

Carson Ice

January 24, 2015



Caples Lake

After a wonderful start of the latest winter season back in December with multiple storms bringing much needed rain and snow after a 3-year drought, the dryness returned in force for another month with not a single drop of rain in San Francisco for the entire month of January.

I'll never forget the surreal experience of going up to Yosemite in January of 2012 at the beginning of the latest drought and being able to drive up to Tioga pass. I still remember flying back from PA for the holidays that year and when we flew over Tuolumne meadows, and I could see cars driving through the barren landscape out the window. It had created quite a bit of anxiety seeing how dry everything was, and indeed when I got home I saw posts on summitpost and Facebook about people ice skating on Tenaya lake since the Tioga road was open.

I ended up going to the high country of Yosemite for a day during the MLK weekend in 2012. The road had been completely dry except for a few inches of crusty snow in the shadows. "Yosemite Ice 2012" was a surreal experience, starting with skating on the smooth frozen surface of Tenaya Lake, facing Pywiack dome, with Polly dome on my left and Tenaya peak on the right. A unique perspective of Mt Conness was visible from the middle of the lake, the vertical face poking skyward like a huge blade. Shell Lake, Fantail Lake and Spuller Lake near the Dana meadows were solid ice with the view toward Mt Dana under an enormous lenticular cloud rippling like a cresting wave. A short sunset hike to Mt Watkins gave a face-on perspective to the mighty Half Dome and an enormous ice falls of Pywiack cascades tumbling down Tenaya canyon.

That trip in 2012 was beautiful and eerie, haunting me since then. I had remembered ice-skating with some friends from PBC at the Winter Lodge in Palo Alto around the holidays just before new years 2012. That had been my first time

skating in many years, and it ended up being a “warm-up” for skating on Tenaya Lake a couple weeks later. Then, during this past holiday in Dec 2014 our church group returned to Winter Lodge - my first time since 2012. We were actually lucky to catch a break during some of the heavy storms in December, and I remember saying to myself “whew! I shouldn’t have to worry about it being such a dry year again - I guess I won’t be haunted again by being able to go skating in Yosemite again this year”. This prophesy turned out to be quite wrong, however - I would indeed be heading up about a month later to Caples Lake near 8,000 feet when the dry weather returned.

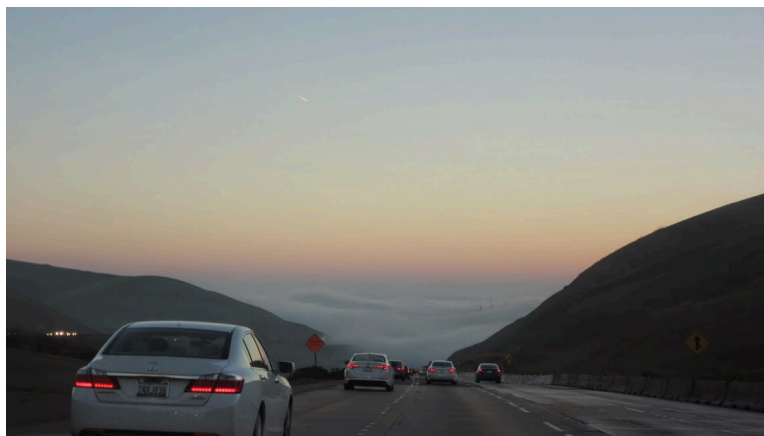
2015 was shaping up to be a near-repeat of the historic dry spell of 2012. The Tioga road hadn’t re-opened, but probably could have with another week or two of drought. Highway 88 over Carson pass was dry. The Kirkwood web site was showing a base of 16 inches at the bottom of the mountain - pretty meager for 8,000 feet. I started to think that instead of spending \$80 on a lift ticket, my money and time might be better spent on snowshoeing or some other alternative instead. A couple climbers had completed a historic free ascent of the Dawn Wall in Yosemite, climbing the 5.13 face over 19 days until their fingers turned to a bloody pulp when they summited on Jan 14. I couldn’t imagine them attempting this during a “normal” year with wind and rain - they were lucky to have such a long string of dry days for their assault on the 3000 ft wall.

