

A Tenderfoots Tall Trail Tale

The saga of a neophyte backpackers descent into the abyss of foot-powered adventure
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Well, my living room now has two backpacks and an inverted but fully-rigged Sierra Designs Meteor Light tent in it. I've had the tent for years, but I had never even had a backpack on until a couple of months ago, let alone owned two of them. Like many things in my life, and the lives of my friends, this backpacking thing looks like it is headed for obsession status. In any event, it looks like I'm hooked, I'll try to explain why.

In 1993 I did a high-water trip on Cataract Canyon with some friends from California. It was a great trip, they suggested that I come out to visit them in California and run some of the local rivers out there. I accepted and, with my friend Mary, took off for the land of fruits and nuts. We went through Death Valley into Lone Pine, then north on 395 through the Owens Valley headed for Yosemite and Sonora. It was getting late so we took off west of Independence at a little sign that said "Gray's Meadow Camping" and found a truly magnificent little campsite, littered with tall, stately pines and bordered on the north by a gloriously noisy brook of crystal clear water making its way to the golf courses, lawns and urinals of Los Angeles.

Well, Gray's Meadow was so kick-butt that, after 5 days of running rivers and visiting, we picked up U.S. 395 east of Tioga Pass and headed south toward Independence. Up toward Gray's, but a last minute change of plans driven by curiosity put us at a place called Onion Valley. We had shopped in Bishop and picked up some typical river trip snacks, some cheese, smoked oysters and kippered herring, all to be eaten with crackers and washed down with red wine. We read the signs about bears, laughed at how conservative the Inyo Nat'l Forest folks had to be to keep their jobs and popped open the canned fish and cheese and feasted inside our tent, away from the mosquitoes that proliferated in the wet areas around the stream that flowed through the campground.

There were lots of cars at the campground, lots more than the campers would justify. It turned out that Onion Valley was a popular staging area for backpackers who were hiking over the crest of the Sierras into King's Canyon Nat'l Park. I watched a few of these intrepid folks come in late in the afternoon and was duly impressed with their effort, but really couldn't see myself doing anything like that. It's so hard to imagine carrying a cast-iron dutch oven, a 120-quart cooler filled with fresh meat and vegetables and ice, and a couple of 5-liter bags of red wine up a big hill strapped on your back. Running rivers in big oar-powered Hypalon boats filled with goodies seemed much more relaxing and fun.

So that was in 1993, this is '95. 2 years passed quickly. Last winter when the local Sierra Club group announced their annual Basic Backpacking Class I mentioned it to Mary, she had

previously expressed an interest in backpacking. I still wasn't motivated, dutch oven rum cake is just too good. But it occurred to me that for the \$45 course fee I could save myself some mistakes if I wanted to gear up for some extended off-river hiking in Canyonlands, one of my annual trips. I took the course, mostly to get a handle on the food and stove mysteries. Mary took the course and liked it so well that she got all fired up about doing the Onion Valley - King's Canyon hike that we had looked at in '93. She bought a pack and went on one of the Sierra Club training hikes. I couldn't make any of the training trips, other priorities prevailed, but it didn't matter. I really wasn't interested in backpacking except for maybe an overnight rim-out hike up from the Green River to the Canyonlands plateau desert area.

Mary didn't make the Cat trip in '95, she got her priorities all screwed up and focused on her job. She also missed a July 4th weekend trip down the flatwater portion of the Green, so she had some extra vacation days available. When I got invited to come out and run the Tuolumne with Bob and David, my friends from California, Mary got busy with the final planning of the Onion Valley hike. I didn't really know if it would come off or not, I was ambivalent enough about backpacking that I just let her do her thing, I didn't do anything except quiz her about her plans. I wasn't pushing the program, but if it happened I didn't want to end up being helicopter bait due to bad planning, so I kept myself updated along the way.

Well, it started to come together, looked like maybe the week of August 14 would work for the trip, I had a mini-triathlon event that I wanted to do on the 12th.

Now don't get the wrong idea, I'm no triathlete. I was 49 at the time, overweight and, although I get regular exercise, I'm not in exactly tip-top condition. I exercise for fun, mostly handball with a little biking. I do it because it makes me feel good, I'm not driven to compete at this stage of my life. The little triathlon was a 1-k swim, a 20-k bike and a 5-k run. I worked out all summer long and got to the point that I was certain I could finish the course before they closed it, 2 hours and 45 minutes. I was out to avoid extreme embarrassment, not set any records. I just wanted to say I'd done it, I did it once before when I was 44.

I relate this to you because physical conditioning is definitely important in backpacking, but don't get the idea that it requires super-normal conditioning or unusual athletic ability, it doesn't. Anyone who is in reasonable shape, has good legs with no major joint problems, and an average cardiovascular system can do it. The worst thing that could happen is that you drop dead on the trail from overexertion and, shucks, I can't think of a better way to go. Especially if you borrowed all your equipment. Anyway, the responsible advice is "See your doctor before attempting this sort of physical exertion," but my own approach is to go do it and if I don't drop dead I figure I don't need to see a doctor. Stick with me, you'll sleep in the street.

Actually, even if you do have some problems, if you start out real slow and work up, the problems may go away. A lot of civilized maladies are caused by lack of proper exercise, not too much.

So, the trip was planned for the week of August 14, it was coming together nicely and now the

pressure was on me. I had to come up with the cash to gear up for the trip.

I have an engineering consulting business and, like many other overeducated folks in late 20th-century America, I've come to question the validity of the societal "work-your-ass-off 'til your old and crippled and then give all that money-you-sacrificed-your-life-for to some unscrupulous nursing home operator who'll fill you up with Valium and let you sleep in your own fecal matter" work ethic. My approach is to live as minimally as I feel I can get by with, work enough to maintain my business and fund a modest pension program (at least that's the plan) and play as much as I can while my heart and legs are willing to put up with it. Since the Americans With Disabilities Act passed I'll be able to maneuver my wheelchair into almost any office, even when I'm 90, but I (probably) won't be able to boat the Grand Canyon when I'm 90, so first things first, eh? Just good planning as far as I'm concerned.

Money was an object, I looked around and found a good deal on an internal frame pack for \$120 at a local sporting goods store. I had gone shopping once with my son, an outdoor recreation management student from Oklahoma State University, and he wasn't interested in anything less than \$400, but I didn't have that option (he wouldn't either if I wasn't lending him a car and paying his tuition, but that's another story). I didn't make the decision to buy immediately, the price popped up another \$20 bucks before I got back to buy it, so I finally went mail order and got my first backpack, a Kelty Red Cloud internal frame pack. Inexpensive, functional and, as far as I could tell, reasonably comfortable. After all, how could I know if it felt good? I'd never even had one on my body until the Sierra Club course and then only for maybe 45 seconds. I was not exactly an experienced judge of backpack feel.

A lot of the folks at the Sierra Club seemed to like the external frame packs, although the experts themselves were divided. I had always been a fan of the external frames, it looked like they were so much more versatile. On an internal frame pack the fabric bag itself is part of the structure, while on an external frame pack the frame is aluminum and stands alone. The suspension attaches right onto the frame and the bag attaches to the frame-suspension combination. So if you wanted to carry a small keg or a TV or whatever, you could rig it right on the frame in place of the bag, whereas with an internal frame pack it would have to fit inside the bag to really work out right. Since these considerations were obviously not of major importance, I went with inexpensive.

My next concern was how to cook gourmet meals at 12,000 feet. I was used to boating, and boating lets you carry whatever you need within reason and, sometimes, out of reason. I carry a solar panel and 12-volt gel cell battery with me on boating trips to recharge camcorder batteries, I've toyed with the idea of getting a 12-volt blender to make frozen margaritas on trips. I'd do it, too, I just haven't found a 12-volt blender. Anyway, this experience colored my thoughts about eating on backpacking trips and I wanted to avoid eating stuff like "Hickory Dicks Freeze Dried Beef Stew with Persimmon Fiber" on trips for a couple of reasons. One, it seemed so non-sustainable. I mean, if you really wanted to do a serious multi-week backpack you'd have to either have stuff mailed to you in care of General Delivery to places you'd be able to get to from the trail, or you'd have to come way out to a store that handled the stuff, mostly found in

medium to large towns. The mail thing is apparently feasible, but the long off-trail side trips for resupply didn't sound right. The second reason, and more pragmatic, was cost. The freeze-dried specialty backpacking food is expensive. The cost for a one-serving entree looked to be more than I wanted to spend, plus I was worried about the taste and quality.

So I decided to go for grocery store items, easily available even in small, out-of-the-way towns. OK, if you are looking for something fully prepared, just add water and "flavor packet" that means dried, packaged pasta dishes, "Pasta with Garlic and Butter Sauce", "Fettucine with Alfredo Sauce" or "Spaghetti Sauce." Well, maybe this suits you, but I have a problem with 950 mg of salt per serving, especially when there are "2-3 servings per container." These guys are going to be in line with the tobacco industry folks at the gates of hell, considering how they label their food. Plus, with only a little extra effort you can get something that has "15 gms of fat per serving, 3 servings per container" which means that after you hammer down the entire package yourself, you've just had your entire daily recommended fat allowance. I think it is more psychological than physical, but eating gobs of fat just doesn't seem to appeal like it used to.

Some of the dried bean soups seem OK, like Uncle Ben's Bean Soup mix, pretty tasty, not too much salt, not bad. But still, I wanted something a little more on the gourmet side plus I wanted to have something to say about what went into it. So I decided to experiment.

First I had to get a stove. I had my eye on an MSR XG-K multi-fuel stove with a "shaker valve" that assists in keeping the orifice clean. You buy a fuel bottle, the stove comes with a pump, you pump the fuel bottle, it injects fuel in a little tube, the tube vaporizes the fuel and, bingo, flame! Good control, hot, burns almost anything including high-proof drinking alcohol (so I've heard), unleaded gasoline, kerosene and white gas (Coleman fuel). Seemed like a good selection to me. But then I talked to my friend David Rudd and he said he had one he'd sell me, he didn't like his. Now I trust David, he's an experienced outdoorsman, so I quizzed him some more about his stove, a Trangia. The Trangia is dirt simple, a compartmented copper cup with a ring of tiny holes running around the outside. You pour in some methanol or ethanol (or, less desirably, isopropyl alcohol), light it and go. I saw a demonstration of it at the class, it seemed to work nicely. So did the more complicated stoves, such as the MSR XG-K, but being an engineer I appreciated the fact that more parts means more things to fail and working in a classroom was different than working on a beach in a mist of salt-spray and sand, or at 11,000 feet after being dropped in the dirt. But I must admit, the multi-fuel capability of the XGK still intrigued me. Finally David made the argument that sold me. He related the story of how one of his fuel bottles leaked on a trip one time and the entire contents of his pack got soaked in kerosene. I can imagine how I'd feel, 2-days hike from my truck and sun-shower, stinking like fuel oil, trying to enjoy the wilderness. David liked the Trangia because the alcohol fuel was practically odorless and if it did leak, it would evaporate quickly. Made sense to me, I went to look at them at a local sporting goods store.

OK, here's the deal. Don't worry about what kind of physical condition you're in, if your heart doesn't stop when you see the prices of some of this backpacking stuff, you will probably be OK on the mountain. A stinking little copper cup, a couple of pressed aluminum windscreen

components, three Teflon-lined pans and a pot-holder ran about \$80! I may have actually gasped out loud! Plus the damn thing was pretty heavy, I was starting to have second thoughts. But I hung in there, ordered the stainless steel lined aluminum pots instead of the in-stock Teflon pans and waited for my stove to arrive so I could start experimenting.

The happy day arrived, I picked up the stove and went out to find fuel. Things got a little dicey for a while, I couldn't find anything except \$3.99/qt solvent-grade denatured alcohol (ethanol) at a sporting goods store (heavily marked up, I'm sure). I finally remembered David had mentioned that the fuel of choice, methanol, was available at a local auto parts store, they used it for dragster fuel. A few calls, a short drive and \$2.50 later I owned a full gallon of it, approximately a 10 year supply based on my anticipated usage. I hurried home to boil water.

