

Backpacking the High Sierra Trail February 24, 2021 David Skurnik



“The Little Brother to the John Muir Trail”



The High Sierra Trail (HST) is a 71-mile crossing of California's High Sierras, starting from the west in Sequoia National park, summiting Mt Whitney, and ending in Whitney Portal near Lone Pine, California.

In this presentation we will cover:

- Overview of the trail
- History of the HST
- Travel Logistics
- Route Planning
- Recommended gear
- Slideshow from my trip in September 2014



Backpacking in the California Sierras



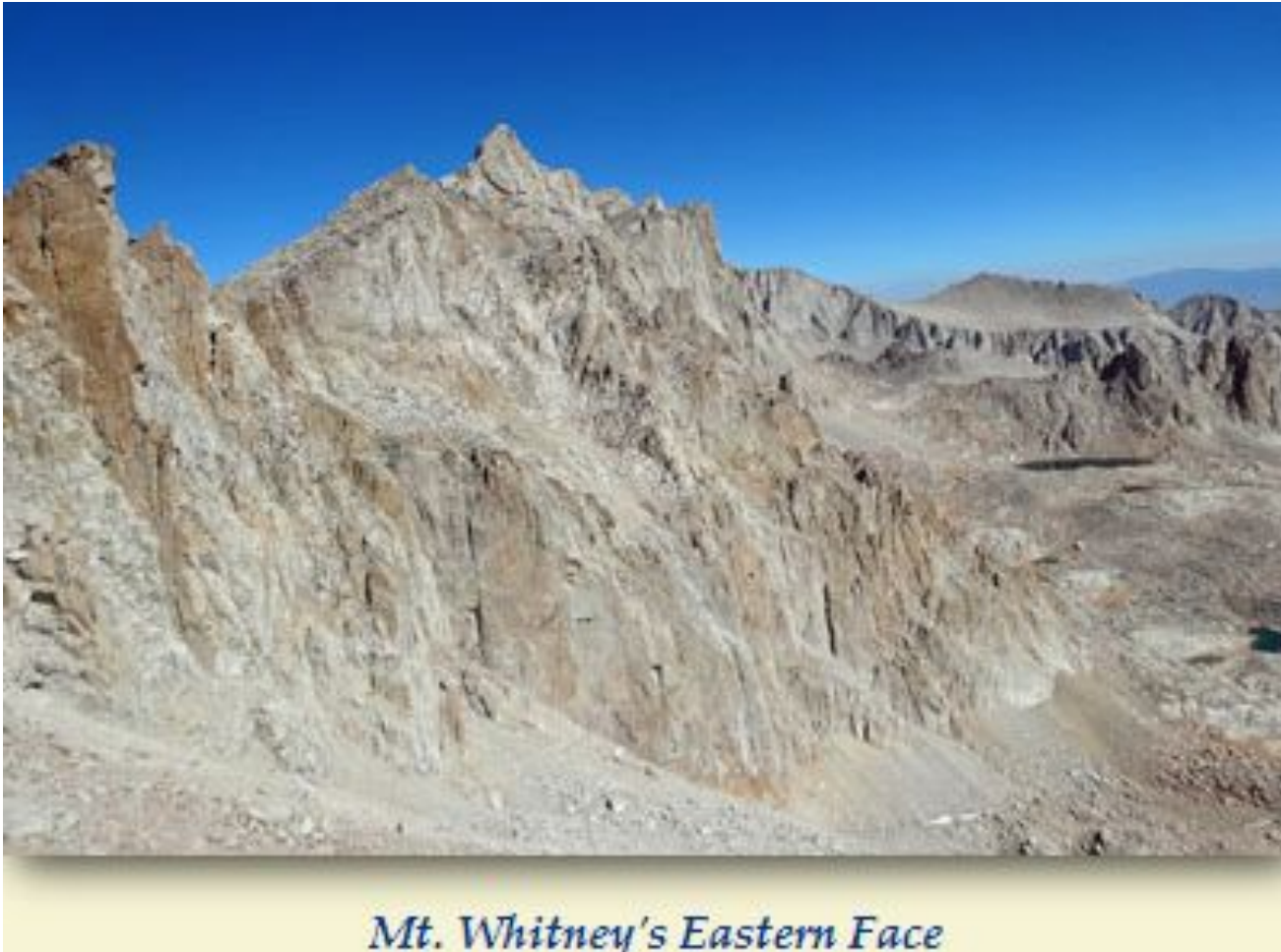
Cathedral Lakes, Yosemite National Park



Big Pine Lakes



Overview of the HST



Mt. Whitney's Eastern Face

High Sierra Trail - Key Facts

Location: Sequoia National Park
Trailhead: Crescent Meadow, elevation 6,687 feet
First pass: Kaweah Gap 10,700 feet
Lowest point (midway): Kern River Canyon 6,705 feet
Highest point: Mt. Whitney, 14,508 feet
Whitney Portal: 8,323 feet
Total elevation gain: ~15,000 feet
Total elevation loss: ~13,000 feet
Hiking Distance: 71 miles
Best seasons: Mid-summer through fall

