

1994 YEAR END REPORT  
ROB PILEWSKI  
ROCK CREEK RANGER

## INTRODUCTION

The summer of 1994 was my first season as the Rock Creek ranger. The season began on June 12 when I hiked over Cottonwood Pass to Rock Creek ranger station. Evidence of yet another dry winter was obvious as no snow was seen on the 15 mile hike. This in contrast to the spring of 1993 when the majority of the trail was covered with snow. Effects of the drought were even more obvious in the fall when the areas meadows were dry and dusty and the mighty Rock Creek was reduced to a small stream.

### I. RESOURCES

#### A. BACKPACKER USE

The Rock Creek area offers fine backpacking opportunities. Access to high alpine terrain can be found over New Army Pass and the Miter Basin. This area is frequented by cross country travellers throughout the season. Many hikers make Sky Blue Lake, located in the Miter Basin, their destination and spend up to a week enjoying the splendor of the area. Through hikers also use the Miter Basin to access Crabtree Pass and the Crabtree-Mt. Whitney area. By summers end there is a well worn path in this trail-less area. Backcountry management issues in this area include the availability of suitable campsites for larger groups in this fragile alpine basin and stock access into the Miter Basin. The first issue can be dealt with by the Rock Creek Ranger making frequent patrols into the area. The second is a matter of safety and stock impact in a very fragile area. The problem often takes care of itself as most stock users choose to stop at the unmaintained trail above Pinned Up Meadow. Above Pinned Up the trail becomes steep and unsafe for stock and rider. There is, however, no regulation restricting stock travel to the head of the Miter Basin. Grazing is restricted to the outlet of Primrose Lake. This area is extremely fragile and cannot accommodate more than a couple head of stock. I think that stock travel above Pinned Up meadow should be restricted for these reasons.

The other main area of backpack travel in the area is the Pacific Crest Trail to Crabtree and points north. This trail gets much use from late July and up top Labor Day. Most of these hikers are heading for Mt. Whitney. The Rock Creek area is a stop over for these hikers and most can be found camping in the vicinity of the three bear boxes in the area.

#### B. STOCK USE

Overnight stock use was down considerably in the Rock Creek area due to the lack of "all expense" trips from Cottonwood Pack Station. Most trips that CPS did have in the area were spot trips. I was able to establish a rapport with the CPS packers and there were few problems with this group. One issue that I would like to address is the fact that CPS issues

all permits for their clients. The result is that the people who are packed in by the CPS are far less informed than those who get their permit at the Lone Pine Forest Service office. The people from CPS do not give their clients minimum impact information or campfire information. This problem could be dealt with by a pre-season meeting between NPS rangers and CPS. I also think that all backcountry users should receive the same information on rules and regulations in our Park. This would allow for more consistency in the way regulations are enforced in the field by NPS rangers.

There were many private stock parties in the Rock Creek area during the month of August. Aside from not knowing where the stock camps were there few problems with these stock users.

### **C. MEADOWS**

The Rock Creek area abounds with fine meadows. This is one of the things that makes Rock Creek so special. Fortunately there are several meadows that are closed to grazing and allows the park visitor an opportunity to see an alpine meadow in its natural state.

Nathans Meadow received the most stock nights in the Rock Creek area. Unfortunately the majority of these nights were taken for administrative use. When the trail crew pulled out of Nathans after 12 nights the meadow was really showing signs of over use. I am partly to blame for not recognizing this problem earlier and having them run the stock to another meadow.

The stringer meadows east of Rock Creek Lake received little use this year. This area has been used frequently in the past by Cottonwood Pack Station. It is showing some signs of recovery and looking better. Rock Creek Lake meadow received some use but is large enough to accommodate many nights of grazing.

### **D. BEARS AND WILDLIFE**

I saw only one bear in the Rock Creek area this summer and it was easily spooked. I received no reports of bear incidents in the Rock Creek area. Most reports were from the Upper Kern/Forester Pass area. There should be a bear box at Wheelbarrow camp on the north side of Forester Pass.

Most other wildlife sightings were in the fall when most Park visitors have left for the season. Many birds of prey and deer were viewed during the month of September. I saw more Pine Martens this year than the last two years combined. Most were seen in the high lake basins. On several occasions a Pine Marten tried to get at the fish that I had caught! At Arctic Lake I saw what appeared to be a Fisher. The animal was at a distance but the size, color and movement indicate that it was probably a Fisher.

## **II. VISITOR PROTECTION**

### **A. LAW ENFORCEMENT**

Law enforcement contacts were low key and at a minimum in the Rock Creek area. Most contacts focused on teaching the backcountry user about proper techniques and minimum impact camping. For some, the trip into Rock Creek is their first backcountry

experience and a positive contact with the ranger can make a lasting impression. Verbal warnings were given in the area for camping on vegetation, fire regulations and aluminum foil in fire pits. There were no citations issued by the Rock Creek Ranger. An illegal fire arm was confiscated (10-343 written) from a stock user who was carrying a rifle without a proper permit. The firearm was returned when the visitor left the park.

