

Wallace / Gromit

Sept 15-16, 2012



View into Evolution basin

I've been looking forward to getting back out to the Sierras for some decent hikes before the season came to a close, and I was still in pretty good shape after a recent climb to Mt Rainier. The weather was finally looking good, after many weekends of thunderstorms which had made a couple previous trips a little more interesting. The monsoon, which persisted for much of the summer, had finally backed off, bringing us seasonable cool and clear weather this weekend.

We were originally planning to have 4 people on this trip, but unfortunately one person never confirmed at the end that he was still interested, and the other (who first expressed interest 4 months ago) had a last-minute work emergency crop up - bummer. So it turned out to be just 2 of us - me and Christophe from the Sierra Club peak climbing section (PCS). I enjoyed hiking with Christophe last month on a trip to Mt Warren and Bishop pass, and I knew him to have quite a bit of stamina - so I knew he would be up to the challenge of the hikes this weekend.

Cloud's Rest seemed to make a good "warm-up" hike - at an elevation just below 10,000 feet, it was high enough to get some decent acclimatization but wasn't too high and strenuous to cause altitude sickness the first day. Our big goal for the weekend was Mt. Wallace which overlooks the Evolution basin. At a height of over 13,000 feet, it would be a decent climb. I had read Bob Burd's trip report of doing Haeckel and Wallace the same day in about 10 hours, so I figured even if we were 50% slower and were doing just one of the peaks, it would still be about 10 hours for us.

I had been to Cloud's Rest a few years ago on a church camping trip. A few of us decided to go that year since most of us had already hiked Half Dome in previous years (the Yosemite "rite-of-passage" hike). I felt Cloud's Rest was a hike for hikers who had already gotten Half Dome "out of their system". We had done it as a through-trip from Tenaya Lake to our camp in the valley (about 17 miles, mostly downhill). I really enjoyed it that year and was eager to get back to it.

Christophe had almost been to Cloud's Rest a couple weeks ago when he decided to cut short an overnight backpacking trip in the Sunrise area of Yosemite to just a long day-hike (and carrying his

pack the whole way - 18 miles!) But the section he ended up cutting out included the summit of Cloud's Rest - he was bummed at the time, but got excited when my trip came up and he could give it a go again. And for me, I had almost been to Mt Wallace last summer when I was doing a tour of the Sabrina lakes area - I hadn't realized Wallace was so close until I was most of the way down and I saw it on the map just 400 feet higher and 1/4 mile away from the ridge at the highpoint on my loop. So this weekend was a weekend of second chances for both of us.

Christophe met me at my place at 6 am and we were soon on our way in his van, heading through the gloomy and foggy morning as we started heading east. A bright sunrise at the edge of the fog bank greeted us by the windmills over the Altamont pass, bringing in a wonderful new day. The weather forecast looked good - mostly sunny, in contrast to our last trip to Mt Warren / Goode last month where the skies were laden with dark thunderstorm clouds.



Clear skies ahead over the Altamont pass

As we made our way through the foothills just east of Oakdale, I noticed a smoky plume in the distance - a wildfire. It was hard to judge the distance and size and location of the fire as we were driving the windy roads in the mountains - at first it looked small and that we would soon be past it, but many miles later it was still looming in front of us. The plume of smoke would disappear for a while, but then re-emerge closer a minute later. We were getting closer to the park entrance and yet the fire was still there - sometimes it appeared it might even block the road ahead of us (which I can speak from experience has happened a couple times before!) We were soon in the park entrance, and they had a notice about the fire - it was called the Cascade fire and it was caused naturally by lightning in late June and had burned slowly over several months to about 1000 acres. Firefighters were just monitoring the fire, allowing it to burn naturally in the way fires had burned for thousands of years. This fire, which was just mostly a creeping ground fire, was burning small brush and debris on the forest floor, revitalizing nutrients in the soil for the red fir forest to continue to thrive. I was relieved to realize what had originally appeared as a threat was actually something beneficial and would affect our plans after all!

The view from Olmsted point along the Tioga road was serene - crystal blue skies in all directions, no smoke and seemingly zero threat of thunderstorms. Tenaya lake was clear as a bell with the formidable massif of Mt Conness and the countless domes around Tuolumne Meadows beyond. The mosquitoes were pretty much gone this time of year - you couldn't ask for better day! I was saddened that tens of

thousands of people scared off by the hantavirus outbreak were skipping their plans to Yosemite even when the threat was minuscule (it was more dangerous on the roadways to get to Yosemite than the virus itself!) I feel the media is doing a great job at making people quite paranoid. My church group had in fact planned a trip to Yosemite just last weekend (the same church group as my previous trip to Cloud's Rest), but changed our plans to visit Calaveras Big Trees instead!

