

Yosemite and Eastern Sierra Sep 30-Oct 1, 2006

Over the last few years, it has become a tradition to make a pilgrimage to the Eastern Sierra in the fall to see the changing of the seasons. I think it started in 2003 with a trip that started with mushroom hunting, which turned into camping by a hot spring, then seeing the glorious fall colors of entire aspen groves. I guess it left an impression on me, since I've wanted to go back every year.

They had been predicting pretty nice weather all week, but near the end of the week, the forecast suddenly changed, with a prediction of some possible rough weather. I remember the trip 2 years ago, when Saturday it was nice and sunny, then Sunday morning, it was snowing! I was one of the last ones over the Sonora pass (the Tioga pass was already closed) until the following June.

I was originally worried about not being able to go, since we had our monthly billing close to take care of at work. But thanks to our new automated system that would fire off a script at the appropriate time, we could let the system take care of itself! It wasn't until about Thursday afternoon I decided to go. I wasn't sure if I'd be able to make the trip this year, since I had plans for the following 2 weekends, and by 3 weeks later, it would probably be snowing already.

I had heard some interesting things about Ragged Peak and the Young Lakes in Yosemite, and that would work out nice for something on Saturday. Then on Sunday, I had wanted to visit the Kearsarge pass area in the southern Sierra. I ended up canceling a week-long backpack trip to the Rae Lakes (that's still on my list though) when I changed jobs recently, but you could enjoy some great views of that area with a day hike to Kearsarge Pass. As with many of my trips to the mountains, the most memorable part of the trip is rarely what you plan it to be. And this trip would be no different.

With my overnight bag packed and maps ready to go, I headed out just before 6:00 Saturday morning. The fog was pretty thick in the Bay Area - a little unusual for end of September. But as usual, it disappeared after I cleared the Altamont pass on 580 heading east. I relied on my usual Starbucks iced coffee drink to keep me going until Yosemite. The sun peeked above the mountains in a glorious sunrise as a few high clouds passed to the south.

I probably reached the park entrance around 9:00 or so, and reached Olmstead point by about 9:30. They had recently finished repaving and building some new trails near the point, so I went out to have a look. A couple people were out climbing around on the rocks in the distance - it looks like a new trail had been built there. The 8500 foot altitude gave me a bit of a wake-up call as I headed out to a viewpoint overlooking Yosemite Valley and Tenaya canyon. We had recently completed a traverse of Tenaya canyon about a month ago, and much of our traverse down the treacherous canyon was visible here. The unforgiving and smooth rock slabs dive many thousand feet into the canyon - remnants of the massive glacier which once flowed there. Looking the other direction revealed the high Sierra crowned by 12,590 ft Mt Conness and its thousand foot walls. A lenticular cloud probably 20 miles long was forming over the high peaks - today wouldn't be a good day to be on Conness, but it would sure have been a spectacular view. There was almost no wind at Olmstead point, however, and I watched as photographers gathered to take shots of the undulating waves in the clouds.

The forecast had recently been changed to partly cloudy with a 20% chance of PM showers in the valley - and in the high country, this can mean anything. The sky was pretty clear in the morning when I set out on the trail from the Lemberg dome parking lot toward Young Lakes. The lenticular cloud over Conness worried me a bit, since I was planning a summit of Ragged peak. I'd have to see how it went, since Ragged is only about 10,900 ft and doesn't stick as high above the terrain as Conness.

There were 2 main routes to Ragged peak - one from the south and one from the north. It looked interesting to combine them as a loop. The loop would go from the trailhead up a spur trail to the south side of a saddle, then up to the peak. Then go back to the saddle, and down the north side of the saddle to Young lakes. Then you could take the Young Lakes trail back - it was about a 10 mile loop.

It was nice and sunny in the beginning - a blue sky over the golden meadows near timberline. A couple deer were grazing by the edge of the forest. Several contrails zigzagged across the sky, intersecting with the wavy clouds to the east. Once my GPS indicated it was time to head toward the peak, I started heading cross-country past the alpine meadows at the base of the peak. It was pretty obvious where to head - only question was how far was it? It was easy to lose the sense of scale in the broad open terrain. Behind me stretched the entire Cathedral range - a row of pointed spires stretched across the horizon. I almost chose to visit Cathedral Lake and maybe one of the peaks on this trip - but I'd have to wait until next time. I later found out Sam was doing a traverse of the Matthes crest - the class 4 and easy 5 route is probably one of the most spectacular in the Sierra. I also found out Matt and Elizabeth were in the Sierra near Tahoe this weekend as well - trying to catch one of the last opportunities before the long winter set in.

