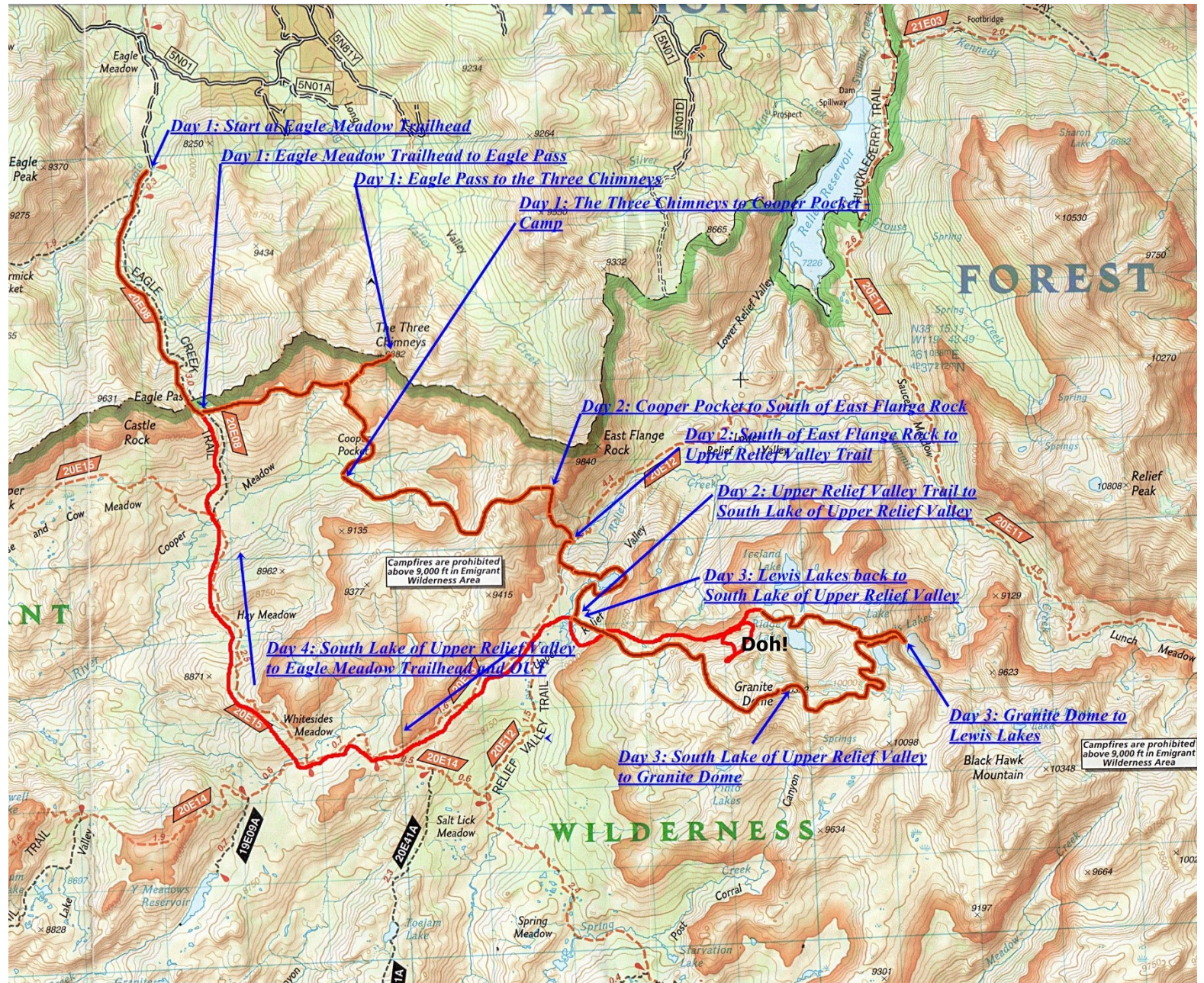

GARY AND ROD'S 2012 BACKPACK TRIP IN THE HIGH SIERRA



HIGH SIERRA BACKPACK TRIP - 2012

Aug 20 through Aug 23. It was just Rod and Gary this year. Ben couldn't go because his Visa for his study abroad in Rome was messed up and he had to stay to make sure it was taken care of and Elizabeth started working at Hillsboro High School that week. Marguerite had had her fill, at least for this year, of backpacking with our weekend, mosquito-filled trip to Mile Lake in the Sister's Wilderness; she opted to float in the pool and drink gin and tonics. Go figure. There was, I think, only one mosquito in the High Sierra during this time period; it has been so dry. That one and only mosquito found my left knee the first night. After that, no, zero, nada mosquitos! Best mosquito (or lack thereof) trip ever. On Friday, Gary finished a solo five-day, 500 mile bike ride down the Oregon coast from Tigard. He was a little on the tired side.



