



## Day 1, August 3, Forks Campground, South Lake Road

I arrive at Forks Campground late afternoon and locate my reserved campsite in the tent-only section. Inyo National Forest only recently put Forks on the reservation system. I was hoping that might result in a better campsite than Four Jeffrey, the larger other reservable campground on Sabrina and South Lake roads. I can see why Forks is not popular. Most of the campsites are out in the open. Only a few of the tent-only and RV sites seem to have any shade. My site is one of the fortunate ones. One is probably better off trying for one of the many first-come campsites at the other campgrounds in the area.

This is my third backpacking trip this season, the first being to Yosemite's Dewey Point in late May for the thrilling blood-moon lunar eclipse. In July, I hiked to Big Bird Lake by way of the Sugarloaf Trail past Roaring River and up Deadman Canyon. I was hoping to spend a couple of days day-hiking to Tableland, motivated by Phil Arnot's *High Sierra: John Muir's Range of Light*. Along with the original edition of Steve Roper's *Timberline County*, Arnot's book inspired portions of nearly every Sierra backpacking trip I've taken in the last 25 years. Arnot's eloquent and evocative descriptions of Tableland, especially Lake 11,200, encouraged me to reserve a wilderness permit when they first became available in March. Phil Arnot died on April 6. His memorial would take place on Sunday, July 18, the day I'd planned to be at Lake 11,200. Nothing would honor his memory better than being solo in his beloved High Sierra.

Phil Arnot was an esteemed member of my local community, a kindred spirit, who I met several times. Every time we managed to get beyond the regular hello introductions and become involved in a discussion of the Sierra or our local open space, we had been interrupted. In a local writer's group, my wife, Barbara, and I became friends with "the love his life," Sandy Claire, who suggested that we get together with her and Phil. Due to circumstances beyond our control (prior commitments, COVID restrictions, and illness) we never got the opportunity. Honoring Phil on a solo trip in the Sierra at a place synonymous with his spirit seemed the right thing to do.

I didn't make it to Tableland. I managed to make it to Big Bird Lake on my second day. The next day, after nearly four hours climbing from Big Bird with no major route issues, I was still not at Lake 11,200. I could see the rim of Tableland and gazed down at the two lovely lakes above Big Bird with the course of the now-dry outlet creek from Lake 11,200 to my far left. Looking up, I felt I could almost touch Tableland. I tried one route that cliffed out after fifteen minutes of climbing and another fifteen descending. I tried another route. While it didn't cliff out, it looked like it would take me a lot more time to reach Lake 11,200. My stamina was approaching its limit. I still needed to get down and back to my campsite. Reluctantly, I gave up.

I returned to my campsite after 5:00. Should I try again the next morning? At that point, a large part of me wanted a layover day to properly appreciate the singular magnificence of Big Bird Lake.

After a night beset by self-recriminations, the next morning the decision was made for me. Clouds provided a spectacular sunrise until they transformed into something more ominous. Today, there would be no hiking over wide-open exposure up to or within Tableland. I spent the day alternating exploring the fascinating area around Big Bird Lake or seeking refuge in my tent amid rain and the rumble of thunder. As I lay in my tent listening to the plops on the rainfly, I thought of how many times Phil was probably also stuck in his tent during his inspiring journeys.

The storm clouds provided a spectacular sunset. After a rainy night and drizzly dawn, I hiked down to Deadman Canyon and Roaring River where the ranger was sitting outside her cabin. She's friendly and we got talking, two kindred spirits extolling this place we love. I look at her name tag and think the name is familiar. Yes, she's Laura Pilewski, who with her husband, Rob, have been the Tuolumne Meadows winter rangers for the last ten years. I have read every one of their weekly reports, enthralled by their astute observations and lovely photos of the Yosemite high country in winter. Meeting her and finding out she's even nicer and wiser than in the reports was the high point of the trip after Big Bird Lake.

That trip created doubt as to whether I could still manage the demands of class 2 cross-country travel both mentally and physically. I made a couple of bad decisions while climbing from Deadmen Canyon to Big Bird that drained my stamina. My judgement of time and distance is no longer accurate and, thus, reliable. Since cancer and surgery, I no longer can do what I used to be able to do. It's nothing complicated. I lack endurance and am just too damn slow on steep cross-country climbs. I have never been particularly fast and now inch up at an excruciatingly slow pace. I am no longer even a Sierra tortoise among the hares. I am a Sierra snail.

As I sit at my table at Forks Campground campsite 17, doubt about this trip dominates my musings. Is this trip to Palisade Basin also beyond my current capabilities? This will be my second visit to Palisade Basin, the first occurring in 2004. After spending two days in Ionian Basin, an evening and morning at Muir Pass, and evening and morning in lower Dusy Basin, I took a side trip over Knapsack Pass to Palisade Basin, returning the following day to the South Lake Trailhead. Ever since that afternoon, evening, and morning in 2004, I have wanted to return and recapture the magic of solitude in Palisade Basin.

I still desire that sense of transcendence one discovers in wilderness. Can I achieve that in a drive-in campground? At times, I have felt that sense when not backpacking. I touch nirvana even if I can't quite grasp it. I realized that in April when my wife, Barbara, and I spend two weeks traveling to Bryce Canyon, Capitol Reef, Zion, Canyonlands, and especially Arches National Parks.

I also crave backpacking, to live beyond the reach of an automobile. Car camping permits luxuries from food and drink to electricity with all its inherent distractions. Backpacking reduces existence down to the basics. A person is confined to whatever can be carried in a backpack. The only thing one must do is consume sufficient food while hiking to a certain location, which can change depending on conditions and personal whims. Hiking solo further simplifies things. No one else is there to interact with or worry about. Any personality quirks are one's own. You have to learn to live with one's self, a humbling, yet enlightening experience.

