



Day One, July 6, East Fork Campground

Last winter's record-breaking snowfall led to a summer season requiring improvisational flexibility, as I discovered. I have been backpacking the High Sierra since 1978 and encountered everything from drought to the record-breaking snowfalls of 1982-83 as well as the large snowpacks of 1995, 1998, 2011, 2017, and 2019. To some extent, those past experiences prepared me for 2023. But this was not simply an unusual year. It was, to use the cliché characterization, an "unprecedented" year. What seemed possible from past experience failed to conform to 2023 reality. All prior history didn't become irrelevant, but any summer Sierra trips required reconsideration and adaptability.

In January 2023, I registered for the Yosemite National Park backpacking lottery and actually received my first choice of the Rafferty Creek Trail on July 6. I assumed that since the historical latest opening of Tioga Road had been July 1 in both 1998 and 2019, I would be able to undertake the trip. I just needed to be ready to improvise according to the conditions encountered; any planned destinations could and probably would be changed. I was wrong. On June 29, I received an email informing me that Tioga Road and thus the trailhead would not be open on July 6. (Tioga Road eventually opened on July 22.)

Since the July 6 date was chosen to avoid conflict with my grandson's first birthday, I either needed to forego the trip or come up with an alternative. With the monumental snowpack, alternatives were few. Along with Tioga Road trailheads, many others also remained closed due to their entry roads still not being open. The best alternative seemed to be the Rock Creek Road, Mosquito Flat trailhead, and Little Lakes Valley.

My wife, Barbara, and I had spent June 21 to June 25 at Rock Creek Lakes Resort celebrating our 50th wedding anniversary. To exemplify the immensity of this year's snowpack, when we were there on those same dates during the then record breaking year of 1983, Rock Creek Road was open to Mosquito Flat and we hiked in Little Lakes Valley. Forty years later, Rock Creek Road was only open to the Rock Creek Pack Station. The final

mile or so to Mosquito Flat remained closed, but the trailhead remained accessible; people parked at Hilton Lakes Trailhead and walked up the unplowed road.

Another reason for choosing Little Lakes Valley was previous experiences in heavy snow years. In July 2017, I went to Gem Lakes for three nights, not encountering snow until the final approach to Gem Lakes; no snow was at Chickenfoot Lake. I also took a trip in July 2019 over Mono Pass to Pioneer Basin. The Mono Pass Trail was snow free until the final approach to Mono Pass; Ruby Lake was completely free of snow. For the 2023 permit, I picked Ruby Lake and Chickenfoot Lake as campsite locations. I assumed from my previous experiences that while those places would contain snow, I would still be able to find a snow-free spot.

However, all available permits for Little Lakes Valley were booked. I kept checking the Recreation.gov website. Due to the snowpack, cancellations began appearing. I only needed one. Four cancellations opened for July 6. Bingo! I had my trip for the desired entry date.

Permit secured, I needed a place to car camp on July 5. To help with acclimation, for the past ten years I have stayed at a trailhead campground the night before. For the July 2017 and 2019 trips, I camped at the Mosquito Flat Trailhead backpacker's campground. However, this year, the Mosquito Flat Campground remained closed. The nearby East Fork Campground opened on June 29 so I booked a campsite for July 5. All that remained was getting there.

On July 5, I head straight up the hill to Sonora Pass at the highway 108/120 junction where if going south of Lee Vining one normally turns right to Yosemite and Tioga Pass. This is my second time over Sonora Pass this year, having gone both directions when Barbara and I went in June. I prefer Tioga; it's my favorite drive anywhere. While Sonora has sections where one can drive 55 miles per hour instead of Tioga's 45, Sonora also has a series of intense concentration hairpin curves. On Tioga there are no hairpins to negotiate so one can appreciate the views. Certain sections of Tioga never fail to thrill me: the overlook of Yosemite Creek canyon,

Olmstead Point with its view of Half Dome, driving along Tenaya Lake, passing through Tuolumne Meadows and Dana Meadows, and finally descending Lee Vining Canyon with Mono Lake providing a fitting finale.

On highway 108, after negotiating the traffic through Jamestown, Sonora, Twain Harte, and Strawberry, I stop at the Column of the Giants where picnic tables provide a pleasant riverside lunch location. After lunch, I pass the turnoff to Kennedy Meadows before commencing the series of hairpin curves leading up and over Sonora Pass.

With last week's heat wave, there is far less snow than ten days ago. Once on highway 395, I phone Barbara from Bridgeport where there is cell phone coverage. We say good-bye for the next six days except for SPOT messenger updates indicating my location and keeping each other informed of emergencies should that be necessary.