DAY 1: SUNDAY, AUG 20

EAGLE MEADOW TRAILHEAD TO EAGLE PASS

We arrived at Eagle Meadow Trailhead about 12:30 PM on Sunday and ate a couple of sandwiches we bought down the road before trekking into the wilderness. By 1:00, our bellies were full of teriyaki chicken sandwiches and fries, and our spirits were full of expectant adventures. We packed up and headed towards Eagle Pass about four miles away on the Eagle Creek Trail.

We had been warned by the park ranger when we got our trail passes at the Pinecrest Ranger Station that there was very little water, especially along the creeks where we were going. He showed us on the map where we might be able to find water. He circled the area of Cooper Pocket at the head of Cooper Meadow. The good thing was that was exactly where we were planning on going. He said if there was water in the creeks, then that would be the place to find it. We had 1.5 gallons of water with us in six quart-sized water bottles.

Along the trail we discovered that he was indeed correct. Eagle Creek was barren of water except in a very few isolated pockets of standing water in a few of the deeper pools. Of course, we had full water bottles so collected none of that water.

The hike to the pass was pretty uneventful. I did see an eagle fly over, first seeing its shadow on the ground and then looking up to see it no more than maybe 50 yards above us. I fumbled for my camera but the next time I looked up, just seconds later, I couldn't see it anymore.

I am not going to be exact on the whole elevation gain thing, so will say that the climb from Eagle Meadow Trailhead, about four miles, was pretty easy, although we gained around 1,000 feet or so. We reached Eagle Pass (8,970 ft.) within a couple of very uneventful hours of easy hiking.

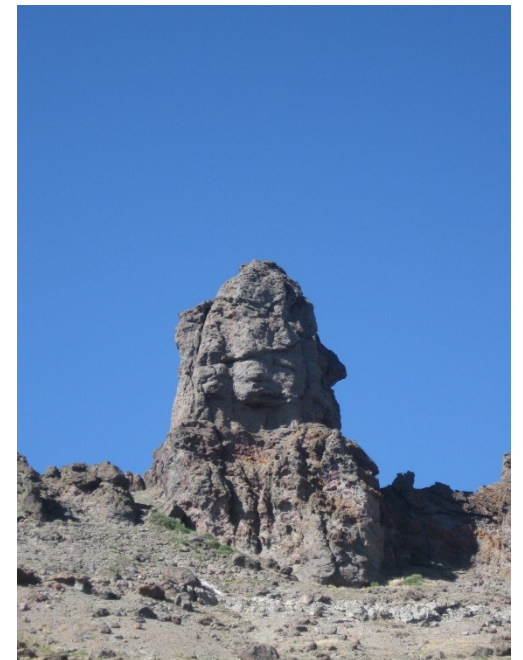


Eagle Peak: The first picture of the trip. Note that that is not a granite peak, but volcanic. Cooper Meadow generally delineates the granite zone from the lava zone. One side of the valley is all lava and scree-covered hillsides. The other side of the Meadow is granite and like walking on a, sometimes very steep, sidewalk.



Clockwise from top left (all pages follow this format):

1. Eagle Pass marker: 8,970 feet. It was pretty easy hike from the car to here. It got harder from this point on.
2. View from where we turned off Eagle Creek Trail to go cross country for the next three days. Far right is the Three Chimneys.
3. Castle Rock
4. Gary eyes his objective of several years: the eye in the Three Chimneys. That is not a flaw in the picture in the third chimney on the right. It is a hole that goes directly through. Gary's objective: Stand in the eye.





1. We rest before cross-country to Three Chimneys. Rod with Cooper Meadow and Cooper Pocket at left of picture. Note all the Granite in the south-facing view.
2. Different angle of Rod at same location. Note that it looks like completely different terrain. It is. No granite; all volcanic and a bunch of scree on the mountainsides.
3. Not as many flowers this year as last. Very dry.
4. Rest the dogs just a bit longer before we make the trek to The Three Chimneys.



