

BANQUET

The banquet was great fun--and I've had two calls today from people who thought the food was outstanding AND they liked the Two Buck Chuck, too. My white fish was the best dish I've ever had there (even better than salmon). All in all...great fun and wonderful people. I thought Andy Fried had a great program with music, etc.

Well-- I had tons of fun ...

Mary Mac



Andy Fried and Virgil Popescu



Mary (Baby Girl) Mac - hee hee

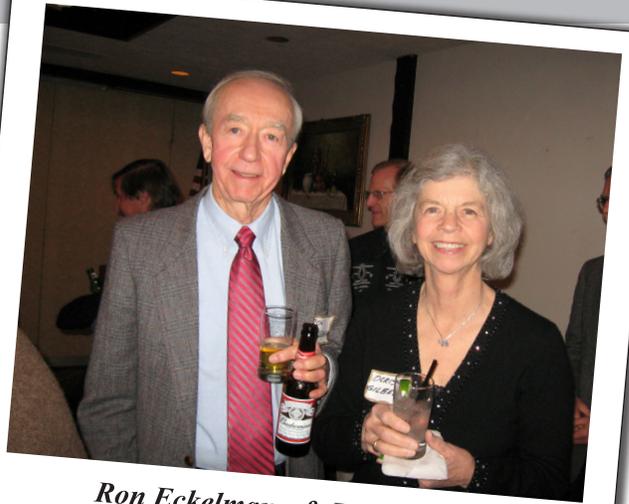


Kathy Rich, Tina Bowman & MaryJo Dungfelder

SPS 2009 Banquet Photos



Lance Dixon, Reiner Stenzel & Gary Holleman



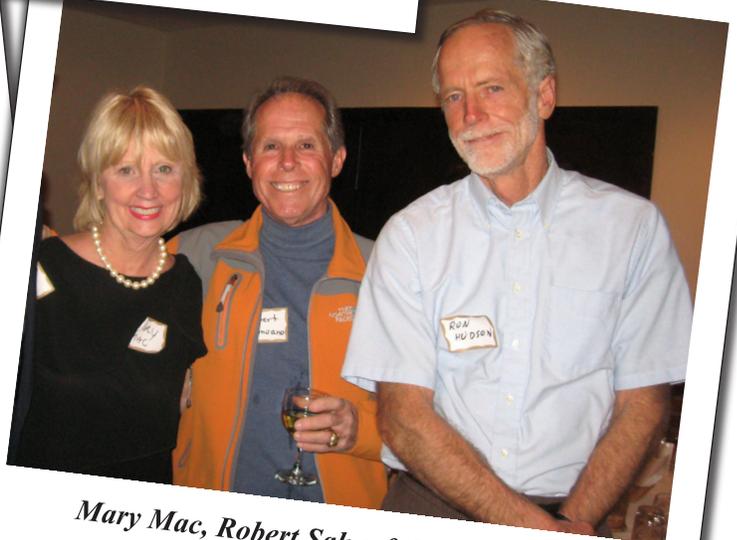
Ron Eckelmann & Doris Gilbert



Barbara Lilly

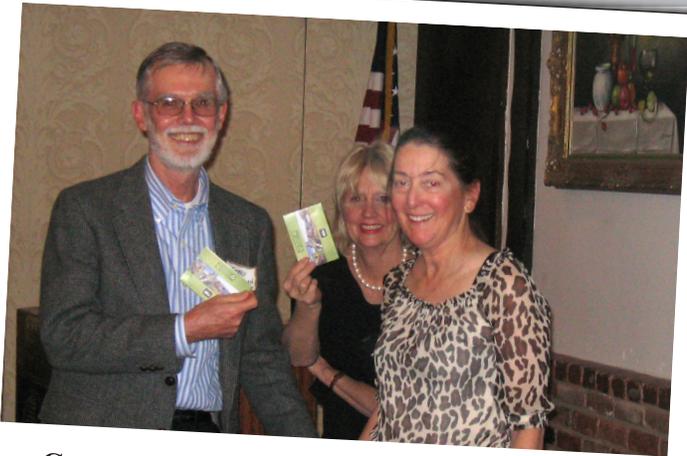


David Scholle & Scott Sullivan



Mary Mac, Robert Salvo & Ron Hudson

.... continued



Gerry Holleman, Mary Mac & Patty Kline



Barbara Sholle, Don & Connie Sparks



Rima & Steve Curry



Kathy Rich, Alex Smirnoff & Doug Owens
All 2009 Management Committee Members!



Gary Schenk, Dan Richter & Bruno Geiger

Enjoying the

HIGH LIFE

at Café Cirque

by Ron Campbell

Café Cirque had all the accoutrements of a fine dining establishment: tablecloth, brass candlesticks, chefs in toques and, of course, inflatable pink flamingos.

Seven back-country gourmets met at Café Cirque near Chicken Springs Lake on Saturday, July 26, to celebrate Decadent Wilderness Weekend VI.

Most were hardened veterans of past Gourmet Backpacks, enured to the harsh rigors of hauling fresh produce, wine and ice cream near treeline. You've got to be tough to eat well at altitude.

