

Mt Keith (13977') / Junction Peak (13888')

August 28-31



Junction peak

We were headed out to the Eastern Sierra for a trip out to Center Basin, a remote area in the eastern part of Kings Canyon national park. We had 4 people (Jesper Schou our leader, Dara Hazeghi and his dad Sassan, and me). I headed up with Dara and Sassan and after a long drive (over 7 hours) and made it to the Onion Valley campground. Jesper was coming back after a 2 week road trip out to CO and met us independently the next morning at the trailhead.

Saturday morning at 8:00, we were all geared up and ready to go. We had a fairly long, 13 mile approach hike just to get out to Center Basin where we planned to climb Mt Keith and Mt Bradley. We followed the trail up over the Kearsarge pass at 11,800 feet under beautiful sunny skies, passing a set of beautiful tiered alpine lakes including Heart Lake and Pothole Lake. Just over the pass were the Kearsarge Lakes and Bullfrog Lake.

A Pacific storm was just starting to pass to the north of us, giving us delicate strands of lenticular clouds over the high peaks behind Bullfrog Lake. The wind picked up and the temperature dropped a bit, but we were treated to some of the finest scenery in all the Sierra. One of the weather reports called for snow above 9000 ft (we'd be camping a ways above that), so we hoped for the best.



View over Bullfrog Lake

We met the JMT and took it south across Vidette meadows, crossing a few small creeks and took it up to the turn-off toward Center Basin. The turn-off is at about 10,500 feet just opposite to some nice campsites (one even has permanent bear-boxes!). We saw our trail on the left, marked by blue and gold ribbons around adjacent trees. Maybe there were Cal alumni showing off some school pride – curious the name of the lake we were going to was Golden Bear Lake as well!

The trail we followed was actually the old JMT (before the "new" one over Forester pass was completed in the 1930's). We passed a bunch of tents from a trail crew – we didn't see anyone working though. Reaching Golden Bear Lake around 4:00, we set up our camp nestled in some scraggly trees right at the edge of timberline around 11,200 feet. Total for the day was 13 miles, 4300 feet of climbing, 2300 feet descending.

Nestled in our tent and sitting in my sleeping bag trying to hold off a bit of hypothermia (even with 4 layers on it was cold!), I was only very slowly able to eat some Mountain House chicken ala king for dinner. I was very hungry, but the cold and the altitude didn't fare too well with my stomach. The sky was now nearly completely overcast, low clouds obscuring many of the peaks. After dinner I just wanted to curl up in my sleeping bag, but after about 15 minutes, I heard a "Wow" from Jesper when he looked outside and saw a beautiful sunset and alpenglow over the summits all around. Feeling much better after warming up and eating, I ran outside to enjoy the show. Even though Jesper and I just had basic point & shoot cameras, Dara and Sassan both had fancy SLR's which they lugged for 13 miles!



Sunset colors from near our camp at Golden Bear Lake

After sunset, the wind got completely calm and the storm broke, giving sunny skies to the west and a brilliant red sunset. The worst of the storm passed to the north, and we just got some clouds and wind - no snow or ice to contend with the next morning - whew! Sunday morning dawned mostly clear with just a few strands of low clouds passing below the peaks. It was quite cold in the morning with ice crystals on the tent and bear cans (during mid-summer in sunny CA of all places, right?) Mt Keith and Bradley caught the morning sunshine above the clouds.

After oatmeal and hot tea for breakfast, we set out for Mt Keith - a few more miles up Center Basin. We followed the old JMT for about a mile south before heading off trail up some scree / talus slopes to a hanging valley above 12,000 ft. We noticed a set of streak marks from water flowing down the rock and we took a sloping path that led us to some nice ledges just above the streaks. From there it was a fairly straightforward climb up the talus to the Sierra Crest, where a right turn along the crest took us to the summit. The skies remained mostly clear with a few clouds passing to the north. A fire in Cedar Grove obscured some of the views to the north, but the view south was crystal clear. We had smelled smoke the previous day from along the trail and were a little worried that the views might be smoky and the air quality would be poor. But the winds from the passing storm worked to our advantage, scrubbing most of the sky clear to the south. We had a fine view of the Williamson Bowl, the Kaweah's, Mt Tyndall and the highest of them all - Mt Whitney. We celebrated our success with chocolate and many photos. The peak is 13977 feet, just 23 feet shy of being one of the fabled 14'ers, so it had very fine views but not nearly the crowds.



