

Anywhere That is Wild: A Trek Log

Tue. 7/19/2022



Bishop, California

A few years ago, D booked my first trip to June Lake, up 395, and baptized me in the waters of Eastern Sierra Nevada. The Range of Light is abundant. We forage and hunt for views on the scenic, bountiful, sometimes arid, eastside. It starts with an early morning drive out of our hometown, up the Santa Ana River, through the San Bernardino Mountains via Cajon Pass, into the high desert of Mojave, up to the Southern Sierra Nevada and finally to Owens Lake. The scenic drive, classified by a sign on the side of the road, begins around here. To think, Owens Lake was once one of the largest bodies of water west of the Mississippi, only to be drained, it's river rerouted, it's sole purpose to feed a growing, sprawling, surging and now overpopulated Los Angeles, always blows my mind. I look out at the patches of vegetation, white slab of a lake floor, now barren, and try to imagine what an oasis it must have been for travelers in a most remote section of California. Death Valley is miles away as the crow flies. I picture thousands of birds in its water. I picture flora and fauna drinking and bathing on its shore. If there is a time I'd like to be alive, briefly, it is when indigenous peoples lived an prosperity with Owens Lake.

We always stop in Bishop. I know exactly where to park. We live at sea level so any hikes in Sierra Nevada are potentially catastrophic if we do not train and ascend slowly. Lunch serves as a break from driving, a chance to soak in the scenery above town where mountains dance

and sing toward us below. Erik Schat's Bakery, where everyone stops, makes a killer sandwich. I opt for tuna today, no cheese, extra tomato. D gets the veggie sandwich. We eat at the park where some ants try to bother us. Bishop Creek flows right through the park toward Lake Sabrina where brother Joe Winter says "power bait will do" in order to catch a fish. I snap a photo for him when I cross Line street. After our break, I try to fill my water from the five-gallon jug in the back of the tank, the tank being my Subaru, also known as the batmobile, Fozzy, road dog, baby babe, or cruise-missile. Tank is preferred. We've driven some long stretches in our mini outdoor beast. That said, every dirt road and trailhead I traverse is not complete in the 21st Century without a Prius or Tesla.

I'm telling you, you don't need a 4x4 anymore.

So I tip my jug over only to find the spout is broken. Water leaks out, spilling over my water bottle. "God dammit!" I exclaim.

We hit a sporting goods store. The first one on the drag. 395 turns to Main in town. We are met with hospitality from three men in the store. "I'm really sorry. We don't have just a cap. Try down the road. Big red horse."

We find the big red horse. Inside, an old man is up to his elbows in paperwork. There is no computer at his desk but a pen. "Try Eastside. She stocks them." Another nice fella.

I run into Ace to check. Nothing. I make it to Eastside. I grab a jug like mine and bring it to the counter. "Long shot but I need this." I point at the cap.

"Yeah, we got em! I hope they're in stock."

The clerk finds one.

"You guys are lifesavers." I look around. What a great looking store. Tons of sleeping bags, accessories, my jug-cap, some bear vaults and everything you need to jump on a trail.

I ask D, "I wonder how the prices are there. I wonder if they're fair?"

We apply the new nozzle. With her help, we're back in business. No more water leaks. Water leaks are not recommended in California anymore. We are in a severe drought.

We're back on the road where I prepare for 10 minutes of adrenaline.

Sherwin Grade is a bitch. When it's hot out, there is a danger of overheating on the grind up.

"I'm going to cool the cabin down as much as I can and drive slow, maybe catch an RV and pace them until the pass. Then we're gonna heat up 'til we're at the top."

We approach the pass. The sign reads, something like, "Avoid overheating. Turn off AC." I flip off the AC; set cruise control. I never rev her past 3000rpms. On some curves, I can blast the AC. As soon as the grade pitches again, I turn it off. "7 to go."

We climb.

"About halfway."

D grabs her water bottle. It's cold. She drinks from it.

I drink too.

"A couple more miles."

It's fuckin' hot out. I am reminded of a time when I drove through Mojave when it was 113. When I returned my friend Adrian said, "Your engine is running way hotter. Just remember that."