I get lucky with the 395 construction outside Lee Vining by joining a long line of cars and trucks following the pilot car. We may be moving at only twenty miles an hour, but we're not sitting still. At the other end, the pulled over pilot car waits for the traffic behind me while a long, long line of northbound cars and trucks is held in place by the flagman.

Beyond Lee Vining, I pass the turn to Tioga Pass with a flashing sign announcing its closure. Heading down 395, I am once again awestruck by the view of the Sierra Crest. Passing the first June Lake Loop turn-off with its dilapidated house that Barbara and I have longed joke about someday owning, I continue past the second June Lake Loop turn-off, Mammoth Lakes exit, and the McGee Creek turn-off. At Tom's Place, I turn right and head up Rock Creek Road. No one seems to pay much attention to the 35 mph speed limit. I drive past East Fork campground and Rock Creek Lakes Resort up to the pack station to see if the road is open to Mosquito Flat. The gate remains closed. Disappointed, I turn around to head back down to East Fork to find my reserved campsite, number 43. It's tucked inside pines and aspens with no near neighbors. This will do fine.

I set up the tent and enjoy snacks and dinner. Afterwards, I walk down to the bridge over raging Rock Creek, cross the bridge and take a few photos

before recrossing the bridge and, returning to my campsite to contemplate tomorrow. It's another year, another season in the High Sierra, my forty-fifth. I spend an inordinate amount of time contemplating these two to three weeks and two or three trips. In certain ways, those two to three weeks are why and what I live for the other forty-nine or fifty. It's those times of solitary bliss, those times of "terrestrial immortality," as John Muir put it.

To some extent, that bliss is what I also find in certain drive-in campgrounds. When the other campers are quiet in their campsites and out of sight, the inner feeling touches transcendence, a similar transcendence to backpacking.

Maybe, at 72 years of age, I should consider car camping as an old age alternative? I may not ultimately achieve that magical spiritual apogee of a sunrise or sunset in backpacking solitude, but I can sense that magic. In sensing that magic, I also relive that magic. I touch it even if I don't inhabit it. Maybe for the remainder of my life that may be sufficient. That's one rationalization for aging gracefully.

Here at campsite 43, as long as I'm facing north, there is only mountain wilderness before me. If I face south, there's lights and campfires. I face north. Right now, I only hear the murmuring roar of Rock Creek, pines and aspen rustling in the breeze, and the distant shrieks and laughter of children playing. This is almost as good as it gets. Perhaps, at my age, that is really as good as it's going to get?

My mind drifts into speculation. Maybe I need to find all the great Sierra car camping places and appreciate them? Find drive-in campsites with lovely sunsets, sunrises, and day hikes—North Lake, Sabrina, Onion Valley, aptly titled Grandview, Tuolumne Meadows (when they finish "rehabilitating" it), Saddlebag Lake, Sawmill walk-in, the campgrounds on Minarets/Reds Meadow Road. My thoughts wander farther to places such as Granite Creek and Cedar Grove along with dispersed camping in the Alabama Hills. However, I tell myself, while the fifteen to eighteen mile days with 3,000-4,000 feet of elevation change are no more, I can still journey in the backcountry.

I am contemplating a lot, but then I am contemplating the rest of my life. I do not know how much time I have left. I know what it is to meet mortality. In 2017, there was cancer and in 2019 I exited the wilderness in a helicopter; the rescue personnel considered me fortunate to have survived intact. I know the long, drawn-out descent towards death, having observed the prolonged decline and attended the funerals of too many friends and relatives. The cliché is getting old is not for sissies. I do not want to become a cliché, but it beats the alternative. So here I am anticipating another backpacking trip.

I must accept that certain dreams are now unattainable; accept who and what I am and live within my limitations; keep on doing what I am doing like the millions of other lives before me. In all probability, I will die another insignificant existence in the infinite chain of evolution. But that cannot prevent me from attempting to still discover “terrestrial immortality.”

Day Two, July 7, Mosquito Flat to Marsh Lake

I awake at 4:00 am and try to get back to sleep, but only doze off for short periods before giving up and getting up at first light. The packing goes well, as I hoped. The Bearikade Exhibition with all the food and remaining interior space filled with two fuel canisters and Luci lights fits perfectly standing next to my new ultralight compressed Thermarest Parsec sleeping bag. Everything else goes in easily. I finish eating breakfast while packing before taking my garbage down to the dumpster and recycling. I leave East Fork Campground and proceed up Rock Creek Road. At the pack station, the gate is open! I let out a silent cheer and continue up the road to Mosquito Flat.

