

BEARPAW MEADOW RANGER STATION
2003 END OF SEASON REPORT
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This year the Bearpaw Ranger Station was staffed from June 28 to September 28, 2003. Due to funding limitations, this season was a week shorter than last year. The season was in high swing by the time I arrived.

General Observations:

This season I contacted more than 1300 hikers on the trails, off the trails, and at the Ranger Station. Very few dayhikers make it out to Bearpaw but I talked to a few and also a few on the High Sierra Trail closer to Crescent Meadow. There were a few private stock users, most were concession packers. There was one llama group that came through Bearpaw.

There was a lot of stock traffic on the High Sierra Trail this summer to resupply the High Sierra Camp. In past years they have made day trips but this year the stock overnighted at Lower Bearpaw Meadow for about half of their trips. This was necessitated by the fact that the packers were coming from the Cedar Grove Pack Station and with travel and packing time, they weren't arriving at Bearpaw until early evening. For most of their overnights, they brought their own feed, although the stock was allowed to roam freely for part of the time. About 12 to 14 head of stock came into Bearpaw weekly from mid-June to mid-September, with some weeks seeing more traffic. There were a few occasions where the Horse Corral Pack Station came in for spot trips or for the Outward Bound resupplies. They never stayed the night. One private stock group came through Bearpaw when they had to exit prematurely. Redwood Meadow and Pinto Lake had some stock use this summer, although not as much as previous years, probably because of the closure of the Mineral King Pack Station this year.

There were no citations issued this year, although I did give out a few warnings for food storage and unattended fire. In these instances, the warnings were sufficient to get and maintain compliance.

There was one medical that resulted in a medivac. A hiker injured his knee while hiking near Elizabeth Pass and hiked very slowly and in pain to Bearpaw where I evaluated him. His knee was stiffening up and I contacted UMC. The doctor recommended helicopter evacuation, which was quickly taken care of, as it was starting to rain.

There were no SAR's in the Bearpaw area, although I was on standby for 2 that occurred in other areas of the park.

This was another somewhat dry year at the beginning of the summer, with a very small snowpack. It did rain for two weeks in July and that water kept the creeks flowing and the flowers blooming for the rest of the season.

Use Patterns:

This year there seemed to be as much hiker traffic as in past years. The contact numbers were little lower but I think most of that is due to the shorter season. There was a lot of concession pack use, mostly for the High Sierra Camp, but that is the norm. This year there were two different pack stations working the Bearpaw area, Cedar Grove Pack Station and Horse Corral Pack Station. They both did a good job and tried hard to follow all the minimum impact regulations. They were also very helpful when we needed any help with moving trash or gear back and forth. There was some administrative stock use in Redwood Meadow in early June for a couple of weeks. That usually consists of 3 head that the Hockett trail crew uses for their work. They leave by the end of June and go to the Hockett area. There was very little private stock use in the area. Two private horse/mule parties and one llama party came through. There was some administrative use by researchers, most notably the vegetation mapping crew, who were in the Cliff Creek area for a week or so, and also in the Bearpaw area for a few days. There were a lot of military aircraft overflights this summer although they were above the 3000' AGL ceiling. There was one low flier that buzzed the Bearpaw area and Alta Peak. It was very low and loud and was called in by many BC rangers as it flew over Sequoia. A few small private aircraft flew around on nice days but none of them were very low.

Natural Resources:

The Bearpaw patrol area has a great diversity of wildlife. In particular, there is a healthy population of bears. Many were seen all through the patrol area, but especially along the High Sierra Trail, Bearpaw and Lower Bearpaw, and the Redwood Meadow area. There were a couple of incidents at the 9-Mile Creek camping area. There are always bears traveling through this area and periodically a backpacker will leave something out. This occurred this summer and subsequently the trailhead and I strongly emphasized careful food storage behavior and there were no further incidents there.

There were many other wildlife sightings, including many Golden Eagles, Cooper's Hawks, Rubber Boas, Garter Snakes, and Pikas. We were asked at training to keep track of the pikas and I found that there were many healthy populations in my patrol area. Mountain Lions were seen quite a few times on the High Sierra Trail, once even in mid-day resulting in a posting of a lion warning at the trailhead. There were no lion incidents. Unfortunately, the pair of Great Blue Herons that have been a fixture at Hamilton Lakes the last few years did not return this year.

