

Leavitt Peak / Mt Starr Jun 11-12



Little Lakes basin on the way to Mt Starr

It had been a long winter in CA this year - in some places in the Sierra they have reported up to 300 % of the average snowpack for June. It had been quite hot for a few days earlier, even topping 100 degrees, making it hard to believe there was still going to be so much snow in the mountains. But there had been a storm just before that, dumping about a foot of snow – strange weather! It had been a fairly stressful last couple weeks at work as well, dealing with a major release, so I was looking forward to getting out for the weekend.

I had a bit of anxiety about it though - not sure what the conditions were going to be like and if I was even going to be able to make it to where I had hoped. I think much of this anxiety spilled over from work, and just a couple days before the trip, it seemed the trip was causing more stress than I had hoped. And so many times I know the forecast may indicate good weather, but then change at the last minute. I even had a dream the night before the trip that when I got to the mountains I found them covered in flowing robes of clouds like how the fog enshrouds the peaks around the Bay area (obscuring all the peaks and trails).

I found out the Sonora Pass on highway 108 had just opened a few days earlier and they were reporting still around 8 feet of snow at the pass! The Tioga road through Yosemite was still snowed over (but was open to bicycles - it wouldn't open to vehicles for a couple more weeks). I think I was the most anxious by about 3 days before the trip, but when things fell into place right near the end, I felt the tension melt away and I felt the opportunity was a gift that God had provided to be able to enjoy nature and the beauty of His creation.

I was out late at a fellowship dinner the night before the trip and kind of looked forward to just sleeping in and relaxing for the weekend - I was a bit hesitant to pack the snowshoes and crampons and ski poles as I was about to head east to the mountains, doubting their usefulness... I knew

several other people who were planning on being in the mountains this same weekend - a friend from the Sierra club who went up Lassen with me a month ago was headed to Shasta, a group from Stanford was headed to Whitney and some folks from the Sierra club were also headed to Norman Clyde (I had originally signed up for that trip but backed out when I saw the climb was a bit "spicy" in places with a 700-ft snow chute leading to a 4th class section and some exposed stretches). When I thought of the camaraderie of friends also going to the mountains, that helped with a bit of my motivation. I slept fitfully that night, awakening with eagerness and expectations about the trip. I've really enjoyed these kind of trips in years past, so I felt the bar was quite high. I was nervous to see how things would turn out this time.

It was still rather dark and dreary as I got up and started heading east on 580 - the fog had rolled in thick overnight. It was still quite cool - it had been a longer and colder winter over the last few months. The storm the previous weekend dumped about a foot of snow above around 8000 feet and brought moderately heavy rain back in the bay area - rather unusual for June. The Sonora pass and several others were even closed for a few days after the storm.

The fog broke up on the backside of the Altamont pass - the final strands of clouds were flowing over the windmill-studded barren slopes along 580. To the east was bright orange sky with just a few bands of high clouds drifting from the west. I passed many of the familiar sights along 108 heading up to the mountains - the Columns of the Giants, Donnell vista, the Stanislaus granite slot canyon and Kennedy meadows. The gate just past the meadows where the road starts its 26% climb had just been re-opened for the season. The amount of snow above about 8000 feet was impressive for June - I had expected it to be more patchy.



Walls of snow by the Sonora pass

Most of the parking areas around Sonora pass were still quite snowed-over, the layers of snow reaching walls of 10-12 feet in places by the side of the road. All the spots were filled, causing me to have to turn around and look again. Fortunately a little ways down there was a spot off to the side where I could tuck my car in safely. A group of skiers were in the car next to mine, gearing up their boots and putting on their skins to head out toward Leavitt peak as well.

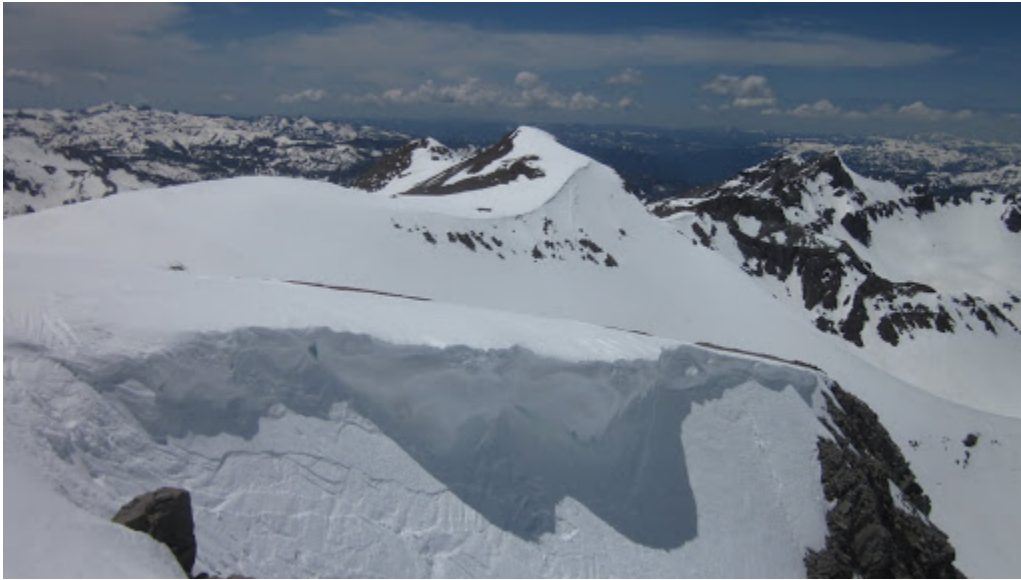
Kicking steps in the hard snow I climbed the wall of snow behind the cars at the Sonora pass parking area and started heading south, following a fairly well-worn boot trail. Another group of skiers were a ways ahead of me, inching their way up the hill and anticipating some turns in the smooth spring corn snow in a couple hours. It was a bit of a huff-and-puff, working my way up the steep hill (there is not much room for a warm-up as the trail starts climbing steeply right from the beginning!)