At 7:15, a single car is in the trailhead parking lot. Two large dogs come down the trail. Of course, they come up to my car to investigate. I make sure both are behind me as I pull into a parking space. A woman appears and lovingly reprimands the dogs. We both rejoice at the opening of the road. She says there is snow at the Little Lakes Valley/Mono Pass trail junction, but it isn't bad. Her dogs hop in her truck and she drives off,

leaving me alone. In retrospect, I realize I should have taken a photo to commemorate this singular occasion of being the only car in the Mosquito Flat Trailhead parking lot.

I put on my pack and grab the trekking pole. One of the bathrooms is open so I take advantage of it. A fisherman arrives, parks his truck, and also rejoices at the opening of the road before crossing the bridge at the campground over a roaring Rock Creek. Alone, I walk up the trail. Snowmelt water tumbles down the path. At the junction, the sign is not visible in the snow as the woman warned me. I slip and slide before taking the snow-free Mono Pass Trail.

The lack of snow continues up a few switchbacks when snow appears in patches until the trail disappears under solid snow. I find a snow-free rock, put on microspikes, and get out the GPS. I'm essentially following the Mono Pass Trail heading to its junction with the side trail to Ruby Lake. The snow becomes a seemingly endless field of suncups. Most are about six inches to a foot deep, though a few are deeper. Hiking over the suncups is extremely tiring. I make incredibly slow progress. I figure I'm moving not much better than about a half mile an hour.

The GPS screen shows the Ruby Lake/Mono Pass junction is not far ahead and Ruby Lake is a little more than a quarter mile away. All I see ahead is rock, suncup snow, and whitebark pines. These are far from the conditions encountered in 2019 or even 1983. When I check my watch, I discover I've already been hiking for over three hours and covered not quite two miles. I have no idea *if* there is a snow-free place to camp at Ruby Lake. I would have to return over the same debilitating suncup snow. There are too many "ifs" with all the evidence declaring "no." This is not what I am here for. I conclude its time for a plan B somewhere lower down in Little Lakes Valley. The reality of summer in the Sierra in 2023 sinks in. Now I truly comprehend this "unprecedented" accumulation of snow.

I head back down over the suncups, essentially following the lay of the land to where the snow becomes sporadic. After removing microspikes while eating a bar, I look down on Little Lakes Valley and see a peninsula jutting

out with no snow and an open area that looks like a campsite. From that peninsula, there is a direct view of the Sierra Crest rising out of the southwest end of Little Lakes Valley. I decide to head for that campsite.

The trail is a few feet below so my following the lay of the land must have conformed with the trail builders. I step down to the trail and walk over a couple of snow sections. Instead of following the trail all the way back to the junction, when I spy what I think is a shorter, more direct way straight down to the peninsula, I take it. On the meandering descent, I avoid a couple of short cliff outs and assume I'll soon be at the bottom. Unseen from above is a section of bushes. I bulldoze my way through twenty to thirty feet of bushwhacking, cursing misguided shortcuts, but avoiding any mishaps. At the bottom there's a short walk through snow and forest until the Little Lakes Valley trail appears a few feet below. Once on the trail, it is about thirty yards of walking to the obvious side trail out to the peninsula along the shore of Marsh Lake.

I follow the trail until high water covers the path. Clambering up a hillside, I emerge on top with a clear tent area leading to a rocky point above the lake. Water access requires a long trip down, but since I am only one person, it's not much of an issue. I eat a late lunch before erecting the tent. Afterwards, I find a rock to lean against and take in the picture postcard view of the of the Sierra Crest.

That view stretches from Mt. Morgan to Pyramid Peak, Bear Creek Spire, Pipsqueak Spire (my favorite whimsical name for a high peak), Mount Dade, Mount Abbot, Mount Mills to the heights around Mono Pass. This is truly one of the grandest sights in all the Sierra. I watch the movement of light over the crest and on the water where Heart Lake empties into Marsh Lake in spiraling manifestations.

So far, it's feels like solitude. I only see two people fishing by the Heart Lake outlet. How did they get over to the other side? I can make out a trail along the shoreline across the lake so I surmise that is the way though there may be more than one unmapped trail used by day-hiking fisherpeople that take them to what the map calls Hidden Lakes.

In my solitude it's hard to realize it's only about two miles from the trailhead. Maybe I will return here in early or late season? Today, I didn't do many miles, but I feel I traveled a lot. Tomorrow I will layover here and check out the Little Lakes Valley trail to the Rock Creek crossing and up to Long Lake. If the crossing is possible and the snow not too bad, I'll go up to Chickenfoot the next day. Otherwise, I'll figure out an alternative. From today's experience, finding an alternative seems more likely. Right now, there are lots of day hikers, but no backpackers.

As evening comes, I climb down to the lakeshore for a different perspective. The day's last light lingers on Bear Creek Spire and it's two neighbors, Dade and Abbot. It's only 8:30 as darkness comes, but I have been awake since 4:00. Maybe that's one reason why today was so weird. It's time to get back in sync with the wilderness after feeling out of sorts for much of today. I'm ready to go in the tent and sleep. Tomorrow will be a new day.

