

Mt Gayley

Jun 30 - Jul 2, 2012



Mt Gayley at over 13,500 feet lies just east of the Sierra crest in the wonderful Palisades region, giving views of some of the fabled 14,000 ft peaks. The route we planned was the "Yellow Brick Road" and at class 3 is one of the most straightforward. From Sam Mack Meadow, you head up to Gayley camp, traversing the Palisade glacier up to Glacier Notch, and then up the class 3 ridge to the summit.

Six people embarked on this 3-day expedition to Mt Gayley - Arun, Scott, Andrea, Magdalena, Piotr and me. We left Friday afternoon after work in 2 cars, preferring to leave around 5:30 to avoid the many hours of rush-hour traffic leaving the bay area. We arrived at the Obsidian dome area just north of Mammoth (with primitive free camping) around midnight. After crashing for the night (it was warm and not so buggy, so no tents needed!), we headed to Bishop to pick up the permits and enjoy breakfast at our favorite Schat's bakery where we fueled up our stomachs for the next 3 days!

My last trip to the Sierras over Memorial day weekend had been foiled by a freak snowstorm that blanketed the mountains with a half a foot of fresh snow above about 10,000 feet. I had been looking forward to a good snow climb of Diamond Peak, since I was getting ready for a big climb of Mt Rainier in August. We got turned back on the Tioga road near White Wolf - so close, but yet so far! I was glad to get on this trip to Gayley which would include a decently high peak, a fun glacier traverse, and some sporty class 3 climbing.

We got our gear organized in the parking lot at the Glacier Lodge backpacker trailhead and were rolling by about 11. A bit late, but that was OK since we were just going up to Sam Mack meadow. We had thought about pushing all the way through to Gayley camp, but at 12,000 feet it'd be a longer day, a colder night, harder to find water, and we'd run more risk of people having altitude sickness (Sam Mack was at 11,000).



Starting on the trail

On the trail, we headed through the desert sage up the canyon along the north fork of Big Pine creek. Along the way we were treated to wonderful views of the Palisade crest, several waterfalls, a beautiful ranger cabin, Temple Crag, and the first 3 of the numbered Big Pine lakes. For such wonderful blue lakes, you'd think they could come up with more inspired names than just "First Lake", "Second Lake", etc, but I didn't mind.

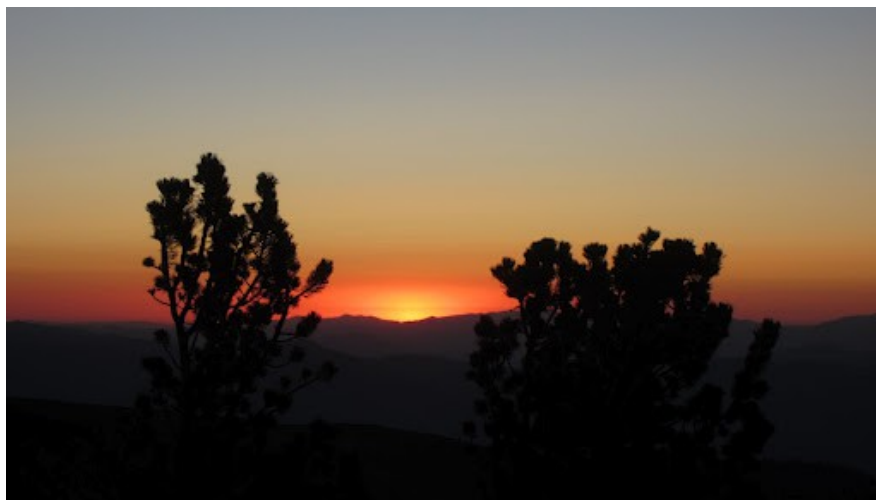
It took us about 4.5 hours to go up the 7 or so miles to Sam Mack meadow. It was nice to get there in the early afternoon so we could find a nice camp spot, filter water, enjoy an early dinner and explore a bit. The meadow is one of the most beautiful in the Sierra - surrounded by rugged granite walls on 3 sides. The green grass and a beautiful turquoise glacial stream were a welcome sight after hiking many miles. Colorful purple shooting stars were in bloom in the lush grass by the water.