It was a fairly easy trek to the saddle, and the peak looked really close now. However, it was still another 30 minute slog over sandy scree to the base of the summit block. The wind was starting to kick up a bit, and the clouds were thickening to the south. I figured it'd probably be a rather short stay at the summit. The lenticular cloud was growing, sometimes even looking like several layers stacked on top of each other. The last 20 feet or so to the summit looked a bit hairy - becoming class 3. Not too hard, but a bit exposed, and with the winds probably kicking up to 40-50 mph, I didn't want to get spooked and slip on the sandy rocks with many hundreds of feet of exposure below. I didn't make the final move to stand on top of the summit block, but even from the base (which was nicely sheltered from the wind), it was a spectacular view - containing both the Young Lakes and the Conness range and several other lakes in the distance. The view the other way looked back across Tuolumne meadows toward the Cathedral range. A tasty Snickers bar at the summit and a bunch of photos (the stitching software would be pretty busy over the next few days), and it was time to head down.

Snow covered much of the north side of the saddle - care had to be taken to go around it, since it was actually frozen into solid ice, like a glacier. This last year was a record snow year, and glaciers and snowfields were there that weren't on any of the maps. I could always have gone back the way I came, but the loop is always a lot more fun. The snowfield headed straight down toward the lower Young lake, and the headwall of Mt Conness capped by the giant flying saucer loomed ahead.

The wind died down almost immediately on the north side of the pass, and it was a fun "scree-surf" down the sandy slope next to the snowfield down toward the lake. The water was almost dead calm, reflecting the turbulent sky above like in a mirror. A lone backpacker was getting ready to set up his tent in a shelter cave by the lake, planning on a summit attempt of Conness the next morning. I warned him of the weather and that the wind was supposed to be worse. I wonder if he made it - we never exchanged contact information so I never found out. The day Matt C took us to Conness was in the summer last year, and it was a perfect sunny day, and the wind was probably still blowing about 40 mph at the summit.

The upper Young Lake was only about 1/2 mile away, and it was worth the short detour across the open tundra landscape. The grass and low bushes had mostly turned a brilliant red color - almost like if the ground was on fire. Winter was just around the corner and it was like the vegetation was taking its last dying breaths before the 7 or 8 months of winter set in. The peaceful serenity of the landscape was very calming - almost like those scenes in the Himalayas where Buddhist monks do their meditations.

But it was about 6 miles back to the car, and thin clouds started to obscure the sun. The weather was on the way in. It felt longer than 6 miles since it had been a long day (being up since about 5:30), and it was starting to get chilly and a bit breezy in the late afternoon. I was back by about 4:00 and looking forward to getting something to eat. Back at the car, the clouds had thickened considerably and I was wondering a bit about tomorrow what it would be like.

Heading east on 120 down the back side of Tioga pass, I passed the gem like Tioga and Ellery Lakes - snow from last years record season was still clinging to the slopes. Soon afterward, the landscape gave way to a barren landscape of steep talus slopes and the tall pines gave way to smaller desert shrubs. Golden stands of aspens stood by the creek in the canyon. As I turned the next bend, a seemingly magical sight came into view - the desert in the distance was lit in a shimmering afternoon sunlight. It almost seemed to be hanging in mid-air. The mountains held back the mountains, tearing a gap exposing the blue sky above, through which the sun was shining.

I had a quick bite to eat at the usual Lee Vining Mobil station - where 120 meets 395 near Mono Lake. It has become the tradition to try to visit at least one hot spring on a trip to the eastern Sierra, and I've never been disappointed. I saw that the sun was getting low and time was running out - I didn't want to try to navigate unfamiliar dirt roads in the dark.

The timing couldn't have been more perfect, however. As I was nearing Wild Willy's hot spring south and east of Mammoth, I saw the clouds had been shaped by the wind into a huge wave-like pattern. It was a classic "Sierra Wave" caused by the extreme topography of the mountains interacting with the leading edge of a storm front coming from the west. The late afternoon colors turned from yellow to orange to pink, and eventually to a vivid red all the way across the sky. It was one of those sunsets to remember, it was like a red wave to the west, and a deep crimson band to the east. In fact when I met up with my friends at church next Sunday - they had all remembered it as well from all different parts of the Sierra.

