

Yosemite / Eastern Sierra Labor Day 2011



Mountains around Saddlebag Lake in Yosemite

I've been wanting for most of the summer to get up to the eastern part of Yosemite in the Saddlebag Lake area again. My friend Arun from the Sierra Club had recently been up Shepherd's crest and raved about how it's a really nice area. Knowing the peak isn't too long, it would make a good warm-up that could be combined with another peak the next day. I had been considering University peak for a little while – we did a trip over Kearsarge pass to Center basin the previous summer and thought about hitting University on the way out, but got lazy and just hiked out. Knowing University was day-hikable I wanted to head back.

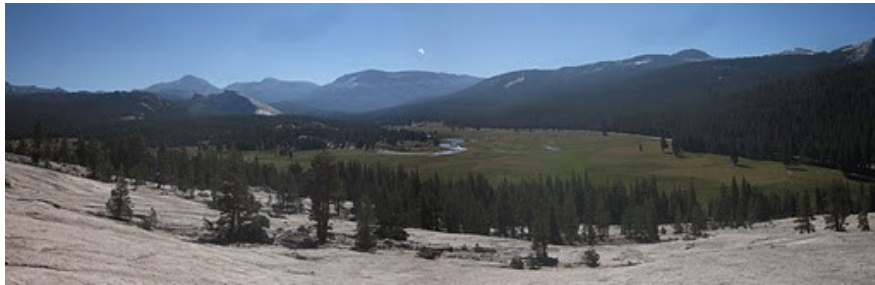
Back in mid-July I had planned to go up to Shepherd's Crest for a day - we had summited North Peak a couple years back in a day and it was a reasonable trip. I knew this year was a heavy snow year (even reaching over 200% in many places), but I figured by July things would have been fairly melted out. Much to my surprise, however, the day before I was planning to go, I checked the conditions at Saddlebag Lake to see if the boats were running and the site was saying "The road to Saddlebag Lake is expected to open the last weekend of July" - what! Wow - the road was still snowed in! And they said the trails still had 5 feet of snow. Oh well - would have to wait for another time.

It had been a fairly difficult year overall for Sierra peak climbing - with all the extra snow this year, and thunderstorms on many of the weekends, many of the summit attempts had come up short. I was going to attempt Norman Clyde back in June but backed out (did easier Mt Starr instead) - with all the extra snow and water, a bridge had been washed out, forcing a lengthy bushwhack to camp. The group lacked the energy the next morning to attempt the peak and turned around only a short ways beyond camp. And a little later on Red & White, the group backed off when the snow got a bit too treacherous near the top. Oh well - the mountain will still always be there!

I had planned to go back to the Sierra shortly after getting back from Peru in August but changed my mind again after the forecast kicked up from "mostly sunny" to 20% to 30% chance of thunderstorms at the last minute - bummer. Plus I knew I would be missing a bunch of things back home that weekend. Peak climbing can be a bittersweet experience, being far from home and friends and a bit lonely, but can be intensely rewarding at the same time.

I postponed one more time and finally picked Labor day weekend to go - third time would be a charm! It was a chilly and rather dreary morning leaving around 5:30, heading east on 580 toward Yosemite - the fog was low and thick, muting the sunrise and obscuring the views. Crossing the Altamont pass was surreal, the fog reaching up about halfway up the uppermost windmills with sunny skies ahead. I was keeping my fingers crossed - the forecast had again gone from "sunny" to "partly cloudy" near the last minute, and by the time I reached the Yosemite park entrance they indicated 20% of thunderstorms both days.

Shepherd's crest is just over 12,000 feet and the hike from the far side of Saddlebag lake is only about 3 miles each way, making for a rather easy outing since you already start over 10,000 feet. I had already been up Mt Conness and North Peak and Shepherd's crest was the remaining peak in the area - I was eagerly anticipating finishing the remaining peak.



Tuolumne meadows from Pothole dome

I reached Tuolumne meadows in Yosemite around 10:00 in the morning – just my 2nd trip of the season (the late season snows kept the pass closed much longer than usual this year). One of my favorite easy warm-ups has always been going up Pothole dome at the beginning of Tuolumne meadows. It is one of the first domes you get to, and the access is just a short trail across the meadows. The view from the top is spectacular, spanning all the domes in the Yosemite high country as well as Cathedral peak, and in the distance Mt Conness and Mt Dana. My first trip was about 5 years ago to go up Mt Agassiz, and part of my warm-up was playing frisbee with a bunch of people on top of the broad granite dome!