I’ve always looked for reasons to get up to the mountains, to hike in the summer or ski / snowshoe in the winter. Nisha was going to be away for a day at a women’s retreat, so I felt a one-day “return to bachelorhood” - what should I do for one day? I started to think of a day-trip on a ski bus - they were heading up to Kirkwood for the day - perfect! I hadn’t been for several years and a new lift had opened recently. However, this was before I realized how dry the winter was shaping up to be. Looking for alternatives, I saw that the Caples Lake resort site showed pictures of people ice fishing on the lake - a rarity since the lake is normally frozen and very snow-covered. But this time, the lake was miles of bare ice - the website invited people to bring their ice skates or drills and rods for ice fishing. hmmm - interesting. I started to envision a repeat of 2012, after all. I had a sense of déjà vu with the anxiety I felt back in 2012 as I anticipated a day of exploring around the Carson pass area.

The day had finally come - the alarm buzzed at 6:00 - the earliest I had been up since I started working again a few months ago! Nisha was still asleep as I got my pack ready, snowshoes and ice skates loaded in the car for a 6:30 start. She was just waking up to get ready to head to the women’s retreat as I headed out - good timing! We would both have our retreats for the day. Her retreat was on the theme of rest and how we need rest for spiritual rejuvenation. My trip would be anything but restful, but would bring a different form of spiritual rejuvenation.

I've been bent on a "carpe diem" philosophy for many years now - with a beautiful day to head out into God's country, I didn't want to miss anything. I remember back in 2012 going out during such a unique time, and I had hemmed and hawed for several days before deciding to visit Tenaya Lake. How could I optimize a short opportunity without having any regrets when I returned? My only regret after I returned from that trip is that I didn't do more when I was out - I had actually finished the hike to Mt Watkins just after sunset - there wasn't much more I could have really done safely before darkness, but it still bugged me. I was a bit nervous about this trip to Caples Lake - not just about safety, but if there would be unmet expectations, and also about if regrets would arise if I realized I missed something or I had a sense of "buyer's remorse" that I should have done something better. I still remember the haunting tones of a barbershop arrangement of "I will go sailing no more", we had sung at Pixar as a tribute to Steve Jobs the day before Yosemite Ice, and whenever I hear that song or something similar I'm reminded of the desire to make the most out of every day.

The pre-dawn sky was just starting to brighten as I crossed over the Sunol grade on 680. Patches of tule fog covered some of the low-lying fields, but otherwise the air was clear and still, the same as it had been during the last several weeks of the triple-R (Ridiculously Resilient Ridge according to weatherwest.com). The satellite photos had shown about the same for weeks on end - a mostly clear state of CA but with a persistent fog bank filling in the central valley as a high-pressure ridge remained parked overhead.



Central valley full of fog

The sun was moments away from rising as I neared the 1,009-ft Altamont pass on 580. The "Jesus Saves" cross was freshly mown - it's wonderful that they've kept it nice over so many years. Wisps of clouds curled over a couple low spots in the ridge as I started to cross the pass. I had forgotten about the fog bank - I hastily reached for my camera buried in my pack in the back seat, and I managed to get it out just in time to capture a shot of the final moments before getting buried in the grey sea of rolling clouds below. The highway descended into a

swirling gloom, blotting out the sun for the next 1.5 hours. I knew the fog bank to only be maybe 800 feet thick, but after an hour or so of driving through the misty darkness, I had to rely on faith that it was going to end and soon I would be climbing back out of it on the east side. The “silver lining” to the clouds was that I didn’t have to stare at the sun for an hour when it was directly in my front windshield - nice!

The trees in the Central Valley orchards appeared as ghostly shapes shrouded in the fog as I worked my way eastward. One lone tree stood as a lonely sentinel in the middle of a field. I felt as if a herd of zombies were going to start emerging – I just kept my eye on the road.

Emerging from the fog just before Jackson, my spirits were lifted as I started seeing patches of clear sky one moment and then a flawless blue sky just a moment later. A glance behind showed the endless sea of white pillows filling the broad central valley. The mountains were crisp and dazzling as I continued up highway 88 the last hour toward Kirkwood through the fabled El Dorado national forest. Occasional patches of snow started appearing around 7,000 feet, though most of the landscape remained dry with spring-like conditions.

The Peddler hill overlook was completely dry - the signs were wrapped up in plastic for the winter season normally to protect them from the 10-12 feet of snow that should have been there. Bear River lake was completely ice-free although it’s at nearly 6,000 ft. I started to have my doubts about Silver Lake and Caples Lake - although the website at Caples Lake said the ice was good for skating and ice fishing a couple weeks ago, with the stretch of near record-breaking warm weather, that was likely to change. I remained cautiously optimistic as I headed further up the hill.



