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## Day One, July 25: Sunset Meadow to Cloud Canyon

I have been dreaming of going to Kaweah Basin since reading Phil Arnot's description in his *High Sierra: John Muir's Range of Light* in 1997. Perusing other online trip reports and photos only increased my desire. Kaweah Basin became an idealized locale, the one place in the Sierra I must see in my life. However, I didn't get around to actually attempting a trip there until 2010. I was trying to minimize the days (due to work commitments) and approach miles as much as possible so I went in by the High Sierra Trail, intending to go over Pyraqueen Col. I broke my big toe on the second day during the climb to Precipice Lake from Hamilton Lakes. I attempted to make it anyway, but when I reached lake 11,682 directly below Pyraqueen Col, I realized it was not possible. My right big toe was swollen to twice the size of my left and the pain was excruciating.

Last year, I was only able to spend five nights in the Sierra due to other commitments. This year, I knew I had to make it or give up my quest. At age 61, I would probably not be able to cover the needed miles in the time I had unless I waited until retirement. I realize I may or may not be able to undertake long backpacking trips by that time in my life. I have doubts about making it this year. Since I wanted to use a different trail, I decided to go from Sunset Meadow over Colby Pass, a slightly longer, but less rigorous approach. While I'd hiked from Roaring River over Colby Pass in 1999, the rest of the trail was new to me.

I am up at 4:00 and on the road at 4:25. Driving the familiar highways to the Kings Canyon/Sequoia entrance, I try not to be too anxious or impatient. I pick up my reserved permit at Grant Grove about 9:30 and make a last phone call home from the pay phone at the Visitor Center.

From General's Highway I turn off at Big Meadow. The road narrows, but remains paved. I'm glad for the directions I downloaded from the Climber.org website for the correct turnoff at the dirt road to the pack station and Rowell Meadow trailhead. On the topo maps, the trailhead location is referred to as Sunset Meadow; the SEKI website and permit call it Sugarloaf. At the turnoff, the sign only mentions the pack station, which is only a quarter mile from the turnoff. Once past the pack station, the unsigned dirt road gets worse. It's decent enough since it's packed dust except for the occasional rock. The dust spews up behind me. The rocks can be avoided and so even at ten to fifteen miles per hour the last two miles are soon negotiated. There are only a few cars parked at the circular parking area at the trailhead.

At the near end of the parking loop, a sign announces the trailhead. The Rowell Meadow trail climbs gradually and steadily through the forest. The view of the opposite ridge is sometimes visible when the trail follows the outer edge of this ascending ridge. After the first mile, there's a sign for Jennie Lakes Wilderness. Within an hour, I come to the snow survey cabin at Rowell Meadow. There's a large campsite between the cabin and the meadow. I stop for a quick lunch while enjoying the view and variety of flowers blooming in the meadow.

The trail gradually climbs to the divide at the National Park boundary where there is a broken wooden Forest Service sign with only "dary line" visible as well as a metal Kings Canyon National Park sign in a few more steps. I catch a view of the Silliman Crest that encourages me after the miles of forest. But the view doesn't last and I continue plodding in forest through several inches of dust/dirt. The trail descends to Comanche Meadow, some of it steeper than expected. I don't look forward to this on the return trip. I know I'm in Comanche Meadow proper by a sign pointing to a bear box. A sign at the Belle Trail junction informs me it's three miles to Sugarloaf. A spectacular spread of lupine covers the area around the junction.

The trail descends to Sugarloaf Valley. I use the downslope to gain speed. I know I'm in Sugarloaf Valley both from the spectacular rock formation that gives it its name and another bear box sign. I plod through Sugarloaf Valley with the creek sometimes visible to my right. The crossing of Sugarloaf Creek is a pretty spot. This looks like a good possibility for camping on the final night. I refill the water bottles and use the Steripen to purify it; the amount of pack stock travel on this trail cause me to be cautious.

At Wellington Creek I rock hop across and begin climbing the ridge separating Sugarloaf Valley from Roaring River. There is an energy boosting view of the Brewer Crest at the top and the sound of Roaring River below. Soon the trail reaches the river, its rapids providing another needed energy boost. A couple of horses graze in an enclosed stock pen. The Ranger Station is soon in view. My watch says 5:50. The sign suggests the designated campsites near the bearbox. One person seated in a folding chair is camped by the bridge. I cross and head up Cloud Canyon, intending to walk twenty to thirty minutes before looking for a campsite. After half an hour, I start looking to the right of the trail towards the river. I try one likely place and see nothing. Five minutes later, there's a more likely area and I soon find a site above Roaring River

I send a SPOT message, set up the tent in the large tent area, and make dinner. While eating, I watch the light on the forest. When I remove my boots and socks, my feet are almost black with dust. The socks are so permeated that shaking them out has little effect. Tomorrow I will wear a different pair. I wash my feet and legs in the creek; the cold water is refreshing. Watching the last light in Cloud Canyon a little above Roaring River, I'm nearly exhausted; the effort to hike this many miles in a day is almost too much for me. As the sun begins to set, the light rises to the small ridge above. I sit and write as the light fades. The moon provides some illumination as I get in the tent. I made it to my goal for today! Tomorrow may be the hardest day of the trip since I hope to make it over Colby Pass and possibly as far as Gallats Lake.

## **Day Two, July 26: Cloud Canyon to Colby Lake**

I am up at dawn. After taking down the tent, I take a few photos of the creek and forest in the morning light and make breakfast. Back on the trail, I head up Cloud Canyon. The trail mostly stays in the forest. A little past the crossings of Brewer and Barton creeks, I meet a couple heading down the canyon. They ask how far it is to Roaring River Ranger Station. They are completing a loop of the High Sierra Trail over Kaweah Gap, up to Junction Meadow, and over Colby Pass. They ask me where I'm going and I answer Kaweah Basin. When I say I'm planning on getting over the pass today, they express doubt, but "you're getting an early start" so maybe I can do it.

This long section in forest with occasional sections closer to the river goes on much longer than I remember when I previously hiked up Cloud Canyon. Often, the views of the canyon are obscured by the trees. I arrive at expansive Big Wet Meadow. The Whaleback rises ahead, a magnificent mass of rock towering above the end of the canyon. I stop for photos and a snack. There are few mosquitoes in this place that's been called a "mosquito factory." A mother and fawn cross the trail in front of me and cavort through the meadow. A chipmunk drops out of a tree by the trail and scampers to his den in the rocks below and to the right of the path.

