

## Yosemite and Eastern Sierras Sep 26-27, 2009



### **Introduction**

This was probably my 5th or 6th annual Eastern Sierra trip now, which has developed into a pattern over the years. The high Sierra has become a refuge and place of peace and where I could spend a weekend as a spiritual retreat.

It was great to be able to look forward to this trip each year. The Sierra seems to have endless opportunities that I would never get bored with. The pattern had developed of visiting some area in the high country of Yosemite, maybe visiting a hot spring or two, maybe visiting some interesting geological area in the eastern side and hitting a high sierra peak the next day (since the first day gave a bit of acclimatization, making the second day much easier) .

This year, I was pretty familiar with most of the area and it was nice to know I could go and just enjoy the area. Initially, these trips had been more of like an adventure with many unpredictable elements, but it was nice this time to know I could do the elements I enjoyed best. The weather

was predicted to be beautiful so I knew I could just take my time on the hikes and enjoy the scenery - no mosquitoes and no thunderstorms...

It had been very busy the previous few weeks at work after I had recently gotten back from my Russia trip - I guess there had been a bit of adventure with that (and with an interesting crisis at work when I got back!), so I felt I needed a bit of peace and quiet for a bit. I enjoy getting out to the Sierra every year and since this year much of my energy had been focused on the Russia trip, I hadn't really thought of the trip this year so much. It wasn't until a couple weeks after I got back that I started to digest the Russia experience and get things under control at work. I suddenly realized I had a free weekend and when I went to check the weather and found the forecast to be ideal, I could make a trip.

Actually when I was thinking about where to go, it was like plans for a Sierra trip had been in hibernation for a long time. When I suddenly realized I could go, I rapidly started digging through the cobwebs of my mind of some ideas. I started with some simple ideas - a short hike in Yosemite and an easy peak just to say I got out. My expectations were low. But I started thinking that I was setting my goals too short - it was like God was saying to try something bigger and He would go with me. I hemmed and hawed a bit, afraid of trying something too big, as if I was afraid God didn't show up and I would have been on my own.

The high Sierra and the lakes is always such a pristine environment - pretty much unspoiled by man. I feel though that as our lives get busier and more stressful that it is even more necessary to take time away and rejuvenate. It's healthy to have a period of reflection - being out in nature gives a great environment to reflect on the Lord and what things are really important. Being in the mountains, I realize how small our lives really are and how even our greatest accomplishments seem trivial. Seeing glacial cut valleys where rivers of ice have carved through thousands of feet of solid rock put things into perspective.

God commanded us to observe the Sabbath once a week - I feel that is for our own good - having a devoted time to spend aside from our daily work activities to focus on the Lord. It is like taking a "sacrifice of praise". I had wondered what this phrase meant and how worship could feel like a sacrifice, but it does involve an intentional time to get away to the point of laying all the burdens aside and focusing on the Lord. I knew I had to evaluate what was really important - what could be put off for a few days and what needed attention right away. It taught me how to be more focused in our daily living. Supposedly Martin Luther was very busy, but even so, he would spend hours a day in prayer to deal with all his issues, and during extra busy times he would spend even more time. It was as if God honored that time spent resting in Him, and He would multiply the time, sort of how like He multiplied the fish and the loaves - we just had to trust Him.

By the time I finally was underway on the trip, I felt a sense of peace that I was doing the right thing - I know God honors the time we spend with Him and the cares of work and our busy lives become mere shadows in His presence. The mountains provide a feeling of eternity and I feel that maintaining an eternal perspective is healthy and God rewards our effort to seek it.

## Saturday

It was an early wake-up call - seems like it is never much fun getting up early to start a journey. Often, I've had a great vision when thinking about these trips, but I easily lose that sense of vision when the reality of planning the trip hits. Often it's not until a ways into the trip that I feel the sense of purpose returning. But I've never had any regrets by the time I got back from these sorts of trips. It's just a long enough journey getting out to the mountains that it feels like I've gotten somewhere worth going - if it was too close it would feel like too trivial of an effort.