Silver Lake

Several feet of snow covered the north slopes just past the cut at Carson Spur and when I made it out to Silver Lake, I found the lake mostly frozen. A few

brave people were out on the ice, probably ice fishing near the island. A watery moat about 4 feet across guarded the shore. The ice was melting and breaking up into large slabs about 8 feet across in several sections. Either those people were brave to venture out onto the ice, or they didn't realize how thin the ice was in places. I left my ice skates in the car and just took a few photos from shore instead.

Passing Kirkwood, I glanced to the right toward Thimble peak and the Wave - the fabled bowl when corniced provides an amazing drop-in to many feet of powder. Today, the slopes were mostly quiet, just a handful of skiers and boarders braving the rock-hard snow. Passing the entrance, I saw several cars with gear on their roof racks leaving the resort - perhaps they were dismayed at the conditions and not ready to shell out the big bucks for scant conditions on man-made snow, and decided to head elsewhere.

Caples Lake was a few hundred feet higher in elevation - I was running some mental calculations to imagine in my mind what the ice was going to be like. I went out to my favorite rock just next to the dam (I remember it from my first trip in 2005 when I discovered the area for the first time - there was a bit of nostalgia in visiting that rock). The 10,364 ft Round Top is directly across the lake. Here, the lake was frozen quite solid, a hard white frothy texture was iced in place, as if the waves themselves were frozen solid. A couple other cars were parked nearby - although it felt remote, it was comforting to know others were around. I stomped on the ice a few times - hard as concrete. A calm serenity filled my mind - I had found peace for a few moments as I wandered out on the ice, exploring the frozen ripples and patterns on the lake.



Caples Lake

A few people were skating a few hundred yards further down - the ice where I was was pretty rough and probably not too suitable for skates, but it looked good nearby. So back to the car I drove to the Caples Lake resort where I joined a half dozen other cars and walked the path down to the lake's edge. The cabins were

quiet, the fishing boats were stacked away for the winter, and the camp store was closed, hibernating for the season. Lacing up my skates, I proceeded cautiously on the smooth ice. I was immediately reminded of my trip 3 years ago. Only patches of snow lined the shore of the lake in the shady areas, and the sunny rocks were mostly snow-free.

A number of cracks had developed in the ice as it went through its daily freeze-thaw cycle. A fractal pattern of geometric polygonal shapes had formed throughout the smooth surface of the ice. Occasional large snowflake patterns had formed from surface meltwater re-freezing. In places, thick slabs had pushed up several feet on some of the rock islands. As the lake froze and the prevailing west wind pushed the ice, it wedged up on one side, exposing a gap on the other side of the rocks. A similar behavior happened on one far side of the lake as well. The boundary effects on the ice had resulted in the ice being a bit weaker and thinner. A hint of a slight movement and rustling sound in the ice had me turning around quickly. Today the wind was from the NE as the blocking ridge persisted, pushing the ice into a slightly different arrangement.



Crack in the ice

The wind was picking up, whipping across the barren frozen surface, devoid of any trees or any other features. Skating into the wind was exhausting, something I hadn't practiced all that much while skating in ice rinks! The ice was mostly uniform in the middle of the lake, but large-scale features spanned the surface of the lake. Several cracks and lines ran across the ice, signs that the freezing process was dynamic and uneven. A series of icebergs had been frozen into place, each about 4-5 feet in diameter, frozen flush with the rest of the ice. You could skate right over them as if they were just painted onto the ice.



A little ice hockey

A frost heave, about 12 feet across and probably a 1/2-mile long had formed near the center of the lake. As the ice expanded, wedging against the sides of the shores on both sides, it had to give somewhere. The ice must have gradually thrust upwards along the weakest point. The frost heave was white and textured - my skates stuck a bit nearly throwing me forward as I crossed it. A little ways further, a long crack had formed. Running about 4 inches deep and maybe 6 inches across, the crack ran most of the length of the lake. I paused by the crack, double-checking the integrity of the ice around. The other people on the lake hadn't followed me closely, and a fall through the crack into the icy watery depths would not have been pleasant. The ice was corrugated, forming parallel rills along the base of the crack, like a miniature canyon, revealing dark and clear ice below the white ice on the surface. Another long crack ran in a perpendicular direction a bit further down on the lake. Although these features appeared dangerous, the ice was still quite thick – I read that in Minnesota (where many people go out on the frozen Great Lakes), the DNR website indicated 4 inches is enough to walk on, and 12-15 is enough to drive a truck on! This ice was at least that thick - no chance of breaking through - whew! The features reminded me of the frozen fairyland I had experienced at the Mt Everest base camp last spring - frozen meltwater pools in the Khumbu glacier, crystalline crevasses and frost heaves that looked like surfacing whales.