The wind picked up a bit, blowing a thin overcast layer of clouds overhead. The weather forecast had gone from "mostly sunny" to "mostly cloudy" almost overnight - the weathermen can never really predict what it's going to be like in the mountains. The orographic lift of the moisture-laden air caused smooth wispy clouds to form right near the Sierra crest - it remained mostly cloudy to the east, but mostly sunny to the west - it's as if the Sierra crest itself parted the clouds. The hike followed the crest southward toward Leavitt peak so the sun would come and go throughout the day. Instead of the clouds obscuring the peaks and trails (as feared in my dream) they added a wonderful texture to the sky.

The few remaining trees quickly disappeared as the trail climbed to above 10,000 ft. I caught up with the skiers and watched them start their turns down seemingly endless bowls of clean white snow - I envied them at this point! But I still had a ways further to get up to the summit - these skiers were just going part way up and doing a couple runs. I had gone on a Sierra club trip with my friend Arun (he skied up and down Lassen peak), and I found out later that he had been to Leavitt around the same time - maybe he was one of the skiers far away! small world...

The slope was fairly consistently snow-covered for the entire way in - in summer the route is quite barren and boring dark volcanic rock. It was quite nice to have the snow-cover, burying most of the crappy rock below. The landscape was so very clean appearing with the generous quantities of snow to purify the scene, replenishing the earth for another season. It was a mostly uneventful route up to the summit ridge of Leavitt peak - just miles of un-tracked snow in all directions. I just picked what seemed to be the most reasonable angle to climb and headed up step by step - though the footing became a bit tenuous in places where the snow was still wind-blown and hard. The views continued to expand in all directions.

A few lower clouds were starting to blow in, augmenting the sky with strands of white and adding texture to an otherwise flat sky of high thin cirrostratus clouds. Some of the clouds were starting to obscure the peaks to the south - most notably Tower peak was being enveloped. A few fluffy clouds seemed to float right above Leavitt peak - I wondered if that peak would have the same fate, causing a whiteout. I had my trusty GPS and trail of breadcrumbs that are left every 50 yards or so (it was like having a set of electronic "wands" to mark my way back if I did get caught in a white-out). I looked to the east toward Fremont lake where we went backpacking around the same time last year - we aborted our fishing attempt when we reached the lake and found it still frozen solid! (we retreated to Poore lake the next night and scored a bunch of yummy 16 inch trout - we caught our limit in somewhere around 15 minutes!) The backpacking trip happened again this year (but I was at Lake Shasta so had to miss it), and this year they got snowed on! (and obviously didn't make it to Fremont lake). The lake would have obviously been frozen solid since a couple weeks later everything above about 8000 feet was still pretty frozen.



Corniced summit of Leavitt peak

The final climb up the summit ridge was tedious but not too difficult - I was breaking trail and kick-stepping in the snow most of the way. It was beautiful in places where the wind formed huge scallops around 5-8 feet deep behind giant rock outcroppings. These scallops made a nice wind shelter where I could enjoy an apple and relax a bit - though it was a bit tricky navigating around them and through the loose volcanic rock. It got even more windy over the wide summit plateau. Some people had constructed wind-breaks from piles of rocks, but most of them were filled in with banks of snow, making them not very useful. The summit register was probably inside one of those wind-breaks as well (I had been to the summit a few years ago and signed the register which I vaguely remember being in one of the shelters). I dug around a bit in the icy snow but to no avail. Oh well - I would just leave my mark virtually with photos and stories.

