



## **Day One, August 3, North Lake Campground**

I arrive at North Lake Campground at 5:30. It is drizzling rain. For days, the High Sierra has been in what the meteorologists refer to as a “monsoonal” weather pattern. Only sites #2 and #7 remain unoccupied. I carry two bags up to #2 and put them in the bear box. This is the farthest walk-in site, but private except for the nearby Piute Pass Trail. Due to the rain, I take the registration to the car and fill out the registration form by flipping up the PriusV tailgate to provide a dry place to write. After putting the registration with payment in the slot, I fetch my pack and carry it up to the campsite.

The drizzle conveniently ends so I can erect the tent without worry about rain. Meanwhile, I send a SPOT message to let my wife, Barbara, know I’m “at the campsite.” When the tent is up, the SPOT indicates a question mark, meaning the message may or may not have been received. I walk back through the campground. A couple of families are camped in campsites 5 and 6, gathering together under a tarp stretched high above the fire ring. On the road that leads to the campground, there is a clear unobstructed view of the sky to resend the message. This time, the SPOT indicates a check mark, confirming success.

I return to my campsite and have dinner. Afterwards, I again walk back through the campground for the wide-open view from the road. The distinctive clouds from the clearing storm make for a fascinating sky and gorgeous sunset.

I can see camping in this place for a longer period of time in the future since the walk-in sites retain some semblance of backpacking. Maybe, this is what I will do in five years. I return to the campsite and sit at the picnic table, writing notes and thinking about tomorrow.

Tomorrow’s question is can I get over Piute Pass? The weather and my physical stamina are the determining factors. If no storm, I expect to go over the pass. If the monsoon conditions continue, I may have to camp at Piute Lake below the pass and rethink the planned itinerary of going up French Canyon to Pine Creek Pass and Royce Lakes.

Also, I have to be able to manage the 2,100 foot climb to the pass, which has become an open question. In 2009, I climbed the five miles to the top of Piute Pass in three hours after waking up at sea level and driving seven hours to the trailhead. However, in 2017, after staying at this campground overnight to acclimate, it took five hours to cover the same five miles. Now long, steep climbs are even more difficult. I still undertake the same training as the past with daily four to five mile runs that include climbing a steep hill. However, my stamina is simply not what it once was. Whether it's being a cancer survivor along with atrial fibrillation, old age, or a combination of all that and more, I do not know.

I can manage shorter steep climbs, as I did less than a month ago when I went to Garnet Lake the first day and the following day did the cross-country hike over the ridge to Thousand Island Lake. But certain sustained long climbs now sap my stamina to the breaking point. What will happen tomorrow?

At the moment, I need to ignore expectations and take things one step at a time. To some extent, actually to all extent, it's out of my hands. If the weather is bad and I can't go over the pass, it's out of my control. If I am now too infirm to do the climb, that is also out of my control despite my wish for it to be otherwise.

It's now dark at 8:30, so I am encouraged to get in the tent soon after. Let's hope tomorrow goes as planned and be ready when it does not.

## **Day Two, August 4, North Lake to Piute Lake**

I am up at 5:30. Breakfast and packing proceed as expected. I put my pack in the bear box, drive to the trailhead, park the car, and leave my garbage with an unopened beer bottle in one of the trailhead bear boxes. As yesterday evening, I send a SPOT on the road back to the campground and it is again successful. I retrieve the pack from the bear box and head up the Piute Pass Trail around 7:30 under a clear blue sky.

The initial climb is more demanding than I remember. When I reach the first level area at the creek crossing, I decide to wade rather than balance on

the log and so change my shoes. I do the same at the second crossing. As I change back to my hiking shoes, a packer group comes to the crossing, so I wait until they pass.

The blue sky of 7:30 has become mottled shades of gray. The switchbacks above the forest out in the open become a one-step-at-a-time grind, again more difficult than memory recalls. Even before I get to Loch Leven, I begin wondering about my planned itinerary. The weather is signaling the need to stop at Piute Lake.

The rock steps in the granite below Loch Leven are not designed for short people. Some of the steps are a huge stretch up. For one of them, I literally climb up. I meet the first downhill hiker amid the steps who talks about yesterday's rain and hale. When I mention that I am thinking of stopping at Piute Lake, he responds "That would be a good idea." The gray/black clouds rush over the ridge from the southeast. It's not a question of if it's going to rain, but when.

As I stop at Loch Leven for a quick snack, three people pass by on the way down. I try to appreciate Loch Leven and the tarns after it. The waterfall by the tarns is as beautiful as I remember. As I struggle up the trail to Piute Lake, the effort on the climb is too much of a distraction to fully appreciate the beauty that surrounds me.

I arrive at Piute Lake at 11:45 so it's taken over four hours to go four miles. At that pace, it's obvious the rain will begin before I reach Piute Pass, let alone find a campsite on the other side. My memory says the Piute Lake campsites are down to the left beginning about halfway up the lake. When I get there, I diagonal down and come to a large campsite. I put down my pack and head off to reconnoiter the obvious sites further down to the right. There are lots of campsites to choose from. I wonder about the water runoff at a couple of them. I pick one on sandy dirt that does not seem to have had a river of water running through it. Next to that tent site is another site surrounded by pines. It looks cozy, but also possibly a problem in the coming rain.

I eat my lunch sandwich while setting up the tent. At 12:30, it begins spritzing. I put the pack, cookkit, and Bearikade under the vestibule. After a few minutes, the spritzle becomes drizzle and I retreat to the tent as the

drizzle becomes steady pounding rain. I hear voices calling in the direction of the first campsite I came upon. As I am lying in the tent with the map pondering changing my route, the crashing of tumbling rocks reverberates from the other side of the lake, concluding with a splash. The rain's running water must have loosened large segments of rock.

The intensity of the rain varies through the afternoon. At 4:30, I think it's stopped and go outside. After about five minutes, the rain returns so it's back in the tent for another half hour or so. Finally, the drip sounds on the ceiling cease.

