

**Le Conte Ranger Station  
2006 End of Season Report  
By Dave Gordon**

VISITOR USAGE/PATROLS

	<u>Visitor Contacts</u>	<u>Day Hikers</u>	<u>Miles Patrolled</u>
June (6 days):	50	3	34
July:	366	11	169
August:	633	16	149
September:	243	15	160
Totals	1,293	45	512

This was another heavy snow pack summer (over 150% of normal) with snow levels initially about 11,000 ft. The snow pack and high creek/river levels make hiking difficult and more hazardous than normal years at the beginning of summer. Snow patches still remain on trails on the south side of Muir Pass and north side of Bishop Pass at the end of September. Stock was not able to enter Le Conte Canyon until early August over Bishop Pass and early September over Muir Pass. (The JMT along Palisade Creek was not stock passable until the end of August due to 63 trees across the trail).

Hiker visitation was similar to past summers, with the exception of a record number of PCT'ers contacted the first few weeks – about 100 contacted and another 100 or so having hiked through before I came in or having hiked by without being seen (most PCT hikers have a good idea of how many are in front or behind them...over 400 were reported as having started the trail in late April of early May). Contacts indicated the following approximate proportions of routes: 50% entire JMT (mostly north to south); 20% N. Lake to/from S. Lake; 15% in and out over Bishop Pass; 10% all or most of PCT; 5% miscellaneous. Groups consisted of eight Boy Scout troops, one church group, two Sierra Club, and a Travel Mt. Sobek trip. The day hikers were all contacted near Bishop Pass or Upper Dusy Basin, having started at S. Lake.

(20) Stock groups were observed in the backcountry (16 commercial, 2 private and 2 administrative) consisting of (110) horses/mules and (3) llamas with a total of (49) stock users and clients (if clients were with the stock). Most of the commercial stock was from Rainbow Pack Outfitters, with a couple of groups from Rock Creek Pack Station (not observed) and one from High Sierra Pack Station. There were two additional llama groups that were reported by visitors as having traveled over Muir Pass in August before it was passable to horses/mules (not observed).

LAW ENFORCEMENT INCIDENTS

Almost every group was asked how food was stored to make sure canisters were used when required. The other standard question asked was if a permit was obtained and where from – not all parties were required to show me the permit, depending upon my belief in the truthfulness of the response and/or how much of a hurry I was in (see Recommendation #1 regarding wired permits attached to packs). Compliance on both requirements was near 100%.

The fewest citations and warnings were issued this summer than in the past ten years. One citation was written for a dog (“pet in closed area”) at Little Pete Meadow with a verbal warning to the same person for no permit. Other verbal warnings were for tents on vegetation (3), tents too close to trail (2), and one to a packer for not adequately removing manure at a campsite.

As with previous seasons, the greatest regulation infractions involve campfires: either illegal fire pits above 10,000 ft; or extraneous newly constructed pits next to trails, water, or another pit; or increasing the size of an existing pit. These are almost always discovered after the party has departed.

SEARCH, RESCUE AND MEDICAL INCIDENTS

Several minor altitude sicknesses and sore knees were encountered that improved with rest/hydration/electrolytes for AMS and rest, elevation and cold therapy for the knees. More serious incidents occurred as follows:

<u>DATE</u>	<u>LOCATION</u>	<u>TYPE</u>	<u>DISPOSITION</u>	<u>PERSONNEL</u>
7/20	Le Conte R.S.	HAPE	Helicopter Evac.	113/513

8/7	Giraud Peak	Broken arms & Head injuries	Helicopter Evac.	111/513
8/12	Le Conte R.S.	Knee injury	TAR/Stock Evac.	113/Rainbow
8/28	Upper Dusy	Possible HAPE	Helicopter Evac.	
9/11	Dusy Creek Bridge	Foot Laceration	AMA/hiked out	113/111(advice)

### SERVICE INCIDENTS

Service to visitors was typical of most summers and included: giving food (many), sun block, water treatment, insect repellent, fuel and a water pump; making an alcohol stove for a JMTER from England; making phone calls for hikers with delays using the satellite phone. Most service involved advice on routes, campsites, pass conditions, stream crossings, weather, fires (smoke), and bears/food storage.

