





## **August 6, Sentinel Campground, Kings Canyon National Park**

I arrive at Road's End in Kings Canyon at 3:00. The day use parking is full according to the barrier and sign so I proceed to the overnight backpacking parking. All parking spaces are taken along with non-designated spaces where cars squeezed in. A car vacates a space on the pullout along the road and I pull in and walk back along the road to the wilderness permit kiosk building. The ranger is in the middle of explaining to a young man what trailheads remain available. The ranger pauses, looks at me, and I wordlessly hand him my permit confirmation letter.

“Oh, this is for tomorrow.” says the ranger. “Let me finish this first.”

I reply there is no hurry. A few minutes later, the young man has his permit and rented bear cannister. In the meantime, a couple and another young man arrive. The ranger beckons all of us so “I only have to do this once.”

The ranger recites the leave-no-trace principles and other backcountry rules and regulations. The young man leaves with his permit and cannister. The ranger quickly fills in my permit, asking what campsite for each night, but interjecting I am not required to adhere to the locations on the permit. He glances at the other people in line as if to see if they are paying attention so he doesn't have to reiterate this particular detail. He wishes me a good trip and sends me on my way.

With permit in hand, I return to my car and drive the road past the closed Moraine Campground to Sentinel Campground. The placard at campsite 46 has my name. I park and unload the car, placing my food for dinner and breakfast, pack, and full Bearikade cannister in the bear box and then putting up the tent. Afterwards, I walk to the familiar pay phone next to the Visitor Center and phone home to my wife, Barbara.

Back at the campsite, I write and snack while looking at the map and contemplating this trip. This is my most difficult trip since Kaweah Basin in 2016. That was a trip that became too problematic to ever formally write up except for “Picket Creek and Kaweah Basins: An Appreciation.” That trip's trials and tribulations told me my possibilities were forever forward more limited. It was the trip that told me I was now old.

Since then, I developed cancer, had one kidney removed, and was diagnosed with atrial fibrillation. My physical reality forever changed. Now, every trip has the potential to be my final backpacking trip; doctors may command no more backpacking trips, especially solo trips. Car camping would become my limit. One can go to many, many beautiful places car camping; Barbara and I have visited lots of them and will visit many more. But car camping is not the same as wilderness backpacking.

Backpacking offers a sublime sense of solitude when one can not see or hear a single person from one's campsite; when the only sounds are wind in the trees, water running, coyotes howling, insects buzzing, birds singing, and one's own breathing. In wilderness, all the baggage of society dissolves. There are no personas, no pretenses. One can be one's true self. A person can reconnect to the primal instincts of being a living, conscious being while also dwelling in a state of spiritual awakening. This trip is about renewing those connections one more time in a singular place I have never experienced.

Two weeks ago I returned from a week-long magnificent excursion through Yosemite's Clark Range over Fernandez Pass, Red Peak Pass, and Post Peak Pass. That trip renewed the connections and restored my confidence in undertaking backcountry travel, even if the route was not as difficult as this trip. Also, though it's an inner emotional feeling, not a rational deduction, I'm feeling lucky about this trip.

The first stroke of luck is that it is a low snow year. While 2017 would have meant encountering major snow on passes, this year I don't expect any snow difficulties. The second bit of luck was learning of the closure of Moraine Campground, my expected campsite for the night before the trip. I happened to be browsing High Sierra Topix when Maverick posted the closure information. Immediately, I went to Sentinel Campground on the SEKI website, clicked the reservation button for Recreation.gov, put in August 6, and clicked "Book Now." I claimed the one campsite available, number 46. I had no idea how good a campsite it might be. It was a place to sleep for the night. With the Moraine closure I figured the walk-in campsites at the other Cedar Grove campground, Sheep Creek, would be taken, especially by late afternoon when I would be arriving. With the Yosemite Valley closure due to the Ferguson Fire, I assumed all Grant Grove campsites

would be full. Camping on Big Meadows Road would entail driving too far to pick up the permit the day before and so negate an early start tomorrow morning. It turns out campsite 46 is actually quite nice. All the Sentinel campsites appear to be far better than tolerable.

I recall when I was camped for one night at Sentinel in 1998 a few calendar days later in August. Like today, the campground was mainly filled with families with lots of kids enjoying themselves and parents actually doing things with their children. I think of the little girl and her mom in the campsite across from me and how their joyful interaction typified how families can experience each other without the distractions of contemporary civilization. I also camped here in 1999, but arrived after dark. That was the one time I climbed up Bubb's Creek out of the canyon (except day hikes). That was a magnificent trip. I hope it's another good portent for this trip.

I take a post-dinner walk, following the light on the canyon. That leads me to the Kings River since the light still shines on the water, the trees by the river, and the cliffs of the canyon. Following the river, I end up at the bridge to the Cedar Grove lodge/restaurant/store. The gossamer light on the trees is especially gorgeous.

Returning to my campsite, I sit and jot notes. The canyon causes darkness to come quickly, which encourages getting to sleep. Before getting in the tent, I tell myself to try to enjoy every step of the journey. No, I realize won't *actually* enjoy every step; no doubt, some will be agonizing. But if I simply implant the thought to enjoy every step and so approach my journey from that perspective, then maybe I can make this journey more than worth whatever effort it requires.

## **August 7, Road's End to Junction Meadow**

I am up at 5:45 and on the trail at 7:45. I would have been earlier except there was an issue with the SPOT-X messages not getting to Barbara. When she sent the SPOT a text message at 6:30 while I was packing the car, I knew she was awake so I drove to the Visitor Center and phoned home. She had received my text reply and last Check-in/OK message so the SPOT seems to be working.