We had gathered in the dim pre-dawn hours (8 a.m.) at a primitive, remote trailhead (Horseshoe Meadow) to brave the brutally long (4 miles), dizzying (1,300-foot gain) death march to Chicken Springs Lake.

On arrival at camp, a few dove in the lake. Most chose to gather their strength (nap) for the coming labor.

As dinner approached, the cooks commandeered several granite countertops to prepare their fare.

I was first out the gate with Crimini mushrooms and roasted red peppers, marinated in olive oil, balsamic vinegar and garlic.

Lisa Buckley quickly topped that with marinated Shiitake mushrooms, gently sautéed and skewered on fresh rosemary sprigs.

Next up was a trio of salads – a Greek salad from co-leader Georgette Rieck, grapefruit with avocado from the very busy Lisa and an amazing combo of baby spring mix, pears, Gorgonzola and candied walnuts in a raspberry vinegrette from first-time Gourmet Backpacker Pamela Rowe.

While we were awaiting the main courses, we sipped a variety of red wines, including a nice Black Swan Cabernet contributed by co-leader Ed Cottone and a red of uncertain vintage and missing label from

Edd Ruskowitz.

Melissa Kane prepared the first entrée, vegan pasta with mushrooms in a vegan cream sauce that couldn't have been creamier if it moored. Georgette and I catered to our more carnivorous (fisherous?) companions. She sautéed Alaskan sockeye salmon and served it with dill. I meanwhile offered up shrimp pasta in a



Gourmet Backpack co-leaders (from left) Ron Campbell, Georgette Rieck and Ed Cottone drink a celebratory toast at Café Cirque. Photo | Edd Ruskowitz.

spicy arrabiatta sauce.

Right around this time, a ranger came into camp. After she checked our wilderness permit, we invited her to dinner. She accepted. We also offered her some wine. I need to point out for the record that she declined the wine, explaining that she was on duty for another hour. Apparently some obscure, onerous federal regulation bars government employees from drinking on the job. Oh, the humanity.

While most of us were stuffing our faces with dinner, Pamela prepared a delightful strawberry chocolate fondue. Ed Cottone, fresh from months of Army Reserve training, whipped up a most unmilitary dish, Bananas Foster. He cut several bananas lengthwise, sautéed them in butter, doused them with rum, flambéed the mix and topped it with ice cream. He'd kept the ice cream cold with several pounds of dry ice. You'll never find that in an MRE, Ed.

On Sunday morning I cooked Hangtown Fry, a scramble of eggs, oysters, bacon, bread crumbs and green onions. It's said to have been the last meal of many condemned men in Gold Rush-era Placerville.

Thus fortified, we set out for Cirque Peak, reaching the summit in a couple of hours via the west slope. Then it was back to camp where we munched leftovers (yes, there were some) and drank a little wine before hoist-



Lisa Buckley sautees marinated mushrooms. Most of the genuine granite countertop at Cafe Cirque is dedicated to liquid fare.

ing our (slightly lighter) backpacks and returning to the trailhead.

In the parking lot we met one of my former WTC students, Chuck Ward. Chuck and a couple of friends had just completed the 98-mile segment of the Pacific Crest Trail from Walker Pass, near Ridgecrest, to Horseshoe Meadow. After exchanging stories of our trips, Chuck, a confirmed ultralighter, let me pick up his backpack.

It weighed 9 lbs.

But of course Chuck had not enjoyed wine or fresh salad or salmon or pasta or ice cream or even inflatable flamingos on his trek.

Life is filled with hard choices. Mine just happen to include pasta, red wine and chocolate.

Chef la Cirque

MENU

APPETIZERS

Crimini mushrooms and roasted red peppers, marinated in olive oil, balsamic vinegar and garlic; Marinated Shiitake mushrooms, sautéed and skewered on fresh rosemary sprigs.

SALADS

*Greek
Grapefruit & Avocado
Gargonzola and candied walnuts in a raspberry vinaigrette*

WINE

Black Swan Cabernet

ENTREES

*Vegan pasta with mushrooms
Sautéed Alaskan sockeye salmon w/dill
Shrimp pasta in a spicy arrabiatta sauce*

DESSERT

*Strawberry chocolate fondue
Bananas Foster with icecream*

BREAKFAST

Hangtown Fry (a scramble of eggs, oysters, bacon, bread crumbs & green onions)

A Week of Peak Climbing In and Around Evolution Valley

Susan and Bill Livingston and I put a trip together to visit some rather far-in peaks in the Evolution Valley region. It was a clean-out trip for Susan and me, climbing the remaining listed peaks in the area that we missed during previous visits. Joining us were some friends from the Loma Prieta Peak Climbing Section (PCS), Louise and Jim Wholey.

Our 6-day trek began by going over Lamarck Col and setting up camp at some established campsites on the east side of the highest lake in Darwin Canyon. This was my third trip over the Col and the third time I got rained on. Seems to rain here a lot. But by the time we reached our campsite, the skies were clearing.

