

Mt Morgan and Eastern Sierra trip August 26-27, 2006

August 26

Ever since climbing Mt Whitney two years ago in August, I've made it a tradition to visit a high sierra peak each year. Last year, I went up to 13900 ft Mt Agassiz, and this year, I had planned to attempt Mt Morgan. This peak was also about 13900 ft - just shy of an official "14'er", but I've heard that the view was stunning from the summit. I was hoping for a nice weekend and that nothing would get in the way at the last minute - something from work, getting sick, or bad weather - and it looked like the odds were in my favor for this weekend.

I got up fairly early - mostly to beat the crowds getting into Yosemite. I was on the road about 5:30 - it was a dreary morning with heavy fog and even a bit of drizzle as I made my way across the seemingly endless San Mateo Bridge. I knew that normally the fog doesn't reach past the Altamont pass on 580, but this time it seemed to stretch forever. However, when I started climbing the hill toward the pass, I could see the windmills silhouetted in a brilliant red sunrise peeking underneath the dark clouds. It was going to be a nice day.

It was nice to not have to deal with traffic - going early on a summer weekend is almost a necessity, since if you left just an hour or two later, it would probably be a half hour wait just to get in to Yosemite, and you'd probably be stuck behind some RV for a half hour as well on the road! On this trip, I was able to reach Yosemite just after 8:00.

It is natural to combine a high sierra peak with a visit to Yosemite - since if you have to pay the \$20 just to go through the park, you might as well use it! Also the Tioga pass is the easiest way and probably the most scenic way across the Sierra, and you get some acclimatization in visiting the high country of Yosemite as well. Actually I had a parks pass, so I didn't have to worry about the \$20, but then I felt I wanted to use my parks pass some more...

This year, I had planned to hike to Dana Lake - a glacially scoured lake at the base of the peak with the same name. I remember when we were preparing for Mt Whitney two years ago, we climbed Mt Dana - a 13000 ft barren pile of brown boulders on the eastern edge of Yosemite. The peak itself was quite uninteresting, though it probably had the best view in all of Yosemite. Moreover, when I looked down the deep glacial-cut cliffs, I was awestruck by a series of brilliant blue lakes below. The farthest lake and largest lake was as deep blue as Crater Lake in Oregon, and on the map it looked like only about a 2-3 mile hike from near the Tioga pass. Since the Mt Whitney trip, I had always wanted to re-visit Dana Lake.

One of my favorite spots in Yosemite is Olmstead point - a turnout among a series of smooth granite domes with a great view of Clouds Rest and Half Dome on one side, and Tenaya Lake and the mighty west face of 12600 ft Mt Conness on the other. I had to go and have a quick look to warm up my camera. My heart was pounding even with a short walk up one of the clean granite domes, especially since I went from sea level to about 8500 feet in less than 2 hours. The normal view point was under construction, so I went up the dome on the other side of the road - it probably climbed 150 feet or so up granite slabs to the top. Stunted pine trees managed to hang on, clinging to cracks in the rock. This short walk was definitely a wake-up, and I realized I would have to take the Dana Lake hike slow, since the lake is above 11000 ft.

Right nearby the trailhead to Dana Lake was the trail to Bennettville, an old mining ghost town from the late 1800's. In my book, the hike looked short, and it would be a good warm-up for Dana Lake.

The trailhead is right by the campground by Tioga Lake just east of Yosemite at about 9500 feet. It was hard to believe long ago that this desolate place was once a mining boom town with hopes of expanding to thousands of people. I wonder if it once felt like Silicon Valley during the boom of the late 90's. Unfortunately, with harsh conditions and not as much gold as was hoped for, the miners abandoned the town looking for wealth elsewhere.

The trail followed the edge of the timberline, and in about a mile or so, it went up next to one of the mine shafts. It was worth taking a peek inside the dark tunnel. A shallow river flooded the tunnel, which I heard went back a good half mile or so. I didn't have a flashlight so I had to settle for a couple time exposure shots looking down the deep tunnel. A few snow patches still lingered by one of the creeks near a decent sized waterfall. Just a little further were two rustic cabins - the only remains still standing of the town. It was cool that some of the buildings had been restored recently - the rustic wooden buildings with a majestic backdrop of alpine meadows and Mt Dana rising in the background looked like something from an Ansel Adams photograph. It was a beautiful day and the scenery was wonderful - I wonder how often the weather was this nice - the high country near the Sierra crest often gets subjected to the worst weather with 100 mile per hour winds and blizzard white outs conditions.