An Army Corps of Engineers' snow survey tower that had collapsed in avalanche debris in 1986 was located at Dusy Bench next to Dusy Creek. Photos (see Appendix II, photos 22 – 34) and GPS coordinates were taken and two possible landing zones were located. Removal should be possible with a long line (100') from a helicopter after cutting/prying a 6" diameter log that pins one end to the ground.

### RANGER STATION

Two hazard trees were cut down in early June that had been identified last summer. Several improvement projects were completed at the station: the cabin was scraped with wire brush, holes filled with wood filler and sanded and painted; the wood stove pipe that had been damaged in winter storms was disassembled, cleaned, elbow and cap replaced with new ones, a support brace was made at roofline, a hangar made to support horizontal portion in the shed and heat shields placed for safety; 3 new shutters/inserts were primed and painted; the shed door apron was rebuilt to make it rigid; the lower perimeter sealed against marmots and porcupines with rocks, sheet metal and wire mesh; and the swamp bridge near the cabin was rebuilt with 3 new logs cut in half lengthwise.

At mid-summer the solar system would not charge above 13 volts and would completely discharge after sunset (the BK Radio charger requires 13.8 volts to charge the Li-Ion radio batteries). By separating the three batteries when fully charged and testing with a volt meter, a bad battery (1 volt less charge than the other two) was found and removed from the system. This allowed the remaining batteries to charge in the day to over 14 volts and operate the Radio battery charger. Three new solar batteries will be needed for next summer, as the old batteries still have limited capacity.

All other station facilities (outhouse, stoves, water filter) are in good shape with no immediate maintenance required. The cabin has not had any rodents inside in the last three years.

A new Ranger Station assessment was initiated at Le Conte by Dan Blackwell, David Karplus, Debbie Brenchley, Keith Hamm and me. Several alternate locations were investigated. Sites up canyon were either too far from water or in avalanche zones. Sites in the vicinity of the landing zone were too close to trails or too visible. Two viable sites were identified near the solar panels ("Solar" site) and near the outhouse ("Outhouse" site). Pros and cons for each of these sites and the current location were compared and discussed. Further review with other participants will occur later (see Appendix II, photos 38-47 for photo information and UTM coordinates of the two alternate sites).

### MEADOW MANAGEMENT

Most meadows opened for grazing per designated dates for a "wet season" on 8/15. After examining meadows with Erik Frenzel in late July, Grouse Meadow was delayed for opening until 8/31 and Ladder Meadow was opened two weeks early on 8/1. As with last year, Rainbow primarily used Ladder Meadow for their spot trips, which received moderate grazing. Big Pete Meadow received moderate grazing at under 40 stock – nights. Deer, Grouse and Little Pete Meadows all received light grazing.

Little Pete Meadow was monitored for residual biomass on 9/21. Both the "Reference" and "Core" plots had some evidence of stock use (24 stock nights known). CUA stock use reports were mostly positive with camps left clean and manure removed/scattered.

### TRAILS/DRIFT FENCES

At the beginning of the summer I cleared most trails of rocks, branches, pinecones and about a dozen trees under 7" in diameter using a bow saw.

A small trail crew (4 for one week, then 3 for a week) came in on 8/22 after several delays. Sixty-three downed trees on the JMT along Palisade Creek were finished being cut/removed on 8/28. Several trees in Le Conte Canyon across the JMT were cleared later that week. Two slides were reworked along the Middle Fork Trail near the Devil's Washbowl that week as well. About a half dozen 1 – 2' diameter boulders will need removing from the Dusy switchbacks next summer that trail crew did not have time for (these have not been a problem for hikers or stock).

Trail crew rebuilt the Deer Meadow drift fence after clearing trees that had damaged it. All four drift fences are now in "good" condition.

The JMT in Upper Le Conte remains a problem in early season (especially wet seasons) partly because of five river crossings between 10,800' and 11,600' that are confusing and/or difficult to cross. Photos and GPS coordinates were taken on 8/7 showing these crossings in a flooded state, with additional photos showing some of the extraneous trails that have resulted due to confusing routes (see Recommendation #4, Appendix II (photo log) photos 2 -21 and Appendix III – map of Problem Areas).

#### BEARS/WILDLIFE OBSERVATIONS

Two small adult bears (about 150 lbs., possibly 2 years old) were seen near the Ranger Station on several occasions by me and others – these were "wild" bears that scared away easily. One 3<sup>rd</sup> hand report of a "canister being broken into by a bear" occurred at Big Pete Meadow, but no details on how/why – assuming food was taken, this was the first and only report of a bear getting human food in this patrol area in three summers.