Day 3, July 8, Marsh Lake

Tomorrow is here and beginning with dawn on the Sierra Crest, it is marvelous. I revel in the view from the cliffs by my campsite and scramble down to the lakeshore for photos. I see no one. After breakfast, I find a good rock to lean against, enjoying coffee and writing random thoughts. Instead of writing what I believe may be profound perceptions (even if they're not), I speculate about those remaining future trips. My body is telling me that maybe I should quit now. Right now, my will to backpack in the Sierra remains stronger than my body's objections. But I now see the future more clearly. How much longer can I maintain that will? I now take it one season, one trip at a time. This is definitely a possible campsite for a future trip, if I live that long. Now, I simply appreciate being alive while navigating the day to day frustrations of contemporary existence.

Today, I will take snacks, map, GPS, and camera at least to the Rock Creek crossing between Box Lake and Long Lake and assess the conditions. I assume I'll follow the west side of Rock Creek use trail to the north end of

Long Lake. I'll scout out possible campsites on Heart Lake and Box Lake. My day is laid out. I'll see how well it conforms to the preconceived perceptions. Yesterday sure didn't conform. I hope today is better. It definitely started that way. Let's discover what's up ahead.

I follow the peninsula path to intersect with the Little Lakes Valley Trail. A few day hikers also make their way up the trail. Patches of snow and boggy puddles fill areas that don't receive steady sunshine. The places that get steady sun are snow free so the trail is clear at the outlet creek crossing at Heart Lake with the little foot bridges surprisingly intact. The shaded portions up the small hill to the cliffs above Box Lake retain patches of snow. The cliffs in the sun above the lake are snow free. A family group is fishing along the shoreline at the south end of Box. A day hiker ahead begins to follow the use trail to the left, looks at his cell phone, and asks me which trail goes up to Long Lake. I reply it's the trail to the right, which being in shade is filled with snow.

He clambers up through the snow on the footprints of previous hikers. I pause to take in the view back of Box Lake before following. The man is soon far ahead of me. The trail becomes snow-free when I emerge out of the woods at the crossing of Rock Creek. The crossing does not look as bad as expected. When I was here in 2017, the rushing water was thigh deep; standing was a struggle. I managed to get across thanks to the assistance of a tall man for whom the water was barely knee deep. He helped his wife who was my height across, then, without speaking, stuck out his hand to assist me. At that time, there was only a smattering of snow on the other side. Now, deep snow covers the trail. The current may be less and the water lower, but the snow is much more.

I follow the use trail up the west side of Rock Creek where there is no snow. During the final shady climb, patches of snow appear. In the snow-free campsites above the lake, one group is packing up. I head down to the shoreline. Long Lake remains covered in ice floes. A woman and her daughter are there. She says her husband and son waded the outlet and headed up the trail towards Gem Lakes. They've been gone more than half an hour and should be back soon. Her husband and son appear a few

minutes later. They say the trail is solid snow all the way up Long Lake and beyond as far as they could see until they turned around.

I decide to come here tomorrow and scout out campsites on Long Lake's west shore. While there are at least three campsites here at the north end, most day hikers come here, look at the lake, then turn around and go back. Perhaps further down the lake, I will find a campsite with solitude. Barbara and I camped on the west side in June 2005 with no snow and no neighbors. Maybe in July 2023 that will happen again though I have already learned past experience is not a definitive guide to present reality.

I head back down, exploring along the cliffs above Box Lake. At the Heart Lake outlet creek by the trail, a group has set up two tents a few feet from the outlet creek and the lake. It's obviously illegal. When a couple of passersby mention the campsite's illegal location, one of the group sarcastically replies. Unless an Inyo Ranger ventures up here, they will get away with it.

Forgetting the Heart Lake negativity, I return to my campsite above Marsh Lake. When I go down to get water and explore around, I find two men setting up along the Rock Creek outlet in a nice campsite unseen from above. We exchange hello waves. That evening when I am following the path along the lakeshore to take photos, I run into them as they return from a hike. They say they went up towards Gem Lakes, turning around before they got there. They encountered heavy snow all the way from the Rock Creek crossing. That helps confirm my decision to go to the far west end of Long Lake tomorrow.

The days final light glows on Mount Morgan, Bear Creek Spire, Mount Dade, Mount Abbot, and Mount Mills. This is the Sierra in all its magnificent grandeur. For a few seconds, time seems to halt as the light remains on the highest peaks, the mountains transfixed in a final display of light and shadow.

