

END of Season Report 1997  
Crabtree patrol Area  
Rob Pilewski - Ranger  
JUNE 26 - OCT. 11

A. General Observations

The summer of 1997 was a typically busy season in the Habree patrol area. Upon my arrival on June 26 I observed many signs of early season visitor use. All camps were showing impacts, and there was also sign of stock use, although there did not appear to be grazing before opening dates. The ranger station door had been hacked at with an ice axe in an apparent attempted break-in and the ranger station privy was thoughtfully filled by visitors in early season. The end of June is too late for backcountry rangers to be arriving at duty stations. Meadows need to be evaluated for opening dates and trail conditions reported.

Regardless of the winter snowpack, rangers should be at duty stations no later than June 15.

Many visitors are contacted at Habree throughout the whole season, with peak traffic from late July till Labor Day. Visitor numbers seemed similar to previous years, with stock use seemingly up (I was unable to keep a good tally on stock users, so for statistics we will have to evaluate the stock use reporting cards.)

Law-enforcement contacts were minimal this season, with no citations or arrests to report. The emphasis at Habree is on compliance and this is usually obtained through educating the visitor on proper backcountry techniques and Park policy. The Park Service presence at the Mt. Whitney ranger station in Lone Pine continues to make a big difference on

getting the visitors information and subsequent compliance to park regulations. Thanks to Mike and Jenna for doing a fine job this season.

Due to the volume of visitors at Crabtree each season, there are inevitably numerous medicals. It is a good idea for the ranger at Crabtree to be available for such incidents in the busiest part of the season. Altitude illness is the most common malady and this can often be dealt with by advising the visitor to take it easy, descend if possible, and take a layover day until the symptoms go away. There were several folks with pulmonary edema this summer and they were candidates for helicopter evacuation. The most serious medical this season involved a gentleman who had a perforated ulcer on the small intestine. Fortunately, this occurred a mere  $\frac{1}{2}$  mile from the ranger station and I was in the area that day. The individual was flown to Kesaba where he underwent emergency surgery. A sidebar to this incident is that we should evaluate our resources (medical facilities) in the pre-season to establish a plan for where we transport our patients. This individual was nearly flown to Lone Pine where he could not have gotten the care required for his illness.

In all, there were 6 medicals at Crabtree this season.

### B. alpe Patterns

① Hiker - The majority of hikers in the Crabtree area are on their way to Mt. Whitney. Their entry point

varies, but the exit point is usually Mt. Whitney / Whitney Portal. The most popular loops start at Onion Valley and Hunsaker Meadow, then exit via Crabtree to Whitney Portal. The High Sierra trail also brings many visitors to Crabtree each season. For long distance hikers, the John Muir trail and the Pacific Crest trail <sup>are</sup> very popular. All of the people approaching Mt. Whitney from the west side create a "funnel effect" and account for the high number of visitors at Crabtree each summer. I have not noticed any drastic increases in the number of hikers since I first started working in the area in 1992.

(2) Stock - Stock use was up this season at Crabtree. The weekend of August 15 saw several large stock groups, as well as small private groups camped at Crabtree. There were over 60 pack animals each night for the entire weekend. Events like this are a good argument against the self-issuing of permits by commercial packers. Stock users (commercial and private) should be included in all trailhead quotas.

Several commercial outfits use the Crabtree area with Cottonwood Park Station during the heaviest use. The Crabtree lakes area was increasingly popular with the CPS groups this summer, as it seems that each week they would pack a group in to the hitching rail and extended stays of up to 7 days. I attribute this increase in popularity to the L.A. newspaper article that "advertised" the quality fishing to be had

at Rabbit Lakes.

Typically, stock use at Rabbit evolves around the fishing and Mt. Whitney. Grazing is spread out between upper and lower Rabbit meadows, with lower Whitney Creek meadow (A.K.A. Shawberry) receiving little use.

The trail crew was in the area for 3 weeks this season and kept their stock at Sandy Meadow. This was a good arrangement as this keeps park stock out of the public eye and in a healthy, sustainable meadow.

The administrative overflight trip brought 20 head for 2 nights to lower Rabbit meadow.

(3) Aircraft - The military use of the airspace over the park can only be described as out of control. This is the biggest threat to the "so-called" wilderness of the Park. I say "so-called" because it is impossible to have a wilderness experience in the backcountry of Sequoia National Park due to the artificial noise created by military jets flying over the Park. The number of overflights and subsequent noise levels were higher this year than the previous 5 that I have spent in the Park. It appeared that most of the jets were F-18's out of Lemore Navy Base.

The noise levels resulted in many complaints from visitors who wondered what the military was doing violating the wilderness of a National Park and what the Park Service was doing about the problem.

I have included in my report a sample complaint from a visitor who left the note on the door of the ranger station. \*

I met with the entourage of representatives from the military to discuss the overflight issue on 8/28 at Duck Creek Lake. I stated my experiences with military overflights and the relevant issues associated with the noise levels created by such flights. I also made the observation that the overflights had virtually ceased the day the military trip started and lasted the duration of their 5 day outing. (I contacted them on the last evening of their trip). The difference, without the jet noise, is like night and day. The military folks seemed unable to relate to my statements and seemed offended that I would imply that because of their presence in the Park the jets had temporarily stopped their overflights. In return for my observations I got the following revelations (among others); the only reason the jets fly low over the Park is to enjoy the scenery (from the wing-commander at Temoque);<sup>2nd</sup> from the air you cannot tell whether you are over Mt. Whitney or Lake Isabella (this in reference to my question as to why the military could not utilize the airspace further south in the R-2598 complex which is not even a National Park). Another interesting comment was that, in their opinion, some people enjoy the sight and sound of military jets overhead. This is just a sample of the mentality the military has on this issue, and how seriously they are taking this matter.

