

Mt. Ritter

Aug 22-23, 2015



This trip would be my 3rd to the Ritter Range, and I hoped I would fill my ambition of finally climbing both Mt Ritter and Banner Peak. My first trip was back in 2007 with some friends, when I was still just getting into backpacking. I was thrilled to be able to get a wilderness permit to camp at Ediza Lake for two nights - it felt like a mecca for pristine wilderness and grand mountains. That trip had left a lasting impression on me - we were camped right beneath the towering twin peaks of Ritter and Banner, gazing at the dizzying heights of towering granite above us, wondering how anybody would be able to climb them. We were there to just explore some of the nearby lakes - we ended up visiting the Nydiver Lakes and Garnet Lake, as well as discovering an ice cave in a small glacier at the base of the Ritter / Banner saddle. I remember on that trip on our hike out, we were following some climbers with their helmets, ropes and ice axes and found out they had just summited Mt Ritter - it had been a long day, but they were successful.

Four years later, I had a chance to return to the area with some people from the Sierra Club Peak Climbing Section (PCS) to attempt Ritter and Banner. Terry from the club was organizing the climb, and we planned to go up to Ediza Lake (again) the first day, summit both peaks the second day and hike out the third day. The trip didn't quite turn out as expected (it seemed like PCS trips rarely turned out as expected) - when we ran into bad weather on summit day. Our original plan was the reach the Ritter / Banner saddle, leave our packs there, summit Banner, return to the saddle, climb the north face of Ritter (following in

John Muir's footsteps on his first ascent in 1872), go over the summit and return via the SE glacier route. I had gotten so exhausted after summiting Banner that I welcomed the clouds rolling in on our way down as a sign that we would be "off the hook" for climbing the intimidating class-3 route on the north face of Ritter. In fact, the weather had turned quite fast, and by the time we were at the base of the route up to the saddle, we saw that both peaks were socked in clouds and several rumbles of thunder had started - we had gotten off the mountain not a moment too soon! I had just barely zipped my tent when rain, sleet, and hail pounded down for the next hour - whew!

We had considered trying to climb Ritter the next day before hiking out, but we weren't in any shape for another arduous day. In fact the weather would turn even sooner, and by the time we hiked out and got to a brewery back in Mammoth, the rain was pounding down for several hours! We resigned ourselves to the fact the adventure would be "to be continued..."

In fact, I remember I had just seen the final movie of the Harry Potter series (the Deathly Hallows) with some friends right before we climbed Banner Peak. I originally didn't realize the final movie was going to require 2 parts, and in the same way I didn't expect the Ritter / Banner challenge would also need 2 parts. Well, it turned out four years later, the chance would finally come after all. Terry (the same leader from the last trip) was organizing another trip to the area and I was thrilled it was happening on a free weekend for me! I was looking forward for a bit of closure.

It took a while for the final decision to be made as to which weekend we were going to tackle the peak - I felt the permit was the prized "golden ticket", so it would depend on when the permit would be available. When the trip was finally announced, I was excited. It sounded like we could leave Friday, hike in on Saturday, summit Sunday and hike out Monday. But if people were fast, they could hike out Sunday instead and not have to ask for a PTO day at the last minute for Monday (the wilderness permit was only based on start date, so if you needed an extra day or shortened a day, it wouldn't matter). Work had been a bit slow for me, and I figured if we ended up staying through to Monday, I could call into my work "stand-up" call remotely if we were on the road - this would make the trip quite a bit more comfortable. However, shortly before the trip, it was announced the trip was going to be just 2 days after all - the summit day was bound to be quite grueling since it would involve the summit climb, hike out, and drive back all in the same day. One guy had done that on our last trip so I knew it was possible - he hiked out while the rest of us stayed a 3rd day.

We had 5 people - Terry, Lisa, Bo, his wife, a guy I didn't know - Craig, and me. I was thrilled Lisa was joining as a co-leader (and if some people needed the extra day, the group could split up since there would be 2 leaders). I had

considered dropping out shortly before the trip - I had hemmed and hawed several nights about it. I was then quite dismayed to find Lisa was bowing out due to a last-minute scheduling conflict with some home improvement work to be done, and Bo and his wife were also bowing out - the trip seemed to be falling apart even before it started!

If that didn't make enough worries already, I knew there were wildfires burning in the mountains - things weren't looking good. A bunch of trees had also fallen recently due to their drought-weakened nature, one even falling on a tent and killing a couple teenagers. I blew a flat tire on Tuesday right before the trip (a 3-hour wait and \$138 later it was fixed the next morning). And on top of that, it turned out we actually didn't even have a permit – so much for the golden ticket! Terry was going to “wing it” by waking up at 5 am to drive to Mammoth to get to the ranger station when it opened, to try to secure a walk-in permit for our group. I was ready to email the group saying I was bowing out, and I even had a draft going, but something in my intuition held me back from clicking “send”.

But I then got an email that Ning was joining (we had hiked Slide mountain together a couple months ago, also with Terry), and Christophe was also joining (we made a 15-hour day-hike of Mt Wallace and a neighboring peak – we called it “Gromit”) several years ago. I had good “vibes” about the group, and I didn't want to renege so I changed my reply to that I was coming, and I gave my carpool information. The logistics actually worked out quite easily, and I felt we were quite blessed after all. I was still nervous, but felt adequately prepared in the end. I guess if we somehow couldn't get a permit at the last minute, there would be many other options or trails we could do instead - we would figure out something. The trip was a go.

Friday August 21

My manager announced at the last minute he was going to be away on the day we planned to leave, allowing me to try to get somewhat of a head start on the traffic. My phone buzzed with an email that we did indeed get a permit, so we were all set. I managed to duck out around 2:00 to meet Craig at 2:30 at his company. We hit traffic almost immediately getting over to 680 to meet Ning in Dublin - the usual bypass options on Osgood and Driscollli seemed to be getting progressively less effective in beating traffic since more people were using their phones (like we were) to “get around” the red stripe of traffic over the Sunol grade - Google was recommending the same bypass options to thousands of others trying for the same goal.

Meeting Ning at her place in Dublin around 4:30, we soon met Christophe, and her van of 4 was finally on its way heading east on 580. I said a short prayer to Jesus as we passed the “Jesus Saves” cross near the Altamont pass - so much planning and anticipation had built up for this trip, and I was really hoping for the

best. There had already been many battles besides the expected battles on the mountain and I was already weary, even before we got out of the bay area. Sandwiches at Subway kept us going, and a nervous peek at the traffic and smoke conditions on my phone indicated everything was clear - whew!

The Rough Fire had been burning for several weeks now in Kings Canyon, sending smoke throughout much of the southern Sierra - they had even posted health warnings in some areas as the air quality exceeded 150 and even 200 (hazardous - you shouldn't even be outside, much less doing a strenuous activity like hiking or peak climbing!). In fact, the day we left, a health warning got posted when the winds shifted, sending smoke into the Mammoth area that morning that hadn't been there all week. We were lucky, however, as the day wore on, the winds shifted back, pushing the smoke back to the south and out of the Mammoth area. I didn't look forward to camping in a smoky campground the first night. In fact one of the Mammoth sites said the Rough fire had "exploded" on Thursday, sending streams of smoke pouring into Mammoth. The fire was over 50,000 acres and only 15% contained - I wondered if it was going to turn into a repeat of the infamous Rim Fire in Yosemite 2 years ago. The drought in the southern Sierra was indicating about 2 full seasons of deficit. Mammoth would need almost 800 inches of snow this year to get back to "normal". The current El Niño trend is looking promising, but climatologists are worrying about the "blob" in the pacific NW that may cause a persistent high (like the Ridiculously Resilient Ridge - triple-R) that spoiled much of the snowfall this last winter. Last winter was the first one in many years I had gotten shut-out from skiing – my only winter trip was ice skating on Caples Lake, a haunting but beautiful outing on the bare ice of the vast frozen lake.