Our first peak of the trip was Mt. Mendel via the class 3 east face route. With an early start the morning of the second day, we ascended into the bowl below Darwin glacier. We had very little snow to contend with because of the unusually dry winter. In the bowl we ran across the wreckage of a plane that crashed here in Sept. 1983. From what I was told by people who keep track of these Sierra crashes, the pilot was never found. Since there were a lot of important plane parts concentrated in this one location (e.g. cockpit components, propeller blades, electronic gear, clothing and manuals), it seems the search-and-rescue party had moved much of the wreckage to this one location.



Bill holding up a propeller blade from the 1983 plane crash.

We then climbed granite slabs to the right of the huge Darwin glacier moraine. Once above the moraine, we started up the major scree fan that leads to the up-and-right ascending chute (or ledge, depending on your own definition) on Mendel's east face. This is where we made our second startling find of the morning. About two-thirds of the way up the scree fan, I saw a blue object that looked like clothing. Upon reaching it, the object turned out to be a down jacket in fairly good shape. Susan recognized jacket as belonging to Patty Rambert. The jacket and a still-missing glove were the only two items not retrieved off the mountain after the tragedy little more than a year before. Susan was to join her friend Patty on that Mendel trip in early June of 2006, but decided against it because of the heavy snow. This year, there was absolutely no snow on the east face, which is the only way we were going to climb it after Patty's accident.

Once in the chute, we followed it up until we got to the second obvious ledge on our left leading south. This ledge took us into the next chute over, which we followed up a short distance until we could see a conspicuous sloping sandy area to our left. I had an old SPS trip report by Duane McClure that helped us get this far. Ducks were also present along the way, confirming that we were on the right route. Crossing over to the sandy area, we then headed up sand and rock ledges to the bowl just below Mendel's summit plateau. A 100-foot cliff blocked easy access to the plateau. Everything up to this point probably went all class 2.

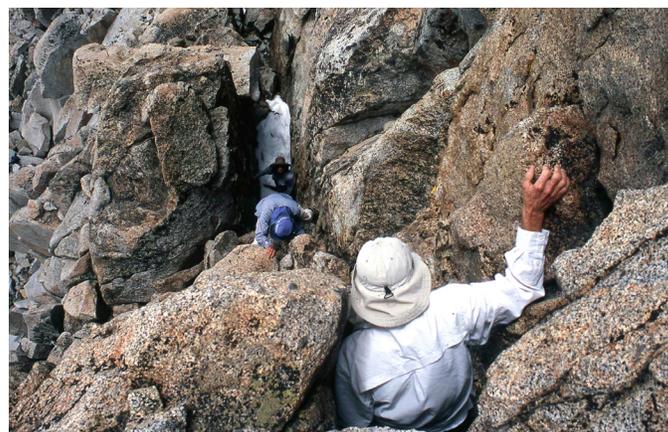
Secor's guidebook and other trip reports describe climbing up to a saddle on the right side and finding a keyhole that leads to the summit. Getting up what looked like the saddle in the upper right-hand corner of the bowl was rather difficult class 3 at best. Everyone else chose to go farther right out of the bowl and over to Mendel's north ridge. Susan and I looked for the fabled keyhole near the saddle but never found it. So I simply went straight up the north ridge another 100 feet to the summit. This involved some exposed class 4 climbing, which the others would rather not do if there was a class 3 route to be found. So I began searching for a class 3 route off the east face. Putting a route together from above is usually much easier than trying to figure it out from below. And after 15 minutes of trial-and-error, I figured out a class 3 route back down into the bowl. Soon, all of us were on the summit taking in the amazing view.



Negotiating our way back down through the slot, the key to getting the last 100 feet up to Mendel's summit.

To climb this particular class 3 variation, from near the top of the bowl, head left towards an obvious vertical crack in the summit cliff. This huge crack simply orients the climber in the right direction; you are not actually going to climb it. After climbing over a short, steep ledge or two, start looking to your right for a narrow vertical slot between the main cliff and huge slab of granite that has peeled slightly away from the cliff. This slot is only about

3 feet wide, but is the key to the route. The slot may be snow-filled early in the season. Climb up and right through the slot to its end, then continue up class 3 rock until you can turn left (west) following a shallow chute up towards the summit plateau. More class 3 rock, some possibly loose, leads up to the plateau only 15 feet south of the high point.



View towards Mt Darwin from Mt Mendel's summit. From left to right: Louise, Jim, Susan, and Bill.

We spotted each other at a couple of tricky spots coming down the first 100 feet from the summit, but never pulled out the rope. So, everyone agreed the route stands at class 3. Back at the base of the climb, Louise found Patty's other glove high on the talus fan. When the trip was over, Susan mailed the jacket and glove to Patty's family.