I do. We complete Sherwin Grade. It's 85 degrees at the top, ten degrees cooler than Bishop.

We approach McGee Creek, Crowley, Tom's Place where one of our favorite hikes begins, and keep cruising toward Mammoth.

"There's your airport." D flew in once and met her family where it rained the entire trip. That's July in Sierra Nevada for you.

The OHV trails, conifer lined ridges, big beautiful pastures, dense forests, roads to Obsidian, Deadman, raptors, songbirds, rare forest dwellers, critters, bears and coyotes are all around us. Humans too. You will notice them the most. They make the biggest marks.

I love the drive up 395. Down too but up means cooler breezes. Air gathering atop glaciers, lakes, snow fed streams, and erratic weather at times are worth adjusting too. "If the weather sucks, drive twenty minutes," says D's dad. He's my John Muir, Dope Rider and father I never had, rolled into one. I love him as much as I ever loved my estranged father if not more.

About an hour after we leave Bishop we arrive in June Lake.

This is our home away from home. The many roads we've covered and trails we've burned always lead us back here. Base camp where we spent a week last September. Now, a bustling summer outdoor paradise. The cool breeze off of June Lake invites us over after pitching our tent.

I jump in the lake. I am reborn. I am baptized. Our trek continues here.

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Base Camp, June Lake, 7,654 feet

Friends vacation here. Friends fish here. I call it Base Camp.

There isn't a better place to hang my hat. I've experienced all sorts of weather in my tent here. One time, I left a vent open. From town, I worried. A snow storm was dumping all around and I left a damn vent open. At June Lake, the worst night of sleep that I ever had was due to wind that was, "about as bad as it gets," according to a local. That was last September. I woke up and succumbed to elevation sickness. I tried to walk it off. I was grumpy. I wouldn't accept help. Eventually it went away but man, I really felt it.

So, here we are. It's July, it's hot, it's going to be a good day. We unload some gear then hit the beach. When we return, our neighbors are there. We only have one campsite next door and one neighbor is better than five only there are at least 6 people adjacent to us. I hop on a rock with my binoculars to look around.

Carson Peak, June Mountain, June Lake, the moraine and ridges surrounding us, dense Sierra Nevada forest cling to the steep sides and drop into this lake basin. Birds fly all around.

Suddenly, a massive raptor takes flight from the lake, northbound with a fish in its talons. I spy it in my binoculars. Then, another. They hunt and must bring their catch to their nests. This is ongoing and happens the entire stay. At one point, I realize their spirit is Esteban and Edith. The two we planned to be with for this trek who were cut down by Covid-19. Stifled but not defeated, they soar above us. They tell us that they are well. They provide for themselves though they cannot be on the trail.

While spying sights on my rock I hear a voice. "Any Eagles out there!?"

I know the tone. I worked customer service my whole life. I don't like it so I ignore the guy.

"Hey Eagle Scout!"

Now I'm certainly ignoring him.

"You see any Eagles?"

I turn around, lift up my hat a bit and shake my head to say no. I'm not saying no to his question. I'm saying, "No, I don't like you." Then I wave and reply, "Name's Sal!"

"Oh. I'm Paul."

"Nice to meet you Paul!"

I'm 5'5", about 125. I'm brown and have a mustache. The times in my life I've been poorly mistaken for wait-staff, custodial, management sometimes, but mostly a teenage immigrant, are degrading. I know my worth and, given the circumstances, I could defend myself in a very meaningful way. I don't like putting my hands on people outside of the dojo.

So, I make friends. Later the camp offers us a cocktail. They make all sorts of buzzed, steak-filled-belly noise. One even throws a fit over her air mattress deflating. "It just deflated! We can't sleep on the ground!" She turns on the air compressor. "I'm sorry! I'm sorry that it's so late everyone!!!"

The time to bed down arrives. I get some rest, wake up around 5:30, run to the restroom like I do every morning at camp, do the deed and watch the sun illuminate Carson Peak.

The glory of a morning in Sierra Nevada when light shines atop its peaks is like no other. The morning of creation. The purpose. The life that we all live together is illuminated on the peaks of Sierra Nevada.