A sense of déjà-vu came as I recalled a spoiled trip 2 years ago where we planned to hike Mt Lyell - when we arrived at the trailhead, the air was so smoky that we turned around without even unloading our packs from the car, and we drove to Lake Tahoe instead to get out of the smoke! I feared the worst, but hoped for the best, as we got closer. The sunset was clear with a tinge of smoke far away - the sun was a brilliant red as we climbed the Old Priest grade getting into Groveland. We crossed the Tioga Pass under brilliant clear skies - the Milky Way was shining brightly. Not a hint of smoke could be smelled - I remained cautiously optimistic.

Coming down 395 and turning on 203 into Mammoth Lakes, we got a text that Terry was at the Upper Soda Springs campground and had gotten there early. He was going to do a hike to Crystal Lake to stretch his legs and have dinner in town - I figured it shouldn't be hard to get in touch and meet up in his camp spot. Unfortunately by the time we got to Mammoth, we realized there was no cell reception - bummer. We drove all the loops of the campground, not finding Terry's blue Prius. Either he camped somewhere else or decided on a last-

minute motel. We were tired and already at the campground, so we just picked a free spot (there were many - maybe many people had been scared off with the threat of smoke and fires). I thought about unsafe trees nearby, and I saw that the rangers had pro-actively cut a couple down recently – we would be able to rest easy that night.

Saturday August 22

I was relieved to wake up at 6:30 in my tent after a good night sleep and not a hint of smoke in the air. The sky was blue and the air was warm, promising a nice day. Of course I knew the weather could turn at any moment, sending smoke back up our way. Our “appointed meeting time” was at 8:00 at the Agnew meadows trailhead - we had already driven past the gate the previous night after 7 pm, so we didn’t need to worry about having to take a shuttle bus.

I wish we could have called Terry to let him know where we were, and that we were indeed past the gate (otherwise, we would have to go to the counter in Mammoth at 7 am when it opened, buy tickets, wait for the bus, and take it to the trailhead).

We did breakfast at our campsite - it was simple - oatmeal, hot tea, and an apple from the local farmer’s market we had visited recently. Fresh fruit in the wilderness is the best! Ning just had cold breakfast and some leftovers. We soon had our tents broken down and made our last trip to the restrooms before making the short drive to Agnew Meadows.



Five of us at the trailhead

We arrived at the trailhead shortly after 8:00. Pulling into the overflow parking by Agnew Meadows, we immediately spotted Terry’s light blue Prius and he was standing just outside getting his stuff ready. It turned out Terry had arrived over an hour earlier, texting, emailing, and trying to call us to make sure we were there

- somehow he managed to get a small bit of signal. He was quite relieved when we showed up! And I was relieved we found him so easily. It turned out he had camped at the same campground as the rest of us (Upper Soda Springs) and had taken the 1st spot, but his car was tucked back in a ways and we had just missed it - oh well. I'm so used to being able to call / text that when there's no signal, I feel "naked" without being able to use my phone!

Ning managed to stuff her cooler in the over-flowing bear box at the trailhead, and I managed to finish stuffing my pack for the next 2 days on the trail. Shortly after 8:30, we were off. At the trailhead, we were reminded of Matthew Greene, who in July 2013 went missing while hiking alone in the Ritter / Banner area. His whereabouts remain a mystery - maybe he got lost, or took a fall in a remote area of the cliff-riddled Minarets, or ended up in an area he was not able to hike out on his own and seek help. It was a reminder of how fragile life can be, and how important it was to keep people informed of your intentions. Maybe his feeling of pride and self-sufficiency caused him to make some bad decisions. I had made solo hikes for many years (though on mostly well-used trails), and have never had an incident or close-call, though I did take a head-over-heels tumble coming down from Diamond Peak a year ago, which could have resulted in a serious injury if I wasn't lucky. On that trip I had a helmet and was hiking with several other experienced people.

The skies were mostly clear with just a slight hint of haze / smoke lingering from the fires. Agnew Meadows was green with a few late-season wildflowers still showing their colors. A number of downed trees still littered the trail - remnants of the 2011 "Devil's Windstorm" on Nov 30 that knocked down dozens of trees - unusual winds from the north had blown down numerous trees, closing several trails and campgrounds. Some campgrounds were supposedly even still closed. I wonder if such a storm was going to happen this year, how many more trees would come down - so many trees are now so drought-weakened that the rangers are concerned.

The trail followed the middle fork of the San Joaquin River along a desert-like ridge, slowly dropping several hundred feet to the forest floor bisected by the river. Mirror-like Olaine Lake reflected the trees and grassy reeds poking through its surface. Just below 8,000 feet, the mighty San Joaquin was just a shallow creek - maybe 12 feet wide and ankle-deep, shallow enough to ford easily if it wasn't for the beautiful wooden bridge spanning its width. We were once again reminded of the fateful trip that Matthew Greene had made nearly 2 years ago - "missing hiker" posters reminded us to keep an eye out for his whereabouts. A couple of our people in our group had "SPOT" transceivers, giving a bit of comfort. I knew we still had to be careful - you never take safety for granted.

On our way down to the bridge, we came across a couple coming the other way

who had lost one of their dogs near 1000 Island Lake - he must have gotten spooked and run off of the trail. I had found a lost dog on a beach near Half Moon Bay and the owner was wonderfully grateful when I hiked back up the trail and he saw the dog following me - I felt like a "hero"! I hoped this lost dog would be found soon and somebody else could be a hero as well.

Climbing Shadow Creek, we made our way up a series of glacial-polished granite ledges leading to the outlet of Shadow Lake. A series of waterfalls, some about 20-25 feet high, poured over the various ledges as we climbed higher. Several pack trains passed by - I had been lucky on my previous trip around that section, picking up a horseshoe dropped by one of the animals - this time though I was just focused on making it up to Ediza Lake and gearing up for the big summit day the next morning. Shadow Lake reflected the Ritter Range like a mirror - the Minarets on the left, then Ritter and Banner - this was our first good view of the peaks, still seemingly impossibly high and steep from that angle. A faint haze of smoke lingered over the valley, slightly obscuring the view, but it wasn't thick enough to smell. I kept my fingers crossed.



Trail to Shadow Lake

Above Shadow Lake, the trail continued to zigzag its way upstream toward Ediza Lake - one of the crown jewels of the Ritter / Banner area. This would be my 3rd trip to the lake. We passed the campsite me and my friends had used on my first trip 8 years ago - I still remembered it as yesterday - even remembering which rock I hid my bear canister behind. Those memories had formed intensely in the mind. Traversing around on the south side of the lake, the trail was longer, but avoided a tedious boulder scramble along the north side. The mountains were reflected in the lake like an Ansel Adams portrait (there's a reason it was called the Ansel Adams wilderness!). I remember the rock my friends had jumped from when we were goofing around and swimming - the nostalgia of the place was

therapeutic in taking my mind off the anxiety of the big summit day planned the next morning.



