

Rock Creek 1999 Year End Report
NPS Ranger Jeff Verkouille
9 June 1999-30 September 1999

INTRODUCTION

Rock Creek and its surroundings remain much as earlier reports indicate. The camp water source is as trustworthy as ever and the cabin still needs a coat of linseed oil or other preservative, as noted three or four years back. Nonetheless the cabin remains in good shape for its fifty one years, and except for a lively and persistent population of field mice that continue to replace each other as earlier residents are trapped and poisoned off, is trouble free. I have left the cabin in better order and next year's resident should have little trouble organizing things, I hope; as I vividly remember searching through boxes of chewed paper and dead mice to find papers that often enough, were not in the cabin.

Contacts with hikers and stock users were all on a pleasant level, and law enforcement issues continue to be addressed, with mixed success, in educational methods. This often means that whenever the ranger misses a group, trash, mostly aluminum foil is found in fire pits. The only bona fide violation I witnessed personally was a couple of hikers with a dog, and they were let off with a stern warning as they were hiking out and were honest about the issue.

Backcountry use in the Rock Creek area continues to follow established patterns, with the heaviest and most constant use in the lower Rock Creek Crossing area. Although this area gets occasional stock use, with the exception of the Trail Crew Camp a quarter mile south of the crossing, the impact issues here were all attributable to hikers and centered around camping issues, notably trash in the fire pits. The only other serious violation was a fire pit abandoned with live coals. I was not, alas, able to catch the violators. This occurred only twice during the course of the season but the danger of neglected or abandoned fires was stressed by the ranger constantly.

A. GENERAL OBSERVATIONS

STATISTICS

Backpackers: 678, mostly bound for Mt. Whitney, or the Miter Basin.

Dayhikers: minimal (estimated at less than 100) and centering around Mt. Langley with a few doing the New to Old Army Passes loop, and fewer still hiking New Army to Cottonwood Passes. Old Army Pass opened early this year, and was snow free by mid July. It was doable when the ranger arrived (6/20/99) with an ice axe or careful and exposed travel on the upper snow field at the top. A fatality occurred on the Inyo Forest side of this pass prior to my arrival. I was informed by Inyo ranger Calder Reid that the fatality involved a 70 year old male who fell from

and onto rock below the snowfield, and thus was not believed to be attributable to snow conditions.

Stock Users: estimated at 350 animals many of which stayed multiple nights as the Rock Creek area is a long haul for dayrides. My estimate is derived from both personal contacts, and trail signs (fresh manure and churned soil in the trail). The vast majority of the stock use involved pack rather than saddle stock, and I would estimate that 250 of the animals involved were mules. I personally encountered only one private party involving five animals in the Rock Creek area, and an additional private party of two at Crabtree. Other than these individuals, the one administrative trip (the military/park trip 8/15-18/99) and the trail crew the stock use was by Cottonwood Pack Station (CPS). There were only two trips by Rock Creek Pack Station, both passing through to Crabtree and returning, and one by Rainbow Pack Station heading south from Crabtree to Cottonwood Pass. I received reports that a private party with five llamas did pass through the Rock Creek area on the Pacific Crest trail on 8/19/99 but was not able to catch up to them.

Law Enforcement: As in the past law enforcement in the Rock Creek Patrol area is best addressed by continual education of park visitors. The two most common violations were illegal fires in the Soldier Lakes area and trash left in fire pits. It appears that the recent accumulation of fuel around both lower and upper Soldier Lakes is now tempting visitors. While visitors seem to obey the fire closure regulation when personally addressed by the ranger any absence of a night or more from this area often resulted in the ranger having to dismantle yet another fire ring. As in the past groups dropped off by CPS were more inclined to have illegal fires, and had to be closely watched. Even here however people were willing to adhere to regulations if politely but firmly reminded of the reasons for the fire closure.

Medicals: Nothing life threatening I'm happy to say. I handled two stock evacuations both involving exhausted hikers. CPS arrived a day later than expected the first time and refused to pick up the second party until they had hiked from Crabtree Ranger Station to Rock Creek Lake. Had either of these delays resulted in a worsening condition in the patients the situation could have gotten ugly quickly. CPS is not reliable, to put it mildly. I assisted in two other evacuations involving helicopters, one from Rock Creek, the other from Crabtree. In both cases Crabtree ranger Jostad was the primary caregiver. Please see her Year End Report for further details. There were no SARs in the Rock Creek area and I was not involved in any SAR activity elsewhere.