I exit the tent and cook dinner as clouds swirl above. The nearby tent area in the pines is a big puddle. Three people have taken that first campsite I came to; they were the voices heard earlier. I send a SPOT to Barbara, telling her I'm changing my itinerary. Hiking to Pine Creek Pass tomorrow and on to Royce Lakes the next day is now more miles than I can cover from here as well as tomorrow's weather remaining a huge question. The ponderings in the tent led to the realization how limited my climbing stamina is now. Even without the storm, part of me wanted to stop here.

I no longer want to put in the miles. Once, planning and hiking fifteen to eighteen miles a day with three thousand feet elevation gain was normal. That's how I experienced Kaweah Basin, Milestone Basin, the Upper Kern, Ionian Basin, Lake Reflection, Wallace Lake, Marion Lake, Bear Lakes Basin, Upper Mills Creek Lake, Grinnell Lake, and so many other marvelous places.

Now I want to reach a spectacular place with solitude and stay there for two or three nights, like Palisade Basin last year. My preference is to sit back and take it all in while appreciating the many wonders of a slow moving day. This may be a rationalization for old age laziness or exemplify mature wisdom; take your pick and draw your own conclusion. When Barbara responds to the change in my itinerary, she asks "Where?" I reply "Mesa Lake" in Humphreys Basin for three nights.

After dinner, I wander around the area taking photos. The wet granite shines in the day's last sunlight. Fresh waterfalls cascade down the cliffs on the

other side of the lake. The clouds pass through a myriad of colors from gray to pink to red to violet. Alpenglow emanates from the surrounding peaks and ridges. It is a brief but spectacular sunset.

When the light begins fading, I sit on a rock by the shoreline, write notes, and take in the view. It appears that there is still a possibility of rain. I put the pack, Bearikade bear canister, stove, and cook kit under the vestibule before getting in the tent for the night. This day has not been anything approaching normal. Tomorrow I hope for a normal High Sierra day though I know that's probably wishful thinking.

### **Day Three, August 5, Piute Lake to Lower Desolation Lake**

I awake to the sound of rain on the tent and check my watch. It's only 9:30, so I've only been asleep a short time. I fall back asleep and awake again around midnight; it's still raining. When I awake at 4:00, there's still the pounding of rain on the tent. At 5:45, there's the light of dawn and loud patter of rain. I need to pee. The rain slows down to a drizzle around 6:00, so I run outside, do my business, and get back in the tent. The rain intensifies once again. I drift off to sleep, wake, drift off.

Around 7:30, I realize I am not going to have my normal cooked breakfast of oatmeal. I sit up, unzip the mosquito netting, and rummage in the Bearikade, grabbing a bar, a piece of bread, and some trail mix. I munch on the food and doze in and out. At 9:00, I turn on the SPOT and it says it has a GPS signal despite being in the tent in the rain. I send a "weather delay" message and to my surprise receive a reply from Barbara that she got the message. I begin wondering, am I going to have to spend the day here?

The rain finally ceases at 10:30; that's thirteen hours straight of rain. This is definitely far from typical Sierra summertime weather. It's not even typical Sierra monsoon weather when there are breaks between the rainy periods and those rainy periods typically occur in the afternoon, not all night through halfway through the next morning. I can only recall one other instance of similar behavior.

Rivulets make their way down to the lake through what were yesterday's rejected campsites. The shoreline rock I sat on last evening is now surrounded by water. The clouds still come from the southeast, but small patches of blue dot the gray. I decide to make a go of it and pack up. I walk up to the trail through mini-rivers of rain runoff. The trail itself is a small creek in places. I attempt to rock hop around the puddles. About halfway to the pass I meet a couple descending the trail. They are long past even attempting to avoid the puddles, splashing down the middle of the trail. That should have been a harbinger of what's to come, but I am too intent on my own hiking to have that register.

A little below the top of the pass, a group is paused taking a break before continuing down to North Lake. They've had rain for six straight days. As we're chatting, a man passes on his way to the pass.

When I reach the top of the pass, I was hoping to send a SPOT, but it begins drizzling. There is no pausing to appreciate the view. I head down and meet the man who passed by earlier and is also now improvising his itinerary due to the weather. I let him know I hike slowly so he can continue at his own faster pace. The Piute Pass Trail has been redone, now passing well above Summit Lake on a long leg of a switchback designed for pack stock. The old trail is still visible below. I remember having lunch there by Summit Lake in 1993.

Along the switchback, I meet the pack train from yesterday and manage to find a place far enough off the trail to let them pass. The woman in front asks if I am cold, probably in response to my slight shivering in the drizzle. A couple of the people warn of nasty creek crossings further down the trail. I thank them and interject I'm taking the trail to Desolation Lake and going to Mesa Lake and so not following this trail much longer. A man at the end of the pack train announces there are no campsites at Mesa Lake. I merely nod in reply and let the group continue to the pass.

The side creek crossings are so swollen that I don't bother trying to keep my feet dry, walking in thigh deep rushing water. Now I know why the couple on the other side of the pass walked through the puddles. The

man met at the pass is far ahead and disappears at a bend in the trail. The drizzle stops, a welcome respite. After the last side creek crossing, the trail goes slightly back up. I meet a hiker heading up to the pass who walks with the determined expression of someone who wants to get over his hike so only nods a greeting.

I know the Desolation Lake Trail will be coming soon. First, the Golden Trout Trail heads to the left. The junction is unsigned; only a duck marks the spot. A little further, there's an obvious path to the right. There's no duck, but I know this is the trail to Desolation Lake. Some maps show the trail and others do not.

I follow the winding path up a little rise, recalling certain places from previous visits. The path heads up to a small ridge and winds through the rocks. When it gets to the top, I know Lower Desolation Lake is not far ahead. The sight of water soon appears followed by the lake itself down to the left. The trail heads in that direction. Storm clouds are imminent. Is there enough time to reach Mesa and a campsite before it rains again? Which way do I head around Lower Desolation, to the left or the right? In the past, I've gone either way. I head to the right. As I'm crossing a short talus pile, one of the rocks wobbles and my right leg whams a rock—ouch! A long scrape appears with blood oozing out. I need to deal with this. It begins drizzling. Reluctantly, I realize I need to find a campsite now.