View over Ediza Lake

On the far side of the lake, we found some grassy meadows similar to where we had camped 4 years ago when we summited Banner Peak - the ranger that Terry had talked with had recommended that area. Coming around some trees, we came upon a tent and a bunch of gear laid out - bummer, the prime spot was taken already. They didn't look to be peak climbing, actually - they had brought camp chairs, fancy Coleman stoves, and even egg cartons to pack eggs. I wondered if they were going to get out a Dutch oven and bake a cake when they got back to their camp!

Craig and Christophe wandered off for about an hour, scouting for a better campsite up the valley - meanwhile the rest of us just relaxed. Terry and I strolled through some of the wonderful grassy alpine meadows, just starting to show some redness as the fall was approaching. Ning found a large flat rock to bed down for the hour (I guess even a rock mattress is plenty comfortable when you're tired!). It remained sunny and warm, though a hint of the smoke was still wafting around the peaks above from the distant wildfires. I wasn't too worried about the smoke at this point but just kept my fingers crossed that it wouldn't haze out too much of the view the next day.

I was just relaxing and playing with a pinecone when the 2 guys came back saying they had found a number of sites further up the valley. I was excited about getting a higher head-start for our summit day - the higher we camped, the easier our summit day should be. It was only around 3:00 and we still had all afternoon to bum around, so I was glad as we continued uphill. We ended up taking one of the highest flat spots in the glacial valley that we could - anything higher would either be on a slope, or too stony to comfortably pitch our tents. Craig and Christophe again headed further upstream, seeing if it was worth camping near the tarn by the Ritter / Banner saddle to get an even higher head-start for the next day. Again I was fine where we were.

Craig and Christophe ended up traversing further to the right, peeking into the Nydiver Lakes basin just above 10,000 feet. I had enjoyed swimming in those

lakes on my first trip 8 years ago - we had spent maybe 2 hours just lounging, eating lunch, swimming and admiring the 70-foot visibility underwater, and jumping off various large boulders into the cool clear waters. Craig and Christophe returned maybe 1/2 hour later, confirming that the spot we had already was good enough. I was glad, since a couple of us were already working on getting our tents set up right where we were!

Craig was probably the fittest one in our group, having been with the Navy - apparently he felt he still hadn't had enough exercise, so at camp he was performing his routine of push-ups and "burpees" (a combination squat and push-up, like what they do in military boot-camp!) I was perfectly fine sitting around the tents, enjoying the lack of mosquitoes and listening to the creek trickling by. My water filter was slow and leaky but still worked well enough - I had spent \$90 for a replacement a couple months ago that was even slower than my slow leaky one I already had - fortunately, returning items at REI is pretty hassle-free. Terry's "futuristic" UV-light water filter had run out of batteries, so my old leaky manual filter served for both of us.

Dinner was a Mountain House beef stroganoff, tea, and an apple - simple but nutritious. It wasn't even 6:00 yet, but I felt like it had already been a long day. Craig was already in his tent, but the remaining 4 of us "stayed out late" another hour until around 7:30, sharing stories of our last adventure in the Ritter range where we barely made it down to camp from Banner Peak before a thunderstorm with hail and lightning stormed down us. Terry's ill-fated climb on one of the faces of Banner Peak on another trip where he was unable to cross an icy moat to the beginning of the proper route on the rock without risking falling on his buddy's head with his crampons made for another juicy tale. Terry could have written a book about his adventurous attempt of Mt St Elias in Alaska, where, standing at the base of a 12,000 foot face, his buddy bailed on the first day of the climb while staring at the vertical wall of insurmountable ice on the forsaken windy mountain, and they subsequently decided to try and hike down a treacherous ice-falls, nearly plunging to their death several times on the crevasse-riddled minefield of seracs before retreating and waiting weeks for a plane to pick them up again.

Jeff, who led the ill-fated Lyell trip a couple years ago, had a broken ice axe in his house - a memento of an adventurous trip some years ago:

Ode to an Ice Axe

McKinley with its deep snow

With my ice axe I did go

Shasta, Rainier and many more

I am sure there was a least a score

*It had always done me much good
But alas it was only wood*

*For after Ritter
It was only litter*

(I'm glad McKinley finally got properly renamed back to Denali)

After an hour or so, we all had our fill of tall tales of mountaineering lore before watching the final bit of alpenglow from the westering sun lighting up the high peaks around us. A first-quarter moon shone brightly overhead of the Volcanic Ridge to our south as I zipped my tent to bed down for summit day.



Tent with a view

Sunday August 23

The anticipated summit day had finally arrived - I hardly slept a wink over night - checking every couple hours to see if it was time to wake up again. A faint hint of smoke caught my nostrils at time - my worries about getting smoked out again due to smoke were coming out again. Peeking out of my tent at perhaps 2 am revealed blazing stars after the first-quarter moon had set behind the mountains. The mountains looked crisp under the arching Milky Way overhead. The hint of smoke passed and the mountains appeared even sharper, renewing my hopes for a good summit day. Orion the Hunter had risen in the SE, slowly awakening for the season, as the summer was getting ready to transition to fall. With that reassurance, I must have slept well the last several hours of the night, even having a vivid dream where I was walking with a group by some old brick buildings, and I had noticed an opening that had broken through the corner of one of the buildings. Climbing my way through the opening revealed a gold-mine

of treasure inside - a room full of abandoned '80s video games, pinball games, and treasures from my childhood - Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, Transformers, and Pac-man games. I was like a kid in a candy store...

I think I was still in that dream when I caught the glare of a neighboring headlamp hitting my tent. Craig apparently was already awake, headlamp ablaze as he started preparing his breakfast. Checking my watch showed a few minutes after 5 am. Unzipping my tent, I first noticed another group of several headlamps far away heading up the mountains. They had turned upslope sooner than I expected - I thought we were going to start from the head of the valley where we were camped. They would be doing the Clyde variation of the SE glacier route - I wondered if they had adequate snow / ice gear since it would involve traversal of a steep part of the glacier (unless it was all melted back by now).

After firing up my Jetboil stove, my oatmeal was soon ready and my Charlie Brown coffee was brewing (my last packet I had gotten on my way back from Nepal a year ago) - the breakfast was light but adequate to get my muscles going for the long day. We were camped around 9,800 feet and the summit was over 13,000, so we had at least 3,000 feet to climb - maybe closer to 3,500. I remember our group from 4 years ago was a bit slow, and I started playing out in my mind what our timing might be like. I was hoping if we could cover 1000 ft / hour (if the route remained reasonably class-2), plus maybe another hour, so maybe 4 hours, 5 at the most. We should be able to summit by 11:00. If we spent 1/2 hr at the top, we should be able to get down by 3:00 at the latest. If we were hiking out by 3:30, we should make it out by 7:00, and if we spent an hour at the Mammoth brewing company for a little celebratory beer / pizza or whatever, we should be able to get rolling by 8:00 and back home by 1 am. A long day, but manageable. Looking to my left, I saw the glimpse of 4 headlamps inching their way higher, but often stopping and looking about - they appeared slightly lost and confused - I hoped the best for them.

The eastern sky turned a dull brown, then brightened to red and orange as the rising sun neared the horizon. Peering down into the valley we had come up the previous day revealed a hazy grey layer below. Apparently the smoke that had been above us on the hike up had settled into the valley. We had smelled hints of the smoke as it settled past us, dropping into the valley. The skies above were clear as could be - the haze was trapped by an inversion layer at around 9,000 feet. I hoped the smoke would stay low as long as it could, but I knew by mid-morning the inversion layer would break and the smoke might start blowing around us again. The winds were forecast to be from the west which should blow the smoke away, so I kept my fingers crossed.