Maybe I'll come here again. If not, I know I have experienced a once in a lifetime place and time. I know I have three more nights, but it will be difficult to top tonight.

Day Four, July 9, Marsh Lake to Long Lake

It's Sunday morning and I worship in the church of my choice. With this view, it's definitely worship. There aren't many finer views, not only in the Sierra, but in the world. I think of Picket Creek Lake, Kaweah Basin, Upper Basin from Marjorie Basin, Mono Divide from Pioneer Basin, the Glacier Divide from Mesa Lake, the Lyell Crest from Red Devil Lake, Palisade Crest and beyond from Palisade Basin. Those are places where all the extraneous hassles of life dissolve in the wonder of wilderness magnificence.

I need to appreciate these mornings. This is when backpacking is still the singular experience. One doesn't get mornings like this in a front-country campground. The only sounds are the birds and rushing water. Not another person is in sight even if they are present nearby. At this moment, they are not present. Nothing is present except the High Sierra wilderness.

This is what I am here for: to experience these timeless moments when I am an insignificant speck in the great chain of existence. I am one tiny being in one tiny place on one tiny planet in a single galaxy among a universe of galaxies, a universe the James Webb telescope has revealed contains a near infinite cosmos.

I appreciate how special this place is on our planet in our single galaxy while being equally aware of our insignificance in the far greater universe. It's a heightened awareness of both how special this moment is and this moment's insignificance in the grander cosmos. We know it is unique yet realize it is one moment among billions of moments. I revel in this particular moment along with its place in those billions of moments. I experience the here-and-now at its most revelatory while simultaneously experiencing the grandeur of all existence.

Now I have to disengage from the timeless to present day obligations. I will pack up, hike to Long Lake, and seek out a place of relative solitude. I have had this morning. Let it reside inside me as I negotiate all the future trials of coping in the over-complicated modern world.

I leave the Marsh Lake campsite about 9:45. The day hikers are out in force, from young couples to family groups. A group of three women are ahead of me at Box Lake where the trail ascends to the top of a hill. When I continue with my uphill plod, they skedaddle away. I don't see them again. A young couple are sitting on a rock along the cliffs enjoying the view.

I follow the now more numerous footprints through the snow above Box Lake. A little way past the Rock Creek crossing, I find a rock off trail to sit and eat a bar. The young couple who were admiring the view from the cliffs above Box Lake, pass me, heading up to Long Lake on the use trail on the west side. I follow a couple of minutes later. The campsites at the lake's north end are vacant. I avoid the day hikers by continuing on the lakeside trail. The young couple are engaged in an earnest conversation with another couple. The lakeside trail stops at a rocky point extending to the water. A path through the rocks is obscured under snow. Another use trail heads nearly straight up over the rocks and talus. On the other side, it drops down to re-intersect the lakeside trail.

A little way up from the lakeside trail, one campsite is engulfed in snow. Since it's too near the north end, I am not interested in it. I head up and around. Snow also covers the next campsite. Walking through snowmelt bog, my foot suddenly sinks in the mud and I almost lose my shoe. Heading down to the water, I come across one site and below that another, much closer to the water, but still the legal hundred feet away. I scout around some more. The site Barbara and I stayed at in June 2005 is buried in a snowbank while another site is in the bog. I return to the one site and leave my pack for a longer exploration. I find a better site with excellent water access and great views of the surroundings since it's wide open to one side above the bay at the lake's south end. Ice floes sit on the water.

I retrieve my pack, and set up the tent in this better campsite. I've only seen three distant dayhikers fishing. My guess is the few backpackers either bunch up at the north end or continue, despite the snow, to Chickenfoot or Gem Lakes and put up with snow camping. As the day passes, that seems to be the case. I see few hikers across the lake making their way along the snowy

trail. So far, no one ventures this far down Long Lake. I may be a little more than four miles from the trailhead, but I am in solitude.

The sun disappears behind the high ridge a little after 6:00, no longer illuminating the trees and rocks near the lakeshore while shining on the peaks of the Sierra Crest from Mt. Morgan to Pyramid Peak, Bear Creek Spire, Pipsqueak Spire, Mt. Dade, and Mt. Abbot. The view here is different from Marsh Lake where there was a remarkable symmetry from Mt. Morgan to Mt. Mills. Here, one is nearer to the peaks and so they seem to rise more directly, the panorama more compressed. The inlet creek cascades down several hundred feet and then divides into distinct streams to enter the lake. A snow-melt creek disperses into a bog with tiny creeks meandering between high tufts of grass.

I attempt photos that capture the inlet bog with the Bear Creek Spire/Dade crest along with the wind-disturbed reflections and ice flows. It is a lovely, almost revelatory sunset. It has been a great day spent with an afternoon in solitude. I'll see about tomorrow.

