

YEAR END REPORT  
ROCK CREEK RANGER STATION

1988

Sites/Firerings: 125  
Miles: 680  
Visitor Contacts: 990  
Trash: 300#

I. Resources

Use: Visitor use was perhaps heavier this year than last at Rock Creek, with a vast majority of hikers passing through on their way to Mt. Whitney. New Army Pass was a favorite trailhead for the Sierra Club, with 8-10 groups entering the park this way. In mid-August, 3 different Sierra Club trips each left the Cottonwood Lakes trailhead on 3 successive days, all crossing Army Pass - I was told - on the same day. I saw few groups of any kind of over 15 people. The heaviest use continues to be at Upper Rock Creek Lake. I contacted many parties heading through Miter Basin to Crabtree Lakes - this route seems to be getting more popular and is heavily used by the Sierra Club.

Stock Use: Cottonwood Pack Station was even busier this year than last. On few weekends they had all their stock, almost 70 head, out on the trail. They had 5 "all-expense trips" to hide-out camp at Lower Rock Creek Lake. For the 6 weeks from mid-July through Labor Day there was almost always at least 1 spot trip in on Rock Creek, often 2. This wouldn't be a problem except that they use Upper Rock Creek Lake almost exclusively. As noted last year and by previous rangers, this lake suffers the worst impact in the drainage and is more vulnerable than many other areas. The spot trips almost double the impact this lake gets.

I contacted 11 private parties with stock, in addition to the Backcountry Stockusers trip. Rock Creek Pack Station, Glacier Pack Trains, and Red's Meadows Pack Station each came through also.

Meadows: (See also meadow report) The meadows were unbelievably dry this year. (Damp instead of oozing.) The heavily-used stringers behind the Lower Lake were as wet as ever, though, and already showed moderate to severe mechanical impact when I arrived - deep hoof imprints, broken streambanks, broken sod. The Pack Station is using this area well before a ranger arrives. I don't think the stringer meadows should be grazed before the end on June on a low snow year, later on a wet year. Penned-Up Meadow also stays very wet. When I arrived I found severe damage to the meadow especially where the trail passes through. CPS takes groups up to Sky Blue Lake; early season trips make a huge mess in Penned-Up - the damage was far worse this year than last because they used the trail so early.

The Backcountry Stockusers Association installed a drift fence below RC Meadow #2. Because of an unfortunate series of misunderstandings, they did

a slipshod job, spending a half-day on the project. The fence is wired to trees and has a swinging gate, so it doesn't meet the standards. The trail crew should at least partially redo the fence next summer. This project didn't seem to merit the impact of 24 people and almost 60 head of stock for 7 days; it seemed, rather, an excuse for a group of stockusers to get together for a week in the backcountry with an amount of animals that far exceeded the quota. I suggest that the group size on a project be commensurate with the amount of work to be done, and that unless there's a really good reason for more than 20 head of stock, the BSA should adhere to the same rules we impose on any other group. This group made a new camp where none had been before on the north side of the creek, about 75 feet from water. There was no reason the group couldn't all have been up in the old sites on the bluff above the creek. There are now well-worn stock paths criss-crossing the area, and large trampled areas where the animals were tied.

Nathan's Meadow received very heavy use, at least 30 nights, and is about 75% grazed now. Because it was so dry, mechanical impact is only moderate. The campsite looks awful, even after I shovelled manure and tried to fill in holes and troughs.

Overall, I remain unimpressed by the ethics of stockusers. They burn enormous logs, hack at anything and everything, leave manure everywhere, leave stock tied up such that they paw big ruts, and build new firepits. (Art McCall's party built one 5' from the established one, right against a rock.) And they frequently show animosity towards the ranger's suggestions.

I get many complaints from backpackers during August.

The closed meadows weren't used to my knowledge, except that I saw some animals grazing in the ranger station meadow while I was hiding from the DWR. RC Meadow #2 gets used some by animals wandering down the stringers from the lake above.

Bears: After Winter shot the bear, incidents dropped from about 1 per night to none. The bear boxes work well, and if people continue to use them, maybe Rock Creek won't have a problem...before the bear was killed, there were incidents up as high as Sky Blue Lake; this is probably the main drawback to the boxes - the bears will keep going higher to find human food.