I take off my scarf and wrap it around the scrape to slow the bleeding. Remembering the campsite stayed at in 2017 was by an immense erratic, I spy a big rock in the distance and make my way towards it. Soon I am by the erratic with the tent area to one side. I take off my pack and pull out the Bearikade and cook kit to get to the tent. I spread out the footprint, cover it with the tent body, and stake down the corners. Getting out the poles, I put them in place and attach the tent. Now for the rainfly. I quickly find the Mountain Hardware logo and put it on the right side, managing to attach the rainfly with the inside of the tent remaining almost entirely dry.

Getting out the rest of the things, I toss them in the tent, undoing the sleeping bag on the pad. Collapsing into the tent, sitting on the sleeping



bag, I get a water bottle, dampen one corner of the scarf, and clean the wound as well as I am able. The leg has a bad scrape, but only a scrape, nothing deeper. One bit of skin hangs off one side. There are several three-inch wide band-aids in the first-aid kit. I take one, put on a squirt of Neosporin, and carefully place it over the bloody section of the scrape. That covers most of it. I add a regular size band-aid for the rest. Lying down, I stare at the tent ceiling and listen to the patters, relieved to have found a campsite and be out of the rain.

After a spurt of raindrops, the splatters end. When I emerge from the tent, clouds cover the sky in all directions. Gazing at the clouds, I realize the wind has shifted. Instead of the southeast, it's now from the west. Maybe the monsoon pattern is over?

With the time remaining in the afternoon, I meander around the area, recalling my stay here in 2017. The water is even lower now than it was then. The talus piles that were underwater are now exposed, making access difficult to fill even a water bottle. The overlook view of the outlet creek with its two pooled lakes no longer shows the same marvelous reflections due to the lower water level. The southern end of Lower Desolation Lake is so low that the exposed rocks extend nearly across the span of the lake, transforming the southern arm of the lake by the outlet into a nearly separate tarn.

After dinner, I wander taking photos of the awe-inspiring view of the Glacier Divide spanning the southern horizon with massive Mount Humphreys rising to the east. The clouds and mist on the mountains transform through a myriad of formulations. The reflections of the clouds and ridge to the west are spectacular in the tarn-like pool at the outlet arm. Mount Humphreys is engulfed in colorful clouds. The sky is ablaze with an amazing array of shades of red. For a few minutes, magical splendor surrounds in every direction.

This is what I'm here for. All the suffering of yesterday and today feels worth it. Now revel in the High Sierra for three days at Mesa Lake and one at Upper Golden Trout Lake. I go into the tent to hopefully sleep well. The day ended on the highest note.

## **Day Four, August 6, Lower Desolation Lake to Mesa Lake**

I awake at dawn to clear skies above Mount Humphreys and the Glacier Divide with a smattering of clouds to the west. At last, a sunny morning! It's hard to believe it's been nearly 48 hours since I left North Lake under the last sunny skies. It feels like much longer.

This is my last morning ever at Lower Desolation Lake. Barbara, Gordon, and I camped nearby in 1993. Seeing approaching coal-black clouds on our way to Mesa or Tomahawk Lake, Barbara brazenly told a worried 9-year-old Gordon that he will be in the tent in twenty minutes. I ran down to Lower Desolation to what seemed a clear area that would serve as a campsite. I got out the tent as Barbara and Gordon arrived. We erected the tent in record time, threw everything inside, and the storm erupted. It was my first experience with Sierra monsoonal weather; on past trips over fifteen years, we'd been fortunate weatherwise with only afternoon thunderstorms. This time, the rain lasted until evening. The next day began under threatening clouds with the rain beginning before noon and continuing until about 5:00. Stuck in the tent, his parents taught Gordon various card games for two days.

In 2017, I stayed at this campsite, also arriving in a drizzle. The next morning, I followed the trail on a day-hike to Desolation Lake. I recall a couple of campsites near the Desolation outlet creek and wonder if that would be better than camping at Mesa. I decide to go to Mesa first since there is no trail there and so more likely for solitude.

Two marmots, who seem unafraid of humans, scurry over the area. As I sit writing, I have to get up and chase one that is sticking his nose into the camera bag in front of the tent in the shade of the vestibule. As the marmots run over the area munching on whatever grass they discover, I take down the tent and pack for the short hike over the ridge to Mesa Lake.

I say farewell to Lower Desolation Lake and it's magnificent view of the Glacier Divide, hoist on the pack, and make my way to where the lake empties into the outlet creek. Unlike in 2017, there is no rock hopping required to

reach the other side. However, the talus is annoying to walk over since it requires care to choose the best location to place each step.

Once on the other side, I diagonal up to the ridge. The creek from Desolation Lake to Lower Desolation winds down to the far right. I pass an excellent but exposed campsite tent area overlooking Lower Desolation.

Traveling cross-county in Humphreys Basin is relatively easy, all class 1 walking. When the last glacier receded, it left countless rocks scattered in a motley maze. One only needs to choose a way around the various druidic boulders and erratics that cover the ground. My method is to pick out a landmark in the general direction of travel and make my way as well as possible. With massive Mount Humphreys spanning the eastern horizon and the Glacier Divide to the south, getting lost in Humphreys Basin is nearly impossible.

I circle a tarn on the way to the top of the ridge where Mesa Lake is spread out below. To the far left, Tomahawk Lake sits at the bottom beyond the Mesa Lake outlet creek. Heading down, I aim for the Mesa outlet. Upon arriving, the creek is little more than a trickle so crossing is merely choosing at what point to step across protruding rocks. A campsite sits in a bare open area a couple of hundred feet from the lakeshore. I don't like this location.

The rain of the last few days has created numerous puddles by the turf-like mounds that populate much of the Mesa shoreline. I zip-zag over the mounds to a familiar lovely sand beach. Above the beach is a flooded campsite. When Barbara, Gordon, and I camped here in 1993, we were at another wonderful location above the inlet creek near this beach.

