

## END OF SEASON REPORT

Tyndall Creek Station      Paul Atkinson      1988

Miles Hiked:            709  
Visitor Contacts: 991

Stock in Tyndall/Upper Kern Area: 99  
Firepit/Campsite Rehabilitation: 87

Nineteen eighty-eight was the second year of a two-year drought in the Sierra Nevada. When I hiked into Tyndall Creek on 06.25.88, there was virtually no snowpack left anywhere in the area. All passes and creeks were easily cross-able.

We had no rain at all until the end of July. Late August and early September also saw some rain, including one huge downpour on 08.25.88, the effects of which (washes, erosion) were visible throughout the whole Upper Kern drainage.

It was a very quiet summer. I expected to see a lot of visitors, and I searched high and low for them, but they weren't there. Tyndall is normally a quiet spot, of course, but I still think visitor use was down. Days went by when no one at all was camped in the Tyndall area. The August crowds never really materialized, and Labor Day weekend was dead.

I left Tyndall on 09.11.88, hiking out over Forester Pass to Cedar Grove.

### Campfires

Firepits were one of my greatest frustrations in the backcountry. Their scars are everywhere; the most pristine and beautiful spots are marred by blackened rocks and soil, mounds of charcoal and scraps of tin foil. Visitors treat firepits like garbage dumps.

After a summer of hiking throughout the Kern drainage, mostly in the higher elevations, I've come to the conclusion that the 11,200' fire limit here is too high. I feel that fires should be allowed only below 10,000' in the Kern.

Wood is scarce at these high elevations (see photos). In many areas, there is no dead and down wood left at all; in fact, the ground is absolutely barren of any organic matter. At the Tyndall Creek campsites (elevation 10,800'), dead branches on most of the trees in the area have been broken off and burned. Some trees bear stumps of branches where the branches were chopped off with a hatchet. The same is true in Wright Lakes Basin, Upper Rock Creek Lake and elsewhere. We are burning the wood faster than it can grow back. This can't go on forever.

Firepits, where allowed, proliferate at an alarming rate. A recent study at Lassen Volcanic National Park showed a 41% increase in the number of firepits in their backcountry between 1977 and 1986. If it weren't for the constant efforts of rangers here eradicating new firepits, our backcountry, too, would show huge yearly increases.

But even when high elevation firepits are eradicated, their scars are with us for a long, long time. The growing season in these high elevations is short. Trees grow slowly; forest litter accumulates slowly. Vegetation takes longer to cover scarred rocks and blackened soil. Recovery takes decades.

Frequently-used firepits fill up quickly with large amounts of charcoal (especially when people insist on dumping dirt on their fires to put them out). It's not easy to find places to unobtrusively scatter or bury all this black stuff at high elevations. There's little duff to hide it in, and few bushes. Digging holes in this rocky soil is often impossible. Take a look at the willows around the most heavily-used campsites in lower Wright Lakes Basin: you'll find lots of ashes and charcoal. It's pretty ugly, but you can't scatter it in the campsites under the trees or in the short meadow grasses. Where can you put it all?

A 10,000-foot limit would simplify our regulations and make them more uniform. The regulations right now are complex, with several different elevations and exceptions to remember. At 10,000', the Kings and Kern fire regulations would both be the same.

The public is ready to accept stricter regulations. People have gotten used to not being allowed fires. Lassen Volcanic and Rocky Mountain National Parks are two mountain parks that have banned all wood fires from their backcountry. Many desert parks do not allow any fires in their backcountry. This summer, people camping at Tyndall who had just come over Forester Pass from the Kings drainage were constantly confused about fire elevations. Many thought it was still 10,000', and they often expressed outrage at all the "illegal" firepits they found at Tyndall.

There is no question but what the fire limit here will one day or another have to be lowered. The area simply cannot handle the impacts associated with campfires. The longer we wait, the worse the situation will get, and the longer the land will take to heal its scars.