I know there may not be many more High Sierra backpacking trips. Sometime sooner than I want to admit, drive-in campgrounds or dispersed camping may be the best I can manage. Every backpack in the Sierra might be the final one.

I tell myself that despite the failure of not reaching Tableland, I managed the hike to and from Big Bird Lake. I will be fine going over Bishop and Knapsack passes. I've already done it. I can do it again.

## **Day 2, August 4, Bishop Pass Trail to Dusy Basin**

I awake at 5:15, stuff the sleeping bag into its sack, take down the tent, and begin the process of packing. I eat a blueberry muffin and drink orange juice while putting the usual litany of items into my pack. Once packed, I drive to the dumpster and recycling at the far end of the campground, pulling into the Forks day-use parking area. Rid of my trash, I drive up South Lake Road past Four Jeffery Campground, Bishop Creek Lodge, the Tye Lakes Trailhead, Parchers Resort, and the final steep climb culminating at the trailhead. I hope there is still parking available in the too-small overnight lot. Yes, there is one parking space left. Two men laugh and gesture towards the final available space.

"Is that really the only space?" I ask after pulling in.

"Yes," they answer, look at their watches, and remark the parking lot is full before 8:00.

I feel fortunate to have this final parking space and so not have to leave my car at the overnight parking beyond Parchers, a mile-and-a-half down the road. I get out my pack, camera bag, and trekking pole. Locking the car, I put on the camera case and pack, pick up the trekking pole, and begin the long climb to Bishop Pass.

The first day and night are the entry day, the day to get in rhythm with the wilderness. The familiar hike proceeds as expected. I surprisingly pass one hiker taking a rest stop on the way up to Long Lake. When I was twenty years younger hiking trails, I used to pass most hikers. Now, at my current snail walking pace, I am frequently left in the dust. I stop at Long Lake for a

snack at the place Barbara and I had lunch in June. A packer passes by and we exchange hellos.

The trail does a couple of short up and downs as it passes above Long Lake before returning to the shoreline. My favorite section of this trail is the graded climb beyond Long Lake that travels above the creek and Spearhead Lake. In this dry year, the creek's cascades are not as serenely beautiful. Lots of backpackers are descending on their way to the trailhead. I am twice the age of many of the people I meet. With my white mop of hair and tripod across top of the pack, I suppose I don't look like the average backpacker. I meet one man who exchanges hellos and remarks I am the oldest person he's met today, which I decide to take as an encouraging compliment.

Continuing past Timberline Tarns and Saddlerock Lake, the side trail to Bishop Lake is blocked off. I stop for a snack at the rocks to the right of the trail prior to the stepping stone crossing of a shallow creek. Meanwhile, a couple adroitly make their way across the stepping stones. This should not be difficult.

When I approach the crossing. I notice the rocks sit well above the water. If one misses, one doesn't simply get wet feet; one falls into the creek. My balance on log or rock crossings is now wobbly at best. I hesitate, but decide to do it anyway. The stepping stones are not exactly level and require big steps. I get to the third stone and stretch to the uneven fourth when my balance gives way. Aaah! The first thought is the camera. I put my right hand under the camera case and lift it so when I hit the water, the case is high enough to remain dry. Since my shoes and socks are wet, I continue forward and wade the rest of the few more feet to the other side.

No one is around to witness my foolishness or offer assistance, one of the negatives of solo travel. I need to find a place well off the trail and assess the damage, if any. Heading up the trail for a hundred yards or so, a set of rocks and slabs appears off to the left side. Taking off my pack, the only casualties seem to be the down jacket tied outside and the left sleeve of my long-sleeve wool t-shirt. Water filled the jacket pockets. I dump out the water, wring the shirt sleeve, and lay both in the sun. Only the bottom

of the camera case is wet. The inside is totally dry, as is the camera and lenses. I set them out in the sun anyway to make sure any possible moisture will dry. Any damage is only to my ego.

I take off my shoes and socks and put both on a rock in the sun. Opening the pack, I get out a spare pair of dry socks. Since I will be here awhile, I also get out my sandwich and eat lunch, taking in the view around me. I spy the Bishop Pass Trail switch-backing up the side of the cliff above. People pass by on the trail. Most say an acknowledging hello and continue in their direction of travel. Among them are the two men who were in the trailhead parking lot. "See you in Dusy," they remark with a smile.

One thing I've noticed in some internet trip reports is a lack of acknowledgment of one's stupid mistakes and the hardships encountered, especially those involving cross-country travel. It's as if admitting mistakes and/or problems equates with personal inadequacy. On one hand, it's a form of macho posturing, though it seems to involve both male and female authored accounts. When published online, this can be irresponsible and even dangerous. People read that a certain cross-country pass or a climb of a peak was handled with ease when in fact it may not have been. An impression is created that leads to people finding themselves in a situation beyond their experience and abilities. No wonder search and rescue volunteers find themselves so busy the last few years.

After about forty-five minutes, I put on dry socks. The shoes are still damp. The wet socks and long-sleeve t-shirt are tied to the outside of the pack. Wearing my still-dry t-shirt and now dry down jacket, I begin the climb up to Bishop Pass. Several people descending make their way as I slowly zig-zag up the tight switchbacks. The grade is not too steep so it is more a step-by-step grind than an exhausting steep climb. Since I'm heading up, I mostly ignore the precipitous drop off down to the beginning of the switchbacks.