Following the shoreline, I head for the inlet creek. At a flat rock above the creek, I take off my pack to reconnoiter. The campsite we stayed at in 1993 is no longer here. I search over the area for a suitable campsite far up the creek and the cliffs all around to beyond the other side of the creek out to the point. After thirty minutes of searching, I return to my pack, have a snack, and contemplate possibilities. From my dayhike to Desolation Lake, the campsites I saw were on that trail side of the lake. Maybe there is also one on this other side?

I continue the circumnavigation of Mesa Lake, following a barely perceptible use trail. Near the far end and its small bay sits a campsite with a clear dirt tent area. It's not exactly perfect, but definitely good enough. This campsite is in the wide open. Nothing offers protection from the elements. The few scattered whitebarks are all one or two feet tall along with dispersed low rocks and a variety of grasses and lichens. A previous camper placed a flat rectangular rock vertically up against a larger rock to protect the stove from the wind. It is the only sign of humans being here except for the barren ground roughly the size of a tent.

I think about checking out Desolation Lake, and decide this is as good, probably better than anything I'll discover up there. This spot is magnificent. The Glacier Divide extends across the entire southern horizon above the blue water of Mesa Lake. Mount Humphreys and its unnamed neighbors dominate the view east. I'll dayhike to Desolation Lake tomorrow.

Once I set up, I have the remainder of the afternoon to appreciate my surroundings. But first, I need to properly clean the scrape on my right leg. Heading down to the lake, I find the best place to do this is by the inlet creek where I can stand in foot deep water and wash the scrape with my scarf. Back at the campsite, I clean the scrape again with soap and water, cut off the dangling thread of skin, and cover the scrape with a fresh three-inch band-aid.

The wind varies from gusts to a faint breeze in no particular pattern. Thunderheads to the east confront the westerly winds. So far, the westerlies seem to be winning. As the afternoon progresses, the winds pick up, causing the occasional white-cap on Mesa Lake. I am enjoying watching the weather, especially since what's coming from the west now dominates. I wander up and down this north side of the lake. Many of the shoreline rocks would probably be submerged in a normal year.

After dinner, I continue my wandering. The moon and clouds hover over Mount Humphreys and the Glacier Divide with refracted reflections in the water. By 7:35, most of the light vanishes on the immediate surroundings; there are more shadows than light on the ridge to the west. The birds no

longer flutter in the whitebarks up the hill behind the campsite. The Glacier Divide resides in shadow, a marvelous jagged array stretched across the entire southern horizon. Immense silence surrounds me.

The light creeps into dark at the end of the day. Days like today are when wilderness mysteries are revealed. Absorbing the immense silence, I glean something intangible that becomes palpably real. As darkness makes it impossible to read what I write, I take refuge in the tent until dawn.

### **Day Five, August 7, Mesa Lake**

I awake to a magnificent morning, oversleeping by a few minutes so I miss the faint pink tint behind the Glacier Divide. I am in time to revel in the first rays of light on the peaks reflected in the still water of Mesa Lake. I try to place the shoreline rocks in the reflection photos to provide a foreground more interesting than only the water of the lake. The sun hits this side of the shoreline and the campsite a little after 7:00.

This is a true lesson morning. Time is irrelevant. I have nowhere I need to go, nothing I need to do. Right here feels like anywhere and everywhere. Last night, I awoke to the howling and yipping of coyotes. Now, I watch a ground squirrel feed on the grass. Every few nips it stands on its haunches to check its surroundings.

Otherwise it is all silence except the gurgle of the inlet creek. I feel I should write something profound, or at least seems profound. At this moment, I'm surrounded by silence, Mesa Lake, and the awesome magnificence of the Glacier Divide. The breeze has picked up so the peaks of the Glacier Divide rise above the lake as distorted refractions. I couldn't have found a better place to take in the spectacle of Humpreys Basin. I sit in solitude, having seen no one since the solitary hiker on the Piute Pass Trail two days ago.

What might experiencing this silent wonder do for the rest of humanity? Would the wisdom of wilderness be revealed to everyone who experiences it? Once there is another person, it undergoes subtle changes. One is no longer in solitude and all that entrails. When in solitude, nothing separates one from

wild nature, from the here-and-now. Only the barriers we erect over the years to deflect the outside world and our inherited genetic determinates impede the intense, profound transcendence.

In the solitude of wild nature, those impediments slowly dissolve. They don't disappear. We are never totally beyond our biological necessities and genetic inheritance. We *are* free from them as much as humanly possible. Each time this happens, I realize it is something one can experience only in true solitude, in true wilderness. In great art, one experiences a profound parable for human existence and life. In wild nature, one experiences life itself in all its intense immediacy. It is what mystics have sought for millennia. It is here for each of us willing to discard our ingrained personal impediments and open up our true inner being.

My transcendent reverie is shattered by the distant roar of a jet plane high above. Human civilization still remains out there with all its irreconcilable issues. Take in this moment in the here-and-now.

I leave the campsite at 9:30, heading across the peninsula and up the ridge separating Mesa and Desolation Lakes. As I diagonal up the slope, I make my way around the rain's leftover puddles. In a few minutes, I reach the top and gaze on immense Desolation Lake spread out below. I am about a quarter of the way up the lake. The two small lakes on the outlet creek are down to the right.

Making my way diagonally down to the lakeshore, I arrive a little beyond halfway down the lake as I near the shoreline. For a few moments, I consider circumnavigating the lake, but realize that will take a long time and I will then have to cross back to this side. I already explored that other side in 2017. Exploring along this side is easier and something new.

I enjoy wandering while taking photos of the huge lake and its rock and green tufts along the shoreline. I follow the waterside down the lake, circling the talus piles at the outlet. All these rocks are probably underwater in a normal snow year.

The possible campsites spied are all on the other side, most likely used by people taking the Desolation Trail from the Piute Pass Trail. I see at

least three, maybe four sites. On this side, the Mesa side, there is nothing resembling a campsite. I feel doubly justified. If I had hiked here yesterday, I would've turned back around and camped at Mesa, which is as good, probably better in terms of view than any of the sites on the other side of Desolation. I am at the best location I've come across in Humphreys Basin.

