

Introduction

This season began on June 16, almost two weeks later than last year. After the traditional two weeks of training, I started hiking into the backcountry on June 28. I hiked over Granite Pass to Simpson Meadow and then up river to LeConte. There was very little snow in the high country and as a result there were a surprising number of hikers in the backcountry.

Upon arriving at the station the bottom left portion of the door had been clawed into by a bear. Probably with one more day of work the bear would have made his way into the station. Also, the window shutter on the south side of the station was partially cracked. Apparently a hiker had attempted to break into the station most likely using an ice axe. Last year the station was broken into twice, once in the fall after Sandy had left and once in the spring.

Recommendation: We do need metal shutters for the station windows and a metal shutter for the front door. See the specifications in the back of the report for the door shutter. Window shutter specifications were given to Debbie Brenchley last season.

Other than that the station was in fine shape. A couple of days later the helicopter came in bringing my supplies for the season. After receiving my supplies it took a couple of days to organize the station and get it ready for the season's operations.

It is a long haul from the area helispot to the station. This season I got a wheelbarrow into the station for this purpose. The wheelbarrow worked great for hauling the supplies down the hill from the helispot. Supplies can be hauled about 2/3 of the way from the helispot to the station until the trail gets too rough.

Early Season

Early in the season the first priority was to get to the passes in the area to check conditions. Muir Pass had snow on the south side down to near Helen Lake. Bishop Pass had only a patch or two of snow on the north side that created no problems for hikers. Mather Pass was the most hazardous in the area. There was about 1/4 mile of snow on the north side of the pass that created a dangerous condition. When each pass was observed, trail conditions were called into the wilderness office.

Trails and Trail Crew

Trail information about down trees and other problems was provided to (551) Torres, early in the season. There were a number of trees down across the

trail in the area. Also, there was a big boulder on the trail about half way up on the Golden Staircase. This season the only trail work done in the area was logging. This was done by a small crew that swept through the area in July and the crew continued north to McClure and out at Florence Lake.

Overall the trails in the area are in good shape. There is some major trail erosion in Big Pete Meadow that needs to be fixed. (see photo in back of report) Also, the Ladder drift fence needs to be repaired. Primarily three of four posts for the fence need to be replaced, as this work can be done next season when they are in the area.

The center beam of the Cartridge Creek bridge collapsed during the summer. The two outer beams stayed in place, but the bridge became a hazard particularly for stock parties. I reported this to (551) Torres and at the end of the season, the trail crew tore down the old bridge and replaced it with a new triple metal I-beam bridge.

Before the bridge was replaced, I made every effort to avoid a problem here. I contacted the Wilderness Office to notify Cedar Grove Pack Station of the bridge situation. Also, a "Warning" sign about the hazardous bridge was posted at the trail junction of the Middle Fork and Palisades Creek. Fortunately this bridge was rebuilt before any problems were created. This was an amazing and timely effort by the Kings Trail Crew.

LeConte Station Repairs

*A metal patch job on the front door insert of the station was done. This repaired the damage that the bear had done and allowed me to lock up the station safely for the season.

*The broken window shutter was replaced and painted.

*A new metal roof was flown into LeConte at the end of the season and stored in the station for doing the installation next season.

For next season, along with doing the new roof, I'd like to paint the outside of the station and the station floor. (See the Station Needs list for materials needed for this job)

LeConte Solar Electric System

When the solar electric system was installed at LeConte five years ago, the panels were put on the roof. This system never did work right because the roof is

too shaded. Also, the panels on the roof were hard to install and they did damage to the roof. This season I moved the panels 100 feet south of the station to a sunny spot and made a simple frame for them on the ground. The wire that runs from the panels to the station was buried a few inches under the ground. The solar worked perfectly all season long. Also, it makes for a very simple installation. Even at the end of Sept. the system was still charging “full tilt boogy” six hours per day. At the end of the season I replaced the temporary wire with a heavy cable that is specified for long-term underground use.