As soon as we were back at camp, a thunderstorm rolled over and we hunkered down in the tents for an hour until it passed. We then packed up and moved down to Darwin Bench following the use trail on the north side of the chain of lakes. This use trail has a few tedious spots to drag the packs through, including a huge rock pile at one of the lakes and a cliffy area at the beginning of the Bench itself. Getting near dinnertime, we camped in the Darwin Bench area.

continued next page

The next morning, we hiked down to the John Muir Trail and followed it to Evolution Lake where we dropped our packs. We split into two climbing groups; Louise and I headed for The Hermit and Bill and Susan went up Darwin's west face route. Jim stayed at camp and fished. The river was running quite low, so Louise and I easily crossed it near the cascade, went over a small bump, and then descended about 200 feet into the huge bowl east of The Hermit. From here, we contoured south and west to the edge of a beautiful meadow, then followed the climbing route described in Secor's book. The worst part of this climb was crossing the huge chute that splits The Hermit. Quite a bit of loose dirt and rock here. Thankfully, we were in this chute for only about 150 feet of climbing before we could find a way out. We continued across the sandy east face for a couple hundred feet and then went up onto the ridge to the summit block. Attempting it from the south side, there is a short, easy class 4 climb to get to the final, really hard part. The last 10 feet goes about 5.8-5.9. I tried it on belay and was not even close to getting up it. So Louise came up, stood on my shoulders and I boosted her right up. We had thrown a rope over, so she rappelled back down after a short stay on the top.

To get me on the summit, Louise tied hand loops in the rope so I could pull myself up the rock. It was still not that easy and it certainly was not graceful, but I eventually pulled myself up to the summit. Before we left, we radioed Bill and Susan to see how they were doing. They reported back that they had reached the summit of Darwin and were getting ready to start down. Bill and Susan said the west face route worked well, as described in Secor's guidebook, and was not difficult to follow on the way up. On the way back to camp, Louise and I were hit by brief shower, but the thunderstorm activity was thankfully decreasing more each day. Back at camp, Jim had a caught his limit of fish out of Evolution Lake for dinner. The evening alpenglow from our camp was spectacular.

On day 4, we got another early start and moved camp up the canyon to a nice campsite near the outlet of Wanda Lake. Our objective today was to climb



Moonrise and evening alpenglow over Mt. Spencer

Mt. McGee. It was going to be another long day, so Jim tried fishing Wanda Lake [unfortunately, the lake proved to be barren of fish] and Bill took a rest day. Louise, Susan and I headed over Wanda Pass, a rocky and tedious pass, and down into the Davis Lake basin. Mt. McGee and the Davis Lakes basin was an amazing sight from this location.



Mt. McGee rising above the Davis Lakes Basin.

We followed an earlier SPS trip report by Greg Gerlach and passed the largest Davis lake on its south shore, then crossed the narrow isthmus between it and the next lake. A really cool crossing! There was a faint use trail on the north side of the next big lake in the chain, which we followed for awhile. We eventually headed up to the large talus fan just west of the highest tower of Mt. McGee, which is the start of the south chute route. Once in the chute, it narrowed considerably and was filled

with huge masses of very large loose rocks. In fact, it was one of the most dangerous class 2 chutes I've ever climbed in the Sierras. Early on, Louise barely touched one huge boulder, immediately causing it to slide downhill. She literally had to jump out of its way. We took extra precautions to avoid rockfall and staying out each others line of fire. The payoff finally came when we got on more solid rock at the top of the chute and followed the narrow ridgeline to the summit. The expansive view was wonderful!



Susan and Louise on the summit ridge of Mt. McGee.

This is truly one of the more remote and least visited Sierra peaks; we were the first to sign in this year and it was nearly August. Going back down the chute was not quite as dreadful as anticipated. In the worst section, we stayed on a solid class 3 rock fin that split the chute. This made the descent almost fun. It took us 9 hours round trip to climb McGee from our camp at Wanda Lake. Much of the travel through the valley between the pass and McGee involves a lot of boulder hopping, which slows the pace.

On Day 5, Louise, Jim and I headed for Mt. Huxley and Fiske. Bill and Susan already had Huxley and Fiske, so they went south over Wanda Pass to get Scylla. We first climbed Huxley, ascending via west shoulder route. When the climbing got steeper, there were now several chutes to choose from to keep going up. Jim and Louise chose the chute at the far end of the west shoulder and I took the next chute to their right. Both worked well, but second chute over, the one I went up, was a little easier. The final narrow passage through the cliffy area just below

the summit ridge was in between our two chutes. This was a rather easy climb for its class 3 rating.



Mt. Huxley from the John Muir Trail.

Retracing our route, we descended to about elev. 11,800 feet on the shoulder of Huxley. Jim decided to go back to camp here, and Louise and I continued down a rather nasty loose chute off the shoulder with the idea of then contouring around the north side of Huxley over into the bowl between Huxley and Mt. Fiske. It worked, but we had several spots of rugged terrain to get across. We ascended the west side of Fiske, mostly following a chute that went just left of the final summit rocks. Just below the top, we exited the chute to our right and ascended easy class 3 rock to the summit.

After a short stay we headed down the sandy south side towards Muir Pass. We had heard from other campers that beer and popcorn was being served for a week in the hut at the pass. This was the last day. Getting down to Muir Pass was tougher than expected, but sure enough, there was beer and popcorn waiting for us thanks to several kind hikers that had been lugging cans of beer up here every August for a few years now.