At what seems to be the crossing of Colby Creek, I step on what appears to be a stable rock of the stepping stones. It isn't stable and I get my feet wet. On the other side, where's the trail? I spend a few minutes searching. Perhaps the crossing was incorrect? I return to the crossing and recross. I missed where the trail takes a sharp right turn to go to the correct

crossing, an easy rock hop over shallow water. Back on the trail I find a good place to change into dry socks, and soak my hat and scarf to keep me cool on the climb to Colby Lake.

Soon a sign soon informs me that the Colby Pass Trail is not maintained and not recommended for stock. The manure on the trail says someone with stock went here anyway. My pace slows considerably as I begin ascending. The trail makes its way around the front of the Whaleback. Stunning views of Cloud Canyon and the peaks in the distance appear as I round the corner and descend down to Colby Creek.

My memory is the trail stuck close to the right side of the creek in this section. Now, the trail crosses the creek and goes above it. It may be better ecologically to have the trail higher up, but some of the enchantment of ascending along the creek is lost. The trail eventually descends back down to the creek and crosses it and recrosses it. Finding the trail at the crossings requires paying close attention. This valley below Colby Lake, with the creek meandering through, is particularly beautiful. A variety of flowers line the creek.

I remember the lake being after this valley. I did this climb from a campsite at the far end of Cloud Canyon where the climb over Glacier Ridge begins. It was early morning and I was full of energy; a person still slept at their campsite by the lake. This is one of those instances where memory cannot be trusted. The climb is much longer than memory, slow and difficult. Frequent rest breaks add to the slowness. I begin doubting whether I can make it over the pass today.

I come to the No Fires Beyond This Point sign, an indication I've made some progress. Soon, a sign indicates it's 4 miles to Big Wet Meadow and 11 miles to Roaring River. After a bit more climbing, I see the lake. I get out my watch. It's 3:30. It took me 3-1/2 hours to get here from Big Wet Meadow. At the rate I'm going, it will take me about two more hours to get over the pass. I'm already very tired. No one is camped here. I decide to stop here for the day and do the pass when I'm rested.

I check the area for campsites. There is a large one slightly off the trail and a nice one tucked away a little further down the lake. I take a wonderful site, slightly below the large one where the lake narrows and is further off the trail. I go down to the narrows for a brief wash in the shallow water, getting the dust and dirt and off and washing my hair. After filling the water bottles, I return to the campsite and put up the tent. Snacking on gorp and Crystal Light lemonade, I consider alternative routes for the trip since I didn't make it over the pass today. With three possible alternatives, I will check the time when I reach

Gallats Lake and decide then.

After dinner, I enjoy the changing light on Colby Lake, the trees, and surrounding peaks and ridges. No one else is here, so I am able to roam freely taking photos. Colby Lake proves to be a fascinating, beautiful place. I am no longer disappointed in not getting over the pass. Colby Lake is too gorgeous to not enjoy. After the sun sets, the western sky is dappled with white clouds reflecting on the water with its many expanding circles where the fish are feeding.

### **Day 3, July 27: Colby Lake to Picket Creek lake**

After a good night's sleep, I awake as dawn is beginning, the trees and rocks visible in the growing light. I take photos of the emerging light on the ridge and peaks above Cloud Canyon and the peaks above Colby Lake reflected in the shimmering water.

After breakfast and packing, I am on the dreaded trail taking me up Colby Pass. I can tell the trail has been worked on since 1999 when I first went over this pass. The views back to Colby Lake and the distant peaks of the Brewer Crest get more spectacular as I climb. I ascend step by gasping step except for a short level section through a lovely small meadow before the long final climb. The meadow's creek is dry. The last section is a series of steep switchbacks. Thirteen years ago, it wasn't as well constructed and so was more direct with fewer switchbacks. As my slow steps get more difficult, I glimpse the top and the sign marking the pass, not too many more steps away. At the top, taking off my pack, I marvel at the view back to the Brewer Crest, down to Cloud Canyon, and forward to the Kaweah Crest, Red Spur massive in the far distance. I send a SPOT, take some photos, have a snack, and even try the cell phone (no service says the screen).

SPOT sent, I begin the steep descent over sandy trail, steep switchbacks zig-zagging to the small lake below the pass. Beautiful flowers — Erigeron is my guess — line the trail in small clumps. Beyond the lake, the trail makes another descent to a long, wide meadow. Following the trail down to the meadow is confusing; the ducks placed on the top of the higher boulders provide assistance since where the trail exactly goes in its twists and turns is not always visible. While it would be easy to treat this section as a cross country route, I want to stick to the trail since the delicate alpine landscape prefers my boots on the designated trail. Walking across the meadow, the view of the surrounding peaks is awe-inspiring with Lion Rock especially

distinctive. At the end of the meadow, a more gradual descent begins through a thickening forest. I remember parts of this drop down to Gallats Lake being very steep with some of the switchbacks completely eroded. The erosion has been repaired, but it's still extremely steep for a trail through a forest. I dread the climb back up. I wonder if I can manage this climb and the final climb to the pass on a single day.

Near the bottom, the Kern-Kaweah roars over waterfalls on its descent to Gallats Lake. I parallel the river on a much gentler descent. A massive meadow surrounds the bend in the river that is named Gallats Lake. A small herd of horses graze. The scene is idyllic, conjuring a mythological Old West. I pause for a drink, a photo, and to check my watch. I decide to go to Picket Creek lake today. Gazing down the canyon, the climb up to Picket Creek Basin looks too difficult until further down the river. Maverick on High Sierra Topix suggested heading up where the trail is below Kern Point. From this vantage point, that appears the optimum route.

The trail winds past the meadow and surrounding trees. Soon, on a twisting drop of the path, I come on the owners of the horses. A trail crew is having lunch. They are the first people I've seen since the couple in Cloud Canyon yesterday morning. They are friendly with the crew chief doing most of the talking, though the other three, two men and a woman, toss in their comments and jokes. The chief asks if I'm going to Junction, meaning Junction Meadow. "No," I reply, "I'm headed to the Picket Creek Lake and Kaweah Basin." "I know the perfect way to get there." I'm all ears at this point.