Visitor Contacts

This season I contacted approx. 1200 park visitors. Visitation seemed to be a bit less than last year probably because it was such a wet summer. Also, there were less foreign hikers this summer than last year, as this may be attributed to the war. Large group visitation such as church and Boy Scout Groups are coming through in a four week period from the last week in July until the week before Labor Day. The North Lake/South Lake loop is definitely one of the most popular loop hikes in our park. Last season many times wilderness permits did not have the park minimum impact regulations stapled on the permit. This season in most cases hikers had this information with the wilderness permit. Once again, the majority of hikers in the area are either doing the JMT or they are doing the North Lake/South Lake loop.

Visitor Assistance

I did assist many hikers this summer in many ways from fixing camp stoves, boot repairs to giving out emergency food. My approach with backpackers is not this: Hi, I’m the ranger can I see your wilderness permit, but Hi, I’m the ranger, how can I help you. Once that you have established that you are the ranger there to help in need, you can check there wilderness permit. On numerous occasions I relayed important messages for hikers through dispatch to make phone calls for them.

Medivacs

On three occasions I called for the helicopter for medivacs. The first medivac was on July 11. At 2100 hrs. a hiker arrived at my station to report an injured lady in his group on Dusy Bench. I packed up emergency gear and oxygen and arrived on scene at 2400 hrs. She reportedly hit her head on a rock and became totally disoriented. We were up with her all night, as she wanted to get up and walk

away. We had to restrain her all night to prevent her from injuring herself further. At 0730 hrs. H-552 came in with (513) John to fly her out to a Fresno hospital. (111) Debbie Brenchley reported to me later in the summer that she had HACE and was not a head injury patient.

On July 18, I flew out a patient that had symptoms of intestinal disease. On August 18, a hiker arrived at the station to report a group member had dislocated his shoulder on Cirque Pass. I contacted (111) Debbie Brenchley with the UTM coordinates and she flew in and medivaced the patient to the Bishop hospital.

On July 13, there was a technical rescue on North Palisades for two injured climbers. (111) was on the scene coordinating this massive rescue effort. On August 9, (111) flew in to medivac a pulmonary adema patient from Palisades Creek and the Middle Fork junction. I was up at Palisades Lakes and on my way back to LeConte Station. There was also the life saving medivac of the girl that fell off the trail above Tehipite and was laying there for four days. Somehow hikers came by and spotted her. This event was also handled by (111) with a hoist effort with the CHP chopper.

I did contact Rainbow Pack Station one time to take out a sick hiker. There was a lady with a head cold that didn't feel strong enough to hike out.

Park Radio

In this area the new repeater tower on Windy did noticeably improve this areas radio transmission capability. This was noticed at Palisades Lakes and at the Bench Lake station. At the Bench Lake station before the new tower, it took a 30 ft. antennae in the tree to be able to transmit. Now with my radio, the Windy repeater can be hit loud and clear from the station.

The area south of Muir Pass from 11,000 ft to 11,500 ft., just below Helen Lake is still "out of range". This is about a 2 mile stretch of trail with lot's of potential for hazard. From Helen Lake up to Muir Pass I had success this season hitting the local R1, which is off of the Evolution repeater. Also, I marked a map of Kings Canyon backcountry showing where the "marginal" and "out of range" areas are for radio transmission.

Simpson Station

I was in the Simpson area several times this season. Repairs were made on the roof of the cabin and to the mechanism that locks the front door. At the beginning of the season the station was thoroughly cleaned. At the end of the season the station was organized and closed down properly for the winter.

Garbage from the season was bagged up and arrangements were made with park service packer D.J. to haul it out on my demobe.

Dusy Basin Forest Service Frog Research Crew

This large established camp continues to be a blight on the area. In talking with these researchers at the end of the season they informed me that periods of one to two weeks throughout the season they were not even at their camp. It was reported to me by one of the researchers that they had a new research site “up north” that was more of a priority to them this season. Unfortunately when they are gone the camp with the large metal box and the tents stays in place. Problems created by this large established camp include the following:

*There are only a few good camping sites around this lake and backpackers create additional impact at this fragile lake by having to select a less appropriate site.