For the next week I tried various fully-packaged meals from Lipton, Knorr and various other sources. Some of them were OK, but mostly I'd eat them and feel like the taste didn't warrant the damage they were undoubtedly doing to my body. I was bummed and my body felt like major water bloat, the salt was getting to me.

I implemented Plan B, I went for the dried foods that were the base for other foods. Many of these foods, such as dried potato flakes, Minute white and brown rice, dried fruits of all kinds, regular oatmeal, regular dried pasta and wheat gluten contained no salt whatsoever. Dried potato flakes make a great broth thickener, the Minute rices add body to clear, low-sodium dried soups. Dried fruit and oatmeal makes for a kick-butt breakfast - just don't put your little shovel away too soon. This was a little more complicated than the pre-packaged stuff, but it made for a much more wholesome dining experience and I didn't feel like a blow-fish in full battle dress.

The stove was not a disappointment, it worked great. The simmer ring that comes with it does an amazing job of allowing flame adjustment, my only complaint being that it is concentrated in the center of the pan. The stainless steel pans were easy to clean and, with a little practice, it is easy enough to cook an entire meal without refilling the fuel cup. Considering that the stove is a complete system with pans, windscreen and burner the weight at a little over 3-1/2 lbs isn't totally out of reason, but it is still a little on the heavy side I think.

Mary purchased a PUR Explorer water filter. This unit was quite a bit bigger than we needed for a backpack trip, but she has a couple of yard-apes that she likes to camp with and she sometimes goes boating with party sizes ranging up to 15 people, so the Explorer was a good choice. I think I'd go for a Scout or Hiker if I was doing it just for backpacking.

Work is the curse of the hiking class and, as usual, my business began to interfere with my life. A job that I'd gotten in mid-June should have been started up, but the clients parts were still not available and the start date had been scheduled for August 28, the day after my anticipated return. This was cutting things a little thin, it began to look like I'd have to make a choice between doing the triathlon or going to California to backpack and boat. I thought about it, for about 2 seconds, and decided that I'd done this triathlon a few years ago, I wasn't going to set any records anyway and I'd never done some of the things I'd get to do on the California trip, so

Mary and I shifted our plans and decided to leave Tulsa on the evening of August 10th instead of on the 13th, putting us back into town on the 23rd or 24th, ample time to get the start-up of my job going before the clients parts arrived, assuming they would arrive on schedule.

I still didn't have a firm plan for when we would do the hiking trip and when we would go boating. The backpack required a backcountry permit from Inyo National Forest and there were only 2 ways to get the permit. One was to apply early in the year and get a reservation during the normal permit-application season which ended in mid-May. The other way was to show up at 6:30 a.m., pick a number and take your chances in a sort of lottery which neither of us really understood very well. Mary had talked to the folks in Lone Pine at the Forest Service office and they said permits were hard to get but not so hard that it wasn't worth trying. I didn't know when my friends in California would have time to go boating, so we were going to California with no firm plans of any kind, just go and see what happens.

Not a bad plan, as it turned out, because when we arrived at my friends house in Columbia, California on Saturday we found out he was stranded in Oregon with truck trouble. There was nothing we could do for him under the circumstances, so we unloaded my boat into his backyard and took off. It was 4 p.m. California time when we left, we had Sonora Pass and a couple of hundred miles of U.S. 395 to travel before we would get to Lone Pine. We had driven in from a short night in western Utah just that afternoon, we were already whipped but we had no choice.

Sonora Pass was fun, my Ford F-150 pickup hugged the road really well, it seemed we were on a roller coaster with no rails at times, we got over the pass before dark. The Von's grocery in Bishop provided our last good grocery stop before we headed up to Onion Valley so we quickly planned some meals, did the food buy and headed out. For the road dinner we had bagged salads, the kind with everything in the bag - dressing, pre-washed lettuce, croutons, etc. Yummy! They really hit the spot, we had been on typical road meals since Thursday . . . hamburgers, coffee, breakfast sandwiches, french fries.

Our meals planned out like this:

Day 1	Breakfast	From the truck
	Lunch	granola bars and fruit roll-ups on the trail
	Dinner	Linguine with red clam sauce and Parmesan cheese - We had purchased a 6-oz can of clams, a 6-oz can of tomato paste, 4-oz of olive oil, 8-oz of Parmesan cheese, 16 oz of linguine and some garlic. I forgot the basil leaves. We also had a 6-oz bottle of Tapatio hot sauce which was a necessity even considering the weight. Some things you just can't leave behind. We split the linguine, garlic and the Parmesan between this meal and the garlic pasta on day 3.
Day 2	Breakfast	Tea and coffee bags, regular oatmeal (much tastier than the 1-minute variety, doesn't take much longer anyway), dried fruit

Lunch	Dried soup, granola bars - this was supposed to be a stop and sit lunch, we had planned to get into camp early in the afternoon
Dinner	A low-sodium packaged beans and rice dish
Day 3 Breakfast	Reconstituted dried fruit thickened with oatmeal
Lunch	granola bars, fruit roll-ups
Dinner	Garlic pasta
Day 4 Breakfast	Krusteaze pancakes, tea, coffee bags, dried fruit
Lunch	granola bars, fruit roll-ups
Dinner	Road Meal!
Emergency food	wheat gluten, dried seaweed soup, brown rice, peanuts. We carried this in case we got hung up and needed a little extra. It wouldn't have been fantastic, but it would have been OK and a lot better than nothing. The wheat gluten can be mixed with water to form firm balls of dough that take on the flavor of whatever they are cooked in, like soup broth or tomato sauce or whatever, very versatile.

This wasn't exactly a boating menu, but the garlic pasta and the linguine with clam sauce sounded really good. It was acceptable even if it was a little heavy, or so I imagined, never having had a loaded backpack on before.

As we headed toward Lone Pine on the final approach a disturbing thought hit us. Tomorrow would be Sunday, we wondered if the rangers would be at their office. The plan was to find the office that night and look at the posted office hours. If they were open we'd camp on the Mt. Whitney road, just outside Lone Pine, otherwise we'd drive back to Independence, camp at Gray's Meadow and hang-out on Sunday. As it turned out the ranger station is open everyday, Sunday no exception, so we headed up toward Mt. Whitney. We had no idea where there might be camping, we were both so tired we could barely see the road, let alone think, and we just wanted to be stopped, it didn't much matter where. We drove through one camp area, it had some vehicles in it, but no bathrooms. We started on up to see what was available, considered just pulling over to the side and sleeping in the cab of the truck, as I am prone to do on these trips, and then decided to go back to where we had seen the other vehicles and sleep in the truck. At least we'd be off the road.

It was late, we were both tired, I climbed in the extended cab area behind the seat, Mary crashed in the regular seat and we tried to get some sleep before our appointed 6:00 a.m. wake-up. About an hour later I heard a vehicle pull in and a voice call out, "Hello, who are you?" I sat up, rolled over the seat back to the front seat and looked out. It was a compact truck with a rack over the bed and, in the bright moonlight, I could make out some little tree shaped emblems on the door. Damn, I must have parked in the wrong spot, the ranger is going to make us move, "What's your name", "Richard Bunn", I stupidly replied, out of a fog of fatigue and intimidation. So this jerk gives his damn truck gas and drops the clutch, his (apparently drunken) girlfriend hollers

something unintelligible and he roars off to harass another bunch of hapless folks sleeping just up the road. What an asshole! I was so embarrassed by being taken in by those jokers that I could hardly stand myself, but I guess there was no harm done. We heard the two of them leave the parking lot, get back on the main road and then come back to bother the folks up the way some more. Lots of loud voices, nothing aggressive just irritating. It soon dropped off to nothing, apparently they were looking for some folks and couldn't find them. I fantasized about having the opportunity to help these folks sometime and just leaving them to whatever fate had befallen them, but I know I won't get the chance.

Morning came all too soon, my watch started going off, I rolled into the front seat and we took off for town. When we came around the corner our hearts dropped, the place was overflowing with vehicles. This was the place to get permits for Mt. Whitney, Onion Valley and a number of other wilderness entry points, but Onion Valley was a heavily used portal to King's Canyon National Park and we had been told a permit might not be forthcoming. With this many cars, we didn't know what to think but we parked and walked up to the building, no sense in bailing now.

The age distribution was interesting, as was the varied country of origin. Most of the folks were, understandably, young, looked to be in good physical condition and spoke good English. There was, however, some Australian or New Zealand dialect in the crowd, some oriental, some older than me and lots younger. A few women, but for the most part males. I was surprised at the number of foreign folks represented. A group of New Zealanders had flown to the U.S. specifically to climb Mt. Whitney, the highest point in the lower 48 states, impressive. Confirmation once again that we live in a great country and we ought to take care of it.

The ranger finally came up, looked in his reservation box and collected a bunch of envelopes. Ah! It dawned on me what was going on here. The envelopes were there for folks who had applied during the regular application season which ended in May. Some of those folks didn't show up to do their trips, so this was one of the sources of user-days that the rangers could distribute this morning. Good!

The ranger passed out cards with numbers, ours was 9. First we had to watch a film about surviving the place. Bears were apparently a real threat, at least to your food. As luck would have it, Onion Valley and Kearsage Lakes were noted as being particularly bad. The bears break into cars at Onion Valley. Great! Apparently lightning is a major cause of death on Mt. Whitney. As they said, not too surprising when you consider that the tin roof of the little shelter at the summit is the highest point in the lower 48. After the video ended they started calling out numbers. 17! 12! 6! (I tried to move in on that call but it didn't work) 13! 15! 22! On and on and on. I didn't see how they could avoid 9 for so long. Finally, it was just us and one other group. 9! Oh good, finally! There were so many folks in front of us that we didn't see how we could get in, but we had vowed to pick an alternate spot if Onion Valley was full. We wanted to go backpacking, we didn't really care where.

No problem, Onion Valley was open, I began to think they used it as an overflow portal when everything else was full, maybe they do. "What day do you want to start?" was the first question

he asked us. The information Mary had said that you obtained a permit for the next day, but we apparently had our choice. We stuck with tomorrow, Monday, since that would give us a chance to get our act together before we hiked in. Since I had never had a loaded backpack on before in my life, I thought it would be prudent.

The ranger continued the talk about the bears. They rip windows out of cars, they'll rip your backpack open if you leave it unattended, assuming the marmots don't get it first. I asked whether a flashlight would spook them, I'd done that once on the Rogue in Oregon when one was on my boat, "Oh, no, these bears aren't afraid of light, in fact they'll walk right up to a burning campfire!" Oh, great! I like adventure, I like getting close to the edge, but I was a little nervous about the bears. "They aren't aggressive toward humans, unless you walk between a mother and her cubs," said the ranger, "They just want your food. Use a bear box if you can find one." Great, they just want my food. "Where are the bear boxes?" The ranger showed us the bear boxes on a little map.

I'm still half asleep, definitely still fatigued from a 2200 mile drive over the last 2-1/2 days, I'd looked at Mary's topos that she had when she was planning the trip, but nothing looked right. "Where are Rae Lakes?", I inquired about one of the scenic wonders we might hike to, "Right here," he pointed to the map, a bunch of squares denoting bear boxes were under his finger, "Lots of bears at Rae Lakes?", "Yes" was the simple statement. "Use the bear boxes if you can, if you can't hang it in a tree or over a cliff." OK, let me understand this. This very nice ranger is telling me, in very matter-of-fact terms, that the place where he is issuing a permit for me to go eat, sleep and live for 4-days is lousy with bears who are only moderately afraid of humans and who, in the rangers own words, are "Very smart . . .?"

Yes, that's it exactly, very smart, very aggressive, very hungry 350 pound black bears, ranging far higher in elevation than they used to because we humans go to all the trouble to pack tasty food up high in the Sierras so these damn bears can steal it and get fat and forget how to forage for themselves. Great, this sounds like a real bunch of fun, eh Mary? The only advice he gave us that might actually spook a bear was, "Look as big as you can, make a lot of noise, bang pans together, do whatever you can to make a lot of noise." Anything else? "Well, you can throw rocks at their back or sides, but be sure you don't throw rocks at their front. It makes them mad, they'll charge you." Oh, great! I'm sure rock throwing will be high on my list of deterrents!