On all my previous trips, the somewhat level section past the switchbacks leading to the pass itself was covered in snow. Now it's snow free. I say hello to two people taking photos of each other posing by the Bishop Pass sign. A little further, a sign announces that Dusy Basin is a no-fire area due to the scarcity

of wood. The two men from the parking lot are taking a break and enjoying the view. They say they are going to camp at one of the upper lakes of Dusy Basin for the supposed good fishing.

The trail has been rebuilt since 2004, beginning with an extremely long switchback. It's possible to make out portions of the old trail down to the left. This reminds me of the rebuilt Kearsarge Pass Trail with its switchbacks above the old trail. Once over the initial long switchbacks, the new trail joins the old trail.

When I reach a point above the "first lake" to the left of the trail, I try to figure out the best way to the larger off-trail lake below Columbine Peak. I camped there with Barbara and Gordon in both 1997 and 2000 at a marvelous campsite, which is my goal for the day. The two men from the parking lot pass by and invite me to join them since they are heading for the same lake. We all descend to the "first lake," pass well around the people already camped there, and head across and up towards the off-trail lakes. The two men are already moving at a far faster pace, heading down to the right, ignoring me. I realize we are headed too low and too far right and call to them we need to head up more left and straight over the ridge. They are now out of sight and earshot. Where are they? There's nothing else to do except continue going in the correct direction. I never see them again.

I climb up the ridge and see two small lakes straight ahead with larger Lake 11,388 above and to the left. I remember walking between these two small lakes in 2004. I do the same and come to the ridge overlooking the larger destination lake. I don't see an easy way down so backtrack a little way around and head down towards the lake. The inlet creek is still flowing with a lovely small waterfall.

This lake has changed since I was last past in 2004 and camped here in 1997 and 2000. The course of the inlet creek as it flows down to the lake is now lined with bushes and shrubs with only one clear spot to cross and avoid the bushes. The favorite campsite is no longer here.

I search for another campsite. On the other side, a tent sits perched above the lake while a small group is camped in the whitebarks on the southern



shore. I decide to confine my search to this area of the northeast shoreline and find three possibilities. One large site sits near the shoreline in full view of anyone. Placing a tent there would be really obnoxious to other campers. I decide on a site with a small grove of whitebarks shielding it from view even though it is probably slightly less than a hundred feet from the lakeshore. It is an established campsite with remnants of a recently destroyed fire ring.

After dinner, I climb a little ways up the ridge behind for evening and sunset photos. There's some haze. Is it from distant fires? Since I don't know, I tell myself to stop worrying about what I can't control. I can only control myself, not the actions of other people or mother nature. As the sun sets, Winchell and Isosceles peaks bask in alpenglow.

I get in the tent as darkness begins. I tell myself, enjoy tomorrow and stop worrying about Knapsack Pass, crawl into the sleeping bag, and gradually drift off to the soothing sound of the inlet creek and its tiny waterfall.

### **Day 3, August 5, Dusy Basin to Palisade Basin**

I awake at 5:30 to a cloudless morning. A little after 6:00, the first light falls on the peaks of the Black Divide rising above Dusy Basin and LeConte Canyon. I enjoy taking reflection photos, trying to get the foreground aligned with the distant peaks. The fish are jumping, creating pools spiraling into the distance.

A chipmunk scurries about the area. He's hopeful, but not expecting the handout that won't occur. The whitebarks grow in groups of six or seven trees, convoluting themselves into singular spread-out shapes. I write, sip coffee, and listen to the splashing of the inlet creek. Due to the changes at this lake, I doubt I will ever camp here again. The memories will suffice.

Since I don't have far to hike today, I linger, not leaving until 9:30. Working my way towards Knapsack Pass as the terrain dictates, I come to a small vale at the unmapped outlet creek of one of the small neighboring lakes. Two bucks are eating the local foliage. On the other side of the creek, I make out a use trail. Being a member of the species that frightens all other mammals, the deer trot off at my approach. Crossing the creek, I follow the use trail until there's a small

talus pile. The talus is mainly level so crossing is easy. The trail resumes on the other side for a few feet until it comes to another beachball size talus pile. Groups of shrubs stand to the right. I cross the talus pile following the line of shrubs.

Ahead lies the bottom of the pass and the chute I climbed up in 2004. It takes awhile to get over there due to the shrubs, but eventually I'm climbing the chute. At a large rock I can go around to the left or right. Since the right looks clearer, I go right. Soon I arrive at a ledge where the step up is too high for my short legs to negotiate with the pack on. Rather than go back down, I take off the pack, sling it up to the top of the ledge, put the camera case by the pack, and pull myself up. I put the camera and pack back on, walk a few steps, look left and see a clear use trail. I should have gone left, not right, at the large rock.

A slab rises to the left above the trail. When the slab is low enough, I step up. This is what I remember from 2004—ascending a slab to the top of the pass on an unobstructed walk to the crest. Now there are a few random giant rocks that need to be circumvented. I see the use trail that descends the other side, climb up towards it, and celebrate being at the top of the pass.

Since it is almost noon, I eat lunch and appreciate the view in all directions. To the northeast, the lakes of lower Dusy Basin extend towards the distant peaks of the Black Divide, Black Giant, and the far Evolution peaks. To the southwest, there's Palisade Basin with the Barret Lakes gleaming in the sun, North Palisade, Polemonium Peak, Barret Peak, the Palisade Crest, Mt. Shakespeare, and numerous far peaks extending to the horizon.