We made it to the Sunrise trailhead where we would hit the trail - we somehow managed to grab the last parking spot! We were both eager to get started as the miles of granite beckoned us forward. Plenty of sunscreen and water would be necessary. I was all ready to go when I reached to put on my hat and it wasn't there - I shuffled hastily through my backpack and overnight bag and trunk of the van and under the seats, but no hat. I realized in my haste and excitement during last night's packing that I had dropped it in my room and it never made it into my bag after all - bummer. Even with several applications of sunscreen, the top of my forehead would end up burning and peeling the next week - it would be a lesson learned.

It was about 11:00 by the time we finally hit the trail - an hour later than I originally anticipated, but at least with the good weather I wasn't too worried. I was thankful that most of the trail wound through forests and wasn't too exposed until right near the top. Tuolumne Meadows was visible through the trees and the views expanded to include the domes and peaks of the high country. Even though Cloud's Rest was familiar from years ago, it still felt like a fresh new experience - I never get tired of Yosemite!

Just before reaching the summit of Cloud's Rest, I wandered over to the edge where you could look down the frightening slope into Tenaya canyon - a wall of naked granite dropping down at about a 45 degree angle for 5000 vertical feet. I hunkered down behind a large boulder - not risking getting too close, since a slip there could start a very long slide and tumble down the glacier-polished rock. The rock flowed in smooth patterns, almost like waves where the glaciers scoured and polished the granite. Below us were 2 chutes carved into the solid rock, separated by a triangular pinnacle - I imagined this pinnacle cleaving 2 adjacent glaciers as they flowed down the slopes of Cloud's Rest, joining the immense glacier flowing down Tenaya canyon into Yosemite Valley during the ice age.



Dizzying view into Tenaya canyon!

Coming back to the trail, I noticed Christophe talking with someone - I thought maybe he was just shooting the breeze with someone while waiting for me, but I realized it was his friend Sarah who he had already planned to visit next weekend! Of all the people on the trail and in Yosemite, what were the chances! I remember on a previous hike to Mt Gayley back in June, our group actually ran into 2 people we knew - small world!



Final ridge to the summit

The rocks near the summit ridge looked like stacks of pancakes - I had remembered this "pancake ridge" from my last hike like it was yesterday! Once on this ridge it was an easy walk up granite slabs and steps right to the summit - the rock formed an 8-foot wide sidewalk all the way up. From many angles, Cloud's Rest looks impossibly steep, and I was thankful that there existed this easy route - the glaciers could have easily formed the ridge of Cloud's Rest instead like the nearby Matthes Crest which was a technical class 4 and 5 route most of the way. Hordes of people looked like ants going up to the summit - gazing and wandering in all directions. The summit was packed with people! On my previous trip, I remembered just our group and a handful of others, but I think with the tight restrictions on Half Dome (people would even scalp the free permits for \$100 online), many people had opted for Cloud's Rest as a consolation instead. It would seem useless to have a register on top - it would fill and have to be replaced probably every month! I wondered how many people hiked from the valley and how many went up from Sunrise. I have a friend who had done it from the valley a few years back as a training for Mt. Whitney the following weekend (both hikes are about 22 mi and 6000 ft gain).

The summit was one of the most impressive views I've had in quite some time. I hadn't expected as much from Cloud's Rest knowing it was just a warm-up, an acclimatization day for tomorrow's big hike. But upon reaching there, I thought it could rival the view of many other Sierra peaks. Half Dome stood unmistakably in profile view in front of us - the sheer face on the right beckons rock climbers from around the world. The cable route was facing us, and a view through the binoculars revealed maybe 100 people slowly meandering up the metal ropes. The view behind us extended to the Sierra crest, including Mt Conness, Matterhorn, Mt Dana, Lyell/Maclure, Cathedral, Echo Peaks, Matthes Crest and countless peaks to the south. It was fun to take an inventory of all the peaks I had been to in previous years, and I started to think about which peaks to visit next.



Christophe and me at the summit

The slabs on the summit were riddled with small potholes about a foot in diameter. I think when lightning strikes the ridge and blasts small divots in the rock, then these small pockets fill with water which freezes and thaws during the seasons, further expanding the holes. We marveled at the shape of the granite all around - we had a great view into granite-lined Little Yosemite Valley, where the rock seemed to flow in waves down the slopes. The Clark range loomed to the south - the arete of the peak stood out like a great spike of granite, calling us to it. The easiest route is class 3/4 and requires a many mile approach - a rather non-trivial effort.

Christophe had a bit of a spirit of adventure and exploration, and we decided to take a short side-trip to the Sunrise lakes on our way down. Many times with hiking with others, we end up sticking to the plan, so it felt like a bit of bonus to get to see something different. Christophe had just been there on his 18-mile marathon 1-day backpacking trip, and he said his favorite of the Sunrise Lakes (the "cute one") was also the closest - just about 1/3 mile on a side trail. Most of the terrain getting up to Cloud's Rest was uneventful and in the forest, so the lake was a nice bonus - and great place to dunk my face and clean off the sweat and grime!