I wish I could enjoy my "mountaintop experience" a bit longer, but the biting wind was a bit chilly to be comfortable. I snapped a few panoramic photos (it seems to always be windy when I use my camera in panoramic mode!) - at least I knew I could stitch them in Photoshop when I got home. I'm sure I repeated several photos - oh well, memory is cheap and batteries can be recharged so no worries. Besides, my camera had started to pick up a few fuzzy bits and hairs that worked their way through the lens assembly and stuck to the CCD sensor inside (you'd need to take apart the camera to get it cleaned - the minimum professional cleaning cost would be \$150 for labor, which is more than the price of the whole camera - \$129!! And blowing through the lens would only introduce more bits of junk - bummer...) I hope enough of the shots would come clean when I blew them up on the computer at home.



Summit panoramic view to the south

The trek up had been a little slower than I hoped - I didn't reach the summit until around 2:00. I planned on having lunch on top, but ended up snacking on the way and not stopping for too long in one place - there were only a few places sheltered from the wind anyway. The best part of the day was on the way down, getting to glissade down! The slope was at just about the right angle, and it was like going on a 500-ft long slide! The snow was soft enough for a nice glissade but not too hard to cause fear of getting out of control (I didn't have an ice axe - just trekking poles). The slope let up like a large bell at the bottom, gradually getting flatter, so if you did end up going faster than desired, you'd slow down naturally. There were no trees or rocks - just open and untracked snow for miles.

On the way back, I could hear what sounded like gunshots in the distance. I looked around and soon saw what appeared to be an avalanche of snow and ice that had broken off one of the cornices. I remember the summit ridge being rather severely corniced on the way up - I was careful to give it a wide berth in case a large section would decide to let loose... I was never near any of the avalanche prone areas - most of my route (along the PCT) was windswept and not too steep. I just hoped the skiers in the bowl knew what they were doing and had avalanche beacons in case anything happened.



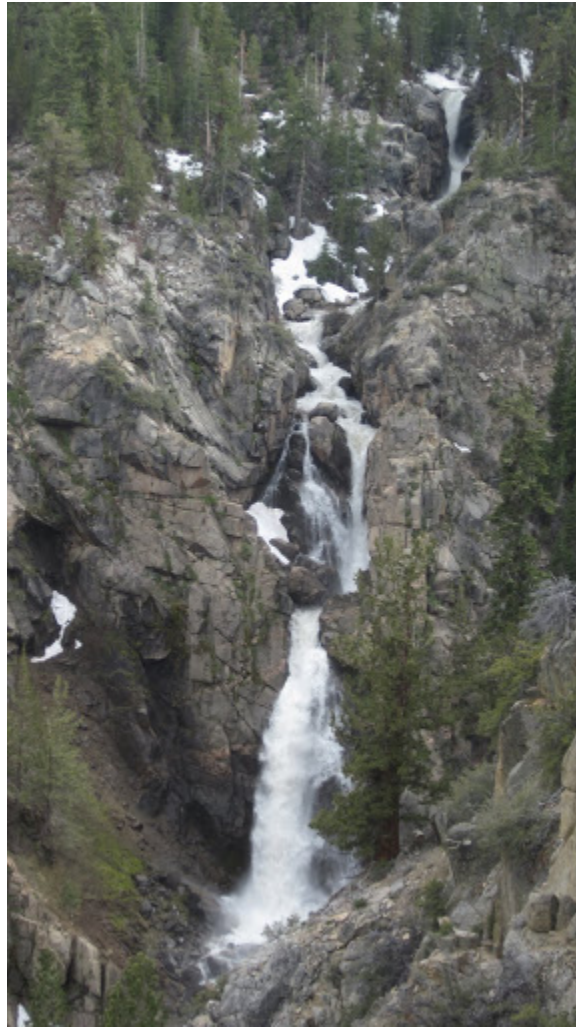
Circumhorizontal arc

Upon looking back to see how far I managed to glissade, my eyes beheld a wondrous rainbow

pattern hovering just above the corniced summit of Leavitt peak. The cirrus clouds overhead were composed of ice crystals and their hexagonal facets were aligned just right to create a beautiful rainbow prism in the sky - called a circumhorizontal arc. I had read about them and seen pictures on Earth Science picture of the day so I knew what it was, but I don't think I'd ever seen such a fine example. It was like one of those unexpected blessings that God had poured out over His creation. I'm glad I thought to turn back and look - otherwise if I had just kept going I would have missed it!

I saw a group of skiers down below in the bowl, carving beautiful S-patterns of tracks - I'd have to try that next time. My friend Arun is an avid back-country skier and he's been able to have a great time this season with all the late-season snow! I imagine all the skiers were safe - they appeared to be happily cruising down. I could see a small irregularity in one of the S-tracks though - one of them must have taken a spill - ha ha. But with so much snow I'm sure he didn't mind too much.