The 4 of us on the summit – Dara, Sassan, Jesper and me

The clouds started to build on our way down and the temperature dropped as the clouds lowered. We had planned about a 2 mile traverse to Mt Bradley to the north, but with the thickening clouds we changed our plan. Dropping down the talus slopes we took a slightly different path to the west, crossing next to beautiful granite studded alpine lake 3592m (strange the topos are in meters here) where we enjoyed some snacks and relaxed a bit after the climb.

Continuing just past the outlet, we caught the old JMT taking us straight back to camp. We decided against Bradley since it was getting late and the traverse looked a bit longer and nastier than thought. The clouds continued to lower and as we broke down our tents, the peaks had become obscured.



Afternoon clouds in Center Basin

We moved about 1.5 miles back to the junction with the main JMT near Bubbs creek where we found a nice site. Being 700 ft lower it was a bit warmer which I looked forward to! Total for the day was 8 miles, 2800 up, 3500 ft down. We enjoyed some fresh strawberries (thanks Dara!) to go with the Mountain house chicken noodle soup (which I enjoyed much better than the first night!).

As the sun went down, the sky remained mostly overcast with fog and low clouds. My spirits had been dampened a bit - I hoped for the best since the forecast called for warmer temperatures the next 2 days. I just hoped it wouldn't be snowing since the class 3 rock would be pretty treacherous with snow. Soon afterward, though as we lay in our tents, a few stars slowly appeared as the fog started to peel back. I hoped for the best when I went to bed.



Bubbs creek from next to our campsite

I had to wake up around 4 in the morning to use the bathroom and I noticed the tent was brightly lit from the near-full moon. I peeked outside to see a crisp clear sky full of stars - not a hint of fog or clouds around! I was quite rejuvenated when heading back in my sleeping bag, anticipating a wonderful hike up to Forester Pass and Junction peak the next morning - it was hard to get back to sleep!

The day dawned cool and clear and we were up at 5:30 to start the hike. Dara and Sassan had to be back the next day - Sassan had a very important 5:00 conference call at work in the evening, so they didn't want to waste any time. After a quick breakfast of oatmeal and tea again, we hit the JMT heading south. We were probably the only hikers on the trail with day-packs - most people were JMT through hikers, heading from Yosemite to Mt Whitney. The 13200 ft Forester pass is quite remote, filtering out the average weekend hikers and backpackers.

Heading higher in elevation, the trees disappeared and then the shrubs and grass disappeared as well, revealing a rocky moonscape all around. Junction peak lay right in front of us, a formidable Matterhorn shaped summit standing directly above a glacial cirque lake. It was a grueling last mile up and over the pass with the air getting thinner, but once we got the view on the far side over into Sequoia national park, we realized it was all worth it!



View south into Sequoia national park from Forester Pass

Sadly, this is the point at which Dara and Sassan had to turn back. They knew if they wanted to make it out the next morning and get back home to take the 5:00 call, they would have to get going and skip Junction Peak. (we found out later they made it back to Kearsarge Lakes that night, then headed out early the next morning, reaching the trailhead at 10:00. Unfortunately they knew in spite of their early start they were going to still miss the 5:00 call, so they ended up taking a leisurely trip back and enjoying a side trip up Lembert Dome in Yosemite. Luckily the call ended up not being as important as originally thought, so everything was fine.)

At this point, it was just me and Jesper. Thanks to some good research he did ahead of time, we had some nice beta on how to continue to the summit. From the pass, we were to head back down the switch backing JMT for about 1/4 mile until you reached a switchback with a thick metal pole in the ground, where we would then cross-country SE through the boulder strewn slopes of an intermediate peak for about 20 minutes (traversing without losing elevation), until reaching the sandy Ski Mountaineers pass at the base of Junction Peak. We knew we had to follow a wide class 2 gully, but to get to it, we had to cross several class 3 ridges. It took a bit of doing, and thanks to Jesper's eagle eyes spotting cairns along the way, we found a gully that would take us to the top. Above the rocky and sandy gully, the climbing turned to more class 3 slabs.



Jesper at Ski Mountaineers pass – Junction peak is on the right

It was a deep, glacier polished and fairly clean granite gully at this point, giving some decent sustained class 3 climbing (you had to be careful to stay on the route to stay off anything class 4 or harder). The route was rather exposed and a bit scarier than I had expected, and we hadn't seen a cairn in a while. But we inched our way up the lofty granite ledges, revealing grander views all around. The climbing was quite fun though a bit exposed - going up was nice but I dreaded going back down it!