The rangers description of the bears behavior reminded me of bad kids, juvenile delinquents. I mentioned this, "They sound like a bunch of little delinquents to me," he corrected me, "Big delinquents!" Yes, that was a significant distinction.

Now I was still fatigued and, further, trying to remember why I had wanted to do this in the first place when the ranger asked, "How long will you be out?" We had talked about a 4-day trip, but we had also decided we would leave whenever we felt like it, maybe cut it way back. So to find out if we should check-in with anybody if we came out early I asked a particularly dumb question, "Do we have to stay the full 4-days?" It didn't seem dumb to me at the time, I didn't know if they were taking off user days based on a 4-day stay, nor did I know if they would be

concerned if we weren't around on day 4, nor did I know anything else at all. I just asked, really to find out if we should tell somebody if we came out early. "Do we have to stay the full 4-days?" It was like in a cartoon, where somebody does something dumb and the whole place, all of the characters, start belly laughing as hard as they can. Our ranger just smiled, but the one next to him said, "Oh, yes, we put a time lock on the place, you can't get out!" and burst out laughing and on and on. The guy next to me getting a permit made a few jokes about it to the ranger and says, "Wow, that's classic!" The whole place was in an uproar, everybody was laughing at me, not with me, and I was miserable. Finally this turd next to me in line says, "Should we tell anybody if we come out early?" . . . "That's what I really wanted to know!" I said, apparently to myself, everyone else was still laughing. "Oh, no, don't bother. We won't look for you unless someone reports you overdue anyway, we just like to have an idea of when you planned to return if someone inquires." Great, the concern is almost overwhelming. But it was OK, I didn't come up here expecting to have a babysitter following me around, I came up here for adventure! And it sounded like the bears would provide it!

On the way out I started to become worried about our menu. "Do you think they like garlic? What about the clams? Is that increasing our risk of an incident?" Mary obligingly said, "I'll go ask." I stopped, she jumped out, ran inside and came back quickly, "He said they like everything, particularly things that smell, like perfume, soap, toothpaste and dirty socks." And clams and garlic! Great, this was making more and more sense to me. No problem. I'd just take my armpits off each evening and put them in the bear bag and stash it in a safe place, no problem. What was wrong with this picture? When you run a big rapid you have some control over the situation, you can to some extent affect your destiny. This bear thing seemed out of control, beyond self-determination. Oh, man, I'm not sure I'm going to have fun on this trip!

Too bad, we were going anyway, we headed out for Onion Valley. Elated at getting a permit and concerned about the bears. Ambivalent is the word.

We headed up the 15 miles west of Independence, the plan was to find a campsite, check out our packs (we didn't have even a clue about what they'd weigh) and then, if we needed anything else, we'd still have time to get to town and back before dark. It was really a pretty good plan, things started to fall into place, the backpack trip was happening! It was about 9 a.m. when we arrived in Onion Valley.

Onion Valley was filled with bear warning signs. Now these were probably the same ones that were there 2 years ago, it's just that after our bear orientation of the morning, we were much more aware. We had laughed in the past about our menu from our first visit to Onion Valley, canned fish, cheese and crackers. I couldn't have picked better bear bait if I'd tried. Now none of this was really funny, the bear threat was real and imminent. We'd been lucky the last time, that's all, just lucky.

We saw some folks leaving, waited for them to vacate completely and parked right in front of the site. It was exposed, but convenient, the truck backed right up to the edge of it. We derigged the truck, got out the gear, clothes and food we planned to take and proceeded to pack our

backpacks.

Food, hat, bandana, water bottles, Texas, emergency water purification tablets - whoops!, compass, poncho, ThermaRest, sleeping bag, sheet, knife . . . whoops! I left my good knife in Tulsa! Oh well, I'll take the Gerber MultiPlier from the truck. ThermaRest patch kit, basic medical supplies, rope, stove, camera, extra film, water pump, tent, wool hat, nylon windbreaker, fleece jacket, extra socks, shorts, shirt, light sweat pants for long pants, map, personal eating utensils, cup, 2 - 0.6 l fuel bottles filled with methanol, candle lantern, extra candles, matches, space blanket, snacks, . . .

The packs, 5000+ cubic inches, filled rapidly. Mary and I split the heavy, communal gear. I carried the kitchen, she carried the tent. We split the food in an attempt to even out the load, but I had to carry the Tapatio Sauce, she had lobbied against carrying that up the hill. But you can't eat without hot sauce, so I volunteered to carry it. I didn't have a scale, I wish I had brought one. My pack felt pretty heavy, maybe 50 pounds or more. Now this was not the 30% of body weight that is recommended as a maximum, but when you add the pack weight to the weight of the fat I'm hauling around, I was loaded at about 50% of my total body weight, so I didn't feel like I was slacking.

I had never had the pack on my back with any weight in it, I decided to make a trial run up the trail to see if I could afford the weight of clams and linguine for dinner. It was about 11 a.m. now, the sun was overhead and hot, even though Onion Valley was at 9200 feet. We hadn't checked-in to our campsite yet, Mary had made an attempt to do so, had wanted to talk to the campsite host first, but the host wasn't around at 11. Mary was confident she would have no problem, she'd done a backpack with the class. I set my pack on the tailgate of my truck, slipped my arms into the straps and stood up into the load. It was heavy. Heavy, but not unmanageable. A few adjustments and it felt better, off I went with Mary not far behind. We'd left our stuff strewn around the campsite but we weren't really worried about it, we needed something to mark it.

Across the parking lot, over a little bridge spanning the burbling, crystal clear stream, past some campers playing in the cold water, simultaneously exalting in the freshness and screaming about the cold. Past the trail sign and onto the fairly gentle slope of the trail. It was hot and as the trail climbed my body felt the strain. I broke into a light sweat, then heavier, then running down my face fouling my glasses and dripping off my nose.

We decided to hike out for an hour to give the rig a good test, then turn around and go back. Seemed like a good plan. The trail was sometimes dusty and rocky, surrounded by boulders and flooded in sun. Sometimes cool and damp and surrounded with trees and vegetation. Sometimes steep and difficult and sometimes fairly level. My heart started racing from the altitude and the strain, I was a little worried about whether I'd be able to do well on the trip, but I kept going, Mary walking without her pack close behind.

We walked out the prescribed hour, which included a few short stops, and decided to hang out a

while before turning around. I was definitely feeling something strange, maybe the altitude, maybe the heat, maybe the load, I didn't know, but it made me uncertain about tomorrow. A little rest was nice.

While we were waiting a family came by, mom, dad, and 2 young kids, really pretty small. They were smiling and happy, mom was carrying the little girls backpack in her hand, it was small and lightly loaded by still too much for a fairly young child. They'd hiked this trail before, many times in fact. They were headed up to just this side of Kearsage Pass. Kearsage was 11,623 feet and about 5.5 miles from Onion Valley. The dad said there were some nice lakes up there, just before the pass. I asked about bears, dad said he'd been coming up here for years and had never had any trouble, "Just be sure to hang your food in a tree, out on a limb." That was comforting, the bear thing was really bothering me. I didn't want any trouble, I just wanted to have fun.

They went on, we started back down. Down is much easier, no racing heart, minimal sweat but still some leg fatigue. Amazingly, it took almost as long to go back down as it did to come up.

We reached our campsite and found, to our dismay, that some asshole had put a campsite occupied tag on our spot while we were gone. They were nowhere to be found, nor was the campsite host, so we just moved. Actually, the new campsite was much more secluded which would make for easier showering later in the afternoon, after the sun shower heated up some more. The new site was quite a bit harder to get the truck into, a narrow parking slot off of a narrow road, surrounded on all sides with vegetation in the 8 - 10 foot high range. It looked like prime bear area to me, but I didn't get too excited about it.

We ran a last check on our supplies, noticed we were short the water purification tablets and a couple of other things, made plans to go into Independence or Lone Pine to pick them up. Lunch was a cooked meal, I don't remember what we had, it was short but tasty. The shower got hot, I hooked it up in a small tree and we took turns showering and watching for folks walking through our campsite. The hot water was wonderful. Soap, hot water, a warm sun to dry and warm the body, it was paradise. We both cleaned up, made our shopping list and headed back to town for the last supplies.

Independence has very little unless you are a fisherman, Lone Pine is a little better off. It was Sunday afternoon, close to 5 p.m., but even so pickings were pretty slim.

We shopped, picked up a couple of things for dinner and headed back. We talked about the bear thing and decided again that maybe we didn't want to do a 4-day trip, maybe a 2-day, or whatever felt good. We had no schedule, we just wanted to have fun. We had no idea what we were doing.

The evening was uneventful, the moon bright and large, the campsite quiet. I slept pretty well that night. Still running on Tulsa Time, we both woke up at the first hint of dawn, just as the eastern sky was starting to brighten over the mountains. Incredibly pretty.

We broke camp and moved the truck up to where it had been yesterday, in a much more open area where it was easier to get around for packing and unpacking. Those assholes who had snagged our campsite hadn't even shown back up! It was still empty, just the way it had been when we pulled out! Oh, well, no harm done.

Last minute shuffling. A few things didn't seem as important today as they had yesterday. I decided to leave my good camera, an old Minolta SRT-101, in the truck and take a little range finder 35 mm, an Olympus 3000. The Olympus was a nice camera and virtually foolproof, auto everything and a 38 - 105 zoom built in, but the pictures I'd gotten with it were no match for those taken by the Minolta. I wanted good pictures of this trip, but I didn't want to carry the heavier camera. I was sad, but convinced it was the right thing to do.

I pondered the 80-feet of 3/8" nylon rope I had strapped on the back of my pack, it was pretty heavy. It was not climbing rope, just utility nylon rope, but it could come in handy if one of us slid down an embankment or if we needed to ferry a pack across a bad spot or do a major bear bag hang. It was heavy and the kind of thing I hoped to never need, but I didn't want to leave it.

We fooled around a while, last minute trips to the toilet, arranged the stuff in the truck to minimize the chance of bear problems. The ranger said that the bears are so smart they recognize the kind of containers typically used to carry food. If they see one in your vehicle they will break a window to get at it. He also said "Roll your windows clear up!" A car in the campsite parking lot was mute testament to that last part, it had plastic over one window and chicken wire around the base of it. I think it belonged to the campsite host, and I'm pretty sure it had been broken into by big, black, hairy things looking for "Something tasty", in the words of the orientation video at the permit office. The little boogers probably got their claws into the crack of a partially opened window and pulled, breaking the glass. I checked my windows again.

We got everything into the extended cab part of the truck except a 5-gallon water bottle and some 96-oz. Minute Maid bottles that I use for water jugs. We stashed the water in the bed of the truck. I figured that most hikers wouldn't steal another hiker's water. Anything else, maybe, but not their water. Mary covered the stuff in the cab with a sheet, it looked pretty good, at least it was our best shot. I parked the truck in the hiker parking area, we got into our packs and headed up the hill. It was exciting for me, it was really happening, my first backpacking trip. Hiking into the 1995 Black Bear Rendezvous in King's Canyon, or so it seemed. I still thought the stories had been overblown just for safety, but we intended to take no chances. The last sign I saw before we hit the trail was "Do Not Leave Food In Vehicles!". Oh, great! I'd known that, but we had quite a few dollars invested in various food products that we chose from for the hike. We had talked about it, decided not to throw them away, just cover them well. But now, thinking about my near new, 1995 very pretty Ford F-150 metallic gray, not-a-scratch-on-it pickup filled with bear bait and unattended for 4 days, I wasn't sure it had been a good call. Oh, well, we'd see.

Onion Valley is at an elevation of 9200 feet and Kearsage pass is 5.5 miles west of Onion Valley at an elevation of 11,623 feet. Our destination was Kearsage Lakes, about 2 miles west and south

of Kearsage pass at an elevation of 10,900 feet. So, if we were to make our schedule today, we had to make the pass and walk a total of 7.5 miles before camp today. It was 10:05 when we hit the trail, we were going up steadily.