EAGLE PASS TO THE THREE CHIMNEYS

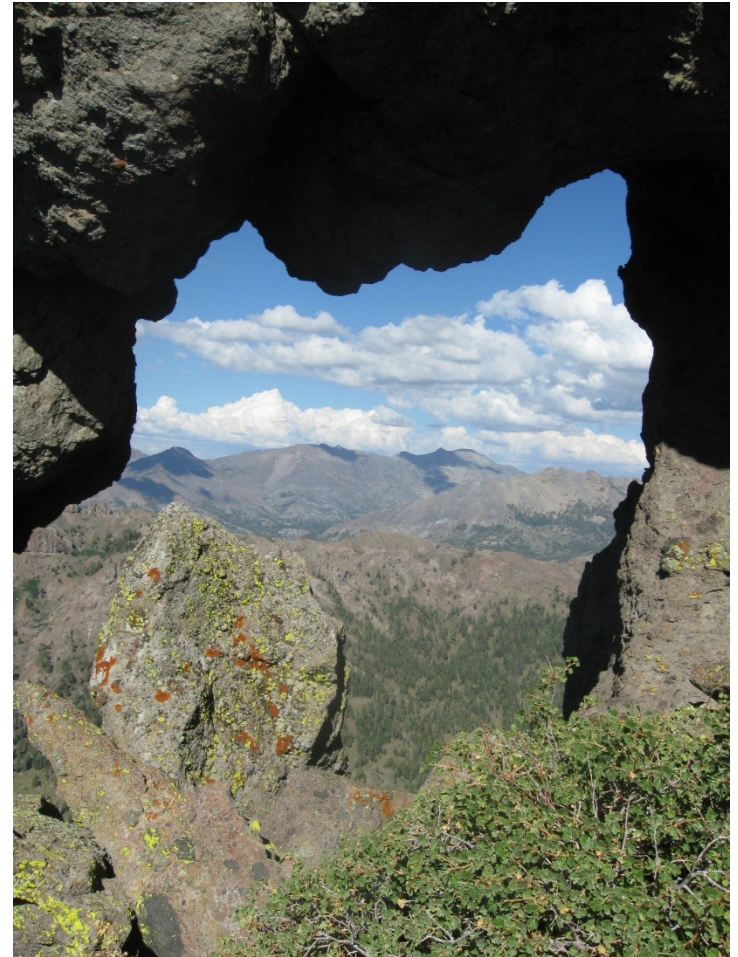
After reaching Eagle Pass, we followed the trail for just a bit longer and then began the major cross-country portion (99.9% of the next two days) by leaving the trail and going east along the south side of the ridge towards the The Three Chimneys.

From a distance one would say that the cross-country jog around the ridge edge to The Three Chimneys would be pretty easy, what with very “smooth” terrain as you follow the contour lines. However, this area is NOT GRANITE as is much of the Higher Sierra, but is lava scree, rock and some granite covered with the loose scree. I think of ball bearings spread across cement and then tilted at 30 degree angles. Try walking on that and, well, you find yourself taking that “two steps up, and slide back one” and also dancing around trying not to fall as you slide back. Put a 40 pound pack on your back to boot, and then you have an idea of what we were facing. The hike from the trail to The Three Chimneys was maybe two miles (at most) but it was over this scree-covered rock and traps. It was truly exhausting and both Gary and I struggled quite a bit.

By the time we reached The Three Chimneys a good two hours had passed, and it was getting along to 5:00 or so. Neither of us had a watch (and neither of us really wanted to wear one). The sun told us we still had a good three hours of daylight left, so we were in no hurry. However, we *did* begin to become somewhat concerned about water. From our vantage point at the base of The Three Chimneys, we could see into Cooper Pocket and could see no flowing water, although there were some dark green spots down there. It looked promising, but there was no guarantee. Two years before this trip we had had to dry camp in the Strawberry Wilderness in Oregon (near Fossil Oregon) and it was not very pleasant. Then, we had one quart of water between us. Now, we still had about three quarts of water left. If we had to dry camp (which neither of us wanted to do) then we would at least have more water than we did two years before, but the prospect of find more water the next morning was pretty bleak and lay to the east over another ridge line at Ridge Lake.

Although we were getting low on water, we still had time left in the day and our first day goal (Cooper Pocket) was in sight just down a scree-covered mountainside maybe ½ mile away. Gary decided, and I – somewhat reluctantly – agreed that he should climb up into the east chimney, the one with the hole that ran through it that you could see for miles around. His objective was to climb up into the hole. My objective was to follow him and take a picture of him in the hole. My objective was also to worry about him climbing that stuff and yelling up at him to be careful every two or three minutes. I wanted to go with him, but the scree was just too much for me, even without my pack on. We had dumped out packs below the chimneys to make it easier to climb up.

Gary climbed and I followed, maybe 50 yards behind. I reached a point where I called it good and stopped. Gary yelled back at me that he would be back in a few minutes and disappeared behind a massive red boulder. I yelled back, “be careful!” and didn’t see him for about 15 minutes. I started getting real



Gary's picture from the hole in the third chimney.