Day 5, July 10, Long Lake

I awake to another magnificent dawn and morning. The ice dissolved overnight at this end of the lake. Farther down the lake, there are reflections intermingled with the remaining ice floes. The sun doesn't hit my campsite until 7:30.

At the moment, it's lovely having sun and no clouds, even if clouds create more interesting photos. Two more days like this would be great. I don't think Chickenfoot would offer more privacy and finding a snow-free, dry campsite might prove problematic if not impossible.

I observe the transition from winter to spring to summer. At this timberline elevation simultaneously there's winter snow, spring melting, and dry summer. This year, the highest elevations may remain in winter all summer. Will Muir Pass, Mather Pass, or Pinchot Pass ever be snow-free this year? I went over all of them in August 1998. Muir Pass had deep snow from

Wanda Lake to below Helen Lake. It was the same abundance of snow at Mather and Pinchot passes. It was only on portions of the return trip that a trail was visible and that was only in places with high sun exposure.

This morning, I'll discover more closely this area at the southwest end of Long Lake. As evidenced by the ice floes dissolving overnight, it's undergoing a speedy transformation. Right now, there are numerous tiny creeks following the low points on the ground as the snowmelt water makes its way down from above until the myriad rivulets eventually come together to enter the lake at four different locations. I make my way through the maze of rivulets and count seventeen step-across crossings before reaching the inlet creek of the falls.

Probably a month ago, the falls themselves were even more impressive. Now the creek forms a series of tumbling cascades with mini-waterfalls until near the bottom when the creek braids into two distinct flows. After exploring a hundred vertical feet up the falls, I come back down, cross the bog just above the lakeshore, and head up to the cliffs at Long Lake's south end. A use trail is clear part way up until it runs into a solid snowbank. I cross over shallow suncups to where there the land is dry around the snow free cliffs.

I walk along the cliffs until they end. Beyond the cliffs, the areas in the trees retain snow, but the shoreline lower down contains only scattered snow patches. I explore the nooks and crannies along the shoreline as far as the Rock Creek inlet where the deep rushing water discourages any thoughts of crossing to the snow drifts on the other side. Slowly meandering back along the shoreline, I take in the view of Long Lake in its entirety. A few ice floes remain at the distant north end. A couple of dayhikers have arrived and are sitting by the lake on a log at a dry section where the bog ends and the creek enters the lake. Heading up, I zip-zag in and out of the cliff's nooks and crannies.

Departing the cliffs, I descend the use trail to where the bog begins, making my way down to the shoreline by one of the picturesque log stumps. I confirm its picturesque quality with a photo. The day-hiking

couple exchange hellos before making their way back to Mosquito Flat. I arrive back at my campsite after two-and-a-half hours of getting to better know this end of Long Lake.

After a late lunch, I find a large rock to lean against overlooking the small bay, write narrative notes, and plan future trips. As it gets warmer, I go down to the lake and wash off the accumulated dirt and dust along with a dunk of my head in the icy water. I while away the rest of the afternoon, snacking and writing while appreciating the views of Long Lake and the Sierra Crest, listening to the falls, far away Rock Creek, and the wind in the trees.

I am simply another creature residing at this time in this place, moving slowly through the day so that each time and each place permeates into my being. I'll hope to repeat today tomorrow. I eat an early dinner so I can photograph the sunlight on this area before it sinks behind the ridge.

As I am wandering around with camera and tripod, a backpacking young couple appears looking a bit lost. They say they are going to Chickenfoot Lake. I tell them the trail to Chickenfoot is on Long Lake's other side. They looked crestfallen. It's already 7:30 and the light is commencing its slow fade. They mention no one is camped at the north end of Long Lake. I suggest they can camp there since the sites on this side are either snow-covered or far from water. They head back that way, but end up choosing the first snow-free campsite I rejected, far from the lake and without the picture postcard views of the crest from the north end.

I only discover this because the young man soon returns and asks me if I have a website for my photos. I tell him the website and point out I'm not well known; the website costs only sixteen dollars a year, so why not? I bid him a good night and good trip as he walks back to his campsite.

Making my way down to the lakeshore, I catch the last light on Mount Morgan, Bear Creek Spire, Dade, and Abbot. When the sunlight disappears, I scribble notes until it is too dark to write. I have one more day here in the High Sierra; take things one step at a time; appreciate here-and-now.

Day Six, July 11, Long Lake

It's another magnificent dawn and morning, though a bit chilly. This is one of the last places on Long Lake to get the morning sun. Once the sun hits the campsite, it begins to warm up.