## **B. FIRE REGULATIONS**

The fire regulations are not easy to understand as they are written on the Parks' minimum impact hand out. To complicate matters visitors were getting incorrect information from the Lone Pine Forest Service office. Some were told that fires are not allowed anywhere in the Park and others were told they could have fires where they are in fact restricted. One visitor was told that they could not use a gas stove in the Park because of fire danger!?! To simplify things I think that the fire limit should be uniform at 10,800' on the Kern Plateau.

## **C. INCIDENTS**

There was one medevac from the Rock Creek area (Rock Creek Lake) for a person in respiratory distress. Several medical evaluations were made by me and in each case the visitor was able to continue their backcountry trip.

Several hasty searches were carried out by the Rock Creek Ranger and Crabtree Ranger. The missing party was found in each instance and no further measures were necessary.

The big incident in the Kern this summer involved a visitor who was threatening others in the vicinity of the Kern Hot Springs. The incident was dealt with by 3-1-3 and 3-1-2.

## **D. LOW FLYING MILITARY AIRCRAFT**

I called in four low flyers this summer. It seems to be quieter in the Rock Creek area than at Crabtree or the Upper Kern. One particularly disturbing low flyer was in the Kern flying at tree line. The jets are very intrusive to what is supposed to be "wilderness." Is there nothing to be done about this?

# **III. FACILITIES**

## **A. TRAILS**

Trails are in good condition in the Rock Creek area. Tyler Johnson and the Kern trail crew did a fine job on several small projects and general maintenance in the area. One area that could use more work is the New Army Pass trail. The re-route that was done last year from Siberian Outpost to the Rock Creek trail has worked out fine and is in good shape.

## **B. RANGER STATION**

The Rock Creek Ranger Station is a cozy log cabin that sits on Rock Creek. Although small, the cabin is aesthetically pleasing and a wonderful place to live for the summer. Several fresh water springs run behind the station and are a great source of drinking water. The coat of oil that Dario put on the cabin last year looks good and should last for at least another season. All in all the station is in good repair and requires no immediate maintenance.

## **C. CAMPSITES**

Campsites are easy to clean in the Rock Creek area because they are easy to find. 90% of park visitors camp in the vicinity of the bear boxes. One day a week during the busy times is sufficient to clean fire pits and pick up trash. I put some signs on the bear box at Soldier Lake and this seems to have cut down on illegal fires there. The one sign suggestion that I do have concerns Lower Soldier Lake. As it is now the bear box is nearly inaccessible in early season and high water. This is due to the fact that the sign and trail to the lake lead the visitor to the side of the lake where there is no camping and no bear box. The majority of campsites are to be found on the peninsula on the south shore of the lake. There is a well worn stock trail that leads to the peninsula. A sign with an arrow pointing to the "Soldier Lake Bear Box" would alleviate much confusion to visitors using this area.

## **IV. RECOMMENDATIONS**

**A.** Arrange a meeting between the east side Park Service Rangers and the permit issuers in the Lone Pine area. Attempted this last year but the meeting was too brief and was not directly with those people writing the permits. Visitors received more misinformation this year than the previous two summers. I would be happy to sit down with the Forest Service permit issuers and discuss Park matters.

**B.** Make the fire limit on the Kern Plateau uniform at 10,800'. See above and the last two year end reports.

**C.** Close Miter Basin to stock travel above Pinned Up Meadow. See above.

## SUMMARY

Rock Creek is a wonderful place to work for the NPS as a seasonal ranger. I would be happy to return next year as the Rock Creek Ranger...that is unless Dario does not return to Crabtree. The team approach used by Dario (Crabtree Ranger) and myself in managing this area of the backcountry worked well this summer. I would watch the Crabtree area while he was away and he would reciprocate while I was away from Rock Creek. The Crabtree area is the most heavily used and it pays to always have a ranger there during the busy days of summer. Several maintenance projects were handled by both of us, as well as the meadow monitoring program.

Thanks to Eric Morey, Kern Subdistrict Ranger, for his help over the years. The guidance and freedom with which he manages his backcountry rangers is very effective. The Kern backcountry team is all the better due to his efforts.

Also many thanks to Gail Bennett, Shirley Crowley and the rest of Sierra District for taking care of us out here.