He describes a section about two miles down river going through some willows. When it gets sandy, look to the right for the river. It's an easy crossing and then there's a gradual diagonal slope up to the lake. They talk about having been there the other day. When I mention I'm going to stop for lunch soon, they say there are lots of good spots by the river on the way down.

After a little more small talk, we say our farewells. Soon I find a place on slabs along the river well off the trail. Soaking my feet in the rushing water, I have lunch and send a SPOT. It's around 1:30 so I'm making pretty good time. After lunch, I head down, keeping my watch on to judge the distance better so I won't anticipate where to cross too soon. After half an hour, I wonder if one section after willows might be the spot, but think the upslope on the other side is not gradual enough while further down the river, I can see that it is an easier climb. I walk another twenty minutes, enter some willows and try to find the crossing place. Where the trail gets sandy, I see an easy rock hop across the river. The upsloping ramp is slightly to the right, but it looks easy enough to reach. I negotiate the rocks

over the river in a convoluted path, avoiding any leaps. On the other side, the willows and rocks prevent me from easily walking to the slope. I spend too much time negotiating a way up and through to intersect the ramp.

I follow the ramp until high above the river, when the best route is no longer so obvious. I'm now tired from the climb as I find my way up slightly to my left, following dirt and small rock patches to the side of the slick granite slabs. I figure I'll reach the lake at 4:30 or 5:00. As I near the top, I try to figure out exactly where the lake is and get out the map and compass. I come to a large vale that goes down all the way to the river to my left while to my right are some cliffs. My instincts tell me to go this way, but since I'm so tired, I don't really trust them — is it just my weariness leading me this way?

I head up and to the right, following a set of footprints. They soon disappear. I waste a lot of time trying to safely negotiate my way through the rocks. I see a small vale to my left, head down, intersect it, and begin walking more easily. I look at my surroundings and realize with Picket Guard Peak on my right and other peaks ahead, I'm headed the wrong way. I got turned around while making my way through the rocks and trying to follow the footprints. I get out the compass. I'm heading northeast when I should be headed south. I try not to let my weariness interfere with my rational judgement. I turn around and begin walking down the vale. After about twenty more steps, I see the lake straight below, a hundred yards or less away.

Making my way carefully down the slope so I don't do something I'll regret in my excitement, I hear a waterfall and see a campsite next to it. When I reach the lakeshore, I walk towards the site, which is only yards away. A cliff stands in between, its sheer face dropping straight down into the water. Climbing up and over does not look simple; tired and with a full pack it's probably dangerous. The other direction, circumnavigating the lake, is longer, but relatively simple and safe. I climb up to one of the cliffs ringing that side and make my way until I can get down to the lakeshore. Following rocks along the shoreline and crossing the outlet creek, I walk the rest of the way around the lake to the waterfall.

One campsite sits on this side of the falls and the better one on the other. Hopping over, I go to a long log at the back of the site, take off my pack and let out a sigh of relief. It's now 6:30. I get out the SPOT and take it to a rock near the cliff above the lake next to the falls. Returning to the log, I separate the tent things from the food. Opening the Bearikade, I see the packaged dried tomatoes and the bag of spaghetti and sauce I dehydrated at home. I put a few tomatoes



and the spaghetti in a pot and take them with the stove over to a flat, elevated rock near the SPOT. I cover them with what I hope is the right amount of water.

I now fully take in my surroundings. This lake has been called the best campsite in the Sierra. I see why. An elliptical body of water sits circled by spectacular straight cliffs, foxtail pines scattered on the cliffs and shoreline. Beyond, the Sierra Crest from south of Mt. Whitney to north of Mt. Tyndal stretches across the eastern horizon. I am incapable of coming up with any words to adequately describe the scene before me. It is beyond words like awesome and awe-inspiring.

I get out the tripod, put on the camera, and take a few photos of the lake, Picket Creek, and the light on Red Spur. The SPOT has been sent and the spaghetti sufficiently hydrated. I boil the food until the water is gone and take the pot to a place on the cliff above the lake where I can sit and lean on a tree while gazing at the view. Dinner tastes great. Life doesn't get much better.

After dinner I enjoy taking photos of the light fading on the peaks. After sunset, I erect the tent in the fading light then go back to the ledge and watch the lakes and peaks until the stars come out. Tomorrow will be a layover day to explore Picket Creek Basin.

## **Day Four, July 28: Picket Creek Basin**

At dawn, I go to the nearby small lake up the creek. Here one sees the first light hit Red Spur and the unnamed peak above the ridge connecting to Kaweah Basin. Engrossed in the growing light and reflections on the small lake, I don't turn around to look behind me for some time. When I do, I see the campsite and shoreline filled with sunlight. I return to take photos of the trees and creek in the morning light.

I have a leisurely breakfast. At 7:30, I sit sipping coffee and writing leaning on the tree overlooking Picket Creek lake, the lake with the "campsite die for;" although to die for is a little far from the truth, but not much. These are the moments, the long luxuriating moments I live for. These are the moments that make the agony worth it. The foxtail pines with their needles glow in the morning light. Small circles appear in the quiet lake, showing where fish are jumping. A rocky peninsula with three foxtail pines juts into the lake, it's shore grasses shining on the water. Sheer granite cliffs rise in irregular forms straight out of the water. Foxtail pines scatter the cliff tops. In the far east, the Whitney Crest forms a one-of-a-kind horizon. Picket Creek with it's small waterfall spilling into the lake, is the dominant steady sound while bird calls are scattered

from all directions. This unique scene is found nowhere else on earth. These are the moments ingrained in our memory, a moment recalled not only visually — a moment not only seen, but felt with all our senses in every sense of our being. These are the moments that show us who and what we truly be.

At 10:00, I go to explore Picket Creek Basin. I follow the shoreline as much as possible by the second Picket Creek lake. Hiking without a pack, I am able to easily explore various routes and so learn the best. At the third lake, I rock hop across over the shallow water. To the right along the shoreline, there seems a better and easier way that avoids any rock hopping. Since I am without a pack, the rock hopping is kind of fun. Beyond the third lake, willows choke passage along the creek. A rock hop crossing is just above where the creek enters the lake. Travel on this side avoids the willows and is relatively easy, especially when I stay further from the creek. There's a downhill stretch to a dried-up tarn with a twenty to thirty foot high headwall above it. On the far left, there's a break in the headwall. I find myself following footprints and what seems to be a use trail climbing up. The use trail ends as it goes through a gap in the headwall. At the top, I gaze through the trees and see the "pass" on the dividing ridge between Picket Creek and Kaweah basins, only a hundred or so yards away. I stop and doublecheck the map. It's a stroll to the top. I can't quite believe how easy this is.