I drive to Road's End and find a parking space in front of the Copper Creek Trail sign. After double-checking the car, I walk past the permit kiosk and begin the two mile stroll to where the trail splits by the bridge over the Kings River. This relatively level stretch of trail gets me in hiking rhythm while taking in the views of the canyon. Just before the bridge, one sign points left to Paradise Valley, the other right to the bridge and Bubb's Creek. Crossing the bridge, I pause to view the river and then proceed over the crossings of Bubb's Creek before the trail begins the climb out of the canyon.

On the switchbacks up, I begin meeting Rae Lakes Loop hikers coming down. They spent the night before at Charlotte Creek. I pause for a snack at the Sphinx junction where several people pass by on their way down.

Every hiker I meet today is doing the Rae Lakes Loop. There seems to be a cachet to named trails. Give it a name and they'll follow it anywhere. Even the mainly off-trail Sierra High Route has many more hikers in the past few years due to being named and GPS tracking information posted on the internet. I've met people daily when hiking portions of the High Route; on other, less difficult off-trail hikes, I will not see a single person for days at a time. The Rae Lakes Loop seems to be for people who want a named route on established trails, but who don't have sufficient free time to do the John Muir Trail and especially the Pacific Crest Trail.

While the Rae Lakes Loop is a lovely trip, there are sections of it, such as parts along the Kings River, Woods Creek, and Bubb's Creek that are not particularly striking, especially compared to other portions of the Sierra high country. Indeed, this portion along Bubb's Creek strikes me as being similar to the hike along Woods Creek in terms of the ecological zones ascended. Despite the canyon being interesting, much of this walk is somewhat tedious, especially when the forest inhibits views of the creek and the canyon. The campsites at Charlotte Creek are nice places, but it's primarily the fact they are 7.5 miles from Road's End at the junction of Bubb's and Charlotte Creek that cause it to be such a popular camping location.

About a mile beyond Charlotte Creek, I meet a man and woman resting by the trail. They seem pleased when I tell them the Charlotte Creek campsites are about a mile down the trail and no one is currently camped there. Farther on, I come to the campsites at the lower end of

Junction Meadow. A group stopped at the first site finishes their snacks and soon zooms by me on their way to Charlotte Lake for their long first day on the Rae Lakes Loop. Walking through the forest, I am tired and eager to see the signs at the East Lake junction so I can look for a campsite. The trail has been rerouted away from the old route through the forest to over the grassy meadow. I come to the junction. The path of the old trail through the trees by the meadow is obvious. The sign says 12 miles to Road's End. The website says 10.3, maybe indicating the distance to the campsites at lower Junction Meadow. The sign at the Sphinx Junction says 4.1 to Road's End and 8.4 to Junction Meadow, for 12.5 miles. Since I am tired, I'll go with the 12.5.

Turning right, I walk over the meadow, cross a dry creek bed, and come to the forest before the ford of Bubb's Creek. A man is camped at the site nearest the crossing. I search and choose one of the farther tent areas in trees near the trail. There is a fire ring a few feet away. When I go down to get water and scout the crossing, the man says a couple crossed a few minutes ago, the woman taking off her clothes and screaming her way across the cold, rushing water as they made it safely across. The creek current looks dicey but doable. I've done worse.

A deer wanders through the forest, eating the foliage near the man's campsite. The doe is unafraid of his nearby presence. It's a moment of wilderness magic as the deer nonchalantly munches on the plants. Shortly after 5:00, a party of four arrives and take the tent areas next to me since there are no better choices. They are friendly and courteous. One begins to build a fire ring. I point out the existing fire ring. He stops building the new one and instead gathers wood he places by the existing one.

I walk back to the meadow area by the junction to gaze on the day's last light on the walls of the canyon. When the exquisite light disappears, I return to my campsite. My neighbors have started a fire. They mention they will be getting up at 5:00. I sit and write, making the best of what might be the worst backcountry campsite I've experienced in over fifty years of wilderness travel: no view in a dense forest with neighbors a few feet away. Their courtesy and the roar of Bubb's Creek keep it tolerable. I'm thankful I made it this far on the first day. If I had stopped back at the

better campsites in Lower Junction Meadow there would be less time to appreciate the more spectacular places I'll be journeying through on the remainder of the trip.

Before I go in the tent for the night, I tell my neighbors by the fire that the creek is so loud it drowns out other noise so if they want to sit up talking, I won't be disturbed. I lie awake contemplating tomorrow before falling asleep to the sounds of Bubb's Creek.

## **August 8, Junction Meadow to Upper Ouzel Creek**

I am awakened at 5:00 by flashlights and muffled voices. By the time I get dressed and stuff my sleeping bag in its sack, my neighbors are gone. I take down the tent, eat breakfast, and enjoy a cup of coffee while jotting in my notebook. I don't see the man camped by the creek wade the crossing.

Today is D-day—Do day. I have been contemplating and dreading this day for months. There is the ford of Bubb's Creek, the 1,300 foot climb to East Lake, negotiating the log jam at the north end of East Lake to reach the lake's east shore, figuring out how to best undertake the 3,200 foot cross-country climb up Ouzel Creek to Brewer Pass, and Brewer Pass itself. Will there be a campsite part-way up to break up the climb from East Lake to Brewer Pass? It's time to stop worrying and anticipating. It's time to be doing.

I put the camera case inside the pack along with my hiking shoes while wearing my Reeboks and march down to the creek. Straight across I decide. Stepping into the water, the first few steps are easy. With another step, I am in the rushing current. The strong force of the water causes me to plant my feet carefully and firmly, taking baby steps while using the trekking pole to maintain balance. The water gets deeper. I feel my shorts getting wet. *Ignore getting wet and concentrate on each step.* At one step around a rock, I almost slip. *Don't panic!* Four more baby steps and I am out of the current. *Don't relax yet.* There are still a few more feet to go. Once on the other side, I feel triumphant relief. Up the trail, I find a rock to put sit on, get out the camera, and switch shoes.