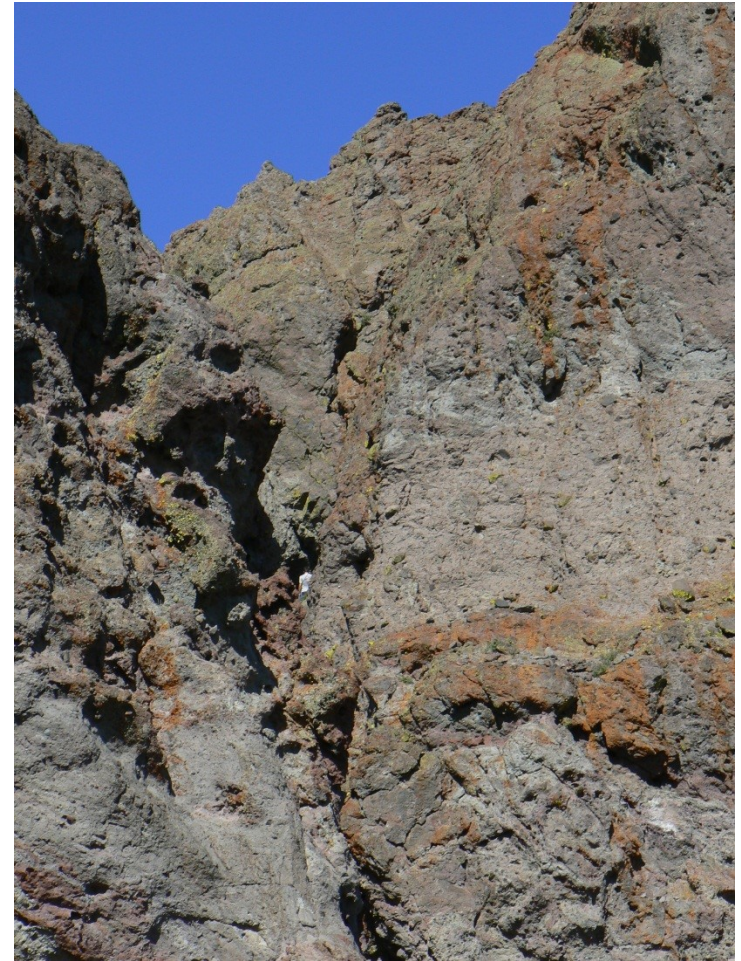
antsy, of course. Still, I wanted to give him his space. When next I saw him, I heard “dad” and looked up and, bingo, there he was, waving at me from the hole in the east-side chimney. I tried to take pictures, but it was a good 200 yards away, so the two pictures I got with him in them are not the best, but that white spot is indeed Gary. He also took some good pictures from the hole.

Gary disappeared from the hole doing whatever one does up there (taking a lot of pictures, I guess) and then about 15 minutes later, I heard “dad” and looked around. He was standing on the scree at the base of the middle chimney. He was safe, or at least as safe as one can be on a 30 degree or more scree-covered slope that extends for a good ½ mile down a mountainside. He took one route and I retraced our steps back to the backpacks.

Last year we had been close to The Three Chimneys and Gary wanted to climb into them then. But then, Elizabeth, Ben and I were able to talk him out of it. We had just finished a day of hard hiking then, so he had agreed. This time, it was an objective. He got to do what he had to wait a year for and I am glad he did it.



I have a kid traipsing around up there somewhere. That is why fathers and mothers get old and gray...



Near the middle of the picture there is a white dot. That is Gary standing in the hole.

THE THREE CHIMNEYS TO COOPER POCKET

From where we dropped our packs to climb The Three Chimneys, we skidded, slid, fell and rolled our way down the side of the scree-covered slope. We both fell a couple of times but nothing serious until I managed to slip and fall sideways over a table-sized rock. The rock was one of those composite rocks that was once lava that had rolled down a hill picking up other rocks and debris so that it was jagged all over with protruding rocks. It was “bumpy” to say the least and those bumps were small rocks protruding out all over it.

Of course, the fall on the rock hurt, but then I couldn’t get up because my pack was weighing me down on one side of the rock and my legs draped over the other side. “Help, I have fallen and I can’t get up!” I didn’t really say that, but it ran through my mind. It was actually pretty comical. I felt like a turtles on its back. No matter how hard I struggled, I couldn’t get up and the more I struggled, the more those damned rocks dug into my trapped arm, shoulder and side. “Gary, can you help me up?” I *did* say that. He came back up the slope and helped me up.

We got to thinking about how funny I looked and started laughing about it. We figured it was funny enough so that we needed a picture. I gently wrapped myself back over the rock and Gary took a picture. The picture doesn’t do the real situation justice though, because I was able to get up from the posed picture by myself.