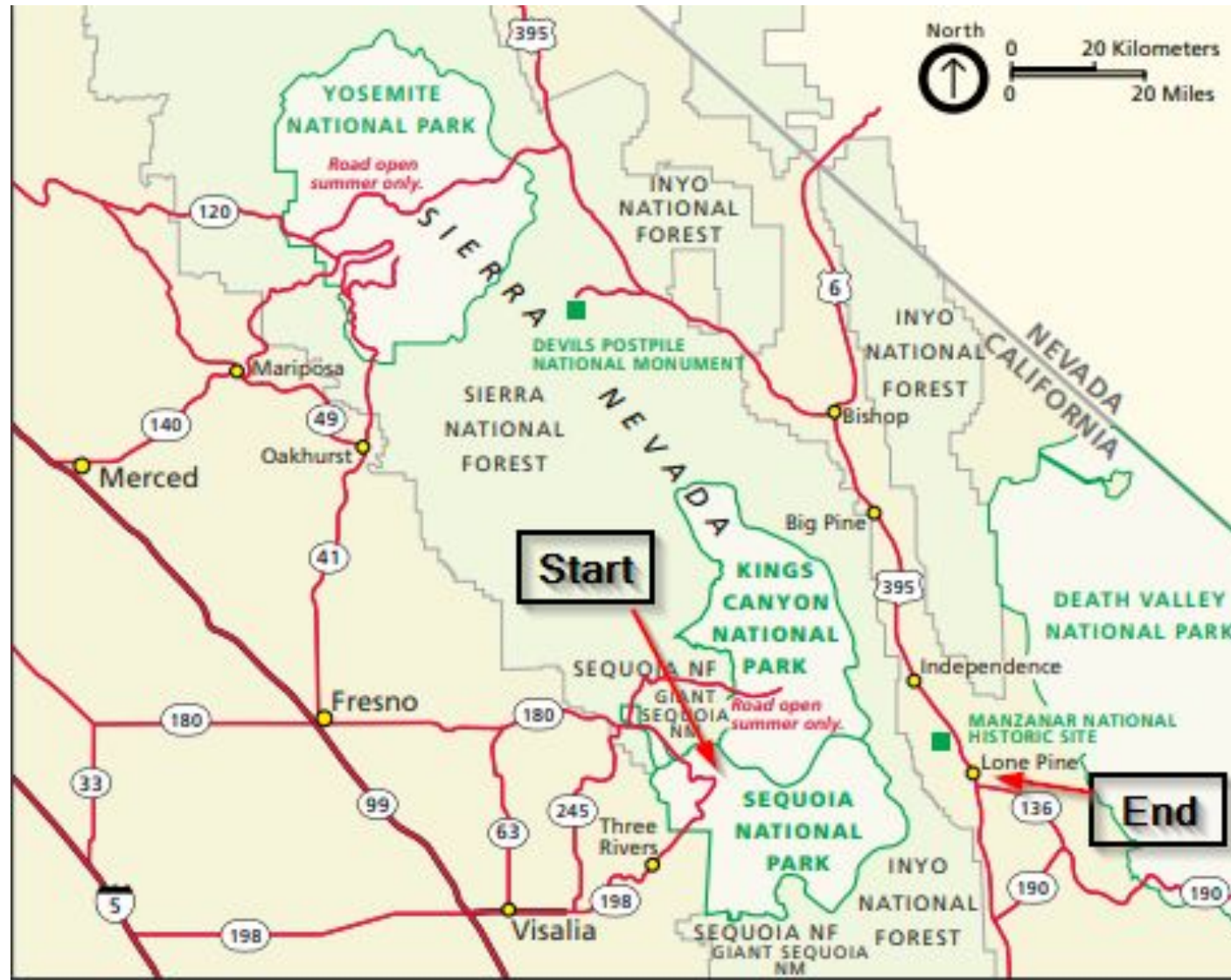
← Whitney Portal 71



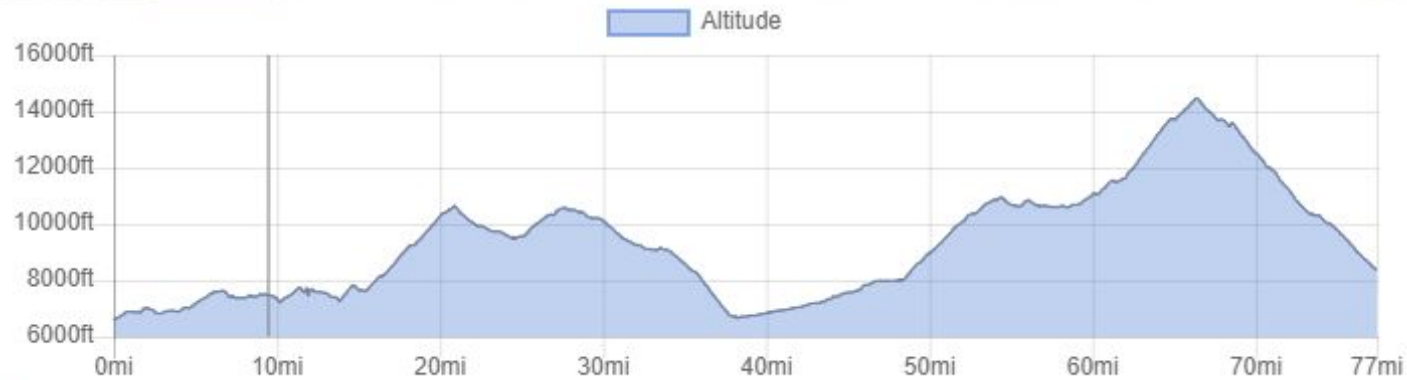
Sequoia Kings Canyon National Park



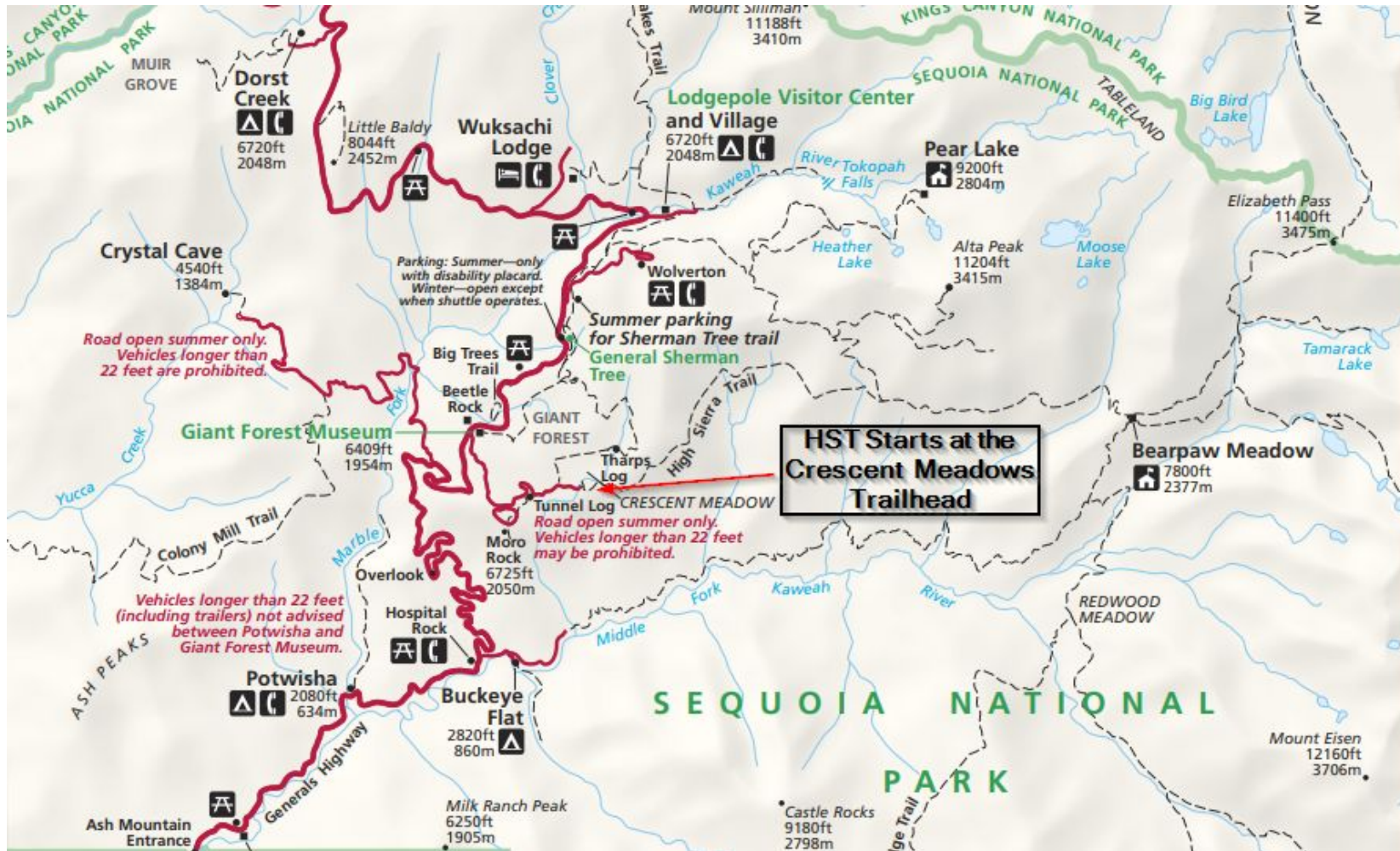
HST: Start and End Point



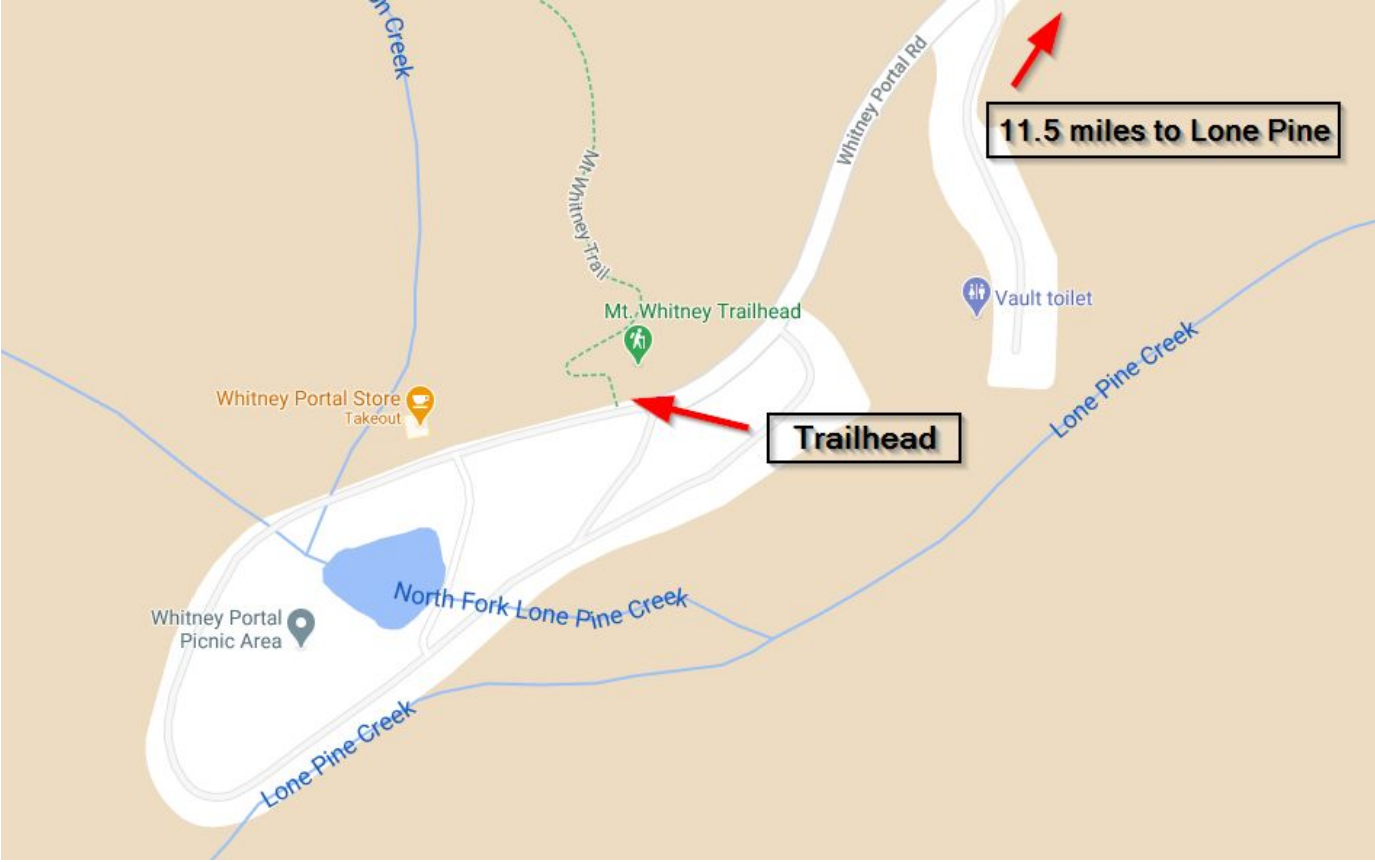
The HST in One View