The climb to East Lake zigs and zags with East Creek on the left. The creek is sometimes nearby and sometimes far away, barely audible. I remember crossing a bridge the last time climbing this in 2007 on my way to

Lake Reflection. The trail switchbacks toward the creek, rounds a curve, and the bridge appears. It is in need of repair, but spans the creek. On the other side, the switchback climb continues, much longer than I remember. A sign appears explaining stock policy at East Lake; a well-worn path heads off to the right to what I assume is a packer campsite.

I climb a little farther and see the water of the lake. The trail zig-zags down to the shore. The log jam is at the north end. The scattered logs do not look like a good way to cross, but the water is only a few inches deep. I switch shoes and begin wading across. There are deeper sections as well as shallow. The creek bottom is rock and sand so easy to walk. I meander across the shallow portions until I am on the other side.

Back in my hiking shoes, I pause to appreciate the beauty of East Lake. The last time I was here, a misty, drizzling rain gave it a claustrophobic atmosphere. Now, the lake sparkles in sunshine with wide open vistas. I follow a crude use trail that varies its path from the shoreline to several feet above the lake. Heading up to the right, I intersect Ouzel Creek about a hundred feet above the lake. This is a good place to stop for an early lunch and get my bearings for the long cross-country ascent to Brewer Pass.

At first, the climb up through the forest is routine. The distance to Ouzel Creek varies, but the rushing water is always within earshot. I come upon a use trail. Following the trail, I meander closer to Ouzel Creek. A couple of ducks mark the route in portions where the use trail fades out over rocks. *So far, so good.* The use trail comes to another rocky section. I see what appears to be the continuance of the path on the far side of the rocks. After a few steps, this path ends in dense foliage. The creek is just to my left. In retrospect, I realize I should have backtracked. Instead, to avoid the bushes, I head up to the right and directly below a cliff. After a short respite from bushwhacking, the cliff ends near the creek.

Bushwhacking along Ouzel Creek leads to a waterfall with no obvious way up and around it. I try one way up by the falls that is no good. Turning around, I spy a possible way to climb up and over if I can get up the ledge directly before me, but the ledge is too high. One small foothold is a couple of feet up. If I pull myself up with the living tree above the ledge, I might manage to get up on the ledge and from there up and around the falls.



Planting my right foot in the foothold and pulling on the tree, I swing my left leg up so my knee reaches the ledge, pull up with my arms, swing up my right leg, kneel, then stand on the ledge. There's a cliff up to the right where I can avoid the worst bushwhacking by hugging the cliff.

Up ahead, a large pine blocks any passage except for a narrow gap between the cliff and the tree. The gap is about the width of a pack. Beyond the gap, the way looks clear. Taking off my pack, I attempt to shove it through the gap. The wet Reeboks in the back mesh pocket cause it to be too wide. I take out the shoes and shove the pack through the gap, tossing the shoes through after it. I squeeze through.

On the other side, I pause to collect myself and ascertain there is no more bushwhacking. I reach down for my shoes to put them back in the mesh pocket. From the gap, a whooshing sound emanates. A backpack appears on the ground in front of me. A few seconds later, a man follows.

"I think there's a better route than this!" he remarks in a tone combining frustration and anger.

I agree. A brief conversation reveals he's going to climb Brewer tomorrow. We exchange various comments on the route we both chose (or mis-chose). He mentions the ducks along the route and the use trail. I suggest that maybe farther down, we should have headed up and to the right to follow the ridge higher above the creek. I take some solace in not being the only person dumb enough to come this way. The coincidence of encountering a person at this point surrounded by miles of trailless wilderness is astounding. I see no one else for the next five days.

The man heads up towards Mount Brewer while I head up in the direction of Brewer Pass. The notch of the pass is clearly visible. I remain on a ridge with Ouzel Creek far below on my left. There's a large talus rockfall ahead, the moraine on the topo map. Above that, the land is treeless. Since it's now past 2:00, I decide not to tackle the pass today and look for a campsite somewhere below the rockfall.

Of course, getting down to Ouzel Creek is not as simple as I thought. The ridge I am following requires backtracking a hundred yards to avoid descending small cliffs through bushes and trees. I eventually make my way down so I am on a low cliff directly above Ouzel Creek. I think I see a small lake shining

below to the left, but it disappears as I make my way to the last relatively level area below the rockfall. I find one spot that could serve as a campsite. I scout out the level area along the cliff and spy the water again. About a hundred yards away, an enchanting tiny lake sits below a wide, level ledge.

While it doesn't appear to be been previously used as a campsite, this is a wonderful location. There's a clear level area for the tent and convenient rock wall to sit and lean against. The tiny lake is directly below with the main branch of Ouzel Creek beyond. An unmapped branch of Ouzel Creek descends back behind to the left on its way down to the main creek.

After putting up the tent and washing the scrapes and cuts caused by bushwhacking, I pass the remainder of the afternoon and evening enjoying the views of the Brewer crest to the west and Mount Erickson to the east. After today's horrendous moments, it feels good to relax in such an ideal timberline location before tackling Brewer Pass tomorrow. The pass appears extremely steep, but from experience I assume that a decent way up usually becomes evident during the final approach.

I accomplished what I needed today, climbing to East Lake, up Ouzel Creek, and finding a great place to camp before the final climb to the pass. It's over the top tomorrow. Hopefully, I can get to Brewer Basin in four or five hours.

I revel in the here and now of this ideal timberline location. Alpenglow shines on Mount Erickson and the Brewer Crest, South Guard rising beyond the jagged ridge of the western horizon. As I drift into sleep, I feel optimistic. One more tough day and then I will be in Brewer Basin for two or three nights in timberline nirvana.

## **August 9, Ouzel Creek to Brewer Basin**

It's a beautiful cloudless morning. It is fun attempting reflection photos at the tiny lake of the first light on the Brewer ridge. Today it's up, up, and over, one step at a time. I know what is ahead. I can see it. I don't see exactly how I will climb the last portion; I'll learn when I get there. Then there's the view on the other side, the view I have anticipated, the view that tells me I've done the worst portion of the trip. From there, it is all downhill to Brewer Basin.