Class 3 granite slabs on the way to the summit

Just around the corner we finally saw a cairn again - yay! We knew we should be able to make it even it was slow and steady. With just a small cut on my finger and a bump on Jesper's head

on an overhanging rock, we made it up to the top rather unscathed. Crossing a final set of ledges and traversing to a ramp leading to the summit ridge, we soon found the glittering metal canister of the summit register! It had been just over an hour since we were at Ski Mountaineers pass 600 feet below.

We celebrated with Lindt Swiss chocolate as we took turns with the binoculars and the map of Sequoia / Kings Canyon parks to see how many peaks and lakes we could identify. I don't know if I've ever seen so many lakes from one place! The smoke from the Cedar Grove fire had dissipated, giving us views to the north of the Palisades, Mt Tom and Mt Humphreys. To the south was Tyndall, Williamson and Whitney, the Kaweahs, Milestone / Midway / Table and so many others. To the east was Mt Keith where we were yesterday. Observing closely with the binoculars we could see people walking on the summit of Whitney nearby the famous stone hut. Since Junction peak is a triple divide (lies on the Sierra crest, divides the Kern, Kings, and Owens valley to the east), by its very nature it commanded some pretty stellar views.



Diamond Mesa and Kern River headwaters to the south

There was not a breath of wind or cloud in the sky as we perused the register revealing names I recognized - Louise Wholey and Liza Barboza (trying to complete the SPS list), and famous Bob Burd who is trying to dayhike all 248 SPS peaks (he just finished Kern Point on 8/26 and has just 3 to go! He may have them all done by the time you read this!) See his website at <http://www.snwburd.com/bob/index.html>. Jesper and I had been only the 6th and 7th people to reach the summit this year - we knew we were on quite a remote and beautiful summit. We spent at least 30 minutes perusing maps of Sequoia / Kings Canyon to identify countless peaks, lakes and trails. I'm glad the Cedar Grove fire was mostly put out or the smoke was blowing a different direction now.

The hike back to camp was rather uneventful - we found the cairns we had missed on the way up, so we had a bit of an easier go on the way down, avoiding the sketchy class 3 ledges we climbed on our way up. We were back at the Ski Mountaineers pass in less than 40 minutes.

Traversing back to the JMT, we enjoyed fine views all the way of the upper Kern River basin. Back on the JMT, it was a quick trip all on trail back to camp - we covered the roughly 4 miles in less than 2 hours. A CCC trail crew was busily re-working the trail just below Forester pass - we had to admire their hard work moving the heavy stones and even working while hanging from ropes suspended over a cliff. We found out later they were the ones who had the tents we saw the previous day along the trail to Center Basin.



The JMT north of Forester pass goes through this classic U-shaped glacial valley

We toyed with the idea of moving camp down to Vidette meadows or Bullfrog lake or further that night, but after a long day up Junction peak, we decided to just lay-over at our same spot another night and just relax for a bit (breaking camp and re-setting the tent would probably be an extra hour). We enjoyed beef stroganoff and beans & rice for dinner as we watched some low clouds once again forming below the peaks - nature gave us a wonderful show. We lay in our tents swapping stories of previous climbs while watching the Milky Way with several satellites and shooting stars streak overhead - life was good!

The next morning we were up and hiking the JMT trail past Vidette meadows, taking an informal survey of the other folks we met on the trail (many were thru-hikers going from Yosemite to Mt Whitney and we were surprised to see a numbers of females doing the trail alone – no men were alone). We took a slightly different path on the way back to Kearsarge pass (giving us stellar views over the Kearsarge and Bullfrog lakes). It was a slow and hot climb over the pass (the temperature seemed probably 30 degrees warmer than the last couple days!)



View over Bullfrog Lake

It was all downhill once we crossed the 11800 ft Kearsarge pass as we ambled our way back to the cars. Dara and Sassan left us a wonderful bottle of pomegranate bubbly in the bear box at the trailhead - wish they could have been there so we could all celebrate together but we did in spirit! On the way back we enjoyed a wonderful steak and salmon dinner at Jacks in Bishop and enjoyed a beautiful alpenglow sunset over the Yosemite high country before making it back to HP in Cupertino just before midnight. It was a wonderful trip, and thanks Jesper for organizing and getting the permits - looking forward to the next trip!

Total for the trip was 45 miles and 13,400 feet of elevation - quite a distance!

Day 1 - 13 miles, 4300 ft up, 2300 down

Day 2 - 8 miles, 2800 ft up, 3500 down

Day 3 - 11 miles, 4000 ft up, 4000 down

Day 4 - 13 miles, 2300 ft up, 3600 down

The rest of my photos and this story can be found on my website <http://www.mattravel.com>. My photos are also on Picasa at <http://picasaweb.google.com/mattblumshots/MtKeithJunctionPeak>.