Reaching the dam at Saddlebag Lake a few minutes later, the parking was already quite full on the holiday weekend but managed to find a lucky spot where someone had pulled out a bit earlier. I wonder how many people would be on the trail. I figured the boats would have been quite full (I would have to wait for a couple turns before getting on one), so to save the time and money I decided to just hoof it on the west side of the lake (plus the flat trail would give a good warm-up from going from sea level to 10,000 feet in just a couple hours!) But I started to doubt if the boats would even be running in the first place when I saw the lake was quite low – it was probably down 40 feet and several large islands stuck out near the shoreline.

About halfway along the lake I realized the reason I go back year after year - the entire area is gorgeous! Sculpted by massive glaciers years ago, the mountains give the classic high-Sierra Ansel Adams views, without much effort required. Surprisingly few people were on the trails - why were so few people taking advantage of the area if it is pretty easily reached? Remembering all the cars at the parking lot, maybe they all just were out fishing in the lake or nearby streams? I've enjoyed fishing with my dad and my nephew and I could see the draw of it - but in recent years peak climbing had become more of a passion. I've talked with people who have climbed all 248 SPS peaks (finished the "list") - although it seems a bit extreme, I could see how and why people could become obsessed with it.

The trail followed the 20-lakes basin valley until just past Steelhead Lake, then veered off to the left where it worked its way up and over several granite benches and beautiful grassy meadows. Looking back toward Saddlebag lake, I did see a couple boats going back and forth – I guess they were running the boat taxis after all. A bunch of tents were in some of the meadows near Cascade Lake – I envied them in a way – they had a wonderful place to camp! I'm sure the permits for Labor Day weekend got snapped up pretty quick though - I would only be passing through for the afternoon this time.



Mountains and lakes along the way to Shepherd's crest

Working my way up the steep narrow trail I met some folks who had just come back down from Shepherd's crest - they made it sound like a walk in the park - "so you going up top too?" Sure - looked straightforward enough. McCabe pass was visible up ahead, at the top of 2 granite benches. The first was easy class 2 but the second looked considerably steeper - maybe pushing class 3. A couple clouds were blowing around - I wanted to be able to sit for a while and soak in the views, but I felt compelled to keep moving. My mind had been restless for most of the day - I felt the peak was a "mission" to be accomplished and I couldn't rest until it was "conquered". And with the uncertainty of the weather and the difficulty of the class 3 bench I felt like I needed to "get it done".

Scaling the first bench was as easy as it looked, and when I reached the top, I again realized one of the things that continue to draw me back to the mountains again and again. Just behind the bench was an unnamed lake - almost completely frozen over, surrounded by snow. From below, you would have no idea the treasure that lay hidden just above. A bunch of kids were building a snow fort and throwing snowballs - they were probably from one of the families camping in the tents just below. An appropriate holiday song would indeed be "in the meadow we can build a snowman... walking in a winter wonderland" - it was a holiday (Labor day) and there was plenty of holiday snow!

I've always been intrigued with seeing snow every month of the year. This would be about my 3rd year of seeing snow every month of the year. I brought a set of crampons just in case - on my previous trip to Mt Starr, I was glad I had them (the snow became hard and icy near the top, and without them I probably would have not made the summit). I was ready to use them on this trip as well.



Winter wonderland

I've come to associate snow with re-birth and purity, where things are made clean again, where rivers are replenished and where beauty is restored. And growing up as a kid, I've often associated winter and snow with the Christmas holidays and festivities. But lately I've come to realize that Christmas and celebration of God's provision of His Son Jesus should not be limited to just the December season (we should be able to sing Joy to the World at any time!). We should be able to celebrate the whole year through. And I feel it's actually more authentic to be able to worship not just in the season when everyone else is doing it (and often with a lot of superficiality). Seeing the purity in the snow and mountains during all the months is like being able to express appreciation for God's provisions throughout the whole year.

Stopping to have a snack and watch the kids playing for a few minutes, I realized the class 3 bench could be pretty easily surmounted by following a series of angled ramps to the left - probably wouldn't even be that difficult class 2 actually. Again I kept my fingers crossed. I remember going up Mt Starr a couple months back, the peak also had looked quite straightforward, but by the time I got up there, I found it to be more of a ridge instead of a peak, and only after crossing several false summits did I realize where the true summit was. And I found out later online that I should have looked on one of the false summits for the register (it was missing from the true summit and I didn't bother to go back and look harder for it - oh well).