After lunch, I follow the use trail. It is not what I remember. In 2004, there was one short section impeded by a small avalanche. It was an easy get-around. Now, a good portion of the trail has been obliterated by avalanches. Past hikers have made two separate sometimes indistinct paths, probably dependent on the conditions at the time. I opt for the lower one on the assumption that it is the more recent and there are no observed obstacles. The two paths rejoin and split until they come together at a couple of short switchbacks up to the old use trail. The old trail doesn't last long. A large avalanche boulder sits across the trail. At this point, below a brief rocky section, I see a small trail switchbacking down until it disappears with a small ridge rising to the left.

Since the descent is steep, I carefully follow the path down. The trail eventually disappears so I decide to climb the small ridge. At the top is a view down to the first Barret Lake, designated 11,468. I see what appears to be the pyramid shape of at least three tents near the lake along with a more distant view of Palisade Basin and its various lakes and tarns. I don't see a good way down to Lake 11,468 so go back down and around the ridge on the other side.

Once around the ridge, I head for the lakes of the lower area out of curiosity and the fact it requires minimal climbing. Though tired and ready to find a campsite, I'm enjoying wandering Palisade Basin. It is so distinctively fascinating and gorgeous. I'm not going to stop until I find the right place, the place to spend three nights and not wish I was somewhere else. One tarn-like lake has no camping. I head over to the thin larger lake that stretches a long way down the basin. I camped there at a lovely spot in 2004 to avoid the large group I met on the top of Knapsack Pass who were going to Barret Lakes.

At the north end of the long, thin lake I ascend an outcropping to see better. I spy a couple of good campsite possibilities. It's lovely, indeed spectacular, but not a place I want to spend three nights. The far view will be better higher up. I have come across a lot of pyramid-shaped rocks that from the distance appeared to be tents. Maybe that is what I saw looking down at the first Barret Lake from the ridge? I have this compelling inner feeling that the ideal campsite with a view is somewhere above at Lake 11,468. It appears it is an easy climb winding up non-rocky areas. The other Barret Lake's (Lake 11,523) outlet creek runs down to the long, thin lake, but it is a longer climb and from this angle and the topo map, I wonder about a possible view.

I eat a bar to stave off hunger and begin the zip-zag climb up to the east end of Lake 11,468. Reaching the top, I walk a few steps and spy blue water. Now I need to find a campsite. At the first site I see, I put down the pack to reconnoiter. I find another campsite with a great view of the entire basin and the peaks beyond. However, the lake and thus water access, is too far away. I fetch my pack, and continue exploring

At the next good possibility, grass has grown over the tent area. I debate with myself and decide to remain legal. At a tarn with Lake 11,468 off to the

right, I spy a distant campsite above the lake and head over. *Yes, this will do.* I drop my pack, but decide to check out the rest of the area. The compelling feeling remains that the ideal spot is here somewhere. I head towards a couple of small stands of whitebarks.; in between them is a tent area. Ahead, all of Palisade Basin extends to distant peaks on the horizon. This is *the* place. I fetch my pack and begin setting up.

The tent erected, I sit and absorb the magnificent view, a “view to die for.” If I had come here directly, I could have been here earlier. However, this way I chose where not to camp by checking out other possibilities while exploring a lovely portion of Palisade Basin. For my sensibilities, I made the best choice possible. Being here three days will be easy. There is no doubt in my mind. *This is the place.*

Palisade Basin is an ideal timberline landscape. Rocks, cliffs, and slabs of varying colors, shapes, and sizes mix with the grass and scattered whitebarks growing in places one does not expect a tree to survive. The whitebarks are shorter here than some other places with the tallest about ten feet high. Looking across the landscape of rocks and slabs, the whitebarks and shrubs provide green contrast to the myriad shades of gray with reddish accents in glacially carved granite.

After dinner, I wander with camera and tripod to the lake, return to the area around my campsite, and appreciate the surrounding peaks’ reflections in the tarn until they are transformed into shapes against the darkening sky. As stars begin populating the universe, I drift off into a deep, contented sleep.

## **Day 4, August 6, Palisade Basin**

I awake at dawn to a spectacular morning. The sunlight starts on the far distant peaks to the south and west. Light beams shoot through the gap between Polemonium Peak and Barret Peak, creating marvelous light rays. So many peaks extend to the southern horizon, I can’t count them all. Today is Sunday and I worship in the church of my choice.

I think this is the most spectacular view I've ever camped at. Then I recall Kaweah Basin, Picket Creek Basin, Upper Basin from Marjorie Basin, Milestone Basin towards the Whitney Crest, a night and morning on Muir Pass, Bighorn Plateau, Marion Lake, Granite Park, Darwin Bench, Red Devil Lake, Pioneer Basin, the Upper Kern, Brewer and Sphinx basins, even my first backpacking trip to Fletcher Lake with the view toward Mt. Conness and the Sierra Crest. I've been fortunate to camp at many marvelous places with spectacular views.

As so many others, this is a view that defies description. "Awesome" is now a conversational cliché. It is beyond words so we come up with inadequate substitutes, such as beautiful, gorgeous, stupendous, fabulous, magnificent, miraculous, awe-inspiring, one-of-a-kind, all-encompassing. I decide all-encompassing is the best I can come up with.

I realize this area of Kings Canyon high country is my favorite portion of the Sierra after Kaweah/Picket Creek basins. The area north of Kings Canyon itself enralls me quite like no other. Dusy Basin, Evolution Basin, Evolution Valley, Darwin Bench, Darwin Canyon, Lakes Basin, Ionian Basin, Marjorie Basin, Upper Basin are all places I've visited at least once and some multiple times. Now, I don't know if I will ever be back. I might get to Dusy again, but possibilities are truly limited. I must appreciate the next three days.