HST Start: Crescent Meadow Trailhead



HST End: Whitney Portal



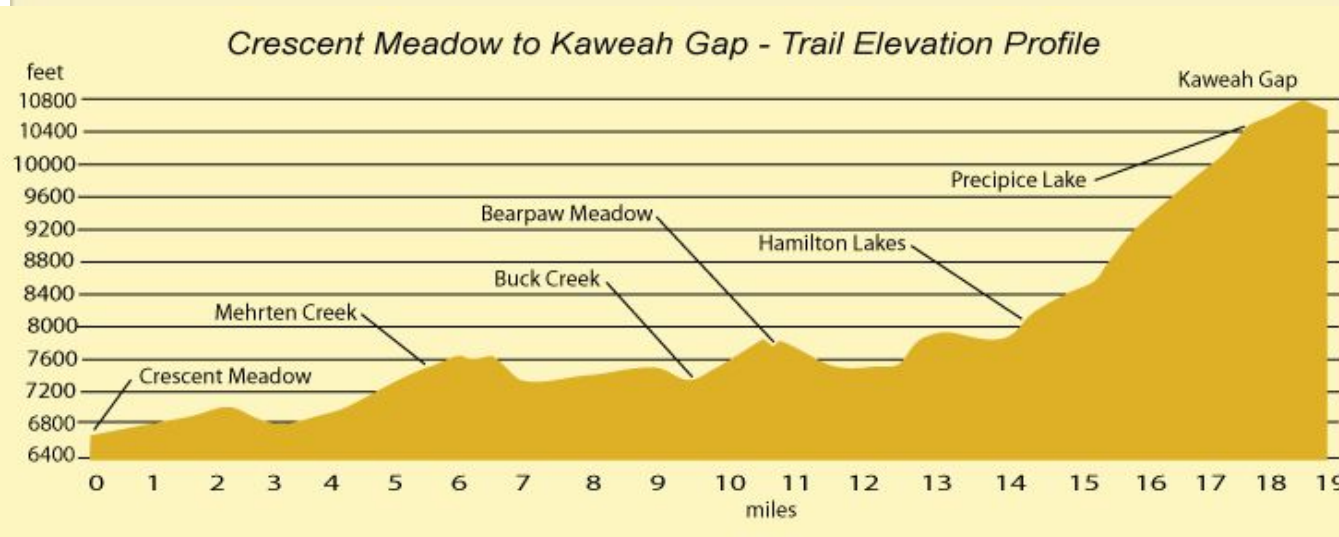
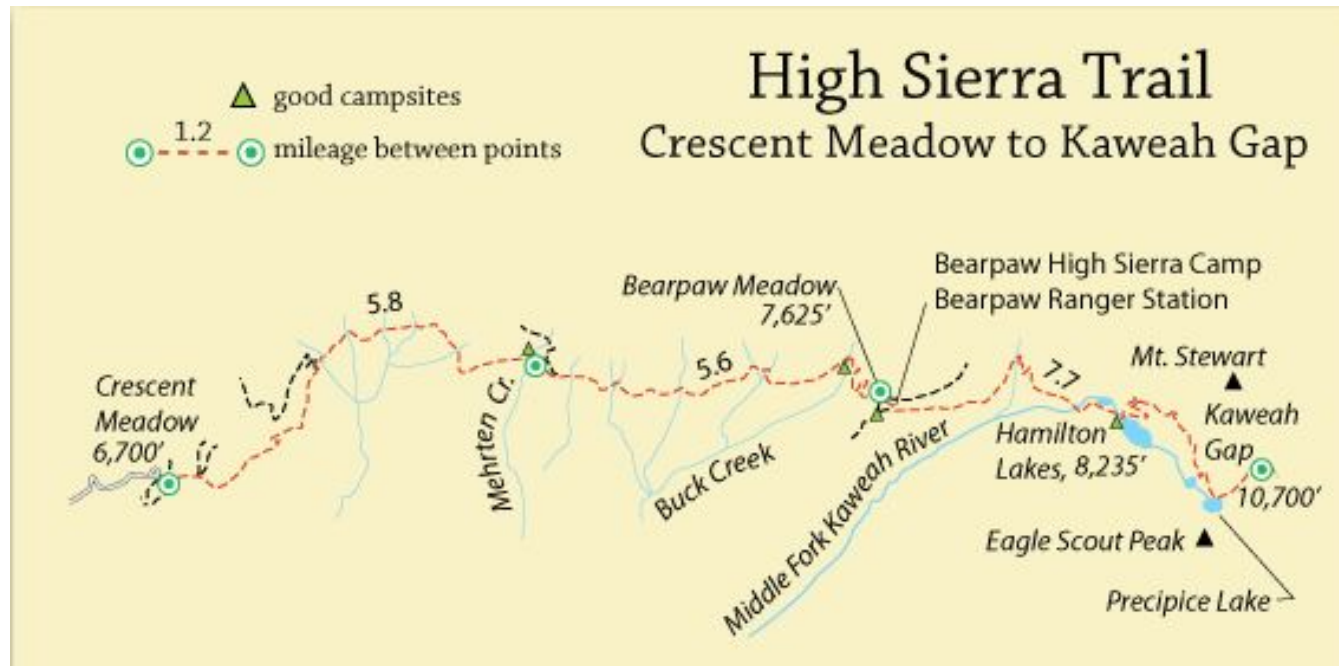
Whitney Portal Store and Restaurant



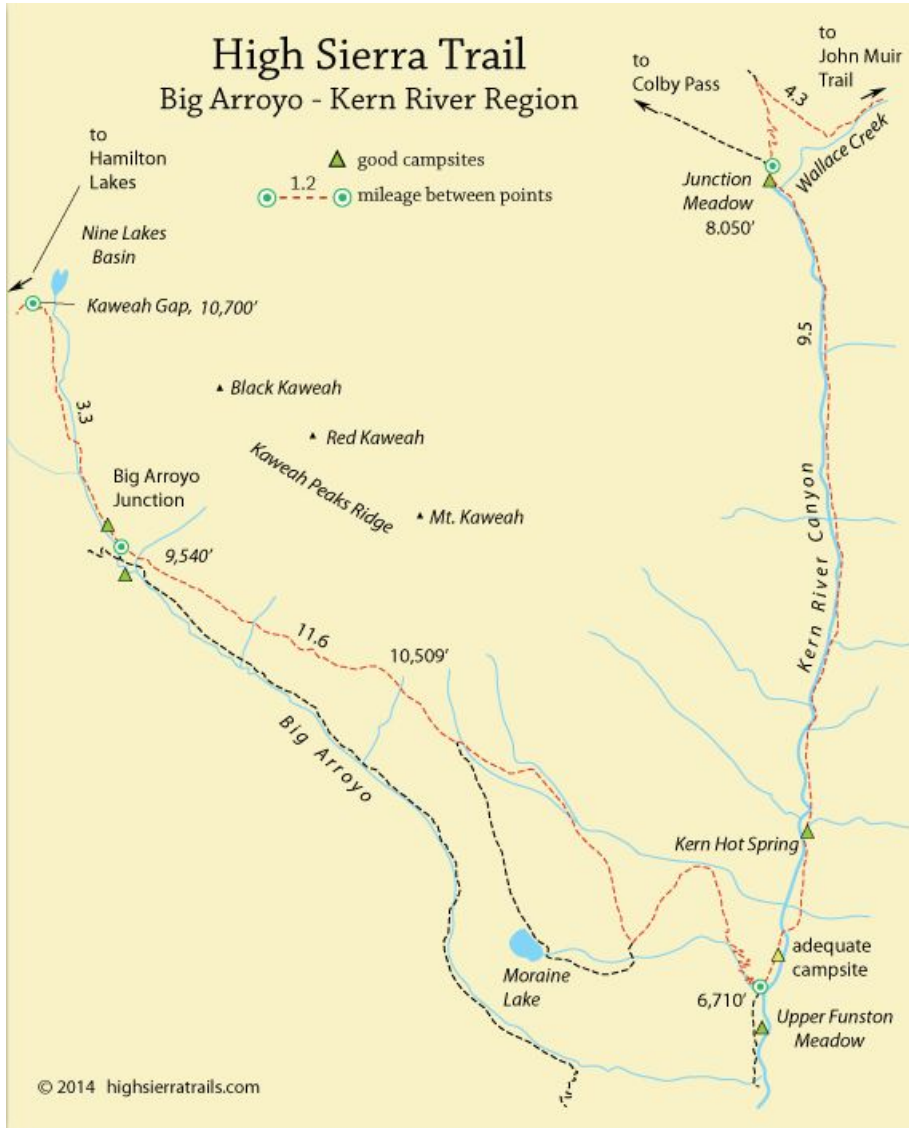
Famous pancake breakfast and burgers at the Portal Store