After a quick breakfast and getting my overnight things in the car, I was off, heading east on highway 237 and then over to 580 and 120 toward Yosemite. The familiar landmarks passed by - the windmills over the Altamont pass (the morning sun had just risen over the mountains far away, giving a blinding wake-up call), the lava table-lands in the foothills, the enormous pile of logs just past the 108/120 split (and the sprinklers were still going as usual), then the Priest grade (closed temporarily for re-paving) and the Don Pedro reservoir (pretty low, but at least not as bad as last year).

Turned out it was a free entrance day in Yosemite - I think the government is trying to encourage more people to use the parks (which was interesting in contrast to the state threatening to close a bunch of the state parks just a few months ago!). About 20 miles along 120, I reached the May Lake turnoff. My coworker had just hiked the high Sierra trail between May Lake and Glen Aulin so we'd get to compare notes afterward (in a way I took this as a sort of "validation" that I was going to the right place). Fortunately the fires that had plagued part of the park were all out by now (which closed Glen Aulin and the road east of Crane Flat). The air was actually remarkably clear - in fact you could glimpse the rounded forms of the east bay hills from Yosemite, so any remnants of smoke had long since vanished. I felt that was also a sense of "validation" that I had gone at the right time.

I've always liked the idea of planning something fairly simple but giving the options of extending the hike and exploring the area - instead of committing to something in particular. My route for today was just to take a cross-country route to Tuolumne peak and explore some of the lakes on the back side of the ridge, and then see what else there was nearby. One could hike the peak in just a few hours otherwise. I had actually already been to Tuolumne Peak on a YAF Yosemite trip several years ago and we went through some amazing granite backcountry on our way to the peak. But on the way we got caught in a snowstorm and the clouds lowered to cover the peaks - it was kind of spooky being buried in the clouds, but fascinating to be in such an other-worldly environment. I was eager to go back and see it again (in sunny clear weather this time!)

I felt lucky to meet a couple soon on the trail - they were just returning from backpacking and had talked with a park ranger recently who recommended seeing a couple of the lakes just over the ridge and exploring by the "Calcite mountain" - I hadn't originally thought about going that way, but it didn't look like it would be that much longer, so I decided to change the loop a little. It ended up being quite an interesting side-trip to a seldom-seen part of the backcountry (even though it was only a mile off the main trail, it felt very remote). The contrasting shapes and colors of the rocks were stunning.



Hiking up the ridge was spectacular - it consisted of acres upon acres of open granite slabs tilted at about a 20-25 degree angle. The angle was fairly steep but still easy enough to walk straight up. The views of the park opened up in a grandiose fashion with every step. The slabs angled up with steps every so often, and with a series of these steps in front of me, it felt like ascending a stairway to heaven. May Lake lay at the base of the slabs and the familiar landmarks of Half Dome and Clouds rest were just beyond. The air was clear enough to even catch a glimpse of the hills east of the Bay Area - probably 150 miles away! The hike was tiring but was so captivating it was hard to stop.



Many of the meadows were in full color - a brilliant deep burgundy red, signaling the end of the short summer in the high Sierra. The sense of peace was wonderful - a serene beauty was all around. And the fact not many people went over the ridge made it that much more special. One of the lakes reminded me of Rio de Janeiro - surrounded by granite spires reminded me of Sugarloaf peak right by the beach. Except this was 10,000 ft higher and there was no cable car to the summit!



I heard the whirring of helicopter blades in the distance - it seems like almost every hike in Yosemite is interrupted by a helicopter somehow - somebody gets hurt or something... hopefully they weren't going to land right where I wanted to go (last year, the helicopter landed right at the swimming hole we were using and we had to leave early!) But this helicopter was passing in the distance where I noticed a faint plume of smoke. It looks like a wildfire had kicked off on the other side of the ridge but I couldn't see it very well yet. I started to have doubts - what if that fire was along a road that I needed to travel (like last summer on Matterhorn, the fire blocked 108, forcing a 1.5 hour detour and I got home around midnight!) But this fire looked small and they were probably just monitoring it. After a couple passes, the helicopter left.