Back at Wanda Lake, Louise and I gathered up our gear and headed down to Evolution Lake where the others had already gone earlier in the day. We reached the Lake about a half hour before dark. Susan and Bill reported they had a relatively easy and fast hike to Scylla. We all hiked out together over Lamarck Col the next day, concluding a successful trip.

North Guard, Aug. 1-3, 2008

The crux of the “easy” route to North Guard is this granite slab about 50 feet high, encountered about 12,800 feet elevation, just west and slightly north of the North Guard-Brewer col. This was the only section where we needed a rope. Members of the climbing party can be seen at the top, preparing to descend.



Back to **The Beast**

by Ron Campbell

In the summer of 2007, Tom McDonnell and I led what was supposed to be a three-day climb of Mt. Brewer and North Guard from the east side. Sometime around 2:30 p.m. on Day 2, we stood atop Brewer looking across the col at North Guard. We were out of time and could go no farther.

So when we started planning trips

last spring, North Guard topped both of our grudge lists.

This time, we decided, it would be different. This time we wouldn't do the rollercoaster backpack 2,800 feet up Kearsarge Pass, 3,600 feet down to Junction Meadow and 1,300 feet up to East Lake. No, this would be a simple, straightforward slog from the west side, straight up from Cedar Grove to a lakeside camp near Sphinx Crest. We wouldn't waste valuable

morning hours navigating the forested maze on Brewer's east slope either. No, we'd just follow a use trail over a pass and so onto the upper slopes of North Guard. And we'd have plenty of time to do Brewer that same day.

Real. Nice. Theory.

Four climbers – Susan and Bill Livingston, Wayne Vollaire and Edd Ruskowitz – joined Tom and me at Cedar Grove on Fri-



The summit block of North Guard is a narrow granite pyramid hanging over an abyss at least 1,000 feet deep. Kearsarge Pass is somewhere to the left in this photo.

day morning. After listening to the ranger lecture, we picked up the North Guard register; rangers had taken it out via helicopter two summers previously while looking for a lost hiker. We had volunteered to take it back.

The trip to North Guard starts in the forested bottom of Kings Canyon and gets more scenic by the mile. For the first hour or so you gain little elevation. Then, after reaching the junction of Bubbs Creek and Sphinx Creek, the trail turns almost straight up. A good trail climbs the slope east of Sphinx Creek, offering spectacular views of Kings Canyon and the Sphinx, until about the 8,800-ft. level. From that point on, one must follow an increasingly obscure use trail. Around 9,200 ft. we crossed to the west side of the creek and almost immediately encountered thick brush and a steep boulder field perhaps 200 ft. high. I'm sure there's a good route across this boulder field. We didn't find it. It took a few hours to navigate the boulder field and the steep hillside above it to the second in a chain of lakes. There we made camp.

Sometime during our climb of the boulder field we stopped referring

to our destination as North Guard. It became The Beast.

We left at 6 a.m. Saturday, quickly reaching a pair of lakes at 10,500 ft. From there we swung south and a little west through soggy ground to a higher lake (marked 10,752 on the map) and a magnificent view of the Sphinx Crest. The Sphinx Col is the obvious low point (about 12,00 ft.) southeast of this lake. From here we dropped into the Brewer Creek basin, staying as high as we could until we had traversed to the east slope of a prominent ridge that runs southwestward from North Guard.

Here at last we got a clear view of The Beast. A staircase of slabs aiming to the south of the peak is the obvious route. Even better, it's the correct route. After a few hundred feet of moderate 3rd class climbing we came to a steep section ending with a head wall. We belayed this last section, circled wide to the left of the head wall and dropped down 10 feet or so into a sandy chute. From there we slogged up toward the summit. We tried to cut directly over the rocks to the summit, quickly got cliffed out, dropped a little to the right (toward Brewer) and squeezed up between a few large boulders and so to the summit.

The summit block of North Guard is, as advertised, a long, narrow pyramid of rock bending out above an abyss. I got just close

enough to touch the base before retreating. Susan, who had failed to reach North Guard on two prior attempts, shinned up the pyramid and touched the top.

North Guard commands an extraordinary view in all directions. To the east is Kearsarge and the crest of the Sierra. Just to the south, the taller, gentler peak of Brewer seems somehow anticlimactic. To the west the hills fall away quickly; in clearer weather one could imagine seeing the Coast Range.

It was 2 p.m. Tom and I felt absolutely no desire to reprise Brewer. We turned back for the long, long return to camp.

My thanks to Tom for the great assist and to our very patient participants for carrying the register and helping us cross The Beast off our grudge list.



Climbers approach the summit of North Guard. From left are Susan Livingston and Bill Livingston in the foreground and, behind them, Tom McDonnell and Wayne Voltaire.



Big, Black and Beautiful: Tasting the Kaweah Mystique

by Augie Medina

In case you've ever wondered, the effort to get to the magnificent Kaweah ridge in the center of the Sierra Nevada pales in comparison to the rewards. Not to pooh-pooh the commitment required--it is substantial because of the area's remoteness--another way of saying there is no easy way to get there.