Back on the trail, it was a pretty quick downhill stretch back to the trailhead. We passed dozens of people on the trail - apparently these folks either hadn't been scared by the hantavirus in the valley or were opting for the high country instead. We enjoyed a short swim in nearby Tenaya lake after the hike - the cool clear water was quite refreshing and cleaning as well - it was wonderful to get the rest of the dust and grime off my body after many dusty miles on the trail! I had remembered ice skating on the same lake back in January possible since we had such an unusual dry spell at the beginning of the winter. But now we were enjoying the warm sun and sand on the beach. I was lucky to have remembered to throw in my swimsuit at the last minute when packing last night! We had talked about visiting a hot spring near Mammoth (as has been my custom on these sorts of Eastern Sierra trips in past years) - but on this trip the sandy ripples and waves in the clear water of Tenaya Lake were just as soothing to my tired feet.



Soothing water of Tenaya lake

Heading back east on 120, we continued over the Tioga Pass and down 395 south toward Bishop. Since we decided to forego the hot spring, we instead opted for a nice dinner at the Bishop Burger Barn. After a bit of a bummer of a burger at Jack's on our last trip and when the folks in the other car on that trip said they had a good dinner at Bishop Burger Barn, we decided to try it out on this trip. It was excellent for being a small family run business (even the kids and their dog were playing outside as we ordered). Burgers and chicken strips with some beers from the nearby Mammoth Brewing company made for a great celebration of the day and anticipation for the day to come. We had gotten some corrections from the owners about some of the local place names when we were chatting - Sabrina was actually like "Sabrainna" with a long I and Mono Lake was actually like "Mohno Lake" with a long O - now we could talk like a local from now on...

Reaching the Sabrina campground in the dark around 8:00, we were pleasantly surprised to find a couple spots still open. Being later in the season maybe many people had put away their gear for the season, but for us that was the best time to go! Less people, no mosquitoes, no thunderstorms and cooler weather made for a great time. The stars shone brightly - not a cloud in the clear Sierra sky. The milky way shone brightly as we took turns with the binoculars identifying stars, clusters and galaxies. The Double cluster near Cassiopeia, the Lagoon and Trifid nebulas, and the Andromeda galaxy were clearly visible. A couple shooting stars whizzed by.

Bedding down around 9:30, I was tired and soon fell asleep - my body cherished the rest. Even though we were getting up early the next morning, it would still be a good 8 hours of sleep, more than I would often get at home.

Sunday

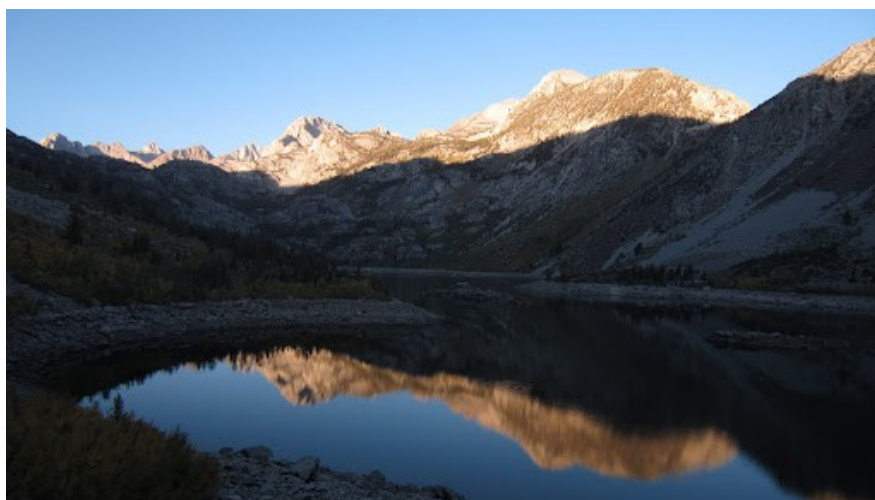
My alarm chimed the next morning at 5:30 - but I was already awake before the gentle strumming guitars on my phone charted ringing. The eastern sky was showing just a hint of deep blue punctuating the darkness above. Venus shone brightly as the eastern morning star. Orion had already risen, reminding us that winter was on its way soon. The milky way shone, stretching from horizon to horizon - not a cloud in the sky. Although it was a cool and clear night, I noticed raindrops dripping on me as I was waking up. Apparently my breath during the night had caused so much condensation on the inside of the tent that it was dripping, wetting parts of my sleeping bag and clothes inside. I'd have to drape my wet gear in the car, hoping it would dry during the day.

I had been anticipating this day for about a year now - I had been to the Sabrina basin just last year for a "grand tour" hike - hiking up to Echo Lake up the Moonlight Lake side, crossing over a ridge at the base of Wallace / Haeckel, then dropping down into the Hungry Packer drainage and traversing back to Midnight Lake where I picked up the trail to Sabrina. The terrain was difficult - requiring many zigzags and ups/downs to get around uneven rocks and cliffs, so anticipated today's hike to be similarly difficult.