It was about 4:30 when I got back to the car - about twice as quick as the way in (glissading is quite a bit faster than tromping uphill while still not being well acclimated to the altitude!). It was nice to get the cold and wet boots off! Having felt a bit rejuvenated in clean clothes and dry shoes, I decided to check out a couple of the local sights since there was still several hours of light left. Just down highway 108 east of Sonora pass is Leavitt Falls - I figured with the incredible amount of snow we had this season that the waterfalls would be flowing pretty well - I would not be disappointed. I had missed the turnout numerous times on previous trips and never actually went in (the sign is a little ways off the main road so you have to know to look for it). I knew the falls were there somewhere (and I could see them from the road far-off, but didn't know how where to get a good view). But this time I found the turn-off. A wooden viewing platform gave quite a nice view. The falls were probably totally about 300 feet high in several cascades - the bottom part was probably over 100 feet and the water was roaring down. It was peaceful and relaxing to sit and watch the flow of water for several minutes - the sun was dodging the clouds over the Leavitt meadow and river, casting shadows on the peaks all around. There something about the simplicity of watching falling water that connects one to nature - I could have just sat there for an hour. At the head of the meadow I could just make out part of Tower peak, still a bit buried in clouds, though the summit would peek through every so often above the clouds.



Leavitt falls

Something I've also been curious about for several years was the fate of one of the local hot springs. A friend and I had been to a nice hot spring just up 395 in Genoa last summer, and I saw there was one on the way down to Bridgeport - called Fales hot springs. I saw online that it was "permanently closed" - hmmm - I wonder what that meant. I imagined it to be like a ghost town - remnants of the old building still strewn through the desert - that piqued my curiosity. I had the GPS coordinates so I should be able to get close enough to find something of interest if it wasn't completely demolished or fenced in on private property.

I came about to the spot and just on the left I noticed some large travertine deposits - some forming cliffs 20 feet high, interspersed with caves and twisted formations. I didn't need to check the GPS very closely after all - I got out of my car and saw a truck pull up. He said that the hot springs resort was across the street from the travertine cliffs, but it was private and it would be considered trespassing. I saw a house across the street with some recent roof work done on it and smoke coming from the chimney. They were obviously around and doing something there. I walked just past the edge of the property along a creek behind the property. The water was warm but not hot - obviously the outflow of the hot springs. The water continued up right behind the house requiring getting pretty close before it would be comfortably hot - hmmm, bummer.

I saw someone just around the corner - looked like he was cleaning one of the tubs. I wondered if that was someone getting ready to use the hot spring - maybe the owners let people use them after all. I don't remember seeing any other cars along the road so I wondered who it might be. Turned out it was the owner - he said hi, and we ended up chatting for some time. It must be fairly lonely living out in the desert, and he was happy to have a visitor - his name was Bill and he mentioned about how his grandparents went to the same place (and they even met there!) when it was a real hot-springs resort. Now, it was privately owned by his family. It was sad to see the condition of the main pool and bathhouses - after almost 50 years of no maintenance, the concrete was breaking down, the roofs of the bathhouses were collapsing and the tubs had large cracks due to negligence. But the main hot springs pool was still flowing beautifully. It demonstrated how man's rule over nature seemed so temporary - the man-made structures deteriorate rapidly, but the natural elements will last for many centuries.



Ruins of Fales hot spring

He said he was going to remove the pool and clean out the old bathhouses, and he was working on cleaning a separate tub off to the side - just enough for him and his family (since it was no longer going to be a public resort). The main pool was around 140 degrees - somebody's dog fell in the water a while back and died. I imagine if you fell in you'd pretty rapidly suffer heat exhaustion and would end up in a similar fate. The owner just finished installing a chain-link fence around the pool for safety. You could feel the heat just standing next to the water. (water can transfer heat 25 times as fast as the air. in fact, near Mammoth a couple years back, the authorities had to close the Hot Creek site to bathing when the water started erupting 6-foot high geysers of boiling water right in the area people were bathing - that would have been quite scary indeed...)

The family in the house would be able to live almost completely "off the grid", using the hot water from the spring piped through radiators to heat the house in winter and solar panels for electricity. A pretty romantic idea indeed - living out in the beautiful open desert country, mountains all around, and your own personal hot spring! They still had a lot of work to do to clean up the property, but I think it would be a lot of fun!

Bill talked a bit about some of the native Americans who lived in the area years ago - there was a site up by the travertine across the street that must have been considered a sacred site. After parting ways, I went across to check out the travertine cliffs and caves, and along the ground I could see numerous bits of obsidian glinting in the sun. I picked up a couple pieces and found them to be chiseled on both sides into arrowheads. I didn't see any other obsidian in the area so they must have brought it in - maybe from Glass mountain or Obsidian dome to the south. Smoke stains on the ceiling of the cave and piles of bones indicated somebody was using it as a shelter. On the top of the hill was an enormous circular depression - probably 100 feet across and about 10 feet deep. It looked like a hot spring used to be up there many years ago - maybe when continental drift moves the plates over hot spots in the earth's mantle, the hot springs migrate as well (geologists have tracked the movement of the Yellowstone hot spot over millions of years, which has formed much of the Snake river basin). The bottom of the depression was grassy and mostly dry - just a fossil reminder of the past. I wonder if the hot spot is now at the guy's fenced in pool - hard to tell, since the pool had almost no travertine but the fossilized spring was ringed in travertine many feet thick).

