



Photos courtesy of Rob Jones

Mount Whitney reflected in Hitchcock Lake.

Wrangling Whitney

A trip up to the highest point in the continental United States.

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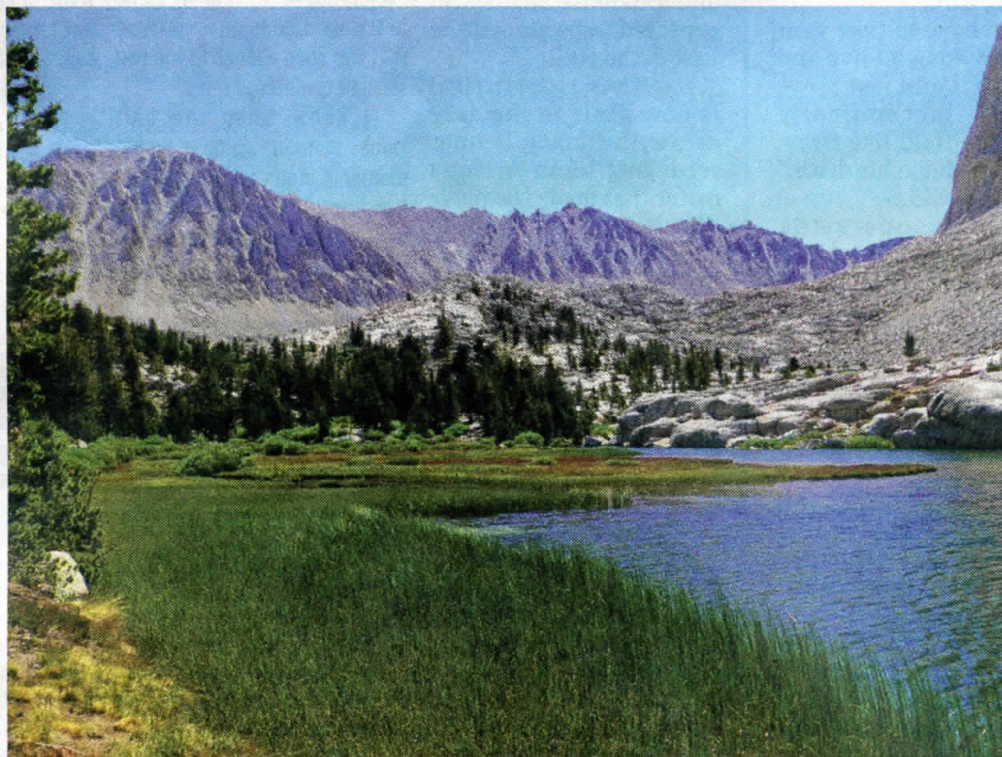
Special to the Daily Sun

I can see headlamps inching along Muir Ridge toward Mount Whitney when I get up at 4:30 a.m. at Guitar Lake (elevation 11,550 feet) and look out the tent. These are the headlamps of ambitious hikers hoping to see the sun rise from atop Mt Whitney.

I'm approaching Mount Whitney (14,505 feet), highest point in the continental U.S., from the west side, after a 70-mile backpack

from Kennedy Meadow. My first goal is to tie in the sections of the Pacific Crest Trail and John Muir Trail I have hiked from Kennedy Meadow to those leading to Donner Summit, a distance of about 450 trail miles. Standing at the Pacific Crest and Muir trail junction is a connecting experience, yet I still have to get off the trail (ready or not), so my next goal is hiking out via Mount Whitney to Whitney Portal.

I'm on the trail by 6:30 and inching into increasingly rare air. Although air contains 20.9 percent oxygen at all altitudes, lower



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air pressure results in an effective oxygen percentage of about 12 percent on Mount Whitney, 16 percent at 7,000 feet on the Colorado Plateau. It's a delightful morning, and only the basic cold weather gear is required - and it gets stowed in the pack after several switchbacks. Setting a pace that allows breathing, I reach the Mount Whitney junction and take apart the pack - placing the bear canister separate from the pack. Guitar and Crabtree camps rang with tales of marmots pilfering packs.

Then, it's up the 2.1 miles to Whitney on the highest constructed trail in the U.S., where it's sunny with calm winds, a rarity. Far less snow graces the high walk than when I last visited, in 2010, and it's more than a month earlier. The extended drought is obvious in the Sierra, with water totals 40 percent of average this year. A sea of mountains graces the views north, west and south, while the deep drop to Owens Valley is seen in the hazy view to the east. This is John Muir country.

Mount Whitney is 14,505 feet per the 1988 NAVD88 vertical survey datum - and it feels every bit this high. It feels like the highest point in the continental United States.

Returning from the summit, the trail climbs a

IF YOU GO...

Getting there: It's a drive of about 500 miles from Flagstaff to Whitney Portal. There are walk-in camps at the Portal, campgrounds nearby, and the popular Whitney Portal Hostel in Lone Pine.

This is a hike that Flagstaff area outdoors people can enjoy without breaking the bank or traveling huge distances. One of the most difficult aspects of high pointing the continental U.S. is getting the Mount Whitney permit.

In addition to using wag bags, one must secure their food in a bear canister when staying overnight in the Whitney Zone.

On the trail: From the east side, the Whitney Portal entry point, it's about 10.5 miles (one way), with an elevation gain of 6,000 feet, to the Whitney summit. Some prefer to hike to summit and back in one slog of a day. Others prefer to backpack to Outpost (3.8 miles, elevation gain of 2,000 feet from the Portal), or to Trail Camp (6 miles, elevation gain of 3,600 feet from the Portal), then climb Whitney the next day and depart or stay another night. Acclimation issues can be an obstacle, especially for those coming from low altitudes. Those of us hiking the high country of the San Francisco Peaks have an advantage.

See the Whitney lottery and background information here:

<http://www.fs.usda.gov/detail/inyo/passes-permits/recreation/>

Halfmile hosts a site where you can download public domain maps, GPS tracks, and waypoints (see CA, Section H for the Whitney section). This is a superb service, and covers the entire 2,600 mile long Pacific Crest Trail - there is even a map set for mobile devices:

<http://www.pctmap.net>

bit more, over Trail Crest pass (13,646 feet) and then drops, on the east side now, toward Whitney Portal. For me, it's down to Outpost Camp today. Sky pilots, purple flowers that grow only at high altitude and smell vaguely of skunk, proliferate among the granite boulders. The increasingly rare (because of climate change) pika, mascot of the Sierra Range, makes "eeking" calls from his haystack.

Hundreds of tight switchbacks make me dizzy on the way to Trail Camp,

where a mass of hikers is preparing to assault Whitney, this time from the east side. It's the local environment that they're assaulting, with too many not using their wag bags.

Ick.

Yes, hikers are required to use wag bags in the Whitney Zone - a double-bag portable toilet. Human waste must be carried out and deposited in a suitable trash container. A wag bag is like an industrial-strength Ziploc bag and typically contains an absorbing material (sort of like cat litter).

It's a long drop of 4,000 feet to Outpost Camp.

I throw camp together and endure a quick bath as my energy and the light fade.

The sound of tumbling Sierra water soothes the night at Outpost Camp. Tomorrow, I'll hike the 4 miles to Whitney Portal and drive home, having high-pointed the U.S.

Rob Jones is a Flagstaff-based outdoor writer. For a map and the complete hike report of the PCT to the JMT trip, see Rob's web site at: <http://wildernessvagabond.com/PCT-2015/PCT-2015.htm>.