Rob Pilewski  
1994 Rock Creek Ranger

## Station Needs

- first aid kit
- large propane tank, full
- 25 small plastic garbage bags
- 25 large plastic garbage bags
- 8 rolls toilet paper
- dish towels, 2
- dish rags, 2
- ceramic coffee mugs, 2
- drinking glasses, 2
- large stainless steel pot with lid
- mattress covers, 2

Addendum:

## Stock Use in Mitre Basin

Concerning the Environmental Assessment on the stock trail to the Mitre Basin it is this rangers opinion that the trail should end at Penned Up Meadow.

This allows anyone, even stock users to have access to the Mitre Basin. From here it is only a one mile hike to the Lower Mitre Basin.

Above this point the trail is too dangerous for stock travel. There are two places that are extremely hazardous for stock, the "lunge spot" (named by packers) and just before topping out into the Mitre Basin a place with slick rock.

The trail is too steep a grade and it would take major trail construction to make safe and environmentally correct.

Also on interviewing fifteen backpackers in the Mitre Basin this season all opposed stock in this pristine environment.

The tie up place at 11,200' in the Basin is an often used camp spot for backpackers and the manure there make this camp undesirable.

Refer to the photos of the two dangerous areas on the trail

D. Malaga  
USNPS.

Totals for 1993, Rock CK.