Right around 6:00 we were underway, helmets and packs on, heading up the grassy glacial valley to the headwaters of Shadow Creek by the Ritter / Banner

saddle. Our route description from Summitpost mentioned there were a bunch of cliffs at the base of the SE glacier route. The route to the right was more interesting - grassy class-2 and 3 ledges interspersed with waterfalls. But the left side was easier - all class 2 if you did proper route-finding. I was surprised that Ritter could be climbed all with class-2. From so many angles, it looks at least class 4 or 5, but our route was going to be taking us on a roundabout path spiraling around the mountain to a summit plateau. Hearing stories of the broken ice axe, I felt we were going to be “hard-core mountaineers”, but ironically, we didn’t bring anything more technical than good boots and trekking poles. For me, being my first trip to Ritter, I didn’t care - I just wanted to get up the mountain! The grassy ramps were actually quite nice - each foot we climbed on grass meant one foot less we had to climb on loose rock.

We moved slowly up the grassy ramps in the growing light, taking our time to conserve our energy. Turning my head to see our progress, I saw the upper rim of a brilliant red ball to the east - the sun had just crested the White Mountains to the east. Diffused through layers of smoke in the valley, the sun glowed a deep ominous red. The sky above was blue, and the sky above us was deep azure blue as well - no hint of smoke around us, so the day promised to be good. It was warm and my fleece soon came off.



Grassy ramps near the base of the climb

Spotting several cairns stacked along our route, we picked our way up the mountain, zigzagging our way through cliff bands broken by grassy ramps and rocky paths. A use trail in places kept us on route. The going was tedious in

places with loose rock and sand along the trail. It was often more enjoyable skirting around the trail, climbing some of the more solid class 2-3 rock instead. At least there I wouldn't have to worry about sending frisbees of granite whirling down the mountain on people below.

We came to a plateau flanked on one side by a snowfield - it was nice to finally see snow, since so much of the mountain was barren after so many years of drought. We enjoyed our first real break next to the snowfield - bars and trail mix gave us a renewed energy to continue. Wandering over to the snowfield, I saw the snow was actually quite deep and icy in places. In fact, the ice extended below the rocks we were sitting on, as evidenced when one of the stones I stepped on moved underneath my feet, revealing sparkling ice underneath. The snowfield was rilled with grooves about 4 feet apart and maybe 2 feet deep. Small streams of meltwater were cascading down the rills. The snowfield was actually a remnant of a once much larger glacier that covered the whole side of the mountain. Dirty looking ice continued for the next 50 feet or so to the right of the visible white ice. The bouldery moraine was very loose from the recently melted out rocks and sand, causing me to slip a couple times. Several people walked right on the ice, but I stayed off the ice to the right which was probably a mistake - the route on the ice actually seemed safer since at least it was stable and not shifting around with every step.



Slab section

After our break, we continued on a slab section climbing several hundred feet - the slabs were clean and polished, wiped clean by the centuries of ice and snow passing over them. The glacier-polished granite was smooth and sometimes slippery - it was best to avoid the sections where the rock gleamed in the sun! The rock was solid the whole way with the slope traversing uphill the whole way

without being broken by cliff bands (the slabs in the Conness lakes basin on a previous trip were more annoying than I anticipated - they looked smooth and continuous, but several times you would end up having to carefully down climb a steep 20-foot section and re-climb a 20-foot section on the other side of a gully)

At the top of the slabs, we came to the beginning of the proper SE glacier. I was hoping for at least some traversal of the glacier (given our route was the "SE glacier" route). Terry had heard from previous parties that ice axe / crampons were not necessary since it was possible to skirt around the ice all together - you could "climb the SE glacier route" without stepping a foot on the ice. However, I found walking on the low-angle ice quite enjoyable and much easier than walking on the loose rock on the right (learning my lesson from a few minutes earlier).

I had slightly mis-judged my water use, only carrying 3 20-oz vitamin water bottles on this trip. I normally carry 3 bottles on trips, but on previous trips, they had been the full 1-liter Gatorade bottles, totaling 3 liters. Here, I would end up only having about 2/3 the water I should have had. I was relieved though to again find some wonderful glacial melt-water coming straight off the ice. The glacier here was also rilled with streams cascading down every 6 feet or so in shallow channels. Filling my bottle with the crystal clear water, I enjoyed a good draught of the cool drink.

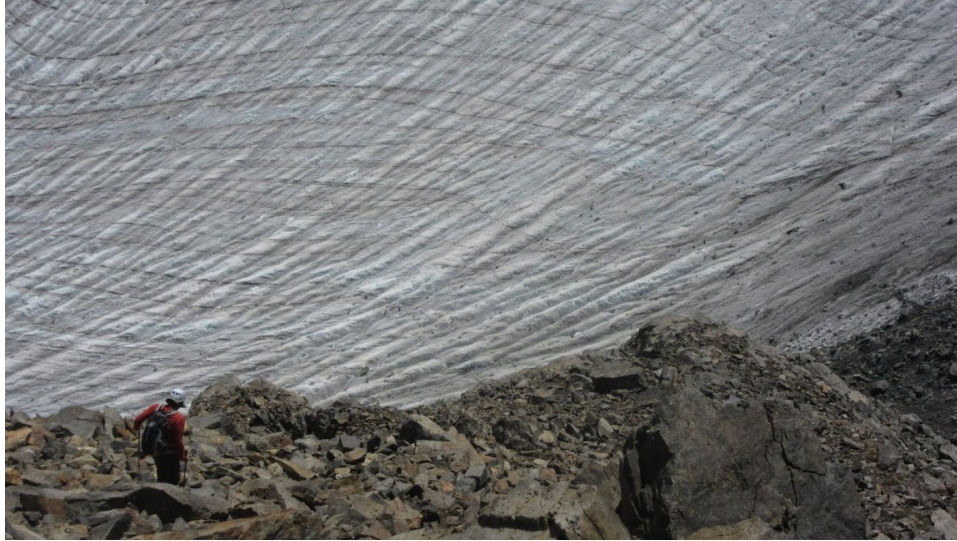
The angle of the ice was shallow enough to continue up with just our boots and trekking poles. Enough sand and small stones embedded in the glacier provided ample purchase to avoid slipping, making for a rather enjoyable climb. Looking back along the glacial valley gave a panoramic view reminiscent of the lower section of the Ingraham glacier on Rainier - a large black sub-peak of Ritter stabbed the sky like Little Tahoma, splitting the once massive rivers of ice coming off the mountain. In the distance the smoke-filled Long Valley appeared as a misty shroud from a Japanese watercolor painting. Two specks high on the glacier had appeared - I thought they might be the climbers from this morning, but I wondered how we could be so far past them by now - they did look a bit confused in the morning, and maybe they had to backtrack a couple times. The two guys were moving very slowly and cautiously - they had not come prepared with ice screws or other protection (the ice was too hard for pickets). They were roped and had ice axes, but a slip on the hard ice would be very hard to arrest given the conditions. Supposedly the other 2 people from their group backed down when they saw the angle and condition of the ice, moving slower, but safer. I wondered if they would come across Matthew Greene's red ice axe or yellow boots - maybe they would have melted out of the ice. Or maybe they would come across an airplane wing from a WWII bomber or something that had been buried for decades - who knows?