II. THE PLAN: THE "EASY" APPROACH FROM THE WEST

I had the good fortune to have a friend and hiking/climbing partner, Tom Becht, who initiated the plans to tackle the Kaweahs. A third candidate was unable to make it, so it was Tom and me in the end.

Of the two approaches, we chose the "easier" one from Mineral King. This would involve a 26-mile roundtrip with 11,000 feet of gain to climb the coveted Black Kaweah. But 18.5 of those miles would be with full backpack and 8,200 feet of gain! I'm not as successful at going ultra

light as Tom is, either with a day pack or an overnight pack. Taking too much food was one mistake for me, but that's in hindsight. We opted to take along ice axe and crampons in case needed. We didn't want to fail to summit any of the peaks due to lack of equipment. We vacillated on the need for tents until the very last minute. We decided to take our respective one-man tents in case of inclement weather (which we got but not at camp).

Tom picked me up at my house in South Pasadena Wednesday after work and we drove to Mineral King. Woe be to anyone who gets car-sick on winding roads because the 25 miles along Mineral King Road are excruciating enough without a queasy stomach.

After arriving at the Sawtooth Trail trailhead we started to throw our sleeping bags beside the car for the night. Just then, we were accosted by a friendly soul who asked about

our plans. Mentioning the Kaweahs brought no sign of recognition to his eyes. Turns out he was visiting his uncle and was not an outdoors type except perhaps for drinking beer on the veranda. Turns out his uncle had a "cabin" (a hovel actually) right next to the trailhead. "Uncle Sawtooth" invited us to sleep on his open back porch. We took him up on his offer. In hindsight, we regretted the decision because nephew had his bedroom out there as well and snored continuously at full volume all night.

III. MINERAL KING TO THE BIG ARROYO: A SKEPTICAL RANGER

The next morning, we arranged our packs and drove the short distance back to the ranger station to pick up our permit. The ranger asked Tom about our food storage arrangements. Tom told him that we did not have bear canisters (they are not required) and planned to store our food at the food lockers at the Big Arroyo campsite. This drew a big raised eyebrow from the ranger: "You plan to backpack all the way to the Big Arroyo from here in one day?" Tom gave a firm "yes" but hedged the bet by letting the ranger know that we were aware that



One method of marmot-proofing

there were bear boxes at Little Five Lakes, 3 miles short of Big Arroyo. The final preparatory step for leaving was to “marmot-proof” Tom’s Honda Element by leaving the hood up (the theory being that marmots only like to nibble rubber car parts in confined spaces).

Once at Glacier Pass, we could see the Great Western Divide several miles to the northeast. We could also see much of our route down towards the gorgeous Spring Lake. The big switchbacks leading to Black Rock Pass, an alternate route, were also visible in the distance.

On the descent from Glacier Pass we kept to the old trail, which seems to follow the most moderate slope down (other points of descent from Glacier Pass don’t look too hospitable). Down we went through meadows and rock slabs a thousand feet to Spring Lake. Here tumbled waters from Columbine and Cyclamen lakes. Another striking feature at Spring Lake is the massive cliff of the north face of Spring Lake Wall (11,480+’).

We skirted the north end of Spring Lake and then swung to the right of the west-facing slope to Hands-and-Knees Pass. As mentioned, an

alternative route from Spring Lake is over Black Rock Pass. But Hands-and-Knees Pass served us as well and was 600 feet less gain to boot. A traverse northeast led to the ridge dividing Big Five Lakes from Little Five Lakes basins. The notch that drops you into Little Five Lakes Basin is obvious from afar.

Stormy Weather and Hungry Skeeters

As we descended into Little Five Lakes Basin, Black Kaweah became a dark, looming presence. The mountain seemed to say: “Well stud, you’ve come this far, now come get me.”

Like good planners, we had checked the weather forecast for today before setting out. Reports were for sunny and sunny. But showing that she is no respecter of forecasts, Mother Nature unleashed a torrential hour-long storm complete with large-sized hail. Our rain covers began to leak and, at one point, we huddled under

a tree to escape the deluge. July is a month for Sierra skeeters to be out in force and this area was no exception. They pounced on us at the passes, on the trail, and especially along the creeks.

Once the rain stopped, the skeeters descended in force preventing snack and rest stops although you could get minute bits of protein into your system by breathing through your mouth and inhaling quantities of mosquitoes with each breathe.

From Little Five Lakes, a sign points “2.9 miles” to the Big Arroyo, all on trail. The drop is about 1,000’ and the lower you go, the more imposing Black Kaweah seems to become. Red Kaweah and Squaretop Mountain, imposing in their own right, also spring into view, as well as the pinnacles on the Kaweah ridge.

The Lush Big Arroyo

The Big Arroyo, at 9,500 feet, is a massive and beautiful gorge with



Our accommodations at the Sawtooth trailhead

lush forests and meadows. The High Sierra Trail runs along its eastern boundary. On its west side are the granite monoliths of the Great Western Divide and, to the east, the massive cluster of the Kaweah Peaks.