Looking at the map and judging the distance to Mt Wallace (and Mt Haeckel via the class 3 traverse as a stretch-goal), it appeared to be about 8 miles R/T as the crow flies, but remembering the unevenness of the terrain, I estimated it as being more like 12-14 mi, and maybe 10-12 hrs. Crows definitely fly straighter than people do... I was eager to get an early start - even considering pushing it up 1 hr to start hiking at 5:30 instead of just waking up at 5:30 to avoid getting caught in the dark on our way out. The hike would end up being considerably longer and more difficult than either of us anticipated, but it turned out to be one of the most rewarding of the season.

I had my tent broken down once it got a little bit lighter. Christophe opted for a few minutes of extra sleep - which was no problem as he was just sleeping in the van anyway! Actually I was glad we didn't wake up at 4:30 after all - breaking camp and making breakfast in the dark would have been a bummer. We knew there were only a couple parking spots right near the trailhead, so we opted to pack up quickly and get something to eat at the trailhead.

I was still pretty full from the dinner at Bishop Burger Barn last night and was fine having just some fruit and bars for breakfast. Neither of us had brought a stove (I was originally bracing for waking up at 4:30 when I wouldn't have had the energy to cook a hot breakfast, so the stove never entered my mind...) A Starbucks frappuccino coffee drink gave me enough of a jolt of caffeine and sugar to get me going.



Sunrise over Sabrina Lake

It was about 7:00 by the time we finally hit the trail - the tops of the peaks over Lake Sabrina were bathed in a golden light. Sabrina was low for this time of year - being a man-made lake, they let the water level down to give more room for the spring snow-melt season. Aspen trees were golden and the willows were showing a bit of color as well - fall was on the way at this elevation." We wandered along the left shore of the lake, slowly working our way up the sage-covered desert, crossing several streams into the forest above. I kept my fingers crossed for the weather - they had predicted clear skies with

maybe some high clouds, but seeing several jet contrails persist for over 2 hours concerned me a little, indicating moisture aloft that could be bringing in a change of weather.

It wasn't until we got past Blue Lake that the sun finally crested the mountains to the east giving us the warming rays to break the morning chill. I was glad to have been in this area last year - the trail makes a bit of a confusing crossing past the outlet of the lake, necessitating a scramble over a bunch of large logs and boulders. Around Blue Lake are a bunch of granite slabs - fortunately marked by ducks for a mile or so. I knew the next lake to be Dingleberry Lake - I had a vague recollection of it but knew it to be not far from Blue Lake. After what seemed to be a mile further (I thought it was half that distance), I thought we were finally there - but checking on Christophe's GPS, I saw there was yet another set of lakes before Dingleberry - Emerald Lakes. Shoot - I had expected the hike to be a bit long but with so many twists and turns in the landscape, the hike seemed to be twice as long as on the map!

Dingleberry lake had an interesting name - maybe named that way since it's an area where horses often like to do their business on the trail? Otherwise it was a beautiful setting - a couple campers nearby had their tents set up and were just starting to awake. A little further was the crossing of Bishop Creek - a line of stones aided with the crossing for about 50 feet. I was glad to have my poles to aid in the crossing but Christophe managed just fine without poles - I had been using them for several years now and maybe they've become like a crutch I feel that I can't go without now.

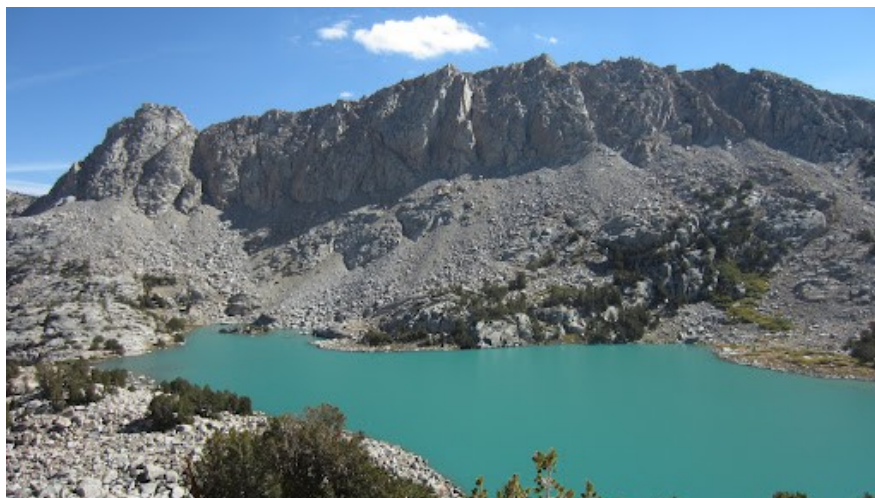
We were finally near the junction where the trail split into 3 forks - toward Midnight Lake, Hungry Packer and Moonlight Lake - on my last trip I had traversed over to Moonlight lake, following a use trail over some meadows and many boulders around the lake. Christophe had on his map an illustration of 2 different routes up to Mt Wallace - a high route over a bunch of slabs and a low route which followed the lake shoreline over all the boulders. I must have taken the low route last time and was glad to try the high route - something different. Plus the slabs seemed much more pleasant.