In contrast, Shepherd's crest was so much easier - easy class 2 all the way up. And the summit was indeed right where I expected it to be - no false summit this time! And the register was right there, tucked under a couple rocks in a very obvious place - whew! The views were incredibly expansive in all 4 directions - to the NE was Lundy canyon with large Lundy lake draining down into Mono Lake. To the SE was Saddlebag lake and the way I came. To the SW was McCabe Lakes and to the NW was Virginia canyon leading up to Matterhorn Peak. This view reminded me much of the view on Matterhorn - 4 separate drainages coming off the summit - their U-shaped glacial canyons cutting through the granite in all directions. Perusing the register I noticed a few familiar names from folks in the Sierra club - notably Arun from last summer. I felt the sense of camaraderie that we were all going to common goals.



Summit panorama

It was quite a breathtaking view from the top. No wind, sunny weather – it was perfect! And the visibility was clear enough to even make out the faint outline of the hills around the Bay Area at least 150 miles away. I got to spend at least ½ hour at the top, soaking in the views and enjoying the mountaintop experience. I had recently re-joined VIH (Voices in Harmony) and one of the songs we were starting to learn was a spiritual “Blow Gabriel Blow” which has the verse:

*And now I'm all ready to fly,
Yes, to fly higher and higher!
'Cause I've gone through brimstone
And I've been through the fire,
And I purged my soul
And my heart too,
So climb up the mountaintop
And start to blow, Gabriel, blow!*

...

*I want to join your happy band
And play all day in the Promised Land.*

I felt I was in the promised land in the mountains – there should be angels proclaiming God's glory from the mountaintops!

On the way down, I saw the map indicated an old mine nearby Steelhead Lake - called Hess mine with several tunnels and adits. Seeing the piles of tailings littered on the far side of the lake, I knew that to be evidence of the hard work and countless hours of digging and drilling in the harsh elements at the high elevation. Although I never saw any of the actual tunnels themselves (they had probably long since collapsed and been buried under rocks pushed down by thick mantles of snow every year), the mining evidence was clear. The Saddlebag lake basin contains interesting geology, where the granitic rocks of the High Sierra meet the metamorphic rocks to the east. Along the contact between the different rocks are many interesting minerals.

It was still a bit early - only about 2:00 in the afternoon, so instead of just heading straight back the way I came, I decided to finish the loop around the 20 lakes basin. I had been to the area several years ago, but only went as far as Steelhead lake and back. The loop (around 6 miles) is one of the classic hikes in all the Sierra. Since I had done about 2 miles of the loop already, it would only tack on 2 more to finish the loop and come back around the other way.

A few people were on the trail - though not as many as I had expected given the holiday weekend and the number of cars in the parking lot. The basin is called the "20 lakes" basin, but that's probably only 20 "named" lakes - there are countless other lakes wherever snowmelt water happened to collect in a depression formed by the glaciers ages ago.



Steelhead lake and flowers

I stopped to investigate an interesting artifact on the trail - looked like somebody had completely lost the sole of one of his hiking boots! When I picked it up to examine what it was I wondered if there was some unhappy hiker out there wishing he had some duct tape! Just then, a family was coming around from the opposite direction - I stopped to say hi, and they said if I'm going around the loop, instead of turning right at Helen Lake (the farthest lake), I should turn left and go down a short ways (into Lundy canyon) - they said there is an "interesting waterfall" that I should check out. Shepherd's crest just a little ways back was an awesome sight - and I had the bonus of seeing the snow-choked lake tucked away behind a granite bench. Seeing the waterfall would be a second "bonus" - sure I'd go and check it out.

Coming to the trail junction at the far end of Helen Lake, I saw where the trail continues down and enters Lundy canyon - Lundy Lake is just a few miles down. I had been to Lundy lake a few years ago when it was just starting to melt out, and a bunch of early-season fishermen found it to be a mecca for large trout. I would have to make a thru-trip some time going from Saddlebag to Lundy lake. Heading toward Lundy canyon for just a 100 yards or so, I could already start to hear the rush of water and see that the rocks started to drop away quickly - the waterfall had to be close by.