Coming into Sam Mack Meadow

The weather forecast was for clear weather, 0% chance of thunderstorms and warm temperatures - a fine weekend for climbing! A few mosquitoes were out but not too bad, as we enjoyed Mountain House lasagna and pasta, tea and soup for dinner. We'd need the energy for an early rise the next morning. After enjoying the alpenglow sunset on the high distant peaks, we were in bed by around 8:00.

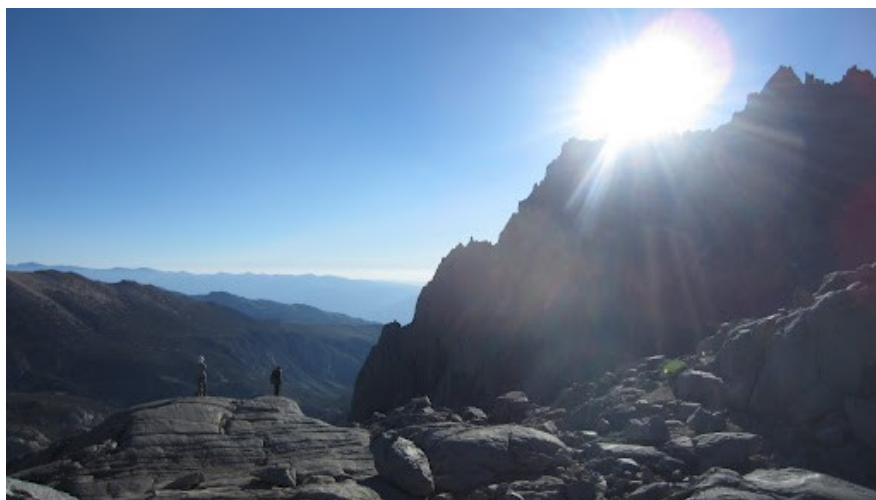
We were up around 4:15 with just a glimmer of pre-dawn light illuminating the eastern escarpment of the Sierra around us. We had a quick breakfast of oatmeal and tea and fruit (my Jetboil stove was great, boiling water in just 3 minutes or so!). We had most of our gear ready from the night before - ice axes, crampons, helmets, GPS - so we were ready to be on the move by 5:00.



Sunrise from above 11,000 feet

It was a bit tedious getting up to Gayley camp at 12,000 feet, ascending over endless slabs and boulders. The sun rose brilliantly around 5:15 bathing the mountains in a warm orange glow. A feathery orange glow lit up the commanding Dark Star face of Temple Crag. Layers started to be shed quickly as the sun rose. It was about 2 hours to reach the camp at the terminal moraine of the Palisade glacier - and I was especially glad we decided to camp lower and I didn't have to carry my pack up that way the day before!

It was evident that we were in a low snow year - much of the snow on the glacier had already melted, revealing bare ice in places. Patches of crevasses had started to open, and the greenish lake at the bottom of the glacier was full of icebergs. A group of 3 climbers was approaching the bergschrund leading to the U-notch - it could still be bypassed on the right, but in a couple weeks, it would be pretty open and a lot more technical.



View from Gayley camp

After a nice break at Gayley camp (and chatting with a solo backpacker for a while who was just waking up), we traversed a long stretch of boulders, trying to not lose much elevation. It was a tedious traverse, and descending to the base of the glacier would have probably been easier, but we didn't feel like having to descend. There was ice beneath the boulders in places, indicating we were actually already on the glacier and the ice went much further down. The glacier was bigger than I expected after all - it was just covered in rockfall and boulders for a while.



Palisade glacier calving chunks of ice

I had a bit of a scare on the boulders - about 2/3 of the way across the seemingly endless traverse, I had to step across a large gap between two VW-size blocks, and during my reach, I heard a clattering sound down below. We had recently gone from bright sun to shadow, so I had stuffed my sunglasses in my outside pocket, knowing I was going to be pulling them out soon on the dazzling snow to come soon. But I had been careless since my pocket was already full with my hat (which I wasn't wearing since I had my helmet on) and my sunglasses were just sitting on top. I would either have to traverse the blinding snow without sunglasses (and risk getting snow-blindness) or turn back and scrub the summit bid. Not to be thwarted, I dropped my pack and started tunneling under the large boulders, hoping one wouldn't shift on me, in the hopes of retrieving my lost sunglasses far below. But luck was with me - after several minutes of crawling deep in the boulder pile, I caught a glimmer of one of the lenses and was just barely able to reach it - I had my sunglasses back - whew! I had to give a little prayer of thanks to Jesus for being able to retrieve the lost item.