Sailor Lake

The slab route started just past the next lake - Sailor Lake. This lake had an idyllic setting, surrounded by meadows and with picturesque Picture Peak in the background (this peak is officially unnamed, but came to be called Picture Peak for obvious reasons!). Just past Sailor lake, we headed on the slabby ridge between Moonlight and Hungry Packer Lake - I imagined this ridge cleaving the glaciers flowing off the high mountains above - one glacier flowing to the left, creating the basin for Moonlight lake and the one to the right forming Hungry Packer Lake. The granite ridge was quite fun - the angle wasn't too

steep and often it formed nice steps to work our way up. The view from the clean slabs improved with each step - we could see Moonlight lake below like a "Lake of Paradise" from the Canadian Rockies. The blue-green tint of the water was from glacial flour as the ice scraped and ground it way down from above. Just above the lake we could see the remnants of one of the glaciers - on top, it was a bowl of white ice, but below it appeared like a grey flowing mass of rocks - a "rock glacier" - as if there was ice below the rocks or the rocks were embedded in the glacier. As the ice melted on top, it left the rocks exposed, even though there may still be many feet of unseen ice below.



Moonlight Lake

We had been moving for about 4 hours now and I knew we still had far to go - though I was already starting to feel the altitude effects. We were above 11,000 feet and I knew the peaks to be above 13,000 - still a bit of a climb ahead of us. My stomach was faring well but had slight bits of uneasiness at times. I knew taking it slow and drinking plenty of water should help. We got a nice break where the slabs ended and joined the talus aprons coming off the backside of Picture Peak. Echo Lake was a brilliant deep blue far below at this point. Last year there were still slabs of ice in the high alpine lake, though this year it was quite barren and dry. The rest of the route was clearly visible - turn right and follow the valley up to where the slopes of Mt Wallace get easier, turning into easy class 2.



Going up the slabs behind Picture Peak

I stuck to a similar route I had taken last year - following the base of the drainage upward. It was quite different this year though, being devoid of snow, but fortunately the rock wasn't too loose or difficult. Christoph took a different route, traversing high and to the right of the drainage, hoping to save some elevation loss. Unfortunately his route turned out to be about 10 minutes slower than mine - the loose boulders being more tedious than expected - lesson learned for the hike back down.



Echo Lake

It was also a tedious slog getting up the final 500 feet to the summit - it was near 1:30 now and we had been going for almost 7 hours now. The last few hours had flown by. I tried to pressure breathe and rest-step when I remembered (useful techniques on Rainier we had used last month) - hopefully they would work on this trip too. My body was already quite fatigued and my stomach was hanging in there but didn't have much appetite at this point. The rock was loose and sandy, often resulting in 2 steps forward, 1 step back. A dusting of snow from some storms a few days ago remained in some shady patches.

I had remembered climbing the final section of Pyramid Peak a couple weeks ago and keeping an easy 1000 ft / hr pace on the steep sections. Looking at my GPS showed about 12,800 feet, so 500 more to go - should be 1/2 hr, right? Of course here, being 3000 feet higher and on much looser rock, the going was quite tough and felt like it was going to take twice that long. Christophe was probably 200 feet below me - I was glad he had a bit of safe distance since many rocks were quite unstable. In my fatigued mental and physical state, my concept of time was getting distorted, and I was starting to wonder how much longer it was going to take.

I was relieved to find that near the top the rock was a lot more solid and stable, even though the climbing turned from class 2 to solid class 3 for the last section. One rock jutted straight out like a horn for probably 10 feet - I was careful to not dislodge it - the last thing I wanted was to be crushed by a many-ton boulder on a 13,000 foot mountain! The class 3 was quite fun and took my mind off the tiredness I was already feeling - it took a bit of problem solving to find the right route up, over and to the right until finding the right path to the summit. The summit was a narrow ridge of maybe 20 feet - a quick scan revealed the aluminum cylinder of the register on the other side of the summit ridge - yay - success!

I had kicked myself on my last hike in the area that I had gotten to the base of the mountain but hadn't managed to climb the last 400 feet to the summit, even though I had only planned on doing a tour and

not doing any summits. I was elated to finally be on the summit this time! Climbing the peak, you don't see any of the view to the south and west until you were on the summit, so I didn't know what I had missed last time. The view to the west stretched down the south fork of the San Joaquin river from the Evolution basin to the tree-filled valley downstream, eventually ending up in Florence Lake just barely visible far away. The mighty San Joaquin flows all the way through the CA central valley, providing water and nourishment for so much of our agriculture.

I had forgotten that Terry Cline and some folks from the PCS were planning an Evolution trip during the last week - I had heard of the fabled Evolution traverse where Peter Croft traversed the 9 peaks in 15 hrs along a ridge line that involves a 5.9 crack climb and a 5.7 face and much 4th and low-5th class traversing over a stretch of 8 miles. Mt Wallace was the 6th peak on this traverse and probably the easiest, so I really gained a respect for this guy who did all 9 peaks in 1 day! I wondered if Terry was going to be doing the whole traverse (over many days) or just parts of it. I did find out he made it to Wallace when I opened the register and the last entry was from Sept 11 with his name!