Weather Summary: The snow pack was reported to me as 65% of normal. All mountain passes with the exception of Old Army were passable when I arrived on 6/20/99. New Army had a small snowfield in late June but was negotiable without an ice axe. It was stock passable by early July. Thunderstorms were common in July for two weeks and occasional in August. Creek crossings were never a problem, even when I arrived. All in all it was a splendid sunny summer. The light snow pack meant that the small spring on the PCT west of Cirque mountain dried up in mid August and the PCT was hot and dry all summer use to the Rock Creek trail. In spite of this late season cattle trespass patrol revealed water but, thankfully, no cattle around Siberian Outpost.

No cattle

B. USE PATTERNS

Hiker: Backpacker use continues to follow established patterns, with the bulk (66%) of hikers headed to Mt. Whitney and camping at either Rock Creek Lake or Lower Rock Creek Crossing. In both cases the bear boxes remain a useful tool in concentrating impact. The bear box at Soldier Lake received low use early in the season but was well used in July and August. In order of use hikers congregate at the Lower Crossing first, then Rock Creek Lake, with Lower Soldier Lake and the Miter Basin picking up popularity in the later season. Upper Soldier Lake receives light but consistent use by small groups. As always the savvy leave-no-trace hikers are found farther from the popular trails. Sky Blue Lake remains the most popular Miter Basin destination, although stock parties have heavily impacted the two trailside camps on the east side of Pinned Up meadow.

Stock: If Rock Creek Lake stringer and lake meadows are closed I predict Pinned Up meadow will get hammered hard and flat by CPS. The old concerns about the safety and resource damage of stock use in the Miter Basin remain valid. My recommendation is that CPS be barred from the Miter but private stock use be allowed, as the area can withstand occasional use, but not the careless and constant use CPS favors. Alternatively a small number of stock nights could be granted, but continued spot packing must be closely monitored as the trail up the basin continues to deteriorate.

Administrative stock use was limited to the park and military trip, and the trail crew. The administrative trip raised the question of impact by staying at meadows that had other large stock parties present. This occurred on their way in at Nathan's meadow where the combined presence of a Rock Creek Pack station party and the NPS party resulted in 35 horses and mules at Nathan's simultaneously. It occurred on the way out at Rock Creek Lake where CPS had a large stock party at Hidden Camp (the Rock Creek Lake Stringer meadow) when the park group stayed at the west end of the lake. Additionally the NPS horses wandered down to the closed drift fence meadow.

The **trail crew stock** wandered into the closed meadow behind the Rock Creek patrol cabin repeatedly. Also considerable time was necessary to clean and rehabilitate the trail crew camp by the Lower Crossing.

On a positive note **military aircraft** did not buzz Rock Creek nearly as much as they did the adjacent Kern Canyon and Mt. Whitney. All the low fliers in the Rock Creek area were en route to violating airspace at either or both of the above area and were called in by other parties. While military aircraft continue to bedevil neighboring areas they usually leave Rock Creek alone.

C. NATURAL RESOURCES

Bear activity centered around one bear who stole food on August 10 and 11 but wandered off after that and did not show up again. VIP Bob Shaffer spoke to the individuals involved at the time and I interviewed them a day later. Both involved careless food hangs at the eastern area of Rock Creek Lake. In September

I observed bear scat with foil at Whitney Creek Crossing while arriving to cover Crabtree Ranger Station for ranger Jostad. Again there was no repeated attempt, and it is hoped that all these incidents involved a non-habituated bear.

Vegetation concerns centered around Rock Creek Lake Stringer meadow where repeated use by CPS has resulted in a golf green look intersected with hoof damage, stream bank cutting, erosion and general mayhem. It is to be hoped that this meadow will be given a rest from CPS. The trail crew camp resulted in a definite trail continuing west past the Lower Crossing, which confused at least one group of hikers. If trail crew camps can be rotated year to year within their basecamp range it would allow these areas to rest and recuperate somewhat.

D. CULTURAL RESOURCES

I was not aware of any problems or issues in this area this season. The patrol cabin is now old enough (51 years) to be historic, and remains in fine shape although a protective coat of sealant is needed

E. BACKCOUNTRY FACILITIES

While the cabin remains solid it is not well served by the solar panels at present. The electricity generated is barely able to recharge radio batteries. Roof mounting of the panels or some way to place them in a sunny location like the meadow in front of the cabin or the large flat rock 100 yards west should be considered. I recommend that the next ranger be made aware of this weakness and begin the season with solutions in mind. At current the situation is bearable, but just barely.

