



July 8, 2024—Porcupine Flat Campground, Yosemite

Everything goes as well as can be expected on the four hour drive to the Big Oak Flat entrance to Yosemite National Park. The extreme heat is the only annoyance. The car's outside temperature gauge reads 100 degrees in Groveland.

After showing the ranger at the entrance kiosk my wilderness permit email and Senior Pass, I park at the familiar small parking lot in front of the administration building. The ranger at the table outside directs me to the window for wilderness permits. At the window, the young woman ranger looks at the permit email and directs me inside to the counter with a Yosemite map under its clear plastic covering. The ranger seems to not be used to dealing with someone who has backpacked in Yosemite since 1978, is familiar with the rules, and knows where he wants to hike on his trip. I wonder to myself, do that many uninformed and unfamiliar people get wilderness permits?

When queried about the wilderness rules, I reply “one hundred feet for almost everything and six inches for the cat hole,” echoing the ranger who gave me my permit last year. Unlike last year, this ranger still runs down each item on the laundry list. When she gets to the item concerning a cat hole, I say I dig it with a tent stake: a tent stake is six inches long so I know the hole is six inches deep. From her response, I don't think she'd heard that before. After she finishes running down the rest of the rules, we both sign the permit.

Back at the car, I remember I failed to ask about parking. I haven't been out of the Glen Aulin Trailhead since going to Waterwheel Falls in 2015. Since then, Tioga Road and its feeder roads have all been redone. I go back to inquire about parking. The ranger says parking is still on the Lembert Dome/Stables road, but now delineated with painted parking space markers. I thank her and she once more wishes me a good trip. Back in my car, I begin the drive to Porcupine Flat Campground.

As I proceed east on my favorite drive anywhere in the world, I recall all the other trips beginning with backpacking with my wife Barbara to Fletcher

Lake in 1978 to all the times car camping along Tioga Road. There was the long-closed campground at Tenaya Lake back in 1979 with a procession of headlights from Tioga Road shining through the tent all night. The next year we arrived late at night at the now-closed Smoky Jack where the immense bumps and chuckholes on the dirt road threatened the suspension on our VW bug. In 1982, we slept in that VW bug at the backcountry trailhead parking lot. At that time, there was no other building in the lot except a tiny kiosk that fit one person inside who wrote out one's permit. Back then, there was no need to reserve a wilderness permit much less enter a lottery. One showed up first thing in the morning, declared where one wanted to go, listened to a brief explanation of the rules, and proceeded to a destination.

This time I reserved a campsite at Porcupine Flat, a place I've never stayed at. Once a first-come campground, since COVID all the campsites are reserved. I decided I needed a reservation since Tuolumne Meadows Campground remained closed for its upgrade while Tamarack Flat, White Wolf, and Yosemite Creek were not opening this year and not all the east side first-come campgrounds were yet open. That meant far fewer available campsites. When I made the reservation, Recreation.gov required reserving two nights, not one, though they didn't inform me of that until I was at the payment portion of the reservation. Since I have a half-off senior pass discount, I made the reservation and figured I'd give the second night to someone needing a campsite. At the time I made the reservation, I had no idea of just how easy that would be.

When I arrive at Porcupine Flat, the sign says "Full." There is no one around with whom to check-in. Instead, a canopy is set up with a table beneath containing a clipboard with a lined sheet of paper on which to write in the arrival date, last name, campsite number, and the final digits of the reservation number. I am glad I bothered to print-out the reservation since otherwise I would never remember the reservation number. Do they expect me to have the reservation on my phone to provide the several required digits? Until I leave the next morning, I never see a campground host or ranger.

After finding my campsite and setting up, I wander around Porcupine Flat, checking out the other sites for future reference. It is a lovely campground, but it is not Tuolumne Meadows. When one camps here, one must drive somewhere else during the day such as Tenaya Lake, Olmstead Point, Porcupine Creek trailhead, or Tuolumne Meadows. When one camps at Tuolumne, one can park their car at the campsite and never drive again until leaving, hiking the trails to any of the many destinations in all directions: Cathedral Lake, Elizabeth Lake, Lyell Canyon, Lembert Dome, Dog Lake, and the Tuolumne River. Since I would rather not drive upon reaching the destination, I prefer Tuolumne. Also, Tuolumne provides a grand panorama with the Tuolumne River, the meadow itself, and expansive views of the surrounding peaks.

When confined to the campsite itself, Porcupine Flat may be superior to Tuolumne at certain campsites in terms of privacy and lack of people. Except for when cars are passing on Tioga Road, this is extremely quiet. When there's no traffic, I listen to the gurgling creek by my campsite along with the wind rustling through the pines of the lovely forest. At Tuolumne, one can almost always hear something human disturbing the myriad sounds of the natural world.

As I sit at the picnic table, a family comes up to say hello and compliment the campsite with its creekside location. They say it is nicer than the one they have. I tell them I am leaving tomorrow to go backpacking so it will be unoccupied, but paid for so they can take it if they want.

Shortly afterward another family comes by. They say they were told I was leaving in the morning. Is that true? Yes, I reply, explaining once more my situation. It turns out they are occupying one of the campsites that is considered closed, but since it was unoccupied, they took it since they couldn't find a campsite elsewhere. I tell them they can have this site tomorrow and let them know I'll be leaving early in the morning. As far as I'm concerned, I am glad they will be able to use it and enjoy it. They thank me and return to their squatter's site.