Crescent Meadow to Kaweah Gap



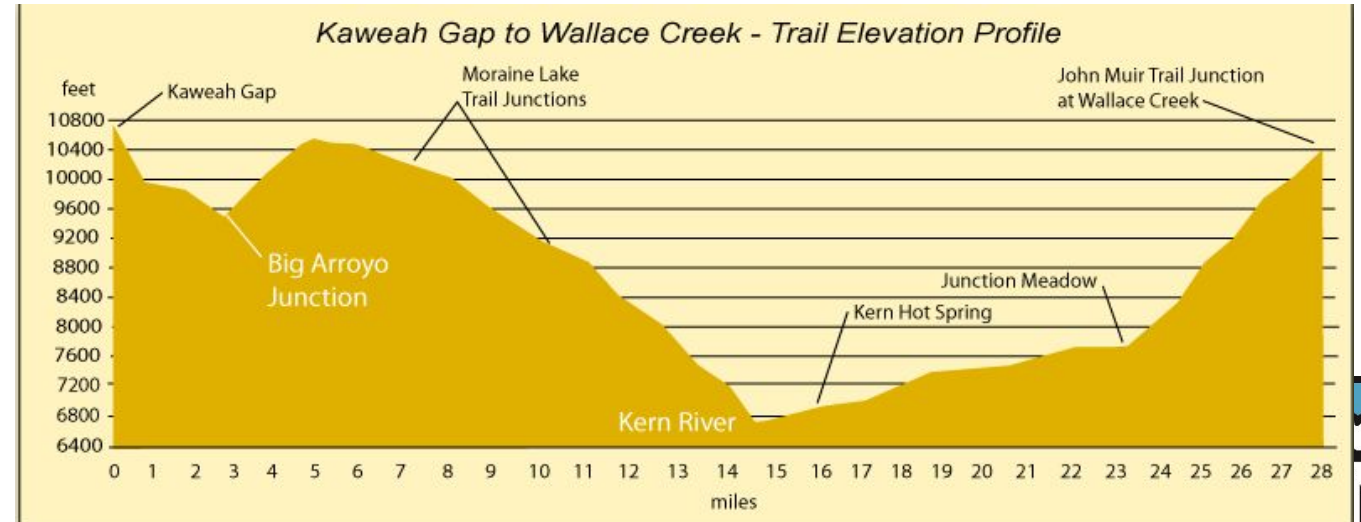
Kaweah Gap to Junction Meadows



Kaweah Gap

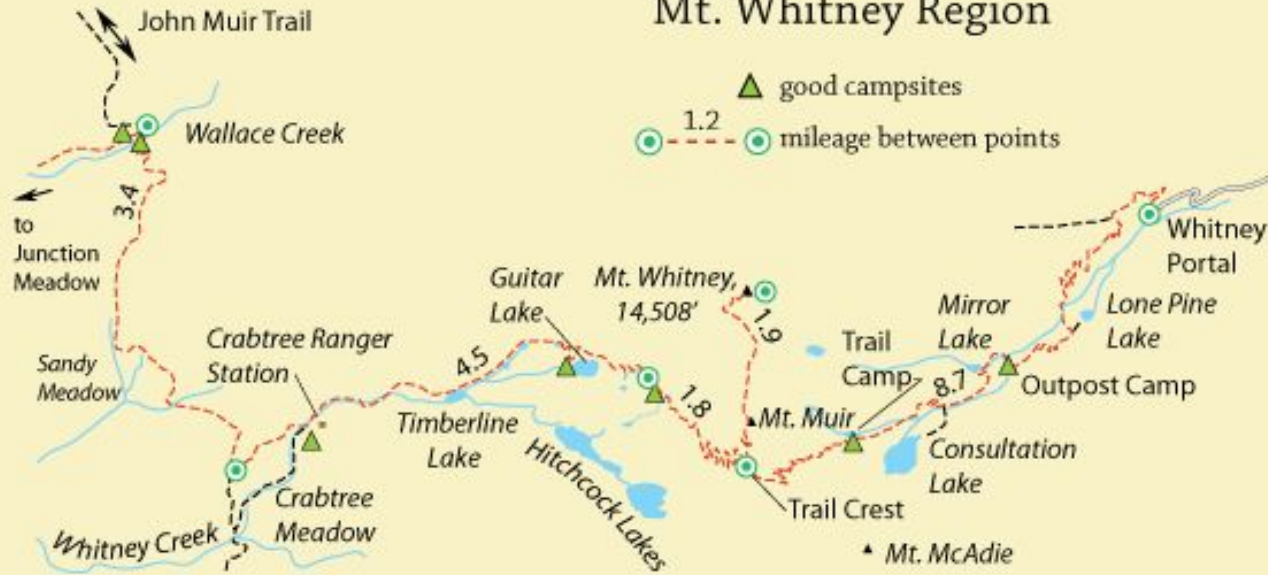


Kern Hot Springs

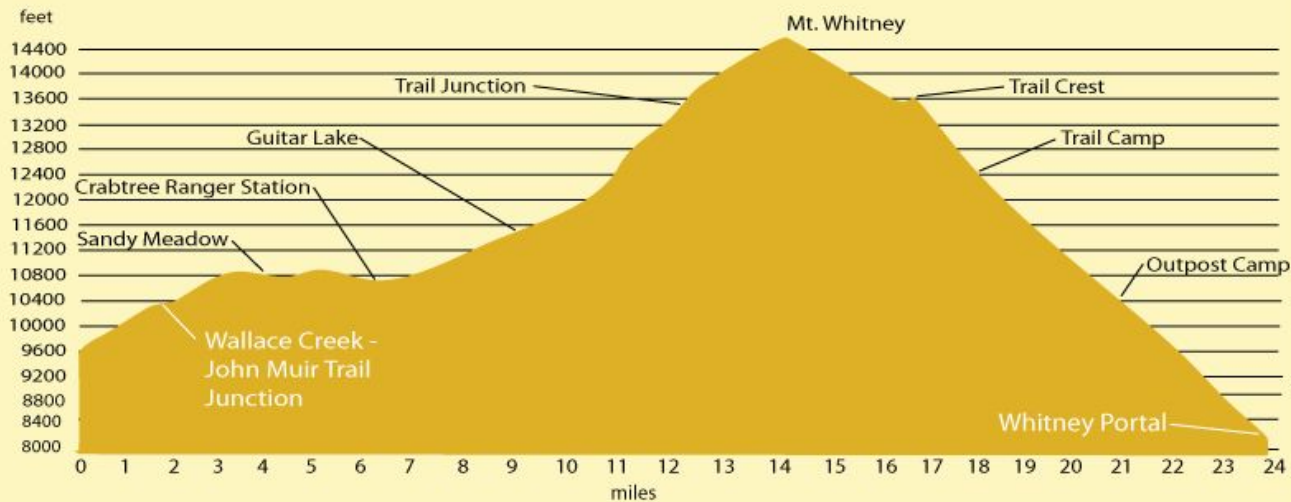


Mt. Whitney Region

High Sierra Trail Mt. Whitney Region



Wallace Creek to Whitney Portal - Trail Elevation Profile



Guitar Lake



Crabtree Ranger Station



History of the HST

For the most definitive history of the High Sierra Trail, watch this video, available on YouTube:

“High Sierra Trail: Gentle Ribbon of Rock” by ranger Bill Tweed

Here are some highlights from the video:

- Sequoia National Park, established in 1890, originally contained what is now just the western region of today’s park.
- It was founded primarily to protect and preserve the Giant Sequoia trees, which grow only in the western half of the park.
- In 1926, the park tripled in size, and now encompassed the High Sierra region all the way to Mt. Whitney. There were, however, almost no trails or roads connecting the original park to the new section to the east.
- A grand vision was proposed to build a trail that would connect the western region of the park to Mt Whitney. The trail was started in 1928. At that time, the High Sierra Trail was the first trail in the Sierras built exclusively for recreation.
- The trail was finished in the fall of 1932, during the height of the depression. Despite the astonishing risks and lack of modern-day safety precautions, no lives were lost in its construction. At one point there were over 80 brave men at work on the trail.
- The park service has not undertaken a trail building project of this magnitude since then!



When Can You go?

Foot travel in the High Sierras is generally limited in the spring by snowmelt, and in the fall by early snowstorms.