The Big Bird Lake trip proved my ambitions are in my mind, not my body. What I can imagine is no longer what my body can accomplish. I will no longer directly experience places I dreamed of visiting: Tableland, Blackcap Basin, Tehipite Valley, or a final return to Kaweah Basin. I can only imagine. That is reality; I have to live with it.

Accepting my limitations is a difficult lesson. There's what I *want* to do and there is what I am *able* to do. They don't always agree with each other. I need to appreciate moments like this in spectacular solitude. That's what I seek: those magical moments of indescribable beauty, those moments of transcendence, those moments when I exist outside the confines of human existence and reside in life itself. In wilderness, life is real and true, unencumbered by human limitations, transcending human constraints. There's no theology, no defining the infinite. It is not divine. It is life itself in all its glory.

Humans seek to transcend those limits in art. It's not the same though. A masterpiece painting or photograph does not engage all the senses. Even the greatest art only shows us what humans are capable of. Wild nature shows us what life is capable of. If we allow wild nature into our being, we glimpse the greater possibilities of all existence. If we destroy wild nature, we destroy those possibilities.

Today, I don't feel like going anywhere beyond the area around my campsite. I feel like doing nothing. That's not precisely accurate. It's doing nothing except spending one day at wild nature's pace; feel the passing of each and every moment so that time seems to stand still. Only the change in light and the ants scurrying around at their frantic pace tell me life is constantly moving. Today is a day to let time pass at its own pace.

I meander down the ridge overlooking the view south and west, walking at a slow pace, stopping every few steps to take in the changing angle of view. I meet a young man doing the High Route who crossed Potluck Pass. He is friendly and talkative, as people traveling solo often are after not meeting anyone for awhile. Two more people appear, a couple who are on their way to Potluck Pass. How do four people in this remote place chance on one another? The three of them cluster around their phones, looking at photos and maps. The three conclude their consultation, the couple heading off to the upper Barret Lake and Potluck Pass. Instead of heading off, the man pauses, tells me his name, and says it was nice to meet me. I reply likewise and we wish each other good trips. He heads off in the direction of Knapsack Pass while I meander some more, taking photos looking down on where I was yesterday.

Watching them engaged in their smart phones, told me just how out of place I am in the contemporary world. I may own a smart phone, but I only use it to make phone calls, not for photos, games, maps, or even email, and find watching a video on a tiny screen ridiculous. The world has passed me by. I don't want to live in the contemporary world and the contemporary world does not want me standing in the doorway and blocking out the hall. The times have changed and I am no longer wanted.

After dinner, I once more wander with camera and tripod. To the south, the peaks are covered in haze. Does this mean smoke from a fire or Fresno on a bad day? I tell myself to stop the sarcasm. The reflections in the tarn of North Palisade and its neighbors are as awe-inspiring as last evening. At sunset, the silence is palpable.

Today has been an almost perfect day. I essentially did nothing well. I simply heard and absorbed the myriad voices of the High Sierra wilderness.

## **Day 4, August 7, Palisade Basin**

At dawn, it's a hazy, but beautiful morning. In this location, it can be nothing but stunning. Mountain chickadees flitter to and fro in the three groups of whitebarks around my campsite. As I'm sipping coffee and writing, a backpacker appears on one of the cliffs about a hundred yards away. He gazes in the direction of Potluck Pass and calls out to an unseen companion that the route is obvious.

This trip, the previous trip to Big Bird Lake, and last year's trip to Virginia Canyon show me how much the High Sierra has changed. Over my forty-three years hiking the High Sierra, there has been a vegetation increase that I believe is mainly due to human-caused global warming, not the natural forces of evolution. As the growing season lengthens, plants become more plentiful. Pines and various shrubs and bushes encroach on open areas. At Comanche Meadow in July, there were fifteen young pines all about three to four feet high scattered among five older tall hemlocks. In Dusy Basin and here in Palisade Basin, the shrubs and bushes cover more territory than when I was last here in 2004. There has also been the Sierra's evolution: Yosemite's Mirror Lake is slowly becoming Mirror Meadow. How much of the shrubs' and trees' expansion is the same evolutionary process?

What is human caused and what is the Sierra's natural evolution? There is no simple answer to the complex interrelationship between humans and the natural world. We can see and articulate the general effects of human pollution and climate change, but the particular effect on each particular

creature, flora, and, fauna is more difficult to scientifically elucidate. Each species responds differently and even the same species can respond differently in a different location. To further complicate the issue, naturalists have observed plants and animals evolving in response to climate change.

While we know the detrimental effects in general, the specifics are difficult to precisely determine. This enables sceptics to point to specific anomalies to question the general conclusion. Science is not one hundred percent determinate. To me, it's obvious that industrialization has adversely effected life on Earth. Dwelling on precise specifics is immaterial. At this moment, here in this land of rock, sky, water, and whitebarks, all those specifics become irrelevant. There is only the here and now.

I head up to the next Barret Lake, designated Lake 11,523. The route to get there is obvious. From Lake 11,468, one follows a green gully that diagonals up to the top of a plateau. When I reach the gully there is a well-worn footpath courtesy of High Route hikers. Near the top, another less obvious footpath goes up to the left. I surmise this will put me more to the far end of the lake so follow it. That proves correct and I am soon standing looking over the north end of Lake 11,523.

The lake is smaller than imagined from the map. I make my way down towards the water. At the top of a cliff, I look directly down into deep, clear water to a distant bottom. Meandering on the cliffs above the lake, I come to an overlook where the lake narrows and empties into the outlet creek. Nearby, out in the open on the plateau, is a barren campsite area with four distinct tent sites a few feet apart. For water access, one must climb down a steep bank to reach the lake or outlet creek. There is no view of expansive Palisade Basin, only distant peaks. One must walk across the plateau for the all-encompassing view.