The trail to Kearsage is divided into 5 parts. The first one is a gradual but varying trail with some long switchbacks but mostly just meandering trail through pine forest, over boulder fields and through amazing, damp, lush green areas with wide leaved plants encroaching on the trail, almost like a jungle, only at 10,000 feet.

Very soon after we reached the main part of the trail we saw a ranger surrounded by a group of hikers. We walked on by and he called out to us to stop so he could check our permit. This was a chance to adjust things and catch a breath, although I was doing much better today than I had the day before. Today it was just sustained effort, some sweat but without the racing heart and general feeling of foreboding. This was just good, continuous exercise.

The ranger checked our permit, we talked some more with him about the bear situation. I asked if our menu would affect the bears interest in us, he didn't think so. He said they would be interested in anything that smelled, use the bear boxes if we could. He mentioned, as had the other rangers, that the boxes may well be full, in which case we were on our own, good luck. One of the other hikers heard me describe the "Linguine with red clam sauce, sauteed garlic and Parmesan cheese" dish to the ranger and commented that they should take our food away from us. That was a mistake. They should wait until I carried it over the summit and then take it away, but not now, not down here.

A friendly fellow with his nephew in tow passed us here. We were keeping a fairly good pace so we weren't passed very often, but I didn't feel bad about being passed either, I just wanted to make camp that evening.

The second part of the trail is a set of fairly steep switchbacks, not too bad, fairly dry but with quite a few trees around. The trees were pine trees, but not like any I had seen before. The trunk might be 2 - 2-1/2 feet in diameter, but the tree would only be maybe 15 - 20 feet tall. And the top of the tree would be pointed, with gnarly, stumpy limbs sticking out of it. It must have been trees like these that encouraged stories of enchanted forests

The pine cones were well formed, but tiny little things, maybe 1-1/2 inch in height. They were everywhere and the place had a wonderful pine smell to it.

It was on this part of the trail that we met the family we had talked to yesterday, the mom, dad and 2 kids. They approached us and the mom said, "Well, would you like a full report on the bears?" We allowed as how we would and they related that the bears had gotten all of their food, right out of a tree. They were on their way down to resupply and, probably, go somewhere else that wasn't so strenuous for the kids. The dad mentioned that he had been coming up here for years and had never had anything like this happen. We felt bad for them, but after an expression of sympathy for their plight we headed on up.

The third part of the trail was, again, climbing and meandering with no well defined switchbacks. This part of the trail wound through some beautiful lakes and shaded paths. The trail is wide and dry and very well maintained. It would be almost impossible to get lost here, it gets lots of traffic. This was where I made a very bad call. We could have stopped and rested and refilled water bottles, but Mary seemed to be doing OK, I felt really pretty good and we still had plenty of water. We looked over the lake and saw folks fishing and hanging-out and generally lounging around, but we hiked on past.

We came upon a couple of grizzled young guys who looked like they'd been out a few days, we inquired about their bear experience. "Sleep with your food" was the reply, "If you hang it in a tree they'll get it, no matter what you do. If you hang it over a big branch they'll climb out on the branch and get it, if you hang it on a small branch, they'll just break it off. Sleep with your food." This was in direct contradiction to most of what I had ever heard about stashing food in the wilderness, except a little volume called "The Lightweight Gourmet" which I had a copy of somewhere. The author there had also said he'd never hung his food and had never had a problem, but I still was very suspicious. It'd be my luck to get a bear that was having a bad hair day and didn't give a darn. Losing food was different than getting cuffed across the face by a 350 pound juvenile delinquent with long claws. I said I believed them but would probably not sleep with my food, they said "Good Luck, the bear boxes will probably be full!", Oh, Great!

Further on the trail I noticed a banana peel that some thoughtless soul had dropped, I considered picking it up but decided that carrying it around with me for 4-days was not a good idea. I vowed to make amends on the way down, I was pretty sure this was not the last piece of trash that would be dropped on this trail.

Now I've got to tell you, hiking with a backpack is either one of the most abstract activities I've ever participated in or one of the most practical, I'm not sure which applies. On the one hand, there you are, marching through paradise and all you see is a little strip of dusty ground about 24 inches wide and, depending on the grade, stretching maybe 5 yards in front of you. Just outside your main field of vision are pine trees, beautiful vegetation, rocks, snow, little animals of amazing vitality and charm, lakes that look like 3-D picture postcards, clouds embracing rocky, icy peaks and other amazing things. But all you focus on is picking up your back foot and placing it in a safe spot ahead of your other foot. You do this in a fixed cadence that suits the grade, but no matter what the grade, it is generally at a subdued pace because you know you've got a long way to go.

So there you are, marching as if in slow-motion through paradise and all you see are the pebbles, rocks, twigs, ruts, twists, turns and slants of the path in front of you. You are pretty much oblivious to anything outside your main field of vision, even your peripheral vision is pretty much discounted, you just march on, one foot in front of the other, sweat dripping from your nose.

Now the reason for this almost trance-like state is based on total practicality. If you take your eyes off the trail, even for an instant, something nasty could, and usually does, happen.

Whenever I would glance back to see how Mary was doing I would step on a twig or roll over a rock or some other potential disaster if I didn't stop. I was amazed how often this would happen. I quickly got in the habit of stopping to see what was going on around me. It probably sounds a little on the conservative side, but I think not. I take really good care of my boat on river trips because it is my only way out of the canyon. I think that taking really good care of my feet and ankles on hiking trips is the same deal, they are my only way back to the truck.

The fourth part of the trail was another set of switchbacks, cooler and dryer than the first set. We encountered our first snow here, a large bank covering most of the trail out to the edge. The friendly fellow with his nephew in tow passed us here again, they had stopped at one of the lakes to fill water bottles and take a good break. I thought at this point that we should have done the same, I was drinking lots of water and so was Mary. The switchbacks went up the face of a fairly steep rock cliff and we were both getting tired. The fellow who was passing us said that when we topped out at the rim of this cliff, we would get our first glimpse of the summit. It was still a long way off, maybe a mile of climbing trail, but at least now we had hope. A mile seemed like a really long way, we thought we'd already hiked a lot more than 4.5 miles.

The last segment was again meandering, as contrasted to switchbacks, but it was hot and dry with no shade. The trail went up and culminated in a long, impressive grade that was cut into the almost vertical face of the east face of the pass. We could see little dots on the trail, we couldn't make out anything on the pass yet. It was quite a ways off still. The pass had been an Indian trading route prior to white men using it. It must have been quite a trip.

Both of us were getting pretty fatigued now. We'd been hearing what sounded like a large bird in the distance, screaming for something. We stopped a couple of times, looked toward the location where the sound seemed to be coming from and didn't see anything. We were both too tired to really focus on bird-watching. Water was running low but we still had some. I was very sorry we hadn't stopped to refill water bottles. Just making the pass was not all there was to it, we had to hike down the other side and get to camp. I was getting a little concerned.

The last leg of the trail up to Kearsage Pass was grueling. The east face of Kearsage is not a very steep pass, rated moderate, but it was hurting both Mary and me. The sun was directly on the slope and it was hot and dry and uncomfortable. My cardio-vascular system was OK, my lungs were OK, my legs were OK, I was just getting tired, very, very tired. Despite the heat and fatigue a little deep blue lake still half-covered with ice elicited sounds of wonder from both of us. It was beautiful, absolutely beautiful.

We reached the summit and I just plunked down on the side of the trail, nearly exhausted. Mary did the same. There was a big group of kids there, apparently a family had an annual reunion high in the Sierras. Seemed like a neat idea.

We marveled at the view below us of Kearsage Lakes and points west for a while, drank some more of our dwindling water supply and did the perfunctory picture drill, standing on the sign that designated the boundary between Inyo National Forest and King's Canyon National Park. It

was pretty neat, well above tree line, rocks and snow and peaks. Pretty cool. Actually, not air-temperature cool, in fact the temperature was moderate to warm, the sun was still doing its job.

A little more rest and we were recovered enough to start down the west face of Kearsage pass. This side was pretty steep, I began to wonder if this wasn't like a fish trap, we could get in but it would be much harder to get out. I guessed that it must be OK, lots of folks did this each year, I was counting on the statistics being on our side.

We hiked down about a half-mile and came to a little junction. One way was Charlotte Lake and Glen Pass, another way was Kearsage Lakes and Bullfrog Lake. The sign said no grazing or camping at Bullfrog, no grazing at Kearsage Lakes. I guess they run pack trains in here, I was impressed the horses could make the climb. Kearsage Lakes, 1.5 miles. Hmmm . . . Camp! Good!

There were about 10 young (18 - 25) folks hanging around the junction, some from the party on the pass, some from other parties. It was encouraging to see so many young people doing this, I couldn't think of a more wholesome environment for young people. The risks out here are nothing compared with the risks of "cruising the strip" or partying with the wrong crowd.

We passed a fellow who was with the kids we had seen at the summit, I asked him about bear boxes. "Yes there are some down there, but you won't be able to find room, there are 9 in our party and a couple of other good sized parties already down there!" Gee, how generous of him. Oh well, we'd see.

Passing this guy was disturbing, however. He had a pair of running shoes strapped to his pack. Mary had a pair of running shoes on her pack and I had a pair of Tevas. I'd selected the Tevas for camp use and stream crossings, but now I was concerned about my selection. It occurred to me when I saw this guys running shoes that he had an effective spare pair of hiking shoes for trails. My Tevas could be made to function on an extended trail hike but, unlike the early Tevas in which I hiked in for many miles over some fairly rough trails, the new "universal" Tevas I had were basically shower shoes. They had good support through the sole, but the dang Velcro straps kept coming loose. This wasn't just my experience, other boaters who had been Teva fans in the past had the same experience. I could make them hold tighter in a pinch, by taping the back strap closed. But it was a temporary fix and might or might not get me home if I blew out my hiking shoes, a fairly inexpensive pair of HiTec hiking boots. This situation worried me and I logged it in to consider carefully before the next trip.

There was still a good distance to go, but now it was down. The major heart and lung work was over, but the legs were still taking a beating. My legs were so tired that on the downhill stretch they were working in a rapid stop-start fashion, like the anti-skid braking system does when pumping the brakes of a car, like stripped gears that catch on each gear tooth but don't hold. They'd release and catch, release and catch, and over and over. All very quickly, so I doubt anybody noticed, but I was descending in a series of little leg collapses and recoveries with each step.

We crossed some small streams that would have made good water stops, but we still had a small amount in our bottles and the lakes looked close. That was one of the strange things about being out here, looking down on things they looked close, even when they were a good way (translate as "hard hike") away. Looking up on things, like the last few hundred yards to a tiring pass, they look further away than they really are, i.e., it will be easier to make it than it looks . . . sometimes.

Down, down, down, finally we reached the flats to the north of the lakes and the end was really in sight now. Kearsage Lakes is at least 3, maybe 4 inter-connected lakes laid out in an L shape with the tall end of the L pointing north and the leg of the L pointing west. We entered on the north end of the tall leg of the L and passed campsites between the trail and the lakes. The lakes were beautiful, clear and inviting. They were also cold as they could be and not be ice. To the right of us was granite, gently sloping up and capped with pine forest and scrub vegetation. Very pretty.

We passed a couple of more tent sites and then saw a whole herd of folks. This must be the group the guy we'd met just a ways back had told us about. Then we rounded a small turn in the trail and immediately discovered the reason for this urban crowding in paradise, there was a bear box. A bear box is a steel box of substantial thickness, maybe 1/8" thick. It was about 2 feet high, 2 feet deep and 4 feet wide. The door opened out, hinged at the bottom and was secured at the top with sturdy spring-loaded hooks on chains. It looked very substantial. We inquired if there was room in the box for more, a smiling lady with gray hair said "Well, it's pretty full but I think we can make room for you." We felt really good. There was no place to camp here, we quickly removed our packs and Mary went to work stashing food while I hiked on around to find a campsite. The plan was to find the closest acceptable site and set up camp, we were both so tired that optimum didn't matter anymore.

We saw one of the folks who had been waiting for a permit yesterday morning, we exchanged greetings, he was going over 13,000+ foot Forester pass tomorrow, south on the Pacific Crest Trail. We said we didn't know where we were going, maybe over Glen Pass. He seemed to give us genuinely high marks for not having a rigid itinerary, I certainly agreed with him.