I walk up to the top and down a little ways to see over the cliffs. There it is — Kaweah Basin, the island lake below and to the left with the Kaweah peaks rising to the right. After all the years of anticipating, wishing, hoping, and even trying, I'm overcome with exhilaration and emotion. I find myself tearing up. Yes, I am really here!

I sit on a rock and take in the scene from the eastern view of the Sierra Crest, the island lake, the two smaller neighboring lakes, the course of the creek, and west to the awe-inspiring escarpment of the Kaweah peaks rising straight up.

Eventually I roust myself from my reverie and return to exploring Picket Creek Basin. Heading down and to the left, I aim for an area on the climb up to the next level of the basin far above where the creekside willows disappear. Some of the foxtail pines on this hillside are especially distinctive. I meander at an angle down to Picket Creek. When I reach the creek, I follow it up for a hundred yards or so. Checking the time, it's now well past noon. I need to decide whether to continue up to the next level or begin the walk back. I go up a little further and have a good look around at the crest separating Picket Creek from Nine Lakes Basin. I follow the creek as closely as possible back down. It



makes for slower travel, but the small cliffs and rocks along the creek are quite interesting and I'm enjoying myself.

When I reach the headwall again, I try to descend more directly, but end up going down the same way I came up. Once at the bottom, I meander around this part of the basin instead of the more direct route I took earlier. I don't return to the campsite until 3:00.

I enjoy a refreshing swim in one of the pools of Picket Creek by the campsite. The water temperature is warmer than expected so I stay in longer than usual. Afterwards, I climb to the top of the knob on the other side of the outlet creek to check out the 360 degree view from the top. The course of the Kern-Kaweah down to Kern Canyon and a section of the canyon itself spread below. The splendor of the Sierra Crest in all its magnificence causes me to pause in silent wonder. The rest of the afternoon passes at luxuriating pace with Crystal Light, gorp, writing, and simply appreciating the view from my vantage point leaning on the tree. Large black ants scurry everywhere. Obviously their food sense is not well developed. They crawl over and inside everything and anything, from the inside of the gallon plastic bag with the maps to inside my shirt. Every once in a while, one bites me, an annoying prick sting.

Dinner of tortillas, refried beans, parmesan cheese, and dried red onion seems a necessary interruption of the passage of the day from afternoon to evening. I eat quickly and pass the time finding vantage points for photos. It is a perfect evening and sunset even if there are no clouds for photos. I eat my one dessert of mint chocolate chip astronaut ice cream as the final light shines on Tyndal and Whitney.

Today has been one of the best days ever in the Sierra at one of the greatest campsites on the planet. It has been a day to treasure, a day I have long anticipated that surpassed all expectations. Let's see what tomorrow will bring.

## **Day 5, July 29: Picket Creek lake to Kaweah Basin lake**

Tomorrow has gifted us with another perfect morning. It feels cold at first, but the temperature rises as the dawn grows brighter. The morning light first strikes the peak above Picket Creek labeled 3954 on the map, then Red Spur, the light shooting up the gap in the valley. It also shines on the rock pile above Kern Point, but takes much longer to make its way down into the Kern-Kaweah canyon. Up Picket Creek valley the light descends relatively rapidly until soon the pines on the ridge separating me from Kaweah Basin

are shining. The ridge to the right of Tyndal shines white as the ball of fire rises over the top and the campsite fills with light.

After breakfast, I slowly pack up and enjoy the view while writing before heading out for Kaweah Basin. Since the route is now familiar, I have an easy time making my way to the top of the ridge dividing the two basins. Filled with anticipation about being in Kaweah Basin, I zip-zag down, avoiding the small talus blocks. The most difficult part is at the bottom. The creek makes huge fissures, mini-canyons, that prevent one from taking a straightforward approach to the lake. One has to carefully pick a route. I find a way down a chute to the creek, rock-hop across and up the other side. I finally reach the shoreline of the lake. Where the creek flows into the lake, unexpectedly I don't see any campsites though this would be a lovely place for one. Does that mean so few people come here there haven't been many campsites created? Spectacular lakes that are easier to hike to —Thousand Island Lake in the Minarets, the Marjorie Lake basin, even off-trail lakes such as those in Dusy Basin, are ringed with campsites.

I cross the creek and head to the end of the lake where the outlet creek empties since that looks like the best place to camp. It's also what I remember from other accounts. I pick my way through the rocks and trees and head for the outlet creek. One site sits on the north side with a wonderful view of the lake and Kaweahs, but not so good to the east. The other side of the creek looks better. Finding a crossing requires some looking. Wading would be easy and there are a couple of spots where it's so narrow it might be possible to leap, but not with a full pack or my now limited leaping ability. I find a rock hop crossing. There's one wonderful site. I look for others. Down by the lakeshore, there's a site with a destroyed fireplace only a few feet from the water, obviously once a preferred site due to it's flat ground, proximity to the lake, and view. I look around some more and then go back to the site I saw. Yes, this will be great. Though the tent area is in the full sun, there's trees for shade and wonderful rocks for sitting and writing.

I assess the best way over the Red Spur ridge. I pick out what looks to be a good route. It would be extremely tiring and I would arrive at the lakes on the other side feeling nearly exhausted. I calculate how long it would take me and surmise two to three hours.

That is not what I am here for. Here and now I'm at a spectacular, one-of-a-kind lake, long anticipated, a place I've wanted to be for fifteen years. It is more beautiful than I ever imagined. This is what I came for, where



I want to be. And I am on vacation, after all. Enjoy and appreciate it now. I'm living my dream. Don't spoil it by exhausting yourself and then turn around and come back here again tomorrow. I am going to really get to know Kaweah Basin on what is probably my one and only visit in my life.