### Bears

One bear -- a small black one -- was seen in the Tyndall Creek area sporadically throughout the summer. The only food it got was some grain left out by the Department of Water Resources people.

The situation was much more active just across Forester Pass, however. Virtually every single hiker coming from Vidette Meadow had some sort of bear story. Most were second-hand since the people hit hardest generally hiked straight out to Onion Valley or Cedar Grove.

Numerous bears plied the John Muir Trail from Vidette Meadow south toward Forester. Bear incidents occurred clear up to the 11,300' mark -- well-above timberline. Bears stole food that was well-counterbalanced, as well as food that people were sleeping right next to.

I finally posted signs at Vidette Meadow and on Forester Pass requesting that backpackers camp either at Vidette (and use the bear boxes) or else on the south side of Forester Pass, but nowhere in between. This apparently helped, because the reports stopped almost entirely after that.

The situation will be greatly improved next year because of the two additional bear boxes that have just been installed up Bubbs Creek from Vidette Meadow. We still will need to monitor the situation, though. The bears have not forgotten their booty from the higher reaches of Forester and they may well be back. If bear incidents resume next year, I strongly recommend that the entire area between the bear box at the Center Basin Trail junction and Forester Pass (especially Wheelbarrow Camp) be officially closed to all camping.

\* \* \* \* \*

In general, we do a pretty good job of getting the bear message out to backpackers when they enter the backcountry through the east and west trailheads, but there are several big communication-holes on the north and south boundaries. I ran into a number of people this summer who had entered the parks from the south on the PCT and were completely ignorant about our bears.

We need signs at all north and south entry points to advise people of the bear problem here. The signs needn't be huge and monstrous-looking; something neat and small attached underneath the normal ENTERING SEQUOIA [KINGS CANYON] NATIONAL PARK signs would do just fine. A map should be included on the signs showing locations of bear boxes in the area.

#### Stock Use/Meadow Monitoring

Under current regulations, grazing is not permitted above 11,200 feet in both the Wright Lakes Basin and Milestone Basin. The regulation looks good on paper, but in reality it just doesn't work. It is impossible to turn stock loose to graze and expect them to observe some invisible, man-drawn line that has nothing to do with natural barriers. The 11,200' line in both basins is easily crossed by stock. In Milestone, Rainbow Packers' stock have wandered above the 11,200' mark for two years in a row. To erect a drift fence clear across the basin would be aesthetically unacceptable. If we don't want stock grazing in the upper portions of either of these basins, we will have to close the entire basins to grazing. We have no choice.

Closing these basins will not cause anybody great hardship. To my knowledge, Milestone was grazed only once this summer (by Rainbow). I discussed the problem with Pete Rigali, packer for Rainbow. Rigali said it would make no difference to him if we closed Milestone -- that he could just as easily graze in the upper Kern.

Wright Lakes Basin was not grazed at all this summer. I did a fairly thorough survey of the meadows in the basin at the very end of August to look for signs of stock use. I saw only two piles of horse manure, both of which were several years old. A closure here obviously wouldn't have much impact on stock users.

\* \* \* \* \*

Several meadows (including Lower Tyndall, JMT/Tyndall Lakes, Milestone and Wright Lakes) were mapped for wet/dry areas in mid July. "Aerial" photos of these meadows were taken from surrounding high peaks at about the same time for Meadow Monitor Mike Neuman. I'm not sure how useful the photos will be since the meadows appear quite small and distant.

All meadows that I mapped seemed to be in fine condition, with the exception of the meadow next to the big packer camp in Milestone Basin. Wet areas in this meadow were pockmarked with many 2"-5" deep hoof-prints from last year's use (see photos).

\* \* \* \* \*

The drift fence gate at the Tyndall Creek/Kern River confluence needs a complete overhaul. Even though I restrung, repositioned and tightened the wire, it still is pretty flimsy. [Note that the fence has been inadvertently omitted from the 1987 drift fence inventory.]