These clustered, wide open campsites provide conclusive confirmation of my choice two days ago. I feel good about that, slightly vindicated even. I make so many bad choices these days that it's a real boost to have made the best choice I possibly could. At Big Bird Lake, I also made the best possible campsite choice. The fact I did both when nearly exhausted tells me to listen to those deep inside voices.



I wander awhile around the plateau appreciating the various near and far views, before descending the gully back to Lake 11,468 where I meander along the shoreline before returning to my campsite. Even though the popularity of Steve Roper's High Route means one sees other people, this area still feels remote, a place of solitude. As far as I know, I am the one visitor not doing the High Route. I came here to be here, not pass through to somewhere else. I came here to truly experience this particular place at this particular time, to explore the nooks and crannies as well as appreciate the all-encompassing vistas.

I enjoy focusing on particular aspects of the immediate surroundings. Much of the tarn's shoreline is now above water. The granite's colorful striations lead to speculations about what could possibly have caused this unique phenomenon. One of the nearby erratics features a stack of large rocks topped by two immense boulders much too large to have been placed by human hands though they appear to be deliberately placed.

As I am sitting in the sun waiting to dry after my dip of a bath, I realize this may be my last day ever on the other side of a class 2 pass. From now on, cross-country journeys will probably involve class 1 walking, not class 2 climbs. There are plenty of places to occupy me in the future, such as Humphrey's Basin, Royce Lakes, or the area above Garnet and Thousand Island lakes. Recognizing and accepting my limitations, it's now one trip at a time.

I sit sipping lemonade, munch trail mix, and take in the out-of-this-world view except it is in this world, in the High Sierra. The wind has been gusty all afternoon. There are a few puffy clouds, nothing threatening. It feels like a transition day. What it will transition to is unknown.

As I begin my post-dinner wandering with camera and tripod, there is another avalanche on North Palisade, the third one I've heard. Is this due to instability caused by lack of snow? There is not much haze this evening. Each rock and peak shimmers in the evening light. The final alpenglow on the Palisades concludes a day as near perfect as possible. A day in the Sierra with nothing going terribly wrong is a great day. Today rivals any day I have ever had in the Sierra. I know I have had others, but there is no need for comparison; accept the grace of a memorable day.

## **Day 5, August 8, Palisade Basin to Dusy Basin**

I awake to an inspiring dawn followed by a magnificent sunrise. It's one final morning in paradise, or at least Palisade Basin. I have not seen anyone since the High Route hiker yesterday morning scouting out the way to Potluck Pass. I am nervous about today. I need to get to the bottom of the pass, climb the pass, get down the pass, and navigate Dusy Basin efficiently. I tell myself it's something I've already done and so rationally there's nothing to worry about. Unfortunately, we don't always listen to our rational side or even our better angels.

Before packing up, I enjoy my last cup of coffee and reflect on three nights and two full days in this magnificent place. The surroundings are the stuff of my dreams. I will remember this place always. I won't be here again to truly experience it in its moods and times of day. Good-bye forever, Palisade Basin. I feel that now I know you. But, I can't stop time and remain here forever. Time is transient, not static. I have been fortunate to have had these three sunsets, three sunrises. The wind picks up, spurring me to get on my way.

I leave the campsite at 8:30 and make my way down to the wide-open panorama of Palisade Basin. Climbing around and up by the small ridge, I easily find the beginning of the use trail. I head up what turns out to be a branch and not the main route. The correct path one sees ascending is not as conspicuous as what one sees descending. I see the correct, clearer use trail twenty-five feet to the right. I descend a short distance, move over to the correct trail, and continue climbing. From this point on, the path is obvious.

The footpath ends at the rocky area that leads up to the old use trail by the immense avalanche boulder. I know the most difficult section is done as the trail heads on a mainly level grade towards the pass. For the avalanche segments, the trail goes down a couple of switchbacks to get around fallen rocks. At the giant boulder blocking the old trail, I go down and around on the newer footpath. I head up slightly and arrive at the pass. My watch tells me it is 10:30.

I have a leisurely early lunch and take some photos of the expansive view. A hiker appears coming up from below. He's friendly and easy to converse with. After crossing Potluck Pass, he ascended the rock shelves up Knapsack, using a GPS track as a guide instead of following the use trail. When he realizes I am also going down, he offers to go down together. While appreciating the offer, I tell him I travel too slow and so will end up being a burden on him. He replies he'll go ahead of me and so be my guide to find out if the route dead ends at the bottom of the slabs.

I put on the camera and pack as he quickly descends. He is easily a hundred yards ahead before I get a few feet so going separately was a good idea. He follows the slabs down until he disappears below. I follow the same right side slabs and end up on a use trail. I glimpse him far ahead as I continue down. He disappears again as the use trail takes a couple of different directions. I follow what seems best and come to a wide talus pile that leads to a clear way beyond that avoids the bushes. Far ahead to my diagonal right, I see the man. He waves and yells that he'd gone down talus and a short scree stretch to where he is. I wave back and yell "Thank you! Have a great trip."

I carefully make my way down and over the talus. The boulders are mainly a couple of feet wide with smaller rocks in between. It's a matter of patience, choosing each step carefully. The talus levels off for the last twenty feet. I tell myself to continue being cautious, thinking back to my accident exactly two years ago today. Certain memories stick in one's consciousness at certain moments, never to be banished. I take my time covering the last few feet. Arriving on clear stable ground, I feel a small sense of triumph.