Just around the next corner I could see the waterfall - probably 40 feet high, but only the top part of it visible - the lower part was completely hidden behind a bunch of snow. When I came up near the base of the falls, I realized the water continued under the snow, forming a large cave! The cave was probably 15-20 feet in diameter with the large scalloped walls continuing deeper for several hundred feet. I could just make out a faint glow at the far end of the tunnel where the exit would be. The cave was totally unexpected - it was one of those ephemeral phenomena in the Sierra. If you came too early, it wouldn't have melted out enough to be accessible, and if you came too late, it would be gone. And probably most years, the cave wouldn't have even formed the way it did (this year was an extraordinary year)!

It was indeed one of the most "interesting" waterfalls I had seen in quite some time. The cave entrance was like a cathedral opening to the sky and sun above, covered in the spray and mist of the waterfall. I followed the water as it went deeper into the cave - the rocks on the side were mostly dry, allowing for pretty easy access. The ceiling was sculpted with large scallops about 2 feet in diameter in the smooth icy snow. Peeking down a couple side tunnels revealed a shimmering blue hue where the sunlight

penetrated the translucent ice. The side tunnels were probably formed from weaknesses in the consolidated snow. As the snow compacted and started to flow a bit down the hill, it broke a bit into crevasses from the shear. Looking down the crevasse from the inside revealed a progression of white to light blue to deeper shades of aquamarine blue.



Cathedral like entrance to the cave

I felt privileged to be an explorer with the opportunity to find a hidden gem that most people wouldn't think to look for (me included!) I bet so many people pass by without even thinking about it either. Back on the trail, I was heading along the far side of Helen Lake, when I said hi to another family and mentioned the cave I had just seen (maybe their kids would like to check it out too?) - when they said they just came from another cave about 1/4 mile further ahead right next to the trail - cool!

I felt like being a kid again - my innate desire for exploration was in full gear once again. Although I was getting a bit tired, it didn't make much difference. Just around the corner was a deep black opening of the entrance of the second cave. Putting down my pack, I ventured inside. The floor of this cave was mostly flat and I just followed the easy grassy slope into the entrance. Inside I felt like I had entered another dimension - suddenly an eerie blue and green light flooded the interior, and when I looked up I could see the ceiling glowing an emerald and turquoise color, with rings of color matching the pattern of scallops in the ceiling. Water was dripping from the points where each group of 3 scallops came together in a geometrical pattern. It was still pretty warm outside, and sitting in the cave letting the cold water drip on my head was a great way to cool off!

All was quiet except for the drips of water all around - it was the perfect place to sit and meditate on the wonders of God's creation all around. I had a Bible in my backpack, and in the soft blue light of the cave I came across one of my favorite Psalms - Psalm 8, which starts "LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!" Although it's a verse I knew and loved for many years I came upon another dimension of God's majesty there in the wilderness.



Translucent ice in the cave

Seeing all the snow still around so late in the year was evidence that the mountains indeed had gone through a punishing winter. Storms dumping 4 feet of snow and bring 120 mph winds were not that uncommon back in February and March. On those nights last winter when I was either working or at choir rehearsal or just sleeping, the snow was falling. There seemed to be an intense sense of catharsis and release of emotions being in a place that is so inhospitable for most of the year.

Of course the mountains themselves had been shaped by the harsh winters, not the summers, when the snow piled up thick into glaciers, scouring out the valleys and forming the meadows and lakes we see now. We are now seeing and appreciating the punishment that had made the land beautiful the way it is now. I can better appreciate the way Jesus had been beaten and persecuted and finally crucified for our sins. But instead of having to deal with the punishment ourselves, he bore the punishment instead. Here it was as if the mountains took the punishment for us and we could see the beauty that it created. It was a spiritual experience indeed - and although I don't believe in worshipping the mountains themselves, I see them pointing to Christ. As the angels worship in Revelation "Worthy is the Lamb who was slain and has redeemed us to God by his blood", I enjoy experiences that can parallel this sense of worship.



On the boat ride back

It was a short couple miles back to Saddlebag Lake, and then it would be about another 1.5 along the shore back to the trailhead. Coming back along the last stretch of the trail to the lake I could hear the hum of a boat engine - I knew the ferry boats would be running most of the day. But I figured with the holiday weekend they would be all quite full (and not worth the wait). But I just happened to show up right when the boat was pulling up - and they still had 2 spots left! In less than a 5 minute wait, we were motoring back to the Saddlebag lake resort on the other end of the lake, saving the last 1.5 miles of hiking - yay!