The drift fence at the upper end of East Lake is an eyesore. Bright red metal posts extend for several hundred yards across the canyon; these should at least be painted brown.

#### Medicals/Searches/Investigations

I had only one major medical during the summer -- a HAPE victim camped at Cow Dung Lake. As luck would have it, I didn't find out about the case until just after dark, so had to sit up with the man all night long until the helicopter could fly him out. It was a pretty helpless feeling being stuck there for eleven hours with only 30 minutes worth of oxygen and a gurgling, gasping man who kept telling me he was going to die. I'm ordering as many bottles of Life-O-Gen for next year as I can get my hands on.

\* \* \* \* \*

I participated on a brief search for a missing trail crew person in the Kern. On another occasion, I assisted a large group of people that had gotten separated from their packers (Reds Meadow Pack Station). The people had absolutely nothing with them; George Durkee and I provided them with food and sleeping bags. That night, I located their packers, who were camped four miles away, and the packers met the group the next day.

\* \* \* \* \*

In late July, I assisted Lo Lyness with a necropsy on a bear that had been illegally shot at Lower Rock Creek Lake. It was a pretty disgusting job. Unfortunately, we were unable to find any hard evidence (shell, bullet) that could help trace and convict the murderer. May he rot in hell forever.

## Aircraft

The roar of military aircraft overhead all day long every day is intolerable. The vast majority of these jets fly quite legally above the 3,000' AGL limit. As a matter of fact, you can't even see most of them -- but their deep rumble and roar is constant and every bit as irritating at 10,000' AGL as it is at 3,000'. Our airspace right now sounds like a war zone.

The problem has to be addressed at a level higher than the FAA or Department of Navy -- we need to get Congress involved. There is no question but what military aircraft must be banned entirely from all NPS airspace. Let the military play its stupid war games elsewhere.

## Cabin

I spent the first week at Tyndall just sculching the cabin. It was, to put it mildly, a cluttered, filthy mess. Dishes were dirty, cupboard shelves were coated with viscous liquids, boxes of food lay everywhere. Over half of the food was either rancid or ruined by mice. The attic was a junk heap.

I flew out an estimated 400 pounds of garbage and old food supplies at the beginning of the season, and another 400 or so pounds throughout the summer (note that this was only stuff left at Tyndall before I got there, not my own garbage).

People who use the cabin need to take responsibility for their messes and clean up after themselves. They need to inventory their food before they leave, properly store the food they'll need for their next visit (mouseproof it), and remove everything else (or arrange to have it removed). A word to this effect to all snow surveyors and other winter users is in order.

A large number of boxes of d-con rat poison were left all around the cabin when I arrived, and the poison grain had been strewn everywhere by mice. Poisons have no place whatsoever in the backcountry. The solution to the mouse problem is simple: just store all food and mouse-nesting material in tins, plastic buckets and other mouse-proof containers. We do not need poisons. (Another word to the snow surveyors.)

\* \* \* \* \*

This summer, for the first time in its 40-year history, the cabin was re-roofed. Preservation Specialist Jack Vance provided technical expertise; George Durkee and I assisted. The original roof was made of large cedar shakes, and we would like to have replaced them with something similar. Small shingles were sent in, however, so that's what we had to use. According to Vance, when the cabin receives official historic status, the roof will have to be redone with the large shakes in order to restore it back to its original appearance. I oiled the new shingles.

New stove piping was installed at the same time the roof was redone. Galvanized piping such as what was inside before emits poisonous lead fumes when it gets hot. I'd rather die some other way.

## Trails

All trails in the Sheep Camp Meadows area need work. The John Muir Trail is particularly bad -- rutted, rocky and multi-tracked clear from the Tyndall Creek crossing to the base of Forester Pass (south side). The Kern Cutoff and old and new Shepherd Pass trails are in similar shape in spots. It would be great if we could get a CCC crew in on this next year. See photos and rehab forms.