On the glacier

Christophe started up a narrow chute that appeared as a shortcut to the upper summit plateau - it looked rather steep and loose but it appeared as a rather efficient route. My route description mentioned the broad Owen's chute further back, which was easy class 2 all the way. Not wanting to risk a repeat of the slip I had a year ago on loose class 2-3 terrain that had been under snow most of the year, I balked at attempting the narrow chute. I pointed with a pole to go up the easier route, but Christophe was insistent. Terry gave a couple hollers for him to come down and he eventually relented, re-joining our group as we continued up the main glacial valley toward the broad chute.

Reaching the upper extent of the glacier, the rest of us exited the ice to the right, making our way toward the base of the broad chute. We could see the full SE glacier in all its glory - even though the glacier looked impressive, I knew it was only a shadow of its former self, having melted back visibly even in the last 10 years (comparing with Bob Burd's pictures from his 2003 climb). Since 2003, a new ridge of rock has become exposed on the left side of the glacier, cleaving it in two distinct segments. I wonder how many more years it's going to last. In 2003, the glacier was also still partly snow-covered, but when we were there, it was all bare ice, all the way to the top, melting rapidly in the warming sun. Seeing the banded layers of ice, I imagined dozens of alternating summers and winters - heavier winters would create thicker bands, which would melt each summer. Dust and small pebbles from rockfalls would get deposited during the dry summers before being covered in yet another thick layer of snow and ice the following winter. The center section of the glacier flowed faster than the edges, causing a crescent-shape in the bands of ice.



Detail on the glacier

The layers of ice appeared as curving tree-rings, a cross-section cut through geologic time over hundreds of years. I wonder if anybody has done a study as to which layers correspond to which years, and if there is a correlation to tree rings data from nearby forests. Perhaps these rings are exposed from the last “mini ice age” of the late 1600’s when the sun entered the Maunder Minimum of decreased activity. I wonder if the proposed future “mini ice age” is going to happen in the 2030’s, and the dying glaciers will once be rejuvenated, or is that an internet rumor? Or will global warming be run-away by that time and the inexorable melting of the great ice will be unstoppable? Maybe we would have to wait several millennia in the future, for a new ice age to dawn, where the great glaciers will once again flow across North America, sweeping across the Great Lakes and New York? Maybe Manhattan will once again become inundated with thousands of meters of ice up to Long Island (an ancient terminal moraine) and remnants of the current towering skyscrapers will become embedded in the moraine? It has happened before - glacial striations across a bunch of rounded boulders in Central Park attested to the fact. One can only speculate when it would happen again.

Owen’s chute was tedious, a sandy and bouldery class-2 slog. Progress was slow, but the views expanded with every step. Pressure-breathing at intervals along the way helped to keep my energy going and reduce my mild headache that I could sense was starting to grow. Rest-stepping preserved my strength and averted any cramping - I could sense fatigue in my muscles at this point, and I remembered salt was one of my key needs. I stopped to crunch down 1/2 a bar near the top of the chute - my energy returned rapidly. The slope started to lessen near the top, and soon we came to the summit plateau. The summit was straight ahead, a use trail marked with cairns lay right at our feet, the weather was bright and clear, and we were re-energized after the short break. The

summit was ours now! I felt it was just mechanical at this point, to move one foot in front of the other and keep going. We had it so easy, compared with the early explorers. I had read John Muir's words recording his first ascent in October 1872 as he was climbing the north face -

I was suddenly brought to a dead stop, with arms outspread, clinging close to the face of the rock, unable to move hand or foot either up or down. My doom appeared fixed. I must fall. There would be a moment of bewilderment, and then a lifeless rumble down the one general precipice to the glacier below.

...

Above this memorable spot, the face of the mountain is still more savagely hacked and torn. It is a maze of yawning chasms and gullies, in the angles of which rise beetling crags and piles of detached boulders that seem to have been gotten ready to be launched below. But the strange influx of strength I had received seemed inexhaustible. I found a way without effort, and soon stood upon the topmost crag in the blessed light.

I knew we were going up the "least adventurous" route on the mountain, but I didn't care - I was glad we were going to make the summit! John Muir had been climbing the North Face, which we had planned to attempt on our previous trip 4 years ago when the clouds rolled in. Reading "I must fall" in his account made me feel lucky we got "stormed off the mountain" and didn't have to attempt the treacherous route. I was content going up the class-2 "boring" slope!

The view to the south continued to expand as we climbed higher. The full extent of the smoke from the Rough Fire in Kings Canyon was becoming more apparent. The smoke reached to a ceiling of just below 13,000 feet with bright blue skies above. The inversion layer was starting to break and smoke was starting to flow over the peaks, but we still had a good look at the countless peaks. The smoke in fact accentuated the peaks, hiding their lower slopes in a grey mist, revealing their summits as layer upon layer of jagged peaks. The peaks of the Minarets, Little Lakes valley, and even the flat-topped Mt Darwin could be glimpsed as a floating island far away. I knew 2 other groups were out this same weekend - one group was planning on doing Cloudripper near South Lake, and another was doing Mt Russell (maybe even attempting the Fishhook Arête if they were ambitious enough) - I wished them all the best, and hoped they would be able to dodge the smoke where they were.

A patch of deep sun cupped snow lay in a small depression just before the summit slope, the last visible remnant of the many winters that shaped this vast landscape. The 5 of us had a nice break before our final push, and I had pretty good confidence we were all going to be standing on the summit shortly - it appeared only 100, maybe 200 feet to the top, maybe 10 minutes max! Christophe was already bounding uphill - eager for the summit. I was starting to

wane slightly - my headache starting to return. I realized I was probably not drinking nearly enough so I pounded 1/3 of a water bottle and took a precautionary Advil to ward off any further throbbing pain. The water and drugs worked rapidly and I continued forward. Ning was just behind me along with Craig and Terry.

Two different routes made for the summit - all class 2. I took the left, as it appeared to be able to look down the steep NW spine of the mountain into the wild Yosemite high country. I kept my fingers crossed it would be clear of smoke, knowing the vast fire lay to the south. I would not be disappointed, as we reached the ridge, I was able to gaze into a magical turquoise-blue glacial lake directly below. Its color was unlike any other lake nearby - silt from a glacier just to our west was flowing into the lake. It was a stark beauty - nature in its naked form, raw geology at its finest.



Turquoise lake below

On the upper slopes as we continued up the broken rocks, I was reminded of some of the words of Mendelssohn's Elijah we had sung at a Schola summer sing just a couple weeks ago. A forceful baritone solo from Elijah sings "*Is not His word like a fire, and like a hammer that breaketh the rock into pieces! For God is angry with the wicked every day. And if the wicked turn not, the Lord will whet His sword; and He hath bent His bow, and made it ready.*" Elijah in the Old Testament illustrated the stark beauty of God's majesty in its raw form in many times. The rocks around us were split asunder. Although the rocks were not broken cataclysmically from a grand act of nature - they were broken apart from

the slow process of ice thawing and re-freezing in a gradual manner - the image was of God's dominion nonetheless.

I knew the summit had to be close, but a check on my GPS indicated around 12,800 feet - shoot, another 300 to go! I felt so close, but yet the summit wasn't getting any closer it seemed. I guess the perspective was playing tricks on my eyes. Looking behind me for a moment, I saw Terry starting to flag, moving quite slowly over the moderate class 2 terrain. I hoped for the best for him. We had made decent time getting to the summit, and I was glad since I knew it was going to be a long way down and a long drive back home.