I rejoice in this solitude by a lake in timberline country. At this point what matters to me is discovering or returning to these places. The ideal locations are off-trail lakes or creeks that do not require an extended difficult climb. For my August trip, I am now reconsidering the Rafferty Creek Trail trip to the Vogelsang area that was cancelled due to Tioga Road being closed. With this year's snow conditions, that may be the best alternative that fits my criteria. The trip I reserved for New Army Pass and Miter Basin on August 1 is not going to happen this year. The last report I read before embarking on this trip, stated an ice axe was required for New Army Pass. I don't own or know how to properly use an ice axe.

At this point, for me, it is journeying to those place that meet the requirement of a hikeable first day or two with three days or more at an ideal place. What are those places? Many fabulous areas visited in the past as well as even more possibilities for the future are no longer feasible. So what is left? After all the musing on future trips, I realize I should not be thinking of where I can't go. I should be thinking of all the places I can and, hopefully, will go. I mentally run through a dozen possible trips, a list that will occupy me for at least three or four more years. If I am still around after that, I will deal with it then. It's time to live in the hear-and-now.

As the morning passes, it only partially warms up. There is a bite to the wind. If the wind is like this at 9:00 in the morning, how will it be in the afternoon? The falls are the dominant sound, penetrating the wild silence supplemented by a few bird tweets and songs, the wind, and the trickle of snow-fed rivulets.

These wild sounds of silence is what is missing from contemporary human existence. It is in our species' DNA. Until the relatively recent advent

of industrial civilization, most humans lived in places that connected them to the natural world. We heard the natural sounds that inhabit the silence. Now, only those humans who enter wilderness have access to that particular wild silence. Currently, even humans living in rural areas have the silence broken by a host of electronic devices and the hum and roar of engines unless one ventures out in certain places after midnight and before dawn. When the vast majority of humans lost that connection to wild silence, we denied an essential aspect of what it is to be human inhabiting the Earth.

We have been evolving into a new species adapted not to nature, but industrial/technological civilization. Neurological studies reveal humans are evolving in response to technology. What will happen to that new species evolved to exist in a technological society? What will happen to us if we no longer hear the wild silence? In losing the connection of hearing our own footsteps amid wild nature, we no longer are a creature of nature, one species among the myriad of species that comprise life. We are not the same people as our ancestors. We seek to control nature rather than live with the natural world.

By changing nature's air and water, we new humans are on the brink of a disaster of our own making. Our changing of the climate adversely alters the natural world that sustains *Homo sapiens* and every other species on our planet. We totter on the brink of an unforeseen future.

While I am musing, a family of day hikers appears: two moms, two dads, three children, and a grandfather along with a black dog. They all fish at various places along the shoreline and avoid my campsite while waving hello. One girl who appears to be about eight years old, catches a fish and squeals in excitement. The fish is big enough to keep if they want it for dinner tonight. They wander the area, enjoying fishing and playing on the shoreline until they depart around 3:30-4:00.

Meanwhile, the pines whisper in the wind. The birds flit about, chickadees especially. Listen and absorb this Sierra afternoon; it speaks of life's perpetual transitions through the subtle change of seasons. One passes through three seasons in a matter of moments. The nearby area goes from clear ground of summer to mushy slush of spring to post-holing snow of winter. Soon

this transition will pass through the subsequent transitions followed by yet another. The High Sierra uniquely condenses the transitions into a matter of days. I have greatly appreciated these five days observing the High Sierra's transitions.

So the day passes. I have not moved more than 200 yards in any direction, yet been thoroughly engrossed throughout the day. I enjoy and appreciate here-and-now, getting to better know this particular place in this particular time. This is one of the last days like this at Long Lake. In a week or two, it will be crawling with people: many of the campsites on this side will be occupied. An eight to nine mile round trip is too tempting once the trail is clear of snow. I am fortunate to have this place to myself.

After dinner, I go down to the lakeshore to fill the pot and return back up for final cleaning far away from the lake. As I'm walking back up with a full pot of water, four young men appear walking along the shoreline, startling me since there is no path along the shore. They want to go to Gem Lakes. I tell them the trail to Gem is over on the other side of the lake, pointing to where the snowy path passes below the cliffs along the east shoreline. They look incredulous and ask about continuing this way. I gesture to the cliffs, snow, and billowing Rock Creek inlet and reply it's much more difficult, if not impossible going that way. I don't elucidate on how the trail heads up before it reaches that end of Long Lake. Instead, I ask "Do you have a map?"

One of the men waves one of those giant regional National Geographic maps, not a 7.5 minute topo map. I add they can best get to the real trail to Gem Lakes by wading the outlet at the north end of Long Lake. They say nothing in reply. My best guess is that their map makes it difficult to see the crossing of Rock Creek, though even on a large scale map the fact the trail passes on the east side of Long Lake should be obvious. In retrospect, I realize I should have retrieved my 7.5 minute topo map and showed them exactly where they are.