A couple old junked cars from the 50's were parked nearby the travertine - looks like some yahoos used it as a shooting range. We were definitely in the boonies! I went back to check the GPS coordinates I had, and the GPS coordinates of the site I found online was actually Fales hot spring ditch, which was about 1/4 mile downstream of the actual spring. It used to be a favorite spot for the local bathers, but now since much of the geothermal energy is being used upstream, the water is barely luke-warm by the time it reaches the ditch - oh well. It was nice to see that they were restoring the old hot springs. Shortly after I got home after this trip, I saw that there was a volunteer group doing projects to restore the old Gilroy hot springs (which is now part of Henry Coe state park). I'm looking forward to being part of that effort.

One of my favorite areas in the eastern Sierra is around Bridgeport – with wonderful hot springs and open views out toward the Sawtooth range. I remembered climbing Matterhorn peak a few years ago, and here there was an amazing view of the mountain, partly buried in clouds.



Sawtooth range over Bridgeport

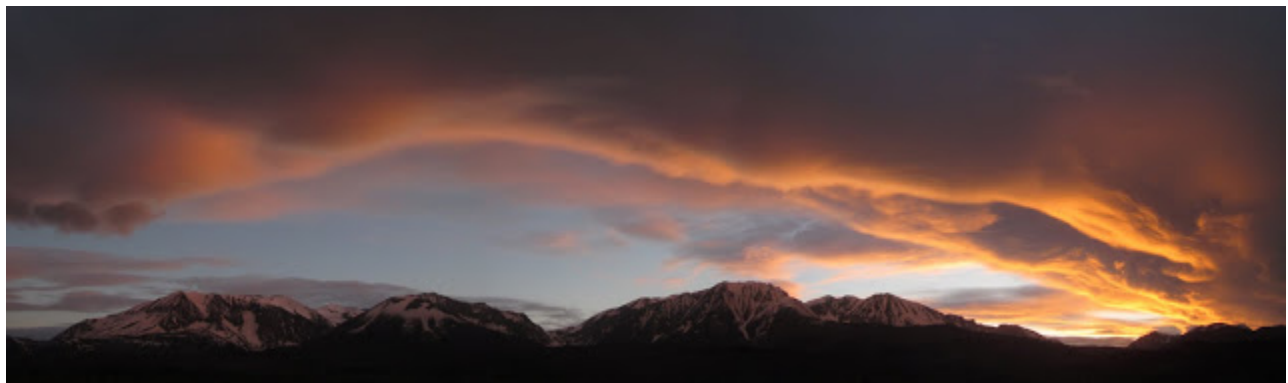
I did a quick spin through the Virginia lakes basin - it was a short side-trip up about 4 miles to the main lake. I was starting to think about the sunset and what would make a good backdrop. To see the orange sky reflected in the Virginia lakes with snow all around would make a wonderful postcard view. But alas, when I got there, I found every one of the lakes to be still frozen quite solid! It was still beautiful and made for a nice spot to relax for a few minutes before I would continue on my way.



Still frozen Virginia lake

Dinner at the Whoa Nellie deli was quite satisfying - the juicy burgers and fries tasted great after a long day! The sun was getting low and the clouds to the east were being sculpted by the wind into a classic "sierra wave" pattern. I had been in the area back in 2006 and got to see a wonderful sierra wave sunset. Sadly I wasn't able to get any pictures (actually I was soaking in a hot spring during sunset and left the camera in the car - oh shucks!) But I hoped to get pictures this time.

Heading southward on 395, I saw the sunset was getting increasingly more intense - the ribbons of clouds were lighting in brilliant yellows and oranges, flanked by the snow-capped peaks below. It was definitely one of the finest I've seen in a while - I reached the turnoff to June lake just in time to find a nice open area to try some photography. A group of people in one of the nearby houses appeared to be heading out after dinner and suddenly a dozen cameras were pointed at the sky to catch the magnificent show. I felt it was God's way of saying "amen" to a great day in the mountains. I saw the sky was clear out to the west, indicating good weather was coming in for the big day on Mt Starr the next day.



Sunset by June Lake

It was nice to just plunk down and relax in my room at the Motel 6 in Mammoth - I was tired, but it was a bit hard to sleep with the anticipation of the next day, and I even had a dream that I woke up

and found it snowing around me (that happened in real life on a trip a few years back!) I made it through about 1/2 an episode of Dual Survival on TV before calling it a night.

Sunday

With such a heavy snow year, I wasn't sure what the road conditions would be like heading up to the Little Lakes valley up from Tom's place. There was plenty of snow around 10000 ft the day before, but with the Little Lakes valley on the east side of the 13000 ft crest of Bear Creek Spire and Abbot and Dade and others, they would be a bit more sheltered from the snow. I kept my hopes up as I headed up the hill. I had my music of the Andes CD playing - we went to Ecuador a few months back on a missions trip with my church and got to see the splendor of the high Andes, and the joyful dancing music made a wonderful complement with the scenery all around.