As I sit writing and reminiscing on my memories of the Sierra, I know my backpacking days are numbered. I'll see how I do tomorrow. I'm just hoping that getting out there with a pack on and hiking the trails will give me the fortitude. That fortitude is now the main question. Do I have the fortitude to continue backpacking the Sierra? I expect to learn that the limitations imposed last year will continue. I need to deal with those limitations and discover what is still possible.

July 9, 2024—Porcupine Flat Campground to Lower Young Lake

I have a restless night, waking often to the sounds of cars on Tioga Road. I finally give up and get up at 5:15, taking down the tent first. Packing goes easily with everything fitting into the Bearikade including two fuel canisters and Luci lights. I am on my way to Tuolumne Meadows before 7:00. I hope the family wakes up to find my empty campsite and enjoys the day and night in Yosemite.

At this hour, few cars are on the road. With only two cars in the parking lot, I can't resist stopping at Olmstead Point to experience the emerging morning light on Clouds Rest and Half Dome. As I make the turn down to Tuolumne Meadows, it's always a thrill to get that first glimpse of marvelous expanse of meadow with Lembert Dome and mounts Dana and Gibbs forming the backdrop. Past the closed store and campground, I make the left turn at the Lembert Dome parking area. There are lots of empty delineated parking spaces on the road. I drive past them, u-turn before the stables, and pull into a vacant place a few spaces before the Soda Springs dirt road.

No one is here. I park the car, lock it, and hoist on my camera and pack. My watch says 7:30. I set out at the trailhead sign for Glen Aulin at the head of the Soda Springs access road. The park service has added a few signs along the road/trail informing people of the area's history. As I reach Soda Springs, a sign points to the right saying "Glen Aulin." This must be the new trail. The last time I was here, the trail went through Soda Springs and along the

Tuolumne River. Now the trail heads up to the right away from the river. Soon a plethora of signs announcing “Yosemite Wilderness” attempt to explain the rules. I walk in forest without the views of the meadow and Cathedral Range peaks. I miss the old trail.

A trail to the stables appears from the right. The sounds of Delaney Creek are soon audible. Heading slightly down, the trail comes to the Delaney Creek crossing. I switch my running shoes, which serve as creek-crossing and camp shoes, carrying the hiking shoes and sox in one hand while the other holds the trekking pole. My balance is no longer trustworthy so I do not attempt rock hopping or suspended log creek crossings. The wade across the creek is soon accomplished. This newer crossing is far from the Tuolumne River. I remember walking out by the old crossing to take in the view of Tuolumne Meadows, the river, and Cathedral Range.

Once across Delaney Creek, the distance to the Young Lakes Trail junction is longer than I remember. I come to one clearing and think this is the junction only to be disappointed. At the next clearing my memory is rewarded. I turn right at the sign and begin the long climb to the ridge and the junction with the Dog Lake Trail. This is the first time I’ve walked this trail since 1988. Soon I come to an open granite area with a spectacular view of much of the Yosemite high country. Here the uphill slog begins in earnest.

The climb is never particularly steep. After the initial open area ascent, the trail steadily winds its way up through forest. At Dingley Creek, which is barely more than a trickle, I soak my scarf and hat on this hot day. I recall more contours on the topo map and brace myself for more climbing. My pace slows to that of a snail. The climb continues its steady ascent. I am not winded, only weary. My will power implores me to take another step and another step. When I think I reach the ridge, the climb continues, the view of the ridge proceeding as before. By this point, this climb reminds me of the ascent of Bear Ridge above Mono Creek where one keeps believing they are near the top only to discover the climb continues. The trail finally levels off for a short spell only to require one final ascent before I am walking along the ridge.

I meet a family of two children, mother, and father heading back to Tuolumne from Young Lakes. The mother does the talking, informing me the climb is done and it's all downhill or level until the final climb to Young Lake. My weary body and mind do not properly register that final climb.

I come to the Dog Lake junction and eat lunch. Barbara, Gordon, and I camped here back in 1988. At that time the area was open with the creek a wonderful place for 4 year old Gordon to amuse himself under his parents' watchful supervision. It looks very different than it did back then. The wide open area is now more a forest with many more trees of about the same height and age. Is this climate change once again showing its consequences? There are no visible campsites even when I wander around the area. I am reminded that even the seeming unchanging High Sierra wilderness continues to change.

After lunch, at the bottom of a downhill, I meet a friendly younger couple. They remind me about the climb coming up, saying it with the right tone combining that it's annoying and you can manage it. I soon begin snailing up switchbacks, the trail leveling off by a lovely meadow before once more ascending. Finally, it stops climbing though the lake is not in sight. After a longer than expected walk, water appears through the trees followed by signs indicating Young Lake with a companion sign facing the other direction for Tuolumne Meadows. Now I need to find a campsite.

Following the lakeside trail, there are many campsites to my left on the other side of the trail. I come to the outlet creek. There is a great campsite to the left. My hopes are raised until I realize someone is already there. There is another campsite next to it, but I decide taking that would be obnoxious; allow these people some privacy. At the end of the east shore, there is a lovely sand beach in a wide open treeless area. Despite my near exhaustion, I decide to cross the outlet creek and find a campsite.

After wading the creek, I see a trail heading towards Middle Young Lake along with a path that goes toward the east shore. I follow the path, cross a small creek, and make my way to the beach. There are no campsites in sight, but I know there must be at least one around here somewhere.

This place is too popular for there not to be a legal campsite along the east shore. I put my pack on a rock and begin reconnoitering. Beyond some fallen trees I spy the open ground of a tent area. Yes, this looks like a wonderful campsite.