I am unsure whether to go up the rockfall gully or the ridges and slabs to the right. Since at this point they are the same direction, I head more towards the gully. The approach proves problematic with the vegetation and small cliffs. I opt for what I instinctively knew was the better choice of the ridge. Two parallel ridges go up and meet well below the final climb to the base of the pass. First, I try the nearer ridge rising directly above where I'm standing. With my short legs, climbing the cliff ledges is difficult and after ascending about a hundred feet I reach an impasse. I now see the other ridge does not require the same climbing and so descend to the bottom again to access that ridge. In the end, that ridge will be easier and faster. But it's frustrating to backtrack and lose so much time; that's the nature of cross-country travel.

Once on the other ridge, it becomes a delightful walk up. I approach it as if it was a trail, switch-backing up the series of low ledges with the lay of the land. Soon the other ridge merges from the left and I continue climbing. Below, from this angle and distance, East Lake appears as if a shining blue pond. Up ahead, I have a clear view of Brewer Pass. It is extremely steep, but now appears to be only a slog to the top. I stop for an early lunch at 10:40. I figure I'll be over the pass by 1:00 at the latest. After lunch, I put the food and my watch in the pack's accessible upper pocket. I don't like wearing the watch while hiking; always knowing the exact time distracts from fully appreciating the timeless wilderness.

Ahead is a talus field. The blocks of talus are relatively level so it is a matter of picking my way from one rock to the next. It requires concentration for each step and the two or three steps to follow. The pass draws nearer as the rockfall talus moraine merges from the left. It is slow going, but steady. The talus turns into a narrow dirt path, then more slabs as the sound of water trickles below; I like to think it is the origin of Ouzel Creek. Gray-white patches of snow appear among the rocks. I reach the final steep climb with the vertical jagged edges of the ridge looming directly above. How best to get to the narrow notch at the top?

I try going up on the right and then cut over to join the main way to the notch. Before I can safely go left, slick snow patches make this a no-go. I check the rocks, but they require technical climbing. I follow around the bottom before the final steep climb to where a large snowfield comes up the moraine slope. Using kick steps and the trekking pole, a short climb of

slick mushy snow leads to rocks. The steep slope ahead consists of scree and rocks. I diagonal up to the right over larger rocks and make it up to where only scree is above me; the rocks I surmised climbing from below turn out to be merely larger pieces of scree. Any step in the scree slides back down farther than where the step began; only planting my trekking pole prevents me from sliding farther. Climbing the scree is essentially impossible. This is worse than Harrison Pass, I tell myself, remembering that horrendous ascent. This seems like a narrower, even steeper version of Harrison without the class 2 rocks on either side to avoid the scree..

I am standing by a large, stable boulder blocking the way to the left. I begin squeezing around it. When I plant my right foot, the rocks give way and the left side of my face slams into the boulder. Blood trickles down into my mouth. I feel where the blood originates, wipe it, and apply pressure with my scarf. The bleeding stops.

As I round the rock, my trekking pole slips into a crack under the boulder. *Have I just lost my pole?* I finish rounding the rock and peer into the crack under the boulder. I make out the tip of the pole pointing up. While trying to maintain my precarious balance, I reach into the crack, get a hold of the tip, and pull it up and out. Turning back around, I assess a way to the top of the notch.

On the scrambling ascent, some of the rocks prove unstable and send a torrent of small rocks avalanching down with my feet threatening to follow. Watching the rocks avalanche down, I realize that if I slip and slide down with the rocks, the distance is now consequential. I adopt a method of reaching up and grabbing a stable rock and then planting a foot on the next rock up. *Stay calm and concentrate on the next step.* Most of the time, the rock I step on is stable, but not always. A couple of more small avalanches crash down as I hang on with my hands while replanting my feet.

Beside the cliff on the left side appears to be a series of stable rocks. The notch is now about fifty feet away. The climb up the stable rocks is extremely steep and I proceed on all fours, once again recalling the final climb of Harrison Pass. Moving like a four-legged spider I crawl until, a few feet from the crest, the slope becomes less steep. I stand erect for the final few steps. I'm too tired and relieved to feel any sense of triumph.



It's the anticipated exhilarating view. On the other side, the small lakes of Cinder Col shine in the afternoon light with the hazy Tablelands beyond. Now, it's a matter of negotiating the steep slope down. It does not appear to be scree. I find a place to put my pack, drink some water, and eat a bar and some apricots. For the first time since lunch, I check my watch. It says 4:15, confirming my estimation from the lower afternoon sun, it is far later than hoped for. Maybe I can make it to Big Brewer by 6:30 or 7:00 before it gets dark.

The way down requires caution and care. Small cliffs prevent a simple zig-zag descent. I have to lower myself down from a sitting position to negotiate a couple of the steep drops. On one of those, the slope sends me sliding down. I did in my heels and trekking pole to stop myself, but am ruffled by the sliding fall. My steps are getting shaky. I push on, reach a Cinder Col lakeshore, and fill a portion of the quart bottle after a long drink for my dry-throated thirst; I hadn't dared to pause for a drink on the way down.

I look for the best way to reach the end of the far small lake of Cinder Col and head down to Brewer Basin. The cliffs prevent simply walking. I decide to go on the left side of the near lake and then cross over to go up the cliffs on the right side of the far lake. When I reach the cliffs on the far lake, I spy the timberline wonderland of Brewer Basin with Brewer Creek and Big Brewer Lake shining below in the late-afternoon light. I pause to totally take in this magnificent view. A huge sense of relief rushes over me to be in sight of my goal. It is now past 6:00. Descending all the way to Big Brewer may be more than I have energy and daylight to accomplish.

