from definitive since I do not watch with my eyes focused on the trail and every hiker who's passing. Who knows how many others populate the trail?

I realize since this lake is shallow and boggy, it does not attract people, unlike Lakes 3, 4, and 5. Since I left the trail yesterday, I have not met a single person. Finally, on this Saturday afternoon, five men cross the bog and take one of the campsites out of sight at the other end of the lake. I don't hear them and only see them when they go out to the lake to fish and fill their water bottles.

After dinner, I walk out onto the meadow/bog, finding a faint path to follow and reach the peninsula/island to observe the days' final illumination. As the sun disappears behind the crest, the light changes quickly as it creeps over the rocks, grass, and sand. For about fifteen minutes, I react instinctively, photographing the transitioning light as it proceeds to the point at end of the lake, the water, and, finally, the trees beyond.

I return back to the path and intersect the use trail. The fading light glints on the rocks, meadow, and trees. Tyndal and the crest radiate the day's final sunshine. Cirque Peak and its adjoining summits glow from the day's last rays. Does something felt deeply inside translate to a photo? Does that sense of multi-dimensional transcendence transform to the two dimensions of a photograph?

With a deep sigh, I slowly make my way back to the area of my campsite. My last evening in backcountry wilderness concludes. I wish it did not have to end. Time and obligations march on despite my attempts at this moment to stop them. I can only hope to return to those moments many more times. Now it's time to go to bed. I'll see what tomorrow brings tomorrow.

## **July 13, 2025, Unnamed Cottonwood Lake to Sabrina Campground**

It is another magical dawn and sunrise as I worship this Sunday in the church of my choice. The moon is higher in the sky so the reflections are not as dramatic. That is a rather nitpicky response to a near unparalleled morning. I move about seeking photos and appreciating the commencement of this final morning in the backcountry.

The five men camped down the lake do their homage to the morning by walking out to the lake with one of them passing by to view the meadow/bog in the morning light. It is gratifying to know I am not alone in my adoration.

This is one of the most magnificent natural amphitheaters in the Sierra. The immense expanse of the meadow rises to the granite crest of Mount Tyndal and its tributaries. It's easy to see why Charles Young and his Buffalo Soldiers rode up to this amphitheater. What thoughts of wonder passed through their minds as they rode their horses in solitude and came upon this wondrous view?

This is my favorite part of the day when fortunate enough to be in the High Sierra. In the morning light, I sit and admire the magnificence before me while indulging in a cup of coffee and writing whatever thoughts drift into my mind. The days' hike can wait while I revel in this timeless moment. It does not get finer than this. I take this into my memory where I can call it forth. It is not gone. It remains and sustains.

By 8:00, hikers begin to pass by on the trail across the lake. After a leisurely morning, I depart at 9:30. There are three different groups camped at the use trail junction with the Cottonwood Lakes Trail. They may have been a little more than a quarter mile from my campsite, but I never saw or heard them. As I walk alone on the main trail, I pause to appreciate the view by the trail to Cottonwood Lakes 1 and 2. The well-trodden pathway to the right is the only indication of where this trail leads since there is no sign. I pause again to take in the magnificent view by the creek crossing near the Muir Lake Junction.

From here on, the trail winds down through forest. The distance to the New Army Pass Trail junction is longer than I remember. I meet no one except for a young man who politely passes me.

At the junction, I find a far-off trail rock to sit and have a snack. After a few minutes, the hordes appear, one after another. At least twenty people pass by on their way to the trailhead, all but four of them descending the Cottonwood Lakes Trail. I let them all pass and follow a few minutes later. At both crossings of Cottonwood Creek, I wade. From there until the trailhead, I

encounter everything from a large group of ten or more to lots of couples, and one solo hiker. Everyone is friendly even if some evidence surprise at seeing a white-haired backpacker.

From the second crossing, it's a gradual climb for a half mile or so until the final mile gradual descent to the trailhead. My car sits with a vacant space on the right side. Moments later, a backpacker and his dog arrive. While I'm putting my backpack in the back of the Prius V, a pick-up truck arrives and pulls into the space across from me by the bathroom. The driver and I joke about her getting the best parking space by the trailhead while her husband puts his pack in the bed of the pickup and the dog climbs into the truck's backseat. They drive off while I get fresh water from the spigot and finish arranging my things before heading off down the Horseshoe Meadow Road to highway 395.

Negotiating the windy road seems longer than when I was driving up even though I am no longer anxious about getting a campsite. As I negotiate down the switchbacks, I think of Humphrey Bogart careening up the switchbacks in the finale of *High Sierra* when this was still a dirt road. Thankful for the crude paving job, I drive into a pullout with a view of Owens Valley and phone reception. On a clear day, this view is breathtaking. Today, there is a smokey haze. The planned panorama photo will have to wait for another time, maybe forever since I don't know when I will be here again.

The cell phone indicates two bars. Phoning home, Barbara has guessed my plan to camp tonight at a campground with a shorter drive home. She likes the idea of Sabrina Campground since she and I spent five nights there in 2006. That time, we were lucky and got the best site in the campground along the creek. This time, I will be happy to get any site.

I head up 395 towards Bishop. There are a lot of cars at Manzanar on this Sunday so many people will learn of the U.S. government treatment of those considered undesirables, a lesson that has taken on greater poignancy under the current administration. Driving through Bishop, I pull into the Von's gas station where I enjoy a 50 cent per gallon discount, a welcome windfall. In Von's I buy a six-pack of Lagunitas IPA and a bag of chips.

Afterwards, I turn right on Line Street and head up the familiar road to the campgrounds and trailheads of Bishop Creek. From a hamlet of four of five houses, Aspendell has exploded into a tiny town. I pass the turn off to Cardinal Village where many times the pay phone booth long offered the last (or first) connection to the outside world. There are five cars at the Sabrina Trailhead parking lot with many more cars lined up in the pull-out parking either side of the road before the entrance to Sabrina Campground.

The campground is not full. Though all the creekside sites are occupied, most of the other sites are open. I pull into campsite #6 since there are no nearby sites. I send an “at the campsite” SPOT, erect the tent, and settle in for the rest of the afternoon and evening knowing I am concluding another marvelous trip. At this point in my life, it is one trip at a time. Treasure each and every one.