Just behind Bennettville was Shell Lake, the first in a chain of lakes leading up past Fantail and Spuller Lake on the way toward 12000 ft White Mountain. I decided to do the short detour to Shell Lake, which was quite a view. I met an older couple who had planned to get all the way up to Spuller Lake - they said the lakes got prettier the higher up you go. Oh well - I'd have to save that for a future trip.

Back at Tioga Lake, I enjoyed a nice picnic lunch while soaking in an amazing view of the lake and the majestic peaks above. After a nice rest, I started up the trail in the opposite direction up Glacier Canyon toward Dana Lake. It was nice to not have to drive anywhere - both trails started at the same spot. The trail circumnavigated the scenic Tioga Lake for a while across a nice meadow, before heading into the woods and switchbacking up a steep slope along a creek. It was quite peaceful listening to the music of the creek and the sets of cascades down the steep slope.

The trees thinned rapidly, and the views started to open up toward the high peaks above. Shortly afterward, the trail went across some lush alpine meadows and up toward some rocky moraines. I had just been to Alaska about a month ago, and the scenery reminded me a lot of one of our hikes to the glaciers there. Here, instead of being at a glacier at 3000 feet, this was over 10000 feet - they said the difference in latitude was about equivalent to 6000-7000 feet of altitude.

I thought Dana Lake was just past the first rocky moraine, but after crossing the first ridge of boulders, I didn't see anything except another higher ridge of boulders. Then there was another rocky ridge of boulders. I wasn't about to turn around, having gone this far, but it was a bit discouraging to just see another painful pile of boulders. As the glaciers retreated long ago, they left a series of terminal moraines. Some of these moraines hide beautiful lakes today, and it takes a bit of patience to reach them, since the trail peters out when the meadows end and the boulders begin.

My patience was soon rewarded, however, as the first lake appeared behind about the fourth ridge of boulders. It was a deep turquoise color - so clear that you could see fish and even the rocks probably 30 feet down. It looked the color of the water in Hawaii - except not quite as warm - there were glaciers just next to the lake and the meltwater flowed directly into the lake. Some trout were swimming - I wish I had my fishing pole! I remember fishing in Yosemite one time and one of us could throw the bait right toward the fish and we'd watch the fish take the bait within a few seconds!

This lake was really pretty, but my GPS indicated that the best lakes were still yet to come. I had

forgotten from 2 years ago how many lakes there were, but I could tell there were still some ridges of boulders to cross. Across the next ridge of boulders were a couple more lakes - these were almost even still encased in ice and snow even though it was late August! Some backpackers at a camp nearby were fishing for trout in the frigid water - and there were plenty of fish. I wonder how they survived the winter, since it seemed like the lake would be totally frozen over. The water here was a deep emerald, again looking really inviting for a swim - at least a short one. But you'd have to be a polar bear club member!

Finally, one more ridge of boulders to go, and I finally reached the goal of this hike - the magnificent Dana Lake. This lake was probably the most beautiful blue that I had seen since Crater Lake in Oregon. The water was so clear - the visibility had to be at least 100 feet. Next time, I should bring my wetsuit and snorkeling gear and underwater camera! I've dived in 49 degree water in Monterey - I wonder if my wetsuit would be warm enough for the frigid Dana Lake. The lake reflected the towering 13053 ft glacier-covered summit of Mt Dana and the vivid blue sky above. It was a piece of heaven - and was really worth crossing all those boulders!

The boulders themselves were actually pretty interesting too - they were full of all different colored minerals - some were streaked with yellow, green, red, and brown layers. I know there was fairly extensive mining in the Yosemite high country - I'm sure there are still many valuable minerals in the rocks - but it would just be so much work to haul all the mining equipment out there and have people do hard physical labor at 11000 feet.

I met some climbers who were planning on climbing the Three Pillars near Mt Dana - it looked like there would be many great routes all around - there were deep ice-filled couloirs in the rocks making for some interesting climbs. I wanted to explore around a little more, but the altitude was starting to get to me a little (I started the day at sea level), and it was time to head down.

Back at the trailhead, I took some Advil and headed down the Tioga road down to Lee Vining toward Mono Lake. It was about 4:00 and still a really nice day. I had a little extra time to goof around - I just wanted to be in Mammoth by around 8. My book said there was an interesting hike around Black Point - just on the north side of Mono Lake. I had heard of it before, but didn't think there would be much there. But the book rated it pretty high. I really enjoyed exploring the slot canyons in the desert southwest on a road trip last year, and the book indicated that there were some interesting canyons in Black Point. Only these canyons were not formed in sandstone, but they were formed by fissures that formed in a lava flow when it cooled. The lava broke apart in a large labyrinth of cracks up to 50-60 feet deep and about 1-3 feet wide. Some are narrow enough that you had to slither through sideways.