I retrieve my pack and put it down in front of a tree at the campsite. Since it's already past 3:00 so I should have arrived awhile ago, I first attempt to send an "at the campsite" SPOT message to Barbara. The SPOT indicates a question mark, meaning the message may not have gone through. There are a lot of trees here so the GPS indicator winks in and out. I go back to the wide open beach area to resend the message. This time the GPS remains on and I quickly get a check mark indicating success.

After putting the tent up, I sit and write, contemplating the day. I am wiped out. I haven't been this tired after a day's hiking in years. There is an all-encompassing weariness I've never really known, even on the most strenuous hiking days covering eighteen or so miles with three to four thousand feet of elevation gain. Unlike in the past when my energy rekindles once I sit, rest, and unwind, the deep weariness remains.

It's a weariness that continues after dinner when I go back to the beach area for the evening view of the peaks to the north and the long ridge extending from Ragged Peak. I find myself sitting down on a rock and requiring a conscious effort to get up to take photos. Only the marvelous "Range of Light" of the High Sierra pushes me to get moving. There's a unique quality in how the light illuminates the land at the beginning and end of the day. Photographers refer to it as "magic hour," an apt designation. It is as if every tree, rock, blade of grass, and peak is a vital living entity. Glowing light appears to emanate from within each and every one.

Paintbrush flowers populate the shoreline at this open-to-the-sky end of Young Lake. Lots of people seemed to be camped on the other side of the lake. No one is on this side. A fish shape emerges and flops back into the water. Many other scattered circular pools appear; the fish are jumping. Until the sun sets, the light slowly creeps higher up the dramatic ridge extending from Ragged Peak to Upper Young Lake. By 8:35, the sun is down.

When I return to my campsite in the trees, my near exhaustion tells me I may be changing my itinerary tomorrow. I planned to go cross country to Roosevelt Lake. Now, Upper Young Lake may be a better choice. Perusing the map more closely, there's the realization of what I will see when I get there. From the map and online photos, Roosevelt sits at the bottom of its surroundings. Any view will be of the surrounding area: Mount Conness, the Sheep Crest, and to the south Ragged Peak and the ridge above Upper Young while to the north, the ridge at the top of Don't- Be-A-Smart Pass. In contrast, Upper Young Lake sits at the top of a broad plateau with a view extending from Mount Conness to the Sheep Crest to Ragged Peak along with expanding far beyond to encompass all of northern and much of western Yosemite

Today was definitely my current physical limit. My planned August trip to Sky Blue Lake needs to be canceled. The trail to Cottonwood Pass, Chicken Spring Lake, and beyond will be more difficult than what wiped me out today. I know because I hiked beyond Chicken Spring to Big Whitney Meadow on my first day in 2002. I'll have to come up with a new trip that conforms to my current limitations.

Tomorrow will be a less tiring day. I won't do a day like this again. I get to be an old person. That's who and what I am. There is nothing I can do to alter that reality. I'll see what tomorrow will bring and accept it.

Wednesday, July 10—Lower Young Lake to Upper Young Lake

I awake at dawn. This morning, *is* what I am here for. The first light strikes Ragged Peak. There are lovely reflections of the peaks and ridges on Young Lake. The fish are jumping, rejoicing in the new day. I am immersed in the immense silence of a High Sierra morning. This is true tranquility. It is not a tranquility one strives for by following a spiritual path set forth by human dictates. It is a tranquility that emanates from nature itself. It is both from the outside natural world and the inner private self. It is being, all being existing in the seemingly chaotic harmony of the natural world—"disharmonious harmony." It is something that simultaneously comes from within and without.

What a difference a decent night's sleep makes. While I'm still unsure about today, I feel I can make a realistic decision based on what my body *and* mind tell me. Last night, my mind was lost in weariness. I tell myself, remember there's no hurry. Take my time and make clear decisions based on the present circumstances. Analyze how I am actually feeling. Be in each moment, be in the here-and-now. Appreciate where I am *now*. Most of all, decide what and why I am truly here. After a bit of hiking, I will know whether to go north to Roosevelt or east to Upper Young.

After watching the day begin, I pack up, full of energy. I leave my campsite, heading north, crossing the trail I assume takes one to Middle Young Lake. I pass through a sparse forest, weaving through the trees and over and around rocks. The way north to Roosevelt Lake heads down a slope. After descending for a few minutes, I hear a creek quite clearly a little further down. This must be the unnamed creek emanating from the unnamed lake below White Mountain. When the forest becomes denser, I find a rock to sit down to assess how I am feeling. My balance has already been suspect at a couple of places weaving between the trees and stepping over rocks and logs. The sitting down makes me realize just how tired I still am. The inner energy did not rekindle as in the past. My waking optimism came from my mind after a good night's sleep. While not as weary as yesterday, my body still feels tired.

Right now, I don't feel like undertaking a cross country hike with route finding choices. Even if off-trail, at the moment, I just want a straightforward route without a lot of micro-route finding. While I know I can manage the cross-country hike to Roosevelt Lake by simply heading north, currently I prefer not to.

As I sit and assess my feelings, both physically and mentally, I mull over the basic question: *what am I here for?* I now want to be backpacking in the Sierra not for the journey, but to simply *be* here. I want to be at timberline in solitude. I desire to hike to a spectacular place and remain as long as possible. *Be* here in the here-and-now, *be* in each and every moment of bliss.