I had to stop at one of the lakes behind the ridge - at over 10,000 feet there was virtually no vegetation and it was mostly granite slabs and boulders. The water was a shimmering sapphire blue - beckoning for a swim. A couple small snow patches went down to the water on the far side - but I pretended they weren't there (so the water wouldn't seem as cold!). After testing the water I found it was tolerable and I could handle a short but "brisk" swim. I slowly got in past my knees - but this seemed like torture and just postponing the time to get used to the water. So I went up to about a 10 ft ledge and cannon-balled in the clear water - the bottom looked like it was another 10 ft deep or so, so should be perfectly safe. But upon entering the water, I realized there was a severe thermocline at about 3 feet (the top 3 feet were reasonably warm and below that it was seemingly freezing cold!) If I were standing in the water above my chest, my feet would be turning numb pretty quick! I moseyed around with a shallow backstroke along the surface and that was quite relaxing. Gazing up at the clear blue sky above and the towering granite walls around, it gave a serene sense of peace - it felt like a piece of eternity was present at that very spot. Nobody else was around - just the peaceful whisper of the breeze - and a message from God's word from Psalm 61:2 came to mind: "From the ends of the earth I call to You. I call as my heart grows faint, lead me to the rock that is higher than I."



I dried off quickly in the warm sun - I hadn't planned on swimming and didn't have a towel handy, but that was OK. I continued traversing the base of the cliffs where the granite slabs weren't quite too steep. I could do a wider but longer traverse on easier slabs, but that wasn't as much fun! The imposing mass of Tuolumne peak grew closer - one side was almost a vertical cliff dropping probably 1000 feet below and the other side not looking much easier. hmmm - I knew I would have to keep things in check since I was reading a trip report about a climber who went alone off the trail and attempted a class 4 route and dislodged a large boulder and broke his ankle - he was lucky to make it back down alive. And then I read that was on one of the ridges of Tuolumne peak! My route didn't look like anything would be class 4, but it was enough to simmer down any cocky attitude out there.

I started gaining altitude on easier slopes which started traversing around Tuolumne peak and soon I was just a couple hundred yards below what appeared to be the summit. Most of the ledges were class 2, so a bit tedious but not difficult. The final ledge was probably class 3 for a short but interesting stretch, and I was soon pulling myself up over the last boulder to the peak. Or what I thought was the peak. I searched in vain for a register but found none. But the airy and exposed views more than made up for the lack of register!

Hearing voices just behind me, I turned around and saw a couple people headed toward another summit nearby - I looked and saw that it looked about the same height as where I was. hmmm - maybe that was the true summit and I was on a lesser summit (maybe by just a foot or 2). I figured I'd have to cover all my bases and tag them both just in case. Turns out the 2 folks were climbers who came up the east face (I think maybe a 5.7 or so) - they had left their gear and went to tag the summit. They were locals and one guy said he goes out climbing probably 100 days of the year! I wondered what kind of job he had that let them take so much time like that! And apparently his wife was very accommodating for his hobby!

I clambered over the class 3 ridge – actually a lot of fun since the weathered granite had many interesting shapes with good holds. We met on the other summit and again searched in vain for

a register - bummer. Oh well. Maybe the peak is too "easy" to deserve a register - it was only about 3 miles back to the trailhead on a pretty easy trail. For an "easy" peak, it was wonderful - all of Tuolumne Meadows with its signature granite domes was spread in panoramic view below me.



I remembered last time I was at this very spot feeling I was on some remote peak in the Himalayas – with the peaks all shrouded in clouds with only glimpses of other peaks poking through occasional breaks in the clouds – some layers of clouds were passing overhead and other layers were passing below us. It was an eerie sensation wandering amid the grey and white swirling clouds and jagged granite.

But today, it was all clear with pretty much unlimited visibility. I'd have to compare the pictures when I got back home – it was a great experience seeing the area with a whole new perspective. In an area where it seemed like confusion was all around last time, this time the curtain was pulled back and everything was vividly clear.

The hike back was indeed pretty uneventful and easy, but to break up the monotony, it was interesting to find a table and chairs set up near a meadow halfway back. It looked like some campers (or maybe park rangers) or somebody had carried them up and left them? I sat down for a moment and enjoyed a snack and perused a few pictures (which I had taken many more than I would have expected by now!) I didn't see any tents or campers nearby and the table and chairs seemed undisturbed so it seemed a bit strange. I may never know...