The book indicated to take 395 north over to Cemetery road, where it turned to dirt and you had to look for a little non-descript sign pointing to Black Point. I was starting to wonder what it was going to be - maybe it was a hidden treasure that was just poorly marked, or maybe there wasn't really much to see. There were no other cars in the parking lot, and the signs were tiny - I was lucky to see them at all! At least it was a scenic view of Mono Lake. The altitude had gotten to me earlier, and I needed some time just to sit by the trailhead of Black Point. And I didn't want to be too worn out for tomorrow, when I planned to go up to Mt Morgan.

I was feeling better after drinking some water and resting a bit, so I started up the sandy trail toward the top of Black Point. The trail started branching out in all different directions up the black cinder-covered hill - there was no official trail - hikers just weaved around the desert bushes up the hill, making their way past some volcanic outcroppings until they reached the fissures. I didn't quite know where to look for the fissures, or even what the fissures were supposed to look like, but I just tried to follow where most of the footprints led. I almost gave up looking at one point, since I was getting tired and didn't want to get too far from the car, and it was starting to get late.

My persistence paid off soon, however, when right in front of me past some bushes was a deep slot in the ground. It looked like a deep slot canyon with a sandy bottom and footprints where people had walked and explored the canyon. This was like a dream come true - I remember in our trip to Bryce and Zion a few years back, one of my favorite parts of the trip was exploring the slot canyons. And here I was, exploring a slot canyon I didn't even know was going to be there! The canyon branched off in all different directions, luring me to explore the different passageways. It took a little exploring to find a good spot to enter the canyon, where the walls were low enough that you could easily drop down in. The trail description said it would be a 3 hour hike, even though it was only about 2 miles roundtrip. I wondered why it would take so long, and I'm sure I could finish it in an hour or so, but I realized later that this was 1/2 hour to get there, 1/2 hour to get back, and it took 2 hours just to explore around the canyons! I felt like I could spend all day, exploring the maze of passageways, some of which were so narrow and dark it was almost like being in a cave. There were multiple mazes of canyons, some of which connected, and some didn't - you had to climb out one side and climb back in a different way. The walls of the passages looked like they were coated with molten lava, and deep pockets were in the walls everywhere. Some of these pockets looked like giant air bubbles 3-4 feet in diameter, and you could see where the bubbles on one wall lined up with the bubbles on the other wall, since the crack split right through a bunch of the bubbles. This would be such a fun place to practice your chimneying skills and also just to rock climb a bit - the walls had so many features that would be fun to climb on. It was also a photographer's paradise - the light bounced off the walls in all sorts of hues.

The sun was starting to get low and I knew it was probably time to get rolling again. I would have to re-visit Black Point and see some more of it - at least now I knew what to look for. Back on the Cemetary Road heading toward 395, I decided to pull out at one of the Mono Lake county parks right on the way. It was interesting to see what the level of the lake once was, and to see how much it had dropped after much of the water was to provide for thirsty LA! Fortunately, with an act recently passed, the lake level is being allowed to come back up to its level in 1964 at 6391 feet. The lake was once 30 feet higher than that many years ago. The lake still has about 7 more feet to go, and unfortunately, this means that many of the tufa towers (which originally formed underwater) will be covered once again, and some of the wonderful bubbling hot springs that we once soaked in will be covered again. But this was at least a small victory for the environmentalists out there.

I was wavering in my decision to visit a hot spring that evening - many of my Eastern Sierra trips involve a visit to a hot spring. But I was getting hungry and the Mobil restaurant was calling. A nice sunset meal of fish tacos at one of the picnic tables in the back overlooking Mono Lake quenched my hunger for the day. I continued south on 395 toward Mammoth where I checked to a Motel 6 for the night. A nice swim in the heated pool under the stars substituted for the hot spring.

August 27

Today was the big day for a summit attempt of Mt Morgan. The day dawned cool and clear as I rolled out of bed around 6:00. After a brief breakfast in my room I packed and checked out and was soon on my way on 395 south toward Tom's Place. The majestic music of Vivaldi made for a perfect setting as the morning light was hitting the high peaks.