It was a very pleasant ride, a great way to just soak in the wonderful scenery all around, relax the tired legs, and chat with fellow hikers and compare notes on the day. Mt Dana lay right in front of us - at over 13,000 feet it's one of the highest peaks in Yosemite, a perfect view for our boat ride back. Back at the resort I enjoyed an ice cream and started to think about the next day. It had already been a wonderful day, and this was originally planned to be just the "warm-up" for the "big hike" the next day.



Band at the Whoa Nellie deli

Dinner at the Whoa Nellie deli was fun – juicy burgers while sitting outside and listening to the band playing. I forgot it was a Sunday and the bands normally play on Sundays. They were doing some of the old favorites – Brown Eyed Girl and a few others. A perfect way to cap off a fine day.

Heading down 395, it was about an hour to Bishop where I checked in and relaxed for a bit. Heading south, however I noticed heavier bands of storm clouds moving across the Owen's valley. They had predicted a 20% chance of storms in Yosemite the next day, with a higher chance further south (the seasonal high pressure over the great basin was in full swing, bringing tropical monsoonal moisture up the mountains). I had thought about doing University Peak (next to Kearsarge Pass out of Independence) the next day, but in seeing the change of weather, decided to do something a bit more mellow and local to Bishop (and if it stormed after all, I wouldn't be too far in and committed). Plus Bishop is right in the heart of my favorite parts of the High Sierra. I had been out of North Lake and South Lake but never Sabrina, so I decided to do something out of Lake Sabrina, maybe checking out the Echo lake area. Without good beta on many other peaks (I knew Mt Goode was nearby, but it is often confused with Mt "No Goode" and people often go up the wrong way!), I decided to just hit some of the trails and get a feel for the area (I knew Haeckel / Wallace were there as well as Picture peak, so I'd love to go back and hit some peaks).

Sunday

Instead of having to get up at my original planned 5:00 I made it 6:00 - since instead of getting up early to head another 40 minutes south to Independence to do University, I was going to be just going up to Lake Sabrina instead which was right out of Bishop.

Winding up the paved 168 heading west into the mountains, I went up to over 9000 feet in just a few minutes, as the road made its way through the ancient terminal and lateral moraines - evidence of the massive glaciation that took place during the ice ages. The landscape went from desert shrubs to junipers to aspens and pine trees as the elevation went from under 4000 feet to 9000 feet. Some of the uppermost aspen trees started to show hints of color - hints of the upcoming fall, attesting to the short summers in the high elevations.

I had never hiked by Lake Sabrina - only been to the dam to look around and take a few photos and promise myself I would come back someday. Well today was that day. I was planning on going up to Echo Lake, the farthest lake before crossing the Sierra crest. I knew Echo col was just behind the lake somewhere, the class 3 col taking you near the headwaters of Evolution basin. A chill in the air and a bit of early morning frost indicated that even in summer, winter is never far away. (I found out that just 1 week later it would be snowing above 12,000 feet - some friends had to cut short a 7-day trip in the Whitney area after it snowed in camp!)

Once the sun came up, however it was sunny and beautiful. Coming up to Blue Lake the grand panoramic views started to open up - Haeckel, Wallace and Mt Darwin were in the distance reflected in the still waters of the lake. The trail went up a series of stone steps - which reminded me of my recent trip to Peru and following parts of the Inca trail where it headed up many flights of ancient stone steps. In fact, the scenery reminded me much of Peru to the point where several nights after this trip I had dreams I was back in Peru. In one of the dreams I knew if I hiked up to 12,000 feet I would be at one of the mountain lodges where I stayed - as if there was a magic portal from the Sierras back to Peru!



Peaks over Blue lake

From Blue lake, the mountains appeared as an impenetrable wall of granite - how anyone found paths that go through seemed pretty amazing indeed. Past Blue Lake was Dingleberry lake, and no it was not full of dingleberries (turds)! - it was small but just as scenic as the other lakes nearby. Just ahead are 3 choices of lakes - from left to right there are Moonlight Lake, Hungry Packer Lake and Midnight Lake.