I no longer need or even want to prove anything to anyone. I backpack in the High Sierra entirely for my own amusement. What I do is of no concern to anyone else's expectations or values. There is nothing I *should* do. There is only what I *want* to do.

I know I should go to Upper Young Lake and revel in that magnificent view. That means ascending back up the 200-300 vertical feet I just came down and the climb up to Upper Young Lake. That is the better choice at this moment. That is what I *want* to do.

I hike back up through the pines I descended, heading up diagonally through the sparse forest. When the use trail appears, I continue through the scattered trees until water appears through the forest. I step onto the trail and make my way to the obvious camping complex above Middle Young Lake.

I see a lakeside trail below. It is obvious and clear as it curves with the shoreline. At a lovely waterfall, the trail disappears. A less distinct use trail heads up to the left. I follow it as it climbs by the waterfall. There are a couple of ducks I ignore as I ascend to the broad plateau of Upper Young Lake. I walk toward the water. A possible campsite is in the whitebarks to the left. I decide to check it out. Yes, it would serve, but I think there are better campsites by the trees on the other side of the outlet creek.

Walking around a large field of spectacular blooming lupine, I come to the outlet creek and cross. A large campsite sits in a lovely grove of whitebarks. I put down my pack knowing this will be better than adequate. Since I see no sign of anyone else here, I explore for other campsites on the west shore and find a couple of other good possibilities. Still undecided, I return for my pack and realize right here *is* the place. The large field of lupine I walked around is nearby with lots of lupine also growing between this campsite and the lakeshore. A small outlet creek below the camping area is an easy excellent water source and will sing me to sleep.

I sit leaning against a rock and eat lunch before putting up the tent. Since the terrain offers a choice, I put the tent more to one side so it will be less visible if anyone else comes along and wants to camp at Upper Young

Lake. Once set up for what I hope will be four days and nights of bliss, I run through August trip possibilities since I am not going to Sky Blue Lake and Miter Basin. With only a Young Lakes area map, I use my memory to contemplate where I might go.

My first choice is Dusy Basin. I will need to contact the SEKI wilderness office to find out the exact particulars about the Dusy Basin two-night camping limit. Can I stay in Dusy for two nights, leave for one night and come back for two more nights? (When I return home, I learn that it is the case.) I also run through other possibilities. Is the Hemlock Crossing bridge reconstructed so I can go up the North Fork of the San Joaquin? What about Little Lakes Valley and Treasure Lakes, Nelson and Mathes Lakes in Yosemite, 20 Lakes Basin, Cottonwood Lakes, Isberg Pass, Humphreys Basin with the first night at Piute Lake, and on and on? Over the rest of this trip, I imagine all the places I can think of and weigh the pros and cons of each one. It's a pleasant way to pass the time and provide impetus for future trips.

The Sierra is the place of many of my happiest and most tranquil memories. This is where and when I feel truly at home. At this point with 46 years of marvelous memories, more than ever I appreciate these moments of wilderness solitude.

The rest of the afternoon I while away the time by further exploring this west end of Upper Young Lake. I discover one campsite on the other side of a rock wall with a magnificent view of Middle Young Lake, Lower Young Lake, and Ragged Peak. Someone could lie in their tent while experiencing a spectacular sunrise and sunset. I enjoy a skinny dip since no one else is here to possibly take offense at the sight of my elderly self.

At about 4:00, I hear a couple of female voices. Two thirty-something women put up their tent below my campsite on the other side of the whitebark grove near the small outlet creek. They don't bother checking out the entire west end of the lake with its many campsites. When they take an exploratory walk later while I am wandering around taking photos, one of them stops, says hello, and asks where I'm camped.

"Right there." I point at my tent a hundred feet away.

“Oh!” she exclaims in surprise. The other woman says nothing, continuing to walk to a crossing of the main outlet creek. The woman I am speaking to calls out “Lisa!” and hurries to catch her. I head off to check out the various spectacular views of the northern Yosemite high country, Middle and Lower Young lakes and the ridge extending from Ragged Peak to high above this lake and beyond to White Mountain and Mount Conness.

There’s lovely alpenglow on the ridges and cliffs. In the slanting fading light the pines are iridescent. And I have three more nights to appreciate sunset here and observe the subtle differences.

This is definitely the right decision. I may deal with people here, but anyone hiking up and camping up here will also want to be in solitude and leave me alone, like the two woman tonight. The fifteen to eighteen mile days with over three thousand feet of elevation gain are part of the past. I now need to make my present and future. Still being able to backpack in the High Sierra is sufficient to find places and moments of transcendence, like today. I’ve had a wonderful day. Let’s hope tomorrow will be, too . . . and the day after . . .

Thursday July, 11—Upper Young Lake

I awake at 6:00. I realize that’s a few minutes late even though Ragged Peak is receiving its first beam of light. The panoply of northern Yosemite is already in sunshine—that’s the few minutes late. The view of Ragged Peak, Lower and Middle Young Lakes, and especially the array of peaks and domes beyond extending to the far horizon is breathtaking beyond words.

This is as wonderful a location as I am going to get. The views are all encompassing in every direction. I suspect it will be like last year at Bernice Lake in terms of people. Maybe no one else will be here tonight, then a couple on Friday and Saturday. It’s all speculation. I just hope for a sense of solitude.

That is what I want—that *sense* of solitude. You don’t get it car camping, only backpacking. Someone else may be on the lake; as long as I do not see or hear them, that’s solitude from my perspective. I feel alone. This is the one and only time I will be here—appreciate it.