The turnoff was onto Rock Creek Road heading up to the Little Lakes valley at over 10000 feet. This road is actually the highest trailhead in the Sierra, and it gives you the best head-start for climbing a high peak. The desert sagebrush rapidly turned into bigger bushes and juniper trees as the road climbed, and soon aspen trees and tall pines were all around. A hitchhiker was looking for a ride up the hill - he was carrying a decent size pack. I'm normally a bit weary about picking up hitchhikers

and my first thought was to just drive by. But this guy was clearly looking for a ride to the trailhead, and you wonder how many cars would be passing by. His name was Wolfgang and he spoke with a rather thick German accent, but he was fun to talk with. He had planned to have breakfast at the Rock Creek lodge, then head up to the Mono Pass and Mt Starr. That had originally been my idea as well, but upon hearing about Mt Morgan, I decided to head that way for the day.

I dropped him off in front of the lodge, and headed over toward Rock Creek Lake. The turnoff was a bit obscure and took a couple tries to find it, especially in my foggy state of mind - I'm not exactly a morning person. But I soon found it, and Rock Creek Lake was like a perfect mirror reflecting many high peaks above.

Thanks to summitpost and topozone, I had some decent maps and directions on the easiest route to the 13800 ft peak. I got my GPS warmed up and got ready to hit the trail. The trail started from the Tamarack Lakes trailhead and headed over past Lake Francis. From there, the peak was pretty obvious, and the easiest route was just to head up along the ridge until the summit. It was quite chilly - in fact some of the cars had frosting on the windshields, and it was probably still around the freezing mark. The trailhead was just under 10000 feet - a little before the end of the road, and even on a summer morning, it is often below freezing, especially when it's been a clear night.

It was a great place to find some solitude - not many people were out on the trail - I guess Mt Morgan doesn't get as many people as many of the more famous peaks, but the view from the summit rivals the view from any of the big peaks. The route is class 2 all the way after Lake Francis - just a bunch of boulder hopping - nothing technical. You still had to be a bit careful - since often the boulders were loose and you could turn an ankle or a rock could roll over your leg. Also, the altitude was somewhat non-trivial.

It was a fairly pleasant hike up to Lake Francis - crossing through some nice forest and lush meadows. The trail split several times, heading to some of the other lakes - you had to pay attention, since you had to know you were first heading toward Tamarack Lakes, but then turning off before Tamarack Lakes and heading toward Francis. None of the signs in the beginning said Francis. The lake was so tranquil - reflecting Mt Morgan as a mirror. It was probably about 10 am now, and the wind was still totally calm.

Just past the lake, the trail petered out, and the easiest way on was to cut over cross-country to a ridge, with some bushwhacking and boulder-hopping. The trees rapidly thinned out, leaving a bunch of bushes and grasses and some alpine wildflowers. Patches of sand lay between the rocks, and sometimes it was like walking on a big beach. The ridge was quite smooth and made for easy walking, which was quite nice. Mt Morgan was actually hidden now, and the peak visible ahead was actually now a different peak - but I knew I just had to continue following the ridge up.

Occasional patches of blue and purple flowers dotted the rocky landscape - braving the harsh elements at 13000 feet. Soon, the ridge merged with a broad plateau, which was covered with carpets of what were like yellow daisies. It was strange to see more flowers at 13000 feet than anywhere else on the hike. It was also interesting seeing wide broad plateaus mingled with the steep rugged cliffs all around. It was like the mountains used to be pretty smooth before the glaciers came and scoured out deep canyons and cliffs all around. This place was like an alien planet - long streaks of snow covered parts of the plateaus, and ragged peaks stuck up like fingers - in fact, the peak next to Morgan is called Broken Finger peak.

The views got more splendid as I followed the ridge up to the summit - Rock Creek Lake was visible far below, followed by Long Lake, Chickenfoot Lake, Gem Lakes, and many others. Mt Starr and the Mono Pass were on the other side of the Little Lakes valley - I wondered how Wolfgang was enjoying

his hike. Just ahead were so many lakes and jagged peaks - Mt Dade, Abbot, and Bear Creek Spire flanked by glaciers. Many of the lakes in the distance looked like Dana Lake - some were tinted turquoise by the glacial flour. The hills far away also looked pretty smooth, but I bet they were actually covered with boulders, just like the hike to Dana Lake. Countless peaks extended seemingly to eternity, and I took so many pictures - I'd have to get a map out later and try to identify some of them.

