

## Syndall Creek End of Season Report 1992

MILES: 825 VISITOR CONTACTS: 975

VISITATION: Use this year, like last year, was relatively light. The largest percentage of users I contacted were hiking from Kearsarge Pass to Whitney Portal, and many others were beginning or completing the Muir Trail. The oldest visitor I contacted hiking the entire trail was 78; the youngest, 7. Use in Milestone, the Kern-Kaweah, and the Upper Kern Basin continues to be light. I noticed a fairly predictable bulge in use on Monday & Tuesday nights, as people who begin hiking at Kearsarge on the weekend arrive at the Syndall Creek crossing. There is a light, steady stream of visitors over Shepherd Pass.

INCIDENTS: Diddly squat. This is the first summer in my "career" when I've had no medicals, no searches, no anything. I suppressed one small fire north of the Bighorn Plateau, human-caused.

LAW ENFORCEMENT: Visitors to the Syndall area are well behaved. I gave verbal warnings for tents on grass (less than 10), camping too close to water (1), improper food storage during the day (in areas where no bears have ever been seen) (2), picking flowers (2), tying a mule

contracts with Cottonwood P.S. to pack the food, he didn't need a special permit for the Parks. He remedied the problem right away. We can expect to continue seeing Ken and his groups - he does a two-week loop from Horseshoe down to the Kern, up to Milestone & Lk. So. America, down to Whitney, and out again to Horseshoe. He has been friendly and receptive to concerns and suggestions.

STOCK USE: Stock use was up this year. Lyndall Creek was visited by representatives of almost every commercial outfit in the area: Cottonwood, Glacier, Rock Creek, Shooting Star, Red's Meadow, even Mineral King. Shooting Star was the most frequent user. They seem to have "discovered" Shepherd Pass this season. There were only three stock parties in Milestone: 7 burros and 9 horses/mule.

The most obvious impacts in this area are the hoofprints in wet areas of the large meadow below the station (15%), a new stock trail on the east side of the creek, erosion on the Shepherd Pass trail (particularly at stream crossings and on the damp meadows close to the drainages) and the trail crew camp, which - because of use by commercial packers - looks like a nuclear war zone. I am a little at a loss about identifying good stock camps in this area. I preferred the camp at the Frog Ponds, but commercial packers won't camp without a fire. That leaves Lyndall Creek below the crossing, where there's almost

(2)

offer to pack out trash for me. He impressed me with his conscientiousness. Though there were no blatant violations, I was unimpressed by Janner's outfit. They had three fires going, mounds of wood, lots of foil in their firepit, tents spread out on both sides of the trail (there must have been 6) and their rehab job was marginal. Can we ask that commercial packers have only one firepit? If Rock Creek can come in with 22 head and leave the site looking almost unused, I don't know why others can't do the same.

When Dave Dohnel came through in July he had 22 animals and no variance. When I questioned him, he said he'd contacted the USFS and been told the 25-head limit was in effect this summer.

Craig London made a trip in early September with 21 head, insisting that when his attorney looked at the 1992 Federal Register they determined that the legal limit this year is 25 head.

Opening dates: I don't understand why the Upper Kern Basin opens before the meadows between Wallace Creek and Milestone. Those little meadows stay soggy for a long time. Also, the categories for meadows in this area are very confusing. One heading says "Upper Kern Canyon", (Junction et. al.) and Forage Area 79-1 is called "Upper Kern River Canyon". (Cold Springs et. al.) Two separate parties, one of them administrative, grazed in 79-1 before the opening dates

## FACILITIES :

- 1) Drift Fences - there is only one in my area, at the Syndall Creek crossing on the Kern. It is nearly new, short, and in good shape. It is a "convenience" fence, having no resource management function.
- 2) Cabin - it's in good shape. The floor should probably be treated next season - ask Jack Vance what he recommends. All appliances worked. There is a crack in one of the burners - it should probably be replaced. The stovepipe spark arrester Jack ordered (?) never made it to Syndall. Where is it? The pit toilet should be fine for at least another season, especially if the marmots continue to dine there. The fire extinguisher was last checked in 1990.
- 3) Radio - lots of people in the Kern had problems with their MT-500s this summer. My reception was consistently fuzzy. My batteries also lasted  $\frac{2}{3}$  the time they usually do, and I used the radio less. I support any plans for new radios, solar chargers for batteries, and the kind of battery packs Eric & Coidy have both used, carrying AA batteries. I also recommend a return to the 0800 check-in time. It seems like there's often a lot of other radio traffic at 1100, and the round-up takes a lot longer than it might.
- 4) Camps - I did a lot of camp rehab work in Wright Lakes, the Kern-Kaweah, and the Upper Kern, mostly obliterating old, unused firepits.

on short posts, about 8" above the ground. Some could probably be removed altogether. I've received a number of positive comments on my hand-written information signs on the aluminum "bulletin boards". However, I'd happily remove them all if there were a consistent, comprehensible fire limit in this area, and if people actually received the correct regulations. If/when we lower the fire limit, I'd support installing small signs - maybe on the Forester & Shepherd Pass signposts - that indicate that fires are prohibited between there & the next signs, which are placed at the fire limit. No suggestions on wording.

6) Trails - The Kern crew was again reduced to two laborers and a packer. Because of my concern about the Forester switchbacks, they spent two days working there - twice the normal amount - and I joined them.