## II. VISITOR PROTECTION

Law Enforcement: I gave verbal warnings for camping on vegetation (a LOT), trash in firepits, picking flowers, messy sites, and improper food storage. There were no serious enforcement problems except the bear-shooting incident. We need a vigilante ranger to deal with that one!

Medicals: Nothing ever happens in Rock Creek. I heard through the grapevine that someone with a sore knee was flown out by a CHP helicopter, called in by someone with a ham radio.

Aircraft: I called in about 15, mostly in July. August was better. The continuous noise of higher-flying aircraft is almost as disruptive as the

low-fliers. There are F-18s flying overhead all day long.

### III. FACILITIES

Trails: From the "Trail Projects To Be Completed" list --

#12 & 13: Upper Rock Creek Lake campsites - I don't know what this is about, but there's no use doing anything here until it's closed to fires. I'd delete this from the list as a lot of work has been done here already.

#14, 15, 16: All still need to be done.

#17 and #24: Completed.

#18: I don't know exactly what this is but the stretch from the PCT/Rock Creek junction to the Lower Crossing has been done.

#19: This all looks OK to me, except a few areas of erosion between Guyot Creek and Guyot Flat, and a bad place 1/8 mile above the Station.

For whatever reasons, the trailcrew only spent a couple of days in Rock Creek and basically just cleaned a few waterbars. The Siberian Pass trail to Rock Creek is badly in need of work, as are sections of the Army Pass trail. Forms have been submitted.

Cabin: Didn't get oiled this year because supplies never came in. There is a 5 gal. bucket of oil at Crabtree that needs to go to Rock Creek. Paul found that the Hudson Sprayer at Tyndall didn't work with the oil we have - is it possible to get a larger-holed nozzle??

Widen and I went through stored junk and sent out almost 200# of stuff. Next year the ranger should send out the rest of the junk in the attic.

Campsites: In the last 2 seasons I have removed some 50-70 old firepits in my area, and reduced the maintained ones such that Rock Creek patrol area looks really good. This season I had far fewer problems with eradicated pits being rebuilt; I think this is largely because of the bear boxes which concentrated use and kept people from camping along the creek and at Guyot Creek. My notes seemed to help in keeping people from leaving trash in pits and enlarging them.

The Upper Lake is still a disaster. The spot-trip groups are the worst offenders, leaving junk in the pits, enlarging them, and trampling large areas. One group this year pounded nails in trees, burned a rainfly which melted over a 10' diameter area, and left a log the size of a sequoia in their huge pit. There is just no wood at this lake - this summer some standing dead snags were cut down. (Again, it had to be a group that was packed in that did this.) I suggest:

- Close this lake to fires. OR, close the entire Miter Basin to fires. Backpackers EXPECT not to have fires and will have no problem with a closure. CPS can spot people in to the lower lake where there is far less use anyway.

- Spot-trip groups should be included in the daily entry quota. The fact that they aren't undermines the effectiveness of the system in Rock Creek. If these steps aren't taken, Upper Rock Creek Lake will be a "sacrifice

area"; I personally don't believe ANY area should be sacrificed.  
Hold CPS responsible when their parties leave a mess. Maybe if we come  
down on them, they'll make sure the groups they spot in leave the place  
looking reasonable.

#### ERRATA:

Group Size: Should be limited to about 12. The biggest problem I see is that lots of organized groups don't double up on tents. Not only are 15 tents in an area an eyesore, but people often end up camping on vegetation. Few camp areas, especially in alpine country, are big enough to accommodate that many people. The aesthetic impact is worst in cross-country areas like the Miter Basin. The use of Crabtree Pass by large groups is causing a definite use-trail to form; it was much more noticeable this season than last.

Equipment: The new women's North Face packs are poorly designed. The old Moraines are much better. The new cameras are great! So are the new North Face foam sleeping pads. Get more!

Training: I think we're trained, now. Good grief. Sure would be nice to get into the backcountry earlier.

Balloons: One of the most disturbing things I saw this summer was a proliferation of dead helium balloons spread all over the backcountry. Is there anything the NPS can do to stop this trend of releasing balloons? I know the other rangers have been finding them all over also.

All in all, it was a nice quiet season and a wonderful summer.

*Lo Lyness September 1988*

Station needs : new enamel coffeepot  
8x8" baking pan  
#10 cast iron skillet  
max/min thermometer