Tom arrived at the Big Arroyo well ahead of me. The river crossing was a bit of a challenge. I opted not to take off my boots and headed for a log that spanned the river. I got almost all the way across on the log but my last step hit a slippery spot causing me to land feet first in the river. I'd have to live with wet boots until well into the next day.

Amazingly, the remote Big Arroyo campsite was packed that first night. A couple of large groups were in town to do who knows what. It wasn't to climb the Kaweahs because they were gone the next day. Anyway, Tom and I set up camp, had dinner, and agreed on a 5:30 a.m. wake-up for our Friday objective of Mount (aka Big) Kaweah. By 8:30, I lay comfortably in my tent entertained by Beethoven's 4th Piano Concerto (the 2d movement is among the melodious glories of Western art) and then Sibelius's Symphony No. 2. I was thankful I hadn't bowed to the dictates of ultra light packing and left my ipod behind.

IV. MT. ("BIG") KAWEAH: TRAIN WRECK SUMMIT

The Highest Kaweah via its SE Slope

We awoke to good weather and were off by 6:30. From our tent, we took the High Sierra Trail southeast for about 1.25 miles. We then left the



Spring Lake below Glacier Pass

trail at a point just to the right of a creek whose headwaters lie between Red Kaweah and Mount Kaweah. Our direction up the ridge was northeast. Up through forested ridge alternating with small boulder fields we went. We refilled water bladders before leaving the tree line. Two sizable unnamed lakes below the sand-choked southeast slope of Big Kaweah served as hand-rails as we skirted to their right on the ascent. At the base of the slope, the saddle just west of Big Kaweah is in view as a target. I can't say that the slog up the sand and scree was fun, but at last we found ourselves on the Kaweah ridge where we headed east. When the summit came into view, it looked like a giant pile of rock rubble, the visual equivalent of a train wreck. Tom had been quite a bit in front of me and he cut a solitary figure sitting on the highest pile of rocks waiting for me. But when we focused on the views from this highest of the Kaweah peaks, elevation 13,804 feet, we forgot about the slog up and the jumbled appearance of the summit. We got superb views of the eastern

Sierra ridge from Mt. Russell to the flat profile of Mt. Langley. Mt. Williamson and Mt. Tyndall stood out as well. There was a register inside an aluminum California Alpine Club box. We signed it noting that we were the first visitors in 2008 to the top of Big Kaweah.

After Big Kaweah, Tom wanted to check out Second (aka Gray) Kaweah (not an SPS peak). I wasn't sure I wanted to expend the effort. We descended Big Kaweah and traversed west to the base of Second Kaweah. Tom took off on the nasty boulder route towards the summit. I enjoyed some snacks and the views, and in general became very relaxed. The decision to forgo Second Kaweah was easy. I sat there for an hour soaking in the atmosphere before heading back to camp.

The High Sierra Trail

I retraced our route taking as a major reference point the two unnamed lakes mentioned above. I took it

real slow and enjoyed the descent: down the sandy slope, past the lakes, through the meadow and down the forested slope that intersected the High Sierra Trail. I was amazed how beautiful this trail really is. Lush foliage carpeted the slope below the trail down into the Big Arroyo. The trail ran through the creek at times and numerous little falls splashed across it into the Big Arroyo.

I arrived back at camp refreshed although, earlier in the day, I had been hurting on the ascent of the sandy slope to Big Kaweah's saddle. We had done about 8 miles with 4,300 feet of gain (not counting Tom's additional gain to Second Kaweah). Tom came into camp not long after me, confirming that he summited Second Kaweah, but had abandoned the idea of taking a peek at the base of Red Kaweah.

Before dinner I took an invigorating bath in the cold river and managed to climb into dry clothes before the mosquitoes swarmed me. Since our route to Black Kaweah the next day would begin straight up the ridge above our tent, we agreed on a relatively late 6 a.m. wake-up.

V. BLACK KAWEAH: THIRD CLASS ROUTE (??) AND A WHO'S WHO SUMMIT REGISTER

To the Southwest Face

Saturday morning, we got off a little before 7. Our route would be the southwest face, reputed to have one or more Class 3 routes. We walked the very short distance to the sign on the High Sierra Trail pointing to Kaweah Gap and began our climb



Tom moving up on route

straight up the extremely steep ridge. We were basically taking aim at the big tarn below the peak. I'm one that likes a little warm-up on a hike or climb before setting foot on steep stuff. But there was no such foreplay on today's route. Our warm-up was a 65 degree slope. Then we reached a beautiful high meadow, and, sooner than I expected, reached the big tarn southwest of the summit. The tarn was approximately half-way between camp and the summit.

Now it was time to fish or cut bait as to our intended route up the SW face. What the hell? It all looked dark and forbidding, no matter which gully or off-shoot we eye-balled. We had both read the guide references and available TR's and knew about the Righthand Chute that is supposed to start the route and the main chute to the left that is supposed to deposit you on the summit ridge. But, from the bottom, it didn't really look neat and tidy like that at all.

From the tarn, we still had a ways

to go over nasty scree and rock. Near the base of the main gully, we edged around a snow tongue and left our trekking poles at the top of the tongue. We then started up the broad chute looking for that elusive 3d Class route.