The sun hits this campsite a little after 7:00. The two women have left. I sit and enjoy the little grove of surrounding whitebark pines. There is something miraculous about whitebarks at timberline. No two trees are exactly alike. The height can vary from one foot to twenty feet. They can appear as single watchers to groups of ten huddled together. They twist into convoluted shapes that defy logic. The bark can manifest as drab gray then transform in the evening light to a glowing red-brown with light seeming to emanate from within.

I can never be bored in this setting. It is the absorption of life itself, all its mysteries, all its secrets revealed in a constantly changing revelation. One exists simultaneously in the here-and-now and the infinity of eternity.

Mid-morning, I set off on a circumnavigation of Upper Young Lake. After making my way around the west side, the south side contains a couple of short sections of talus. There are not difficult or dangerous, but require some thought with the placing of each step.

There are also three sections that retain snow. The first snow section requires picking out a route through talus not in snow. When I see snow overhanging thin air, I immediately recall my accident in Little Slide Canyon with the snow overhanging the creek. I am not going to repeat that. The second snow field has only a few feet of talus before a shoreside trail appears below the snowfield.

The third and largest snowfield is another story. The wide snowbank hangs out over the lake. To get around it, the first four or five steps are in the lake, the water at least waist deep with a precipitous drop off beyond. Those few steps might as well be a mile. I do not want to turn around and go back over what I just navigated. *It's just a snow field. I've done a lot worse.*

I see a deep trench in the snow field about ten feet above the drop off. The trench doesn't begin until about halfway across. Prior to that, it's steep solid snow. I walk higher up the edge of the snowfield to where the slope is less steep with the idea of angling down to the trench. I step onto the snow. Yes, it is soft enough for kick steps. It's one step at a time, firmly

planting the trekking pole, taking a baby step and kicking until my feet are not sliding. On this slope, if I slip, I plummet uncontrollably into the lake. It is slow going as I make my way diagonally down toward the trench on the least steep line the slope allows. Above the beginning of the trench, I sit down on the snow, making sure the trekking pole is firmly planted, and inch down until my feet are above the trench. I slide into the trench and feel more secure. Stepping over a rock, there are only a few more steps before I am back on dry land. I am too relieved to feel much of a sense of triumph.

The rest of the way I alternate following the shoreline and exploring the areas with clumps of whitebarks with lovely campsites tucked in the sandy areas between the pines. I revel in the views, from the shoreline flowers and a quaint island to the ridge extending from Ragged Peak to the peaks on the distant horizon of northern Yosemite.

After three-and-a half hours I return to my campsite. For a short period around 2:00 the clouds become more numerous with a couple of them turning into puffy white thunderheads. The weather from the west never develops beyond that, the clouds dissipating as they reach Ragged Peak.

Upper Young Lake is another wonder of the Sierra, like Bernice Lake. One can reach it by trail about a mile from a main route. It only takes a little effort to get here, but a sense of purpose to come here. Lots of people do come here as evidenced by the many campsites, unlike Bernice. Now my backpacking pursuit is to seek a destination and inhabit it for two, three, or even four nights. It's those spectacular places far enough off the beaten track to warrant a long stay.

Today continues to be a great day. I don't see a single person all day. It's another fabulous sunset with the trees and cliffs bathed in alpenglow. As I sit and write at the end of the day, the mosquitoes come out in force. When darkness falls, I'll go in the tent knowing I had the best day. Tomorrow can be thought about tomorrow.

Friday, July 12—Upper Young Lake

I am up at 5:30 and take my tripod to the rock formation below the campsite. I climb up to gain an unobstructed view north, west, and east. At 6:00, the sunlight begins on the far peaks to the north, including one with side-by-side summits so I surmise it's Twin Peak above Virginia Canyon. I am not adept at picking out all the peaks I see. I surmise the larger (as opposed to highest) peak I make out is Whorl Mountain, but that's only a guess.

After the initial grandeur of the day beginning on northern Yosemite, Mount Conness, and Ragged Peak, I climb down and seek other locations for photographing Middle and Lower Young Lakes, the lovely whitebarks, and many fascinating rock formations. Since I am alone, I am free to wander anywhere the whims of inspiration send me. Mornings do not get better than this. I revel in uninhibited, unbounded delight.

After sunrise photos, I make breakfast and enjoy my morning coffee while writing. Afterwards, I decide to explore in the direction of the peaks to the east and north, heading towards the dominating presence of Mount Conness. I walk through scattered whitebarks and various size rocks over a sand landscape. I spy an obvious high point cliff ahead and head towards it. As I get nearer, it becomes clear that this is the east end of the cliffs that hang over the forest and creek below, thus the farthest and highest point of the plateau of Upper Young Lake.

From the top is a breathtaking view that covers many miles of the Yosemite high country, from White Mountain, Mount Conness, Shepherd Crest, Twin Peaks over to what I guess is Tower Peak and extending west over all the peaks, domes, and ridges to nearby Ragged Peak. It is a monumental array of all northern Yosemite extending across the horizon. I notice the singular pyramid that forms the summit of Mount Conness, a detail about Conness I've never noticed before in forty-six years of gazing at this mountain from various angles and distances. I sit down and take in the view, unaware of time. Photos can wait; first appreciate this specific time in this specific place. I won't experience it again. I'll memorialize it with a photo for my private memories since the light is far from ideal.

There is something larger at work here in this time in this place. Absorb it into one's being to provide solace from the myriad annoyances of surviving in the 21st century human world. And it is a human world. Now all of planet Earth is ruled by human dictates except for those laws of physics that control life in the universe, laws that humanity has only partly deciphered.