Once at the end of the boulders, it was time for crampons. I had just bought a new set of crampons and ice axe for this summer - I had hoped to get on them before doing Rainier coming up and was disappointed when our last trip fell through. Here I was looking forward to trying them out on real ice (instead of just flat dirt out by my patio at home) to see how they performed. Without realizing it, I actually ended up putting on the crampons backward, switching my left and right foot! The labels were a bit misleading on the bottoms of the toes, and one of the straps was put on wrong when I bought them, further adding to the confusion. I guess when I tried them earlier, I might have also had them backward, but didn't realize it since I didn't have them on very long. Here, I had tightened the straps as tight as they went, and made it about 1/2 way across the glacier until the part where it started to get steeper.

Arun noticed something a little odd with my crampons and decided to do a quick gear check. Thankfully we both quickly noticed the error and got the crampons straightened out and adjusted right. My old crampons had actually been my roommate's and we were about the same size, so the crampons

fit easily. But my new ones were just different enough to create the bit of confusion. My boots also seemed to have a flaw - even though they were barely a year old, they had both developed cracks between the heel and the ball of each foot, causing them to flex significantly and allowing the crampons to slide around a bit - I would have to monitor them continuously to make sure they stayed on straight. For Rainier I knew I would either need to get my boots fixed or replaced, or rent the double mountaineering boots (which are probably over \$500 to buy) - I was glad to find this out on this simpler climb on Gayley.



A crevasse on the Palisade glacier

The angle steepened from around 20 degrees to probably about 35 along the 20-30 minute traverse to near the base of Glacier notch - nothing too steep or technical. The view was astounding the whole way, stretching from North Palisade and Thunderbolt, Starlight (we could glimpse the famous "Milk Bottle"), Winchell and Agassiz. A few small crevasses had to be crossed, but they were at most about 2 feet wide - we went parallel to one until it narrowed to less than a foot and we could step across easily. A peek down revealed a deep blue chasm of ice and I didn't dare venture too close!

My crampons did just fine on the rest of the glacier except for the very last couple steps - when I put my pack down and got ready to take my crampons off, I noticed the left one was sticking out at a 45-degree angle - whoops! At least I was on sand and rock now and at a safe place - I was ready to be taking them off anyway. A loose 100 ft class-3 chute took us to the top of Glacier Notch - we were at the pass that divided the N and S fork of Big Pine creek. Directly in front of us was the massive buttress of Mt Sill - we could just make out a couple climbers starting the Swiss Arete route (5.7), one of the classic Sierra climbs. We had intended on keeping this trip class 3, so even though Sill was tantalizingly close, its easiest route (North Couloir following the L-shaped snowfield) is class 4, so we'd leave it for another time.

Dropping our axes and crampons and most of our gear at the top of Glacier notch, we enjoyed a brief snack and marveled at the wonderful mountains all around us. Only a seemingly privileged few get to make it even to where we were, and we weren't even at the summit yet! It was still just around 9:00, pretty early, though we've already been up for 5 hours!

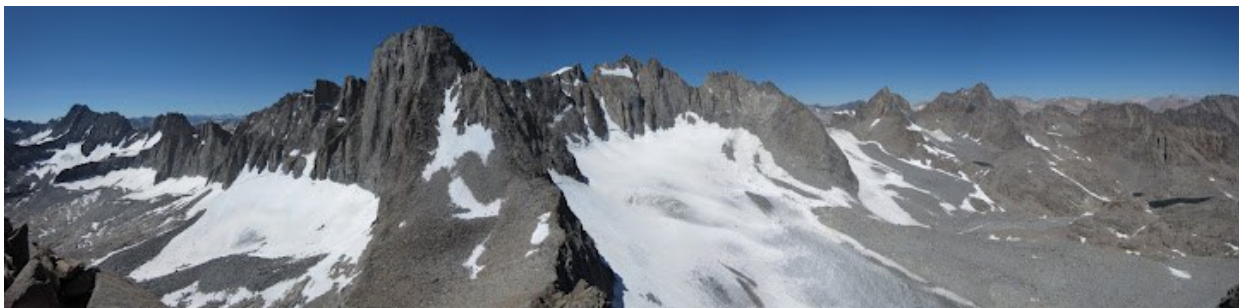
The Yellow Brick Road is mostly class 2 with sections of class 3. The boulders were solid and great to climb on - very little sand / loose rock. After about 1/2 hour, we were climbing the final few blocks to the summit - what a view! We could see as far as Mt Humphreys to the north, Middle Pal / Norman Clyde and countless peaks beyond (maybe even the Kaweahs). Sill was directly behind us and Temple

Crag and the loose slopes of Alice were behind Temple Crag.