It's interesting it seems like many things in nature are the most brilliant before passing on. The fall colors are most brilliant right before the leaves fall and die. The tundra was the most beautiful right before being covered in snow for many months. Here the sunset

was the most brilliant - the day was fading quickly and it would be dark soon. The salmon in Alaska would turn a bright red while spawning and their bodies would decay soon. Even many stars turn into red super giants shortly before their deaths. It's a pattern in nature that seems to have been scripted. It had been a fun summer and I had gotten to visit a few places, but I figured this would be my last trip to the mountains for this season - the high Sierra climbing season was passing on.

It was a magic moment lying in the hot spring, sharing stories and beers while soothing the muscles. All this while the gorgeous fireworks were happening above. My only regret was I had left my camera in the car - I didn't want it to get wet, and I didn't really expect to have much to take a picture of. Murphy's law proved true again!

It was just a few more miles south toward Bishop. I was still a little hungry and grabbed a burger before checking into the motel in town. It was about 8:30 and I was tired - having been up since about 5:30 in the morning. I guess it's a fairly sleepy town - the front desk was almost closed when I got in!

Sunday

-----

The weather forecast had been revised to chance of PM showers - I had been debating which hike to do, and if it was worth getting up early. I had the maps and directions for the hike to the Kearsarge pass area and up to a nearby 13000 ft peak. But with the wind and iffy weather, I didn't want to get caught in heavy wind and clouds. I had my Sierra hiking guide handy, and there were a couple other hikes on my list to do sometime. I ended up visiting the Big Pine creek canyon up to the first and second glacial lakes at the base of the Palisade crest. This was a bit shorter, and if the weather was OK, it would allow some time for visiting some places on the way back to the bay area.

I had a quick breakfast at the motel - my usual breakfast bars, fruit, and Starbucks coffee drink (much better than motel coffee!). I was probably on the road by about 7. Clouds in the east obscured the sunrise, but it was mostly clear overhead as I headed south toward Big Pine. I was looking for Glacier Lodge Road - according to the book you head 9 miles west to the trailhead. But a sign for that road never turned up. I saw a turnoff on Crocker Road which indicated there was a campground 9 miles to the west, so that had to be it - how many roads into the mountains could there be from the tiny town? It turned out in a couple blocks, Crocker Road turned into Glacier Lodge Road!

There were 2 trailheads about 1/2 mile apart - hmmm, which one to take? The "you are here" dots at both trailhead signs said the same thing! There were more cars at the first one and almost none at the other, so I went with the obvious choice. I was surprised to see how many people were out on the trail - I think many of them were on backpack trips and maybe doing summit attempts of the 14ers on the Palisade crest. I hope they weren't getting caught in high winds at 14000 feet.

The trail headed up the Big Pine creek canyon - looking straight up toward Middle Palisade and the Norman Clyde glacier high above. It was quite an intimidating view - I've heard it was possible to summit in a day trip, but most people spend several days or even a week on a mini-expedition and hit several peaks. The sky was mostly clear - just a few high clouds. I wondered when the clouds for the "PM showers" were going to show up. They were probably waiting on the far side of the mountains, but at least the weather held up nicely for now.

The trail turned to the north and followed the north fork of Big Pine creek, heading past a waterfall surrounded by brilliant yellow aspen groves. The fall colors is one of the things that bring me back to the mountains in October - and this time, the trail went through some of the prettiest groves. The trail started in desert shrubs, but now started to enter forests of tall pine trees - appropriate for Big Pine creek.

In another mile or two, the trail went up to the first couple glacial lakes - very pretty lakes with very uninspired names - First Lake and Second Lake. Actually there are 7 lakes all following the same uninspired naming convention. But the lakes were a stunning turquoise color - colored by the glacial flour coming down off the massive Palisade glacier above. I heard in about 2 more hours, you could reach Sam Mack Lake and the edge of the Palisade glacier which then reaches all the way to the peak of North Palisade. Many people camp out there for a summit attempt of North Pal. It would be a fairly strenuous climb to the base of the glacier, and I could have probably done it, but I'd have to save it for another day.

I always love being surrounded by the serenity of the pristine wilderness. It's great to be able to just go a couple miles and enter a land that seems to be appreciated by so many people, but actually only visited by a few. I only saw a few people on the trail - maybe since in the fall, not as many people think to visit these places. But in a way, that makes it more special. And this area hadn't been commercialized - no fees, no frills, and no billboards (but you have to know your way - especially when the signs aren't so good!). The wilderness shouldn't need anything added - it speaks for itself.

