

## Rip us some Cloud!

*July 28-30, 2017*



The name “Clouddripper” had given me a sense of awe and splendor ever since I first heard of the peak over 10 years ago on a climb of Mt Agassiz. The crown of the “Inconceivable Range” stood as a fortress unreachable by the common man. It wasn’t until several years later that I learned of a doable route up the summit, and when the PCS decided back in January at a planning meeting to attempt the peak this summer I was thrilled. After a trip was cancelled due to a stormy weather forecast one year, and another due to lack of interest during the summer of the Rim fire, our trip this summer was finally a go!

Alex, Ning and I hit the road around 2 pm to try and beat as much of the Bay Area traffic as possible - though during the last several years, “beating the traffic” is hardly an option anymore. At least we made it out in good time to arrive at the Four Jeffrey campground outside of South Lake at a decent time. In the Inyo National Forest at near 8000 feet, we had a picture-perfect view of Mt Humphreys and the Sierra crest high above us. The entire Milky Way arched from horizon to horizon in the high desert sky. A couple shooting stars streaked overhead in skies that looked perfect for climbing the next couple days.

The weather forecast was ideal for the weekend and we had 12 people signed up - Ning, Louise, Aaron, Eszter, Bo, me, Jean, Terry, Alex, Jim, Sharon and Joan. And our 4-legged friend Robbie belonging to Jim & Louise. Aaron did a little research ahead of time and found that if instead of South Lake we started at the nearby Parchers Resort, no permits were necessary. That would sure make the planning and logistics easier -

nobody had to reserve a permit months in advance, or take a day off from work and stand in line for hours to secure a permit the day before!

All 12 of us showed up about on time for our 8 am departure - it was forecast to be a warm weekend, so the early start was nice. Many of us had brought crampons and ice axes, but seeing the warm forecast and that the snow was melting fast, those who brought axes would leave them in the cars. Starting in the abundant wildflower gardens near the resort, we soon met the Green Lake trail. Climbing the wooded slopes to a hanging glacial valley east of South Lake, we gained altitude quickly and efficiently until we came near the tree line just below 11,000 feet. The trees gave way to flowery meadows and streams as we came to the outlet of our first lake - Brown Lake. Although its name may suggest a dirty and muddy pond, the lake was actually a jewel, reflecting the snowy slopes above and surrounded by brilliant wildflowers. Springtime is only now arriving to this elevation after a long winter. Robbie enjoyed a brisk swim in the cold water. He would end up covering probably twice the number of miles as us - supposedly his VO2 max is somewhere around 250 (elite marathon runners have around 75).



The mosquitoes started coming out in force, beckoning us to continue our progress onward and upward. I was starting to slow, carrying my full pack above 11,000 feet. But soon Green Lake appeared - our home for the night. Several other groups were already set up near the lake, but a wonderful spot with a meadow by some trees had opened, providing ample room for our group. Tents were erected, sleeping bags unfurled, water filtered, and lunch was being devoured.

We had a nice break for an hour or so to unwind - Jim went fishing, a couple people were reading, and some were watching Robbie jumping 4 feet in the air, chasing sticks

thrown in the middle of the lake, and swimming back (though sometimes he would get confused on exactly which way to swim back to bring them back!)

It was only 1:00 and we were sitting, swatting the numerous mosquitoes, and deciding what we wanted to do for the afternoon. Should we just hike around camp or a nearby high-point, play games in one of our tents, go swimming, or just hang out? Or just go ahead and climb Cloudripper? It was supposedly only 4 miles to the peak, doable in 3 hours, so if we left at 1:00, we'd be back around 7:00 still with plenty of light left (sunset was around 8:30). Why not? The weather was still nearly perfect, just a few clouds blowing to the north of us. The delta breeze was in full force, blowing the monsoonal moisture away to our east, so things were dry and quiet over us. Then the pressure would be off for Sunday and we could have a leisurely hike out.