At the summit of Mt Wallace

We had briefly considered the 3rd-class ridge traverse to neighboring Mt Haeckel to the north, but seeing the time and noting how tired we already were, decided to forgo the bonus summit. The ridge looked jagged and blocky and a fun 3rd class route, but I was happy saving that for another day. We did see, however, that we could make a traverse in the other direction to the south, following the Sierra crest down to Wallace Col (a route to enable access to the upper Evolution basin without needing to go over the longer route over Lamarck col). From Wallace Col we could continue south to the next peak, which promised another great view and didn't look much harder than class 2. The peak to the south was roughly on our way back, requiring a lot less back-tracking than Haeckel, and the weather was still holding pretty nicely, so we decided to go for it. Christophe with his spirit of adventure was eager to see the other peak - I probably would have skipped it had he not been there, and I was pretty tired, but was willing to push myself a little. Besides he had driven us the whole way and was willing to drive on the way back - I probably wouldn't have made it to the bonus peak and maybe not even to Wallace had I known I had a 6 hour drive waiting when we got back to the trailhead.

The next peak, which was un-named, was actually the triple-divide point of the Owens valley to the east, the Kings river drainage to the SW and the San Joaquin drainage to the NW. This is where the Goddard Divide met the Sierra crest. I had been on a similar summit a couple years back to Junction Peak where the Kings meets the Kern - the next river further down. I thought this peak would have had

a name like "Junction" or "Divide" or something similar, but was dismayed to not find a register or any trace of a name on any map. We did decide later, on the way down to call it "Gromit", so our trip was to Wallace & Gromit - one of our favorite claymation British comedy series in the 90's. Each second of filming of the series took 30 frames, which took about 1 day - every scene was set by hand with no computer animation, so the films in the original series took years to make!

After carefully down climbing the class 3 blocks just below the summit, we started traversing over toward the south ridge, following the Sierra crest down. The going was pretty easy, fairly sandy class 2 with immense views on both sides. Echo Lake and Picture Peak on the left and the headwaters of the Evolution basin on the right. A use trail seemed to follow the ridge line - this was actually part of the Evolution traverse, as many folks go between Wallace and Mt Fiske along the Goddard Divide via the ridge.

At Wallace col, the trail started heading back uphill - although I knew it was hard to judge how much higher the peak ahead was, I knew it couldn't be more than a couple hundred feet, as my GPS still read over 13,000 feet so fortunately we hadn't needed to lose too much elevation in between. At times it felt close enough to almost reach out and touch, but at other times, it still felt like a mile away - my eyes were playing tricks on me. Maybe this peak didn't have enough prominence to qualify as a separate named peak, and with the Clyde Spires a little further south being just a little higher (and at class 4 much more difficult), that's why Gromit didn't have an official name.

The summit block of the un-named peak had a fun blocky class 3 route which I clambered up in about a minute. From above I could see Christophe making his way - he was about halfway up from Wallace col at this point, so just a few more minutes. The views were astounding in every direction - looking to the southwest we could see the headwaters of the Kings River into a barren basin of un-named lakes. Remnants of several small glaciers flowed down the slopes of some of the peaks with one even flowing into an iceberg-choked lake. Cameras were snapping pictures and movies were being shot as memory cards were furiously being filled - to capture a moment that we worked hard for.



View toward Echo Lake and Moonlight Lake from Mt Gromit

To the northwest we had another angle into the Evolution basin - looking down a chain of alpine lakes following the headwaters of the San Joaquin river. In the distance the river appeared to follow a straight line into the tree-lined Evolution valley before making a slight left turn and merging into Florence Lake far away. To the north, the jagged Sierra crest stood as a seemingly impenetrable divide between the Pacific ocean and the deserts of the Great basin. Mt Wallace lay directly in front of us with slightly higher Haeckel beyond. Flat-topped Darwin stood just behind Haeckel and imposing Mt Humphreys just a bit further to the north. To the east we could see directly down to Echo Lake and down the Bishop creek drainage all the way back to Lake Sabrina and the Owen's Valley. White Mountain peak seemed to be floating on a faraway range east of the vast valley. To the south we could see the row of peaks of the Palisade crest crowned by the 14,200 ft North Palisade. We could glimpse

the imposing Milk Bottle of Starlight and the 5.9 summit block of Thunderbolt just in front.



View into the Kings River drainage

It was already pushing 3:30 by the time we finished a snack and were heading off the summit - I estimated we had about 5 hours to get back, so darkness would be creeping in on the last stretch. If we had set a turn-around, I probably would have picked 2:00 so we'd still get back in the daylight and be able to start the long drive back home at a more reasonable time. And I probably would have started an hour earlier (I had originally thought 5:30 or 6 at the latest). However, I knew we would have regretted turning around before the summit just because of time (we had turned back on a snowshoe trip to Lassen early last year maybe 1 hr before reaching the summit - we could have easily made it, but we wanted to play it safe). I had already been to Lassen so I didn't mind, but I would have been quite bummed to not make the peaks on this trip, especially knowing I had been quite close last time as well! Had I been by myself, I don't know if I would have had the stamina to make both peaks, so I was glad to have Christophe pushing me along!