Our morning is here. It's time to pack up for the backcountry.

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Tioga

Our original trek this summer was scheduled off of Tioga Road within the boundaries of Yosemite National Park out of Ten Lakes trailhead. At mile 5.5 we would have been just shy of 10,000 feet. The cool air of the high country, views of the 10 Lakes Basin, Yosemite Creek, even the valley and possibly the Grand Canyon of the Tuolumne would certainly make the 2000 foot grind worth it.

We take all of our gear and provisions for the 10 Lakes trek to June Lake. We pack it up on a Monday and start the drive. First, a proper meal. Dehydrated food and trail snacks are good but, given the opportunity, I like a big meal from a proper kitchen. My favorite coffee spot with grab-and-go burritos is closed. We pop over to the next option. Our cashier informs us orders will take 25 minutes. I thank her and leave.

It's time. I turn north onto 395. The morning sun illuminates Parker basin that is unchanged though man has left his mark on every adjacent area. To look out from Parker Lake, toward Mono Lake, is a step backward in time. We continue north to Lee Vining. Signs for Yosemite's reservation policy display just before our destination: Tioga Road.

I stop in Lee Vining where I always snap a photo for JR, back home. JR and I get gas here. It's a Chevron and today it costs me over \$7.50 to fill my tank. I like to keep a full tank up here just in case. In case of what? A fire. A rescue. Any emergency or, better yet, a call from the wilderness that keeps me driving. What if I meet someone who says they're smoking a pig near Bodie Ghost Town and I need to drive there? I'd rather get there first than last.

The car has fuel. Now we need fuel.

At the corner of 395 and Tioga there is a gas station with a full kitchen, patio, gift shop and lawn where I gazed at Mono one afternoon through my binoculars with D by my side. I have been in love with her for many years and it keeps growing. Thankfully, she loves me back

and makes me my best self.

We order two breakfast burritos, avoid the chocolate cake, turn left out of the gas station and head west on Tioga.

Tioga is a treacherous road. Once privately funded, it is in the hands of the National Park System (NPS). NPS is in charge around these parts but not where we're going. Before the Yosemite entrance, only a few miles in, up a grade that overlooks a tremendous drop to Lee Vining Creek, we turn onto Saddlebag Lake road, a gravel road that is paved in some sections. Before I know it, I see a Prius.

"God dammit! Why did I buy this car? A damn Prius can handle it!"

I have the tank in low-gear and take in the beauty that surrounds me after my fit of rage. We climb the road, pass some hikers, wave at fellow cars, and finally reach Saddlebag Lake.

When we hiked here a few years ago we walked toward Conness Glacier. We got lost a little among the blooms, started to scramble up a some rocks but decided to turn back. Our base camp at June Lake was a little far to stay out that day. That and the grind from shore to shore of Saddlebag is very rocky. The sun is heavy here. There is no where to piss without being at risk of indecent exposure. Still, that day was as grand as any in Sierra Nevada. Wildflower blooms that stretch as long as football fields. Creek drainage that makes for grasslands and natural features billionaires pay to recreate in their backyards. Rocks and trees that tower over us and make us feel small in all of the best way.

I love the 20 Lakes Basin and planned to return. I had no idea I'd be backpacking.

A few years ago, we also hiked to Bennettville Ghost Town too. It's only a few miles from Saddlebag.

There are many ghosts out here, mostly harmless.

With familiar territory ahead, I reexamine the map a day before. Satellite too, in case a backcountry spot is visible. They are not.

At Saddlebag we make our final preparations. We eat, I get bit by a mosquito, we pack up, stretch, take some deep breaths then begin the grind to the north shore of Saddlebag.

It's rocky. There are rocks on the trail no smaller than softballs and they are jagged. The trail is well-worn so, as long as we stick to it, we walk atop compacted softball-sized jagged rocks.

We meet some hikers along the way including a couple who stayed at Shamrock Lake. "There's tons of mosquitos out there. They kinda came outta nowhere." Noted.

We are covered well, doused in sunscreen and bug spray. Still, they love me. I wonder why?