On the class-3 route to the summit

After an enjoyable 1/2 hour or so on the summit we clambered our way down the large blocks along the ridge back to Glacier Notch. It was fun trying different routes (mostly class 3, maybe with a couple class 4 moves - though these weren't necessary). In a couple places, the easiest way down was going through tunnels in the boulders or ducking under large overhanging rocks. A wonderful class 1 "sidewalk" followed a cliff for a stretch - making for an easy walk down.



Panoramic view from the summit

Back at the notch and retrieving our gear, we noticed the Mt Sill climbers coming down the L-snowfield after a successful climb! They passed us pretty quickly - seasoned climbers. For us it was a quick descent down the notch and to the Palisade glacier where we donned the crampons again. Heading to the base of the glacier near the iceberg-choked lake proved far easier than traversing what seemed to be 1/4 mile of continuous large boulders, saving maybe 1/2 hour of tedious boulder hopping.

No trouble with my crampons on the way down - good!

Heading up the loose boulders of the terminal moraine of the glacier was a slog but not too bad - we all took different lines to avoid knocking rocks on each other. At the top of the moraine, we were back at Gayley camp, where a chatty lady said hi. We were talking about the climb and what her plans were, and how she had just recovered from an injury and was looking forward to getting out again. It turned out the lady was Emilie Cortes from the PCS!! What are the chances?



Group at Gayley camp

After a good 45 minutes or so of chatting and snacking and catching up, we were on our way. Down the granite slabs, around several more moraines, on our way back to Sam Mack. My phone chimed as it re-entered an area with service, a reminder that civilization was not too far away. We had a great view of First, Second and Third lakes all in a row, each lake a lighter and brilliant turquoise blue than the one below it. I was able to surprise Nisha with a call from 11,000 feet and give her the good news we made the summit and were on our way down!

Back in camp around 3:30, it had been around 10.5 hours since we had left camp in the morning (though with some long breaks in between) - a good day indeed! We got to relax as the sun went down, soak our feet in the cold but clean turquoise stream, share stories about climbing in other countries - Arun and Piotr had both been to Satopanth in India (at different times, Piotr made it to the summit but Arun got snowed out!), and some folks had been to Aconcagua, the volcanoes in Ecuador and Mexico and to countless other peaks. Many great stories were swapped while lazily watching the sun get low at camp! A young lady had pitched her tent just down the meadow from us, planning a solo trip along the Palisades traverse - I wished her good luck!

Dinner was some leftover pasta from the night before, miso soup, noodles and tea - I was quite tired but pleasantly so. A few mosquitoes buzzed around but not as many as I expected - maybe given the dry year, there weren't as many as last year. After dinner we were in our tents around 7:30 (the sun still grazed the summits of Sill and Gayley, just visible from our camp). It was strange to go to bed when the sun was still out but sleep came along quickly.



Our camp at Sam Mack Meadow

The next morning was our hike out - no rush to get going, but once the sun was up, we were up by around 5:30 (10 hrs of sleep!). After packing up camp we were on the trail around 6:30 (seems early, but with the long daylight hours, it never felt rushed), and back to the trailhead around 10:00. We passed Third and Second lakes (with the iconic Temple Crag in the background - one of my all-time favorite Sierra views), and made our way back down the canyon toward the desert once again. An unusual sight came near the waterfalls past the ranger cabin - a group of probably 50 Korean hikers (I first misunderstood it as 15 and I thought even that was a lot!). But there was one non-Korean mixed in that group - Arun immediately recognized him as David Hough from the day hikers group! Wow - small world - that we met 2 people we knew in the mountains 6-7 hours from home!



Temple Crag over Second Lake

We enjoyed lunch in Bishop (back to Schat's our favorite bakery) as we headed up 395, back through the Yosemite high country while thinking of our next trip. Afternoon thunderstorms billowed up north of us on our way out - I was thankful for the wonderful weather we enjoyed the whole trip! We were back home around 6:00 - it was nice to be home early enough after a PCS trip to relax at home, soak in the hot tub and actually get caught up a bit before heading to the office the next morning...