I knew there were a bunch of lakes in the area but never really paid attention to where they were. Since they were all fairly close by, it would be a reasonable trip to be able to see all 3. It's fun to use the imagination when seeing how these lakes were named. Maybe a backpacker without enough food was passing through at night, passing Moonlight lake by the light of the full moon and finally getting to Midnight lake very late! I'm sure these lakes would be beautiful at night with a full moon and millions of stars.

I was heading to Moonlight lake, but on the way took the short detour trail (about 1/4 mile) to Midnight Lake - the trail petered out in a bunch of open granite slabs just before the lake, and cresting the granite ridge just before the lake, I beheld the beautiful lake tucked in the mountains surrounded by walls of granite. A waterfall poured into a grassy meadow just before the lake - shooting stars, columbines, lupines and Indian paintbrush were all in bloom.

Getting over to Moonlight lake took a little bit of cross country, following the drainage over a bunch of granite boulders. The lake was a beautiful turquoise blue, colored in part due to glacial flour from above. At this point, I was clear of the last trees and it was all open granite and meadows ahead. Echo Lake was just up the next granite bench. It was nice to stop and enjoy the view for a few minutes - the annoying mosquito pests must have been held at bay by some chilly weather that had passed through recently.

My original goal for the day was Echo Lake - the last lake in the chain before crossing the Sierra crest. Echo lake was only about 1/2 mile further past the end of Moonlight lake - the terrain was mostly rolling slabs and grassy meadows, allowing for some fairly easy and fun cross-country. Echo col was behind the lake, around to the left - but at this point, I was happy to just be at the lake. The snow slopes around the lake were fairly steep - about 40 degrees, flowing right into the lake. Without an axe (I only had crampons) it looked a bit sketchy. And the col itself was supposedly class 3 - pretty steep as well.



Blue lake and icebergs

Echo lake was a deep vivid blue, still partially covered with large slabs of ice from the previous winter. Much of the water's surface was littered with floating icebergs - brilliant bits of white floating in a deep blue sea. I heard the lake was beautiful but it came as a total surprise once I actually got there - like the ice cave the previous day, I realized it to be one of those wonders of nature that few people venture out to see. I felt privileged in a special way to have the opportunity to be there - I had to be thankful for

good health, my good job allowing me the opportunities to get away occasionally, the beauty all around, and the good weather we have in CA so often. A small iceberg even calved off while I was there.

It was just a bit past noon, so I decided to venture out a bit more - Echo col seemed a bit more than my ambition was up for, knowing I was on my own and out a ways from civilization. A use-trail went over and to the right, heading in the direction of Wallace and Haeckel. I wasn't planning on doing any peak-climbing, but wanted to get a good look since I figured I'd be back in the area again sometime. After a tedious boulder-field for about 15 minutes, it was mostly steady snow-fields around the corner from Echo lake, making for a fun and pleasant climb.

I could tell there was a small depression in the snow field up ahead – which would make a good spot to hang out and have a nice break. When I got to the depression, I realized it was full of water, shining a wonderful light blue. The clear water in the snowy bowl was colored like a beautiful Caribbean beach on shimmering white sand. With a bit of care to not break through, I decided to fill a couple water bottles in the lake - the water had to be about as pure as you could find in the Sierra, being pure snow-melt. I imagined the chance of giardia or some other contamination to be about nil. I broke the thin crust of ice floating on the water and plunged my water bottles in the water for a wonderful fill-up, allowing me to extend the hike a bit more. This is another one of those things that brings me back year after year, sensing the purity of the landscape all around as well as finding these wonderful kind of surprises.



Shallow snow-filled lake

The snowfield led all the way up toward the base of Mt Wallace - the peak looked inviting to climb, though I was just planning on passing through. Just to the right looked like a pass, which looked like an easy way over the Sierra crest. At this point, I thought it would be a wonderful bonus to peek over the other side and see into Evolution valley and Mt Darwin and the countless peaks in Kings canyon. But upon reaching the pass, I realized it was a separate spur east of the Sierra Crest (the actual crest was a jagged 3rd-class ridge for quite some distance in both directions) - bummer. I was still around 13,000 feet though, and the view was spectacular. I could now see into the Hungry Packer lake drainage ahead and the Echo lake drainage behind. Mt Darwin's imposing bulk was just ahead. Lake Sabrina lay far off ahead and to the right. I realized I could make a nice loop and get back to the trail by Hungry Packer lake (I had already seen Midnight and Moonlight, so this would be perfect - I could see all 3).