I marveled at the age of some of the folks up here, some of them were easily in their 60's or more. I guess they got here the same way we did, but I was amazed. I hope I can do this when I'm their age.

Walking without the pack was a pleasure. I hurried around the corner of the L, turning west into the sun. It was about 3:30 now, we'd been hiking since 10 a.m., 5-1/2 hours without too much time out for breaks. I passed some animal fecal matter on the trail, it was undoubtedly bear scat. They were here, alright.

I found a small spot not too far from the bear box we passed, maybe 1/4 mile, tied a bandana on a limb to mark the site and took off to recover Mary and my pack. It wasn't 15 minutes before we were back at the proposed campsite. We dropped our loads and, as is my custom,

immediately looked around for an upgrade in accommodations, this place was small, but with a great view.

Sure enough, not 15 yards away was a much better selection and, to our relief, Mary spotted another bear box not 100 yards on down the trail. I volunteered to check out the box, I was so tired I knew that I'd be crashing soon, I wanted to get in work credits quickly so I didn't appear a complete shirker. The box was about ½ full, no problem. Mary went back for the food in the other box, I changed into my Texas and went to fill the sunshower. After seeing a bunch of young folks on the other side of the lake jumping off of a low cliff I had attempted to jump in the lake myself, but it was so cold that I couldn't get much further in than calf-deep. It was ice-cold. The kids on the other shore must be tough. Other than that everything had gone perfectly so far. I put the sunshower on a sunny rock to warm and set up the tent while I waited for Mary to return.

She was back quickly, stashed our food in the box and we went about housekeeping chores. We made a point to empty all the food out of our packs. Peanuts and granola bars for snacks, little assortments of snacks in various spots, etc. I was determined to avoid bear problems.

There were a few mosquitos around, quite a few actually, so I climbed into the tent to arrange and organize the backpack stash. Besides bears, the rangers had warned us about marmots and squirrels, both of which would be willing to rip or chew a hole in your backpack to check out any likely spots where "Something Tasty" might be hidden. Based on that information, we'd decided to stash the packs in the tent, at our feet.

I'd patched my ThermaRest, again, on the way out, I blew it up and it seemed to be holding. Oh, good. The air temperature was comfortable but it was fairly warm in the tent, the sun was beaming in directly on the west wall, heating up the interior. We got the evening stuff out, lights, sleeping bags, etc., I laid back on my bedroll and crashed. I couldn't do anything, I just wanted to lay down, I don't know if I've ever been that tired, no kidding.

Mary, even though she had seemed to have a slightly harder time with the hike today, was in much better shape, full of energy. She pumped water for dinner and set up the kitchen on a flat rock well downwind of our tent. Keeping cooking odors away from the tent, even to the extent of putting the clothes you cook in into the bear bag, was the best way to avoid attracting unwanted visitors in the middle of the night.

I just laid in the tent, half-conscious, not fully asleep, just lying there with my eyes closed. Oh! I was really whipped! I wondered what tomorrow would bring as I drifted back and forth toward the edge of sleep.

Some time passed, the sun settled further in the west and some of my strength returned. I became conscious of my surroundings and looked out the door of the tent which was facing east. The gnarled, exposed roots of an old pine tree made a great, abstract form, framed by the door of the tent and I couldn't help but take a picture of it. I'd carried the camera in my hand on the hike in, and it was a good move. I got pictures I wouldn't have gotten otherwise. I didn't know at the

time whether they'd be any good, but as it turned out many of them were excellent. Maybe not of the quality I could have gotten with my SLR and 38 - 85 mm zoom lens, but very good, sharp pictures. If I'd had the SLR I'd have gotten far fewer pictures and, while the equipment is important, so are the number of shots you get. The more shots, the more chance of getting a good one. In this case, given the weight of the hardware and the capabilities, both physical and artistic, of the cameraman, the picture quantity factor outweighed the equipment quality differences. The little, lightweight camera provided me many more good shots than the SLR would have.

I struggled out of the tent, rested but a little groggy. I looked around and there was Mary with this ridiculous bug-net cover on her head. She looked like a bee-keeper, I laughed out loud at her. I had already laughed at her, at Onion Valley, when I saw her mesh hat, but now, when I saw her in it here I laughed even more. Sure, the mosquitos had been pesky, they had encouraged me to crawl into the tent earlier, but they certainly weren't bad enough to warrant wearing anything that ridiculous. I emerged from the tent pouring friendly insults on her. She just smiled.

A few minutes later I understood why she didn't take the insults too personally. I was spending most of my time swatting mosquitos. Off of my legs and arms and neck and face and ears and head. Off of the back of my hands and the palm of my hands and my fingers. Off of my feet and toes. They were swarming all over me. I usually don't have much problem with mosquitos, even when those around me are being heavily dined on, but this time I was a victim. I scurried back into the tent and put on long pants and a long-sleeved shirt.

The little pests weren't so bad that I couldn't keep them off of the rest of me, I went over to see if there was anything I could do to help with camp. Well, yes, there was. I could put the sunshower somewhere that it would be useable. No problem, I was for that, the sunshower was a good deal. Mary had carried it up the hill, she had loaded herself up pretty good, no slacking. I had filled it and, within just a couple of hours, it had absorbed enough of the hot high Sierra sun to be warm enough to take off the chill of a quick bathing experience. Bathing experience, as contrasted to a bath or shower, because the air was getting cool. Even with warm water, the experience was a chilling one. But worth it, after a day of sweating. We both put on clean clothes and everything started to look better.

Dinner was a major success, we had the linguine with red calm sauce. Except for having to chop a full head of fresh garlic, which Mary had done while I was recovering, it was a snap. Open the clams and tomato paste, saute the garlic in 4 tablespoons of extra virgin olive oil, pour in the clams and stir. Thin it with a little water if you wish and it's ready to eat. Low sodium, since, although the clams are preserved in a salty broth, the tomato paste doesn't have hardly any salt in it. Cook the linguine, serve it into bowls, pour on the sauce and load it up with Parmesan Cheese . . . and Yuummm . . . this was heaven! The cans had been heavy, and I'd have to pack the empty cans out, but tonight it was worth it.

Mary had been ravenous earlier, now that she had food in front of her she was not nearly as hungry, the fatigue may have been setting in. She asked me to finish her food, I did so with mixed feelings, I wanted her to get enough to eat, but this stuff was really good. She convinced

me she wouldn't finish it, I accommodated her request, feeling only slightly guilty.

It was getting dark, the last of the sun was hitting the peaks to our left, the east, and it was beautiful. The lake was a mirror, reflecting the rock and snow towers that surrounded us on two sides. Even the mosquitos, which seemed to be giving up a little, couldn't damage the experience.

By the time we had washed up the dishes and stashed the trash, dirty socks and unused food back in the bear box it was time to hit the tent. I found the candle lantern and got it going. I'm not sure it was worth the weight, but it came in handy this particular evening. Whether I ever carry it again remains to be seen. We checked to be sure we knew where the pans were, so we could find them in a hurry for noise making, if the need arose.

The tent has a strip of no-see-um screen right across the top which gave us a slightly blurred but nevertheless spectacular view of the high Sierra sky. It was wonderful, we were both extremely tired and it wasn't long before the conversation dwindled off to nothing.

A rude awakening took place some hours later, probably early in the morning, when we heard our neighbors to the west banging their pans. Mary looked out, saw some flashes in the medium distance, announced that they must be taking pictures of the marauding bear, we agreed it would be a little scary, but not without redeeming value and went back to sleep. More banging, this time from across the lake to the east. The bears were working, alright.

Still running on Tulsa time plus having gone to bed about 8:30 Pacific time, we were ready to get up at the first sign of dawn, a golden glow over a low spot in the dark outline of the peaks to the east. It was quiet, we had apparently been spared a visit by the furry vandals of Kearsage Lakes. Fine with us, one night down, 2 to go.

Breakfast was plenty of hot drinks, tea and coffee, followed by oatmeal with raisins. The oatmeal was good, but it was still oatmeal. We had forgotten to bring sugar, some brown sugar would have made it much better. Even so, it was good and between us we ate what looked like an enormous amount. Mary crouched beside the kitchen rock with the sun-tipped peaks in the background reflected in the still lake made a postcard-quality image.

The hot liquids and the oatmeal brought the inevitable result, nature called. I had been dreading this, my only experience with "cat-holes" had been 3-days earlier on Ebbets Pass when I had been overwhelmed with the need to commune with nature. I had immediately discovered, to my dismay, that the soil covering the Sierra granite was pretty thin, nowhere near the 8+ inches that I'd like to have had. The soil here was no exception. It was shallow with bedrock being down about 6 inches in most places. By careful inspection you could find places where the soil was fairly deep but you would almost always find coprolite, fossilized fecal matter, immediately under the surface.

Actually, fossilized is a stretch. Mummified would be a better description. In any event, we were

immediately aware that we were not the first creatures to bury fecal matter here. Fortunately, it looked like most folks adhered to the admonition of packing the toilet paper out. Burning above 10,000 feet was banned, so the typical “burn the toilet paper” routine didn’t work. I selected a nice ziplock bag for my used toilet paper collection. I was always careful to put it in loathsome-side first, being careful not to touch the sides of the bag. This method was 100% successful on this trip, I’d gingerly push the nasty stuff into the bag, zip it most of the way shut, gently squeeze the air out of it and put it into the toilet bag. The toilet bag was a plastic grocery bag that contained the shovel, paper and our personal used-paper stashes. It was a good system, it minimized the opportunity for contact between functioning parts of the toilet kit and human skin. Thorough hand washing at a wash-station with soap and water between the latrine and camp completed this part of the procedure.

We finished eating, communed with nature, cleaned up the dishes and began to break camp. I had planned to wear clean clothes every day, but hadn’t gotten a chance to wash my dirty clothes yesterday evening. The clothes washing could have been accomplished if we had brought a collapsible bucket, but we didn’t have one along. We respected the need to stay well away (minimum 100 feet) from the lakes with all wash water and we didn’t have a mechanism to get water for clothes washing up where it was needed. I climbed back into my nasty green shorts and blue shirt. Based on my experience of yesterday I knew I’d be sweat-soaked within a few minutes, even though the air temperature was actually a little chilly.

I wish I’d brought suspenders, the shorts tended to ride low on my waist until I put the backpack on, then they’d stay wherever I put them. The jockeying to get them up on my waist with a full pack was, I’m sure, hilarious and probably inviting a back injury to some extent, but all worked out this time.

The most confusing part of the morning was trying to figure out where to go and what to do. I reviewed the map we had, Mary had purchased a quadrangle map of the area. I suggested we hike out past Bullfrog and then toward Glen Pass. But Charlotte Lake looked inviting and was much closer. Neither Mary nor I was sure we could make Glen, an 11,978 foot pass that stood between us and Rae Lakes. Rae Lakes was a remarkably picturesque place, images of it appearing in California tourist literature regularly. We didn’t see any way we could make it that far, but I wanted to see Glen Pass, just to see what a nearly 12,000 foot pass would feel like. Mary was pretty agreeable, and the prospect of going down to Charlotte, about 400 feet down and then back up tomorrow, didn’t appeal to either of us.

We had finally decided to head out toward Bullfrog lake, pick up the John Muir trail, which was the same as the Pacific Crest Trail through this part of the Sierras, and generally head toward Glen Pass. After an incredible amount of discussion we decided to leave part of our food in the bear box here at Kearsage and take only what we planned to eat on the trip to Glen, then come back here tomorrow night and camp. If the bears got our food tonight at least we’d have some food we could get to easily.

Loaded up and moving out at 9:05 a.m., both of us felt much better today than we thought we

would, no serious muscle soreness or fatigue. Maybe we were getting used to the altitude. The plan was to hike toward Glen, try to make the summit and then immediately turn around and come back down, camping as high on this side of the summit as we could.

I was concerned about trying to make the trip down into Rae Lakes, not only was it a long way, and an elevation loss of about 1100 feet from Glen pass, but one of the parties we'd passed yesterday told us there was lots of snow on the trail on the other side of Glen. If you got there early enough it would be dry, but if you come through much past noon it would be wet. My boots were not waterproof, I didn't want to soak them and then walk in them, I didn't think my feet would take it.

