

## **BEARPAW END OF SEASON REPORT**

**1998**

The 1998 season at Bearpaw was very busy. The snowpack was so persistent that the season didn't really begin until almost July. It started on the first day with a search, and continued with high water crossings, lots of snow, hazardous trail conditions, medivacs, and a mule rescue, among other things. The high precipitation this winter caused extremely late opening dates for meadows and facilitated one of the best wildflower displays I have ever seen in the Sierra. The Ranger Station was staffed from June 28 until September 30 and the High Sierra Camp was open from Fourth of July weekend until September 27

### Incidents

The season started with a three day search for Tammy Skaggs, Kaweah trail crew member who lost her way while crossing a snowdrift on the High Sierra Trail near Nine Mile Creek. She was found safe and sound on the third day above the trail. There were four helicopter medivacs this season. The first was for a broken scapula from a fall on the snowfield at the tunnel above Hamilton Lakes. One was for severe dehydration from a virus or flu, another for dehydration and exhaustion from altitude sickness, and the last I preferred to send out by stock but they weren't available for four days and the patient was exhausted and very unsteady and possibly suffering from altitude sickness and a storm was coming in so I decided to send him out while the conditions were stable. There was one citation issued for lack of permit at the beginning of the season. At the end of the summer, concession packer Jerry Page had a wreck with his mule string at the Alta Bluffs and the two first mules fell forty feet down the cliff into a slot. Jerry had to kill the mule that landed under the other one and we rescued the live one the next day. It took two z-rigs with two teams to haul her out of there. The trail crew, rangers, Bearpaw employees, and concession packers worked excellently together to pull it off and it was one of the most amazing extractions I've seen. The rescued mule is recovering nicely.

### PATROL AREAS

#### Bearpaw

The Bearpaw area was quiet at the beginning of the season due to residual snowpack and high water crossing on the High Sierra Trail. There was a five foot snowdrift

behind the station and a snowbridge over P-P Creek. When they reached Bearpaw, most visitors stopped at the ranger station for the most current trail information and to chat. It was a great opportunity for quality visitor contacts and I think people had safer and more enjoyable trips after getting their questions answered. The campground wintered well and an Outward Bound service project helped clean it up and repair some things. One of the pit toilets was redone by the Kaweah trail crew and should last a couple of years.

### Hamilton Lake

This camping area gets extremely heavy use most of the summer although the difficult water crossings were responsible for very light use until late July. The trail crew repaired the broken pit toilet which is now in great shape and should last. The trail crew's last camp for the season was at the lake and since the crew was so small they occupied one of the campsites. This worked out well and campers seemed more likely to follow the rules with park personnel in the area.

### Tamarack Lake

This area received light early season use due to snow cover and high water. It gets much lighter use than other areas but the occasional fire ring appears, even with a no fires sign. Periodic visits keep it clean. Lone Pine meadow opened for grazing the second week of September but to my knowledge, it wasn't grazed at all.

### High Sierra Trail West

Early season use of this trail was mostly restricted to Panther Ck. and Mehrten Ck. camping areas. Only the more experienced hikers attempted the high water crossings. NPS personnel at Mehrten camping area was very useful for safety and information during peak runoff periods. The new bridge at Buck Creek held up fairly well although it had water over it occasionally. The water at Mehrten, Nine mile, and Little Blue Dome Cks. was treacherous at times. After peak runoff, use picked up and the camping areas received more use. They stayed in good shape this season with frequent patrols. The trail crew did quite a bit of work on the trail and improved many sections that needed repairing. As usual, they did an excellent job.

### Redwood Meadow

Although the meadow was reopened to grazing this year, it was so wet that the date was pushed up to September 30 and I doubt any grazing occurred. The meadow looks good and the coneflowers are not as plentiful as in past years. The cabin is in fairly good shape. It has a few more deep scratches from bears but is otherwise intact. This season we were extremely lucky to have former Bearpaw Ranger Richard Perrelli and family volunteer for a month and staff the Redwood Meadow cabin. It was a pleasure to have them there and many visitors who hiked through were able to get questions answered. I really appreciated having him down there keeping an eye on

things and patrolling the lower parts of the patrol area. It enabled me to concentrate on some things I didn't have time for in the past. Richard and family had a great time and I hope they come back and volunteer in the future.