It appeared to go from summer backwards to spring and to winter again as the road headed up to the higher elevations. I had hoped the road would be open at least to Rock Creek lake (and the resort / lodge). I was glad to see Rock Creek lake on my left (completely thawed) as I headed up past the resort and through an open gate indicating "narrow winding road". But just about 1/2 mile further was a gate with a road closed sign where I could see obvious snowbanks still laid across the roadway just ahead.



Road up to Mosquito flat

Parking at the gate and checking my GPS I saw I was only about a mile from Mosquito flat - not too bad. Plus it made for a nice warm-up before I hit the actual trail. The whole route looked to be about 7-8 miles, so an extra mile each way wouldn't be too bad. It was rather lonely at Mosquito flat - in years past, the place would be like Disneyland with lots of people, and I would barely be able to get a parking spot, even though there is room for probably 50 cars. This time, there were no cars, but just a few snowbanks across the empty lot. This time I could see the elemental beauty of the place without the distractions of hordes of people.

The first part of the trail was mostly snow-free, just a bit wet from fresh snowmelt. Though often the

trail was the easiest path for the meltwater to flow, making a river cascading over the stone steps on the trail. My boots were still a bit damp from yesterday and I knew they would get pretty wet again (I had polypro socks, keeping in the warmth a bit better than regular ones), so I didn't worry too much about the wet trail.



Entering the wilderness

A few campers had set up tents near one of the lakes, right about where the trail headed uphill toward Ruby Lake. I must have missed the signed turn-off (maybe the sign was still buried under many feet of snow or I just went by it) - hmmm. But with the trusty GPS and map I started cross-country uphill. Fortunately with it being a sunny south-facing slope, it was just a steep hike up the rocky slope, where soon afterward I caught up with the trail. It felt reassuring to be back on the right track for a short while, even though it would probably be soon buried under snow again.

The snow cover became pretty constant just about 1/4 mile further where the trail went along a flatter stretch on its way to Ruby lake. Some ski tracks provided an easier bit of navigation as I headed up through the tree line and to the open country beyond. At this point, it looked pretty straightforward which direction to go - just stay right until you pass Ruby Lake and then turn right to get to Mono pass. However soon afterward things ended up getting pretty tough. The snow was starting to soften up as the morning wore on, and suddenly out of nowhere I found myself up to my waist in deep snow! There must have been a bush or small tree hidden under the snow (the top of the snow was just an even white surface). After a bit of grunting and working my way back to the firmer snow I continued onward. I hoped it would be an isolated thing, but about 100 feet further I soon found myself in a similar predicament!

Luckily the snow had a fairly even consistency for the next 1/4 mile or so, where I could make my way closer to Mono pass. The pass is the easiest way upward - just a slog up a bunch of snow slopes up to the summit plateau. I saw just a bit east of Mono pass was what looked to be about a 700 ft snow chute also heading to the summit plateau. The slope was a fairly consistent 35-40 degrees and looked like a fun climb and a nice short-cut. I thought of the group on Norman Clyde and wondered if they were starting their 700 ft snow chute at around the same time. I wished them best of luck, and

maybe I would be up for that kind of trip next year.



Chute up to the Starr plateau

The bottom of the chute was softer than expected, causing some deep plunge steps every so often. I'd take a few steps and then suddenly, whoops I'd be up to my waist in the deep snow! It was never dangerous - just annoying and hard work. After a dozen or so of these plunges, I started having second thoughts about this route, and if it was worth going around to the Mono pass route. But the chute didn't look that bad - even though I knew the distances were deceptive. Fortunately a little ways further the snow got firmer, allowing for a bit more purchase with each step - it was nice to make more even progress. A panoramic view of still frozen Ruby lake lay just behind me - the lake was evident only by it being a large flat area in the snow, ringed with a blue rim of meltwater all around.

A clattering off to the left got my attention as I saw a rock slide starting down the cliff bands on the left side of the chute. Patches of dirty snow indicated it was a slide-prone area - so today was probably no different than most. The melting snow was starting to loosen up the rocks and sand that had been lodged for the winter. I stopped to catch my breath and watch the slide for a minute. The main part of the chute was nowhere near the rockfall zone (there was no headwall or anything above the chute to create falling rocks) and the angle was easy enough to not be at risk of avalanche. It was just pure fun going up.

Near the top of the chute, however, the snow started getting even harder, to the point where my boots were prone to slipping a bit. A rock bench made for a good place to rest and put on the crampons for a bit more security. The top 150 feet of the chute went by rather slowly - I didn't have quite the right kind of boots - since the toes flexed a bit, the front points of the crampons didn't get as much purchase as they probably should. But the climb was still surely a lot easier (and safer) than without them! The air was getting thinner above 12000 feet but the view was incredible!