The meadows in the patrol area looked good this year. They were, in general, greener and lusher than last year. The two weeks of rain in the middle of the season really helped to prolong the growth cycle. Redwood Meadow had less sand visible in the upper end than in past years. Pinto Meadow looked as it usually does. Lower Bearpaw Meadow was quite wet into September and had very tall growth. Lone Pine Meadow was also very wet into September.

The population of *Raillardiopsis muirii* on the High Sierra Trail looked to be comparable to prior years. This year the wildflowers were good and lasted quite a while due to the mid-season rains.

There is still a lot of cheatgrass on the High Sierra Trail and the Cliff Creek Trail. This has been reported and short of a huge eradication project, will probably not change.

Cultural Resources:

There are a few archeological sites in the patrol area, most notably in the Redwood Meadow area. They are off of the trail and get virtually no visitation other than by a few park employees. Their status is unchanged from the last few seasons. The buildings in the Redwood Mdw. Area are historical and are in good shape. The ranger station is looking good. It is maintained by the Hockett trail crew and checked out frequently by the historical buildings crew. The tack shed is clean and in good shape. The historical pit toilet near the campsite is holding up, although it probably gets too much use. The old ranger station at Bearpaw, which is now being used as a storage shed, is doing OK. Each year we need to check to see that dirt has not piled up on the foundation on the uphill side as it will disintegrate the wood if it makes contact for too long.

Backcountry Facilities:

The patrol cabin is still in good shape. Some of the new paint applied two seasons ago will need to be retouched next season, mostly on the front exterior beams where the rain and snow contact them. The shutters are still working well and the appliances are all functional. The solar system was very problematic at the beginning of the season and the batteries needed to be replaced. It is now working great and the problems have been fixed. The batteries must keep a charge all winter and the panels must be unobstructed in order to work.

There are no drift fences in the Bearpaw patrol area that need to be maintained.

The signs in the patrol area are in good shape. I put in a sign request for a No Fires sign at Pinto Lake. This is needed as people are constantly building new fire rings there. I assisted 5-1-11 in installing a sign at the top of Elizabeth Pass this season.

Trails:

Of the two trail crews that work in the Bearpaw area, I only was able to contact the Kaweah Crew, as the Hockett crew was finished in my area by the time I made it to the station. The Kaweah crew, led by Lorenzo Moreno, again did an excellent job this season. They redid a rough section of the lower switches of the Elizabeth Pass trail, made some intermediate steps on the HST west of Buck Creek, did some beautiful work above Hamilton Falls, and cleaned up the Cliff Creek area. I'm still hoping that someday a big project will take place to rebuild the upper reaches of the Elizabeth Pass trail. It is very hard to follow, and really steep. I've been told that short of a huge project, only small improvements can be made. The trail crews have been very good at improving the areas where the route is in question.

Camp Areas:

The Bearpaw campground continues to get heavy use. The campground is looking very good since the tree crew finished their hazard tree and fuels reduction projects. The trees are less dense and the downed trees were cut into firewood for the campers. They are making good use of the wood and although the fire pits need to be cleaned often, the wood is being reduced every year. The trail crew inspects the pit toilets every year and moves them when necessary. They will last until next season before needing to be moved. The bear boxes are still working although they will need some hinge work soon.

The High Sierra Camp again had five excellent employees this season including the manager, Carolyn Pistilli. They do a great job and are really helpful with everything. The guests are still required to get wilderness permits and I believe that this is essential as they need to hear the minimum impact talk since they spend a few days in the backcountry. They were resupplied by the Cedar Grove Pack Station this year. The packers spent a few nights in Lower Bearpaw Meadow as their trips were taking them all day. The meadow handled the stock presence well, as the packers brought their own feed. There was an issue about the stream crossing to get to the campsite. It is very muddy and silty and the animals were leaving very deep hoofprints. I asked the packers to find a different path to the campsite and they complied. The only remaining issue was that the animals went down to the stream to drink and left prints then. We were starting to address that issue but the pack station was able to start earlier and didn't use the meadow anymore later in the season.