### Cliff Creek

This area is the first main campsite with a food storage locker coming over Timber Gap from Mineral King. It gets considerable use. The Mineral King trailhead rangers did an excellent job this year visiting and cleaning this area. It fared better than past years because of the frequency of visits. I make it over there about four times a season and they at least equal that so it gets almost weekly visits which are ideal. The construction trail crew was camped just a mile above here for much of the summer and completed some much needed improvements.

### Pinto Lake

This was the first year of the temporary fire closure in this area. Early in the season I obliterated fire rings along with 3-1-4, and 8-1-17. Signs were posted on the food storage locker there and all trailheads emphasized that there were no fires allowed. I did not discover any new fire rings this season and all campers I contacted there were complying with the closure. The area will be monitored closely for the next few years to assess the effects of the closure. The meadow there opened a few weeks after the expected date but was completely dry by the time the first stock party grazed there. To my knowledge it was grazed only 2 or 3 times.

### Spring Lake

This lake received lighter use than previous years because of snow load but still gets stopover visits from people using Glacier Pass. Frequent help from 3-1-4 and Mineral King trailhead rangers assists me in maintaining this area.

### Middle Fork Trail

Many early season visitors used this trail due to the water and snow on the HST. The concession pack trains had to come in this way to open the High Sierra Camp because the HST wasn't stock passable until a couple of weeks after it opened. There was a little more summer use than usual and I heard that Backpacker magazine had an article on coming in that way to visit Redwood Meadow. I guess that some use could be attributed to that. The trail is in good shape.

### Other Areas

The Elizabeth Pass trail didn't get used until late in the summer and as usual is difficult to follow in the last bowl. The lower sections were brushed and had some minor repairs and looked pretty good. The HST above Hamilton was extremely hazardous at the tunnel due to a big nasty snowfield. One injury and one near miss

occurred there. I posted hazard signs and helped a few people through. When the snow finally melted the trail crew was able to go in and blast two huge boulders and do some other work and it looks really good now. Over-The-Hill trail had some logs and snow that were cleared up by August. I assisted the trail crew in blasting a huge tree off the HST below Bearpaw.

### High Sierra Camp

Four returning employees, Paul and Becky Bischoff, Major Bryant, Bryan Czibesz and new employee Alan Ballard made this season an excellent one at the camp. This was the second and last season that Kings Cyn. Parks Services ran the concession on an interim basis. It opened about a week late because of snow conditions but was then busy for the rest of the season. The new policy of requiring backcountry permits for camp guests was very useful for informing them of hazardous conditions and making sure they knew minimum impact camping practices. There were many returning visitors who were very happy to find familiar faces and as usual the food and treatment were fantastic. The employees were always helpful and courteous to visitors and their extensive mountaineering experience was a valuable resource that they shared. They completed the water duties when I was gone and were always lending help and advice when needed. They all showed an interest in Park Service policy and made sure to give correct information to visitors. I feel very lucky to have had this group of people as neighbors this season.

### Wolverton Pack Station

This was Jerry Page's second year here and he did a good job this season. Early on they had to use the Middle Fork Trail which was very difficult but they managed to bring in the supplies. His mules are well taken care of and he is reliable. He doesn't have enough mules to comfortably run both MK and Wolverton pack stations and is planning on buying more this winter. I hope that occurs because there were many occasions when things would have run more smoothly with well rested stock and/or time would have been saved. With an more stock and a few more employees I think his operation will do very well in the future.

## **RESOURCE MANAGEMENT**

### Bears

Early this season two backpackers improperly hung their food and a bear ate most of it. After this incident, there were many more incidents in the Bearpaw patrol area. A bear was seen many times at Hamilton Lake and tried to get food there and turned over much equipment. At Bearpaw a bear ripped into all the tents that the employees live in numerous times and got into some trash there. It also was seen lurking and was chased away many times. Other than the first incident, it did not get much food, just trash and it did some damage. Since the mule accident, as many as five bears have been seen feeding on the remains of the dead mule.

## Other Wildlife

Mountain lions were seen a few times in the area, once just below Bearpaw. The Golden Eagles were around quite a bit and many other raptors including Red-Tailed Hawk, Sharp-Shinned Hawk. There was a water shrew in the springbox and I saw a rattlesnake on the HST for the first time on my last day out.

## Meadows

There was very little grazing done this year due to wetness from the heavy winter. Pinto Lake meadow got some use and Lone Pine Mdw. and Redwood Mdw. received little to none.