First, I will have lunch. Maybe I will perk up and feel energetic after some food. After eating, I still feel tired. It's as if my metabolism has run down. I just want to sit down, even lie down. Maybe I need more to eat? I eat some gorp—chocolate and mixed nuts. I decide to put the tent up. I shake the tent out of its bag and roll it out, separating the fly and the tent. I want to sit down again. Okay, try having a Power Bar and some more water. I notice I've drunk over a quart of water since arriving here. I sit for a few minutes, then put up the tent. Maybe a swim will help? Feeling a little better, I go down to where the lake empties into the outlet creek. After a bath, I feel better. (Two days later, I discover the cause of my feeling so tired: in the half light of dawn, I took a double dose of my blood pressure medication.)

I explore the nearby area. I find a good crossing at the outlet. Following the lakeshore, I go to the island, which is a peninsula this year. From the middle of the island I take in the unique perspective of the rest of the lake.

I watch the light on the Kaweah peaks, as Arnot suggested. There's a steady wind with larger gusts blowing from the west. When I go to get my polartec jacket out of the tent, I discover the zipper on the mosquito netting is stuck. It ends up separating, rendering the netting nearly useless. I wonder what happens if this occurs when I am inside the tent. Do I cut my way out with the knife?

After dinner with tripod and camera, I spend a couple of hours appreciating this special place. The light on the trees is especially magnificent. It's as if each tree is coming alive.

Here in the wilderness we all become alive. We're not simply existing. We're living with an intense awareness of all our surroundings. Being in the wilderness is engaging all one's senses. It's not only the beautiful sights of the peaks and lakes. There are also sounds of creeks bubbling, birds singing, the wind blowing. There's feeling the breeze rush over you. Look, listen, and feel how and what the wilderness tells you of our past, present, and sometimes the future. It is our greatest teacher for the lessons it teaches convey the essence of life itself.

It is getting dark. The creek settles into its nighttime songs, each splash a part of the rhythm and melody. The wind has settled down to a gentle breeze. Moonlight shines on the peaks, rendering a soft glow. It is time for rest and sleep. Tomorrow is the Kaweah sunrise.

## **Day 6, July 30: Kaweah Basin**

The transition from dawn light to sunlight on the Kaweah crest is almost instantaneous. Black Kaweah, Kaweah Queen, and Lawson Peak shine in the morning light. I am caught by surprise by the sudden transformation. At first, a slight breeze disturbs the reflections on the lake surface. After about fifteen minutes, the wind stops and the water stills. The reflections on the lake of the foxtail pines are especially stunning, so stunning that I spend a half hour taking reflection photos. This view of the lake and Kaweah peaks is an enchanting marvel.

The serenity of this place is palpable. All feels right with the world. There are hundreds of trees and millions of rocks in view. Each and every one is exactly as it should be in relation to the grand serenity of all. It seems eternal as it is now, life's constant changes frozen for this profound moment. Hold it inside and weld it to memory. As the creek's gurgle pronounces, life's constant changes continue.

That presence of the eternal strikes me as what only be called mystical. Last year, I was in Winchester Cathedral on a Saturday afternoon. The choir was rehearsing for Sunday services. Mid-summer sunlight shone through the stain-glassed windows, rendering the light inside on the soaring columns with a reverential sense of peace. That is what Kaweah Basin feels like, a natural cathedral. Except this is not a man-made structure with choirs singing. This is the natural world — wilderness unadorned, unsullied by humans beings.

I leave at 8:40 to explore Kaweah Basin. I follow the obvious route in from the shoreline to the inlet creek crossing. I continue in from the shoreline wondering whether this would be a good way to go tomorrow. At the end of the lake I head to the shoreline. The neighboring smaller lake is only a few feet of creek flow from this lake. What a great place for a campsite. I decide to check it out on my return. I figure on going about two to three hours up the drainage and then turn back since by then I'll be rather hungry.

The neighbor lake is lovely. I follow its right shoreline as well to the small lake above it. Beyond is a level wonderland of rocks, slabs, and foxtail pines with the Kaweah escarpment above. In certain respects, this is the most interesting view in the basin. The foxtail pines are spread out so no distant view is obscured. To me, foxtail pines are the Sierra's most interesting and beautiful tree, even more beautiful than whitebark pines. The foxtrails grow to a greater height and form themselves into a myriad of shapes. The reddish-tan/brown bark glows in the sunlight.



The combination of the gray granite, the Kaweah's reddish tinge, and various shades of brown is evocative. There are many tall snags among the trees, the barren branches shining in the morning light. A large rock formation made of white quartz seems to grow out of its neighboring granite slab. I stop for photos, hoping to somehow capture the essence of the scene. I meander west to a cliff above the creek. The creek spills out of a large lake up ahead. Leaving the cliff, I find the obvious preferred route down to the lake. At the far end, though the creek is not visible in bushes, its route up to the last level before the Kaweah escarpment is easy to surmise.

The right shore of the lake is a mass of boulders with scattered green patches. I find a crossing of the creek and boulder hop for fifty yards before turning back. I'll try the other side where the low water may make it a walk across flatter shoreline rocks. After recrossing the creek, following the left shore I am soon around the lake. I sit on some rocks jutting out over the water and check my watch. It's already past 11:00. With over an hour to the next level and an hour to return that will make me hungry and hurrying instead of leisurely making my way back, exploring on the way. After a Power Bar, I make my way to the inlet creek, take a long look up visualizing the alpine landscape above, then make my way back around the lake.

I wander slowly by a different way than I came. I come to a drying tarn lake, probably the blue speck next to the larger lake on the map. I wander through the slabs and foxtail pines, heading to one side and the other to check out a single tree or the details of rock and land. There are many erratics scattered on the slabs. Why did the receding glacier leave them to sit in that particular spot through the eons?

At the third lake in the chain, I follow the right shoreline. The water has receded to such an extent that walking is easy. At one spot, the shallow bottom extends out at least twenty feet. Stopping to watch life in the shallows, I see tadpoles scurry. A tiny frog hops by and then another and another. Observing them more closely, I see they have spotted backs. Is this a colony of endangered yellow-legged frogs, still thriving? They move too quickly and are camouflaged too well for a photo. Often, only the eyes are visible above the water. I observe them for many minutes, fascinated by their movements and ability to camouflage themselves as they hop and swim among the shallows.