After an indeterminate time, I climb down, walking a couple of hundred yards until I reach the base of White Mountain. At that point, it's either climb up or turn right to Upper Young Lake lying far below. I turn right, zig-zagging my way down to the northeast end of the lake where I walked yesterday. Once more, I appreciate the small island and flowers before meandering back to my campsite.

Now there are more clouds. A mass to the southwest is mildly ominous, but next to that is a patch of blue sky and puffer clouds. Currently, this doesn't look like it's going to be anything threatening. Since I am still in solitude, I enjoy another skinny dip.

Soon afterward, there is the sound of thunder in the ominous cloud mass that hangs over Dog Lake and Tuolumne Meadows. It's difficult to come to a credible judgement of what's going to happen with that cloud mass. To the west and north is blue sky with puffy white clouds. It's only to the southwest there's the threat of a thunderstorm. It's fascinating to watch it unfurl. If the clouds to the west were not benign I'd expect a thunderstorm. The west wind picks up, doing one of its storm precursor gusts. Maybe it won't remain so benign? I'm ready to go to the tent if necessary.

I am still in solitude. My traveling solo is an anomaly. Everyone I've seen or met on this trip is either a couple, family, or a small group. In my twenty-seven years of solo Sierra trips, I usually only meet a couple of other solo hikers every trip, most of whom I commiserate with. There's an unarticulated shared understanding among those who choose to go solo, an unspoken sense of brotherhood or sisterhood. Each of us connects to wilderness in one's own unique way with a larger common affinity.

Solo, one needs to mull over all the inner thoughts conjured with no one else to distract attention or offer a contrary point of view. Whatever one hears

and feels inside comes out, no longer suppressed by others. Each and every decision is made by one's self and only one's self. If the sky is going to turn and the weather may become rainy, one deals with it. No one else will offer a more pessimistic or optimistic response. If one should continue or stop, there is only one person to suffer the consequences, good or bad. Some people are not as comfortable in the wilderness alone. People like to have someone else to complain to, commiserate with. The climb may be hard, but it is shared misery and misery loves company.

At around 2:30, I see the first people since yesterday morning. The couple look like thirty-something year olds. She's not carrying a full pack, only a day pack. I fantasize a scenario that it's her first trip and he's carrying everything else. My mind creates a short story about a new romantic relationship attempting to establish itself on a backpacking trip. They head off in the direction of the campsites on the west end.

The wind is now doing more precursor gusts and there are ominous clouds to the southwest heading this way. The rain begins at around 3:00 and ends a little before 4:00. Outside the tent, I see one ominous cloud left. I'm betting it will break up before it gets here. It does.

There is a noisy group camped at Middle Young Lake. I can hear them even from up here when I venture forth to the overlooks. When one hears a human voice in the wilderness, it seems out of place. It does not belong. It is a shrill interference of wild silence. The bird's song belongs here, an integral aspect of wilderness. Humans do not belong here. Human voices come from somewhere outside, imposing cacophony on the wild.

At 6:00, the clouds obscure the sun, but as the sun descends, sunlight peeks under the bank of clouds to the west to shine through. The whitebarks glow by the shore of the lake. The peaks and ridges above are bathed in alpenglow.

When I make my way back to my campsite along the ridge, I still hear the group at Middle Young Lake. I feel fortunate not to be camped there. Here at my campsite, away from the ridge, I sit and jot notes until dark. The only thing I hear is the tinkle of the creek and the breeze rustling in the trees,.

Saturday July 13—Upper Young Lake

I awake to a strange morning weatherwise. It's cloudy, unusual for a High Sierra summer morning. When I climb the rock formation below my campsite at dawn, the peaks, ridges, and domes to the west and north go in and out of the light of the rising sun. I try to be patient and wait for when the light peeks through to strike the exhilarating panorama.

At 8:00 it's still cloudy. Even if there are clouds at sunrise to the east, they usually dissipate by this time. I'll see if this means more thunderstorms this afternoon. This is my third morning at Upper Young Lake and my last layover day until August.

Therefore, this is a day to do "nothing." I will not go anywhere much beyond this area of the lake until 6:30 or 7:00. I will try to get to know those few hundred feet very well. Why are so many rocks about a foot high by two feet square while a few feet away is a sloped formation of another one foot high stones while in between are similar rocks imbedded firmly in the ground and set in a natural ellipse as if by design instead of receding glacial happenstance.

Mid-morning, a group of dayhikers arrive and head towards the shoreline on the other side of the outlet creek far down the lake. Is this the group camped at Middle Young Lake?

My mind wonders and wanders over my future. I want my Sierra serenity to continue, but it only occurs like this on backpacking trips, not car camping. There are places one can go to on a dayhike, but it is not quite the same. Finding solitary serenity in those instances is brief and one is almost always aware of the brevity. Out here, the experience is continuous for hours, not just for a single moment; it lasts for an entire day of moments. I am intensely aware of each moment today.

I suppose if one responds to the sense of silence in the High Sierra wilderness one feels one they should whisper. One senses something beyond the here-and-now. There is a profound sense of the eternal in the Sierra

wilderness. The eternal is not something to whisper. It is something to privately shout about, even scream, not in frustration or anger but exaltation while remaining outwardly immersed in personal silence. When we walk in an old growth forest, wander the High Sierra, we touch the eternal, that sense of the infinite. That sense of the immensity of the universe is expressed within the confines of an old growth forest or a wide open High Country basin. The grandeur of the trees that stretch to the sky, the alpenglow lingering, speak of life, all life, each and every life from the tiny insects to the moss on the trunks to the branches seeming to extend to infinity to the peaks reaching to touch the sky.