*A big part of what we provide for park visitors is the “feeling” of true wilderness. When there is an established site like this with the metal box, all the tents, lawn chairs, etc, it no longer feels like true wilderness.

*As a result of all of these researchers living here, trails have begun to be established around the lakeshore through the fragile lakeshore grasses. These trails will take many years to renaturalize.

Are we going to allow this camp to stay here indefinitely or are we going to establish a time limit and a deadline for removing the camp. How about three years is our policy for this camp. There time is up and this camp must be removed at the beginning of next season!

Recommendation: I am definitely recommending that this camp be removed next season, so we can begin to restore this area. In the future, as managers of this backcountry, we need to be the ones that select the camping areas for research crews in order to avoid problems like this in the future. Also, should we be allowing researchers other than our own park service crews to be setting up studies in our backcountry.

Ash Mountain Fire Weather

All of the backcountry rangers and crews in the backcountry rely very heavily on the 1600 hr. weather report from Ash Mtn. Fire. Over the years it has consistently been delivered on a reliable basis between 1600 and 1630 hrs. This season it was not. We had the wettest summer season since the last ice age and we would get a weather report during our monitoring times maybe once or twice a week. In Sept., with new management in that office the weather report became more reliable. We do need to make sure that they understand the importance of transmitting this forecast during our monitoring times so that this does not happen again next season.

Law Enforcement

I issued two citations this season. Both of them were for dogs. The standard requirement for all hikers with dogs is that they do not continue their trip once the citation is issued, but they exit the park immediately via the nearest trailhead. If the offender tries to continue their trip, our SOP is that they will be issued a mandatory court appearance. The offender needs to be informed that at that point it is up to the judge's discretion as to the amount of the fine. I make sure that the offender knows that this fine could be extremely substantial.

This hard line on dogs needs to be our consistent approach with all backcountry rangers so the word gets out. There were more dogs that came through the area than I ran into, as evidenced by dog tracks on the trail. Also, most of the locals from the Owens Valley know that the rangers leave at the end of Sept. There does seem to be an increase in dogs brought in later on in the fall.

Muir Hut

Hikers continue to camp on Muir Pass and in the hut. They also continue to burn garbage in the fireplace leaving a ½ burned mess. I was on Muir Pass five times this season and would do the cleanup each time passing through. In August, I rocked in the fireplace to prevent hikers from trying to burn their garbage. I rocked in the fireplace years ago and it remained that way for many years until a few years ago. For some reason, our sign man Steve, unrocked the fireplace when he put the new sign in the hut.

I also did a repair on the front door latch. It is important that this front door remains closed particularly during the winter, otherwise snow will accumulate inside the hut. The roof of the hut leaks like a sieve. I contacted hikers that were in the hut during a rainstorm and they reported to me that there was not a square inch

on the floor that was dry. Do we make an attempt to patch this roof or just leave it alone?

Bench Lake Station

This season I was at Bench on two occasions. In July I repaired and painted the plywood floor to make sure that it makes it through the winter. (see photo in back of report) We are in jeopardy of losing this floor if we do not finish this project next summer. We need to finish the floor with 1” by 10” pine boards.(see materials list in back of report)

Recommendation: Next season when we mobilize Bench Lake we need to fly in the boards. I would like to do this work, since I built the floor and that way I could make sure that it is done right. At the beginning of the season I could do this work.

Bench Lake Station is a vital backcountry station that should be manned every year. While being stationed there two seasons ago, I noticed an obvious increase in visitation here over the past five years. This is due primarily to the increase in Muir Trail Hikers. I estimated two seasons ago that 75% of the hikers I contacted were doing the full Muir Trail. In the past, this station has been an “on again off again” manned station depending on if funding were available. Again this season, with all of the hiker activity in this area, it proved that the trend of high visitation in this area will continue into the future. We no longer have the luxury to not fund Bench Lake every season.

Resource Projects

I did three special resource projects this summer. As mentioned earlier the Muir Hut fireplace was rocked in to prevent the burning of garbage. This will help to keep the hut clean, as regular patrols here will still be needed to keep up on the litter.