It's a short walk to the neighboring lake. Once again, I am able to follow the shoreline except for one short section. At the end, I check out the idyllic campsite sitting between this lake and the larger island lake. There are three

tent sites and a wonderful rock overlook of the island lake with the Sierra Crest in the background. I make out my tent, a blue spot among the trees and rocks. Something is lying on the granite of this rock, an MSR deluxe spring ring headnet. Perhaps someone was watching the sunset and found the bugs weren't as bad as expected and left it here. I decide to turn it in at Grant Grove after my trip since there's obviously no one around who is going to come back to retrieve it. From its condition, it's been here for several days and I have seen no one since the trail crew four days ago.

I slowly make my way back around the island lake to my campsite, checking out inlets, trees, and rocks. I reach the campsite about 2:30. After lunch and another bath, I write notes on my hike up the basin. The wind picks up with gusts much stronger than yesterday. I take a walk along the outlet creek to the brink, taking photos of the rapids and falls cascading down to the lake below, exploring more extensively than yesterday.

After dinner, I once again enjoy a couple of hours moving around the area with tripod and camera until the last light shines on Kaweah Queen. The sun sets on one of the best days ever. I'm not going to try and remember the others right now. I revel in this day. In twilight, there are faint glows on the peaks, not from direct or indirect sunlight; it seems the day's collected light absorbed into the rock and reflected outward. I feel completely in touch with the wilderness. It is within me and surrounds me with its wisdom.

Twilight transitions to darkness. I can barely see to write; reading what I write is impossible. I don't want this day to end. The moon rises over Red Spur. I can almost see what I write except for the shadow of my hand blocks the moonlight from the paper. I now have my day in Kaweah Basin. It is mine to treasure for the rest of my life. It has more than exceeded my expectations. It is time for bed and I should conclude the day, but oh what a day!

## **Day 7, July 31: Kaweah Basin to Picket Creek lake**

Once more, I'm startled by the quick transition from dawn to sunrise on the Kaweahs. Unlike sunset, the first light on the Kaweahs doesn't begin with a small light shining on Kaweah Queen. It's like flicking a switch and the Kaweah crest is lit. The phenomenon is heightened by the hush over the landscape.

The creek gurgling is a soothing background that accentuates the feeling of total tranquility that defines this place at this time. It's like one of those indoor water relaxation fountains except what's surrounding is not

a suburban living room or bedroom. Here the outdoor surroundings are the source of the tranquility, echoed by the creek.

These mornings where I linger, looking at a lake, drinking coffee and contemplating are my favorite moments in the High Sierra because of that tranquility. Whatever else happens for the rest of the day, this moment is an elegant epiphany. Rain, thunderstorms, an agonizing climb, negative incidents on the trail, a difficult creek crossing — none of them exist. There is only the awe-inspiring beauty surrounding me and the serenity I experience. It is not the same as the transcendent epiphany of sunset when my inner spirit soars. This is something for which the only word is tranquility.

When I finish the coffee, I sit silently for a few minutes, appreciating this enchanting place. I am quite reluctant to leave. It is only my sense of necessity (lack of food) and duty that permits me to say farewell.

I pack up and begin the short journey to Picket Creek lake. I've decided to exit the basin by the same route I entered, exploring on my way. From the shoreline, I follow the inlet creek up to its right angle bend where it turns down to the lake. A little further up the creek, there is a rock hop crossing. A distinctive stand of foxtail pines is about halfway up; I passed it on my way down so I diagonal up in their direction. From the trees, it's a convoluted climb to the saddle, following the best way up that avoids negotiating any large rocks of talus.

At the top, I take off my pack and sit overlooking Kaweah Basin. I do not wish to say farewell. The knowledge that I will spend tonight at the Picket Creek lake permits me to put my pack back on and proceed. I stand for one extremely long last look in which I take in Kaweah Basin from the island lake to the awesome wall of the Kaweah peaks.

Turning, I head up and over the saddle and enter Picket Creek Basin. Since I am in no hurry, I enjoy exploring after I make my way down the use trail at the headwall. I arrive at the Picket Creek lake campsite and have lunch before setting up, having a swim, and exploring around the area. I go through the remaining contents of the Bearikade, reorganizing it for the final two days. The rest of the afternoon is spent writing, snacking, and appreciating this special place. A hummingbird flies in directly in front of me, wings buzzing. I see a flash of yellow on it's breast.

It is now five days since seeing another human being. Tomorrow that will change, I expect to see the trail crew. I fantasize they will be going back over Colby Pass and can load my pack on their horses. I'm dreading



that climb. I'm hoping the relatively level sections allow me to recover enough before the steep stages.

Clouds have been building all day. I don't think it will rain, but it does leave me wondering about tomorrow. The clouds coming from the southeast are beginning to look more ominous. The direction could mean a monsoonal flow, not a heat generated thunderstorm from the west.

This is the last afternoon to sit and write and so intently experience the wilderness. I should be writing something more profound. This lake has such a sense of self-containment within itself due to the cliffs, foxtail pines on the cliffs and shoreline. Beyond is the view of the Whitney Crest. No place I've been in over 35 years in the High Sierra is quite like this. It may not be the best campsite in the Sierra; that is too subjective for adequate assessment. But there are very few that can be said to compare for solitude, uniqueness, and beauty.

There is a quality to the light that shifts throughout the day. Because of the east and west angles, the sunlight arrives early and stays late. Peaks and ridges don't block the angle of the sun to Picket Creek Basin. The light shoots through from the west to illuminate low down in the basin. Across Picket Creek the trees are still in sunlight at 7:00. To the east, the Whitney Crest shines until sunset. Kern Point also retains the light until late.

The full moon rises as the sun sets, the last light glowing on Mt. Whitney's summit. The moon reflects on the water as pink and white clouds surround the white sphere. Tomorrow I begin the long walk home.

## **Day 8, August 1: Picket Creek lake to Colby Lake**

I am up at 5:30. I pack up the tent before 6:00. Due to clouds to the east, the sunrise is not as spectacular as the other two mornings. That makes it easier to eat, pack, and get on my way. I wade the outlet creek, make my way around and up the cliffs, and change into my hiking boots. I descend to the gully that extends down to the river and choose a small chute to go up the other side where I can descend down to the river. The chute looks easier than it turns out to be. While obviously used by others, they must have had longer legs. My short legs won't reach high enough so I need to pull myself up at a couple of places.