Throughout the morning, the clouds continue gathering. At about 1:00 the storm breaks. For the next twenty minutes all hell breaks loose. Rain, hail, and wind are so strong I worry the extreme gusts will snap the bending, shaking tent poles. For about five minutes, the hail whacks the rainfly so hard I feel moisture on my legs at the center of the tent. I sit up hoping the wind won't blow the tent down with me inside. Despite the extreme intensity of the battering, the tent holds. The hail stops. Gusts weaken. Hurricane-like gale decreases to rain and wind. I just need to wait it out. From about 1:20 until around 2:00 the rain continues. I can see a glare of sunlight at the top of the tent yet the plops of rain persist. When the plops become drips and ultimately dissipate a little later, I go out with the camera trying to chase the storm's light to the northeast.

I seem to be the only person here. The day hikers disappeared when the storm arrived. I see no sign of the backpackers who arrived yesterday. Right now, I am reveling in solitude at this spectacularly beautiful place. At these moments, the wilderness speaks in the language of wisdom. It is not a written language. It is a language comprehended beyond the limitations of human language. It is the sermonizing of each and every rock, tree, bush, tuft of grass, lapping of water, piping of birds all intuited within an individual's being. It is communication to the depths of what human language terms our soul.

About 4:00, a young friendly couple appear making their way towards the west end of the lake. We briefly converse and I answer their inquiries about campsites with a description of the site behind the rock wall with the magnificent view west along with adding there are other campsites with nearby spectacular views situated closer to the lake; it depends on one's sensibilities as to which is best. They are obviously interested in a place that offers a sense of solitude. They head off and I catch glimpses of them exploring the west end before never encountering them again.

I can't get over how absolutely still this place can be. Right now the wind is rustling in the pines and I am wondering if that approaching black cloud is going to make dinner late; instead it dissipates.

After dinner, I climb the rock formation for the view of the two lower Young Lakes, Ragged Peak, and the expanse of northern Yosemite. Now that I am so well acquainted with this place, I climb down and move around to the movement of the light on the rocks and whitebarks. This is my last night here so I revel in the marvelous transition as the alpenglow finally fades until the last beam of golden light glows on a summit. It has been four nights to forever retain in my memory. I am reluctant to conclude this day, but as darkness descends on Upper Young Lake, I realize time does not stop.

Sunday July 14—Upper Young Lake to Lower Young Lake

I awake at dawn. I climb the rock formation to once more witness the beginning of the day. At 6:00, it is a spectacular sunrise, the light shining on the peaks of Northern Yosemite with wispy clouds hovering above. After sunrise, more clouds materialize to the west especially around Ragged Peak. The clouds multiply so by 7:30 it's totally cloudy with storm precursor wind gusts. The rain begins at 7:50. Rain at around 8:00 in the morning in the summer in the Sierra? While I've had rain begin in the night or at 4:00 in the morning on one occasion, I've never had it rain at this time except when it's been raining all night.

After the cloudburst, when I emerge from the tent after about twenty minutes, the wind has shifted to the north. With all those days of sun and heat, the weather is reacting unpredictably. I guess I'll just continue to wait and see. I leave the tent up and won't pack for at least another hour. Right now, it looks like it can go either way.

I make breakfast and sit with morning coffee when the rain begins again. I drink the first cup while sitting in the tent, the mug situated under the vestibule. It's windy, but no hail. The rain ends about 9:00. The wind shifts back to the southwest. I go back out and sit, write, and drink my second cup of coffee. When the coffee is finished, it starts raining again. Am I getting the same set of clouds and rain at each shift in the wind? That rain finally ends about 10:30. The wind essentially halts.

I enjoy my final morning at Upper Young Lake by attempting reflection photos of Ragged Peak and its extending ridge with the storm clouds. It's comforting to live with only concern for the basics—weather and food. Out here, one doesn't need to be concerned about anything else. The food will run out tomorrow so I will have to return to civilization in order to eat. But for the next twenty-four hours, I will only worry about the basics, the necessities. This is the final morning of true solitude. The couple met yesterday is camped somewhere, but I do not hear or see them. In my perception, I am in solitude.

Reluctantly, I take down the tent and stuff my pack with the tent, sleeping bag, clothes, and Bearikade, which now contains not only the remaining food, fuel canisters, and Luci lights, but also the mug, plastic utensils, and garbage. I say farewell to Upper Young Lake and head down to Lower Young Lake to join the crowd.

I try the use trail visible from above near my campsite since I've observed others use it. At the top of the waterfall, I hit a dead end of downed trees covering any path. There may be a way to bushwhack through, but I find it easier to turn around and descend by the trail with the ducks used on the way up. Since I am going down, I can see the way to go so ignore the ducks. There is only the one use trail going in the right direction.

From the bottom of the falls, the trail is unmistakable as it winds past Middle Young Lake down to the outlet creek of the lower lake. At that point, the path divides in various directions: one towards the east shore I used on Tuesday, one to an unoccupied campsite, and three different versions to crossings of the outlet creek. I take one of the crossings. The campsite by the outlet creek I was hoping for is occupied once again. The next campsite seems too near to the outlet creek site and isn't particularly nice. The next campsite I check out is as good as I'll will find. It's well away from the lakeside trail so it seems to have at least a semblance of solitude.