Final slope to the summit

I shouted for Christophe who I thought was near the summit, but no answer. I thought he was just a few yards ahead of me, but apparently the summit was larger and more rounded than I expected - the final slopes seemed to take forever! The boulders continued, coming to a class-3 section of even larger boulders. I was quite tired and had to stop a couple times to catch my breath. Finally after heaving myself over the last boulder, I saw the top of the white helmet on Christophe's head! He was already at the summit and getting ready to pick up the register - I just had a few feet to go before finally stepping foot on the highest point of the Ritter Range. I was ecstatic to make the summit!

Ning was coming up just below me, and Craig was just a bit further behind. I hoped Terry would soon be following. Opening the summit register, Christophe and I came across a banner with the large letters "Mt Ritter, Elev 13,143 feet". I thought the "official" elevation was 13,150 feet (any my GPS just so happened to read exactly 13,150 as well) - not sure why it was 7 feet less, but I didn't care - there was obviously not another summit nearby that was 7 feet higher! (though this has happened many times in the past, like on Slide Mountain a couple months

ago, and on Tuolumne peak a couple years ago - I had to tag all the high points to say I “summitted”, because what if I thought I tagged the high point, but missed the true summit?)

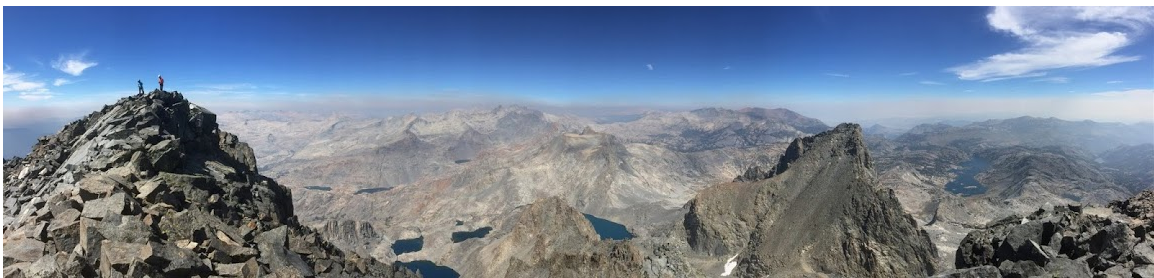
A faint haze lingered over northern and western Yosemite but far from where we were. Garnet Lake looked like a blue jewel to our NE, the Nydiver lakes just to the south, and the Minarets towering over Cecile Lake stood to our south. We had clear views over Mt Lyell / Maclure just to our NW, Rodgers, Davis, Electra and countless other peaks. We could see 3 triple-divide points nearby - Mt Lyell dividing the Merced, Tuolumne and Rush Creek (on the east side of the Sierra crest) (actually the small sub-peak to the east of Lyell is the “proper” triple-divide point), Rodgers Peak dividing the Tuolumne, San Joaquin and Rush Creek, and Mt Davis dividing the North fork & Middle fork San Joaquin and Rush Creek. The Ritter range divides the north and middle fork of the San Joaquin, not the Sierra Crest, though, being the highest range in the area, would appear to be the dividing crest (we actually had already driven over the Sierra Crest over the modest 9,000 ft Minaret Vista on our way in). We were just about 40 feet higher than Mt Lyell, though without a GPS it would be impossible to tell that. I can see why in some remote areas of the world, they still have not properly determined what the highest peaks are.



Ning and I at the summit

I took turns holding the banner with Christophe and Ning, before walking the 50-foot ridge line at the summit to a slightly lower subsidiary summit. This slightly lower summit stood right at the brink of the great precipice, flanked by cliffs dropping straight down toward the Ritter / Banner saddle. A glacier flowed down the north side of that saddle almost right into brilliant blue Lake Catherine below. I wonder if Catherine used to be as bright turquoise as the other lake earlier when its glacier was more active. Banner was unmistakable - its thousand foot

cliffs looked nearly vertical on many sides. The class-2 slope was facing us, but with the fore-shortened distances due to perspective, looked much steeper than it actually was. Mono Lake stood hazily in the background directly behind Banner Peak.



Summit views

We soaked in the view for perhaps a half an hour, shooting movies, panorama photos (I love the iPhone panorama feature), selfies and group photos. The ammo box on the summit had several registers - the current one dated back to 2010, placed by Matthew Hengst. I wonder if that's the same Hengst of Mineral King fame - I had gone on a caving trip to some marble caves around there a couple years back - the alpine marble caves at 10,000 feet lie in the shadow of Hengst peak. The name was so unusual they had to be related... I added another Matthew to the register - my own name, with a short prayer of thanks that God allowed me to make it to the top. I did a quick look for another Matthew's name on the register - Matthew Greene, but a search in the vicinity of July 2013 turned up empty.

Unfortunately after some time, we realized that Terry was unlikely to come join us at the summit. Craig had already run down to check on him, and unfortunately, Terry reached a point where he hit a wall and could go no further. He was having dizzy spells, probably as a result of the altitude and not eating and drinking enough. This trip had been a bit more ambitious than originally planned, especially with it now being a 2-day trip instead of a 3-day one. I was getting eager to head down as well, knowing we had many hours to go ("miles to go before I sleep"), and if Terry was going to need help, it was best for all of us to be there for him.

It was a quick scramble down the 500-foot slope back to the plateau below - a use trail made for rather fast scree-surfing and boulder hopping. I knew I had to be careful - again remembering my slide last year. But this time, it was uneventful for everyone, and we were soon back down. We decided to have a short break at the plateau to recover our strength for the long hike back to camp. I had forgotten part of my summit ritual - to see if I could call my wife at home! It was around 11:30 and I figured she wasn't back from church (2nd service normally lets out around noon, and she would be home around 12:30), so it probably didn't matter anyway. But just in case, I checked my phone and indeed had signal - Mammoth Mountain was still clearly visible, and an array of cell antennas on the mountain ensured that signal was available for miles around, as long as the mountain was in view. I noticed she was online in Skype, so I sent her a quick note (hoping she had the ringer on silent so it wouldn't chime during the sermon), and I was surprised to hear right back from her! She had decided to skip PBC and go to the evening MPPC Open Door service instead. So I called her and got to give the good news that we had summited - she was elated! She was looking forward to seeing me back that night (hoping it wouldn't be too late), and she sent us good wishes (I put the phone on speaker for a bit) to make sure we got down safely. She talked about a magnitude 4 earthquake that had happened in Mammoth the previous morning (which would have been around the time we were having breakfast) - strange that nobody felt it! I knew earthquakes were common around Mammoth, but the last magnitude 4 quake in San Jose a couple weeks ago woke up Nisha but not me - I guess we were all distracted by so many other preparations! After hanging up with Nisha, I posted a selfie and a panorama on Facebook and a half a dozen "likes" had accumulated in the next 15 minutes - it seemed like so many people "lived on Facebook"!



Heading back down

We had seen the group of climbers from earlier in the morning just now reaching

the plateau. They had indeed started around 4:30 in the morning (about an hour earlier than us) and had attempted the Clyde variation of the SE glacier. If the snow was better, it would be a fun route (and I'd love to go back and do Ritter again when the snow was better), but today, it was slow and agonizing. They were camped just above Ediza Lake (maybe 1/2 hour below us), but they were going to be camping a second night. They could still take their time to the summit - the weather was still clear and they should have plenty of daylight to get back to camp. (Of course for us, I was hoping to get back by 3, so we could pack up and make the 7-mile hike out before it got dark). I wished them well - they were tired but still looked strong enough to make it.