Coming off the summit, I had remembered from my trip to Rainier that 80% of the accidents on mountains happen on the way down. Again, I was so glad to have summited both peaks that it didn't seem to matter too much! I knew I might pay for that someday, however if I did get hurt. I just tried to be careful and deliberate, since I knew there was much loose rock and many boulders to be crossed before we got back to a trail. I knew if we got back down to Wallace col we should be able to follow the sandy scree-filled chute back to the drainage below to get back to Echo lake.

On our way back down the ridge, I could see the top of the chute that appeared to lead all the way down and we started making hasty progress down. I was eager to get down at this point and looked forward to getting back to known territory. The chute had quite a bit of sand and loose rock, making the going rather treacherous. I didn't want to risk a sprained ankle late in the day still at this high elevation and far from the trailhead and neither did Christophe so we took it very slow.

Unfortunately instead of getting easier, the chute seemed to steepen and the rock got even looser. One step could send a dozen fist-size rocks tumbling down the rocky chute, the rocks bouncing like billiard balls off the walls. I wished I had a helmet here - we had a similar chute on Gayley back in June and we did all have helmets there. We tried going down next to each other, not allowing too much distance to come up between us - since having a rock hit my head at 30 mph at 12,500 feet wouldn't be much fun.



Chute and small glacier on the scree-filled descent

Christophe found the going difficult not having trekking poles - I had been used to using my poles as a crutch for many years and here I was very glad to have them. But I felt Christophe to be at an unfair disadvantage here and was glad to lend him a pole to help us safely navigate the slippery ankle-twisting scree. Traversing a ridge to the right fortunately led us to a slightly easier chute, taking us further down. A rocky cliff further to the right formed an impenetrable boundary so we were counting on the chute "going". However, it steepened yet a bit further giving us pause. Traversing to the left would probably be a sandy class 3/4 at best, and the cliff on the right was probably 5th class, so the only other option would be to climb 300 feet back up the chute and find a whole different way. We sat and assessed the situation for a few minutes and decided to risk going for it and pushing forward down the chute. With a step and a prayer we kept making our way down - the easier slopes just ahead beckoned us forward. A check on my GPS showed we still had almost 1000 feet to the elevation of Echo Lake - I was dismayed to realize we had a ways to go.

Luck was with us, however, as we carefully butt-scoted down a sandy class 3 section, which led to an easy class 2 apron and the top of a small glacier. I knew the glacier would take us all the way to easier terrain, so we would be home free after that - yay! Without crampons, I slipped on the ice a couple times but at least the angle wasn't too steep, and we weren't slipping on a steep rocky slope where a fall would be dangerous. I had slipped a bit earlier when a rock moved under my feet, gashing my left shin a bit - fortunately my hiking pants cushioned the blow and prevented much bleeding. I knew there were many layers of moraines beyond the glacier and with the rock most freshly melted out of the ice, it was bound to be quite sandy and loose. A small stream flowed through the ice, carving a channel from the fresh glacial meltwater. I was almost out of water at this point and gladly filled a bottle with the cold, clear water.

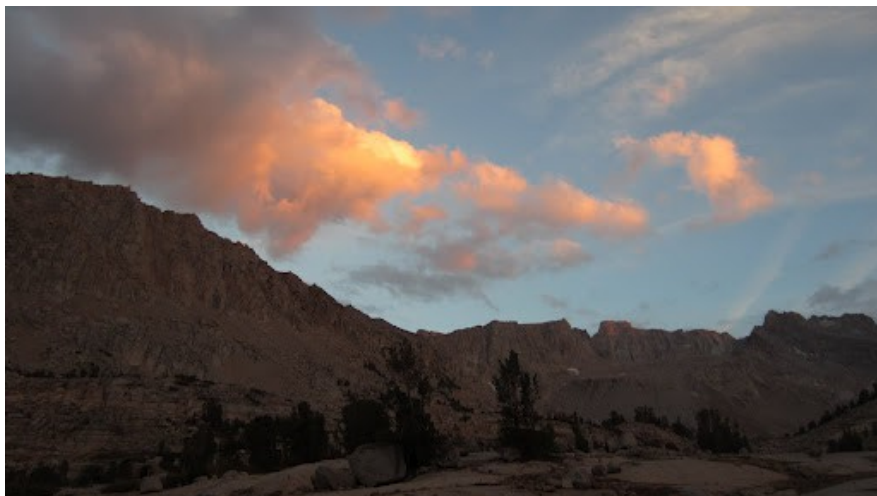
Fortunately the slopes weren't too steep and we picked our way back over to Echo Lake in reasonable time. Just ahead we could see the end of the endless talus fields where the boulders gave way to sloping alpine meadows flanked with grass. Seeing vegetation and life once again boosted my spirits. We would soon be back into low bushes and small trees as we came up to the granite slabs we had ascended on the way up. I knew the trail was just at the base of the slabs, and we still had several hours of daylight left so we were doing well.