I make my way down the cliffs and slabs to Brewer Creek. While easy enough, I move slowly, legs proceeding by will power auto-pilot. When I reach the wide pools of Brewer Creek it's past 7:00. At this rate, it will be past dark before I make it down another level to Big Brewer Lake and find a campsite on the far side. I head for the nearby barren unnamed lake looking for a flat area where I can put up the tent at least hundred feet from water. I think of cowboy camping, but I've learned to never trust the weather in the Sierra. On too many occasions, I've had rain after midnight. After today's trepidations, I'm not feeling lucky. Near the lake there's no place for the tent. I turn around and head back towards Brewer Creek. In between the lake and the pool, I find a clear level spot. This will do even if it is not a "campsite."

Behind clouds to the west, the sun is setting. Fortunately, at this moment, there is no alpenglow or even outstanding light on massive Mount Brewer rising directly above, tempting me to take photos instead of erecting the tent. For dinner, I cook instant mashed potatoes and freeze-dried peas, which requires heating only a cup of water. At this point, I don't have much of an appetite. I'm in that not-hungry state that comes from exhaustion. I manage a few bites and scoop what's left into the garbage bag.

I text Barbara on the SPOT X, my fingers stumbling in the near darkness to strike the correct characters. As the light totally fades, I gaze at the emerging stars and look for Perseids meteors. No shooting stars streak across the blackening sky. Collapsing into the tent, I lie in my sleeping bag and decide to pack up first thing in the morning, head down to Big Brewer Lake, find a campsite, and celebrate with breakfast. I am soon in deep sleep.

## **August 10, Brewer Basin to Big Brewer Lake**

I awake at dawn and pack. For sunrise photos, the rising sun is blocked by Mount Brewer and there are no outstanding reflections. The view to the west offers the best light. Hoisting my pack, I head over to the rim of this level of Brewer Basin overlooking Big Brewer Lake. Wandering Daisy on High Sierra Topix recommended the campsites by the outlet creek on the other side of the lake. From this vantage point, that looks best. As I find my way down to the lake, I try to figure out how best to get there.

The cliffs around Big Brewer make simple circumnavigation around the shoreline impossible. One must descend cliffs to the shoreline and then climb back up and around the next cliff. I suppress my impatience and decide to enjoy the walk, appreciating the scattered clumps of flowers. Descending the last cliff, I see several possibilities for campsites in the area around the outlet creek. There is one excellent campsite on the near side, with room for two or even three tents. I hop the creek, wander around, and discover more campsites, including one past a magnificent snag that offers privacy, a great view of Mount Brewer, and easy access to the cliffs that run above the west side of the lake. This will be perfect. I send a SPOT programmed message declaring "at the campsite" while enjoying a leisurely breakfast.



I can't quite believe how little energy I have. I spend the rest of the day within a hundred to two hundred yards of my campsite, following the outlet creek as it cascades down, gazing down on the lovely lake below, and wandering along the cliffs above Big Brewer with an exhilarating view to the west of Cloud Canyon, Roaring River valley, and beyond. I wash in the creek, using my scarf to scrub the scabby scrape on the left side of my face from slamming into the rock yesterday and numerous scrapes and small cuts on my legs caused by the bushwhack the day before yesterday. I maintain this unscientific belief that the cold, clear, pure water of High Sierra creeks and lakes is an excellent antiseptic.

As I sit gazing on Big Brewer Lake and the Brewer crest, I reflect on yesterday's ordeal. I will not hike another steep scree slope again. There are too many great places to go without encountering one. I no longer want to push my physical limits to the furthest point. In wilderness we learn our limitations and also discover exactly how far we can extend them and perhaps discover we can do more than we thought. That's the way it is for most of us. But for a few, they discover their outer limit and do not return. I know my limits and will plan accordingly. I have nothing to prove to anyone, especially myself. From here on, I will attain the reward without pushing limits.

Big Brewer Lake is a place worth getting to better know. I'll stay here another day. That way I will have a day with no packing up, no moving. This is my one time to be here, my first time and my last time.

I enjoy dinner, appreciating I'll have having another day here. The moving clouds cause the light to shift on Mount Brewer and it's neighboring peaks and ridges. It's a sublime evening and sunset. The glow of light on the Brewer Crest, the hill above the lake, and Brewer Creek is beatific transcendence.

In wilderness I escape the madness. In the civilized human world, we live amid the madness. Random human violence is everywhere and anywhere. Every single day we witness the madness from the various combat areas of the world to the combat in every city and town in the United States, even our schools and houses of worship. The wilderness can be dangerous and unpredictable, but it is never diabolical. One can lose one's life in the wilderness due to a tragic personal mistake or an unpredictable whim of nature, but those are extremely rare occurrences. I am in more danger while driving to and from the trailhead than when I am in the backcountry. The wilderness is the safer place.

In wilderness the coming of night, true darkness, comes when the only light is the natural light of stars and moon. There is a perception of real and true finality to each and every day. With the coming of true darkness is also the coming of sleep.

Tomorrow will be a day to enjoy, no moving, no packing up. It will be one day to appreciate the High Sierra in a unique, wondrous place. a place I probably will never experience again.

## **August 11, Big Brewer Lake**

Mount Brewer blocks the sun so the rays inch around either side, shining on the ridge above Cinder Col on one side and the Sphinx Crest on the other. Slowly the light creeps down the cliffs to the small ridge above Big Brewer and its grove of whitebarks. The disc of the sun begins creeping out from behind the mountain. Within a few minutes, the light makes its way down the ridge to shine on this campsite and all the west end of Big Brewer. The chill in the air gives way to warm sunshine.

Today is the do nothing day, no packing, no hiking, simply appreciate this place. So what is this place?

Big Brewer Lake sits in a bowl at the bottom of Brewer Basin. To the west, Brewer Creek plunges 3,500 feet down to Roaring River and Cloud Canyon. To the east, north, and south the peaks of the Brewer and Sphinx crests rise two to three thousand feet above. Those jagged summits and ridges are each distinct. Big Brewer is on a shelf with the rest of Brewer basin sitting on a separate shelf above. The roar of Brewer Creek as it descends down from the upper part of the basin is a constant background presence, magnifying the larger surrounding silence.