Earliest:

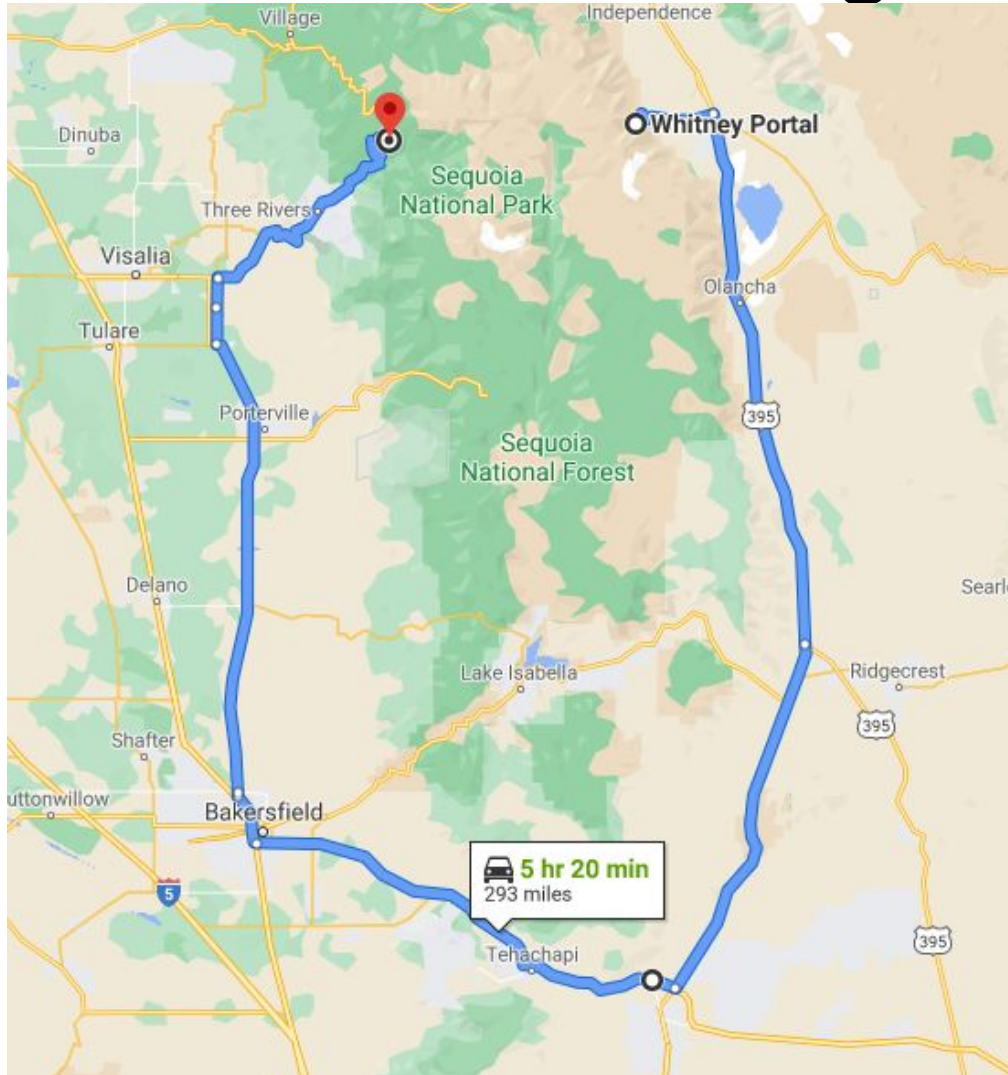
- In low snow years the trail might be safely traveled in early June.
- In high snow years, this safe travel might be delayed until mid to late June
- Beware: the mosquitoes usually hatch right after the snow melts!

Latest:

- In the fall, you are gambling against an early snowstorm. It is usually a safe bet to go as late as mid September, getting a bit riskier by October 1.
- We did our trip in the first week of September, and we were very lucky with perfect weather, and no mosquitoes! There in fact had been a snowstorm just the week before, which resulted in many otherwise dry creeks running with fresh snowmelt. Consequently, we had no trouble finding water on the route.



Travel Logistics –Driving Only



The start and end points of the HST are about 300 driving miles apart, about 5 1/2 hours of summer driving. If you are driving, and your group has more than 1 car, then it is feasible to do a car shuttle, although it will take a long day of driving to do it.

Volunteer drivers can drop a car at Whitney Portal, and then drive back to meet the rest of the group waiting at Crescent Meadows. That is not such a bad thing, since the non drivers can spend the day acclimatizing to the altitude (6700 ft) and can explore the magnificent Giant Sequoia trees.

The first night can be spent at a campground near the trailhead, to further help with altitude adjustment.



Travel Logistics: Flying from the Northwest Using Public Transport Only

- From Seattle fly to either Fresno or Bakersfield
- Use public transport, such as local or regional bus, to Visalia
- Pickup camp fuel or fuel cannisters on the way. There are plenty of outdoor shops in Fresno and Bakersfield, but fewer in Visalia.
- Spend the night at one of the hotels in Visalia that is on the pickup route of the Sequoia Shuttle (advance reservations required) Note: Sequoia Shuttle suspended operation for the entire summer of 2020 due to the Covid-19 pandemic.
- Ride the Sequoia Shuttle from Visalia to Crescent Meadows trailhead (2 hours)

Hike the High Sierra Trail and climb Mt Whitney! Arrive one week later at Whitney Portal

- Have a burger at the store, then thumb a ride (11.5 miles) to Lone Pine.*
- Stay the night in Lone Pine at a hotel or the Lone Pine Hostel
- Next morning, ride the Eastern Sierra Transit bus from Lone Pine to Reno airport (6 ½ hour bus ride)
- Fly home, Reno to Seattle.

*counting on thumbing a ride has inherent risks. We got a ride in less than 15 minutes



Travel Partners



Alaska Airlines: Seattle – Fresno and Reno - Seattle



Greyhound Bus: Fresno - Visalia



Sequoia Shuttle: Visalia – Crescent Meadows



Thumb: Whitney Portal – Lone Pine



Lone Pine Hostel



Eastern Sierra Transport: Lone Pine - Reno



Route Planning

- ❑ There is no route planning required – there is only one trail, and it has been unchanged since 1932
- ❑ The trail is very easy to follow, is well graded, and all junctions with crossing trails are well marked. (This could be different in snow or bad weather)
- ❑ The only decisions to be made are how far to hike each day, and where to camp each night. There are some well-known recommendations for this.



Which way?



Recommended Hiking and Camping Itinerary

Day 1: Crescent Meadows to Bearpaw Meadow 11.4 miles

Bearpaw Meadows has many campsites available with bear storage vaults. The commercial Bearpaw Meadow Camp is a tent hotel/wilderness resort run by the park concessionaire. There is a small store.

Day 2: Bearpaw Meadow to Hamilton Lakes, Precipice Lake or Kaweah Gap 6-8 miles.

East of Bearpaw begins the ascent of the Great Western Divide. This is one of the most strenuous and spectacular sections of the trail, so it is worthwhile taking it slow and camping at one of these spots. Beyond Hamilton Lake there is nowhere to go but up past Precipice Lake into the alpine zone above tree level. There are a variety of spectacular camping sights along the trail.

Day 3: Kaweah Gap to Moraine Lake or Upper Funston Meadows 12 miles

This is relatively easy day of hiking. The trail makes a moderate ascent of up the north wall of Big Arroyo, then descends to the bottom of Kern Trench. There are good campsites at Moraine lake or Upper Funston Meadows.



Day 4: To Junction Meadow 13.7 miles from Moraine Lake; 15.5 miles from Upper Funston. Here the hike climbs gradually along the forested banks of the Kern River. About 4 miles past Upper Funston Meadows, Kern Hot Springs provides a welcome respite for the weary hikers. The water temperature from the spring is about 115 degrees, and there are several concrete bathtubs that mix with the cold water from the spring to moderate the temperature. After bathing, the trail continues along the river, gradually climbing to a campsites at Junction Meadows, elevation 8050 ft.

Day 5: Junction Meadow to Crabtree Meadow, 8.9 miles.

The trail leaves the Kern River and begins the ascent of Mt. Whitney. As the trail climbs a series of switchbacks along Wallace Creek, the views of the Great Western Divide and Kaweah Gap unfold behind you. The trail joins the John Muir trail after 4.3 miles of climbing. After 4 days of mostly solitude, here you will join the procession of Muir Trail hikers who are nearing the end of their 210-mile adventure. Another 3.2 miles take you to Crabtree Meadow with abundant campsites. Guitar Lake, a further 4.5 miles is the last campsite with water before the Whitney climb.



Day 6: To The summit of Mt. Whitney 9 miles.

With water bottles filled from Guitar Lake, begin the ascent of a long traverse, transitioning to a series of switchbacks to Trail Crest. Here you may drop your backpack to ascend the rocky, open rocky spur route on the west side of the Sierra Crest. The summit of Mt. Whitney at 14,503 ft., is surprisingly flat and spacious and does not resemble much of peak. Dozens of hikers can easily enjoy the view without crowding. Return to Trail Crest, fetch your pack, and continue over the crest to descend the famous 100 switchbacks to Trail Camp, 12,400 ft., or other campsites further along the trail.

Day 7: To Whitney Portal 7 miles.

From Trail Camp, descend to Whitney Portal, 8000 ft. Enjoy a snack at the Portal store, and thumb a ride to Lone Pine.



Recommended Summer Gear for the HST

- Lightweight backing gear is recommended because of the long climbs and high attitude
- The summer nights can be very cold, so a good 20 deg or better bag is needed.
- California weather in the summer is generally fair, but a flash thunderstorm can happen in the Sierras any time. It can also snow any time in the summer, although it is unlikely the snow will stick long. Most people do not bring any snow travel gear.
- A lightweight 3-season tent is typically adequate
- Good sun protection is essential – wide brimmed hat, sunscreen and sunglasses
- Your food must be protected from bears and critters *everywhere* on the trail. Before Crabtree Meadow, all the campsites have food storage lockers. There are no storage lockers in the Whitney zone beyond Crabtree Meadow, so bear cannisters are mandatory there. Since your food will be mostly depleted by then, you can likely get by with 1 large cannister for every two or three people.
- There are trail toilets in most of the campsites before Crabtree Meadows, but in the Whitney zone it is mandatory to carry your waste out. Bring at least 3 WAG bags per person.