On the Desolation Lake outlet creek there are two small lakes, situated side by side. Following the shoreline to the far end of the second lake, the outlet creek begins its long winding descent to Lower Desolation Lake. Climbing the low ridge above the outlet creek, I am rewarded with a view of Desolation Lake and Lower Desolation Lake with Mount Humphreys rising above. In the other direction, Mesa Lake's badgelike shape is created by the peninsula jutting out of the northeast end, the corner bay by the outlet creek, and the small peninsula on the southwest shore before the sand beach.

I continue on the ridge heading for a large erratic, marveling at the expansive views. Beyond the erratic, the tarn passed yesterday sits below. Turning back, I pass the erratic and take in one final time the magnificent view of Desolation Lake, Mt. Humphreys, and the neighboring peaks. I zig-zag down from the ridge from the high point climbed a couple of hours ago. A campsite is carved out of the level area a couple of hundred feet above Mesa Lake. There is also a possible campsite perched on the peninsula. I prefer my current campsite and arrive back at around 12:30 from my fascinating excursion.

At 1:00, the wind picks up. So far, there are only numerous puffy clouds with no sign of thunderheads. The wind shifted back to the southeast so perhaps the monsoonal weather has returned. The clouds become more numerous with larger clouds close together and the sun only occasionally breaking through.

A fisherman appears on the point across from me. Another fisherman walks along the far shore, the first humans I've seen since Friday. Both of them move from place to place along the shoreline. Eventually, they both meet up on the far shore and make their way moving like tiny undulating toys until they disappear from sight. I surmise that they are camped at Tomahawk Lake.

Wispy black clouds hover below bright clouds and blue sky. The clouds become darker. Every once in a while a ray of sunshine peeks through and

illuminates a particular spot on the faces of the Glacier Divide. Here, one can while away time watching the weather. As long as one is prepared for the worst, one can enjoy the machinations. Observing the subtle changes puts one better in tune with one's surroundings.

Today has been everything I could wish from the magnificent sunrise followed by a leisurely morning and hike to Desolation Lake to the afternoon spent appreciating my surroundings while happily doing nothing considered useful.

The evening progresses to that period when the near area along the lake has gone to shadow while anticipating the alpenglow on the peaks. There are now puffy clouds to the west. I wait to see when and where the sun breaks through. Right now, I'm betting on a magnificent sunset. Maybe tomorrow I'll climb the ridge above for a different sunset view.

To the west, the clouds, transform into a memorable mix of shades of yellow, pink, and gray. Mount Humphreys and its neighbor turn deep red. Another day concludes in magical beauty, a day at one with the wilderness. Today was an amazing gift; appreciate it so it resides inside forever.

## **Day Six, August 8, Mesa Lake**

It is a spectacular colorful dawn. Numerous pink/violet glowing clouds to the east around Mount Humphreys are reflected in the still water. Red sky at morning? Does that mean take warning? The sunlight appears and disappears on the Glacier Divide. Taking photos is an exercise in spontaneity since the light and color constantly shift. There is no time to pause and reflect on the composition, only instant instinct and familiarity with craft.

This is my last layover day of the trip. It could be my last one ever since I never know when the doctors are going to lay down the line on backpacking. The uncertainty covering the future gives each trip an added intensity with a need to take it all in as much as possible. Every Sierra backpack may be the last one.

I am enthralled by the view over the water of Mesa Lake to the Glacier Divide. One does not see the large area extending to Tomahawk Lake and



beyond. Only the far shoreline edge of the lake forms the horizon with the peaks seemingly rising from the water. From this angle, the Glacier Divide appears an insurmountable string of class 4 cliffs.

It's easy to see why the explorers of the late 19th century followed Evolution Creek to Evolution Valley and so avoided the Glacier Divide. When was the first recorded crossing of the Glacier Divide? Was it Snow Tongue Pass by the Hutchinson brothers in 1904 on the way to their first ascent of Mount Humphreys? The Glacier Divide may be the most difficult long divide of the High Sierra. There are still no maintained trails over it, unlike all the other major divides I know.

It would have been thrilling to journey the High Sierra in the 1890's and early 1900's with Joseph LeConte, Lucy and Bolton Coit Brown, the Hutchinson brothers. What was it like to witness the High Sierra before it was formally preserved as wilderness? Were the native Piute, Shoshone, and Miwok along with the shepherds and their "hoofed locusts" the only sign of human habitation?

Now, only the wilderness designation saves it. Otherwise there would be numerous roads over the Sierra south of Sonora Pass besides Tioga Road. A road was proposed, but never constructed between Mammoth Lakes and Clover Meadow. There would probably also be a road from North Lake to Florence Lake with resorts along the way. Imagine a Hutchinson Meadow Resort with numerous cabins with a large lodge along Piute Creek. I recall camping at Hutchinson Meadow in 1998 with not a single person in sight.

Now, I sit here at Mesa Lake in solitude. The one maintained trail is only a couple of miles away yet it might as well be miles and miles. I still have seen no one except the two fishermen since Friday.

I detect animal movements up the hill above the campsite. I assume it's a marmot. Then I notice two enormous pointy ears protruding from its head. A rabbit at 11,000 feet in the Sierra? The rabbit ignores me, munching on the grass between hops down to near the tent. I get my camera and take a photo. He seems oblivious to my presence, so I move nearer. He hops a few feet away.

The clouds are from the southeast and already numerous. Does this portend rain as in red sky at morning? I will do my day-hike exploration wearing a raincoat and be ready to hightail back here. I hope it holds off at least until afternoon. This feels like it is building for something big. Already the wind has picked up. I put the pack, stove, and cookkit under the vestibule before heading off to Tomahawk Lake. The weather discourages more distant explorations and I am curious to revisit Tomahawk after my two days there in 2017.