One section of trail is much unimproved. Everything else is the same.

a) Muir Trail: lots of erosion gullies in the sandy area 2 miles below the pass. Needs checks and fill. Multiple trails across the meadow north of the crossing.

b) Shepherd Pass: Erosion continues. The east side was worked this season. The trail looks like it's been vacuumed. The trail disappears crossing the drainages just above the last trees.

c) John Dean cut-off - The section between the meadow and Muir Trail gets worse each year. It badly needs to be rocked to prevent multiple trails from forming (in places there are 4 & 5 ruts). When this officially



## RESOURCES

1) Wildlife - BEARS. I saw sign twice near my station, once near Cold Springs, twice in the kern-kaweah, & twice on Wallace Creek. But I never saw a bear. There was only one, unconfirmed, incident. I took no reports of incidents at Wheelbarrow Camp, though Rob Pilewski heard some second or third-hand reports. Someone built a kind of rock "cave" there that some people have been using to store food. Problems at Center Basin and Vidette seemed mainly to be the result of two factors: 1) large groups commandeering the boxes - I heard a few complaints about stock parties hogging the boxes; and 2) failure to receive information about the locker locations. Large groups should be instructed to make room for other parties and to establish a "bear-watch" for any food that doesn't fit in the locker. The lockers themselves are all okay.

marmots, jackrabbits, and mice are all abundant this year. The deer look healthy and there were lots of fawns. The marmots were digging in to the toilet, though that wasn't a problem last year. I neither saw nor heard coyotes, which seemed strange as they were fairly abundant last year.

2) Sensitive Plants - the *streptanthus gracilis* populations are doing well. I saw some individuals in Milestone (10,800'), in the kern-

fuelwood inventory system outlined in the new plan is useful. I support Dan Duriscoe's efforts to develop an alternative.

### TRAILHEAD OPERATIONS

The Parks' operations are excellent. Without belaboring the point, I have to report that the Mt. Whitney Ranger District operation continues to be abysmal. People get old information, mis-information, or no information. More than one party complained that, coming from the north to Onion Valley they had driven down to Lone Pine to get a permit, and discovered that they could ONLY get a permit at Onion Valley. By the time they had driven up there, the permit office, open only until 0900, was closed. Unhappy campers.

Some ideas to improve the operation:

- Improve recruitment procedures. My friend who directs the Mammoth Visitor Center got around the requirement to hire her front desk folks from EDD by advertising the positions as Public Information Tech's instead of Forestry Tech's, and she was able to hire a much better staff.
- Pool SEKI funds with wilderness funds so the wilderness rangers also write permits, as our trailhead rangers do. Don't know if this is financially or logistically possible.
- Centralize & computerize the permit-issuing routine so that a person

AIRCRAFT: Visitors to the Lyndall area continue to be assaulted by the sound of freedom. low-flyers may have decreased some this year. "Crutch" seems truly committed to Doing Something, and the Kern rangers will welcome his pictures and identification aids during training next year. I understand that the routine flights cannot go higher than 30,000' because of commercial airspace, but can't they go south over Walker Pass instead of across the middle of the wilderness?

TRAINING: I support the idea of a backcountry-only law enforcement refresher. How about Mineral King as a location? It would be cool, there's housing & cooking facilities, etc. Maybe we could do 4 10-hr. days and get it over with. I missed the VMC docs this year. Their refresher is usually relevant and useful.



## Summary of Recommendations

- Locate / identify alternate stock camps in Tyndall Creek area
- Replace cracked burner on woodstove
- Get new radios; consider battery packs that use AA batteries
- Trailcrew to spend two weeks in Tyndall area; rock John Dean cut-off, start working on erosion gullies on JMT & Shepherd Pass trail
- Close Kern-Kaweah to fires above Gallats Lake
  - " Upper Kern Canyon " " " 10,400'
  - " Lk. South America trail to stock use
- Continue working with Mt. Whitney R.D. to improve visitor services to backcountry users
- Place some "rehabilitation site" signs with small, low "no camping" signs; remove unnecessary signs
- Find a better place for training - Mineral King?
- Treat cabin floor next season; get recommendation from Jack
- Locate spark arrester - stovepipe cap & send in to Tyndall
- Do "Round-Up" at 0800 next season
- Schedule a service project @ Lk. Reflection (Cedar Grove trailhead)

## STATION NEEDS

### NEED

Fuel  
Stuff to treat cabin floor  
Paper towels (2)  
Burlap Sacks (16)  
Light penetrating oil for rolling table  
"stove black"  
2 stove generators # 412-5621  
for stove 413H 426-5621

### Add to station inventory:

2 thermometers  
Large O<sub>2</sub> canister  
1 bread pan  
1 pie pan  
1 8x8" pan  
New wheelbarrow  
Wooden spoon  
1 rolling pin

### Have at station

T.P.: 4  
Large Plastic bags: 25  
Small " " : tons  
Burlap sacks: 6  
Matches: 2 boxes  
2 rolls each duct/strapping tape  
1 new sponge  
2 dish towels

### Remove from inventory:

1 cereal bowl  
1 box life-ogen canisters

## Addendum

- It might be time to start thinking about flying the winter wood supply in to Tyndall rather than cutting it here. There are lots of stumps left from snags that have been cut (most of which were foxtail) and the viable down trees tend to be foxtail. This year I vetoed the move to cut a snag, but I know it's been done recently. Wood has been flown in to Charlotte for some years now. Anyway, it's a thought.
- George Durkee is recommending putting the bear box that was to be flown to Wheelbarrow camp last year at Center Creek on the Muir Trail, just ~  $\frac{1}{4}$  mi. south of the existing box near the Center Basin rd junction. I support this suggestion. Many of the bear reports I took this summer involved a lack of space in the C.B. box; and the bottleneck of hikers at that site has caused a marked impact. The addition of another locker would, I believe, both relieve pressure on the one campsite and take care of the bear problems in that area.
- I looked for the can dump S. Bush reported in Milestone and was unable to find it. How bad can it be??!