Once I got over the initial anxiety of the safety of the ice, I started really enjoying being out in the open, soaking in the scenery of Round Top and Thunder Mountain, enjoying the sun and blue sky and the gleaming reflections on the ice. Several others were out now, shooting hockey pucks back and forth. I had asked my friend Allen about joining me, but he had a hockey game back in Sunnyvale - oh well - he'd be skating man-made ice instead. Several other locals from near the Sacramento area were out as well, taking their dog and some kites out on the ice. I should have brought a kite and used it as a sail to pull me along the ice - next time! I thought of the Peanuts ice rink in Santa Rosa where I enjoyed my birthday a couple weeks prior - it was surrounded by murals of children skating

on a natural lake with friends and Snoopy the dog (the dog just used his feet for skates!) I felt like being a kid again.

Skating back with the wind, everything appeared so calm and still. The only sound was my skates scratching on the ice and the occasional whoosh bloop of the ice pinging as it expanded during the returning warmth of the sun. The pings were unsettling, as if the lake was going to cataclysmically collapse, sucking chunks of ice into the watery void below, but I soon remembered them from my trip to Tenaya lake years ago - they were quite normal - whew! Although they seemed a bit of overkill given the solid condition of the ice, a couple people had brought picks to allow one to climb out of a thin patch should they break through. I wonder if next time I should bring picks in case anything happened.



Round Top across the lake

After about an hour and a half I had my fill of ice skating (they need to open a coffee / hot chocolate stand!), and it was time to warm up, get something to eat and relax. The skating was actually quite tiring, involving muscles seldom used. I looked forward to checking out the Mokelumne wilderness as well. One of my friends summited Round Top on Christmas day 2011 (just before my trip in Jan 2012) when the ground was nearly bare. I saw this time there was a moderate amount on the north-facing slopes, and an ascent of Round Top would probably be a crampons / ice axe venture. Plus, the wind had further kicked up, sending spindrift plumes across the corniced crest near Kirkwood to the south. Round Top was probably being battered with 40-50 mph gusts.

I headed up to the Carson Pass sno-park area where the PCT meets highway 88 - the site of a previous snowshoe trip with Nisha in the bountiful year 2010 when the snow was piled over the roof of the ranger hut. Today, the snow was less than 1 ft, barely covering the first step to the hut. Luckily with the snow so low, I was able to park in a satellite lot just down highway 88 where the sno-park permit was not required - saving a half-hour and the 10-mile drive in each direction to Sorenson's to pick up the \$5 permit.

I had most of the day to just mess around and explore - the season had been a most unusual one so far, with near record-breaking rainfall in the bay area, high snow levels during a week-long "pineapple express" storm, and then a bone-dry January. What little precipitation that persisted as snow above 8000 feet must have been rock-hard by now, or completely gone if it warmed up enough during the days. The conditions were definitely unique - the last few years of climate change has resulted in seemingly unprecedented conditions. Supposedly the winter of 1976-1977 was unprecedented for its time (the "granddaddy of CA droughts") - the high country was so devoid of snow that someone made a winter ascent of Mt Williamson also on Christmas day that year - his summit photo toward the Kaweahs showed merely a dusting of snow, like what it should have been in early fall instead.

Seeing the conditions in the high country is a good way to see the bigger picture of the changes of our climate in recent years. The extreme snowpack in 2011 (I had to postpone a trip in mid-July to Saddlebag lake since the road wasn't open yet) and the extreme low snowpack in 2012 (the pass was still open in mid January - there was more snow in July than January) were indicators of how the season really behaved. The snow is a good "memory" of how the weather had been for many months (far better than my human long-term memory). My exploration of the Carson pass area would be foreboding - a gauge of how dry things really had been. There had been numerous severe wildfires in the last couple years - the Rim fire in Yosemite had stymied my plans several times in 2013, and if this year was going to bring another low snow-pack, I'm sure firefighters would be bracing for a busy season once again.