At the pass, I had a splendid view of Wallace and Haeckel and the connecting ridge-line (considered one of the classic traverses in the Sierra). At the base of the ridge was a deep unnamed lake - filling an enormous "pothole". Snow surrounded most of the lake, all the way to the still deeply frozen surface of the lake. Although it was already September, it still looked like early June in these parts of the mountains. By my feet, a few tenacious polomonium (sky-pilot) flowers were blooming - their blue balls of petals appearing like out of a Dr Seuss book. Just a little to the south was the triple-divide point between the Sierra crest, the Kings River drainage and the San Joaquin drainage (where the Goddard divide meets the Sierra crest). I'm surprised the triple divide peak isn't named or considered "important" according to the SPS list - the 248 peaks in the list sometime seem a bit arbitrary. Maybe next time I should climb it, name it Mt Blum and petition to make it peak #249.



Mt Wallace and snow-choked lake

The sun went behind a cloud for the first time - a few puffy cumulus were starting to blow around. Even though some of the weather reports said "sunny" or "mostly sunny", you never know when the thermals of moist air hit and bounce around in the mountains. Thunderheads could pop-up at any time. I looked over the back-side of the pass and a bit to my surprise it was completely snow-covered and quite steep. I found out later this was the upper part of the glacier coming off Haeckel. It looked like a fun glissade, but without an axe I had second thoughts.

I know I could just go back the way I came and abort the loop. But that would be disappointing - since I had been carrying crampons and trekking poles the whole way so far, this would be a good place to actually use them! The snow was actually quite crusty and icy in spots, dropping at about a 40 degree angle. The angle eased as the snowfield got lower, so the run-out was OK with no rocks at the bottom in case I did take a tumble - though that would be last resort!

Gingerly stepping on the crusty snow, I inched my way down, one step at a time. Vertical granite walls flanked the snowfield on both sides, making for what appeared to be an intense mountaineering experience. But the route was never actually that difficult - it was just a bit slow and tedious. After about 5 minutes of careful stepping, the angle eased and I was able to resume walking normally without fear of slipping and sliding out of control. Upon looking back up at where I came from, I was amazed at having been able to make it over the ridge. But now I was rather committed - I knew the drainage continued on to Hungry Packer lake, so I wasn't too worried about having to schlep my way back up the steep slope and go back the way I came from Echo Lake.

A series of granite benches pockmarked with several other hidden gems of lakes lay in the view just below. The end of Hungry Packer lake lay just below - even though it looked close, subtracting the elevation of the lake from my elevation on my GPS still indicated I had a couple thousand feet more to descend! At least the snowfields were pretty moderate, and even allowed for some nice glissades when the snow wasn't too hard. No tedious boulder slogs got in the way and the slope continued downward

at a reasonable pace. I was starting to tire a bit and was thankful for each easy stretch.



Looking back up the snowy bowl

Things were about to change a bit, however just above Hungry Packer Lake. The snowfields ended and the rocks started getting steeper. I knew on the map the trail goes to the outlet of the lake. The thing I didn't realize though was most of the lake is surrounded by steep cliffs all the way to the surface of the water. Standing by the top of a waterfall that flows steeply as the inlet of the lake, I realized I had to make a decision. Either climb back up and find another way, try to traverse the steep cliffs around the lake, or explore for further options. Being a bit tired I tried to minimize any climbing back up that would be necessary, so I opted for trying to traverse to the tops of the steep cliffs (requiring a little bit of climbing but would hopefully be easier than trying to traverse all the way around the lake).

At least the view was splendid the whole way - Picture peak towering over Hungry Packer lake was a view that I'm sure is what gave the peak its name! Wandering through some grassy ramps and benches, the traverse to the beginnings of the cliffs was not too bad. Just ahead I saw what appeared to be a cairn - so I went by it and looked for a way onward. And then another cairn - or was it? This one seemed to be in a pretty random location - maybe it was natural (it was only 1 flat rock placed on another rock outcrop). I guess I was a bit more lost than I expected - hmmm, what was the best way on?