The grind officially ends near Lee Vining Creek but trees and brush appear on the trail less than a quarter mile before that. I stop and talk to some hikers. I notice their gear on the beach.

I yell, "Hey neighbors! Are you overnighiting?"

"Just here for the day. Filming right now."

"Awesome. Did you cut over to the cabin or stick to the trail?"

"Follow that to the log bridge."

"Thanks, brotha!!"

Sure enough, Lee Vining Creek is gushing. The logs are stable. With a heavy pack on, I balance across the rushing creek with my trek poles in hand. They seemed to throw me off on my first steps.

I watch and wait for D.

It's her first backpacking trip. I consider her my equal if not better than me at hiking. The last thing I want is for her to fall into the creek or have anything ruin any moment out here. Later, I confirm her joy but that's later.

We break every thirty minutes. I slow down every chance I get. 10,000 feet with a heavy pack is no joke. We find a trailhead for Greenstone and Hummingbird Lake. We follow it north where we take a proper break, drop our packs, rest in the shade and eat. I take my boots off.

"Well, it shouldn't be long now. We can camp anywhere after that sign." I point to a wooden post with *Hoover Wilderness, Inyo National Forest* nailed to the top.

We're almost home.

Now, at this point of the trek-log I cannot divulge as much information as I'd like to due to Leave No Trace principles. I am as guilty as every hiker who has left what I shouldn't have in the wild. Shoelace ends, para chord, toilet paper. I've done it. Even when I'm trying my hardest it happens. This trek went without anything being left behind, as far as I know. If I told you where I hiked to and how to find the spot, I fear more wildflowers would be trampled. Mostly, there's a dangerous algae bloom where I camped and, if you don't know what you're doing, you could die just by coming in contact with what looks like a perfect water source.

So, I'll describe our next moves but I cannot reveal the location. Not so publicly.

We hike into the Hoover Wilderness. I find a good spot but there's no coverage.

I see what looks like a manmade rock pile. My eyes in the wild are sharp but deceive me. Luckily it's not too hot and I have my wits. Otherwise, I might keep trying to shed the skin of civilization and start seeing street signs like I did in Joshua Tree while hiking in 85 degree heat on the steepest section of the California Riding and Hiking Trail (CRHT). These mirages turned out to be parts of one of the most beautiful, lush desert garden I've ever immersed myself in. It is near Covington Flats, if you're wondering.

We hike. On the 20 Lakes Basin trail you can reach Lundy canyon if you dare. We've hiked there before. I get vibes from that canyon yet I feel okay about this section of the forest.

Later, we plop down. "We can camp here if we want." I put the bear can far away. We leave our packs on our footprint and explore a little more.

I see a rockpile that looks man-made. Again, am I seeing things? I wonder.

I walk up to it and notice a terrace. I peak over it thinking I will find a flat.

Nothing.

I see another terrace, even higher.

At 10,000 feet, every steep climb takes my breath away. I start breathing faster with my heart beating with excitement. The training is paying off.

I recover and peak over the next terrace.

"This is it!"

A well worn dirt pad. Someone's been here before.

We grab our gear, repack, and set off toward the spot.

"I feel like a prospector who just struck gold! Let's go!"

And just like that, we're backcountry living. No longer a hike but a stay. Weather is in our favor. The barometer drops and some clouds move in but not enough to form. The next day we might not be so lucky.

We look around. Heaven is everywhere.

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Camp

We've camped in all sorts of climates. Desert, mountain, beach, rainforest. I've never been in a jungle, wetland or the arctic. I suppose I've only scratched the surface when it comes to camping and backpacking. At this point I think I'm an average hiker and backpacker.

Average in a sense that I have a day-job. I train when I'm off and hike as much as I can when I'm out and about. I don't have the resources to commit to month-long expeditions and I don't like spending money on all the food it takes to get in really great shape.

I am in my prime. Last night, I went back to the dojo and received a very uplifting compliment. "It's like you never took a day off."

Certain lifestyles lend to experience. Experience that we may build upon. Without building upon our foundations we remain stagnant, complacent and bogged down by the pressure that the world puts upon us.