We moved slowly down Owen's chute, taking care to not slip on the loose boulders that had recently melted out of the snow. The smoke was starting to pour over the mountains a little by now - I was glad it was all clear earlier when we were on top. The view to the glacier and surrounding peaks was clear, but a dull grey haze filled in the background now. Wisps of smoke started floating overhead as the inversion layer had broken in the early afternoon. The glacier in front of us, though still appearing grand, was fading to a shadow of its former glory. It was apparent that fires and the melting glaciers were becoming the new norm now - I was glad to still have a glimpse of the former days before they were gone.

We had an extended break before descending the glacier - letting Terry catch up and the rest of us fill our water bottles again with fresh glacial meltwater. Craig was busy with his book on his Kindle. It was a great day to soak in the view in the warm sun, knowing now that the worst was behind us, and we just had to go carefully and we would be fine. The tension of the day had finally melted away and I felt I could finally truly enjoy being out. A couple other sections of the Elijah were going through my head - I thought again about the Rough fire to our south and the numerous judgments in the Elijah with God sending fire. I listened for the "still small voice" of God - prevailing even in the midst of tempests, earthquakes and fires. (all of these had happened recently - the "Devil's windstorm" of 2011, the earthquake yesterday, and the fire going on now).

We descended the left side of the glacier this time, staying more on the "dirty" side, since the clean ice was quite slippery by now, especially while we were walking downhill now. The ice was covered in gravel and small boulders, providing better traction than the bare ice we had ascended in the morning when it was still solid and less slippery. About 1/4 of the way down, we passed an opening in the ice that looked like a shallow cave that could have formed when a chunk of ice had broken away. I remember the opening on the way up, but hadn't thought much of it, especially since we were a ways further out on the ice. However, on the way down, we passed within 10 feet of the entrance - close enough to have a peek inside. A few small stones were cascading down the icy

slope at the entrance as the underlying ice was melting in the afternoon heat.

We were still wearing our helmets, and I decided to have a quick peek inside. What I thought might have been just a shallow opening in the ice was actually a tunnel that went much deeper. In fact, a small creek was slowly flowing along one side of the tunnel, melting out the ice from the inside. Layers of banded blue ice lined the wall, revealing the history of the ancient ice as it had formed layer by layer over successive winters. The wall was striated with glacial polish that was occurring this very minute - I've always thought of glacial polish in old geology textbooks as something from the last ice age tens of thousands of years ago, but this was still happening right now! I wondered how much longer it would be there, however, since sadly, what would have taken hundreds of years to form might be gone in a decade or two if we continue to have the dry winters and warm summers like we have been over the last 4 years.



Inside the glacier ice cave

Exploring a little deeper down into the tunnel revealed a sparkling blue ice chute that descended at least 20-30 feet. I hadn't planned on going inside much, and the ground quickly dropped below me in a 6-foot cliff. I just took a couple pictures quickly and got ready to head out. As I was exiting the cave, however, I noticed the tunnel continued uphill for a ways as well. The entrance was actually in the middle of a much longer tunnel where the tunnel had melted out from underneath enough to become accessible from the surface. Continuing uphill about 15 feet, I saw the tunnel curved to the right, turning into an electric blue amphitheater of layered clear ice. It actually spooked me a bit in an unexpected way, even triggering a pang of thalassophobia, like I was in a deep ocean. But once I cleared the fear, I suddenly felt like the kid in a candy store, from my dream. I had to pinch myself to see if this was real - maybe I was still dreaming back at camp, and we hadn't even woken up yet, and we hadn't started for the

summit yet. But I couldn't believe it was real - we had indeed summited, and now I was in this magical place. Although there weren't any retro '80s video games in mint condition inside, the ice cave sparkled in all its natural wonder - I was not disappointed.

Exiting the cave, I saw Terry just outside, taking a short break. He was struggling a bit with the descent and I was happy to be able to help a bit. The others had moved a ways further down - I guess I was in the cave longer than I thought. The angle of the ice was easier now, and we moved quickly down, following the meltwater channels to the moraine. I re-filled one of my bottles with the meltwater - again enjoying fresh water as clean as could be! We were soon on the granite slabs below the glacier - the day was playing in reverse now, as we came to each section of the route.

The pressure of making the summit was past now so I could enjoy the remarkable geology all around - the rock was often fractured in beautiful geometric patterns - cleavage planes in 3 distinct directions often made the rock appear to be made of large "pixels", like it was built from Minecraft - with edges of 6-12 inches across, sometimes tilted in different directions. It was wonderful fun to climb around on. Sometimes, layers of green and yellow minerals would line the cleavage planes, evidence of copper, sulfur, or manganese deposits. There is mining in the Mammoth area, and if this area wasn't quite so inaccessible, maybe the early prospectors would have picked this area as well.



Blocky section

After the slabs came the large snow-patch I remembered on our way up - this was our first snow of the ascent (and last of the descent). We went down a different way below the slabs - our route-finding was not quite ideal and even put us on a short class-4 section, but we managed just fine. Some fun class-3 slabs,

short cliffs studded with waterfalls, and grassy ramps made for a scenic descent. One section looked like a long staircase of geometric-shaped steps. Christophe was taking the lead, and Ning was just behind me. Craig was looking after Terry, so we all had buddies heading down the mountain - it was these moments of camaraderie that I cherished on these sorts of trips.

The tarn at the base of the Ritter-Banner saddle was straight ahead, and below the grassy ramps was another scree field, marked with cairns and a use-trail. The going was boring and tedious, but each step brought us closer to the lush green meadows just below us. We were about at the level of the Nydiver Lakes when I suddenly felt “home-free” that we were “home” and “going to make it now” - I was exhausted but immensely satisfied. The trail went through a short tunnel just before reaching the flat valley ahead just below the tarn. Another use trail connected ahead, probably the one that takes you to the saddle to climb Banner Peak (when we did it last time, it was all deeply snow-covered). I was so exhausted I couldn't imagine going the next day to climb another peak! We finished our last step on the scree and finally reached the grassy meadow - yay!

Ning was just behind, but Craig and Terry still had a ways to go. We were soon at our tents where I just sat on a rock, gazing at the peak we had just climbed, hardly believing we were just up there - it looked so insurmountable! I got Craig's stove going so when he arrived a few minutes later, water would be boiling. In the meantime, I got my water replenished (all 3 bottles were empty), putting my filter to work. It was just around 4:00 when we were all back in camp, relaxing finally after a hard day's work.



Back at camp

But alas, the work was not nearly done for the day just yet. By 4:30, our tents were packed away and we were getting ready to hit the trail out. Terry had a

motel booked already in Mammoth (since he wasn't sure if he would be able to drive by himself when we got back to the TH), but now he had decided to just stay in camp another night right where he was (and forfeit the motel). I offered him my extra meal and tea (I always pack an extra day's food on these trips), and he was thankful - he took the tea. It was bitter-sweet leaving him, but he had camped many nights by himself, enjoying the solitude of the wilderness, and now that his altitude problems had passed, he was doing much better. He was too exhausted now but he knew he would be fine in the morning. We'd leave a note for him on his car when we got out.