On the way back down, I met up with a young couple who had just summited Split mountain. That's also one of the 14ers next to North Pal. They had thought about doing North Pal, but with a 4th class exposed climb on rotten rock with 50 mph winds, they thought otherwise. I probably would have too. Split is much easier and less exposed, but is still quite a worthy climb. The couple was camped in Sam Mack meadow, and they also mentioned about the spectacular sunset last night. They said it had even snowed a bit overnight but then all cleared by the morning.

The clouds were thickening again as I headed down, and the wind was picking up. I was glad to be down by about 2:00. It'd be about 5 1/2 hours to get back. Without stops, it'd be about 7:30, but it's nice to be able to break it up a little. As soon as I hit 395 north, I looked back, and the high peaks were all enveloped in clouds! They were right - the weather was coming in fast. I was starting to wonder if I'd get caught in snow again on the way back - like 2 years ago.

It was worth a quick detour to visit the lava bluffs of the Crooked Creek canyon by Tom's place - the 50 ft sheer lava walls drop straight down to the river which feeds Crowley lake. The walls are pockmarked with air bubbles - like the sandstone walls full of caves at Castle Rock. It'd be fun to come back with climbing gear and check out some routes. A little further up, near the June Lake loop is Devil's Punch Bowl. A dirt road heads east - one of the features on the "volcanic auto tour". I've found on most eastern Sierra trips, I've been able to visit a hot spring and a volcanic feature - like Devil's Postpile, Black Point, or Obsidian Dome. Devil's Punch Bowl looked like a massive blast crater - like Ubehebe crater in Death Valley. It was probably 500 feet wide - it must have taken quite a bit of force to blast it. Interestingly, the sandy crater was full of 4WD tracks - some people had ridden their ATVs straight up the crater walls, pulling tight 180s in the sand

and heading straight back down! It looked like a lot of fun. The sand was steep - probably 40 degrees - I just hope nobody flipped their ATV's over!

It was still sunny with mostly blue sky, but as I headed north past the Deadman Summit north of Mammoth, the sky started getting dark and sheets of rain were covering the eastern slopes of the mountains. It didn't start raining until I started up 120 toward the Tioga pass, and then the rain got heavier and heavier as I headed uphill. The pass wasn't closed - a good sign - so it wasn't snowing. This pass is always the first to close if there was any snow.

It was comforting in a way to see the rain nourishing the landscape again - I had gotten used to and enjoyed the dry summer months, but it was like there was a deeper longing that was now finally being satisfied in seeing the life-giving rain returning. This weekend had definitely seen the changing of the season, and winter's long hibernation would soon be on the high country. I was starting to feel a need to settle down after being active much of the summer - there was a deep longing for rest for my soul for a while.

It was a rainy but otherwise uneventful drive back toward the bay area. The sky was a dreary dull grey through Yosemite and back toward the central valley. Ragged Peak was completely shrouded in clouds. I wondered if it was snowing on top. The clouds persisted for most of the drive home. However, about when I reached Oakdale, I noticed what looked like a bright band in the clouds way in the distance. And then another band. It was like someone took a knife and made cuts in the clouds, revealing the glorious sky above. Soon, the cuts became longer, and the sun even started to peek through one of the gaps. By the time I reached Manteca, a warm glow started to fill the sky, bathing the dull grey clouds with an orange light. Then quite suddenly, the entire sky turned a shimmering crimson red as the sun, now below the horizon, found its way through a distant cut in the clouds, illuminating the cloud deck from below. This shimmering sunset persisted for probably 15-20 minutes, long enough for me to stop by one of the orchards and get some pictures. I missed the pictures of last night's sunset, but this one was at least as spectacular. I thought the most memorable part of this trip might be Ragged Peak or the Palisade crest, but I think it ended up being the sunsets and how many parts of nature shine the most brilliantly right before passing on.

It had been a great trip, and the sunset was a beautiful icing on the cake. I was back home by about 8:30 - giving me enough time to briefly log into work (our monthly billing close had just started), and see that the scripts were running fine. After the hectic work schedule this last week, the trip was quite therapeutic, clearing the mind and giving me a fresh start again.

I think my annual pilgrimage to the eastern Sierra for the fall colors will probably continue for at least a while longer. Until next time...

THE END