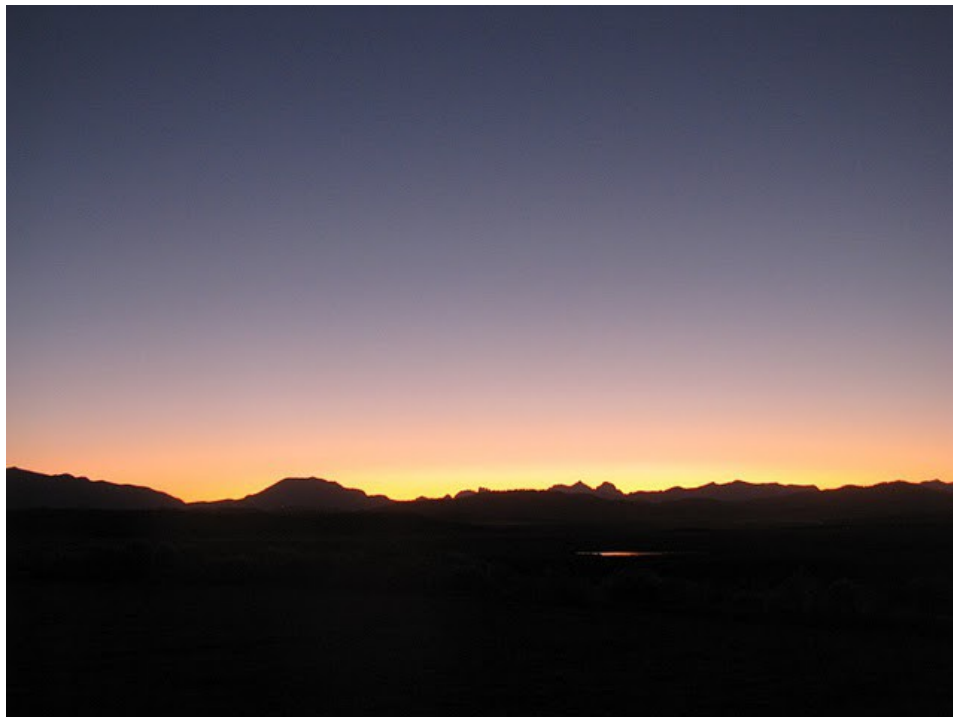
A little farther, I found a use trail which then became a pretty good trail (though slightly unmaintained in a couple places with some fallen trees). I met a couple who had been hiking back from the Polly Dome lakes and they were surprised to see anybody on that trail - they thought they were the only ones who knew about it! I thought it was the main trail back to May Lake, but when I checked the map, I realized the main trail branched off and this trail wasn't even on the map! Apparently it used to be a main trail to Glen Aulin but then it was abandoned.

Soon I was back at May Lake with the welcome sights of camp, knowing I was only about a mile yet to go. I met a family with a dog who were backpacking and returning from the May Lake High Sierra camp - I was surprised to see the dog (since I didn't think they were allowed in Yosemite). Actually dogs weren't technically allowed but maybe the ranger didn't really mind

(like the rule wasn't really enforced or he didn't care so much about the letter of the law) – it seemed too beautiful of a place for a ranger to spoil it with rules...

I enjoyed the company on the last part of the hike back – they were from nearby and had been to the park many times. The last mile or 2 can feel like drudgery many times on hikes, but we were back at the car sooner than expected. I was a little beat for this being the “warm-up” hike to prep for Mt Lamarck the next day, but it was very enjoyable. We parted ways and maybe we'll meet again someday...

I stopped at some of my usual spots – for a short dip in Tenaya Lake (the beach and shallow water are usually pretty warm), a stop at Ellery Lake to see the golden rays of the afternoon sun reflected in the lake, and an ice cream stop at the Whoa Nellie overlooking serene and alien-looking Mono Lake. I always enjoy traveling along highway 120 over the Tioga pass and then 395 on the east side of the Sierras - there is such a sense of grandeur of the mountains from the east side and not many people make it over there. The contrast of the desert and rolling hills with the jagged peaks high above is stunning. And I find the best way to enjoy this beauty is from the soothing waters of a hot spring. It was just getting dark at this time and the last golden rays were waning over Ritter and Banner and the Minarets far away - the sharp points like razors cutting the sky.