Hamilton Lakes is a very popular camping spot and gets very heavy use at times. Since it is on the High Sierra Trail, people going both directions stop there. I think it would be very difficult to limit how many people stay there per night but I would like to delineate the prior campsites in some way because people often camp too close to water or on the vegetation. This year I moved a sign stating revegetation area into a spot where people camp too close to water. I hope that this keeps people away from there. I would like to place some campsite markers, probably carsonite, to help people find appropriate sites. The three bear boxes in the area are sufficient to hold everything except in the most crowded situations. I didn't hear about any instances this year when there wasn't any room left. The trail crew moved the pit toilet to a new spot and did a great job. There are no fires allowed there, and except at the beginning of the season, I didn't find any fire rings.

Tamarack Lake is at the end of a trail and doesn't get as much use as other areas. People still stay there often but usually as part of a cross-country trip. Most people take bear canisters there as there is no bear box. I didn't receive any reports of incidents there this year. A few illegal fire rings had to be destroyed there this season.

The High Sierra Trail west of Bearpaw continues to get considerable use. The Buck Creek camping area often has one group but looks to be in good shape. The bear box there really needs some hinge work. The 9-Mile Creek camping area had another bear incident this year, even though there is a bear box. People just aren't vigilant enough and don't check their packs carefully enough. There are about 4 sites there although the top one gets the most use. Mehrten Creek gets a lot of use but patrols by both the trailhead rangers and myself help to keep it clean.

Redwood Meadow gets some use but as there is no bear box there, most people pass on through unless they have a canister. The one obvious campsite gets the most use and has a cemented fire ring that fills quickly. Overall, the area stayed pretty clean this summer.

The Cliff Creek camping area gets considerable use by hikers entering from Mineral King over Timber Gap. In the past, the Mineral King trailhead rangers helped with that camping area but this year I don't think they visited it much. There are two firerings and a bear box. I cleaned the site thoroughly a few times this summer and it looked good at the end of the season. The bear box there is in good shape.

Pinto Lake camping area continues to have illegal firerings built even though there is a fire prohibition in effect there. I have requested a No Fires sign to be posted near the bear box. I feel that the Mineral King trailhead rangers need to emphasize more strongly that fires are prohibited there.

Permit System:

This year the trailhead operation in Lodgepole lost a position and only had two paid trailhead rangers and one volunteer. I really feel that this is inadequate and we really need three rangers. I feel that the quality of work and training of rangers exceeds that of volunteers in most cases. Even so, they did a very good job of informing people of the minimum impact rules and contacting the backcountry rangers with any information that would affect them. They also did a good job of patrolling the trails and keeping the camping areas clean and talking to people. If there were 3 staffed positions that lasted the whole season, they could cover even more ground and provide much needed coverage.

The Mineral King trailhead operation this year was much reduced from past years. Their staff continues to be cut and I see the effects in the backcountry. Many hikers don't get complete information about their trip or the minimum impact regulations. Many people are having fires at Pinto Lake or not storing their food properly. Many of the permits issued from Mineral King are incomplete. Also, the MK trailhead rangers' absence from backcountry training is conspicuous. I think that more funding needs to be spent to hire trailhead rangers for this position and they need to attend the park training and be more involved in backcountry patrols.

I would like to comment on the new \$15 fee for wilderness permits. I feel that this is in direct opposition to what we are trying to accomplish in protecting the resource. One of the main purposes of the wilderness permit is to inform people about minimum impact practices in the backcountry in order to protect it. Another is to limit the amount of people on the trail so that the resource is not overused. This fee could potentially prevent people from getting a wilderness permit because they don't want to spend the money. This will result in uncounted people who haven't been briefed on minimum impact practices. Also, most visitors have already paid to enter the park, then paid for a campsite in the park the nights before and after their hiking trips. How many times are we charging them to see the park? This is their national park. The minimal amount of money collected is not worth the cost to the resource. A few years ago, when Ralph Moore was the wilderness coordinator, there was a meeting with all the backcountry rangers and we discussed the possibility of a charge for the wilderness permit. Overwhelmingly, it was decided that there shouldn't be a cost for the actual permit, for the above reasons, but that it was reasonable to charge for a reservation as that took time and paperwork in advance. At the very least, I strongly believe that all park employees should receive permits for free. That includes concession employees. I feel that this is very important because these people need to learn about the backcountry to inform the public, they help clean up out there, they provide needed information on different routes, they often come across visitors who need assistance. We absolutely should NOT be charging them!