Two campsite rehab projects were done in LeConte. One was done at a camp in Big Pete and the other was done at a camp in Little Pete. The camp in Big Pete is small and close to the river. It is too small to accommodate a fire ring, so this fire ring was removed. I removed this fire ring the summer of 02, but backpackers rebuilt it. This time I put a “no fires” sign on a tree in the camp. The camp in Little Pete is also too small for a fire ring, so I tried the same method with the sign in the tree. This fire ring was also removed in the 02 season only to have

it rebuilt by backpackers this season. Both of these camps will be monitored closely next season to make sure that these fire rings are not rebuilt.

Along with this work throughout the season I cleaned out many fire rings and was on trail litter patrol all over the area. Also about 30 fire rings were torn down above 10,000 ft. and 15 fire rings were torn down below 10,000 ft. that were in inappropriate places.

Stock Use

There was a significant amount of stock use in the area this season. Rainbow Pack station started coming regularly into LeConte the first part of August and they continued to have trips into the area through the end of Sept. The word from their packers is that they had their best year ever. Other pack stations that came through the area included: Red's Meadow, Sequoia/Kings Canyon, Mike Morgan, and Mammoth Pack Station. There were also two private stock parties in the area this summer.

Rainbow had a very busy summer for trips. They had 10 individual trips into the area. Most of the time they would camp at Big Pete Meadow, as they preferred this camp for a variety of reasons which include: 1) the drift fence keeps their stock in the area, 2) they prefer this stock camp because it is near the meadow and hidden from the trail.

In meeting with Sylvia Haultain this summer we took a close look at the Big Pete Stock Camp. The meadow had received what appeared to be the maximum amount of grazing for the summer.

In Big Pete there is a very fragile and rare plant group that needs to be protected. As a result, Sylvia has closed a section of the meadow to grazing. Instead of closing the whole meadow to grazing or putting up a fence, we once again are looking for the lowest impact type of method to protect the plants. Sylvia had the idea to put up a map in the stock camp of the meadow that shows the closed section. This sign could be tied to a tree that would make it easy to put up at the beginning of the season and taken down at the end of the season. The packers would then be aware of the closed area and responsible for keeping their stock out of this area.

Recommendation: We need to limit the amount of grazing in Big Pete Meadow. The number of stock nights this summer was 75. We can use this number of stock nights as a limit or quota for grazing Big Pete. Once the quota is met, then the ranger in the area would have the ability to close it to grazing for the rest of the season. Stock parties from then on would be required to camp at either

Little Pete, Ladder Camp or Grouse Meadows or bring in their own feed for camping at Big Pete.

Also, there were numerous trees at the Big Pete camp that were deeply rutted around the tree as a result of stock being tied to the tree.(see photo) This amount of impact in time will kill these fragile lodgepole pines. This illustrates that an alternative method for packers to tie up their stock is needed here. We've tried making hitch rales in the past and this amount of development proved to be excessive. A better alternative that Sylvia and I discussed was to designate two trees that a hitch line would be tied to. This would prove to be a lower impact way to designate where the stock would be tied and would protect the trees. The area that we found has a down tree that will need to be cleared out early next season. (see photo)

Recommendation: Next season we need to designate these two trees to be used for tying a hitch line to. (see photo) We also need to specify to packers using this camp that stock will not be tied to trees in this camp.

Next season in working with the Rainbow Packers we want to reduce their usage of Big Pete Meadow. We can spread out their use by having them camp 1/3 of the time a Ladder Camp. **It should be our goal for next season to establish this camp as a prototype for all stock camps in the park.**

Stock Camp Guide

Rainbow had one extended stock trip this season. This was over Mather, Pinchot and Sawmill Passes. Their young packers met with me inquiring on where to camp and graze their animals on this trip. I marked their map showing them the best stock camps along the way. This also prevented them from camping in inappropriate places. Similarly, Mammoth Pack Station packer, Victor Parker, stopped by the LeConte station inquiring about stock camps from LeConte south to Crabtree Meadows. I marked his map showing where the best camps were and making sure he was clear on the closed areas. I also had the Wilderness Office contact each ranger to the south letting them know the dates this group would be in their area. Evidently each ranger contacted this group as there reportedly were numerous problems that they created that needed to be dealt with.