Exposure Summa Cum Laude

Pretty quickly, we encountered 4th Class rock and wondered aloud where the 3d Class ramp was. Oh, well; we were both confident in our abilities on 4th Class rock. But one thing that



View on ascent to Mt. Kaweah



Black Kaweah from Little 5 Lakes

grabbed my attention as never before on other 4th Class routes was the exposure on Kaweah. It reminded me of the common description of 4th Class as equivalent to climbing a ladder a mile in the air: the holds are there but you'd better not fall. It was exactly so on Black Kaweah. As I tested holds—and several book-sized flakes came right off easy as pie—when I grabbed them—I noticed that there was nothing but soft air below my feet. If you fell, you've wouldn't even hit solid rock for hundreds of feet.

The climbing difficulty was sustained. Tom and I expressed to one another that we hoped we would encounter a 3d Class route on the way down, deluding ourselves that maybe the 3d class section was more evident on the descent than on the ascent. That wasn't the case.

In some ways, the route-finding itself was not difficult. Just get up the big

chute and hang a right at the summit ridge. But care had to be taken on the chosen lines to avoid traipsing onto 5th Class rock. At one point on the ascent, I did exactly that as I split off from Tom's line to ascend what I thought was a non-lethal line. Tom

had a better vantage point than I did of where my line led and he made an emphatic comment to the effect that I should not continue my "variation" unless I didn't mind sustained 5th Class free-soloing. I did mind. It felt very dicey downclimbing back to where Tom was but there was no choice. Gingerly, I got back on track.

Long Exciting Summit Ridge

At last, we reached the summit ridge. It was much, much longer than I expected. It also narrowed to a foot or so in some places and one six foot high block smack dab in the middle of the route required us to wrap both arms around the block in order to stay attached to the mountain and edge around the block. This ridge was fun, exciting stuff, a real treat. The high point came into view and Tom and I summited together. At 13,765', Black Kaweah is only slighter lower than sister Mt. Kaweah.

The Mother of all Sierra Nevada Registers



My summit pose

It goes without saying that the views were magnificent. The Whitney area, the Palisades, and much, much more. Then we both took our turns with the summit register. Tom told me that some busybody had threatened to climb Black Kaweah and withdraw the original register to Berkeley's Bancroft Hall. But he hadn't done it yet and we were ecstatic to find it still in the register box.

The register is a Who's Who of famous Sierra Nevada hikers and climbers: Norman Clyde, Eichhorn and Dawson and Smatko and Heller. One featured page was the 1929 entry of Walter ("Pete") Starr, Jr., in his own blood for lack of a writing implement, the date and signature still dark and prominent after over 8 decades. When entering our own names into this 84-year old document, we were by no means the first to express the sentiment that it was a privilege to sign the same register as the pioneers of Sierra Nevada hiking and mountaineering.

A Descent Meriting Respect

After 45 minutes on the summit, we began our descent. We resolved to be especially careful knowing that the summit was only the half-way point of our outing and having experienced the loose rock and steep, sandy sections on the way up. We tried to exercise good downclimbing management by alternating going down when a particular section was too narrow to descend side by side. However, at one point, while I was waiting for Tom to descend one section, I shifted my weight while in an otherwise completely stationary position, and caused a softball-sized rock to unleash right towards Tom. I of course yelled

out a warning. Fortunately, the rock missed Tom. Thereafter, I determined not even to take a deep breathe while waiting above for Tom to get clear of a section.

Besides rocks whirling through the narrow chutes, the diciest part of our downclimb came on a 20 foot section of low 5th Class rock. Tom reached it first and exclaimed, "I don't like the looks of this at all." Tom studied the section and carefully downclimbed. This is the only section of downclimbing where I had to face into the mountain.

We breathed a sigh of relief when we made it down to the base of the main gully. We swung over to the snow bank to retrieve our trekking poles and then started the long descent back to camp.

We arrived back at camp about 8.5 hours after we had started. We had enough energy to decide to break camp and hoof our packs the 3 miles and 1,000 feet of gain to Little Five Lakes Basin to overnight there and thus have less distance the next day

to get back to Mineral King.

VI. MARMOTS COOPERATE

Sunday morning, we were off by 6:30. As we ascended to the upper lake region of Little Five Lakes, we took in some last views (and photos) of the Kaweah ridge. It looks particularly awesome from that vantage point. Hands-and-Knees Pass seemed to come up relatively quickly. Then the giant drop to Spring Lake, followed by the upswing towards Glacier Pass. Near the top of Glacier Pass, I remember being almost mesmerized by two gushing tongues of glacier water plunging from above.

After topping out on Glacier Pass, we took a more direct route to catch the unmaintained trail than we had on the way up. This descent over scree and boulder fields was painful for me as my toes had now become very tender from banging against the front of my boots. Finally, we reached the old trail and sailed down to the trailhead. On top of a great trip, the marmots had left Tom's car's hoses alone. We couldn't ask for anything more.



Sunflowers along the Sawtooth Trail

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