Off we went, into the unknown, walking further and further from my truck with each passing step, and not even worrying about it. Everything was great, beautiful place, beautiful day, feeling good. Backpacking is definitely a positive experience.

On we went, past Bullfrog, met some other folks stopped for a Moleskin break. We chatted, discussed the bear situation, I allowed as how the bears must think the bear bags were Pinatas, put there for their pleasure, since they seemed to get them all. We all laughed, we went on.

We'd learned something yesterday. Before we hit the Pacific Crest Trail, which looked pretty dry on the map, Mary pumped our water bottles full. It was a good move, the rest helped as much as the water.

A short distance ahead and there was the junction of the trails. It was full of a bunch of old geezers. Actually, they probably weren't much older than I was, but even so, they looked older than I felt, hence the "old geezer" title. I was amazed, however, how this seemingly strenuous activity drew such a broad age distribution of participants. I was impressed, these guys must be in pretty good shape.

North on the combined John Muir Trail and Pacific Crest Trail. A nice level stretch, a hard switchback rise, another level stretch and we arrived at the junction where the trail to Charlotte Lake split off. The sign, stuck out in the water in a big puddle read, Charlotte Lake, 1.5 miles; Glen Pass, 2 miles; Kearsage Lakes, 3.5 miles, Kearsage Pass 2.5 miles. So, we'd come 3.5 miles so far, seemed reasonable. 2 more miles to Glen, we felt good, we could do that.

As we had approached the Charlotte Lake junction, we saw a most curious sight, a man and a woman hiking ahead, the woman carrying a bright blue umbrella for sun protection. It looked like an old "Heart of Africa" movie where the women are in dresses and carrying umbrellas, or more correctly, parasols. It struck us as funny, but it did make me think about sun protection. I spend time in desert environments from time to time, and sun protection is a big deal there. I pride myself on avoiding skin damage from the sun, mostly with clothes and hats. This time I was feeling no heat on my arms to speak of, although last night I had a little sun-buzz on them when we got into camp. I wasn't too worried at this point, we carried on.

Past the puddle, past a spectacular overlook view of Charlotte, Mary thought there should be people playing golf down there, it was so green and beautiful. We both hoped there never would be, but who knows.

The view over Charlotte Lake did bring back the reality of how limited natural resources like the one we were hiking through were. Between the peaks west of Charlotte was a fairly thick brown haze, plenty thick enough to be picked up by the camera. It was sad, to think that the emissions of the sprawling cities of the coast reached clear up here, hundreds of miles east, and littered the sky with their vaporous trash. Too bad, I'm just glad we still have places like King's Canyon National Park, even if the sky does get a little brown sometimes.

On we went, catching up with the blue parasol lady. The couple was from New Zealand, hiking toward Rae Lakes. We talked a while, they went on, we stopped for granola bars, fruit roll-ups and water.

The rest was refreshing, we loaded up our packs and headed north. The trail was still pretty level, but it soon started to rise. Up and down, the trail through here was a roller coaster, but generally rising. Finally, it turned east and we started up a modest drainage that, according to the map, would lead us to Glen Pass. We must be getting close, it must be right around that corner.

Mary got so sick of hearing that phrase, "It's close, right around that corner!" Well, I really thought it was. It seemed forever before we even reached the little lake where I had thought we could camp. It wasn't a good spot, we just kept heading up. We negotiated a couple of substantial snow fields on the way up. The drainage that is the approach to Glen Pass is fairly rocky with little shade and no water near the trail except in a couple of places.

We kept climbing and, finally, we could see the summit. Mary was getting extremely upset now, she was acting like she didn't want to go on. If she was really too whipped to make it, I didn't want to put too much pressure on her, but I had been around her enough to know that sometimes she fades a little when the goal is in sight. I pestered her some about going on, she fought me pretty hard. Finally I said, "OK, let's go back!", she couldn't take it, she said, "No, let's go on!", so on we went. We could easily make out individuals coming over the pass now, in both directions, we were getting pretty close. The last leg of the hike up Glen Pass from the south is pretty steep and continuous, no let-up. It was hot and grueling, Mary did a great job, we just took it slow.

We passed a couple of guys who were hiking the 50+ mile Rae Lakes Loop from a lodge in King's Canyon Park. Their eyes got pretty big when they told us about a snow field on the other side, they said it was a little hairy, pretty steep and pretty slick. I didn't want to risk it, I was glad we weren't going down into Rae Lakes.

On up we went, Mary hanging in there, but obviously tired. This is when accidents happen, when people are tired, I didn't want to push her too much, but we were very close to our goal, the pass. It had been a long 2 miles up the trail from the Charlotte Lake junction.

I was moving pretty slow, but steadily, Mary a few tens of yards back. I knew she was furious, I knew she hated me right now, but I felt this was the reasonable thing to do, we were so close.

Finally we made it, tired but miserable. We sat down and chowed some goodies from our packs, drank some water, generally kicked-back a little, it was good. The view from the pass was incredible. Directly to the west the world seemed to end at the peak, but to the north was the Rae Lakes region. I looked at the map, the features matched perfectly, we could see directly into the Rae Lakes. We were looking down into a bowl that started to our left and curved gently around to the right. Below us and to the left was a very large snow field and, below that, a couple of modest lakes. If you slipped on the snow field you'd slide an easy 1/4 mile on a steep grade, then stop suddenly against a line of big granite boulders. Not inviting.

Through the gap in the enclosing mountains, the sides of the bowl, we could see Rae Lakes, or at least part of it. It was absolutely glorious, sun shining off of the snow fields, the pines surrounding the dark expanses of lakes, gray granite providing the backdrop for all of it.

It didn't look very far, in fact it looked lots easier than going back down Glen to the south. We talked about it, I claimed that it would be easier to hike down into Rae Lakes tonight than to go all the way down Glen and back to Charlotte or Kearsage Lakes. We hadn't really seen a place to camp on the way up Glen so our plan to camp just down from it wasn't feasible, or so it seemed. I really had no hidden agenda, I just wanted to get Mary into camp as quickly as I could, she was genuinely quite tired, but holding up well. The food refreshed her, she was having no real problems, other than tired. I was sure it was her hatred of me right now that kept her going, she claimed otherwise.

She bought my plan, we started down the north face of Glen Pass, across the glaring, wet snow fields. I was really glad I'd brought that 3/8" rope now, if one of us slipped it would come in mighty handy to get a person and pack back up onto the trail. Worth the weight.

Down we went, and down and down and down, across unconsolidated boulder fields, slick snow fields and, finally, we met up with the main trail. We found out later that the unusually heavy snow last winter had covered the main trail and the tracks we were following, while the current route, did not follow the regular trail. Bummer, dude! The rocks were really dangerous, 2 - 3 foot diameter boulders teetering and rolling underfoot, snapping at ankles and threatening serious harm. Not good.

By the time we reached the main trail my feet were damp but not squishy wet. I definitely had to consider getting a pair of better hiking boots if I was going to do this on a regular basis. I have often been scornful of folks parading around in \$250 hiking boots and vowed you'd never catch me in a pair. Continuing a tradition I started at birth, I was wrong again. Them dang foot covers are my ticket out of here. Motorcyclists who wear helmets say, "If you have a \$10 head, get a \$10 helmet", I think the comparable saying in backpacking may be, "If you have \$50 feet get a \$50 pair of shoes!" My feet and ankles meant much more to me right now than they usually do, I'll have to think how much they're worth, but \$250 hiking boots no longer look extravagant.

Down, down, down we went, I couldn't believe how close it looked and how far it was to hike it.

We exited the primary bowl that we had viewed from above and proceeded down a wide drainage that emptied into Rae Lakes. Huge pines were now lining the trail at intervals, vegetation was getting much more abundant and the streams that emptied the lakes above cascaded across the trail in a number of places. It was beautiful.

On one fairly large stream crossing Mary decided to forge across in her boots, I opted for changing to my Tevas. Changing was a good move, Mary got her boots soaked and was not a happy hiker on the rest of the trip down, although I'm not sure the wet boots were the only problem. The "not too far" hike was stretching out pretty good, I was fading as well.

On down, through some really fantastic scenery, Rae Lakes becoming more visible to the east, finally the land bridge between the east and west banks becoming visible.

We reached the west side of the land bridge about 4:30 p.m., the sun was still high but long shadows were stretching across the lake area, it was time to find a camp, quickly. Mary was worn out, she was going no further without a firm plan, I didn't blame her. She plopped down on a rock, shed her backpack and I did the same on an adjacent rock.

We saw a couple of campers across a little bay to the north, they waved and told us they were so beat when they got down they just grabbed the first place they found, I understood.

I volunteered to scout campsites and took off across the land bridge, without my pack, to find a good camp and, if possible, a bear box. I quickly came to a log bridge across a gap in the land bridge, this was the drainage for the south lake into the north lake, a gap of about 20 or 30 feet spanned by large logs tied together with rope. Now whoever did this did a pretty good job, the logs didn't roll or shake too much, but there were no hand holds and the water below was cold and moving swiftly. A fall into the lake here would have pushed you quickly out from shore, swimming back would have been easy enough in a 70 degree lake, but in a 40 degree lake I wasn't sure. I moved across the logs quickly. I was glad Mary wasn't here, she wouldn't like this part.

On east on the trail on the south side of the land bridge I came to a piece of rope hanging from a very tall pine tree. It was obviously the remains of a bear bag that had been hung by humans and scored by the bears. It had an eerie appearance, a kind of end of the world look to it. Tied in the tree, shredded cloth from the bag waving in the breeze, it made me uncomfortable and at the same time gleefully respectful of the intelligence and perseverance of the bears. They really were marvelous creatures, even if they were pests or, at times, worse.

I didn't see any sites that looked good, finally I reached the east shore of the lakes, turned north on the main trail and went up about a 1/4 mile before encountering a sign that read "Bear Box" with an arrow pointing to the near shore of the lake. I glanced at my watch, I'd been hiking about 25 minutes. I hurried down the trail and came into a large open space with a couple of bear boxes

in the middle. I didn't see any other campers at first, then the New Zealander came out of the trees to my left. "Ga' Day, mate", I guess that was the traditional greeting, "Howdy!" was my reply. We checked one of the boxes, it had room, but the problem was the population density around the bear boxes. Virtually every available site was filled. These bear boxes provide the forest service and park service with a powerful management tool. The campers are drawn to them by the security they offer for storing food and discouraging marauding by the Home Boys. I couldn't believe how many folks were huddled around these little steel boxes. Amazing.

I looked around a bit, was not hopeful about finding a site and, considering that I was 25 minutes out, it was probably too far and too late anyway. I doubted Mary would be up for the hike, I doubted I'd be up for the hike by the time I got back, but at least I found the fabled bear box at Rae Lakes, mission accomplished.

On the way back I passed a number of sites that I'd missed when coming over the first time. The direction of travel makes a world of difference on spotting the signs of former human habitation, I was surprised.

Back over the log bridge, back to where Mary was waiting. I explained the situation to her, she offered to look just to the north, past where the first campers we'd seen were set up, I agreed and sat down. I'd been hiking about an hour since we'd first hit Rae Lakes, I was pooped.

She came back in about 15 minutes, said she'd found a couple of good prospects. We loaded up and started down the path. No not this one, no not this one either, yea, this one looks great, let's do it.

Unload, change into my Tevas to give my boots a chance to dry, set up the tent, same routine as last night. We were on the west side of the second lake at Rae Lakes, Painted Lady was just to the south of us, it was beautiful, really beautiful. There was a 20 foot cliff between our camp and the main lake so we used a small lake behind us for pumping drinking water. It was spectacular.

The mosquitos were spectacular as well. They swarmed around me. The silly hat that Mary had looked like paradise. I wanted one and vowed to find one and buy it, first chance. There were clouds of mosquitos. Clouds, no exaggeration. They were so thick I inhaled a few of them, nasty! They were so thick that they took the fun out of Rae Lakes. All this beauty wasn't worth it, the mosquitos spoiled it.