I've been to most of the hot springs by now so I like going back to the ones I enjoy the most. The hot pools out in the open desert make a perfect ending to the day. This time I picked Wild Willy's - enough people are usually there for interesting conversations and it also ensures that the springs are maintained enough to be enjoyable. Last time I was there, some guys shared a couple extra beers as we compared notes about the day's adventures. This time, we didn't



have the beer, but I met a couple from Colorado who came to the eastern Sierra for some climbing - interesting to see how they were going on a vacation from the Rockies to the Sierras - felt like they were saying that our mountains were better! They had just climbed Cathedral peak and were getting ready to climb Conness the next day. I had done Conness a couple years ago and it was great - I wished them all the best.

I could have soaked for hours, but after my skin was sufficiently wrinkled up I figured it was time to move on. I didn't need a flashlight to walk back since the moon was high overhead in the open desert and the sky was full of countless stars. I saw some other campers nearby and wish I were camping right there. But I also knew there was a warm bed waiting for me down in Bishop a little ways away.

It was about 8:00 by the time I reached Bishop about ½ hour further – I was happy with just a simple dinner and relaxation. At the McDonalds just down the street from my usual Motel 6 place, I met a group of bikers who had just finished the NdZone White Mountain double century - a grueling 200 mile bike ride starting from Bishop, climbing to over 10,000 feet in the Bristlecone pine forest, then down into some remote parts of NV where the wild horses still roam free, then making a wide loop back through Coleville and Basalt and Benton hot springs. It's part of the California triple crown of bike riding - where riders have to complete 3 double centuries within a year. It was humbling to meet these guys who had come from such an exhausting journey - it made my little "adventure" in Yosemite seem trivial. These guys had just finished almost 16 hours on their bikes and were ordering a triple-crown of big macs!

Back in the motel room, I enjoyed the burger and a nice bed and the movie "Happy Feet" - my feet were definitely happy to be resting in the warm bed for the night! The next morning I had planned to go up to North Lake and tackle Mt Lamarck.

## Sunday

Again it was a fairly early wake-up call in the morning, but I was already feeling energized with anticipation for another great day in the mountains. I was soon out of bed, having a quick breakfast with fruit and Danish and my usual Starbucks coffee drink. The Starbucks coffee definitely beats the cheap free coffee at the motel lobby, and it seems like after several of these trips, the taste of the Danish and coffee drink has developed a strong association with the anticipation of a fun day in the mountains. After checking out, I was heading west on 168 toward North Lake, just in time to catch the sunrise alpenglow on the craggy east faces of the mountains. It promised to be a great day.



The road went through the flat plain and then through undulating foothills until it reached the terminal moraine of the glaciers that once flowed down the great peaks ages ago. Again, I was struck by the contrast of the desert still in shadow with the sunlit high peaks above. I see how John Muir called the mountains the Range of Light. The verse came to mind about "as I wander in the darkness, I will seek the light". I was saddened to realize how many people are so used to the darkness they have forgotten that there even is a light that can be sought. The isolation on the road toward the light reminded me of that.

The aspen trees were starting to show their color for the fall and as I went up in elevation, it appeared that the season was moving in fast forward. Around 6000 feet, the trees were just barely starting to change near the top, and then around 7000 feet, they were more of a greenish yellow. Then around 8000 feet a deeper yellow, then at 9000 feet, they were bursting with color - appearing as rivers of gold, orange, and pink. The multicolored hues of the trees were reflected in the still waters of North Lake right near the trailhead. The colors were a bit muted in the morning shadow so I had to remember to come back after the hike and revisit them.

I remember the trailhead from hiking toward the Humphreys basin about a year ago - but this time, the trail to Lamarck Lakes soon branched to the left toward the lower Lamarck Lake. I had read online there is a trail almost all the way to Mt Lamarck itself, which was surprising, considering some of the rugged country it would have to pass. Just past Lower Lamarck Lake, a network of use trails split off to the left and I was a bit dismayed since the route wasn't very clear. Hiking to a small peak nearby to get a better view, I could see a decent trail in the distance and I knew that had to be it - a small "eureka" :-)

Hiking up the Lamarck Col trail, the Piute crags on the right reminded me of pictures of Dragontail peak. I was thinking of Sam my roommate who was up in Washington state on a 3-

day climbing trip there - it was cool to feel the camaraderie of knowing both of us were out doing what we really enjoyed and we could come back and compare notes afterward. They were calling for near-perfect weather in WA as well, so it appeared we'd both have ideal conditions for our trips! (later I found out he had a great trip with lots of great pictures).