\* \* \* \* \*

The topmost section of trail on the east side of Shepherd Pass, although never in the greatest of shape, is now in much worse condition following a tremendous rain storm in late August. A number of switchbacks were completely erased, and people are just crashing straight down the gullies now. It will definitely take a lot of work to make this passable to stock...

\* \* \* \* \*

The trail from Cow Dung Lake to Lake South America goes right through Lake South America Col Meadow. The potential for damaging the meadow is there, and especially if stock-users start coming over Shepherd Pass in great numbers. This trail should be rerouted out of the meadow into the talus slope to the east before it etches into the meadow too deeply.

## Signs

Signs in the Upper Kern are contradictory, confusing and extremely ugly. Signs point to Milestone Basin from miles away, yet the junction with the trail that leads into the basin itself is unsigned and you can hardly find it. The sign at one end of the Upper Kern Cutoff Trail says it's 2.5 miles long; at the other end of the trail the sign says it's 4 miles (I personally don't care how long it is, but I think this makes us look pretty inept and sloppy). Most of the red lettering is peeling out of the old silver metal signs. The Shepherd Pass/JMT junction is marked by nothing more than a horse skull. The Colby Pass sign looks like something pulled straight out of a wrecking yard -- it's a twisted, tortured piece of junk. Etcetera, etcetera, ad nauseam. See photos.

Sign requests will be submitted to clean some of this up.

## Cross-Country Routes

The USGS did the park an immense disfavor when it stuck a dotted line over Harrison Pass on its new 7.5 minute quad. Now everybody wants to go over Harrison Pass. The trail on the south side of the pass disappears a short ways down into nothing but a jumble of dux that lead nowhere. I knocked over 20 zillion of these cursed little piles, yet they seemed to reappear week after week. I also removed several enormous rock cairns (plus a huge wooden cross) that had been built in various places along the saddle that the pass crosses over.

\* \* \* \* \*

A fairly well-defined trail is developing from Shepherd Pass into Williamson Bowl. The main chute (from the bowl to the peak) described in Roper's Climbers' Guide looks like a freeway. This is by far the most heavily-used route up the peak, and the scree run down is turning it into one big loose mess.

\* \* \* \* \*

The saddle leading from the Shepherd Pass Trail into the upper Wright Lakes is trumpeted from every guide book ever written as the way into the basin. A clear trail has become established across the top, but it peters out on either side.

\* \* \* \* \*

Milestone and Midway Passes get a fair amount of travel. No trails are developing (fortunately they're just talus heaps), but each had "registers" jammed beneath rocks at the top -- rusty cans or old bottles stuffed full of illegible scribbles on scraps of paper. I removed them.

#### Sensitive Plants/Archaeological Sites

On 07.26.88 I discovered a small population of Hackelia sharsmithii on Mt. Langley that, as far as I can tell, has not been found before. Approximately 300 individual plants are growing between 12,000' and 12,800' on the north side of a ridge 1.6 km NE of Upper Soldier Lake (4041300N,388200E).

I'm sure there are bunches of archaeological sites in the Tyndall area, but I did not find any this summer.

#### California Department of Water Resources

At the beginning of September, Herm Raimundo and Don Neudeck of the DWR, along with Neudeck's son and son-in-law, descended on Tyndall for four days to put snow survey food on the shelves and install some new equipment at the Upper Tyndall site. They completely took over the cabin and were demanding and arrogant. I have never seen a bigger boondoggle, a greater waste of taxpayers' money in my life. It was obvious the trip was just a big lark for them; they treated Tyndall like it was their own personal playground.

The NPS should take over their duties. We can do a far better job at a fraction of the cost.

\* \* \* \* \*

Tyndall Creek Snow Survey Log entry for 02.28.88: "Tried new travel system of each person being pulled by 2 huskies. Works well...." Is this a joke? If not, it's just one more reason why the NPS should take over the snow surveys from the DWR.