Wilderness Permits

- Obtaining permits can be the most difficult part of the trip
- Permits for the John Muir Trail are very difficult to get, and some can wait years to get one
- Permits for the HST are known to be in less demand than for the JMT, but that may change in the future. The Covid-19 pandemic has kindled an awakening in wilderness travel
- Permits are now obtained the online portal reservation.gov



Slideshow from Our Trip in September 2014



From Left to Right: David Skurnik, Joshua Skurnik, Andrew Reynoldson,
Mount Whitney summit, Sept 6, 2014



Day 0 - Travel



Lunch in Fresno



BIG 5 in Fresno had stove fuel for the trusty, but loud, MSR Dragonfly



Waiting for the bus in Fresno



Our ride...



Day 1 Crescent Meadow to Bearpaw Meadow



Day 1. At the Trailhead, Crescent Meadow



Heading for Bearpaw Meadow



Tribute to the Trail Builders



You are standing at the start of an amazing footpath that has an inspired story. From here – you can hike to the Sierra Nevada’s highest peaks.

In the 1920’s Congress extended Sequoia National Park eastward from the sequoia groves to the crest of the Sierra Nevada.

Superintendent John White knew that people needed access to the new park area. Rather than build roads, he envisioned a “High Sierra Trail” from the Giant forest to Mount Whitney.

For his trail building project, White set forth two criteria: minimal damage to the land and as few up and downs as possible. Despite the steep, rocky terrain, trail crews met his challenge. Using White’s route, hikers today can travel from sequoia grove to the Sierra Crest with remarkable ease for such a rugged landscape.



To Bearpaw Meadow



On the trail to Bearpaw Meadow



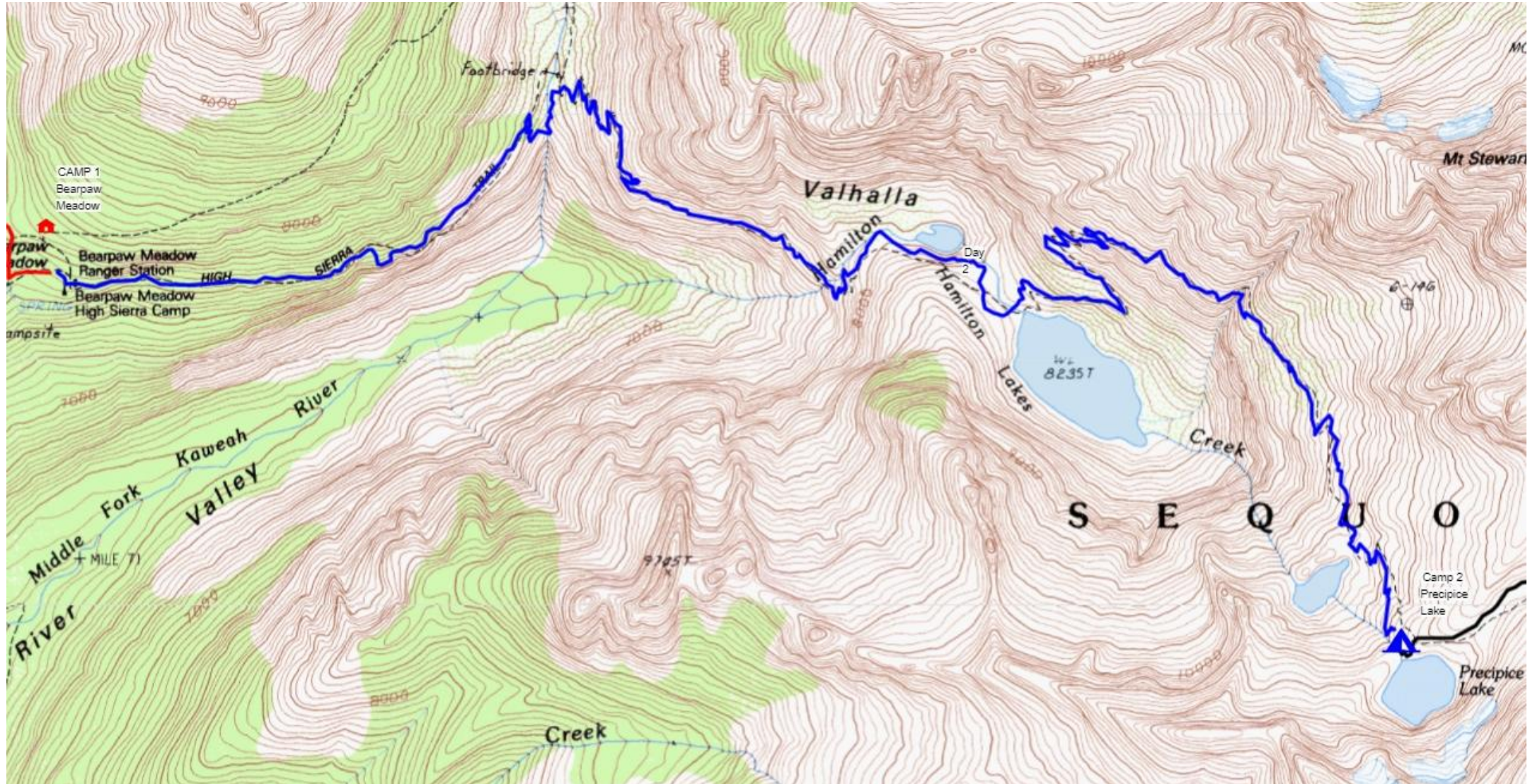
Camp 1 – Bearpaw Meadow



You can always count on the Eagle Scout to build the campfire



Day 2: Bearpaw Meadow to Precipice Lake



Day 2: Bearpaw Meadow to Precipice Lake





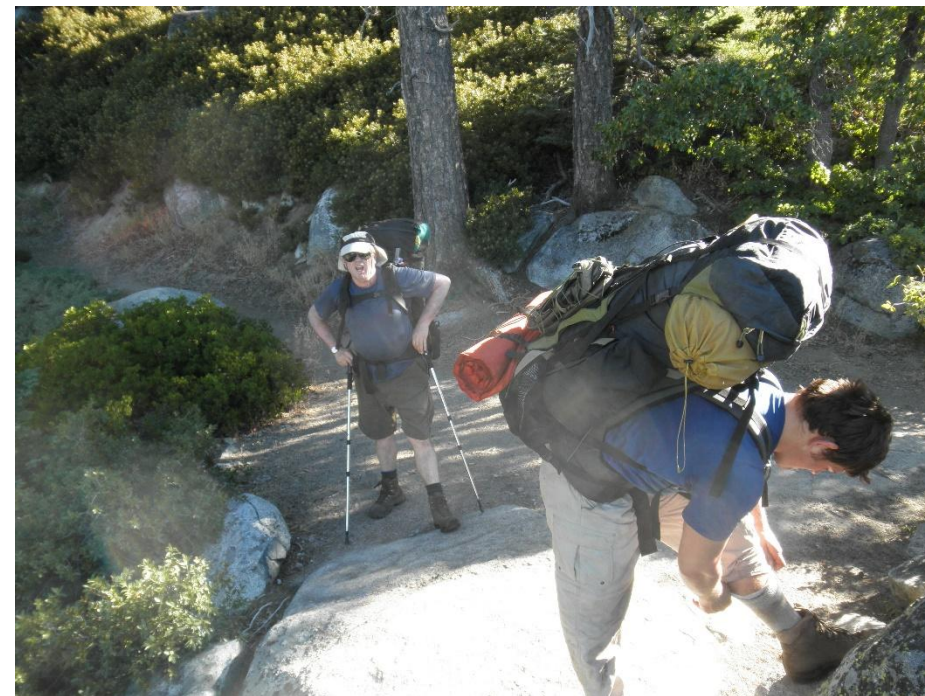
Where needed, the trail builders blasted tunnels in the rock



Climbing Up To Precipice Lake



Still Climbing...