Nisha and I were planning on heading up to Yosemite and skiing at Badger pass for our wedding anniversary in just a few weeks, but now we weren't so sure anymore. (I checked their website when I got home, and they said "hopefully we'll be able to re-open soon") - not a good sign... I just feel for the folks who shelled out \$800-\$1000 for season passes at resorts around Tahoe.



Low snow

Ever since I had performed Mendelssohn's Elijah back in the fall of 2002, I had a habit of playing it and remembering the Biblical story of the 3-year famine and God's miracle through Elijah to bring rain again upon the thirsty land. It had become a habit and almost to the point of becoming a superstition, as if God would respond with a formulaic answer. It seemed to work initially the year - the thirsty land was blessed richly in December. I would have never expected a completely dry January. We know that God gives and takes away, but I didn't expect such an extreme whiplash in hope and despair.

The 20-ft tall pillar monument to Snowshoe Thompson (the father of CA skiing) at Carson Pass was dry - had I been there back in 2010 or 2011, only the top 4-5 feet of the pillar may have been poking through the snow. In fact, I just kept my snowshoes in my pack as I headed out on the hard-packed trail. A 16-ft snow gauge stood in a meadow just a short bit from the trailhead - a sign of how deep the snow could be - there was a reason it was as tall as it was. Today, it didn't even reach the first marking on the pole - 2 ft. It was probably 1 ft at the pole, and bare ground was exposed nearby in a sunny patch on a south-facing slope.

My snowshoes still remained in my pack as I continued up the beaten trail through the woods. A couple locals and their dog were on the trail next to me - reminiscing on days when the snow drifted to the roofs of the cabins nearby. The wet years and dry years seemed to go in extreme cycles, from the abundance of 2005-6 to the dry in 2007, abundance in 2010-11 and the dry starting in 2012. We all hoped for a change shortly out of the dry - it was long overdue now.

Heading on a side trail toward Frog Lake, I passed a large group of campers enjoying a weekend outing in the snow. A number of trails criss-crossed up the

hill toward the lake. I knew about where the lake was from hiking there in the summer, and since the snow was so low I was able to find it in the winter without getting out my map or GPS... The summer-time trail markers were visible. I felt way over-prepared for the conditions - my extra jackets, gloves, snowshoes, map and GPS would not be needed.

Frog lake was about 3/4 bare ice, surrounded by a few inches of hard-packed snow on the far side. A lonely old snowman stood on the far side by some weather-beaten Jeffrey pines. I thought of Olaf in "Frozen" wishing for summer, wanting to visit a hot sandy beach - the sad irony seeming to come true as he had to endure weeks of warm, dry weather, even near 9,000 feet. The trees behind the snowman attested to the normal prevailing gale force winds and driving snow that seemed to belong to an age long lost, in the way the landscape still attested to the size of the grinding glaciers during the last ice age that was long passed. On a sunny rock out of the wind I unzipped my fleece and enjoyed a vitamin water and a snack. Round Top gleamed above, partly reflected in the shiny surface of the frozen lake.



Frog Lake

The ice was smooth but not particularly slippery - it was actually quite frozen a light sapphire blue color, seemingly even to the bottom. The lake appeared to trap cool air above its surface, preserving the ice better than I expected. Several small cracks a couple inches across fractured part of the surface as the ice contracted during the cold night, but the ice was solid all the way down for at least 8 inches, as far as I could see into the crack.

Continuing up the main trail, I soon came to Winnemucca Lake - a frozen expanse at the foot of Round Top. The spindrift was whipping around the crest. I was considering heading up further maybe toward Round Top Lake or to the crest, but now decided otherwise. It was breezy at Winnemucca Lake but not too bad. Some campers had found a conveniently set up snow shelter and were getting their gear set up. It would be chilly at night, but during the day, they

would probably be good with summer backpacking gear! We chatted about Round Top and my several previous trips during the last few summers. I was hoping to return later in the spring and maybe give the Crescent Moon couloir a shot if the snow was in good condition. The route didn't look good now, but maybe with some more storms it would improve.