Sitting on these cliffs above the western shore, Big Brewer Lake feels isolated and distinct from its surrounding areas. That insolation is not as distinct when one stands at Cinder Col looking down on the entire basin. From that vantage point, Big Brewer Lake is the lower portion of the larger basin. Its separateness and distance from the larger upper section of the basin is not so obvious. It is not until one descends to Brewer Creek that one begins to comprehend the vastness within the basin.

Walking over this landscape requires attention to its details—small cliffs, bushes, rocks—that dictate where one walks to navigate between more distant places. There's a subtlety that demands one's attention with every step. The micro route finding can be frustrating or interesting, depending on one's perspective. I prefer interesting and focus on the size and shape of the rocks along with how slabs connect to create a longer distance of easy walking. The visual melding of the distinctive scattered pines and green shrubs with the austerity of the granite is aesthetically marvelous, but an annoyance when they prove a barrier to travel.

Brewer Basin's greater surroundings are not simply the named peaks of the Brewer group. Each ridge is distinct. There are many singular unnamed rock formations such as the one between Big Brewer Lake and the Sphinx Crest. There's the large granite hill separating Big Brewer and Mount Brewer, the crag above Cinder Col, the peak to the right of South Guard (Thunder Mountain?).

It feels much like Kaweah Basin in the sense it is bound so dramatically by its surrounding peaks. Unlike Kaweah Basin there is a sense of human presence, faint, but there. Even though I have seen no one for more than two days, there's a feeling of someone somewhere nearby; it would not be a shock to see the figure of a person on the horizon.

Today, I enjoy doing nothing except the necessary chores and appreciating this particular place. Those chores consist only of preparing meals and figuring out my route for tomorrow. I will climb Sphinx Pass and plan to camp at the southeast end of lake 10,546, the western lake of the pair of timberline lakes before the plunge down to lower Sphinx Basin, a campsite suggested by Shawn on High Sierra Topix. Now, I don't feel like wandering far, just a few strolls to listen, see, feel, and understand this seemingly timeless place. It is a day spent in Henry David Thoreau's words "as deliberately as nature,"

I spend the first part of the afternoon contemplating the weather as picturesque clouds evolve over the Brewer Crest. Rain begins, I go in the tent, the rain stops, get out of the tent, and then back in the tent when the rain recommences. Snacking food is in the vestibule. Later in the afternoon there are all the symptoms of a Sierra thunderstorm. The tent flaps in the turbulent, swirling winds. Thunder rumbles in the distance. On the layover days of two

trips this summer, I spent an afternoon going in and out of the tent due to rain. As at Red Devil Lake, the rain ends late afternoon.

Following the storm, there's a fresh glow to this magical place. Here, I am the richest person on earth for I experience unsurpassed beauty and wonder. The wealthiest billionaire does not experience anything approaching this magnificence even in the grandest of palatial estates. This place is for any and all of us, owned by all of us. All that is required is the exertion to reach it.

I exist within each moment unaware of the passage of time. Each and every moment is distinct as it hovers into the succeeding moment. Past, present, and future merge and flow. The day passes in it's own time.

The perspective from here is unlike anywhere. I have to remember to ignore expectations and permit the wonder; enjoy the day and appreciate each moment. I'm mired in writing cliches, encumbered with the limitations of language, human language. I need to discover a new language for what I see and feel. Writers are encouraged to stick to specifics to avoid banality. How does one endow the specifics of Brewer Basin with that infinite sense of wonder? One cannot "explain" the serenity of an evening in the Sierra, in the wilderness. Why must humans feel compelled to explain the unexplainable?

The outlet creek seems louder with the coming of darkness. The inlet on the other side of the lake seems to sound louder than the outlet. The water sings me to sleep.

## **August 12, Big Brewer Lake to Sphinx Lakes**

It is Sunday morning and I worship . . .

I sit in solitude in the High Sierra backcountry. Meanwhile, the Wilderness Act is under attack by the Congressman whose district includes Yosemite National Park. How many of our elected representatives have spent a day in solitude in wilderness? I expect it's a very small percentage. Most have no experience of the elemental spiritual connection that is awakened and nurtured. They may worship in the church of their choice, but they do not understand, let alone comprehend the meaning of wilderness. They worship an imagined being. In wilderness, one experiences the eternity of evolved life in all its myriad manifestations.



We especially need our connection to wilderness and nature when it is under assault from all those Philistines unable to comprehend why humanity requires nature in order to thrive. We become sages when we reconnect to our essence in wilderness. When we disconnect from nature we disconnect from our human essence. Once upon a time, we were all creatures of nature.

Some may wonder what I did for two days at Big Brewer Lake. I never traveled more than a quarter mile in any direction and became absorbed in a particular place at a particular time. I felt and observed the many whitebarks, snags, rocks, boulders, creek, small waterfalls; each of the magnificent surrounding peaks and ridges, each with its own singular identity even if unnamed by humans. How do names encompass the grandeur of the many peaks and ridges of the Brewer Crest? North Guard and South Guard are mere words to designate a particular location. Each rocky promontory's distinctive shape and singular appearance in the shifting light is beyond words.

This is not a place to leave others to visit and see through their photos. There are far too many of those places all over the world I will have to vicariously visit: the Swiss Alps, Patagonia, Himalayas. This is a place I could come to so not to come would be more than a missed opportunity.

Today I leave Brewer Basin and the solitude and serenity of Big Brewer Lake forever. There are lessons learned and confirmed when permitting a place to exert its spell. Now it is time to discover other lessons to learn.