After some discussion, 6 of us decided on that option - Bo, Jean, Louise, Ning, Alex and me (and Robbie!). We didn't want to waste time, so we quickly got our packs ready with food and snacks for the 5-hour round trip to the summit, grabbed our trekking poles and were on our way. I stuffed the crampons in the bottom of my pack just in case, but doubted we would need them at 3:00 in the afternoon. The topo maps suggested the snowfields would be rather low-angle, so the need for an ice axe for a self-arrest seemed pretty unlikely.

We had 2 options for reaching the upper slopes of the mountain - either heading straight up the steep talus slopes to the south of Green Lake, or heading up the switchbacking trail. I opted for the safer option of the trail, not wanting to risk a repeat of an accident on a steep talus slope some years back resulting in a somersault nearly landing on my head, and a lost wedding ring. Reading Bob Burd's account of his ascent up Cloudripper taking the same route affirmed our decision. A group of a half-dozen hikers was already on the trail ahead of us - I wondered if they were going to meet us by the summit.

The trail climbed steeply but efficiently to the Coyote ridge east of Green Lake. Route-finding was pretty straightforward as we wended higher along the rolling slopes. It seemed like it should just be another hour at the most to reach the summit, but as usual, distances were deceiving in the vast terrain. Patches of snow started to appear

around 12,000 feet. Robbie was already romping around like a kid playing snow-angels - he loved cooling off! Cresting the first high-point (12406 on the map), we had a spectacular view into the Baker Lake basin below. Thunder and Lightning Lake was immediately below us (though the blue skies didn't show any signs suggesting the name). Sky Haven peak was at the crest of the ridge behind (a more appropriate name).



Although the terrain looked rather flat for the next section, it was actually dropping about 100 feet before passing a saddle to the next snowy slope. (We'd have to pay for the downhill as an uphill slog on the way back). Rest-stepping in the snow and pressure-breathing kept my pace consistent. Bo looked like he could run to the summit (with Robbie), but we moved steadily as a group. Plodding our way uphill brought us to the base of Vagabond peak (a false summit of Cloudripper). I thought maybe we could traverse around Vagabond to save the 300 ft up / down, but at the beginning of the traverse, it was apparent that going up and over was the only practical option. It soon became a maze of cliffs and loose rock - again there is a reason this range is "Inconsolable". But as a silver lining the views opened to grand panoramas as we crested the false summit. Supposedly there is a register hidden in a small cave near the summit, but none of us were in the mood for hide and seek...

Another group of hikers was following maybe 1/2 hour behind us - I wondered if they would catch up and meet us on top. My energy was starting to flag - one of my fears on the mountain was that we'd get to the false summit, think "oh shoot, let's just call it good here", and turn around. But Bo and Jean were already running down the slope - the decision was "onward"! It was maybe only 20 minutes further to the final summit ridge, though it felt much tougher. There was no turning back now! I looked back to see if the others were still following, but it appeared they did turn back at the false summit - we didn't see them the rest of the day. We had set a 5:00 turn-around time, but the summit was at most 5 minutes away now, so we cheated the time a little and proceeded upwards. We skirted to the right of one snowfield, then traversed to the left of an upper one before coming to what appeared the highest point.

Two people were just coming down from the summit as we came to the ridge - they said it was class 3 and a bit scrambly, though I thought we were so close and it looked at

most class 2. But once I thought we crested the final boulder, we saw the rest of the summit blocks - shoot, there was a bit more to go. The summit blocks looked like a solid class 4, maybe even low-class 5, but I spotted Bo's green jacket traversing to the left, out of sight. Following him, we traversed a straightforward ridge and maybe 15-20 feet of fun and solid class 3, and we topped out on the summit - success!



Jean was already at the summit with Bo when I arrived. Ning and Alex came soon afterward, and Louise finally came after tying up Robbie at a safe place just below the summit where he wouldn't fall. We congratulated our 100% success for the summit. I thought we'd just get a quick photo or two and head down promptly since we were already a bit past our turn-around time, but those 2 minutes turned into more like 15 as we perused the summit register and soaked in the views.