I decided to venture out on Winnemucca Lake a bit - the island was beckoning a visit. I imagine few people ever visit - in the summer the water is probably too cold for normal people to swim to (unless they were Russian polar-bear swimmers), and in the winter the landscape is normally so snow-covered that most of the features are buried. I hadn't brought my skates with me (my snowshoes took up most of the room in my pack) - oh well, but walking the 1/4 mile or so to the island was pretty easy across the frozen lake. The rocky island was bare, maybe 30 feet in diameter and 5 feet high, surrounded by a sea of textured white ice with some clear sections. I was wary of the clear sections at first, but upon further inspection, I saw they were pure ice, mostly devoid of air bubbles, but solid at least 2 feet down. Lines in the ice were actually thin cracks that appeared as veils running vertically into the ice. A deeper set of lines were visible about 12 inches down, running in different directions as the upper set. The ice was hard as steel. I had seen pictures of people who formed an impromptu hockey team in 2012, setting up goals and bringing their skates and sticks to the lake - they could probably have set up a rematch!



Winnemucca Lake

A couple people were heading down from Elephant's Back to the east. The 9,500 ft summit was windswept and bare, with brown and green sage-brush high above the tree-line forming a sharp line against the deep blue cloudless sky. I felt I wanted to summit something - I had considered Round Top and / or 4th of July peak, but seeing the wind and snow conditions, I decided on the slightly lower and bare Elephant's Back. The route was pretty obvious - just follow the spine of the hill southward from the lake.

The hike was a bit tedious, starting as a slog through about a foot of snow. Snowshoes might have helped for the lower part of the hill, but seeing that the snow was ending just around tree-line, I again kept them in my pack. I was hoping to get to use them, but the hiking was sure faster and easier without them! The wind picked up as I headed higher. The trees had disappeared completely

into a barren wind-swept tundra. I thought of the lilac trees in “On the Street Where You Live” - Vocal Spectrum had been playing in my car on my way up. The desolation near the top of the peak was anything but a garden – it made me think more intensely about home and Nisha. I felt I had journeyed so far from home (even though it was only for an afternoon!). We had plans to renovate our patio at home during the spring, and I thought about how we could make a garden with numerous green plants and flowers.

The familiar large cairn was still sitting there - a sight I remembered from several years ago on a snowshoe trip with Nisha. This time, the winds were kicking up with gusts probably up to about 40 mph at the summit ridge. There was no register by the cairn so I just snapped a few photos before ducking out of the wind. The view was spectacular - the 9,585 ft summit was one of that highest nearby. To the north was Red Lake Peak and Stevens, mostly bare and snow-free. To the east, the desert peaks stretched to the horizon almost completely barren. Round Top loomed to the south, and to the west was Kirkwood, Thunder mountain, and the outline of the Bay Area hills on the far side of a 100-mile wide sea of fog. The air was crystal clear - the smog and haze had been trapped for weeks now in the valleys.

It was a short scamper down the sandy and gravelly slopes of Elephant’s back to the PCT where I joined a couple others for the short walk back to the trailhead. A couple had been out, trying their skis on the upper slopes of Round Top. As expected, the snow was bulletproof and like iron. A windy blast at the saddle between the Sisters and Round Top pelted them with ice pellets - they would have to go back another day for the summit of Round Top. They were relatively local so they would have opportunities in the future. The only real bummer was upon returning to the parking lot, hearing the husband say “shoot - the car...”. I wasn’t sure what he was talking about, but I soon noticed his left rear tire - completely flat - bummer. He had a spare which would get him back into town, but of course dealing with tires is never particularly fun. My last flat took 15 minutes to change in our parking lot (when I was already late for work) and several hours in the Honda shop to replace – nothing like in an F-1 race last year, they broke a record by changing all four tires in 1.985 seconds! I offered to help but he had the situation under control - no need to call AAA. I had developed a flat just a month ago so I emphasized with him.

My car was still sitting in the satellite lot, along with just one other car. No ticket or flat or break-in - whew! It was only 3:30 - the hike had been considerably easier and faster than expected without the snowshoes. I had heard of the Silver Lake potholes on a previous trip to Round Top, and I still vaguely remembered where to look for the trail. With the thin snow cover, the hike would probably be summer-like, so I wouldn’t even bother with my poles or snowshoes. I headed back to Silver Lake to the same spot I started the day, and ventured out on the

trail.