The hike was going pretty well, even a bit better than expected, but then a little further on one of the steep parts I noticed a slight twinge and feeling of weakness in my right knee - I didn't think too much of it initially but I knew if it got more severe I could be in some trouble. So many times I take it for granted that I can always take my next step and that I'm always in control. Even though the pain never got very bad, it was enough to keep the right perspective. I knew the Lord watched every one of our steps – we can't take even one step for granted. I was reminded of a song from Rich Mullins -

*Step by step You'll lead me  
and I will ever praise You.*

I whispered a little prayer about the twinge in my knee and later I realized I hadn't eaten much since the beginning, and after a couple granola bars, the weakness almost immediately subsided and I was fine - it was probably a combination of the altitude, not eating enough and probably some fatigue from the previous day (and on my right side more than the left since I was traversing from right to left much of the day on the slabs on Tuolumne peak). The bars definitely helped and I'm sure God was with me along the way too. God just wants us to walk with him - we don't have to run - we just need to be faithful.

Above about 12,000 feet it was almost a surreal and barren landscape - the views all around were unhindered by anything in the foreground at this point. It felt like such a pure environment, so uncluttered, nothing to distract from the glory of the mountains all around. The trail was good all the way to Lamarck Col, which was surprising - I had expected much of it to be an off-trail scramble, so the surprise was welcome.



Most of the Lamarck Col itself was covered in ice - a small glacier lingered there, one of the last surviving remnants of the ice age and the enormous oceans of ice that once covered much of the landscape, leaving just the highest peaks sticking out. It's amazing to imagine the forces that carved the mountains and valleys all around, cutting through thousands of feet of solid granite rock.

From the base of Lamarck Col, it was a bit of a tedious boulder-hopping climb off to the side toward the summit plateau. I was going easy on my right knee just in case it would want to start acting up again - this would not have been the best place for it to give out! The large jumbled and angular slabs of granite were stacked in all directions, and the scale of the whole place was so much greater than originally thought. From afar, the peak looked pretty easy and the boulders not too bad, but it was deceiving.

But once I had surmounted the last angular granite slab, I found myself on what seemed like an "island in the sky" - a relatively flat and broad plateau with sharp and jagged cliffs going down most of the way around. The plateau was like a quadrangle with 4 corners, each providing a different view. I could just make out the town of Bishop far away and about 10,000 feet below - appearing as a green oasis in the brown desert. To the north I could just make out Ritter and Banner - some of the signature peaks in the whole Sierra. Countless peaks cut the horizon in the distance. To the south and west were the imposing massifs of Mt Darwin and Mendel, flanked by steep and crevassed glaciers flowing down like cascades of ice. Near the base of the glacier were a magical set of lakes, a light sky blue in color very much unlike the deep blue of the lakes lower down. One lake was emerald green in color with chunks of ice floating in the water along one side. They appeared like hidden gems in the mountains that very few people got to experience.

One of the corners of the summit quadrangle was out on a knife-edge granite ridge - I made a very careful traverse around one of the boulders to get the view, which extended down the deep and remote Darwin canyon sprinkled with lakes all around. In the distance, the canyon joined with the tree-filled Evolution valley, where the San Joaquin River flows on its wandering course through the rugged mountains toward the Central Valley far away. We often take the food at our dinner table for granted and we often forget the "heavenly storehouses laden with snow" that provides the water for California's agriculture. Next time I'm eating my vegetables at home, I have this new perspective. It was like glimpsing God in heaven and seeing how every good gift comes from above. Having this new perspective broadened my perception of thankfulness even in everyday affairs.



It was definitely an exhilarating experience being out on that remote summit - it was like a sanctuary and I could see how people since Biblical times would have worshiped mountains or thought the "gods above" lived on mountain peaks. Even though it wasn't the highest peak (Darwin is a few hundred feet higher), it felt like the highest one and that all of creation lay at my feet. But instead of worshiping the mountains, I knew I could worship the creator of the mountains who himself must be so much greater.