After lunch and setting up the tent, I walk the lakeside trail towards the west end of the lake. I pass several campsites, most of them close together and so within sight of each other. At this time, only one of them is occupied. There's a lovely sand beach at the west end, but no nearby campsite. Ink-black clouds sit around Mount Conness and the ridge above Upper Young Lake. As I am walking back, I spy a rainbow. Unfortunately, the entire rainbow is not visible from anywhere along the shoreline, but I attempt a photo of what one is able to see.

This is nowhere near as spectacular as Upper Young Lake. There are no views of northern Yosemite. One sees Mount Conness and the ridge extending from Ragged Peak to White Mountain. Lower Young Lake is the beginning of the High Country, the first lake where one experiences the magnificent majesty of the High Sierra.

Despite all the other people, it is quiet here at the moment. People are around, but they are in their own space appreciating Young Lake. Since Young Lakes is essentially an out and back trip, people arrive with a sense of finality. They aren't moving on to the next place down the trail the following day. People are not merely passing through on the way to the next location. The trail ends here. Young Lakes is the goal. That seems to create a different sensibility among the people camped here.

A single young woman strides by confidently, but does not cross the outlet creek. She takes the campsite next to me. About an hour later while I am off taking photos, she picks up her tent and carries it about fifty yards further from the lake to a flat bare space with a view of Mount Conness.

It's a lovely sunset, even if I wish I was still at Upper Young Lake with its jaw-dropping views and unique sun angle that brings the whitebarks to life. Here, the alpenglow lasts a long time on the ridge extending from Ragged Peak. It's interesting seeing the open area above the east shore beach from this perspective of gazing across the lake in contrast to my first night when I was admiring it close up. The alpenglow slowly fades to gray as darkness descends.

It has been a good trip because I made sure it was. I listened to my body and while I didn't like what it was telling me, I heard what it said and responded appropriately. This has been everything I could wish for. I accomplished almost nothing except being in solitude in wilderness. That is enough of an accomplishment. It is, in the end, the only accomplishment that matters. I go in the tent and sleep a satisfied sleep.

Monday, July 15—Lower Young Lake to Tuolumne Meadows

I awake at dawn. No one else is up and about. There are lovely reflections on the water for photos. Right now the silence is all encompassing. The birds are flitting above from tree to tree.

I'm having a hard time realizing it's the final morning. I am happy with the last six days. I did what I set out to do, which is be in timberline country solitude. Solitude is crucial. The wilderness speaks to individuals, not groups. Each person discovers their authentic self in wilderness. Those who are in tune with the rhythm of the wild discover both the wisdom of the wild and the inner depths of the authentic self.

While great art can inspire and sometimes touch that inner core, in the wild, one inhabits the inner core. It is not a human wildness. It is life's wildness in all its clarity and wisdom. It is life at its most elemental.

The wild calls forth something deep inside that harkens back to our far distant ancestors, those *Homo sapiens* who existed for millennia without the written word, without civilization. Those first humans were in the process of creating language that somehow approximated those deep inner feelings.

Those humans lived *in* existence without concocting grand outside forces who controlled what occurred. These are the humans who were the first among us, merely trying to survive, humans who were still animals. The wild to them was both a threat and a wonder.

In these times, the wild is only a wonder. While the wild's threats are immense and we experience the consequences, humanity goes on much as before. A flood, a tornado, a hurricane, cause massive destruction, but most humans survive, adapt, and continue. Humans can adapt to almost anything and everything at this point.

It is only when we experience wild nature we rediscover the depths of wonder. There is geologic time—real time, existence time—and there is human time, which is short lived, now transforming with each generation. Technology has created humans who accomplish things many of us remain perplexed and baffled by. For me, a smart phone serves as a phone. For my son, it is a window to the world.

It is time to move on, return to contemporary human civilization where I will do my best to muddle through. I pack up my belongings and depart Young Lakes forever.

The hike down to Tuolumne Meadows proceeds slower than hoped. Being mostly downhill, I expected to be faster, but it still ends up a five hour hike, not the three hours of ten or twenty years ago. I meet no one on the trail, passing the Dog Lake Trail junction. Soon, I begin the plunge through the forest. Dingley Creek remains barely a trickle. I enjoy the first glimpse of the Cathedral Range. At the open area before the descent's conclusion, the Cathedral Range and other peaks above Tuolumne Meadows create a stirring panorama. I stop for a snack. The sky is clouding over, threatening rain, so I eat quickly.

After the junction with the Glen Aulin Trail, I begin meeting many hikers. Drizzle commences so I stop to put on a raincoat. Some of the hikers heading out look disconsolate with the rain while others seem to be enjoying their trip despite the weather. I wade Delaney Creek and know I am on my last mile.

By the gate at the trailhead, a large group is gathered by their van in their raincoats trying to be optimistic about what lies ahead. I go to my car and put the SPOT on the hood of the neighboring car to send an “At the car” message. I put the pack in the back in the back of the station wagon and the camera, leftover snack food, and water bottle on the front seat. Once the SPOT message sends, I start the car and turn on the windshield wipers while heading to intersect the Tioga Road.

As I proceed west, the rain stops. At Tenaya Lake, the parking lot at the picnic area is full. I drive on and end up stopping at the Yosemite Creek picnic area. One family is there at the picnic table nearest their car. I head down to another table by the creek and wash off the trail dust. As cleansed as can be, I make the long drive on the familiar road back home.