I begin by continuing the circumnavigation of Mesa Lake begun on Friday. Puddles remain in many places so I walk on the tufts of grass, an odd sensation since the height of each tuft differs. Now I know why the fishermen yesterday seemed to be moving like undulating toys as they made their way near the shoreline. When I reach the Mesa outlet creek, the foliage forces me to walk far away from the creek. About a quarter mile above Tomahawk Lake, I debate continuing since the weather appears more threatening. When will the clouds' burst? My weather radar tells me to head down to Tomahawk.

The lovely campsite at the one end of the bay that forms the blade of the Tomahawk is no longer there. I find my campsite from 2017, unoccupied, but still a clear tent area. I head out to the point and gaze at the view before following the shoreline to the place where there was the great view of Pilot Knob reflected on the lake. Now the lake is so low the rocks protrude above the water. I circle around to obtain the view of the lovely vale along the Mesa outlet creek, sitting on a high rock overlooking the valley to the west while to the south, there's Tomahawk Lake with the Glacier Divide rising beyond.

After eating a bar and wandering among the rocks, I head back up to Mesa. The wind has further picked up, signaling an imminent storm. Hiking up the hill as near to the creek as possible, I see how Mesa Lake achieved its name if it was approached from Tomahawk. One crosses a flat plateau that morphs into the shoreline of the lake. Passing the campsite rejected on Friday, I continue the circumnavigation of Mesa Lake, following the shoreline as much as possible. Numerous puddles remain and the campsite near the sand beach is still flooded.

I return to my campsite shortly before the storm erupts at 12:45—red sky at morning indeed. Wind shakes the tent. Hale clatters for about ten minutes. The hale transitions to drizzle. At 1:35, a downpour ensues. Anyone out in this will be in trouble. The downpour lets up after about twenty minutes, slacks off further, and becomes a drizzle that concludes at about 3:00. Emerging from the tent, the clouds indicate the rain is merely in hiatus. After walking along the shoreline while watching the cloud machinations over the Glacier Divide, I sit leaning against the chosen rock about midway between the tent and the lake and write in my notebook. Someone comes to the peninsula across the water and begins putting up a tent in the spot I noticed yesterday. I wave hello, but don't think he notices.

From observing the clouds, I decide to have an early dinner so I can finish before the next round of rain. I cook my dinner, enjoy the view while eating leaning on my rock, wash out the pot, and place them under the vestibule. Heading to the lakeshore, I observe black clouds with sheets of rain pelting the Glacier Divide. The ridges surrounding Mesa are in sunshine. I look for a rainbow, but none is visible.

Walking back to the tent, the black clouds over the Glacier Divide have progressed across the lake. The rain starts at 5:30 as I put the camera bag and tripod inside the tent. Zipping shut the vestibule, I kick off my shoes and crawl inside. About 6:00, lightening and thunder commence. A total downpour ensues with wind whirling and the tent shaking. This reminds me of when I was at Upper Basin in terms of the rain and wind. At 7:00, I begin to wonder when the rain will end and what to do tomorrow. Will I have to remain here?

The rain stops about 7:30 so I go out and observe the marvelous mist swirling on and around the Glacier Divide as the clouds pass over. The sky is pink/red to the west with tinted shades of gray over the peaks. It is too late to climb the ridge for the view, as I considered doing yesterday.

The rabbit comes out after the rain ends and remains after the sun sets, nibbling on the grass. My presence does not disturb him unless I move too close. I hear a distant landslide somewhere on the Glacier Divide; the location cannot be pinpointed.

Today had its ups and downs due to the weather. It was still a wonderful day. Any day spent in the High Sierra is a day spent in a magical reality. In the uncertainty of wilderness, one becomes attuned to the subtle changes as well as the grander revelations.

As darkness slowly comes, the rabbit disappears. I wander back to the lakeshore for a final look at the swirling clouds as it becomes too dark to read what I write. I unzip the wet vestibule and mosquito netting, sit down, zip shut the vestibule, take off my shoes, swing my legs into the tent, zip shut the mosquito netting, turn on the Luci light, make a pillow, crawl into the sleeping bag, and soon drift into sleep.

## **Day Seven, August 8, Mesa Lake to Upper Golden Trout Lake**

It is an uncertain dawn. Clouds blanket the sky in all directions while the sunlight peaks through gaps. The Glacier Divide reflections in Mesa Lake are even more marvelous than the two previous mornings. There's an other-world quality to the light. Enjoy today and tomorrow by appreciating the Glacier Divide one final time. Take it into your memory bank to pay dividends for the rest of your life.

Clouds pass over the Glacier Divide in a variety of forms and altitudes. Behind the moving gray clouds is a mix of blue patches and white clouds. The grayer clouds are moving quickly from the southeast. I don't know if will be going elsewhere for my final night or remaining here. At the moment, it looks like I will be departing, but I leave the tent up as a refuge from possible rain.

Do other animals worry about the weather to the extent of humans? Are other animals so attuned to all its subtle patterns that there is no uncertainty? Were our prehistoric ancestors also as attuned? I realize I am better attuned out here, especially after a couple of days. Yesterday, I was able to go to Tomahawk Lake, intuiting the weather and returning a few minutes before the rain. Today is not following typical Sierra patterns, not even monsoon weather patterns. This is something different and I

can't read it with any sense of certainty. However, worrying about the weather is not something to wallow in. The decision is not mine, it's the uncontrollable weather's.

The neighbor on the opposite peninsula has taken down his tent. He comes this direction and stops to say hello. He said he didn't see my tent until after he had set up and saw me with the tripod taking photos. He's going to go over Puppet Pass. I mention following the wall on the way down from the pass. He replies that's exactly what his internet research said was best. We commiserate on the weather with the same bewilderment about what it might do the rest of today. We wish each other good trips; he walks a little farther before beginning his climb to Puppet Pass.

I decide to also gamble on the rain holding off and take down the tent. Once packed, I set off on that I think is a more or less a direct route to Upper Golden Trout Lake and the marvelous campsite on the knoll above I stayed at in 2017. Cutting across the Mesa Lake peninsula, I avoid the many puddles between the tufts of grass. I diagonal up to the ridge above, choosing a way that avoids the numerous rocks that help make Humpreys Basin such an interesting landscape. Once at the top of the ridge, I walk south towards the Glacier Divide.