I gingerly stepped back off the knife-edge ridge back to the safety of the plateau and it soon occurred to me how glad I was that I didn't look down - there were excellent holds and I just stepped across the rock - it was actually pretty easy. But if the rock gave way or I slipped, it could have been pretty bad - a fall down the 500 foot cliff would not have been fun. I didn't really think about it much until afterward. I took a peek near one of the other edges of the plateau near a low wall of snow and soon realized on the other side of that wall, the snow dropped off probably 1000 feet at probably a 60 degree angle all the way down to a greenish

odd-shaped lake at the bottom. In "Happy Feet", some of the penguins slide down 1000 foot ice cliffs and surf across the ocean water - sure looked like a fun short-cut in the movie to slide down the glacier and surf across the lake... but I wasn't about to try it in real life!

I finally visited the "summit proper" where the register was. This summit wasn't the highest point so I'm not sure why they indicated it as the summit, but the register was there. It was fun perusing the names of the folks before that had been on that very spot - some people were dodging raindrops and lightning bolts during a thunderstorm, some were caught off guard in snow and clouds, some were trying to seek shelter from the wind, but many had a great experience and wrote poems and drew pictures. I wasn't at my most creative moment and just left my signature and location. It appeared I was the only one to reach the summit that day (I didn't see anyone coming up the trail for a while on the way down). I found the signature of Bob Burd, who had grown pretty famous in the Sierra community - his goal is to day-hike every one of the SPS peaks (some require 50 mile hikes!) - he had done Lamarck as well as 2 other peaks on the same hike - I was happy with just Lamarck - he must be obsessed!

It took less than 3 hours to get all the way back - plunge-stepping along the sandy trail was sure a quick way down (and much safer than trying to imitate the penguins!) The wind was calm and every one of the lakes reflected the craggy peaks above with mirror-like reflections. Being back in the trees after several hours with no vegetation, it smelled like Christmas. We always had a real tree at home in PA, and I counted the weeks until I'd be flying home to the family.

It was only about 4:00 and I actually had some time to enjoy the magnificent fall colors all around. It appeared God took a big paintbrush and with large orange and red strokes splashed the mountains with vivid colors. And if that wasn't enough, the still water of North Lake reflected all the majestic scenery. I had just gotten the latest CD from the MIT Cross Products (an a-cappella group that I sang in during college), and one of my favorite songs was there - Indescribable. It starts:

*From the highest of heights to the depths of the sea  
Creation's revealing Your majesty  
From the colors of fall to the fragrance of spring  
Every creature unique in the song that it sings*

The words rang so true as I headed back down 168 to bring a couple tears - I had to stop for a moment and let it soak in. To have God's poetry and music in nature shining as Chris Tomlin's song was playing was like a moment from heaven. And to think that heaven will be even so much greater than this made me wonder what more was in store.



It was bittersweet to have to head back - I was a bit tired and was looking forward to my own bed, but I didn't feel like leaving just yet. I'd love to spend another day or 2, but I knew I would have to face reality the next morning at work! I found a little side road that went up to "Lookout mountain" near Mammoth lakes - a perfect spot to see the sun setting over the mountains to the west, sort of like a coda to a symphony.

Halfway back down, I realized the whole mountain was obsidian and chunks with razor sharp edges were all around... it would have been a bummer for one of those to cut through a tire! But all was fine and I was on my way back home.

Crossing Yosemite just after sunset, I saw how many stars had come out – the stars gleamed like diamonds in the pristine air. A near-full moon hung overhead, lighting the open granite slabs in a magical light. I stopped at Olmstead point and could see very clearly without a flashlight. Half Dome and Clouds rest were basking in the moonlight with the countless stars of the Milky Way overhead. A shooting star streaked overhead. I paused to take some time exposure shots with my dying camera battery (which barely held on long enough – I was surprised how many photos I had taken!), capturing the scenery engulfed in the cool blue light of the moon.



I arrived back home around 10:00 – thankfully no fires blocked the road this year and no cops stopped me for a speeding ticket (one was enough for this year!). I was glad to be home and refreshed and full of many great memories.