We used to be able to find a good gig, like Broadway Playwright , buy a car and use that as collateral to find a wife. These days, there are too many extraneous commitments and a vice-like grip on our complicated lives.

Hiking takes all that anxiety and helps us focus.

People ask me about bears in the wild. I've seen a couple.

John Muir writes of a time he caught up with his fellow shepherds in Yosemite. They were scared. Portuguese Joe said they heard bears taking sheep in the middle of the night. This was during the time of the Grizzly in California. Our state flag may bear a Grizzly but they're long gone now. Muir wonders why bears, who only attack men to defend their food or cubs, won't snatch a man in his sleep. He lists animals he experienced in the past and notes that only the tiger, perhaps mosquitoes, are the only animal that will attack a man in his sleep and devour him. The tiger is the most dangerous animal in the wild. Maybe a crocodile. Certainly, man himself should be considered a threat to his own safety.

I've met more wild men than wild beast.

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At camp, I am very relaxed. My senses are heightened. Eyes, sharper. Ears, more keen. Nose, confusing but smarter. I'm still honing my scent. I can smell barbecue and hot coals from miles away. I can hear the sound of a beer can crack over acres of land.

Camp is perhaps my favorite place to live.

At Oh Ridge, last September, we made camp and stayed for 8 days.

In the morning we wake up, handle our personal affairs. I check guy lines, sweep for critters and feel out the weather. If I have reception I check the forecast. If not, I walk around, hopefully find a host who has a weather report, or look at the last weather report I saved on my phone.

In a region where life is dependent on fair weather, I feel like life in Sierra Nevada is akin to the most natural life one may lead.

Consider, the most weather we experience may be from our front door to our car and car to our office. What a shame!

If I want to hike in Eastern Sierra I must be mindful of the weather. It could be the most beautiful day of your life. You could soak in the sun, breathe a fresh gust of wind, ponder the wonders of the world while staring at clouds or sit by a babbling brook during the first snow of the season and listen to a peaceful dust fall.

All of the sudden the wind may shift. The barometer drops, clouds form, wind picks up and trees start to crack. Have you ever heard a tree crack so loud that it rattles your bones?

It is best to have a good base camp to return to. The same rules apply for the backcountry.

A camp should be high and dry. It should be atop some dry grass or a dirt pad with plenty of room for a tent and your self. If necessary, pitch a tent near to natural features but not so near that they may harm you. You don't want to pop out of your tent and be poked in the eye of a nearby shrub. Nor do you want to adjust a guy line while a stick pokes you in the spine.

I never camp next to a water source anymore. Not after a trip to Big Sur. The last time I slept next to the Big Sur river I fell asleep to its calming lullaby. Later I realize any lion could drink where my body lay and I wouldn't hear it coming because of the river's consistent, soft hush.

When it comes to trees find good coverage, hopefully by multiple trees but be careful not to be beneath a dead or decaying tree that might topple onto you. A few trees are good. A single tree is bad. You don't want to be struck by lightning because you decided the lone tree atop a hill of granite is the perfect photo opportunity. Oh and if you're around Coulter Pine be wary of their cones. They don't call them widow makers because they want to bake you a pie.

Be aware of branches, shrubs, caves, burrows, dens, beehives, ant hills and nests. Look around for animal hair on the bark of trees that surround you. Scat too. Animal tracks will tell you who lives here. Deer take a distinct step and leave a distinct mark when their back foot meets their front. Oh and hooves look different than paws.

One time, in Lundy Canyon, we saw a massive paw print. I turned to D and said, "Looks like a dog's been here."

"That's a pretty big dog."

Other times, when we see paw prints and scat, we examine the tracks and don't say a word. Perhaps communication is different in the wild. Some words do not need to be spoken. Did early man have a way of speaking about an animal leaving remnants of their presence or did they simply note it, maybe gesture to each other, and move on?

These are things I'd love to have field-knowledge of. I don't trust books as much as I used to. Maybe a local Piute, Shoshone, Chumash or descendant of the Ahwahneechee could tell me. Given my profession I could probably look it up.

Bears and lions don't scare me as much as critters. A rodent chewed our packs one night in the desert. They know how to find water and will chew your straw to get some. A tiny exposure from a rodent may lead to a compromised drinking supply.