Six pikas were observed (compared to 23 in 2004). Other animal seen include a short – tailed weasel, a pine marten, a porcupine (under Ranger Station) and a coyote.

#### MINOR PROJECTS/FIRERINGS

(58) Fire rings were cleaned /reduced in size and (45) were eliminated (mostly above 10,000 ft, but some were next to existing ones or too close to trail or water). Lower Dusy Basin, Upper Le Conte Canyon and Palisade Lakes were most of the illegal pits were eliminated.

#### CAMPSITE SURVEY/INVENTORY

(130) Campsites were located and assessed for various parameters. "Condition Class" on a five scale was calculated for each site based on the average of five point ratings for the following: (1) vegetation density, (2) vegetation composition, (3) total area of campsite, (4) barren core area, (5) campsite development, (6) litter & duff, (7) social trail and (8) mutilations (of trees).

The definitions for each of the five ratings for these eight parameters were established and used for a 1979 survey – every effort was made to rate campsites this summer using the same criteria. GPS/UTM coordinates were taken for all these sites and (39) restored sites (not used in several years and restored by natural and/or human means).

About 100 hours (13 days) were spent by me on the project including time to hike to/from various locations, looking for previously unseen sites and assessing the sites (3 day for training at Darwin Bench; 3 days for "Upper Le Conte" sub-zone; 3 days for "Ladder/Rambaud" sub-zone; 2 days for "Big Pete Meadow" sub-zone; 2 days for "Little Pete Meadow", "Le Cont R.S." and "Grouse Meadow" sub-zones).

Sandy Graban, in addition to training me at Darwin Bench, also worked with me for a day to evaluate (recalibrate) my ratings – her ratings of campsites, previously evaluated by me, were within a tenth of a point of mine. She also completed the "JMT – Simpson Junction" sub-zone and the "Deer Meadow" sub-zone, while I was working in the Ladder and Rambaud Lakes areas.

A summary of results can be found in Appendix I at the end of the report. Some of the more significant comparisons of the current survey to the one did in 1979 include: (56) fewer total sites in use (39) sites restored by natural and/or ranger intervention); only 2 sites of class (4) or (5) vs. 20 (4) and 16 (5)s in

1979; an average condition class of 1.5 vs. 2.4 in 1979. These improvements are dramatic considering what a class (4) or (5) site looks like and indicates to me that quotas, group size restrictions and rangers have all improved the impact of camping on the wilderness.

#### COMMUNICATIONS

The Windy repeater was out for most of the summer. Fortunately, Local R-2 on the repeater worked and was connected to Park Dispatch on July 11<sup>th</sup> and then to the Grant Grove Ranger Station in early August. A satellite phone was used to contact Dispatch and 735S for the first couple of weeks – this proved to be frustrating at times, as only certain locations (such as the Le Conte LZ) were viable due to cliffs/trees and satellites needed to be in position, which occurred less than 30% of the time (calls often took 10 -15 minutes to connect and often would drop out in process requiring repeat tries). Normal Windy repeater functioning resumed on 9/8 after being completely out for several days during repairs.

#### RECOMMENDATIONS

- (1) Wired – attachable waterproof permits issued at Bishop and Lone Pine Interagency Ranger Stations would be easier for rangers to check, easier for hikers (not having to dig through packs to find permits) and would encourage permit compliance (being blatantly obvious if none possessed).
- (2) CUA checks for groups traveling through several patrol areas could be called in to 735S and passed on to other effected rangers such that the party only has to show ID, permit and CUA once.
- (3) The double – log, make – shift footbridge at Lower Dusy Creek crossing should be replaced with a real bridge – although the logs are two feet above water level normally, they were completely submerged for a week or so early season and wet (slippery) for several more weeks (a very hazardous place to fall in swift water).
- (4) The JMT in Upper Le Conte Canyon Lake between 10,800' and about 11,600' has (5) river crossings that could be made easier to cross and less confusing to stay on the correct route with large rock steps similar to those used at the inlet of Evolution Lake.
- (5) The Le Conte Radio (Group 3, channel15) needs to be programmed to transmit to INF Repeater (radio receives Inyo Dispatch, but does not transmit to it).
- (6) Food storage violations should not have been reduced in bail (\$150.00 to \$75.00...up to \$5,000 in Yosemite).