I pick my way down trying to avoid the steep, slick slabs. I go down more directly than I hoped for until about halfway down. At one of the shorter slabs, I try to descend it and end up sliding for ten feet on my rear with my feet extended to stop me at a rock and tree below. Even for that short distance, the descent speed is disturbing and would be terrifying if I hadn't had the natural stopping point of the tree and rock.

I head diagonally down for a spot on the Kern-Kaweah that has no creekside willows. From this vantage point, it looks like the area where I ate lunch last Friday. The rest of the way down is relatively easy; I just avoid any cliffs. I am soon at the river. There's a simple crossing of rocks and boulders well above the water. I take two steps and place my right foot on the next rock. It feels stable. I shift my weight to my right foot for the next step. The rock suddenly tilts forward and I fall face down, landing on my hands, my lower right arm sliced by a sharp rock. I remain completely dry. Righting myself, I continue to the other side. Blood is pouring from the gash on my arm. I wrap my scarf around it and find a place to put the pack down. After washing my arm in the river, I put on a large adhesive bandage.

This looks like a good place for an early lunch. After lunch, I find the trail. Soon I meet the trail crew with their horses descending to Junction Meadow. I move off the path since the horses are having trouble negotiating the wide bend in the trail. We have a brief conversation. They appreciate my joke about it being too bad they aren't going the other way to carry my pack. The woman mentions that the Picket Creek lake is her favorite place in the Sierra.

As the trail crew continues down, I continue up. Gallats Lake is deserted. Above Gallats Lake when the trail turns to the right, away from the river, I stop to fill my water bottles and soak my hat and scarf; my memory is this is the last good water source until the big meadow below the pass. The trail twists up steep switchbacks through the forest and I plod on, one step at a time, taking several short rest breaks. Finally, the switchbacks end, the trail becomes less steep, and the trees begin thinning out. I've made it up the first of the three stages of the climb to Colby Pass. Heartened by my progress, I stop for a snack.

The long meadow is the most sublime section of the trail with views of the crest around Triple Divide Peak to the left and the peaks around the pass straight ahead. The next stage of the climb commences at the end of the meadow. The ducks assist following the trail's various twists and turns. This section of the climb is by far the easiest and I am soon at the level section by the lake below the pass. One more stage to go.

Sweat drips in my eyes on this hot day. One baby step at a time I inch my way up with frequent rest stops. The clusters of *Erigeron* lining the trail make the climb more tolerable. The views down and back behind become more spectacular with each small step, encouraging me upward. I know the sign should be soon. There it is. I made it!

I put down my pack and get out the SPOT. I tell myself two people are now going to be very happy and relieved. My family knows I am over the

pass and the worst is over. Except for the four east side passes (Taboose, Baxter, Sawmill, and Shepherd) Colby may be the hardest trailed pass in the Sierra. There are a lot of cross-country passes I would rather go over. Once the SPOT is sent and I finish my snack, I begin the switchbacking descent.

Going down, the damage done by stock and hikers cutting switchbacks is more evident. I need to pay close attention to avoid sliding on the steep downslope. I'm not sure which is worse, the slow, step-by-gasping-step climb or the scrabbly, knee-jarring descent. I'm relieved to come to the meadow plateau. The rest of the climb down to Colby Lake is much more a conventional zig-zagging trail and not as steep. Slightly above Colby Lake alongside the trail, a large group of butterflies flit among the flowers. I briefly stopped, enthralled by the winged creatures flying all around, seemingly oblivious to my presence. They provide the uplift I need to hike the short distance down to the lake.

I spy one tent at the lake so unlike last week, I have company. They are a young couple in the site nearest the trail. I choose the same site as before since an elderly couple are camped at the site beyond. Dropping my pack, I head down to the lake to wash off the dust and my hair. The water feels wonderful. I feel extremely tired, yet relieved with a sense of accomplishment as I set up the tent and make dinner. Afterwards, I climb the small knoll behind the campsite for the view of Cloud Canyon and the ridge above the lake. When the sun goes behind the ridge, I return to the lake. The cloud formations above the peaks at the far end of the lake are quite striking with their sweeping swoops shifting in the sky over the summits. I watch the shifting patterns until the sunlight disappears, signaling the end of the day. The dusk light settles over Colby Lake, bringing its quiet serenity. I write in the remaining light before crawling in the tent with its non-functioning zipper, drifting off to sleep with a feeling of contentment.

## **Day 9, August 2: Colby Lake to Sugarloaf Creek**

It's another beautiful dawn. I climb the small knoll and watch the sun's first beams strike Glacier Ridge and the Whaleback. The neighbor couple are up and about when I return to the lake for sunrise reflections. As I finish breakfast and begin packing, the couple heads up towards the pass. They, too, want an early start for a long day. I am aiming to reach Sugarloaf Creek.

The hike down from Colby Lake is lovely. The valley below with its timberline-like landscape alongside the creek is one of those sublime Sierra hikes as the trail crosses and recrosses the creek. After the last crossing, the



trail climbs for a short distance on its rounding of the Whaleback. In the morning light, the view down Cloud Canyon is awe inspiring. The remainder of the descent to the canyon becomes less thrilling, a hike where I wish to reach the bottom as quickly as possible. When the trail passes alongside Roaring River above Big Wet Meadow, I stop for an early lunch at a lovely section of riverside slabs.

Lunch finished, I begin the long miles to Roaring River Ranger Station. Hiking the trail this direction is more enjoyable than the hike up. Descending Cloud Canyon becomes not as tedious as it was ascending. The trail is level or slightly downhill. Roaring River's presence on the left for certain stretches adds to the sound and beauty. I walk in solitude until a little before the crossing of Brewer Creek. There seem to be two separate parties at the crossing. I sit on a rock fifty yards before the crossing to let them sort out. One is a guided group comprised of people in their forties, fifties, and possibly sixties going to Mt. Whitney. As they pass, we have a brief conversation. When they ask where I'm coming from, they don't recognize the name Kaweah Basin. Their route and hiking stops and distance are dictated by their guide. That seems a little sad to me since I treasure picking my own route and stopping places each day. The other group is in their late teens and early twenties. Though the one group follows their guide's itinerary, they exude self-assurance while the younger group seems confused, unorganized, and slightly contentious. How they got this far seems a function of youthful energy and the patience of the young man and woman who seem to be in charge.

A mile or so from the Roaring River Ranger Station, I play trail leap frog with another solo hiker. He's not talkative. To end the leap frogging, I head down to the river to replenish my water bottles.