I depart Big Brewer Lake at 8:15. I decide not to attempt what may be the most direct route and instead make my way up and around the cliffs on the east shore and diagonal up the slabs near Brewer Creek. I enjoy meandering up, down, and around the cliffs, bushes, and whitebarks. When I reach the next level in Brewer Basin where I camped two nights ago, a gully heads up diagonally in the direction of the unseen pass. I come across what appears to be a use trail. That leads to straight-on view of Sphinx Pass and a marvelous view of Brewer Basin below and the area around Cinder Col beyond. Coming up from the left is a wide gully that seems to begin just above Big Brewer Lake. I stay high to the right following a ledge that connects to a traverse across to the final climb to the pass. I follow the green in the granite to travel up towards apex of the pass. Steep zig-zagging leads up to the topmost ledge running along the top of the ridge of Sphinx Pass.

Enjoying a snack, I take in the view of Brewer Basin and the distant peaks of the Monarch Divide and Cirque Crest. I look down on Sphinx basin where the infamous immense talus jumble leads down to the first lake. Since the talus stretches across the entire descent, I head down the middle, which, from the brown discoloration of the rocks, seems to be the preferred route. At first, the talus is quite steep. However, most of the talus blocks are large and stable. It's a matter of going from one relatively level block of granite to the next block of granite, planning one's steps two or three blocks in advance. It is slow going, but safe as long as one pays attention. I use my hands for balance a few times as I make my way down the steepest section to the less steep portion above the first lake.

When I am past the talus with no need to focus on every step, I turn around to look back up the pass. Black and gray clouds are emerging from behind the Sphinx Crest. I pause to admire the lovely columbine emerging from the rocks and alpine grass before proceeding. The storm hits as I am making my way down from the upper lake to the larger lake below. A deluge of hail crashes on the granite, first pea size, then grape size. The hail comes down so fast and furious, it covers the ground, giving it an almost snow-like appearance, except it looks more like slush than snow. There is nowhere to seek cover in this wide open expanse. My best strategy is to keep moving and get lower down. One bolt of lightning is followed by an instantaneous thunder crack. From the angle of the flash out of the corner of my right eye, I assume the lightning bolt struck North Guard or Mount Brewer. After about twenty minutes of intense hail, it transitions to steady rain.

This area of the lake and the creek appear to be an ideal transition from alpine to timberline landscape. With the hail and rain, I am unable to pause and appreciate this singular beauty. I discern two lakes on the next lower level. As I make my way down, crossing and recrossing the outlet creek to avoid the bushes, I think of how I will put the tent up in the rain. I spy what looks like a campsite area on the north shore of the near lake. The best way to get there seems to be to circle the lake's western shore. Recrossing the creek, I make my way over slabs and around bushes to the shoreline. Rounding the end of the lake, I head for the trees above the water. A clear way close to the

lakeshore is not possible due to downed trees so I walk higher above the lake than intended. This provides a decent enough view down to the water on my right. I spy what may be a campsite, so stop to get a better look. A hundred yards or so away is a definite campsite, one that seems to be today's intended destination.

The rain stops, but the swirling wind is blowing hard, telling me more rain is coming. I need to get the tent up during this fortunate break in the storm. The breeze makes it difficult to spread out and stake down the corners to prevent the tent traveling to the next county. I manage to get the corners staked down and attach the poles. The rainfly keeps blowing off until I get opposite corners hooked in. I toss the sleeping bag, pad, and dry clothes inside the tent, and put anything wet in the vestibule.

A few minutes later, the rain recommences, first as a drizzle and then as a downpour. From the comfort of inside the tent, I spread out the sleeping bag, lie back, and listen to the pelting of rain. The downpour continues for fifteen minutes before slacking off to a steady rain for another half hour or so before becoming a trickle, then stopping. Emerging from the tent, there are patches of blue sky to the west. I take my wet clothes and hat and hang them from pine branches to catch the sun and wind.

With the rain concluded, I finally take in my surroundings. Yes, this actually is my intended campsite. The Sphinx Crest forms the southwest horizon with Sphinx Pass unseen behind a ridge. The outlet creek of the second lake passed on the way down cascades into this lake. I realize I made the correct decision to round the western shore to reach this campsite. I also realize how lucky I was to not have the storm hit until I was over the pass and past the talus. With the hail and rain, the talus would have been treacherous.

From this vantage point, one sees the ridge from Mount Farquhar to North Guard and Mount Brewer to the distinctive ridges of the Sphinx Crest. The evening light slowly proceeds up from the water, glowing on the trees, and, finally, the peaks. As darkness descends on Sphinx Basin, I am serenaded by the inlet creek across the lake. Otherwise, all is silent. It's a silence that surrounds, a silence as Van Morrison sings, "hear the silence." When a jet airliner passes high overhead, the spell is broken.

I fall asleep to the wind in the pines and distant roar of the inlet creek.

## **August 13, Sphinx Lakes to Moraine Campground**

The sunrise pattern is again dictated by the light around Mount Brewer, despite the different perspective. In the morning light under a cloudless sky, I am able to see the inlet creek and its surrounding rocks, bushes, and trees. This looks so different in the morning light under a cloudless sky. Sunlight sparkles on the slabs. The lake is calm except for the ripples caused by jumping fish. The inlet creek is a low roar across the lake. The Clark's nutcrackers are up and about, flitting from tree to tree.

The High Sierra is at its most magnificent in the one or two hours around sunrise and sunset. The period of time when the sun first shines on the landscape creates a sense of possibility; anything could happen. There is also a sense that whatever happens will not irrevocably alter the larger land the sun shines on. It is as if this is so magnificent there is no need or desire to alter it; simply appreciate this place as it is. This sunny morning, right here and now, is so near to perfection. From the nearby flowers to whitebark pines to placid water to distant peaks, the idiosyncracies give it timeless splendor, timeless grandeur.