We proceeded anyway. It was too late to heat any bath water with the sunshower and the water was ice-cold and both of us were encrusted in dried sweat and surrounded by a malodorous cloud. I can't imagine what the mosquitos saw in me.

OK, let's see. We were on the second night of a 4-day, 3-night trek, we had 2 dinners and 2 breakfasts to go and we were still on our first 6-oz fuel bottle. We had a full 6-oz fuel bottle to go and it looked as if we'd get through tonight on the open bottle. Hey! Let's heat some water on the stove, pour it in the sunshower, repeat that a couple of times and take a bath, eh? Sound

good? Yea! So we did it, without really thinking too much more about it. This was amazing, too, since I had given a passenger on a recent river trip a really hard time for heating water with our cooking propane when we had what seemed like plenty then, too. But, hey, things happen on a river, like boat flips and lost gear, we didn't have that problem, so let's do it!

It was wonderful, even though it was just lukewarm. The air temperature had dropped too much to really get into a major bath, but by washing the head and face first, then drying, then washing the arms and torso, then drying, then washing the legs and underworld, then drying, it was possible to become somewhat civilized smelling and feeling without inducing immediate hypothermia. It was good.

Baths taken, I repaired to the tent to kill mosquitos while Mary set up the kitchen. I know that sounds like male-chauvinism, but it was really the essence of practicality. Mary had the kick-butt head-net and didn't like to kill mosquitos. I didn't have the head-net, the tent was incredibly full of the little winged devils and I was glad to kill as many as I could. I was careful to allow a group of tiny, benign flying things to live. I wondered if they noticed that bugs on all sides of them were dying, but they were not touched. It was kind of cool, killing the mosquitos by sliding my hand across the inside tent surface, being very careful not to kill my little fly friends. No, I had not altered my natural body chemistry with foreign substances. It was really fun, try it sometime.

I killed all of the nasties in the tent, left the chosen ones, dressed in long pants, bandana over my nose and mouth, nylon windbreak with hood over my head and ventured outside the tent. Mary was perfectly happy, in her darn head-net. We were having an easy dinner, a packaged beans and rice dish. A pan of water, pour in the dry stuff, pour in the flavor packet and wait for a wonderful meal. Well, wait anyway. The rice didn't want to cook. These packaged rice meals must have real rice, not quick-cooking rice. We waited. And waited. The rice was still hard. Maybe it was the altitude.

We had some seaweed soup with us, and some quick-cooking brown rice, we decided to make an hor d'oeuvre. A soup course before our soup dinner. Well, let me tell you, it may have been the altitude, it may have been the fatigue, it may have been the scenery, but whatever it was, that Kikkoman seaweed soup with Minute brown rice was fantastic. It had a nice fish taste and smell, almost perfect to draw bears I thought, but so what, it tasted great! Try it!

While we were eating the soup course soup, we put the main course soup back on. The rice never did get really soft, we finally ate it anyway, just added a little extra Tapatio sauce to the stuff, it was fine.

Our neighbors came over later, it turned out to be the guy and his nephew who we had met on the trail up to Kearsage. They were the ones who had snagged the first available site on this side. We talked a while, they were thinking about sleeping with their food, we told them we had considered that but had decided to hang it over a cliff, over the water. We'd heard the bears find the food bags by sight and smell, so hiding the bag and ropes was a good idea if possible. I used

thin nylon string, breaking strength about 90 pounds, about 1/16" diameter or less. We loaded the bag, hung it over a 20 foot cliff that rose out of shallow water from the main lake and covered the string at the top of the cliff with flat rocks. Be careful which flat rocks you choose, most of them are hiding wanna-be coprolites. Anyway, we took our best shot, I figured the bear might not want to lean out over the water on the cliff edge to spy the bag and I hoped the water was cold enough to discourage him from strolling over and reaching up to grab the bag. Hang your bear bag and take your chances.

We chatted with the neighbors a bit, they were having fresh potatoes and fresh eggs for breakfast, they said if the bears scored our food to come on over, we carefully noted their invitation. While we were talking, in the fading light of the mountain valley evening, we saw a fellow coming into the Rae Lakes area, just starting to cross the land bridge. Man, this guy must have been tired. He was moving incredibly slowly, one foot just barely in front of the other. We wondered where he was headed, but since he seemed to be doing OK, just ultra slow, we wished him well and went about our business.

The tent beckoned, we were both really beat, but in amazingly good shape considering how we both felt a few hours ago. Sleep came quickly and our sleep was undisturbed. We both woke about the same time, again dawn was just making an entry, barely a hint of a glow in a low spot of the mountains dark silhouette. Painted Lady was marvelously reflected in the perfectly still surface of the lake, it was a magic place this morning. Maybe I was wrong, maybe it was worth putting up with the mosquitos, after all.

Same routine as yesterday, only I made breakfast this time. A pan of water filled with diced dried fruit, then thickened with some oatmeal. The reverse of what we had yesterday. Man! Was it good! This would be great anywhere, not just on a backpack trip. But you had to be sure you hadn't put the toilet bag away yet, it asserted itself fairly rapidly.

We cleaned the dishes, broke camp and packed up. We were hiking toward Glen Pass, 2 miles away, by 9:00 a.m. Our neighbors saw us off, they marveled that we were going to hit Glen again, so soon, but we had no choice, we had to hurry up and have fun.

Mary's shoes were still wet, she had a plan to hike past the water hazards then change into her dry shoes for the rest of the trek. Sounded good. My shoes were basically dry, just a teeny bit damp on one side of the toe, but I was going to hike in my Texas 'til we passed the big stream crossings. Changing for the stream crossings yesterday had been a good idea, it was just as good an idea today.

So we climbed. We crossed the streams, I changed into my hiking boots. We hit the snow fields, they were still dry, not wet and mushy. We were passed by part of a trail maintenance crew, a group of volunteer young folks led by an adult professional outdoorsperson. They had come into Rae Lakes from the north, we warned them about the snow ladder and the unconsolidated boulder field and went on our way. We passed them, they passed us, we finally left them as they bunched up at the base of the snow ladder.

We made the summit in 2 hours and 20 minutes, not bad for a couple of Okies. Down was much easier, but still steep. Mary said her legs felt good, mine did as well, I think we were getting used to it, the weight and the ascent had felt good, the descent was not bothersome, I think we've got it!

On the way down we saw lots of places to camp, places we had walked right by yesterday without even noticing. Amazing. Stop and look back down the trail regularly if you're looking for a camp, it makes a difference.

We stopped part way down and took a nice, long breather. I took off my shoes to try to get the last of the moisture out of my socks, Mary pumped our bottles full from a little burbling stream that was the overflow for a picturesque little lake. Hmm . . . life was good. While we waited a fairly young woman, mid-30's maybe, came up about 10 yards ahead of a fellow who definitely had some miles on him. He looked mid-60's minimum, maybe mid-70's. This dude was carrying an immense amount of stuff, including ice picks and other, more mysterious, climbing gear. My guess was this guy was an experienced climber, out with his daughter or very young girl-friend romping through the Sierras. Totally kick-butt, man! I want to do this when I'm 70! They moseyed on past, looking great, smiling, having fun. Man, backpacking was truly a wonderful sport, one you don't have to give up as father time takes his toll.

The little gray, stub-tailed picas cavorted on the rocks around us as we rested, they probably had a pretty good life up here . . . except for the mountain cats that undoubtedly hunted this area. We packed up our stuff, swilled some more water and headed down. Down was much easier, soon we were on the flatter portion of the trail that headed almost due south. We entered the pine woods and quickly came to the junction where the sign pointed to Kearsage Pass, Kearsage Lakes and Charlotte Lake, the place where the sign had been in the middle of a big puddle yesterday. Today it was on the edge of a big puddle, the water had gone down.

The sign said Kearsage Pass 2.5 miles, I knew the little junction we'd passed day before yesterday was where we'd end up, it wasn't very far from there to tonight's camp, so we decided to see the high road, the one we hadn't seen yet. We'd hike toward Kearsage Pass, then drop down into Kearsage Lakes. Seemed like a good plan, we turned east and started climbing. We walked through dry pine forests, the ground littered with tiny pine cones. This trail was much drier than the low one, the one around Bullfrog Lake. The trail there had been damp earth, here it was dust-dry white stuff. The trail was well marked, it kept climbing and it was hot, much hotter than the other trails we had been on. The sun was slightly at our back now, it was past noon. We kept climbing. And climbing and climbing and climbing. This went on forever. I checked the topo map again, I still didn't see where this route was much worse than going back thru Bullfrog, but this was getting miserable. High, hot, dry trails on the south face of the mountains. Steep drop-offs. Stretches where the trail ran over flat rock, no foot prints, just an occasional rock marker.

Finally, finally! After what seemed like an eternity, we came to the little junction. We were almost at Kearsage Pass! The pass was only 1/2 mile of trail and 400 feet of elevation away! Man!

It didn't look this bad on the map. We started down into Kearsage Lakes, considerably more tired than we'd thought we'd be.

We hiked around the lakes, one party asked if we'd seen the bear that was visiting the camps that afternoon. We hadn't, I was slightly displeased, but not seriously. On we went, bear scat in the trail again, finally reaching the same camp we'd had night before last. There were fresh bear tracks all over the ground. We checked the bear box, our stuff was still there, good deal, everything was working perfectly. I'm not sure about the ethics of leaving a food cache overnight like that, considering that the bear box space is at a premium. But it is an almost foolproof method of preventing the bears from succeeding at stealing food, and that is the key to stopping their marauding, take away the incentive. This box wasn't full when we arrived, it wasn't full when we got back, I doubt we caused anyone any inconvenience, but I don't really know what the right thing to do is. I know that leaving the cache at Kearsage was a conservative move for us that worked well, I'm glad we did it.

We started to unload when I noticed another camp down by the water, right on the main trail around the lake. I mentioned moving to Mary, we discussed it a little bit, decided that, considering how tired we were, we'd just be extra quiet and stay right where we were. Good decision.

Mary was famished, we made some clear soup with Knorr vegetable soup mix, one pack of the seaweed soup mix and some instant brown rice. Wow! It was great! Quick, extremely tasty, warm and refreshing. Easy. The Kikkoman seaweed soup really added a lot to the soup mix, we mixed the Knorr soup a little on the dilute side and put the seaweed soup in to spike the flavor. It was wonderful.

Clouds were coming in from the west, it looked like Glen Pass and the Rae Lakes region might be getting hammered, but we were in the clear, at least for now. The temperature was dropping, it was too cold to take a good shower, but we both took our turns at trying to get clean. Considering the cloud situation and the possibility of weather getting us I'd decided not to heat bath water tonight.

I did my time at cutting garlic this night, I didn't feel really that tired after eating the clear soup and it was Mary's turn to play during dinner preparation.

The garlic pasta turned out good, 4 tablespoons of olive oil, a head of finely chopped garlic, some crushed red pepper. Saute the garlic and pepper in the oil, put it over cooked pasta noodles, smother in Parmesan cheese and enjoy! Uuummmmm!! Mary had the same reaction tonight she'd had the first night, she was ravenous then couldn't eat all of her dinner.

We cleaned up the kitchen and started to make preparations for organizing the tent for the night. It was getting pretty cold now, down in the low 40's, and clouds were rolling in on both sides of us. The peak to the south-east was getting pretty good cloud action at the summit, we were both getting worried about snow.

The warm bath of last night had seemed nice, but tonight it seemed like not such a good idea. Mary's fuel bottle was completely empty, mine was down maybe a third. I wondered what would happen if it did snow, if we got a good cover over the trail. Having a little extra fuel is a good idea, whether boating or hiking. I was sorry I used it for heating bath water last night.

It continued to get colder and the cloud cover to the north and south continued to build. We were both getting worried. I had only a light pair of sweat pants for long pants, although I had plenty of wool and pile for my arms and torso. My light-weight shoes were also a worry, I was running a little light on this trip, I hoped our luck would hold.