I would like to repeat that the noise created by military overflights is the biggest threat to the wilderness of Sequoia National Park.

Several commercial outfits use the Cabtree area. The ones contacted this year were: A+B, The Sierra Club, Outward Bound and the numerous commercial pack stations. All groups contacted had the required commercial permit and were eager to comply with park regulations.

There was no evidence of hunting activity in the Cabtree area this season.

### C. Natural Resources

(1) Bears. There was little bear activity at Cabtree this season. After returning from the EMT-refresher in September I discovered that the ranger station was visited by a bear. The bear did a number on the storage area located adjacent to the station, I assume in a search for food. It appeared that a visitor had left some trash or food items out near the station where the bear could get at them. There was no permanent damage to the ranger station.

The only visitor reported bear activity occurred north of Guest Pass at Michel-Banel Camp and Violette meadow. The park should place a bear-box at Michel-Banel camp.

(2) Meadows - Cabtree meadows were showing signs of much use by seasons end. I believe that stock use was up considerably in the area this season. Lower Whitney Creek and Arallace Creek saw minimal use. Sandy meadow was used exclusively by the trail crew this summer. Davis and I conducted the residual biomass study at the assigned

meadows at Peck Creek and Cabtree in the Gull

D. Cultural Resources - archeologic sites in the area appear to be undisturbed by human hands. There are several sites in the area that have been catalogued and consist mostly of obsidian flakes.

The Mt. Whitney shelter is the only historic structure in the area. The shelter survived several break-in attempts (to ranger side), and is in good shape. The hasp could use replaced to better secure the NPS rescue cache. The lightning protection system is in good shape. I would conduct routine inspections of the shelter on each of my 10 visits to the summit this season.

#### E. Backcountry Facilities

The Ranger station remains in good shape. The roof was patched this fall and hopefully will eliminate leaks. The roof should be good for at least another season.

The solar system was permanently installed in the least visible area and is in good operating condition.

The one drift fence at Lower Cabtree is in good repair. All signs in the area are accurate and in good shape. The old drift fence at Lower Whitney Creek should be rolled up and removed. The fence was placed by the trail crew, which is where the fence served the most. It has been out of service for 2 years now and lying on the ground.

#### F. Trails

The trail crew spent 3 weeks at Cabtree working on a much needed reroute on the



TMT above Guitar Lake. The trail was re-routed from an always wet meadow (above Gumbelme) to the adjacent hillside. The length of the re-route was approximately  $\frac{1}{3}$  of a mile and was fairly labor intensive. Davis and I pitched in when possible and the trail crew had reinforcements sent in for the project. The project came out excellent and Guin Federly and crew are to be commended for their efforts.

There are several other areas of the Whitney trail that need marked and these areas were identified by Guin Federly and myself. These areas will be marked when time and manpower allow.

### 6. Camp Areas

The bear-boxes continue to attract the majority of overnight users in the area. This facilitates fire-pit maintenance and campsite clean-up. Having not been here before the boxes were implemented, I am not sure whether these areas are much more adversely impacted than before the boxes.

During the busy season 1 day of campsite clean-up a week is necessary. Keeping camps clean is important as the visitors are more likely to leave a clean camp if the camp is clean upon their arrival.

There continues to be a human waste problem at Guitar Lake. This can be attributed to the volume of people using the area and the limited places that are available to take their waste. I do not know what the solution to the problem is. I think that limiting the numbers that camp at Guitar Lake

would certainly help, although I do not know how we could effectively do this.

There seems to be a pretty good balance between firewood availability and fire regulations in the area. I would like to qualify this assessment with the fact that it is quite difficult to know what the area would look like if fires were restricted in the area. Surely there would be more dead wood on the forest floor and, perhaps, the lowest branches of live trees would remain intact. What aesthetic "alterations" are we willing to accept to allow fires in the backcountry? I think that restricting fires in the Great Basin Pine forest (elevational) would be a good idea.

H. Permit System

The bikers in the area are getting good information from all Park permit issuers. Stock groups are more likely to be uninformed about park regulations due to the self-issuing system.

Mt. Whitney permits are not a problem on our side of the Mountain. The U.S.F.S. has their bands full on the West side, mostly with day bikers. I would estimate permit compliance this season at greater than 95%.

The "dial-a-permit" system out of Big Pine continues to be widely accepted and appreciated by Park visitors. There were a few problems that I observed this season. The group size regulation is being abused by people who call in and get several permits for groups greater than 15, and then

claim that they did not know about the regulation, also, due to no shows from the phone-in permit some people are unable to go on their planned trip (walk-in permits) even though that particular trailhead quota has openings.

### K. Inventory

- \* 1 2/3 Tanks of propane at habitat
- \* solar system needs inverters.
- \* New large bear-box by ranger station needs to be mouse-proofed ???

### L. Needs for next year

The ranger station needs a new rug for the front room. An indoor-outdoor, or thin wool rug would be best. The dimensions are 75" x 125".

Otherwise, the station is all set-up for next season. Some area maps would be useful.

Park equipment issued this season was quite adequate and I can think of no needs for next season.

### M. Recommendations

- Ban military overflights of Sequoia National Park.