Crossing highway 88, the trail soon came to a campground next to the Silver Creek tributary of the south fork American river. A paved path lined with stones had a couple blue foot prints pointing in the direction I was walking - one foot had the letters "POT" and the other had "HOLES" - I must be on the right trail - nice! I didn't bring any beta for this trail and I didn't know what was really back there, so I gave it a shot. I had about an hour to kill, so I figured I would give a 1 hour "spike" to research the area. I'd probably want to return in the summer with Nisha, so if I didn't find anything, no worries. The trail was partly snow-covered, but a bunch of boot-tracks were pretty obvious. When the trees thinned into open granite slabs next to the creek, I knew I was getting somewhere interesting.

Just to the left were the first few "pot-holes" where the creek had carved a few shallow "Millerton" whirlpool holes in the granite. A series of small cascades ringed with ice at their edges flowed from one hole to the next. It was quiet and a serene place to relax. I felt the day's "accomplishments" were finished, so I could just relax and enjoy the scenery. One waterfall near the base of the potholes, about 6 feet high, was behind a veil of clear ice several inches thick. Repeated freeze-thaw patterns had created a set of zebra-stripes in the ice, a few millimeters apart, flowing like the strings in a roll of strapping tape. Several potholes abandoned from the main flow of the creek were still full, with small lakes of ice in the shadows.



Silver Creek potholes

The trail back to the car was maybe just 15 minutes - the soreness of the ice-skating was a bit more pronounced and I was glad to be rolling at last. The sun was getting low and the late rays of sun were beaming off the hills behind Silver Lake. The ice fishermen were packing up for the day. Nisha and I hadn't spent too many days apart recently and I missed her after just 1 day, so I was glad to be getting back - we were eager to swap stories.



Sunset

The sun was getting low, promising a brilliant sunset. The peaks of the Desolation Wilderness were catching the late afternoon light, flooding Pyramid Peak, Agassiz and Price in orange light. A wide turnout appeared just in time off highway 88 facing the fog-filled central valley with the sun shimmering like a red rubber ball just inches above the horizon. It rippled and deformed as it passed through the stable layers of the atmosphere, landing in a brilliant orange-red sea of fiery sky. Some high cirrus lit up in coral pink moments later. A half dozen cars had joined me to take in the view. The air got chilly suddenly as I headed back to the car.

It had been a most wonderful outing. It was wonderful to find out how others took advantage of the time as well. I would find out when I got home that Bob Burd and a friend climbed the Snake Dike on Half Dome the same day I was out - in fact, many people were taking advantage of the dry weather to summit the iconic peak in Yosemite. If the drought persisted I would have to consider what else was possible during the weeks ahead. I felt camaraderie that others were making the most of this rare opportunity. I remember back in 2012 a couple friends hiked out to the frozen Cathedral lakes in Yosemite the same weekend I went ice skating on Tenaya Lake (we must have missed each other by less than 15 minutes!)

Heading back toward Jackson, I could tell we were nearing the fog bank covering the Central Valley. The sky remained a brilliant deep orange above, but the ominous cloud of darkness loomed closer. My mind was starting to ease, now that the adventure-filled day was over. I had no regrets and the sunset made for a perfect “icing on the cake”, as if God himself was affirming my outing. As I followed the stream of tail-lights back into the coal-black darkness, I felt a serenity as the clouds enveloped me. In a way it felt like I was passing from this earth into death, but in a peaceful way. I had accepted it as a natural part of my life’s journey. Enya’s “Only Time” was playing - her soothing voice and musical tones a soothing backdrop. Sometimes it is in these unexpected moments that I

felt reaffirmed of my assurance of salvation, that when my time comes that I pass on from earth, that I can calmly surrender to Jesus in heaven.

The central valley was chilly - 15-20 degrees colder than the air at 4000 feet. A brief fast-food dinner stop to keep me going powered the last hour of my journey back home. It wasn't until I nearly crested the Altamont pass on 580 on the west side of the central valley that I once again emerged from the fog-bank. Fog was cresting over the highway like an ocean wave just before it cleared. A bright crescent moon and hundreds of stars gleamed above. I could just glimpse the turquoise aura of Comet Lovejoy making its way by Taurus and the Pleiades.

I was soon home, enjoying the nostalgia of the movie Grease when Nisha stepped in a 1/2 hour later from her retreat - she had a fine day at Mission Springs learning about spiritual rest. Now it was time for some physical rest - well deserved after a memorable day.