Topping out of the chute and putting the crampons away, I saw it would be mainly a bunch of sandy boulder hopping the final few hundred feet to the summit. Unfortunately, Mt Starr doesn't have a clear single summit, but it is more of a summit ridge. Scampering up the boulders and dodging a few

slippery snow patches, progress was slow but steady. My thoughts started wandering from how my friends were doing on Lassen and Shasta and Norman Clyde, to my trip to this area last year around the same time (and skiing at Mammoth - was still open!), to knowing I would probably have to start shopping for a new washer and dryer (the washer started leaking pools of water a couple weeks ago...).



Little Lakes valley from Mt Starr

Focusing my thoughts back on the climb, I inched my way higher up the rocky slopes until the summit appeared to be in view. What a splendid view! The entire Little lakes valley lay to the South, stretching past Morgan pass (where I went last year), Mt Morgan (which I climbed a few years ago), Mills & Abbot (which some friends just climbed a couple weeks ago) and even to Mt Humphreys - the nearly 14,000 ft summit dominating over the desolate Humphreys basin further to the south. To the west a bank of clouds was pushing up against the western slopes of the Sierras near the Silver divide near Edison lake. The tops of the clouds appeared to be around 8000-9000 ft, pouring over some of the lower summits before being backed up against the higher peaks. To the east was the Owens valley and the White mountains and to the north was the vast open snow-filled stretch of the 4th Recess (the headwaters of Mono creek which flows into the San Joaquin). I think I could just make out Ritter & Banner and Mt Tom as well to the north. In the snowy basin right at the base of the peak were 2 blue patches in the snow - I looked at my map and saw there were supposedly 2 lakes - Summit lake and Golden lake at around 12,000 ft. The landscape was still so frozen that the lakes were only evident by their blue rims in the otherwise mostly flat plateau. There was almost no wind (in contrast to Leavitt peak the previous day) - it was wonderful. My package of tuna and crackers and fruit was delicious - a simple meal, but quite satisfying!

I thought about my friends who were also in the mountains at the same time. I wondered if the group was reaching the summit of Norman Clyde at around the same time as I reached Mt Starr (if they kept on schedule they should have been close). I wonder how “spicy” their climb turned out to be. With the snowfall from just a week ago, I could see still fresh snow on the 4th class slopes around Bear Creek Spire / Dade / Abbot – above around 12,000 ft. I imagined there would be a bit on Norman Clyde as well.

I was about to look for the summit register when it occurred to me I didn't think I was actually at the summit yet - there was a higher bump a few hundred yards to the north - bummer. I stopped for a few minutes to decide if it was worth going further to "tag" the actual summit or if this was good enough. I knew I would be kicking myself for not reaching the "official" summit - I checked on the map and found the marked summit to indeed be the higher bump, so I made up my mind to press on toward the final summit.



Final push to the summit

There seemed to be bits of a trail through the sandy and rocky slope, but it would come and go - was actually rather confusing. I didn't see any ducks to confirm the route either - I just had to continue north until I got to the highest point. When I topped the ridge the second time, I could see the higher bump closer now, with a small rock placed on top - that had to be it! The broken slabs of granite were fun to climb - although you could easily stay on class 2 terrain, it was more fun to climb the slabby class 3 rocks. Actually the class 3 was probably even safer in places since the rest of the rock was pretty sandy and it would be easy to slip. I was pretty careful and avoided a slip the whole day - a turned ankle would be a bummer indeed!

I searched in vain for the register for a few minutes - knowing I was at the high point was nice, but it would have been fun to read other people's accounts of the climb. I have friends who I know have been up Mt Starr in years past and I wanted to their stories. Instead I would just have my pictures and stories online to tell of the trip. I was 0 for 2 with signing summit registers on this trip - bummer. But being 2 for 2 with peaks was very satisfying! I would find out later online by reading Bob Burd's trip report that the register was supposedly on the other summit (the first one I went up, but when I saw the higher summit, I didn't think to look for a register at the lower one) - bummer. Would it be worth going back and looking again? maybe someday... at least I would know to possibly check both places!

The initial part of the down-climb was tedious - requiring shimmying down a bunch of sandy granite slabs for several hundred feet. The angle was a bit too steep to move very quickly and the sand wasn't deep enough to plunge-step - bummer - it would be a slow process for a little while. I didn't

want to slip - the trekking poles came in quite useful at this part. At least it wasn't too late - I'd be able to just enjoy my time and not have to rush. There was no threat of thunderstorms or lightning anywhere nearby - just a couple fluffy clouds floating by.