Now, it's a matter of navigating Dusy Basin to find a campsite at one of the off-trail lakes. The bushes dictate where I walk on the way up to the lake camped at the first night. I come to an overlook near the southeast end of the lake. No one seems to be camped at the lake. Traveling above the lakeshore, I head towards the north end. When I reach a use trail that heads up from the lake, I take off the pack and check out the campsite where the person was camped the first night. It's an excellent campsite, but it's not what I am looking

for. I'm not interested in staying here, but rather at Lake 11,388, the large lake above it, or one of the scattered tarns. I see a party of four or more men on the other side of the lake looking for a campsite. I yell and point at the just-explored large site above me, which might be what they are searching for; I know the sites on that side of the lake are either too small or too out in the open for a group that size.

Putting my pack back on, I head up the use trail by the cliff next to the inlet creek to the small lakes above and Lake 11,388. At first, I go by the right side of the tarn-like lakes. I don't see anything on the east side of Lake 11,388; scattered whitebarks indicate possible campsites on the other side. Crossing the outlet creek, I come to the campsite Barbara, Gordon, and I stayed at in 1997 with the giant erratic we used to stash our food in the days before canisters. I remember waking in the middle of the night and hearing something outside. In the morning, visible bear tracks circled the erratic as our food rested out of reach and untouched on top.

A couple of small groves of whitebarks sit above the water further down the lake. A use trail follows the lakeshore and heads in the direction of the whitebarks. There I find a couple of clear tent areas. No inlet creek currently flows into this lake from the lake above. From here, the upper lake appears barren except for ground and rock since the whitebarks end here. The view from this campsite extends from Mt. Winchell, Thunderbolt Peak, and Isosceles Peak to Columbine Peak and the long ridge of the Black Divide. I decide to camp here. The watch says it's 2:40.

I like to get to a campsite by around 3:00 or 4:00 and while away the afternoon with writing, snacks, and exploring the area. I've never enjoyed arriving late and erecting the tent while cooking dinner with only a short daylight time span to appreciate the surroundings. One needs to stop and let the Sierra absorb itself into your being. One needs to experience wilderness unhurried in the serenity of solitude.

So far, I have the lake to myself. A tent is visible beyond, probably above the small lakes next door. I am overjoyed to have successfully done this trip. After the failure of Tableland, I was doubting myself. This trip

proved I can still do it, at least to some extent. But it took me two hours to climb 500 feet and get to Knapsack Pass from my campsite. In other words, I was moving at about the same speed as I was climbing 1,000 feet towards Tableland from Big Bird. I now realize the July trip was a result of unrealistic poor planning due to not realistically recognizing what I can manage. Now, I've learned my limitations. Some places of my dreams will remain only dreams.

After dinner, I wander with camera and tripod down to the end of the lake to the small tarn next door and the magnificent views of Winchell, Thunderbolt, and Isosceles peaks. As the sun falls lower on the horizon, the trees on the small island below my campsite glow in the last light. When the sun begins to set, Winchell and Thunderbolt gleam in the days final alpenglow. It's a fitting conclusion to a wondrous day.

This has been the best four backpacking days in a row since Picket Creek lake and Kaweah Basin in 2012. When I ended the second day at Barret Lake, this trip entered a magical phase. My focus on the here-and-now has been incredibly intense. The solitude helps. The magic continues on this final evening.

As darkness descends on Dusy Basin, the quiet of this place is stunning. The silence is only broken by the occasional breeze and the lap of water on the lakeshore. One hears the myriad voices of the natural world when there is silence, human silence. At this moment, I am the only one who can shatter the silence. I sit as quietly as possible and absorb the wilderness. Something indescribable happens inside our selves when we are immersed by silence. When we listen to the natural world, we reconnect to our true selves. In the all-encompassing silence of the wilderness, the wisdom of all time is revealed. The wilderness proclaims there is so much to learn here. Without wilderness we will lose the greater revelation that arises when we listen to the silence.

Venus and the crescent moon shine above the mountains over Dusy Basin, emanating the serenity of eternity.

## Day 6, August 9, Dusy Basin to South Lake Trailhead

It is a magnificent morning once again, with no clouds. That's six straight days of cloudless mornings. I climb the ridge above the lake separating this lake from the popular "first lake" one encounters on the Bishop Pass Trail. At the top, the view extends from Lake 11,388 to the neighboring tarns and the larger lake camped at my first night over to Dusy Basin, the Black Divide and over to the "first lake" and the peaks around Bishop Pass.

From my campsite, a long uninterrupted ridge extends from the summit above Knapsack Pass, past Giraud Peak through a total of seven summits rising above the lakes of lower Dusy Basin. Beyond that is the high ridge above LeConte Canyon with three visible summits. It's not as all-encompassing as Barret Lake, but it is still awe-inspiring. These are the places the High Sierra wilderness takes you, a place somewhere beyond the confines of the contemporary world to a place you see, hear, touch, and feel the deepest recesses of being. Unless one escapes to wilderness, that connection to our collective essential *Homo sapiens* selves will be lost. We need to experience the wild in order to preserve our selves.

Humans are too selfish and too greedy to ever learn to truly live among and with wild nature. We must set it aside and visit it, if we are lucky enough. Most city kids go through shock when they first encounter wild nature. Some never accept it. The lucky few embrace it, like Sheldon Johnson. Most are moved by it so that they recognize nature is worth preserving.