I was the only one on the summit - I was actually a bit surprised to not see anyone else there at the moment. I found the register and did my duty to sign it. My GPS registered about 13750 feet - pretty accurate. Just as I was enjoying a snack and the view, I saw some people far below coming up the ridge toward the summit. There was one guy by himself, then a group of about 3 others. I decided to wait and say hi before heading down. The lone guy came up first, and I thought he looked a bit familiar - it turned out to be Wolfgang! His original plan was Mt Starr, but when he had breakfast at the Rock Creek Lodge, one of the rangers was recommending Mt Morgan since the weather was so good. Also, when he knew I was planning Mt Morgan as well, he changed his mind at the last minute. And how we were re-united on the summit!

The other 3 climbers reached the summit, and one pulled out a great map of the central part of the Sierra. We started trying to identify peaks - Red and White mountain and Red Slate mountain and even Ritter and Banner to the north, Mt Humphreys, Mt Tom, and Mt Darwin to the south and White Mountain Peak to the east. We could make out the mining roads leading up to the Avocet tungsten mine to the south as well - I thought Bennettville was in a desolate area - this mine was really remote... The other climbers were from Bishop and one guy said he could see his house through the binoculars!

Thanks Wolfgang for bringing an extra tomato to the summit - I felt like that would be the last thing I would pack on a hike, but it sure tasted good! Wolfgang and I decided to head down together - it was nice to have some company for a bit. We headed down the bowl instead of the ridge - it looked much easier. However, it led us to a rather steep and loose boulder pile, causing us to regret our decision a bit. Taking care to not step on a loose rock and hurt my ankle or cut my hand or something, I headed down slowly. Wolfgang headed down a ways behind me as to not accidentally knock a rock down on me.

It was a rather uneventful hike back down the mountain, but I felt like I noticed a lot more things - the flowers seemed to have bloomed a bit more, Lake Francis seemed even more picturesque, and the smell of the trees seemed a bit sweeter. I guess on the way up, most of my thoughts are of how to get up the mountain, but on the way down, I could stop and "smell the roses" a bit. I felt now that my goal was accomplished, and everything else was like icing on the cake. Wolfgang and I swapped stories for a while - of my experiences in Alaska and his stories of trekking in the Alps in Europe. I could tell he missed being in the Alps, and it made me want to visit there someday.

We were back down at my car at around 3:00 - about a 7 hour hike. I remember seeing in the summit register that someone made it all the way to the top in under 2 hours! I guess he must have been already well acclimated to the altitude and in really good shape... It probably took me 3.5 hours up and 2.5 down with an hour at the summit. It turned out he needed a ride back to the Rock Creek Lodge - his family had actually been staying there for a few days vacation. Today was their last day, and Wolfgang's day alone to attempt a peak - his wife and kids weren't into long hikes so they just relaxed around the lodge. We parted ways at the lodge and swapped contact info so we could share pictures afterward. He'd probably be back in LA about the time I'd be in the bay area. Maybe we'd meet again in the mountains sometime.

I thought about visiting a hot spring on the way back - it was a pleasant 65 degrees or so when I

reached the car. However, I forgot about how much the temperature changed with altitude, and when I got to the Long Valley where the hot springs are, it was probably at least 90 degrees outside - not the most pleasant weather for a soak... So then I went over to visit Hot Creek, since there you can swim in the cool river and do a hot spring at the same time. However, Hot Creek was closed - there was some recent volcanic activity, and the behavior of the springs was a bit unpredictable. In the interest of public safety, the whole place was closed to swimming - oh well. I'd have to find something else.

Back on 395 heading north, I filled up at the Lee Vining Mobil again, and headed back west on 120. It was nearing sunset when I reached Tenaya Lake, but it was still fairly warm. I know the lake is a popular swimming spot in the summer so I decided to relax on the sandy beach a bit and go for a short swim in the cool water. It was a great way to unwind after a long hike to rejuvenate a bit before the long drive back to the bay area. The last rays were hitting the beach and 10000 ft Tenaya peak above me in a golden light.

I was hoping it would last a little longer, but the sun soon went behind some hills and the temperature started dropping. It was getting late and time to get on the road again. The drive back seemed longer than the drive out, and the traffic seemed to keep slowing - maybe it was just my imagination - I was pretty tired after a full weekend and looking forward to my warm bed. I ended up logging almost 300 pictures, one of which I later submitted in a national photo contest. I was back home and in bed by around 10:00 - it was a great weekend and I'm already looking forward to the next one. What will be next high sierra peak to try?