We continued to ease down the mountainside until we reached the green, promising-looking valley – Cooper Pocket. From only a few yards away from the creek that ran through the pocket, there were no obvious signs or sounds of water, other than deep green foliage growing along its edge. Still, that was a good sign and we were hoping that there would be at least pockets of water.

As we approached the creek we saw a great flat spot on the other side of it that would be a great place to camp for the night, with or without water. I was in the lead and perhaps five feet from the creek, looking directly down to make sure I didn’t fall over the rocks strewn about. I looked up at the creek bed and saw a beautiful, well-watered flower. It was in too good a condition to not have a very good water supply supporting it, unlike the flowers we had seen up to that point. My brain told me that there had to be water there and then I heard it, a faint trickle. Another step and I saw it, a pool of water being fed by a two-inch wide trickle of water flowing over a large rock in the middle of the creek. We had our water! In fact, the creek was running pretty nicely all along the creek, not stagnate at all. Gary and I knuckle-bumped and nearly shouted for joy. I think the sight, and especially, the sound of that little stream was the emotional highlight of our trip. It is so joyous to hear running water when you are thirsty and the odds of a dry camp are looking more and more likely. *Joy* is the right word.

We drank deeply of our remaining water and then filled our empty water bottles from the creek. We put iodine tablets in the bottles, but I bet anything that water was as clean and pristine (or more so) than any water we can buy from a store or get from the tap at home. It seemed almost sacrilegious to put iodine in that beautiful water. Still, we didn’t want to take a chance.



Help! I have fallen and I can’t get up! Notice all the loose scree. That stuff was like walking on ball bearings. Notice the composite boulder. That was like falling on, well, a composite boulder.

We set up camp with about two hours of daylight remaining and basically just hung out the rest of the day. We ate and when it turned dark we went right to bed. The stars were absolutely beautiful. We could see the Milky Way before it was completely dark. Amazing! Or “Grand” as Gary likes to say. I guess that is the word that describes the High Sierra compared to other places we have been. The High Sierra is *Grand*.



1. As we neared the bottom of Cooper Pocket, there was more and more granite; the hiking go easier. Still, even granite can pose its own problems.
2. Cooper Pocket. Just a few more steps and water.
3. Joe Cool after climbing in the three chimneys.
4. And sometimes, you just take a picture because the sky is so pretty.





One of the flowers that marked Cooper Pocket, and particularly the wonderful stream that flows through it. Oh what a wonderful site those flowers were and what a more wonderful sound the sound of the running stream. It was small, but it was water.



This is the single biggest tree (at least at the trunk) that I have ever seen while backpacking. It was perhaps 25 yards away from where we stayed in Cooper Pocket. There were a lot more trees like this, but none that we could see with the girth at the base as this one. Probably a good 30 feet in circumference. I think it is a Sequoia, just not yet a “giant” but getting there.

DAY 2: MONDAY, AUG 21

COOPER POCKET TO SOUTH OF EAST FLANGE ROCK

We had a good night – no rain and no invasions by bears or sasquatches. I did not sleep well, as is my way on the first and sometimes second night of a backpack trip. Gary slept ok, but also woke up a lot. As is my way, I got up earlier than Gary and made a cup of coffee and quietly drank it while watching the morning quietly unfold into day. Gary told me the night before that he would not get mad if I woke him up earlier than usual, which meant maybe an hour after I got up. Gary likes to sleep. After my coffee, I woke Gary up. We ate breakfast and determined that we would go southeast up a ridge, directly towards Granite dome. We would eventually turn north and ease our way down into Upper Relief Valley and make our way to Ridge Lake and camp for two days. Tomorrow, we would scale Granite Dome and visit the lakes thereabout.

The map is not completely accurate for day 2, but gives a general overview. From Cooper Pocket to South of East Flange Rock was a pretty easy hike. We topped the ridge and stayed on it. We skirted to the south of our “rock” that marked our landmark that we used the entire trip. I don’t know what it is called really, but looked very much like Castle Rock, only a bit narrower.

After skirting around the “rock” we stood at over 9,000 feet looking down on Upper Relief Valley wondering just how we were going to get down there. We couldn’t see Ridge Lake, Iceland Lake or the Lewis Lakes because of the ridge that ran down from Granite Dome. But we did see a couple of small, unnamed lakes in the valley.



My handsome(?) son emerges from his tent ready to start day 2.



That beautiful stream the morning of Day 2. Such a beautiful sight for us.



1. The “rock” that was our landmark for nearly the entire trip.
2. Rock formations were absolutely amazing. I am not even begin to explain them; just enjoy their beauty.
3. Few flowers along the way, but some managed to eke out a living.
4. Beautiful formations.