Recommendation: These two examples from the summer show the need of establishing a stock camp guide for packers showing where the recommended stock camps are throughout the park. Sylvia Haultain is currently working on this

project. Included in this report are locations of good stock camps in Kings Canyon to be used in this guide.

Stock Camps

It is long overdue that we **establish and designate specific stock camps** throughout the park. By establishing stock camps throughout the park and designating them on the “stock camp guide”, we can help direct the packers to the best place to camp and graze their animals. This will also serve to help prevent the packers from camping in inappropriate places. (see appendix) By specifying the trees in the camp that are to be used to tie a hitch line to, we can protect the trees in the camp. Some of these camps will need to “improved” in a similar way to the Big Pete camp by clearing the area where the hitch line will be tied.

Bear Canisters

Bear canisters are still continuing to work very well in the area. Most hikers coming through LeConte have a canister. In spite of the additional weight, most hikers seem to be content with the food protection that they offer. There were two bears to my knowledge that were traveling around in LeConte this summer and I never heard a report of a bear getting food this summer.

Rainbow pack station on one occasion brought in a group that did not have food storage capability. This group was camping near the ranger station and I asked them to bring their food over in the evenings to store it in the ranger station. Last season a couple of times Rainbow brought in groups that did not have food storage capability.

We need to work with Rainbow and all pack stations to make sure that they have food storage containers for all their groups coming into the park. Now, I think that they are charging their guests for food storage rental. **This should be a service that they are required to offer for free.**

Recommendation: Currently canisters are required for hikers coming over Bishop Pass if they are planning to camp in Dusy Basin. Hikers that do not plan to camp in Dusy are exempt. I definitely recommend changing this regulation requiring all hikers coming over Bishop Pass to have a canister.

Signs

The brown trail sign that we use in the park has become a target for graffiti. Hikers scraping words on them have defaced over half of the signs in my area. (see photo) These signs are very easy to mark up. Evidently Yosemite has a sign that is practically vandal proof because it is not painted. It is being proven that we made a big mistake a few years ago when park wide we changed out the signs to this painted brown style. The defacing of these signs looks very bad and will never be resolved by replacing the signs. It is also proving to be very costly, as each sign will need to be replaced every few years when it is marked up.

Conclusion

It was another awesome season in the backcountry. The opportunity to work with this park as a backcountry ranger is one of the best jobs in the world. It could also be considered to be one of the most challenging jobs in the world. Hiking around with a forty pound pack in some of the most rugged terrain in North America is certainly a huge challenge.

One of the biggest challenges that we face in the future in managing this magnificent wilderness is to protect the water quality. It continues to get worse every year due to the stock and human waste contaminating the water sources. The most fragile areas are the high elevation lake basins. It is time that we take a close look at stock use in Sequoia and Kings Canyon backcountry.

Currently, along the Muir Trail, some of the lake basins are closed to grazing. This was done for the obvious reason that the impact got so heavy and devastating that the closure was made. **What is the cause of the incredible amount of algae slime that is growing in Rae Lakes.** These lakes are literally infested with an algae growing in the lakes. It is not an algae that is growing on the rocks on the bottom of the lakes, but a unique form of slimy algae that grows thick like “algae clouds” in the water. **Has the cause of this ever been studied by the park?** No other high country lake that I’ve ever seen has an algae slim like Rae Lakes. Certainly, a common sense observation would be that it is a result of fecal bacteria contaminating the water source- human and stock. Unfortunately, the closure of Rae Lakes to stock grazing was made too late. The algae slime in this lake is irreversible and may continue to get worse.

We are doing many things right as managers of this wilderness, but there are problems that we must face up to that require innovative ideas and new regulations that will be controversial. A big part of our responsibility in backcountry management is to understand what problems exist. It is our job as backcountry rangers to provide this information to management. Then it is up to management to work within the system to affect the changes and make new regulations that protect this magnificent resource.