Once, I kept my eye on a raccoon while lounging at camp because I could sense its voraciousness.

It's true. Once an animal, like a bear or racoon, finds a good meal that spot becomes prime territory. An animal will defend its territory. That's why they say not to feed bears.

Anyway, the racoon I eyed eventually tried to grab one of my bags. It put its grubby hands on my loot and tried to scoot. I had a fighting stick in my hand and run it off. That's what you gotta do in the wild! Stake your claim, defend your claim. Every Californian knows how to defend their claim. To this day, in the 21st century, every Californian is weary of our fellow prospector. Whether a claim on a river bank, apartment in the suburbs or house on the hill, we will defend our stake. It's leftover from the Gold Rush.

The law of the jungle states that animal shall not harm man. If so, man returns with even more men who have torches, guns and the will to clear an entire jungle in a single sweep just to avenge a loss of life. Even striking fear into a man will compel him to return to the jungle with vengeance.

The lust for gold, a lust for power, a lust for life. Man breeds superiority by might.

I woke up the morning after the raccoon tried to snatch a sack of mine I took a stroll around my campsite and found a foul smelling raccoon with a gnarled tail. It looked like it's tail was either burned by a fire or stripped clean by the teeth of an animal trap.

So, I'm walking and I keep spotting him. He's doing the same loop around camp that I am. I find a friendly RV Camper with a bug net over his face.

"Hey neighbor. You might want to keep an eye on things. I've seen a very keen raccoon snooping about."

I doubt I said this. I probably spoke in abbreviated tongue like the best of us. You get what I mean.

"Thanks for letting me know."

I didn't walk more than 7 feet when I heard a racket.

"Get on!"

Mr. Bug Net thanked me.

"He was in my crawl space!"

"Told ya!"

That was the last I saw of Mr. Gnarly Tail.

Find a camp, make a camp, enjoy a camp and return to camp when you need to. When you pack up, do a dummy check for any loose drawstring, para chord, cord lock, bits of packaging, trash, coins, food and whatever a human could leave behind. A good camp should look the same or better than when you found it.

The principles of Leave No Trace apply in every situation. It's very difficult to feel like you've stepped back in time when a view or moment is obstructed by anything from a twist tie to a giant black monolith.

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If it's mid-morning at camp, I grind coffee by hand and boil water. Over breakfast, we check maps and weather. "Let's go north."

North in Sierra Nevada is always good. North means more elevation, cooler temperatures, more chance of thunderstorms. There's more adventure north in the high country. We explore and find new places to pitch our tent wherever we go.

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Base camp is one thing. Backcountry camp is another.

Without the tether of a camp host, forest ranger, or car, your backpack is your life. While it is important to pack for comfort, necessities, a narrow focus on keeping weight down, medical emergencies and shelter are a must.

A few years ago I completed all 38 miles of Joshua Tree's California Riding and Hiking Trail. I kept my lists that included how much food and water I needed for 4 days in early November. Despite winter approaching within a month, temperatures sustained at 80-85 degrees. CRHT made for a primary backpacking template.

There's no water out there. If you don't have access to a water source and have a good water filter, you will need to cache your water somehow. We drove out a day before to stash water and secure it from rodents. I leave notes wherever I go. They're always something along the lines of who I am, what I'm doing and a plea not to tamper with my water. I leave a note at Base Camp when I leave, too. Same contents. Who I am, what I'm doing and a request.

"Please do not tamper with my water. It is critical to my survival" or "Please do not occupy my camp while I am away. It is critical to my safety to maintain this camp for my return."

Communicate.

Everyone knows where I am, even strangers. The ranger knows because I pulled a permit.

I still love being lost only I do it in more controlled environments. The feeling of being incognito, my location unknown, still relaxes me completely. Only, these days, I prefer to take a day off of work and not tell anyone I'm hiding at home. I like to get lost in the garden or hallway on the way to the bathroom and avoid judgement. Mainly from myself.

To lose yourself in the wild is to become part of nature. I can be a tree in the forest, a rock in the desert or the river itself. As long as no one is around, who's to say I am not a mountain?