SOUTH OF EAST FLANGE ROCK TO UPPER RELIEF VALLEY TRAIL

After about a 15 minute break where we drank water, ate some peanut M&Ms (the best new food of the trip and one we will take with us on all our trips from now on. They don't melt.), and studied the map to figure the best way down to the valley floor – we could see the actual trail down there – we began our scree-laced decent.

It took us a good two hours to work our way down. The distance wasn't that far, but it was hard to see the best way down and we often had to turn around, blocked by sheer drop-offs. Working against the scree and the awkward descent, we were (or at least I was) very tired by the time we reached the bottom and the trail.

UPPER RELIEF VALLEY TRAIL TO SOUTH LAKE OF UPPER RELIEF VALLEY

We followed the trail south for maybe ½ mile (or less) until we topped out and then headed southeast up a very steep slab of granite, maybe 200 yards up at an angle of over 35 degrees. We topped the slab of granite and looked down on the two small, unnamed lakes in the valley. We were tired and agreed that staying at one of them would be nice. We could make the trip to the four lakes tomorrow. We were tired.

The lakes were gorgeous. All along the way down the ridge from above the trail we kept hearing something like a bell in the wind. We couldn't figure it out until we stood on the granite slab and looked south beyond the southern lake. There we saw a herd of cows, of all things. I guess ranchers use this as open range, which explains the old cow pies we saw at our first campsite at Cooper Pocket. And we thought we were in the wilderness...

We debated which lake to stay at and since the cows were closer to the southern lake, we decided to go to the more northern one to see if it was a good place to stay. We reached it a few minutes later. It was indeed beautiful, but we went all around it and couldn't find a real good place to stay, although there was a horse camp on the northern end surrounded by trees. It was an ok place to stay, but it was a horse camp, something we really try to avoid.

We were on the verge of staying there when I decided I would take a walk down to the southern lake and see if it was good. I had seen several trees on the northern side on the white granite slabs that I figured had to have some nice campsites. It took less than five minutes to walk there and, yep, I found four really nice places to stay. I went back and got Gary. He agreed and we settled in for the next two nights. While we could hear the cows' bells, it was not bad.

The water in the lake was pretty warm compared to most of the mountain lakes we have either swam in or tried to swim in, and I took a swim. Gary couldn't do it, saying that even if it was warm, it was still too cold for him. He just doesn't like to get cold and take a long time to warm up, which it does when you take a swim in a cold mountain lake.

We settled in and hit the sack after dinner. We tried to watch the stars a little, but both of us were ready for bed almost as soon as it was dark.



The other side of our "rock." Actually, this walking was not too bad, although it is still definitely not granite.



1. From our "rock" there is all granite down there. The lake in center is northern lake in Upper Relief Valley.
2. Boundary of lava and granite.
3. If I see flowers, then I have to take a picture of them. This one along one of the rare creeks.
4. Gary climbs the steep granite slab - 200 yards of 35 to 40 degree climbing.





1. East Flange Rock. I wanted to call it Rhino Rock.
2. Even Gary had to rest while climbing the steep granite...well, after I begged him to.
3. Rock formations galore. I asked myself, "What would Ben see?" Ben is my photo artist.
4. The southern lake in Upper Relief Valley. We wound up staying here, in the trees to the left, for two nights.





1. More formations in the granite. What would Ben see?
2. North Lake in Relief Meadow.
3. Flower opportunity.
4. Rod with South Lake behind me.



DAY 3: TUESDAY, AUG 21

SOUTH LAKE OF UPPER RELIEF VALLEY TO GRANITE DOME

This was the day of our ascent of Granite Dome. We left our heavy packs at the camp using only our day packs, and so the ascent of Granite Dome was really quite easy, although we hit a false summit. When we reached the false summit, we saw Granite Dome a good $\frac{1}{4}$ mile further on. Fortunately, it was still a pretty easy ascent. It took us 2 $\frac{1}{2}$ hours to go from our lake to Granite Dome.

We stayed on Granite Dome or thereabouts for over an hour, taking all kinds of pictures, eating and just resting. The eroded rocks formations are absolutely fascinating; the forces of nature make for wonderful artist's tools. I think the best way to explain most of it is to let the pictures do the talking...



Gary sleeps and I perch on a granite slab above our camp and drink coffee. All is right with the world.



Granite Dome: 10,333 feet. Although we struggled past a very promising false summit that dashed our morale just a bit, it still took us just 2.5 hours to reach Granite Dome. The trip back to camp took far longer with many more “false summits.”