The Palisade crest to our south commanded our view - topped by North Palisade and the surrounding 14'ers. I think there are 6 we can see (Thunderbolt, Starlight, North Pal, Sill, Middle Pal, and Split). To the NW, Mt Humphreys stood like a spire to the heavens. Flat-topped Mt Darwin lay to our west, and countless other peaks beyond stretched to the horizon. Bishop and White Mountain Peak lay to the east. I performed my summit ritual - 360 panoramic movie ending with a selfie, 2 180-degree iPhone panos, photo of my entry in the register and a post on Facebook! My wife was on a hike with some other friends at Henry Cowell Redwoods, so I'd have to call her later, but I finished the rest of my ritual!

It was pushing 5:30 by the time we started down-climbing the summit blocks. Slogging our way back up and over the false summit of Vagabond was a chore, but once at the top, we knew it would be an easy descent back to camp. With the pressure off, I relished the views in the late-afternoon light gleaming off the snowfields. Patches of daisies and purple polemonium flowers dotted the cracks between boulders where the snowfields ended - nature's hardy way of sustaining life in the harsh environment. I'm glad we took the switchbacking trail back to Green Lake in the waning light - no sense to risk a tumble down the bouldery slopes to try to save 15 minutes. Besides a few muscle cramps, the hike down was rather uneventful (thanks Ning for the salt pills). We pulled into camp in time to watch the twilight gleam off the mirror-like Green Lake.



Freeze-dried spaghetti and meatballs made a hearty dinner as we swapped stories into the night under a starry and moonlit sky. Talks of fishing, telescopes, astrophotography and Louise's planned diving trip to Cozumel next week for her birthday extended into the night. Our tents were zipped and we got to enjoy some much needed Z's for the night. A few people were getting up early to do the peak in the morning, hoping to repeat our success.

Aaron, Terry and Eszter were up at first light around 5:00 to get ready for their shot at Cloudripper. The forecast had changed to 30% chance of T-storms after 11:00, so the early start was advised. I was glad to get to sleep in a bit and relax, knowing we just had to hike out at leisure. Sharon and Joan were just going to do a short hike around camp - they were just there to have fun and the peak wasn't too important. Jim was satisfied just trying his hand at fishing again in the lake. Breakfast was the usual oatmeal, tea and fruit for me. I keep talking about getting something more elaborate like cartons for hard-boiled eggs, or a French coffee press, but laziness seems to always take over.



It was time to pack up and start the long drive back to the Bay Area. It was a bitter-sweet time - I feel as soon as we got into the "wilderness mindset", it was time to head out. Bo and Jean hiked out first right after breakfast, and the rest of us followed later after relaxing a bit more. It was warming up quickly as Jim & Louise & Robbie and Ning and Alex and I started plodding downhill. We said farewell to the alpine lakes and meadows as we switchbacked down the forested trail back to Parchers Resort. We said a final farewell to Jim & Louise since they were heading to the Bishop airport to fly back to Truckee - they would be the first ones home! Meanwhile, Alex and Ning and I still had many hours to drive back home!

Lunch was BBQ chicken sandwiches and Mammoth Brewing Company IPA overlooking Mono Lake at the Whoa Nellie - a treat to celebrate our wonderful summit. The drive back was a bit tedious - getting caught in a 40 minute traffic jam trying to get through the eastern gate of Yosemite, and following a pair of super slow RV's going 15-20 mph for the next 25 miles through Yosemite. But I guess that's the price of enjoying summer in the wilderness for a weekend. We saw some evidence of the record snow-pack this

last winter - the Tioga Pass resort was partially caved in from what must have been the weight of many feet of snow piled high on the roof. I hope it gets rebuilt since I've enjoyed it before. We just made the 5:00 deadline to cross the bridge over the very full Don Pedro reservoir on Hwy 120. Traffic was fine otherwise, getting us home around 8:00 to catch the sunset from highway 237 near Milpitas. Thanks for a great trip!

Meanwhile, Aaron, Terry and Eszter continued toward the summit after we left. Terry turned around near the 12406 high-point due to some muscle soreness, but the other two summited. They were a bit slow, however, reaching back to camp around 3:00 and starting the hike out around 4:00, only reaching the cars around 6:30 and Bishop at 7:00, getting them back to the Bay Area after 1 am the next morning - whew!