Hamilton Lake



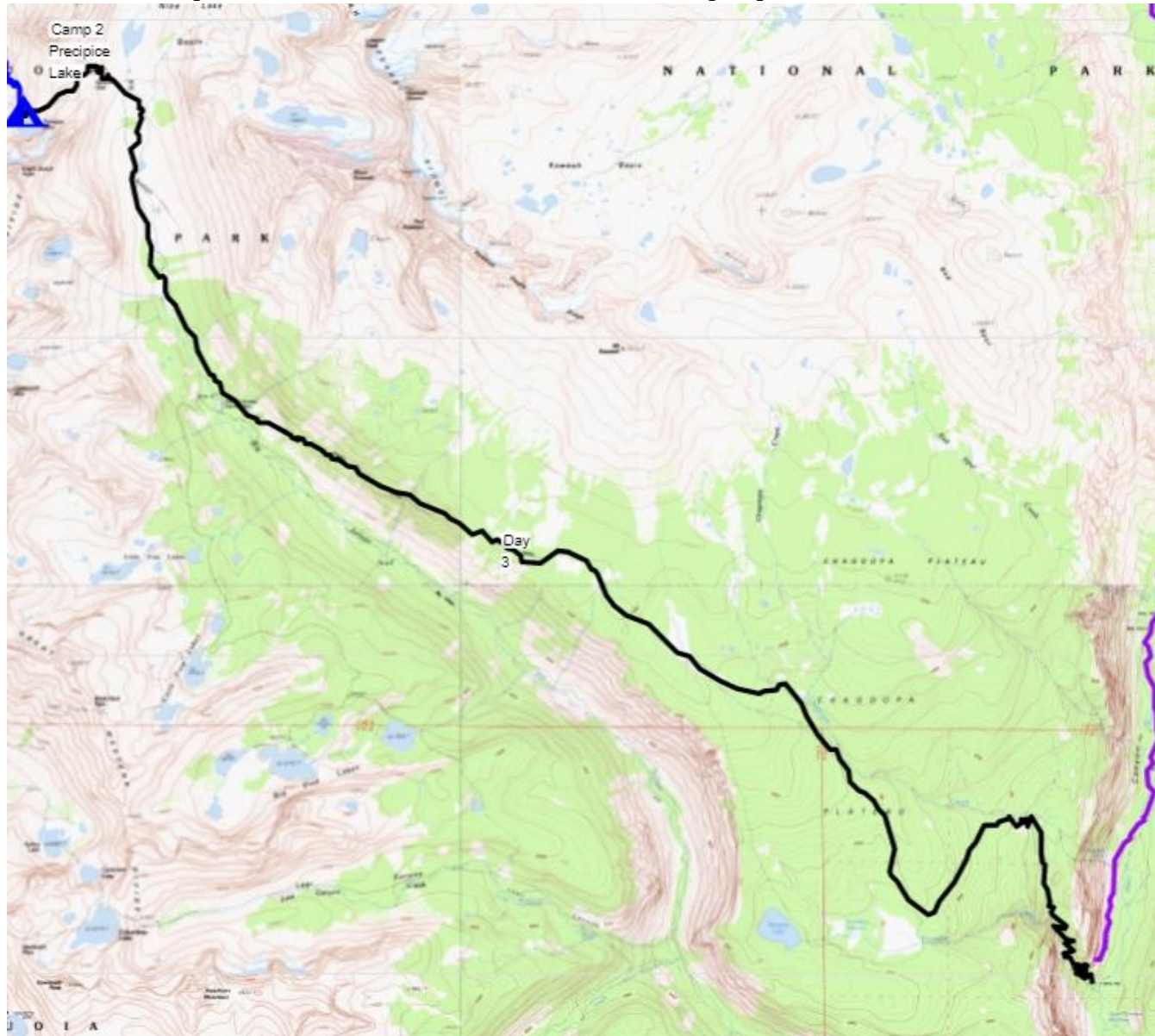
Camp 2: Precipice Lake



Starry night – no tents needed



Day 3: Precipice Lake to Upper Funston Meadow



Day 3 Precipice Lake to Upper Funston Meadow



Descending the Big Arroyo



The Big Arroyo



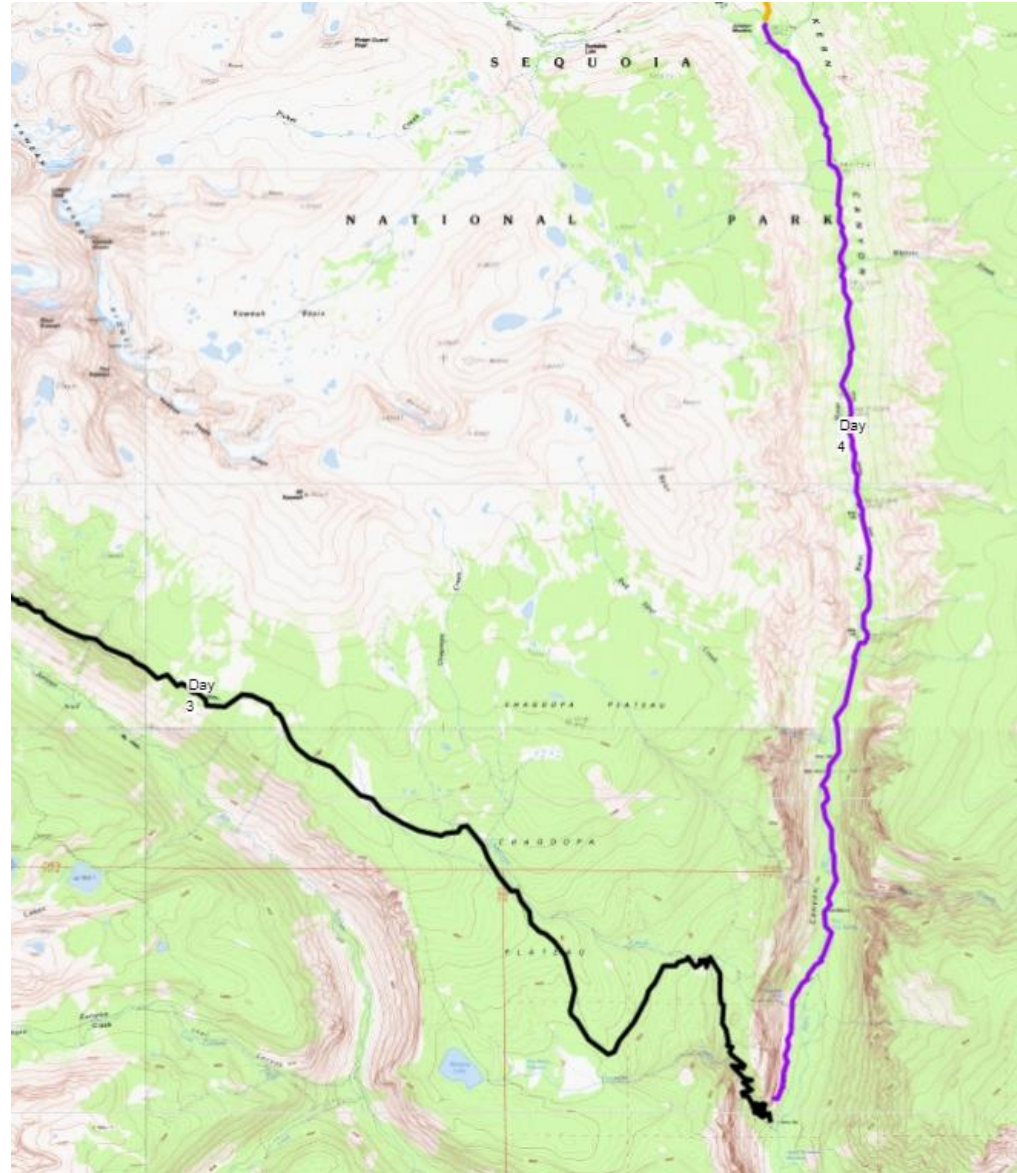
Still Descending



Camp 3: Upper Funston Meadow



Day 4: Upper Funston Meadow to Junction Meadow



Day 4 The Kern River



Up the Kern River Valley



Blisters!!



Serious Hiking



Searching for Kern Hot Springs....



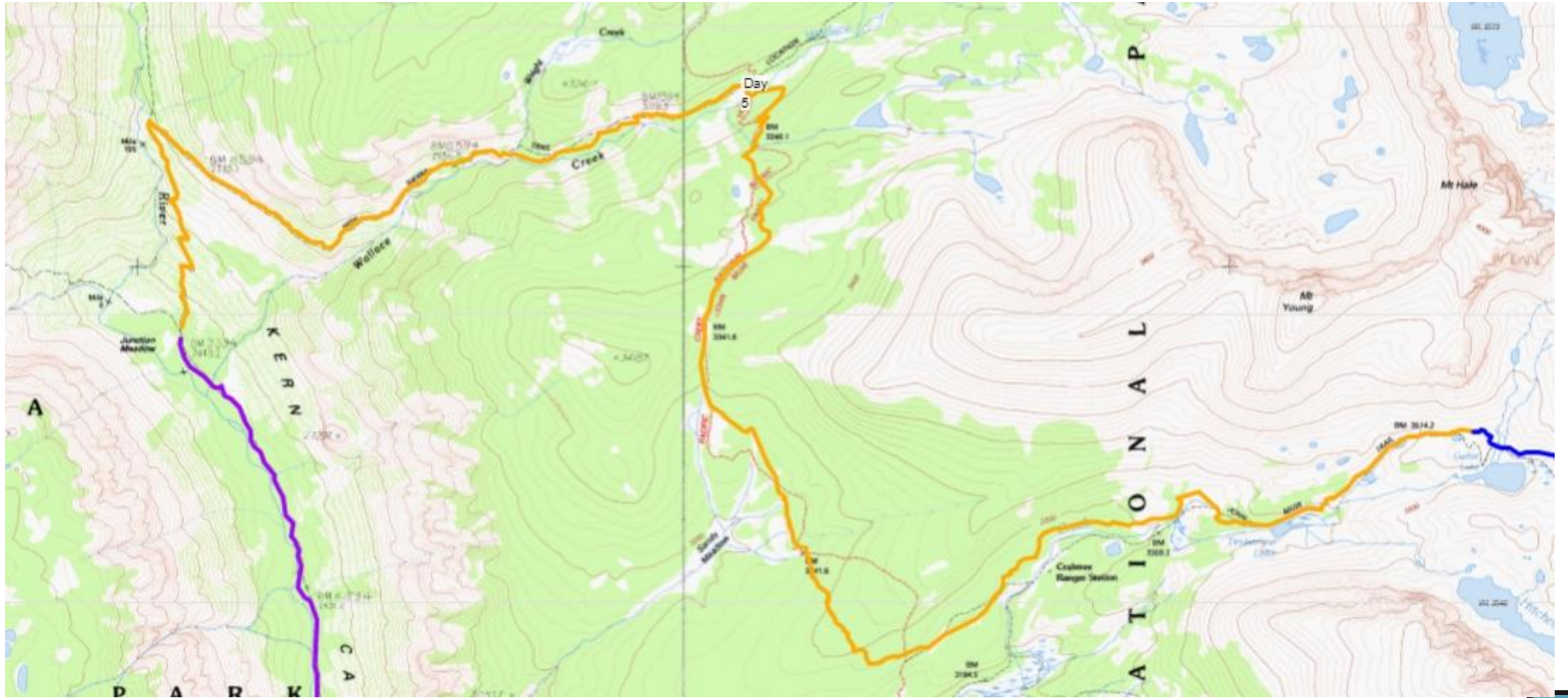
Kern Hot Springs



Camp 4 Junction Meadow, 8050 ft.