The **drift fence** between Rock Creek Lake and Nathan's meadow is an abomination. Since this is a repeated observation I have little hope my words will be heeded, but for what it is worth, I'll say this: fix it. The fence is not acceptable as it stands, leans, and winds about. Since removing it is not on the table, I volunteer to show up and help the ranger next season to repair and construct a decent fence and gate. This should not involve more than a few days at most of work, but it needs to be done as the current fence wire is cutting into trees and trails around in a jury rigged fashion. Everyone who walks or rides through sees the fence, and it does not, to put it mildly, make a favorable impression. Let's show the public a presentable and effective sign of NPS.

The **trail signs** in the Rock Creek area are in good repair. The sign at the junction of Rock Creek trail and the New Army Pass trail was knocked down by the military-park stock on their way out and set up with rocks to firm up the base. When I left it was standing firm but it should be checked after winter snows and wind for loosening. One PCT hiker complained to me about the absence of PCT signs (there is one at the PCT-Rock Creek junction, but no others in the area) but this is not a major issue. Frankly I'm not sure it even qualifies as a minor issue.

F. TRAILS

The trail crew has done a solid job around Rock Creek in the past and no great projects loom in the near future. The issues continue to be the same ones voiced in past year end reports: the section of the Rock Creek trail from Soldier Lakes to Rock Creek Lake continues to erode due to steepness and stock use, the Miter Basin trail, official or not, exists, and is in sorry shape, and a sharp eye needs to be maintained to ensure that stock difficulties in steep sections do not worsen. Overall trails in the Rock Creek area are in good repair. Current trail work in the patrol area thus focuses on maintenance rather than repair or rerouting. There are a couple of wet spots on the way up from the Lower Crossing to Guyot Pass that need to be watched to make sure they do not become bogs, but the past trail crew work has paid off and the Rock Creek trails are among the clearest trails I've hiked on.

G. CAMP AREAS

The principal camp areas and needs reflect the use patterns of two major groups: Mt. Whitney bound hikers and stock users. Many of the larger groups bound for Whitney seem to have little experience in backcountry travel, and need friendly advice on simple camp matters. The resource impacts center on trash, both in fire pits and toilet paper not quite hidden behind convenient trees and rocks. Fire pits also crop up willy-nilly and must be eradicated early and often. Stock groups have greater impacts because of the nature of horses and mules, but the only area I find hammered beyond common sense is the Rock Creek Lake Stringer Hidden Camp of CPS. Spot trip groups are the most troublesome and seem to combine the worse aspects of both hikers and equestrians. Since most of these groups are brought in by CPS for fishing they settle around Rock Creek Lake and occasionally Penned Up meadow or Lower Soldier Lake. The resource issues here are greater quantities of trash and fires that leave logs half charred lying about. Nothing drastic, but consistently a hassle. Although I cannot call them belligerent these groups do seem to be the thickest skulled individuals the ranger has encountered. Patience and a large trash bag seem to be the best solution.

H. PERMIT SYSTEM

No problems here I'm happy to say. Hikers seem pleased to show their permits and Inyo trailhead hikers seem to be informed on park regulations at least as well as hikers from western trailheads. One detail I like about the WRS permits is they have a list of leave-no-trace guidelines and backcountry regulations on the permit itself. Not a big deal but it is a nice touch that helps highlight the need and opportunities for our visitors to be well informed about the need to hang food, camp away from water, bury human waste, etc.

K. INVENTORY

I left two propane tanks on the front porch of the cabin, labeled with duct tape. One was used but not empty and the other full.

L. NEEDS FOR NEXT SEASON

The station remains well taken care of and the needs are minor. I recommend several mouse traps (the varmints come in waves and longer patrols are rewarded with new furry residents popping up), carpentry tools (the current tool box is rudimentary at best). The next ranger will best be able to judge based on his/her skill level the exact tools, but a plane, sandpaper, nails, screws, bolts would all come in handy time to time. The need for cabin sealant is known. An extra daypack that could be prepacked for SARs would be nice and seems common at other stations. The ropes at the cabin should be inventoried and tested as their age and history is not known to me.

M. RECOMMENDATIONS

Most of these are in the body of this report, but to reiterate the most critical: close Rock Creek Lake Stringer meadow to stock use for a year or more, fix the drift fence, oil the cabin, and look for a better location for the solar panels.

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Rock Creek 1999