Beauty every step of the way

GRAND: ON TOP OF GRANITE DOME – FORMATIONS, LAKES, SKY, GRANITE – PICTURES TELL THE STORY





1. Wind, rain, the ages...
2. ... sculpt the top of Granite Dome
3. Small pocket traps some water in pools
4. And the lakes capture the rest

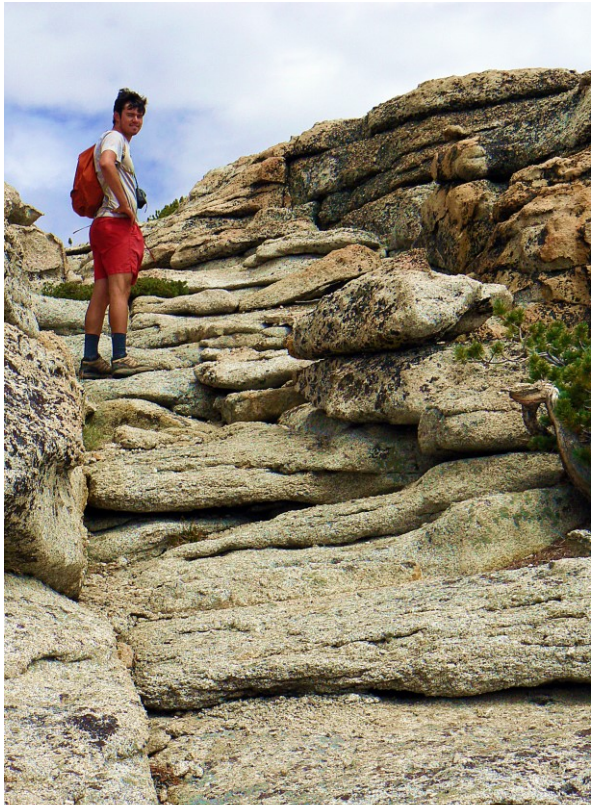


From the Three Chimneys to Granite Dome.



Life takes a strong hold and the flowers take advantage of the pockets of water on the Dome.





So many rock formations. We could have taken pictures all day long and believe me, there are far more pictures than just these, but I think this is a good representation to give you an idea.





GRANITE DOME TO LEWIS LAKES

After taking probably 200 pictures and videos on Granite Dome, it was time to make our descent into the lake region below. We could see Lewis Lakes, Ridge Lake, Iceland Lake and Sardella Lake in addition to others east and north. We determined that the best way to get off of Granite Dome was to go east around a mound and then follow a boulder-strewn valley down to the westerly Lewis Lake. I am not sure how accurate my trail on the map is, but it is close.

The trip down from Granite Lake took us over some crazy ridges and granite slabs and valleys. Still, it was not that difficult of a descent. We rested at the easterly Lewis Lake for a while, studying the maps and eating. We made sure to touch the water. We then figured we would take a look at the easterly Lewis Lake, which, according to the map was about 400 feet below the westerly version. Wow! It was. There was no way we were going to touch the water of that one. That water would have to wait for another trip. We took note of a really nice little lake just north of it that would be a nice place to stay some other time.



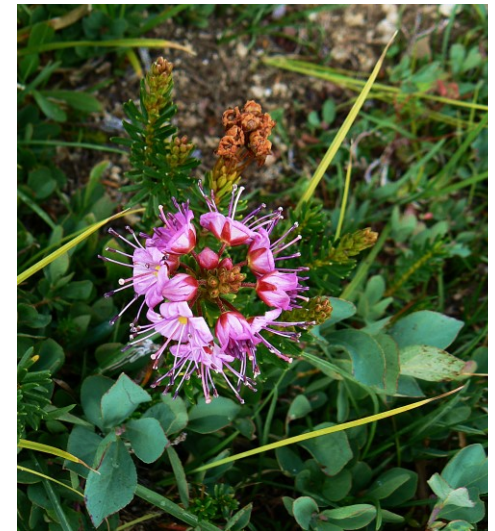
Picking our way below Granite Dome to the lakes.



Everywhere we went I kept asking, "What would Ben see?" He would have seen this differently, I am pretty sure. But I think there is art in this picture somewhere, but it takes an artist to find it. The good thing is that in the High Sierra, the artist is still at work and the art from one day to the next changes.



1. Running water was hard to find, but the ice fields around Granite Dome kept it coming, likely for the entire summer.
2. Many ice fields made a pretty big stream. This one poured over the edge just below Gary.
3. Flowers loved it along the streams.
4. Inside the ice field itself. Gary got this picture lying on his stomach.