Visitor Contacts - 1132

Miles Hiked - 1153

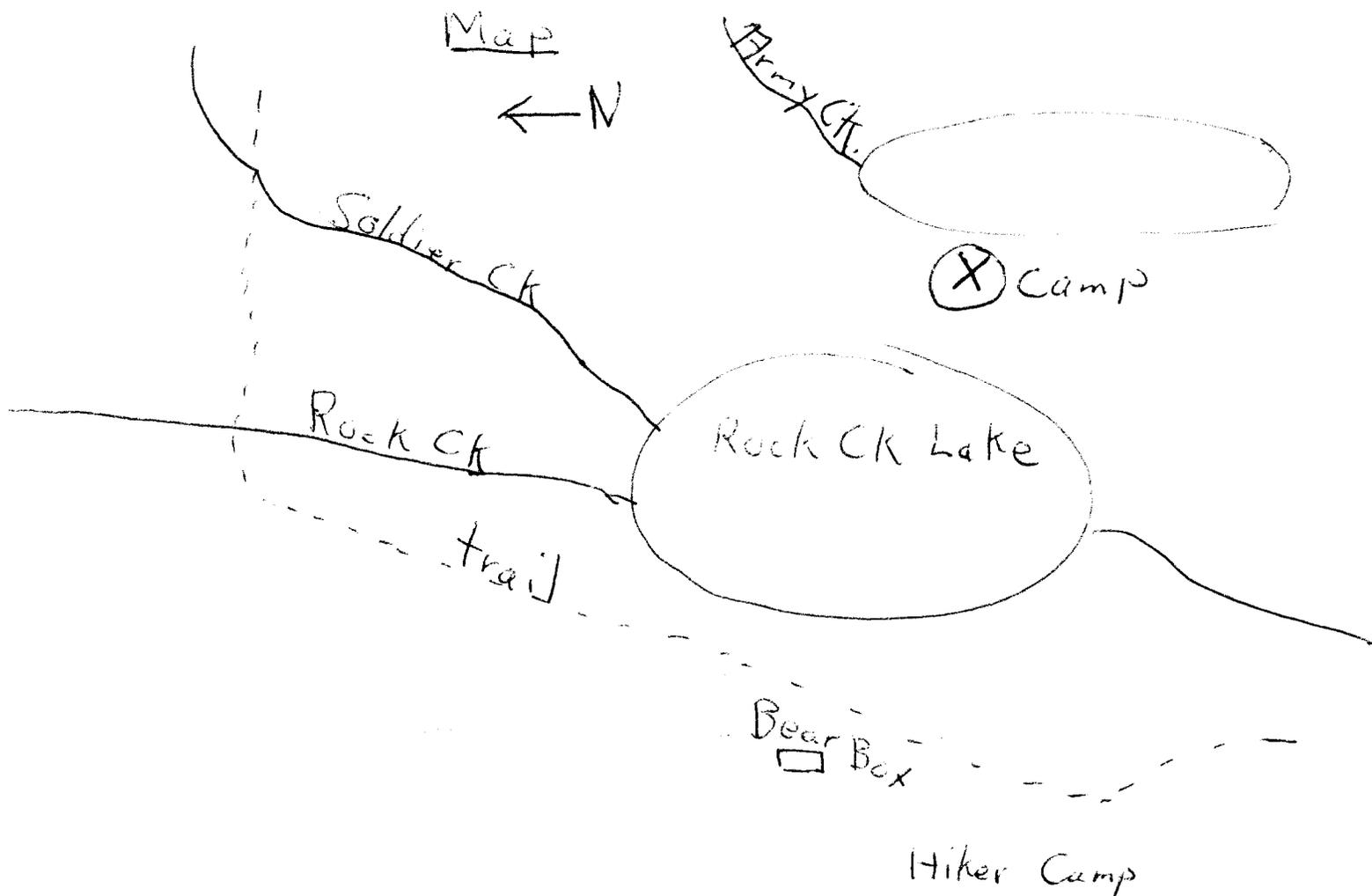
Citations - 0

Verbal Warnings - 15

# Stock Camps, Locations and Maps for Rock CK area

## ① Lower Rock CK Lake

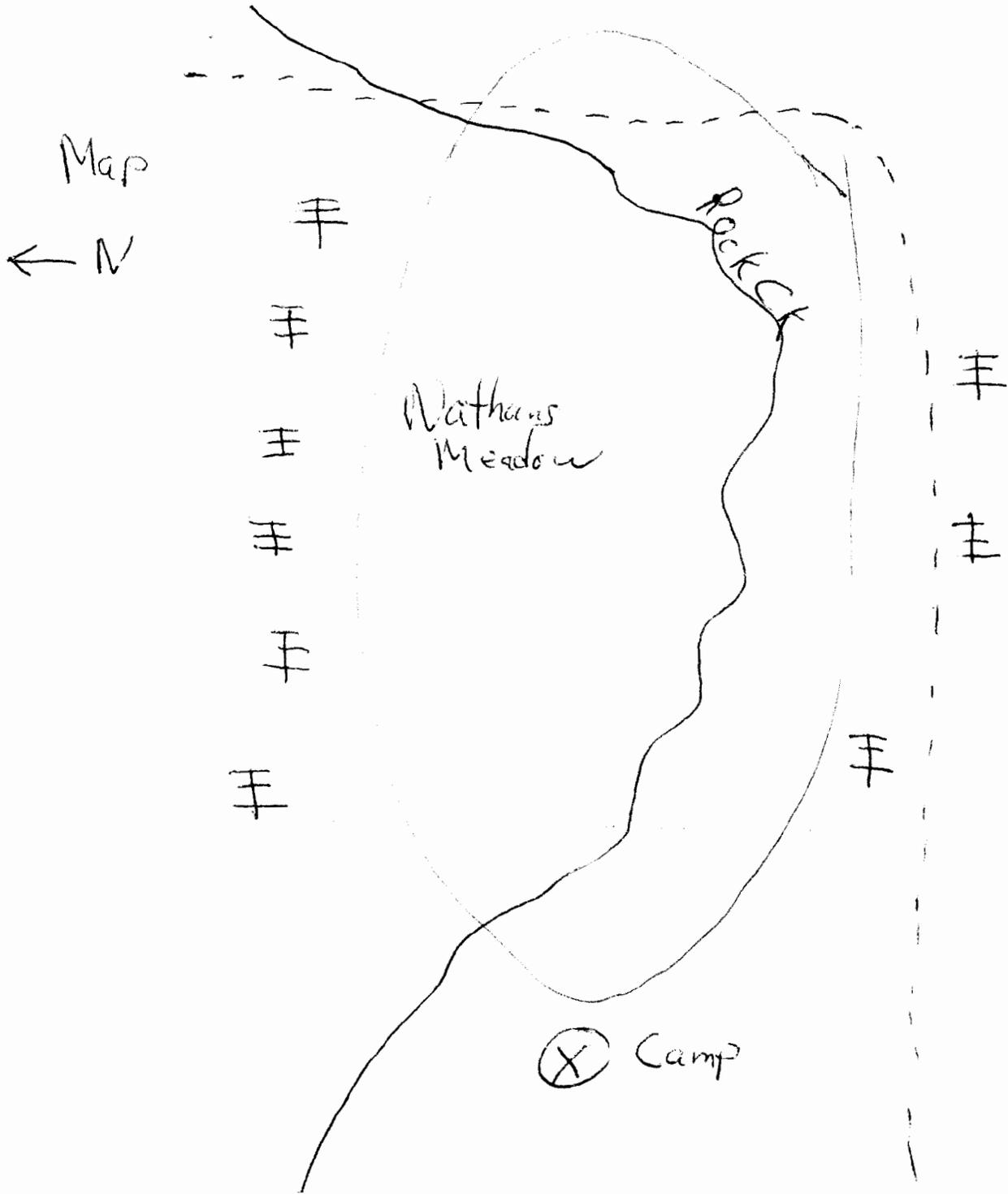
Located behind the lake from trail, 200 yards from the SE shore of lake, next to the uppermost Stringer Meadow



# Stock Camps

## ② Nathans Meadow

Located in Middle Rock CK,  $2\frac{1}{2}$  miles below Rock CK Lake and  $1\frac{1}{4}$  miles above Ranger Station.



Stack Camp

③ Lower Rock CK

Located  $\frac{1}{4}$  miles below  
Rock CK crossing on the South  
side of Rock CK.