\* \* \* \* \*

The Upper Tyndall snow sensor site (just south of Cow Dung Lake), which is maintained by the DWR, is truly a dump (see photos). I cleaned up most of the

rusty metal scraps and rebar and other loose stuff lying around, but a lot of old, unused, cemented-in equipment remains (including some sort of buried tank that Raimundo and Neudeck say contains radioactive cobalt [?!]). I asked Raimundo and Neudeck if the DWR were planning to remove any of this unused equipment. They claimed that the equipment belongs to the Army Corps of Engineers and that the Army Corps is responsible for removing everything.... Frankly, I don't care who owns the stuff -- it's got to go. It's litter, and it does not belong in the wilderness.

\* \* \* \* \*

Herm Raimundo mentioned that none of the aerial snow survey markers in the parks are being used now. The pole at Bighorn Plateau is already gone, but those at Tyndall Meadow and Upper Tyndall remain. These should both be removed at the earliest possible date next year.

### Group Size

Iridescent Lake, Wright Lakes Basin, Upper Kern Lakes are all remote and pristine places far off the beaten path -- places where people should be able to feel some solitude. This summer, however, I wandered into each of these spots only to be confronted by bustling cities (twice in Wright Lakes!). Brightly-hued tents were scattered about everywhere, and with all the people milling around I might as well have been on an L.A. street corner.

All of these groups were Sierra Club sponsored. In each case, the people were highly conscious of their impact on the land; indeed, their wilderness manners were impeccable. There was little if any physical impact. It was not unreasonably noisy. But the visual impact was huge. If for no other reason, we need to restrict cross-country travel to small groups -- I'd say no more than eight at the very maximum.

### Miscellanea

Throughout the summer backpackers asked me questions about park happenings that I was completely ignorant of. Since we only monitor our radios for brief periods of time, it's impossible to pick up on everything that's going on (assuming it's even on a channel you can receive). Sometimes I felt pretty stupid when backpackers had to tell me about a guy killed weeks previously in Mineral King, or about a fire in the lower Kern. I realize that the Sierra District office is an extremely busy place, but a brief report of medivacs, searches, fires or other pertinent information a couple of mornings a week would be very helpful.

\* \* \* \* \*

A few additions to the regulation sheet would be useful, particularly specifics on fires. For example:

- Construction of new firerings is prohibited.
- Where fires are permitted, use existing firerings only. Keep fires small and clean. Do not add rocks or dirt to the firering.



Also, since a lot of backpackers are now carrying the new metric 7.5 minute topo maps, we need to provide the metric equivalents for fire elevations (9,000 ft = 2740 m; 10,000 ft = 3040 m; 11,200 ft = 3400 m).

\* \* \* \* \*

A few days before I left Tyndall, one of Rainbow's packers came in with a food drop for some people. Rainbow apparently had promised the people that the Tyndall Ranger would store it for them and they could pick it up at the cabin whenever they happened by.

There are a few problems here. First, no prior arrangements were made with me to find out if I'd even be around. What would they have done if I hadn't been there? Second, I don't think the ranger station should be used as a storage depot for the packers, anyway. And lastly, packers shouldn't be leaving food for people anywhere in the backcountry because of the bear problem. These things need to be discussed with the packers.

### 1989 Work Projects

Install water bars in trail just above cabin. This section of trail is a river early in the season and a rock pit the rest of the time.

Measure trail distances using measuring wheel.

Install signs ordered.

Perform minor maintenance work on the shepherd's cabin located just below the patrol station, as authorized by Jack Vance: 1) dig soil away from cabin to provide drainage so water doesn't pool around cabin and rot sill and spansill logs, and 2) remove pieces of black plastic on roof that are torn and dangling.

Clean up Upper Tyndall snow sensor site; remove snow survey poles from the Tyndall Meadow and Upper Tyndall sites.

Work on major campsite rehab projects in Milestone Basin, Sheep Camp and along the Upper Kern Trail.