View into the 4th recess and headwaters of Mono creek

The rocks ended in about a 400 ft smooth snowy bowl - perfect for an extended glissade! I should have put my camera in movie mode and filmed the way down - it was wonderful - fast enough to be fun but not too fast to be scary. Just hearing the wind and snow rushing by while watching the 13,000 feet peaks glide by all around - I wish I could take a lift up and do it again! I decided to go back down the main route over Mono pass instead of going down the 700 ft chute - the snow seemed a bit steep for a glissade there, and besides it would be fun to make it a loop. At the bottom of the glissade, I wasn't far from the blue rim of Summit lake - it was probably 1/2 mile to Mono pass over a wide snowy bowl. The serenity and peacefulness of the vast open snow-filled basin was wonderful - there was no wind, just the sound of my footsteps plodding along the level snow. I was glad to not have to deal with any post-holes - the snow was pretty well-packed. The next couple miles were a wonderful walk in the park in the firm snow. As the path went over the gradual arch of Mono pass the mountains on the Mono creek side slowly disappeared and the mountains on the Rock creek side slowly re-emerged.



Descending the snowy bowl

The trail steepened enough to allow some nice glissades again, and the best part was the final glissade down toward Ruby lake. It looked like I could go all the way down to the lake and just continue along the shore and re-join the trail. My butt was getting cold from the snow but it was nice warming up on the sunny rocks - the view toward Ruby lake was wonderful. A collection of melt-water pools formed a series of bright blue pearls in the snowy basin. I probably spent 1/2 hour just relaxing, laying in the sun, watching a slough avalanche creep down one side of the mountain and meditating on the beauty all around.



Glissade tracks

As I packed up to continue on, however I realized the way down to the lake was flanked by steep cliffs in many places and it would be a difficult obstacle course through steep snow-covered boulders, buried trees and bushes. I think the safest and easiest way would be to go back up and get

back to the path I came in on. I was probably about 200 feet below my track in (according to the bread crumbs on my GPS) - it was a painful and slow slog going back up! I was tired and really not motivated to climb back up after a nice glissade down! At least I didn't run into any deep post-holes...



Ruby lake below

Back on the route I came in on, it was a mostly uneventful walk through the thinning snow back to the meadows around the lakes below. A few birds chirped - a stellar's jay squawked overhead, and the smell of the trees returned - a welcome sight after many hours of snowy desolation. One of the large trees was right adjacent to an 8-foot boulder right in the middle of nowhere - it looked like the giant boulder rolled way down the mountain, hit the tree and parked itself right there. But I think the boulder must have been a glacial erratic pushed by the ice many years ago, and maybe the tree started growing in the shelter created by the boulder. The boulder was there long before the tree!

The trail got dusty in places as the scenery became more dry and desert-like - quite a contrast to the landscape just 1/2 mile away! The eastern Sierra is an area of extremes - amazing how the desert can be so closely juxtaposed to the snow-clad peaks. Just a little ways further was the wilderness boundary sign of the John Muir wilderness, and soon after was the trailhead to Mosquito flat. It was a wonderful hike. It was about 4:00 at this point - not too bad. But I realized I had another mile to go to get back to the car and about 5.5 hours back home. The last mile along the road was a nice cool-down and place for my mind to relax and wander as I headed back to the car.

Springtime was coming around slowly – although it was mid-June, it looked like early April in one of the creeks just north of Tom's place.



McGee creek and aspens

I sat for probably an hour or so at the Whoa Nellie on the way back, enjoying a bit of live music and good food to cap off a wonderful weekend in the mountains. I knew work was waiting for me the next morning, but I managed to put off any thoughts of bugs and database issues out of my mind until I would have to deal with them! I find it healthy to be able to disconnect from everyday stresses and re-focus the mind by getting away for weekends. I know so many people who never seem to be able to put away the computer and cell phone even for a few hours.

The low clouds were settling in for the evening as sunset neared – the tops of the peaks were poking through as the peaks were bathed in late evening light. I could see the top of Leavitt peak playing hide-and-seek with the clouds as I returned over the Sonora pass. This was indeed similar to the scene I had in my dream, but now seeing it on my drive home, I could just relax and enjoy the view!



Sunset over the Sonora pass

The panoramic view to the sunset and lights over the central valley opened as I reached the lower foothills of the Sierra as the number of lanes of the highway slowly increased and so did the number of other cars. The hustle and bustle of the silicon valley was calling as I started climbing the Altamont pass on 580 – the gateway back to the Bay Area. The fog returned in earnest, hiding the stars and moon as the temperature dropped around 20 degrees. I got home around 11:00 – tired but satisfied from a great weekend in the mountains.

I found out later that the group climbing Mt Whitney did indeed make it to the top, camping at Outpost camp above 10,000 ft and summiting the next day. The climb was quite long and difficult with the deep snow, but I'm glad they made it! Unfortunately for the group on Norman Clyde, a bridge fairly low on the trail had been washed out by the rushing water from snowmelt, delaying them for several hours to bushwhack a detour (the creek was not crossable for quite some time). They got near the base of the technical section through the deep snow but turned back due to time. Oh well – I'm glad they were safe, and the mountain will always be there! I'm just glad for the wonderful gift of being able to visit the sanctuary of the mountains and delight ourselves in God's creation.