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D and I are in the backcountry above Saddlebag Lake, inside the Hoover Wilderness. We make a wonderful camp.

First, we pitch our tent on the dirt pad. What a perfect spot. I feel like I accidentally stumbled up on it. I can't give my senses or experience credit. It was such an incredible find that I'm not really sure how I found it but I from what I recollect I was drawn toward the trees for coverage first.

I spot a rockpile that lead me to a terrace. I looked over the terrace expecting to find a flat. Nothing.

Further up the hill, into the trees, I see another terrace. As soon as I peak my head over, it's there. The dirt pad.

There are more natural amenities like a long tree to hang, say, a shirt, wet clothing or cache from. I don't like stringing my cache so close to my camp so I put the bear can on a ridge about 50 paces away from us. Though the hillside is precarious for me I have no doubt a critter could easily find their way to it. After all, they have much more experience in the wilderness than us humans!

Later, while looking around, I keep seeing something man-made where I want to keep my bear can.

"I'll move it down there later. I keep seeing things like I did in Joshua Tree," I tell D. "Let's have dinner down there so we're away from our master bedroom."

We cross what I call "The Living Room" where hundreds of wildflowers bloom. Little yellow specs that create a carpet worthy of royalty.

When we reach "The Dining Room" I see a fire-ring made of rocks. Apparently we scored an amazing backcountry site. The more time I spend, the more amenities I find. A babbling brook. There are wildflowers of all colors and size.

Within the fire-ring I fire my stove. We eat and play in the dining room. We stare at North Peak as the sun sets behind it. Conness Peak calls to us. "Come check out the glacier!!"

The sun sets and I get that feeling I get every time the sun sets in the wild. My ears perk up, eyes widen and I have a feeling that draws me to the safety of my tent. It's about 2-3 hours after sunset when darkness consumes the land. I stop worrying and keep cooking. After handling our affairs in the dining room we pack up the bear can and head to the "Master Bedroom."

I strip off my clothes and put my base layers on. The bug net around my head keeps me safe. Later we notice I have around 80 mosquito bites. So much for bug spray.

In the tent I get cold and decide to heat up. If you can heat up in your bag you can make it through a cold night in the forest. While I'm shivering, the moon rises, shines directly over a ridge into our tent, illuminates the landscape and draws D outside. At this moment I realize she's okay. In fact, I get the feeling that she could carry me out of here if I keep shivering.

Later, inside the tent, we relax and listen to the abundant quiet. A couple planes pass early into the night, amplified by the bowl that a melted glacier left behind years ago. After that, the kind of quiet you only find in the backcountry. A quiet that reminds us what it was like for thousands of years before the white man brought battle cries and manifest destiny to these peaceful landscapes.

I fall into the deep, rejuvenating slumber that mountain air provides. I wake up at first light when the birds start to sing. I even hear a hummingbird outside.

Outside the tent at dawn it's cool. There is a little wind but nothing to worry about. It excites me. We emerge from the night well rested and gaze up at North Peak. Conness Peak and North Peak light like a fire. As if someone struck a match they burn red in sunlight. They are the first to feel the rays of a new day. We watch them shine a while before we return to the tent for a snooze.

I wake up, chug water, and start to sing. Nature hears my greatest songs. Later on the trail, I find myself singing songs of The Band like "The Weight" and "Up On Cripple Creek."

What a day to be alive!

We pack up our tent, half-pack our bags and head down to the kitchen. There are no signs to tell us any critters have inspected our cache. We make breakfast, clean up, do a dummy check for any trash left behind, snap one last photo and start our return.

If the weather did not call for 20% chance of thunderstorms and dry lightning, we could have kept our camp, day-hiked and truly explored the 20 Lakes Basin. Even 1% makes me reconsider any hiking in the high country.

Instead of the same route in, where Lee Vining Creek flows, we opt for the longer route around Saddlebag. Though longer, the trail is dirt not sharp rocks. We find the old cabin and stop for a minute. I'm pretty charged from breakfast and snacks so we don't stop long.