Lakes along the downclimb back to Midnight Lake

I knew if I climbed a bit, I would have more options - going down or continuing the traverse would only make things more difficult. The going was rough, but I managed to make my way up about 100 feet or so up some steep 2nd and some 3rd class terrain until the ridge flattened out. Just to the left I realized I was coming up to Midnight lake! I remembered from before (on my short 1/4 mile detour) I could navigate from there. Over the ridge was only remaining about a 300 ft steep snowfield leading to some meadows near the edge of the lake. I took one last view toward Picture peak, knowing I was going to head toward Midnight Lake instead.

I knew with crampons the steep snowfield wouldn't be too much of a problem (it was less steep than the icy snowfields a while back), but I was lazy and didn't feel like putting the crampons back on. I almost regretted it when I slipped a couple times on the snow - although I slipped only a couple feet down, it was hard to tell when I was going to be able to stop. My legs started to cramp a little from having to tense up continuously for a period to navigate the snowfield. Oh well - even though the crampons would have taken a little longer, the increased safety would have been worth it - lesson for next time.

At the edge of Midnight lake, I knew I was home-free. I just had to traverse some meadows and some rocky stretches to get back to the scraggly foxtail pines I remember stopping at from earlier. I was quite tired by now and glad to be back on the trail again - yay! It had been a wonderful traverse through a wonderful pass of the High Sierra. Looking back, I kind of wished I had taken a bit of extra time to go up one of the peaks - Mt Wallace would have probably been a fairly easy (maybe 1-hour) peak. And after many summers of peak-climbing I had gotten so used to considering a trip a "success" as long as I made all the peaks. On this trip, I had considered University, then maybe Goode, then maybe Wallace, and ended up not doing any of them - a bit of indecision, slight lack of motivation, and tiredness had me change my mind several times, so even my original laid-out plans for University fell by the wayside. But I knew I would be coming back - maybe next year, with a greater appreciation and knowledge of the landscape.

Coming back toward Blue Lake, I went to the same spot I had been several hours earlier to compare the view. The view now was rather socked in with thick clouds touching the tops of the mountains. Heavy rain and probably some hail was falling up by Mt Darwin - glad I was already out where I was. A couple distant rumbles rang in the distance - the 20% was now a 100% chance since the storms were right there! It never really rained where I was - it stuck mostly around the Sierra crest. I wonder though if I had spent the extra hour or 2 to climb one of the peaks if I would have gotten caught in some of the weather. I don't mind the bad weather once I'm at a safe distance! And it gave an interesting contrast to the experience of being in the mountains. It reminded me of our Ritter / Banner trip a couple months earlier - the weather was clear and beautiful, held pretty well for us to summit Banner, but by the time we considered Ritter, it was changing. By the time we got back to the snow-filled valley at the base of the peaks, the mountains were caught in a swirling mass of dark clouds with rumbling thunder and heavy rain. The weather gave a greater sense of majesty to the place - and I got to enjoy it instead of being caught in the fearsome storm.

It ended up being a fairly long day overall, getting back just before 6:00. I read shortly afterward of a group that spent a 3-day backpacking trip and didn't even get as far as I did in 1 day. It was a great tour of the area and I definitely look forward to getting back either to do some peak climbing or a more relaxed trip, enjoying the lakes some more. I was tired but satisfied by the time I was back at the car - I was hiking back with a couple for the last several miles - swapping stories and enjoying each other's companionship. They were locals to Bishop and so only had about 1/2 hour to drive back, though I had

over 5 hours to get back. I think the hike came out to about 15 miles, done in about 10 hours (my GPS battery didn't make it the whole way, dying around Midnight lake on the way back).



Sunset on the way back

After a quick fast-food dinner in Bishop, I was heading north on 395, watching the sun setting over Ritter and Banner to the northwest. The remnants of the storm clouds were breaking up and when the sunlight reached the underside of the spreading anvil cloud tops, they were illuminating in a shimmering red and orange. The saw-teeth of the Minarets seemed to be cutting the clouds in half - that's one of the things that draws me back to the eastern Sierra - the way the sharp mountains interact with the clouds. There's even a peak near Bishop and South lake named Cloudripper - a testament to some of the prevailing mountain weather patterns.

The rest of the drive back went fairly smooth - I'm glad I decided to head out a bit late on the last day, since I'm sure earlier in the day, a lot of the holiday traffic would be filling the freeways. I hit almost no traffic all the way back to the Bay Area, reaching foggy San Jose by just before midnight. A tiring but wonderful weekend - I can't wait to go back for more!