Mary began to hound me about putting the rain-fly on, I resisted. I've had the experience of having a really ripping thunder storm come over me while I was down in a canyon and it was an experience I wanted again, it had been spectacular. It had been on the Grand Canyon and the dark, rain-laden clouds had been right down in the Canyon with us. As they had passed over the bolts of lightening had been spitting out and hitting the Canyon walls and producing a truly other-worldly experience. If it would happen here I wanted to see it, even if we got a little wet. I did get the fly out, check it out, show Mary how to put it on and fold it up neatly at our feet. It was ready if it rained, I told her how easy it would be for her to get out and put it on if it was raining, I'd stay inside the tent and hold it down. She was not amused.

No such luck this time, however. We dropped off to sleep under a partially overcast sky with stars showing through in a few places and woke up in the middle of the night to a completely clear sky, the California sky aglow with million-year old light. Awesome doesn't really begin to describe it.

Morning snuck in again, but we caught it before it even had a chance to do any damage. Up at the first glint again, running on Tulsa time. We had pancakes, Krusteaze honey and nut pancakes. A friend of mine from California had left the mix in my truck on a past river trip, I was bringing it home. While we were doing the pancakes, a bunch of fat birds started forming up in a tree just east of our tent. Pretty soon this terrible screeching came out of the tree, it turned out that these fat little birds, about the size of a large robin, were responsible for the screeches we had heard on our way in here. It seemed impossible that such a small bird could make such a big noise, but they managed. The tree was full of them, it was great.

I had intended to bring a small, Teflon-lined skillet to use for cooking things like pancakes, I forgot it. Probably just as well, less weight. We tried with modest success to cook the pancakes in olive oil in the stainless steel pans I had, it worked out OK. Not great, just OK.

Breakfast over, packs loaded, off we went toward Kearsage Pass, it was just past 9:00 a.m. The air temperature had been 38 degrees when we'd gotten up, it wasn't a whole lot warmer now. I put my fleece on the outside of my pack where I could get at it and hiked out of camp in my green shorts and blue short-sleeved shirt, the same ones I'd worn during the day since I'd left Onion Valley. Nasty!

We headed out, came to the little junction ½ mile below Kearsage Pass. There was a family who had been out 9 days, the teenage son was ebullient about their experiences of this trip and previous adventures. We told them of our hike up Glen Pass, they related getting caught by weather on the pass and hiding under an overhang while they rigged their tent, then running to a flat spot to set it up, all while freezing rain and snow was pelting them. All of them glowed with memories of that trip, the lady's smile was blinding as she related some of the details. This family had experienced some real adventures together, adventures they'd never forget. I was jealous. Backpacking had really enhanced their family unit. This was a great sport. I was afraid I was getting hooked, but then I caught a whiff of myself and such sentimental thoughts evaporated in a gust of foul smelling vapors coming out the neckline of my shirt. We headed for the pass.

The last 400 feet were pretty exciting. It was pretty steep, but it was also in the shade, we were on the west side and the sun was still pretty low in the east. The wind was blowing out of the west with a fury and it was cold. I was hiking at a good pace, and I was sweating, but I was still cold. Very cold. So cold, in fact, that I was not sure how easy a time I'd have taking my pack off, putting my fleece on and getting rigged back up. So I did the intelligent thing, I walked faster. And I got colder. And I walked faster, and I got colder. I didn't see how this could be happening, but I was getting some symptoms of incipient hypothermia and at the same time my heart was pounding and I was sweating. It didn't seem possible, my core temperature was probably above 98.6, not below. Even so, I was losing a small measure of my balance and my head hurt. My arms and legs were cold. This was awful. I saw the summit and just pushed on to it, well ahead of Mary. I hadn't the strength to look around to see how she was doing, I was too cold.

I laid my camera down on a rock, dropped my pack on the north side of the trail, and put on my fleece. Oh, my, it felt good! As soon as I had my jacket on I started back to see how Mary was doing. I'd gone only a few yards when I spotted her, moving up the trail. "You OK?", "Yes, no problem!", I turned and went back to the summit.

Another couple were already on the pass, on the more sheltered south side of the trail. I asked if I could move in with them, they said OK, I grabbed my pack and moved it to their side. Ah! Shelter from the wind, warm sun in my face, beloved fleece jacket covering my arms, I felt much better. Mary showed up, we broke out the granola bars and celebrated Kearsage Pass, our 4th pass in 4 days, not bad.

We hung out a while, loaded up and hit the trail. About two-hundred yards down the trail I noticed I didn't have my camera. I immediately remembered laying it on a rock by my pack when I first got to the summit, but I didn't move it when I changed sides. I quickly dropped my pack and started running up the trail. A couple of young boys, late teens, who we had passed on the way down, saw me coming up at a run and brought my camera down to me. I was grateful, nice kids.

A few yards further we met a couple of guys probably mid-40's who didn't look to be in the peak of physical shape. And they had no packs, strange to be up this far without a pack. "Day

hikers?”, “No, our sons got tired of waiting for us, so they went on up to the pass and came back down and got our packs!” Cool! Two out-of-shape dads hiking with their young, athletic sons and the sons were making up the difference in physical capabilities by carrying their dad’s packs on the up-slopes! Wow! I can’t believe it, how wonderful! Must be the altitude.

The highlight of the trip down was the people we met who were coming up. A really frail looking guy and, apparently his son or grandson, planned to hike to Bishop, 60+ miles to the north. Impressive. A Japanese fellow, followed by an American, climbing the trail, asking questions about bears and bear boxes. One fellow was so focused on the trail that he didn’t notice me until he was right beside me, probably saw my feet. He straightened up with a start, said, “Wow! I was really into it, in The Zone, then Bang! There’s Grizzly Adams!” I assumed he took me for Grizzly Adams because of my appearance not my scent, but I didn’t know for sure. Close to Onion Valley, much later in the afternoon, we met a lone female hiker. She already looked tired, was asking how much further to the pass. I didn’t want to tell her that there was no way she’d make it in daylight, I did tell her the approximate distance and that there were plenty of good places to camp on this side of the pass, some with bear boxes. She went on, but my guess is she came down either that day or the next, maybe not.

I atoned for not picking up the banana peel on the way up. I emptied one of my snack bags and started picking up everything bigger than a nickel that I saw on the trail. I had to put a limit on the size, because there was ultra-micro trash spaced fairly regularly on the trail. It was difficult and, to some extent, risking injury to be bending down every 15 feet or so to pick up something the size of a piece of belly-button lint. I focused on the bigger things, found maybe 2-cups of stuff before we got to the parking lot, most of it in the last few hundred yards where the day-hikers and fishermen come up. I’m not indicting these groups, there are just lots more of them, many of them children. Trash happens, all you can do is pick it up.

There were thoughtless day-hikers, though. One family was coming up the trail with day packs, looking for quick adventure, hurry up and have fun. We had gotten in the habit of stepping to the side of the trail to allow those ascending to pass before we stepped back into the middle of the trail. People had done this for us as we were ascending, I didn’t really appreciate it then, I guess you don’t until you’ve been so tired that taking a step to the side can be a major effort. Anyway, we stepped to the side to let them pass, they got almost right even with us and started some kind of family discussion, while we were waiting for them to pass. They didn’t know, it was just a little irritating. The lady finally figured it out, she gave me a quiet, no-eye-contact “Thank You” as she moved her group on past us, it was cool.

The parking lot came into view and, after a few switchbacks, I caught a glimpse of my truck. It didn’t have plastic and tape all over it, that was a plus. I imagined claw marks across the otherwise unblemished hood and top, the lovely metallic gray clearcoat paint ripped by hairy vandals seeking White Minute Rice or some other barely palatable food we had left behind. I mused about this for quite a while, but since I was also in The Zone, just as the ascending hiker had been a couple of hours ago, I didn’t let it get me down, I just focused on making every foot landing a good landing.

My shirt stunk. It had a strong offensive odor, a stench. I couldn't believe I had worn the same stinking shirt for 4-days of heavy sweating, it was totally out of character for me, I usually prided myself on wilderness hygiene and cleanliness. Not this time, bro. I was a walking Superfund Site. Not having a bucket to carry water in and being unwilling to rinse out my shirt in the creeks was the psychological root of my malodorous state, fatigue was the physical cause of not having found a work around. I was embarrassed, I made a point of trying to stand downwind of anybody we met on the trail.

But through the fog of fatigue and the building thrill of having completed my first backpack trip without incident, I began to think back to the truck. Ummm. Water in jug in back of truck! Ummm. Hot sun. Ummm. Hot water in jug! Ummm. Very good!

The last couple of long switchbacks appeared, the parking lot was directly below us, my truck wasn't obviously trashed, I was getting excited. Blacktop! We'd made the parking lot!

Past a trash barrel to dispose of the day-trash, then directly over to the truck, open the tailgate, remove my pack, unlock the door, get my soap out, slip my shorts off, remove my underwear, put my dirty shorts back on, put on my Tevas and return to the tailgate, all in less than 2 minutes since I'd gotten there. There were a few people in the parking lot, but they were a few cars away on the next aisle. The sun was hot, we were for all practical purposes alone, even though we were in the middle of a crowded parking lot. I picked up one of the Minute Maid water bottles that had been lying in the sun and poured it on my head. Oh! Oooh! It was wonderful! Unspeakably wonderful! This was a must do, leave a bunch of Minute Maid bottles in the bed of the truck, full of clean water. Who'd steal a bunch of used Minute Maid bottles? And they were paradise! Soap my face, head, neck, torso, rinse, soap my legs and, while still semi-modestly in my shorts, cleanse the underworld, rinse well with warm water and dry off with a towel saved expressly for this purpose. Oh, dang, this was wonderful!

Mary had a little bit more trouble than I had, since she was shackled with a sense of common decency, but it worked out for her as well, we both felt considerably better . . . no, we both felt immensely better. Donning clean clothes from the truck was the coup-de-grace, we were civilized again. This whole episode, from the time we got to the truck 'til we were both washed took under 5 minutes, it looked like a well planned, well coordinated operation, it was actually just an act of desperation by desperate people. I gingerly wrapped my disgusting shirt in a towel and stuffed it behind the seat, I'd deal with it later. I washed my hands after touching the shirt.

A quick stop at the toilet and we headed out of the parking lot, down the long winding road toward Independence. Just outside the campground parking lot, right in the middle of a stretch of road that was bounded by dry, rocky shoulders, was a substantial pile of bear scat.

It was an affecting picture, the big, unmistakable pile of black scat, smack in the middle of the road, almost like the bear had been making a statement. The bears had provided some of the excitement on this trip. We'd had a perfect run, I'd told one of the folks we passed on the way in that my goal was to finish the trip without even seeing a bear, we'd done that. Virtually nothing

had gone wrong. The weather had held, lucky for us because I certainly wasn't prepared for an extended snow-trek. The scenery had been beautiful, breath-taking actually. My legs had held up amazingly well, no screaming knees or knotted muscles, I was pleasantly surprised. And the work-out had been awesome. A substantial level of physical exertion from 9 or 10 in the morning until 3 or 4 in the afternoon, almost solid with only minor breaks. 4 passes in 4 days, 7.5 miles per day, we'd done pretty good for a couple of Okies!

It was great, a transcendental physical experience. My partner had been great, Mary was a pleasure to hike with, only making noise when I pushed her too hard, pulling more than her own share of the deal the rest of the time. The whole thing had been exceptional, a really significant experience in my life. I loved it, every bit of it, except maybe carrying out the toilet paper and not washing my shirt, I didn't like that. But it was a small price to pay for walking through such a magnificent place.

So! A couple of weeks after I got back, a sporting goods place was selling out it's stock of backpacks and I saw a JanSport D-3 external frame pack at what looked like a price I couldn't refuse. It felt good, I wanted to try an external frame pack, another person I knew had a JanSport and liked it a lot, I bought it. It has started, the obsession. It will go on for a while, I'll probably get a new pair of boots soon, probably a water filter of my own. I'll lighten up my accessories as much as I can, I'll do things I have laughed at other folks for doing, but I won't care.

I know what power this stuff gives me, what a feeling of independence I can have marching through the woods or over the desert or across a high, cold rocky pass, totally self-contained and focused on nothing but the trail ahead. It's like a lot of other outdoor activities, "You won't know until you go!"

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