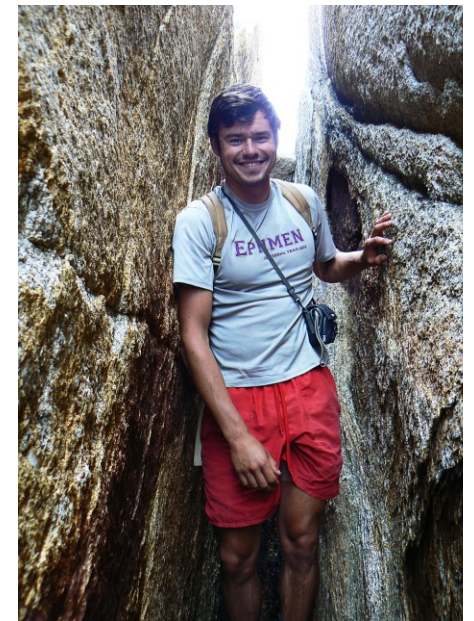




Getting to
Lewis Lake



1. Photo Journalist Gary Roberson
2. We scrambled over and around some massive boulders getting to the lake area.
3. There were some narrow passages down to Lewis Lake in particular. This passage must have been two feet wide, 20 feet high and 30 feet long.
4. Finally, the west version of Lewis Lakes.



EASTERLY LEWIS LAKE – YEAH, THE WATER WAS THAT BLUE



LEWIS LAKES BACK TO SOUTH LAKE OF UPPER RELIEF VALLEY

We made our way along the creek bed that was not completely dry between Lewis and Sardella Lakes. Beautiful! Absolutely beautiful! We edged along a ridge and dropped over to Ridge Lake. We did not try to go to Iceland Lake because it was too far north and we were starting to get concerned about the time. We did not want to get caught up here when it turned dark. Still, we had a good three hours before dark, but figured we should be safe, not sorry. As it turned out, that was a good decision.

To make a long story short, we never got lost but kept getting thwarted by huge cliffs or mountains. We had to alter our course several times. I likely exaggerated a bit on the map, but not as much as you would think. We *do* know how to read topo maps, but squeezed between the topo lines one often finds small ledges and drop downs so that we can make it down an apparently sharp descent, especially when granite is involved. That is actually how we made our way back, by finding the small, navigable drop-offs and bounders that allowed us to descend and ascend along the ridge. But they were fewer than usual in this area, so we had to search a bit harder, and it took us a bit longer than we wanted to pick our way along.

We were headed directly west and with the sun getting ever lower in the sky my eyes began to give out on me, even though I had good polarized sunglasses and a billed cap. Gary told me later that he was starting to worry about my eyes and my ability to see well.

Although we were within my “window of concern” time-wise, we still made it to camp with nearly an hour of daylight remaining. I was absolutely exhausted. Gary told me later that I was very obviously tired. I slept like a baby that night. We also got a bit of rain that night, but nothing serious. I think that was our first night in the High Sierra ever to get rained on.

The sunset that night over our lake was beautiful. Gary got some very good pictures while I drug myself through a small evening meal and then to bed.



Ridge Lake



1. We traveled through massive boulder fields.
2. We had to get over that ridge, which we called "The Thumb."
3. As the shadows were getting longer, we found our lake.
4. This boulder was as big as our house and I don't know what was holding it up.



RED SKY AT NIGHT



BLUE SKY AT MORNING



DAY 4: WEDNESDAY, AUG 22

SOUTH LAKE OF UPPER RELIEF VALLEY TO EAGLE MEADOW TRAILHEAD

On Wednesday morning we both slept until about 8:00 (late for me and early for Gary). It was great! The first good night's sleep I had had on the trip. While drinking my coffee I suggested to Gary that if we wanted we could hike out today because we had done what we had come to do: climb Granite Dome and visit the lakes at its base. He completely agreed. All we were going to do that day was pack to Cooper Meadow, hang out, and then pack out the next day. We had done Cooper Meadow before; it was time to leave.

We left at 10:00 and backpacked out about nine miles, all on trails, and reached the car about 2:45.



Back at the trailhead, we changed out of our really stinky clothes, took a couple of parting shots and were on our way to pizza.

PIZZA

Last year the kids and I stopped in Sierra Village to get pizza at a small pizza shop that advertised the “best pizza you ever ate, Sky High Pizza. I saw that a large pizza was \$29 and gulped since we figured we would have to get two of them. With pop and a tip, I was looking at close to \$75 for lunch. No way! We went somewhere else. This year since it was just Gary and I, we decided to pay premium so stopped there. We got one large pizza and could only eat half of it. It was awesome; actually pretty close to *the best pizza I ever ate* (at least in the top five). So, next time we go we can get one pizza and feed all four of us for \$29 + pop and a tip. THAT is actually a good deal!

Bottom line: Great Trip, Great Food and Great Company.