Though much longer, this side of Saddlebag has its perks. There is shade in little pockets. There are flowers. We greet day hikers as they pass.

"Where ya'll headed?"

"You were singing. I love it!"

"I hope you have bug spray."

Most of them wear shorts and tees. Meanwhile, I was covered head to toe for sun and mosquito protection.

On the hike back we find a wall of lupine that extends up a stream. I wash my gloves in the stream under the most glorious wall of purple flowers I've ever seen in my life.

In the rocks, I hear a call. I call back. Out pops what appears to be an American Pika. As if to say, "Hey, you're not my cousin!" It scurries back into the rock. I read that we often hear Pikas before we see them. This was certainly the case today.

We return to the car where we collect ourselves.

When John Muir arrived in San Francisco someone asked him, "Where do you want to go?"

"Anywhere that is wild."



Within You

There is a place inside all of us that nature connects to. If you run toward it or wait long enough it will appear.

Some of us call this "home."

Muir did. He wrote, "Going to the mountains is going home."

I used to think home was in the woods, by a river, under a canopy of conifers, inside a cave, asleep on the beach or anywhere wild that I could be alone.

I've been to SESPE alone. I've been to Pinnacles alone. I've been to Joshua Tree alone. There are many wild places that I call home.

Like a porch without a doormat, I was incomplete.

I wrote a song for my project, *The Dying Californian*, a few years ago about a hiker known as Mostly Harmless. You can google the story and find new accounts of this man's time on mother earth. The original story spoke to me. If you find the entry out of *Adventure Journal* online, or hear the song on my website, you will hear about a man going home.

Mostly Harmless is you and I. A troubled man. A man who found solace in nature. A man who was found dead in his tent with no apparent reason to die. I believe his money, food, provisions and resources were within arms-reach.

Part of me died when I read this story. I wrote and recorded it at a time of heavy emotion. It was around Christmas, nearly a year after the Covid-19 Pandemic started. I was estranged from many friends and family. Though I found comfort in lockdown, even thrived in many ways, I was in bad shape. Thankfully my art always saves me in distress the same way nature saves us when we are low, depressed, anxiety ridden or blue. After I wrote this song, a few months later, my father died.

I mourned him and my Uncle, two brothers, both passed, possibly reunited in heaven, as I walked the trails of Pinnacles National Park. With an abundant bird population, incredible dawn chorus, Manzanita and the Pinnacles themselves surrounding me, I walked.

I walked it off.

I wept up a gulch. I sobbed with every step toward infinity.

Most of all, my old ways died.

If there was anyone who I missed more than my father or Uncle it was D. She was at home, scared and confused that I left so abruptly.

I'm not sure what the future holds. I may or may not do something like that again. I certainly hope I don't. I acted out of emotion and split within minutes of telling her in a poor way that I was leaving.

She called me on the road. I could not drive well for I could not hold my tears back, talk and navigate at the same time.

A year and a half later, after a dip in June Lake, short drive on Tioga up to Saddlebag, in the backcountry of the Hoover Wilderness, I found a new home.

Of course it was right in front of me the whole time. She's been right in front of me for 15 years. It took about 10 to figure it out and another 5 for us to go backpacking but I finally found my home.

I live with D.

Together, we are home.

Whether in our house, kitchen, on the road, in a tent, at a wedding, kicking around town, near or far, we are safe together. We thrive together.

I no longer need to run and hide in the woods. I can simply reach out, touch her and feel like I am home.

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The backcountry is beautiful. There are mountains to view from all angles, birds who sing, critters to worry about, weather to excite us, colors that ignite us, rivers to quench us, meadows to ponder the mystery of creation, clouds to stare at, dirt roads, single tracks, trees, towers of flowers, our fellow brothers and sisters to help us enjoy the flow of life.

All of that anxiety you feel right now from staring at a screen too much is real. It's okay to be afraid. In the wild you will fear what you are meant to fear, not bullshit. Not Fox News or Instagram.

Next time we have a chance to hit the trail, pitch a tent, tell stories around a fire, stargaze, hike, camp or backpack, I hope we take it.

I promise it will be worth every moment.

Leave No Trace.

-Salvador Cobain

X