On the other side of the bridge, there are at least two large groups in the camping complex. I get out my watch at the Ranger Station. It reads 3:15; I should be able to make it to Sugarloaf Creek. I was hoping to stop for a rest and a snack, but the crowd makes a quiet rest impossible. I head down the trail and pass a large group enjoying their own respite on the river. A short way down, there is a good spot off the trail where I can take off my boots and soak my feet in the cool water of the river. A large group passes on the trail. Rejuvenated, I follow them a few minutes later. There are dark clouds in the sky, but no sound of thunder.

The climb over the divide separating Roaring River and Sugarloaf Valley is extremely tiring. I'm relieved when I reach the top with its inspiring view of the Brewer Crest. At the bottom of the descent to Sugarloaf Valley, it

begins drizzling. I cover the camera bag with its built in raincoat, but decide to forego other raingear. The group who passed me are stopped ahead, putting on raingear. They begin hiking again, but it's obvious I'm walking faster. I pass them, exchanging hellos and rain jokes. A couple of minutes later I discern footsteps behind me. It's not the group, but a man in his twenties who passes with a friendly hello. The drizzle stops. When we reach Wellington Creek, his female hiking companion is sitting by the creek waiting and he sits beside her as they confer. I cross the creek. Now only another mile or so to go. A final burst of energy gets me to Sugarloaf Creek. No one is here. A large packer site sits to the left of the trail. To the right, further off the trail, is a single tent site. I take off my pack at a log behind the tent area. It's 5:30.

As I open my backpack, the couple from Wellington Creek appear, pause to confer for a few seconds, wave, and cross the creek. I am putting up the tent when the group comes down the trail. I let them know I'm taking this site so the big packer site is free and leave them to debate their course. The woman who is the obvious leader says they should go further today; they wave good-bye and cross the creek.

With tent up, I go to the creek, wash the dust off, and enjoy Crystal Light lemonade and gorp while soaking my feet. It's a pretty spot, the best I saw on the way here. Though it is 6:00, I see no point hurrying dinner. The water's gentle gurgling, and the coolness of the water on this very hot day make for pleasant unwinding after a long day. The sun is still shining and will probably stay until after 7:00. A little quiet time feels good right now.

I finally rouse myself from the creek to cook dinner — spaghetti, tomatoes, and the rest of the Parmesan cheese and dried red onions. When it's ready, I take the pot down to the creek to enjoy the sun and water. Done with dinner, I get the camera and tripod, cross the creek, and climb the knoll above for the sunset views of the Brewer Crest and Sugarloaf. After sunset, I return to the creek and write until it's too dark to see. I'm hoping the rest of the trail is as interesting as today has been. Other than the fatigue, today's hike was a true joy.

### **Day 10, August 3: Sugarloaf Creek to Sunset Meadow**

I awake at dawn and begin packing. At sunrise, I cross the creek for a photo of the moonset reflected in the water and Sugarloaf in first light. After breakfast, the sun shines on my campsite. It's nice to sit in the sun on the last morning of the trip. A bird is calling, an interesting call. There are at least two other species of birds, not as loud as the one since they are further away. Otherwise it is quiet as can be. A morning stillness hangs over all.

There's a sense of anticipation in the stillness, as if enjoying the moment before the regular noises of the day commence. Though I picked this place to camp on the hike in, I didn't expect it to be this nice. Of course, not having a large group nearby or even anyone else helps. I can appreciate the morning stillness in solitude.

I see no one on my hike through Sugarloaf Valley. The morning light is gorgeous on the trees and Sugarloaf itself. Traveling in this direction, the distinctive rock formation is more prominent, the valley's dominating presence. Once I pass it, the hike becomes less interesting. The climb up to Comanche Meadow is a tedious slog. At the Belle Trail junction, the stunning carpet of lupine remains in full bloom. The climb to the crest at the national park boundary is also a tedious slog, relieved by the view of the Silliman Crest a little before the top. A large group is stopped for an early lunch at the boundary. Heading down, I make better time. Another large group of young people are making their way up. Beyond a passing hello, they say nothing, exhibiting weariness of the climb.

I stop at Rowell Meadow for a snack and to enjoy the flowers before the final two miles downhill. As usual, the final mile seems to stretch in my anticipation. Finally, the trailhead appears. A dust-covered car awaits me.

On the dirt road, I meet two separate trucks going up, which only adds to the layers of dust on my car. Back on the paved road, I find a place to pull off by the creek a little before the series of car camps. I wash off the dust and dirt, and change into clean clothes. Filling the water bottles, I pour them on my windows and turn paper towels black washing the dust off.

When I turn onto General's Highway, I feel I am back in civilization. The crowds at Grant Grove confirm it. I phone home and enjoy that always delightful first conversation in days. After turning in the headnet, I go to the pizza place, order a pizza and beer, and fill a plate with fresh greens from the salad bar. I celebrate and contemplate my trip.

This has been an unforgettable trip. I appreciate it on so many levels. First and foremost, getting to Kaweah Basin and Picket Creek lake, not merely passing through; inhabiting them, getting to know well their subtle nuances within their singular splendor. Then there's knowing that I did it when it may be my last opportunity. My body tells me I can no longer hike as many miles in a day. Once, fifteen to eighteen, even twenty mile days were common; they were what I planned for six to seven hours of walking. This trip, hiking fifteen miles almost wiped me out and took over eight hours. Previously, climbs, while difficult, could be done at a one to two mile an hour pace. Now it's half to one mile per hour. Knowing this, I will still be able



to get to most places I want if I plan carefully. And now those places I will never get to that still matter to me are few and far between. Perhaps, when I have enough days, I will return to Picket Creek Basin and Kaweah Basin, and even make it to Red Spur.

Kaweah Basin may be the most serene place on the planet. It invites one to linger and contemplate. There's such an enchanting, even mystical presence. The timelessness one always feels in the High Sierra is intensified. One's insignificance amid such grandeur and beauty is felt and understood to the core of one's being. I reconnect to my true self, the depths and essence of the human spirit and to the depths and essence of life itself.

In his journal, John Muir used the term "terrestrail immortality" to describe the transcendence experienced "alone in the depths of the wilderness" of the High Sierra. In Kaweah Basin, I found "terrestrail immortality."