I could stay here all day simply gazing on the scene before me. Why leave this place to re-enter civilization? Even those who live in relative isolation remain connected to the outer world. Is it even possible to self-subsist anywhere? Civilization has encroached everywhere in the United States and Europe. Even the most remote parts of Asia, Africa, South America, the Arctic and Antarctica are all touched in some way by human civilization.

The final morning is always the most difficult leaving. The lack of food and the demands of contemporary existence force me to pack up and begin the journey home. Having a home I want to return to makes the departure tolerable. Once I hit the Avalanches Pass Trail, it should be merely setting one foot in front of the other as I wind my way down to the bridge over the Kings River.

I feel fortunate to have had this morning where I was able to appreciate Sphinx lakes in the sunshine. As I drink the final cup of coffee, I wish I could be teleported to Roads End.



The hike down to the next lake involves negotiating talus to avoid the bushes. At one point, I cliff out. I backtrack fifty yards in order to get to the section coming down on the left that is the easiest way down to the lake. At the bottom, I discover a use trail along the shoreline that goes to the campsites at the north end.

The next stage down to the final lake requires zig-zagging around brush and negotiating a short talus jumble. This is where going down is such an advantage. I can see far enough ahead to avoid any bushes. There are times my seeing ahead proves incorrect due to misjudging the height of small cliffs, but I'm able to slightly backtrack, head sideways then continue down unimpeded.

My meandering route sometimes varies far from Sphinx Creek and other times alongside it. There are sections that follow a use trail and sections when I either lose the trail or it simply disappears in rocks. The biggest obstacle turns out to be downed trees in the lower forest portions. I proceed through the forest and come to a large downed tree or trees that must be gone around on one side or the other. Sometimes I choose correctly and other times not, forcing me to backtrack.

I know I must be approaching the Avalanche Pass Trail when the use trail becomes more prominent. One section goes through a small bog. I question mushing through, but the path is clear. I come upon a marvelous campsite by Sphinx Creek, so I know the Avalanches Pass Trail is nearby. Suddenly, my steps are on an obvious trail. Now I only need to follow it down to Roads End.

At the Sphinx Creek crossing, I stop for a late lunch. As I am eating, I glance back up the trail and see a cinnamon tinged black bear coming down the path towards me. I yell. The bear is unimpressed. I yell some more and wave my arms. He stops coming, but remains on the trail, staring at me with the typical bear quizzical expression that combines wariness and aggression. I pick up a couple of rocks to throw in his direction while yelling some more. The first rock gets his attention. The second rock confirms it. He disappears into the woods. His lack of normal fear leads me to finish my lunch nearer my pack.

I rock hop Sphinx Creek and head down the trail. In a couple of minutes I see the same bear in the middle of the path in front of me. I again yell and

wave my arms and he is once more unimpressed. I yell some more and walk towards him. When I am about twenty-five feet away, he slowly ambles into the woods to the right. When I pass him, he is maybe ten or fifteen feet off the trail staring at me with that same quizzical expression. I quickly walk down the trail about twenty yards and turn around to see what the bear is doing. He is nowhere in sight.

The first part of the Avalanche Trail is relatively level until it begins a pleasant descent. I'm making good time and figure I'll be at the bottom by 4:00. I round a bend and reach a long downhill on a series of stairs. This section is not built for short people. Sometimes the stair requires using my hands to help negotiate the step down. About halfway down, I meet two friendly young men hiking up, the first people I've seen since the man on the hike up Ouzel Creek. They are doing a several day loop to Cloud Canyon, Colby Pass, Mount Whitney, and then returning. I continue down the annoying stairs until they finally end.

Back on a normal trail, I again make good time until I come to another section of stairs. Now, I just want to get to the bridge over Bubb's Creek, stop for a snack, and do the final four miles to Roads End. The stairs conclude and I soon reach the bridge. Thunder is rolling behind me with black clouds above the rim of the canyon. I sit near the junction, eat a bar and some trail mix, and wonder about impending rain. A few minutes down the trail, the rain begins. It is light rain, but I put on my raincoat to protect the camera. On the way down, I only meet one couple heading up. The sprinkles stop. I feel a sense of relief when I come to the bridge over the Kings. There are only two more level miles.

Those last two miles to Roads End become a necessary annoyance. When hiking out, these two miles provide a chance to get into hiking rhythm. Hiking back in, they become two miles that one wishes would disappear. I try to appreciate the late afternoon light on the walls of Kings Canyon. More people than I have seen for the last five days pass by from either direction. Finally, I see cars and walk the final yards to the overnight parking area at the Copper Creek Trailhead. I load the car and switch to my other shoes from my dusty, damp hiking shoes. I'm tired, my knees ache, and the thought of having to drive all the way home is daunting.

On my way to Cedar Grove and the pay phones, I pass Moraine Campground. Is that a tent? The gate appears to be open. Have they reopened Moraine? When I phone Barbara at 5:15, she encourages me to stay at Moraine for the night. If I drive back tonight, I wouldn't get home until well after midnight. I decide to eat before going to Moraine and order a cheeseburger and the fruit cup at the diner/restaurant. The food is much improved from my last visit. Fresh fruit tastes especially good after six days of backpacking food. Following dinner, I buy beer and snacks at the small store. I drive to Moraine and find many campsites to choose from. I pick one nearer to the east end in order to walk to Canyon View in the morning for photos.

I set up the tent then drive to the picnic area by the bridge over the Kings River. Down a steep hill is a good spot along the river to take a soapless bath to wash off the layers of trail dust. The sunset light on the canyon is especially exquisite. After getting somewhat clean and changing clothes, I appreciate the day's last light on the walls of the canyon.

When I return to the campsite, I enjoy a snack and beer while writing by Luci light. I am still reveling in the transcendence of connecting to wilderness and my true self. I touched the essence of what it is to be alive and journeyed into what John Muir called "terrestrial immortality."

Tired, but content, I lie awake recalling the serenity and transcendence of Big Brewer Lake before sliding into deep, sublime sleep.

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