Picture Peak and Hungry Packer Lake

Coming off the slabs between Moonlight and Hungry Packer lake, however I could feel my calves starting to tighten - after many hours of abuse and flexing, they were getting pretty tired. I remember on a hike several years ago in the Mokolumne wilderness, I ended up adding a couple loops I hadn't planned on (since it was a beautiful area and a perfect day) and I paid the price on the hike back - my legs tightened on an uphill stretch on the hike back, the muscles turning into hard rocks that wouldn't move. All I could do was sit and massage them until they loosened, hoping I was going to make it back safely. I was able to move again slowly, but then about 15 minutes later, the same thing happened and then a 3rd time shortly after, until I finished the uphill part. It was quite painful and debilitating, and I was glad to make it out before dark.

We still had several hundred feet of slabs to descend, which was taxing on my muscles - requiring constant flexing of my calves and thighs. I could feel my legs almost about to seize up at any moment - I learned on our Rainier trip last month that eating and drinking and getting salts consistently was important at every break. We had gone several hours without a break and I realized I was probably a lot more dehydrated and lacking of minerals than I should have. After sitting for a few minutes and guzzling some gatorade and eating a bar, my muscles had thankfully relaxed quite well and the pain was alleviated. I suddenly realized I hadn't been paying attention to the wonderful views all around and I quickly got my camera out to capture the scene across the open slabs falling into Sailor Lake just ahead.



Sunset near Sailor Lake

We finished the slabs and traversed in front of Sailor Lake where my eyes caught the sight of something truly wonderful - the trail! Yay - we were back on a known path - we should be relatively home free from this point. I had been in a sort of "survival" mode for the last couple hours - making sure I was going to make it back safely. I knew it would be getting dark in a couple hours and fortunately we both had headlamps and several packs of extra batteries.

We stopped for about 15 minutes for Christophe to filter a couple liters of water (I thought I still had enough from the glacier meltwater I took earlier), but I was glad when he offered me some more in case I needed it. His filter had a UV bulb in it using radiation to kill any bacteria and giardia that may be in the water - efficient and sophisticated. I had gone the "natural" route, hoping that none of the giardia germs would survive in the frozen glacier above. A few clouds had rolled in, which were now bathed in a beautiful orange glow of the sunset - this glow reflected off Sailor Lake was wonderful - the camper near the lake was there again for another night, and I envied his position. I wished to be able to just stop and enjoy a restful night and relax, but alas we had many hours and miles to go before we would sleep.

Fortunately, it was a rather uneventful romp along the trail as we hopped the stones across Bishop Creek (fortunately still with some light left) and made our way back down into scattered trees. Just as we were coming up to Dingleberry lake in the dusky light, a deer peacefully tromped off to our right. I hadn't thought much about the wildlife during the day - my mind was focused more on our goal of the peaks. I wondered if there were bears just out of sight that we missed as well.

By the time we reached Blue Lake, we had our headlamps on, navigating the cairn-lined granite slabs carefully. Fortunately, Christophe's GPS kept us within about 20 feet of our bread-crumbs trail from our hike up in the morning so we never strayed too far from the trail. He did a great job leading us down amid the growing darkness. The stars shone like gleaming diamonds in the sky through breaks in the trees. The starlight was reflected in crystal-smooth Blue Lake and the Milky way was again showing its glowing band across the sky. Sagittarius and Scorpius were behind the lake as we turned to the north on our way to Lake Sabrina. The Big Dipper pointed us to the north star.

The final section of the trail seemed to go on and on longer than expected - I thought we only had about 1/2 hr to go from Blue Lake, but it turned out to be much longer - more like 1.5 hrs! We could see the reflection in Lake Sabrina still far below us - the lights of the buildings nearby the dam were reflected in the calm waters. Fortunately the switchbacks and undulations of the trail eased up on the last mile.

We made it back to the car right at 10 pm - whew, 15 hours! My headlight batteries were just barely hanging on, and Christophe's GPS battery was blinking - probably less than 10%, but we made it! A grand adventure of a hike, taking us to some of the far-reaching peaks of the Sierra crest. Thanks Christophe for driving the many hours back to the bay area - we made it back at about 3:30 am! We had stopped back at Tenaya lake in Yosemite on the drive back for a 20 minute power-nap, enough rest for the 3.5 more hours of driving back home. The lights of the central valley gleamed as we descended the steep Old Priest grade back into Oakdale. A few intellectually engaging podcasts playing through the radio worked to keep us awake and between the lines on the roadways through the mountains. No close calls or adventure on the road - we had enough on the trail already!

I was asleep by 4:00 leaving the unpacking until later, but after Christophe drove the rest of the way to his place (we had met at my place), he unpacked, cleaned up, and prepared for a early Monday work meeting that morning - giving a total of 40 mins of sleep before getting up for work! It had been a grand weekend out and I can't wait for our next one!