While I take the pot of water up to a clear spot far up from the shoreline to clean it, they stand debating. They are too far away for me to

overhear any discussion. As they begin walking back to the north end of the lake, I suggest it is easier to hike farther away from the shoreline. One of them complains it is wet up there. Though it is already almost 6:00, I don't bother adding it's so late in the day that hiking to Gem and back to Mosquito Flat is probably not possible in the remaining daylight. They obviously don't really want to listen to anything this white-haired old guy has to say.

After about fifteen feet of struggling along the rock and tree-filled shoreline, they head up to follow the way I suggested. I need to leave them to their own devices. They are not in serious trouble requiring rescue assistance. I see a person standing at the shoreline on the north end. Maybe that person can manage to get them to comprehend exactly where they are and would be better off walking back to Mosquito Flat at this time of day.

I put my camera on the tripod and go off to take photos of the last light on the lakeshore and trees behind my campsite. I try to find something different from the previous two evenings. I appreciate this final evening. How many more will there be? It has been a near perfect day in the High Sierra. I doubt anyone will have such a good a day at Long Lake this season.

Everything settled down for absorbing only the wilderness. There is only me and the wilderness at the bay at the far end of Long Lake. To listen intently to those myriad voices is almost overwhelming. One's individuality becomes part of something so much more significant, filled with a grandeur we only can suggest. It's eons of evolution coming together in this moment.

It's a beautiful though not spectacular sunset. Without clouds, the clear blue sky does not bring about spectacular alpenglow. I simply want to appreciate this magnificent day one final time. It has been a great three days here. I never expected this. Tomorrow it's back to the unreal world from this true real world. The dark descends and the night chill comes over me. I say good night to this magnificent day; treasure it always.

Day Seven, July 12, Long Lake to Mosquito Flat

It's my final morning and, of course, magnificent. Over the last three days, I've grown to love this corner of Long Lake as it slowly transitioned. The green grass in the bog will become brown in a few days. The snow will continue to melt though snow will linger on the high peaks through summer. What will not change is the Sierra Crest. That marvelous panoply of peaks rising out of the Little Lakes Valley is one of the most stirring sights anywhere.

Of course I will return in some way. Barbara and I will stay at Rock Creek Lakes Resort. Maybe I will backpack here again by going to Treasure Lakes in August, Chickenfoot in July, or even return to Marsh Lake when my backpacking days are ending.

This has been a great trip. I've managed to be in solitude, sitting in the silence of the High Country, to reside in "terrestrial immortality." That is what keeps me returning. Maybe I can get this solitude elsewhere, but not within this incomparable landscape of the High Sierra. It's not just what one sees with their eyes. It is the total experience that one sees, feels, smells, and touches throughout all the hours of each and every day.

There is no other place quite like this on Earth. For those of us who are compelled by its calling, we experience something known to the fortunate. Only a few may gain fame and fewer attain fortune. We are paid in sunsets, as ranger Laura Pilewski told me, acknowledging she was quoting fellow ranger George Durkee. We are paid in ways that cannot be measured in conventional terms. We are paid with a life not just well lived. It is a life worth living.

I pack up and head home. To a large extent, the bog has diminished so it is easy to avoid mud. The path through the rocks and talus is now snow free. No one is at the north end of Long Lake. The Rock Creek crossing between Box and Long Lake now looks like a relatively easy wade with the creek's current only knee high. There is still snow on the trail through the forest down to Box Lake. I meet the first day hikers coming up. There is also well-trodden snow on the path between Marsh Lake and Mack Lake. Now I meet lots of day hikers heading up.

The parking lot at Mosquito Flat is filled with cars. I think back to my single car a few days ago. I remove the garbage from the top of my pack and walk it to the dumpsters at the end of the parking lot. My car starts as expected; no dead battery. I meet a couple of cars coming up the one-lane road; we manage to get to the side well enough to let each other pass with acknowledging waves.

I stop at Rock Creek Lakes Resort for a burger, salad, and apple pie a la mode. The woman who takes my order is friendly and the man who brings my food recognizes me from when Barbara and I stayed here last month. I enjoy my lunch, especially the incomparable apple pie.

On highway 395, flashing signs announce Tioga Pass remains closed so it's back over Sonora Pass; next time in August I should be able to take Tioga. The trek on highway 108 requires acute attention due to the traffic for the miles from Strawberry through Sonora to Oakdale. From there, the usual horrendous traffic on 120, 205, 505, I-80 seems an expected continuation of the inherent hassles of driving in contemporary America.

It's back to civilization and like Huck Finn, I wish I could light out for the territories except now there are no territories left to light out for. There's only going home.