The hike is a cross-country delight. In many ways, this is more pleasant than walking on a trail. I choose my own steps around any obstacles, picking the best way through the rocks, bogs, and tufts of grass instead of following a well-worn dictated path.

I come to an overlook of the two lakes that, from the map, were alternate campsite possibilities. Both are now much depleted, more shallow tarns than lakes. I see no possible campsites even if I wanted to camp here. There are puddles below the tufts of grass as I make my way across the depression by the lakes to a ridge overlooking the view south. A lake sits far below. Is that Upper Golden Trout? I sit down on a rock, eat a bar, and get out the GPS. The location triangle appears exactly where expected; yes, that is Upper Golden Trout Lake five hundred feet below. I just need to follow the landscape down.

From the barren hillside, I descend down to abundant trees, stepping across the Piute Pass Trail. Allowing the trees and rocks to dictate my course,

I come to the trail that leads to Golden Trout Lakes hiked in 2017. The path is not as distinct and beaten down as I remember. Maybe my memory is at fault. A creek appears to the left. Following the trail down, I spy Upper Golden Trout Lake shining up ahead.

The little knoll with my 2017 campsite sits on the other side of the creek. After wading the creek, I have to cross a distinct well-traveled trail to reach the campsite. Last time, there was no trail here. I go up to the empty campsite. The trees by the tent area have been cut. There are at least four distinct tent areas, not the two I remember.

This place has radically changed. When I was here before, the Golden Trout Trail I just hiked down passed on the other side of the inlet creek, giving this place a sense of isolation. There was a meadow with beautiful flowers and a second creek paralleling the main inlet creek that also flowed into Upper Golden Trout Lake. It was idyllic. That's why I wanted to camp here for my final night in Humphreys Basin.

After lunch and setting up the tent, I explore around the area to better see what else has changed. I follow the new trail to the right over a small rise that was not here in 2017. Now, beyond the small rise, there is a tarn created at the creek's conclusion; a small knoll now prevents the creek from flowing into Upper Golden Trout. I surmise that the Golden Trout Trail has been rerouted so it now runs past the west side of the tarn and the knoll campsite where I am camped. The trail I followed to get here was the old trail. That is why it was not the well-used path I remember. There is no fault in my memory.

To provide a final confirmation for the rerouting of the Golden Trout Trail, a party of four people come down the new trail past the campsite and cross the inlet creek of Upper Golden Trout Lake to connect to the old trail that continues to Golden Trout Lake.

In five years, this landscape has become a different place. I am finding it difficult to adjust to this new perspective of a familiar location. This exemplifies how an area can radically change in a brief passage of time. I'm not sure what results from evolution, climate change, or Forest Service administrative decisions.

When I return home after this trip, I write Inyo National Forest. A ranger replies, directing me to a specific person who should be able to answer my questions. All my attempts to contact that person never receive a reply so I can only speculate about what might have occurred.

Was it the winter of 2018-19 when the massive snow melt caused the creek to change course and create the small knoll blocking the creek's former access to the lake? Did the subsequent drought years only exacerbate the changes? Is this Sierra evolution or human-caused climate change or, as I suspect, a combination of both amplified by administrative decisions regarding the rerouting of the Golden Trout Trail?

The more profound and deeper aspect is that our favorite places in the High Sierra all change. I have discovered that many of my favorite places from the past, especially campsites, are not the same. In the last four years, I have found favorite campsites that have disappeared in Dusy Basin, Ireland Junction in Lyell Canyon, the Merced Peak Fork, Post Creek, and upper Virginia Canyon along with Mesa Lake this trip. Probably, if I attempted to return to many other beloved campsites stayed at over the last forty-four years, I would also discover they no longer exist. I cannot reliably tell people there is a great campsite at a particular location, something I've done many times. That campsite may no longer exist. Too much change occurs, even in wilderness, especially when it's compounded by climate change and government administrative decisions.

Anyone reading any trip report or memoir must understand this is only one person's experience at a particular time in a particular place. If someone attempts to gather specific information about a place, they may discover something quite different when they go to that location. The Sierra wilderness journeyed by John Muir, Joseph LeConte, Norman Clyde, or even Steve Roper is not the High Sierra wilderness journeyed today.

The Sierra, any location, evolves, changes. Even the mountains change with landslides, as I discovered last year on Knapsack Pass. Wilderness is constantly changing. That's what I realized at Palisade Lakes in 1998. The depth and breadth of that realization is now totally sinking in. The one and only constant is change.

This is my last night, probably forever, in Humphreys Basin. I thought coming to this campsite would be an idyllic final night. While it's no longer the same place, it will still be fabulous.

After dinner, I head down to the Upper Golden Trout lakeshore, exploring the now changed point where the current inlet creek enters along with the shore of the bay where five years ago the second inlet creek spilled into the lake. When the sunlight disappears behind the ridge above, I head up to the new tarn by the rerouted Golden Trout Trail for the reflections of the surrounding peaks. To the west, Pilot Knob is engulfed by clouds glowing in a myriad of colors. I dash back and forth between the two bewitching views, providing a magical conclusion to my final night in Humphreys Basin.

At 8:30 it is getting dark, but I don't finish up since it's the final night. I feel like dawdling, especially since the colors in the sky linger long after sundown. This has been a great trip because even if the weather radically changed my itinerary, I did what I felt like. It was a trip that met my goals, a destination that met my goals.

As the stars and planets slowly emerge, beginning with Venus, I amble back up the knoll, pausing at the overlook of Golden Trout Lake before crawling into the tent.

## **Day Eight, August 9, Upper Golden Trout Lake to North Lake**

At dawn, I make my way down to Golden Trout Lake to watch the light emerge on the Glacier Divide. I am mesmerized by the reflections of the ridges and peaks, whitebarks, and bushes in Golden Trout Lake. When the sun clears the ridge next to Mount Humphreys, I head up to the campsite on this final morning in Humphreys Basin, my nineteenth one.