I originally thought of staying another night as well and going back with him, but that would have meant a full day PTO at work (we'd probably get back to the car around noon, and back home by 6:00 or later), and I had a choir audition that night which I didn't want to miss! And I was really missing Nisha now - work had been stressful for her recently, and I wanted to get back as soon as I could, even if it was 1 or 2 am! We bade our friend Terry good-bye (even though he was the one "signing out", he had the rest of us "sign out" of the trip - it would look awkward for the leader to "sign out"!)

Crossing the creek, we headed to a use-trail on the far side of the meadow. The going was quick, especially as we found out the trail was a short cut, passing on the north side of Ediza Lake, bypassing the long traverse we had done on our way up. The trees had returned, meadows and willows once again lined the trail, and the fragrance of the vegetation revitalized my spirits after so many hours in the barren alpine wilderness. Coming back to Ediza Lake reminded me of the lines from the Brahms requiem that we had sung in another Schola summer sing a couple weeks ago - the work begins with "*Selig sind die Toten*" (blessed are the dead) - the haunting melody in the first movement sets the tone for the rest of the work. The piece also ends with a reprise of the same melody, bringing a sense of closure. Passing Ediza Lake on our way out brought a sense of closure as well, as our trip was drawing near to an end. The late-afternoon light was waning as we made our way forward.

Crossing on the north side of Ediza Lake, I knew we would have to cross a boulder-field with our packs on. I picked my way through the boulders, following a decent use-trail. Ning stopped just before the boulders - she was getting tired and starting to slow down. Craig was already across, and offered to run back across the boulders, take Ning's pack, and carry it across the boulders for her - Ning had hurt herself on a trip a couple weeks ago, stepping on a sloping slab near Lake Tahoe, slipping and badly bruising her shin. Not wanting to injure herself again, she graciously accepted Craig's offer.



Crossing the bouldery section

At the outlet of Ediza Lake, since the proper trail was on the other side, we had the choice of following the same side of the stream until the footbridge a little ways further, or fording the creek to get to the proper trail. Seeing that the footbridge was a little further than I expected, and that there appeared to be a plausible crossing point where we were, we decided to attempt the ford. Two large boulders maybe 3 feet apart bridged the creek. The boulder on the far side had a slope, reminiscent of the one that Ning had slipped on a couple weeks ago. Christophe just jumped across with his pack, making it look easy. I wasn't quite ready to chance it - I was quite fatigued and an accident at this point would have been a bummer. I managed to clumsily pass my pack to Christophe - it slipped a little in the process, but luckily he caught it right away. The only casualty was an errant water bottle that plopped in the stream, bobbing in the current, on its way down the San Joaquin to Fresno - oh well. I realized later if my pack had fallen in, that would have been more of a bummer - my wallet, and electronics surely would have gotten wet...

I helped with Ning's pack, helping make sure she got across as well. Craig made it in a quick hop - no problem. The rest of the way was just pounding trail now. Craig and Christophe decided to plow ahead - we figured we had 2 hours to go, and 2 hours of daylight remaining. Craig had lost his headlamp somewhere deep in his pack, further motivating his speed and progress on the trail. Meanwhile, Ning and I were happy just plodding along at our own pace.

We passed Shadow Lake in the late afternoon light, casting a warm orange glow on the opposite hills, reflected in the still water. The switchbacks down to the San Joaquin River seemed to take forever, but in the process, we were able to once again see Mammoth Mountain. Actually I wasn't paying attention to the scenery (I was just tired and wanted to get back by now), and it was only when a

flurry of pings, chimes and buzzes came from my phone when it re-awakened with signal. I was able to update Nisha with a play-by-play, giving her an updated ETA (which looked to be about 2 am now), and reassuring her everything was all right. Terry would be able to find out that we were OK once he got signal again.

The evening alpenglow was shining on Mammoth Mountain as we crossed the footbridge across the river. Some campers were having a good time with drinks and a roaring campfire near the river - they didn't have to go anywhere tonight! We still had many miles to go before we slept - I quietly envied them as we continued to pound the miles of dusty trail. I finished one last bar and my remaining water bottle just before we had to climb the last few hundred feet on the other side (it was a bummer the trail had to have an uphill at the very end...) I was out of water at this point - my lost bottle was sorely missed, but I thought I could manage the last mile or so. Fortunately, the evening had cooled nicely - I originally was dreading this section, anticipating an uphill slog in the desert when it was 90 degrees out.



Pink clouds as we reached the trailhead

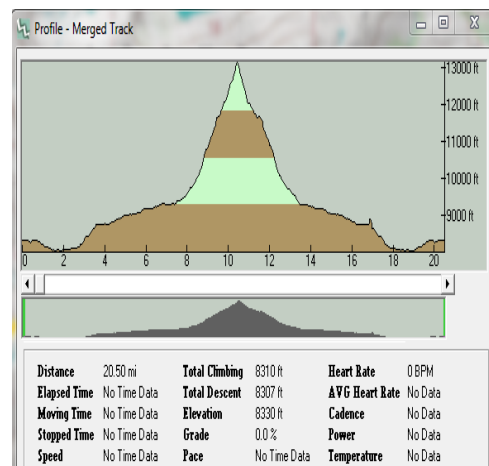
A passing band of cirrus clouds lit up a heavenly pink, further illuminating our path in the waning twilight. Checking my GPS I saw we only had 0.4 miles to go - I would be able to make it - whew! The moon was a waxing 1/4 phase, lighting our way as the twilight dimmed. I got out the headlamp for the last 10 minutes - it was probably not totally necessary, but back in the forest, the path was considerably darker with interspersed tree roots interrupting the trail - tripping on a root with a pack at the end of the long day would not be fun. Scattered broken tree-limbs and root clusters from the blow-down a few years back visible in our headlamps littered the trail like haunting ghost-hands reaching at us.

At last, the open expanse of Agnew Meadows opened on our left - my mind was

singing “*Wie lieblich sind deine Wohnungen*” (how lovely is Thy dwelling place). Just ahead was the glimmer of a lantern light - Craig and Christophe had gotten to the car maybe 10 minutes ahead of us (just beating the darkness) and had a lantern lit, guiding us home like a beacon. The car was like a chariot that was going to take us to heaven! I was so glad we had our cars there and didn't have to take the bus! In fact, the buses stopped running at 7 pm, so we would either have to thumb rides, or camp at the trailhead until the morning - whew!

Our “celebration dinner” turned out to be at a “famous Scottish restaurant” with the well-known name MacDonald - the greasy burgers, salty fries and caffeine-laden Dr. Pepper never tasted better! We were hoping to “celebrate properly” at the Mammoth Brewery but it was too late and we were too tired to care. At least the bathrooms were clean - cleaning 2 days of grime from my hands and face (using probably 1/2 ream of napkins) was like heaven! It was around 9:30 by the time we got rolling.

It was about 5 hours under sparkling star-studded skies heading back up 395, past Mono Lake, over Tioga Pass through Tuolumne and Yosemite, and back through the flat Central Valley to Dublin where Ning lived - we took turns driving and sleeping as the first-quarter moon set over the East Bay hills. Christophe picked up his car and Craig and I took my car back home to my place. His girlfriend was the very car in front of us as we pulled into my parking lot - what timing! She helped Craig load his car and we said our good-byes. Craig would be up 3 hours later to get ready for work. I was finally home just before 3 am, and asleep with my wife about 4 minutes later - whew! Good times, and I can't wait for the next trip (though maybe we should take the extra day next time!)



Our route and elevation profile