## Hazard Trees

There are still a few bad trees above the ranger station and Rich Thiel came out and assessed them and hopefully they will get taken care of next season.

## Tussock Moths

This year seemed to be the peak year for these pesky moths and larva. The caterpillars were everywhere, falling out of the sky and giving many people bad rashes, although they are quite interesting looking. The cocoons were everywhere and also would initiate a horrible rash if touched. The moths eat the white firs but the Bearpaw area wasn't hit as hard as Wolverton or Grant Grove but we still felt the effects of the poison oak like rash. Despite their role in the ecosystem, I wouldn't mind if there were less of them next year.

## WATER SYSTEM

The water system worked extremely well this year. There were no major problems and I had enough filters for all the changes. Peggy Hunt did a great job opening and closing the system. All the components functioned properly and all water samples were received in a timely manner and came out fine.

## SOLAR SYSTEM

I received the panels and other parts for a solar electric system in August and spent a few days setting up the system. It works very well and the station now has lights that run off the batteries and an inverter where I have plugged in a radio battery charger and a stereo. The system is very strong and only after 3 days of no sun and continual use did I start to conserve and the batteries recharged very quickly. It is a relief to be free of propane lights and disposable batteries! Many visitors have commented how nice it is to see the solar panels and know we are using a renewable resource.

## **CABIN MAINTENANCE**

The station continues to deteriorate. The shutter system is getting very bad and the front of the building needs painting desperately. The snow load this winter temporarily bent the station and the door wouldn't close at first. When it finally did, the doorknob got stuck and broke and had to be removed to open the door. I immediately called out and sent a message to maintenance that I needed a doorknob but nothing happened. I then sent out the broken one and stated that I really needed a new one before the end of the season so I could secure the station. I checked again the last week of September and it still wasn't finished. Unfortunately the station only has a padlock that can be unscrewed and so is vulnerable. At this time there is a plywood shutter nailed over the door so I hope no one gets beyond that. The procrastination in updating the shutter system has created a much bigger problem and I fear that all the trim on the station will have to be replaced. We should do something very soon!

## **TRAILHEAD**

This year there were again only two trailhead rangers. Carolyn Pistilli returned and again did a phenomenal job. The new ranger was Dan McKee. Dan was new to backpacking and to the Sierras. He had an enjoyable summer and learned quite a bit but I think that with a two person operation he may have reduced efficiency because of his inexperience. I strongly encourage the hiring of an additional trailhead ranger because of the many miles of trails and the large number of permits issued. The frontcountry trails could use more coverage and with three employees they could get further into the backcountry for familiarization and could do many more patrols on the first few miles of the trails. I also recommend the hiring of individuals who are experienced backpackers and have some knowledge of the Sierra if possible. It is especially important in a season with hazardous conditions to have employees giving visitors the most accurate advice possible.

## **COMPLETED PROJECTS**

Completed infrastructure paperwork and sign inventory.

Fixed bear box at Hamilton and pit toilet door in Bearpaw Campground.

Set up and installed solar power system at station and wired inside for lights.

Inspected and cleaned equipment at station.

Redid screen on upper back window of station.

Removed broken doorknob and returned it to frontcountry.

Routine cleaning of all campsites and firerings in patrol area.

Water system routine maintenance and some advanced work.

## NEEDS FOR NEXT SEASON

New doorknob keyed to 5-51.

Two more RV 12V lights.

Two sets of director's chair covers.

A new fire extinguisher for the kitchen.

Stencils for the food storage lockers "Keep Closed At All Times"

Clothespins.

Holey envelopes.

12V inverter for solar system.

100 feet wire for solar system.

7 propane tanks.

P-cord

scale

belt weather kit

Books: A Sierra Nevada Flora by Weeden

National Geographic Bird guide

Butterfly and insect guide

## List of Bearpaw Rangers

1963	Jolyon (J.P.) Van Ettinger
1964	Robert Simpson
1965	Pat Coplin
1966-7	John Kline
1968	Garriett (Art) Janssen
1969	Madison (Skip) Hinchman
1970-1	Roger Barclay
1972-8	Dana Abell
1979-84	Peter Pellegrin
1985-6	Lo Lyness
1987-90	Richard Perrelli
1991-3	Bob Meadows
1994	Jane Weisenberger
1995	Catie Stephenson
1996-8	Nina Weisman