On a final morning like this, I think about all the previous mornings in the High Sierra since 1978 at frozen Upper Fletcher Lake when Barbara and I sat in the sunrise and basked in the sun's warmth. One only needs a freezing night followed by emerging sun to understand the adoration of our ancestors to worship the sun as a deity. In wilderness solitude, one gets in touch with



millennia of human existence. Ironically modern, high-tech equipment permits us to get most closely in touch with our ancient ancestors. In wilderness, one experiences life at its most basic while carrying modern technology gear.

Final mornings are always bittersweet. There is the realization that I must pack up and hike out, endure the long drive home, and, after days of solitude, return to contemporary civilization and all that entails. On the other hand, there's also reveling in the magnificence of a High Sierra morning and hiking through a marvelous landscape.

I've learned so many deep, enduring lessons this trip. The Sierra changes constantly and some of those changes are not so subtle, as this place illustrates. Appreciate the here-and-now in each and every place; one may never see it the same way again even if one returns to the exact same place. One finds something new and uniquely beautiful in its place.

With that lesson learned along with the others discovered at every sunrise, every sunset, and the hours in between, I must do my best to bring those lessons home with me and carry them deep inside. Along with what wilderness teaches, there is the knowledge found inside oneself from the heightened awareness of who and what one is. One rediscovers life itself and our single infinitesimal place in something larger than we can imagine. The lessons of wild nature conform to no ideology, no religion. They are life itself, unadorned by human impositions.

I finish my last cup of coffee before setting out back to North Lake. I must remember to appreciate each moment as I hike. The uphill to the pass will be difficult and following the trail down with its twists and turns necessitates paying close attention instead of dreamily strolling. Plus, I will encounter people, lots of people, after four days of almost total solitude. I say farewell, maybe forever, to Humphreys Basin.

I leave the campsite and turn right on the trail, go over the small rise, and past the newly-made tarn. As the trail winds up, I recognize some of this landscape from when I wandered down cross-country from the unnamed lakes above. This trail seems to go on longer than the old route. I finally meet what is obviously the blocked-off old trail that heads down to the left as this path winds further up to ultimately intersect the Piute Pass Trail.

The gradual climb to the pass travels over the side creeks that now allow me to rock hop above the water. With the pack-stock grade, I only slightly struggle on the way up to the pass. A group with a couple of dogs is stopped at a rock promontory just below the pass. A packer party comes on the trail from Muriel Lake to intersect the Piute Pass Trail on its way back to North Lake.

I stop at the top of the pass and put down my pack in the convenient rock bench to one side of the trail I've used in the past. I enjoy a snack and climb up to take photos of the view of Humphreys Basin to the west and, to the east, the Owens Valley extending to the White Mountains. Piute Lake and Loch Leven shine in the midday sun.

Many people are both ascending and descending the trail. The path is still flooded in places, but it is not difficult to rock hop over and around the water though it requires more concentration than simply following the path. The packers with their empty horses are paused for a break above Piute Lake. They soon catch up to me, but I easily get well off the trail. For old time's sake, I stop for a snack at the tree by Lock Leven as on so many other occasions going up and down Piute Pass.

While having the snack, three parties with dogs go by. After finishing, I pass the three parties who are now stopped conversing together with all the dogs wandering off leash. One dog, a German shepherd, runs at me, stopping literally six inches in front of me, barking and snarling. Startled, I manage to blurt I will report it to the Inyo sheriff if he bites me. I avoid mentioning none of the dogs are on a leash and therefore violating Forest Service regulations; I just want to continue safely down the trail. One owner comes up and grabs the shepherd. I head down the trail. Unfortunately, all of these people are younger day hikers so I know they will catch up.

While I'm taking a photo of the waterfall below Loch Leven during the twisting convoluted descent, they come by in three separate groups. A couple with their two well-behaved dogs arrives first. I get well off the trail on an outcropping above the rocky path to allow them to pass. The family with the German shepherd have put the dog on a leash. One of the men in the third party makes a remark about thinking like a mule to follow the trail, presuming I do not

know where the trail goes. I don't correct him as I sit directly above the trail. I'm not interested in proving anything. I just want them down the trail so I can walk in peace. I sit and appreciate the view to create more distance ahead of me.

I wind down the steep steps to the long open switchbacks that conclude in the forest below. I hear the creek up ahead. One of the parties is coaxing their dogs over the crossing. I wade the creek far above them. At the second crossing, the family with the German shepherd is attempting to coax him across. I again wade the creek above them by the log crossing and walk as fast as I can manage. At one of the switchbacks above North Lake Campground, I see the couple with their two dogs below me. Since the other two parties are now well out of earshot, I sit on a rock to and have a drink to allow the couple to get further ahead. At the campground, they are stopped talking to a couple of other backpackers. I walk past with a hello and continue down the road to the trailhead parking beyond the pack station.

At the car, I take off my pack, get out the garbage (including the bag of used toilet paper), open the tailgate, get out the clothes bag hidden in the compartment below, and put it on the front seat with the camera bag. Down at the trailhead bear box, I use the fireplace gas key left on top to open the box and fetch the bag of camping trash with its still unopened bottle of beer. I add the trip garbage to the trash bag and place it on the floor and put the beer in the clothes bag to have with dinner. Sitting down on a nearby rock, I remove my wet shoes and socks, and put on dry ones.

Now ready to go, I hopefully hit the ignition button. The car starts and I exhale a sigh of relief. Heading down North Lake Road, I fortunately meet no cars. At the bottom, I pull into the area by the end of Sabrina Campground where a large bear-proof dumpster sits. After throwing out the garbage, I take the bag from the car down to the creek, wash my legs and torso, and put on a clean shirt. Maybe now I don't stink quite as badly, a vain hope after a week in the wilderness. The reactions of my fellow shoppers when I buy dinner at the Bishop Vons confirms how vain that hope it is. I use self-checkout before heading up highway 395, over Tioga Pass, and, finally, home.