Despite the possible drastic effects of human-caused climate change, I have little doubt that somehow human ingenuity will permit human civilization to continue in some form. Humans seem to come up with a means of adapting to anything. It is still a possibility we may take the necessary actions to forestall the worst possibilities of climate change. However, our planet will never be the same. While awareness of its value is now ingrained, wilderness will not exist in the same way as it has for the last countless centuries. There may be set-aside wilderness areas on every continent

permitting humans to escape the worst ravages of civilization, but those ravages will deleteriously effect all remaining wilderness. Human pollution and climate change have a way of reaching anywhere and everywhere on our planet. While one will still be able to hike in places and not see another person, the effects of humanity will still be encountered. No matter how remote a place may be, no one will ever again escape the negative effects of human civilization.

As I sit and contemplate such stuff as dreams are made of on this final morning, like yesterday, I feel like I want to extend here-and-now to forever. It's hard to fathom that today I will journey from solitude here in Dusy Basin to the cacophony of civilization and the long drive home.

I leave the campsite about 9:00, heading diagonally up the ridge climbed earlier this morning. On the other side, I follow a wide gully down to above the "first lake," go over an outcropping, and down to the cliffs above the lake's east shore. Instead of going down to the lakeside trail, I continue diagonally up to intersect the Bishop Pass Trail. I begin to wonder when I am going to reach the trail, but continue. I come upon the trail a little before it begins the switchbacks up to the final climb to the pass. I couldn't have picked a better location to intersect the Bishop Pass Trail.

A couple of small groups of descending backpackers pass by with friendly hellos and "have a good hike." I meet the same packer I saw on Friday. Recognizing me, he and I exchange longer greetings. He does this route regularly, properly appreciating his work's location. No one is at the top of the pass. I meet a couple on the mainly level portion before taking a side trail to appreciate the magnificent view down to Bishop, Saddlerock, and Long lakes. Back on the Bishop Pass Trail, the tight switchbacks zip-zag down and down. The view of the sheer drop beyond the path is not for the acrophobic. I hardly noticed the sheer drop on the way up, but here, on the way down, one can't help gazing at the precipitous plunge to the rocks below.

I meet no one until I am past the switchbacks and heading over the rocky trail with the sound of water running beneath. Continuing down, I finally come to the stepping stones at the creek crossing before Bishop Lake. I take

off my pack, change shoes, and am about to put on my pack, when a young couple come to the crossing. The woman asks if I'm okay. I explain I don't trust my balance on the stepping stones. They wish me a good hike and deftly hop across. I put on my pack and camera case, pick up the trekking pole, and wade through the shallow water of the creek. On the other side, I go to the rocks on the left side of the trail, take off my pack and wet shoes, and get out lunch while drying my feet in the sun.

After lunch, I put on my dry hiking socks and shoes, and begin the final four miles to the trailhead. At the shallow stepping stone crossing past Timberline Tarns, I am a few steps from the other side when I hear fast footsteps behind me. I jump to my right as a trail runner bumps my pack, knocking me sideways. I am too startled to say anything as he and his running mate continue down the trail. A few minutes later above the Long Lake inlet creek, another trail runner knocks my pack and me off the trail as he whizzes by. I avoid falling down thanks to the trekking pole providing sufficient stability. His companion pauses, asking if I'm okay. This time, I have enough time to react.

“You need to let people know you're behind them.”

“Yeah, uhm, yeah,” he stammers.

“It's simply trail etiquette,” I continue.

The man looks embarrassed, starts to say something, but then continues running after his companion.

I curse trail runners who consider themselves above and beyond observing simple trail etiquette and continue my slower walk down to Long Lake. At the lake's far end, I again stop at the rocks above the lake to take a break and eat a bar. A couple of parties pass by in both directions as I finish my snack.

A couple who just passed me and a group heading up to Long Lake are in conversation near the Chocolate Lakes junction. I nod hellos and continue heading down. I joke to myself about getting dizzy zip-zagging the tight switchbacks below the Chocolate Lakes junction. The section after the switchbacks before the Treasure Lakes junction always seems to go on too



long. I pass the Marie Louise Lakes junction with the sign facing more the descending than ascending direction. I meet an elderly couple. The woman asks about the Marie Louise Lakes junction, remarking how this section always seems to last too long. I reassure her the junction is just ahead. We stop and chat briefly, the man remarking on how nice it is to see so many “fellow elders” on the trail. He is seventy-six. I hope I can manage this in six years.

The final mile descent to the trailhead also always seems to last too long. The remaining remnants of South Lake and its exposed rocky shoreline shimmer down to the left. At the bottom, the side trail to the parking lot is blocked off so one must ascend the steps to where the path heads to the trailhead sign. Those few climbing steps at the end serve as a reminder of what one endured to reach this finale.

A young couple are sitting by their car at the near end of the parking lot. The woman cheerfully offers me a beer. I’m tempted, but reply, “Thanks, but no thanks. I have a seven hour drive ahead.” Despite the temptation, chugging a beer doesn’t seem like a good idea right now. I unlock the car, get out a stashed bag of clean clothes, and decide to go home dirty. It’s already 3:00. I’ll wait to get home and take a proper shower rather than take the time attempting to wash off the trail dust and dirt.

After cleaning the filthy windows and dumping my garbage, I snake down South Lake Road to its junction with the Sabrina Road. At the bottom, outside Bishop, I get a phone signal and pull into the Cerro Coso Community College entrance road. I revel talking to Barbara for the first time in a week.

Driving up highway 395 from Bishop to Lee Vining, black clouds and sheets of rain engulf the mountains to the west. Where I was yesterday is now undergoing a High Sierra thunderstorm. Sometimes one gets lucky with one’s timing in choosing when and where to journey in the High Sierra wilderness. One can receive six days in paradise with no adverse weather. Feeling extremely satisfied and fortunate, I drive the many miles and hours home.