Day 5: Junction Meadow to Guitar Lake



Day 5 Junction Meadow to Guitar Lake



Nothing like an early morning climb



On the Way to the Muir Trail



Climbing up above
Wallace Creek



Wallace Creek



Junction With the John Muir Trail - PCT



Crabtree Meadow



The Trail to Guitar Lake



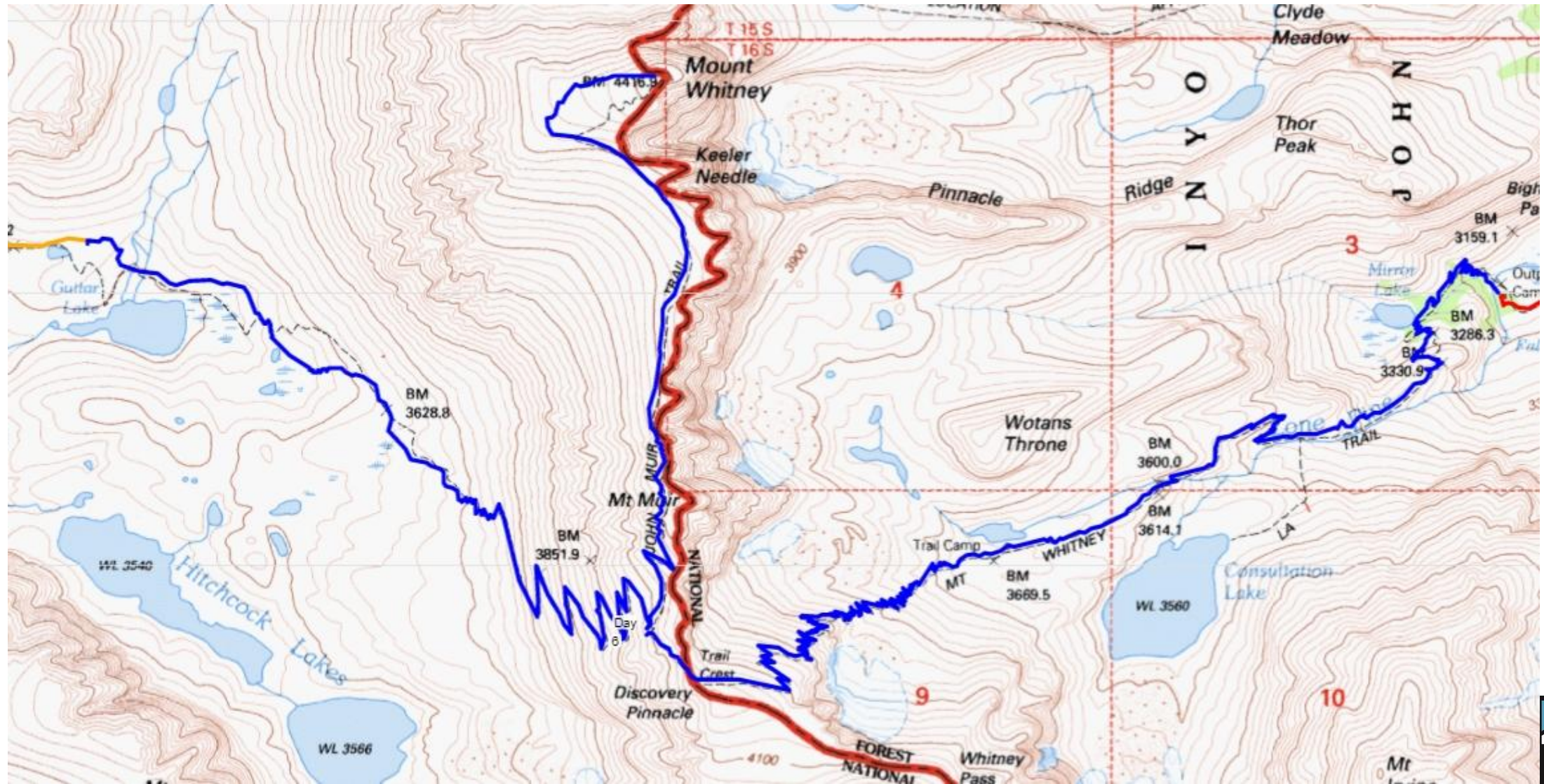
Guitar Lake



Camp 5: Guitar Lake 11,500 ft.



Day 6: Climb Mount Whitney



Day 6: Climb Mount Whitney



Guitar Lake in the early morning



The Sierra Crest



Guitar Lake From Above



Trail Crest, Elevation 13,600



Dropping Our Packs at Trail Crest



On the Way up to Whitney Summit



The Final Push to the Top



The Summit, Elevation 14,496 ft.



The Summit Register



Summit Photos



Retrieve Our Packs at Trail Crest



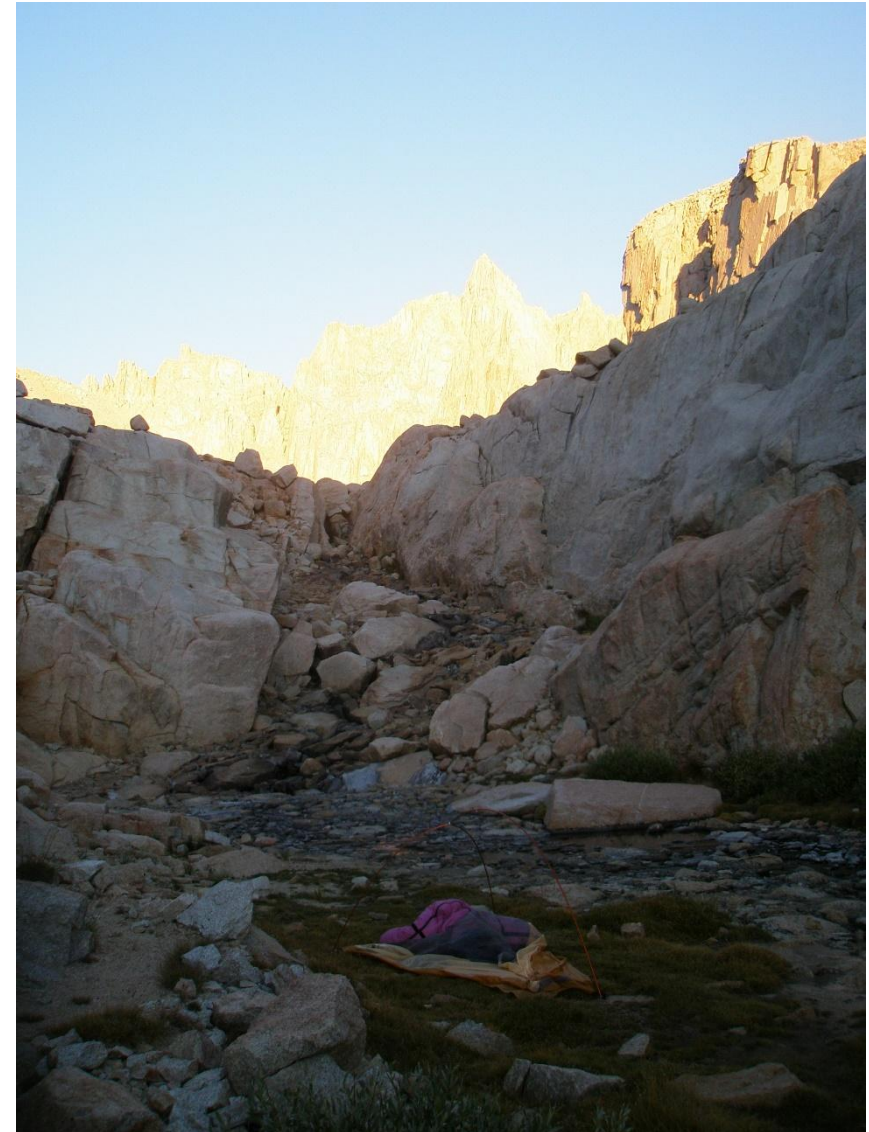
On the Way Down the 100 Switchbacks



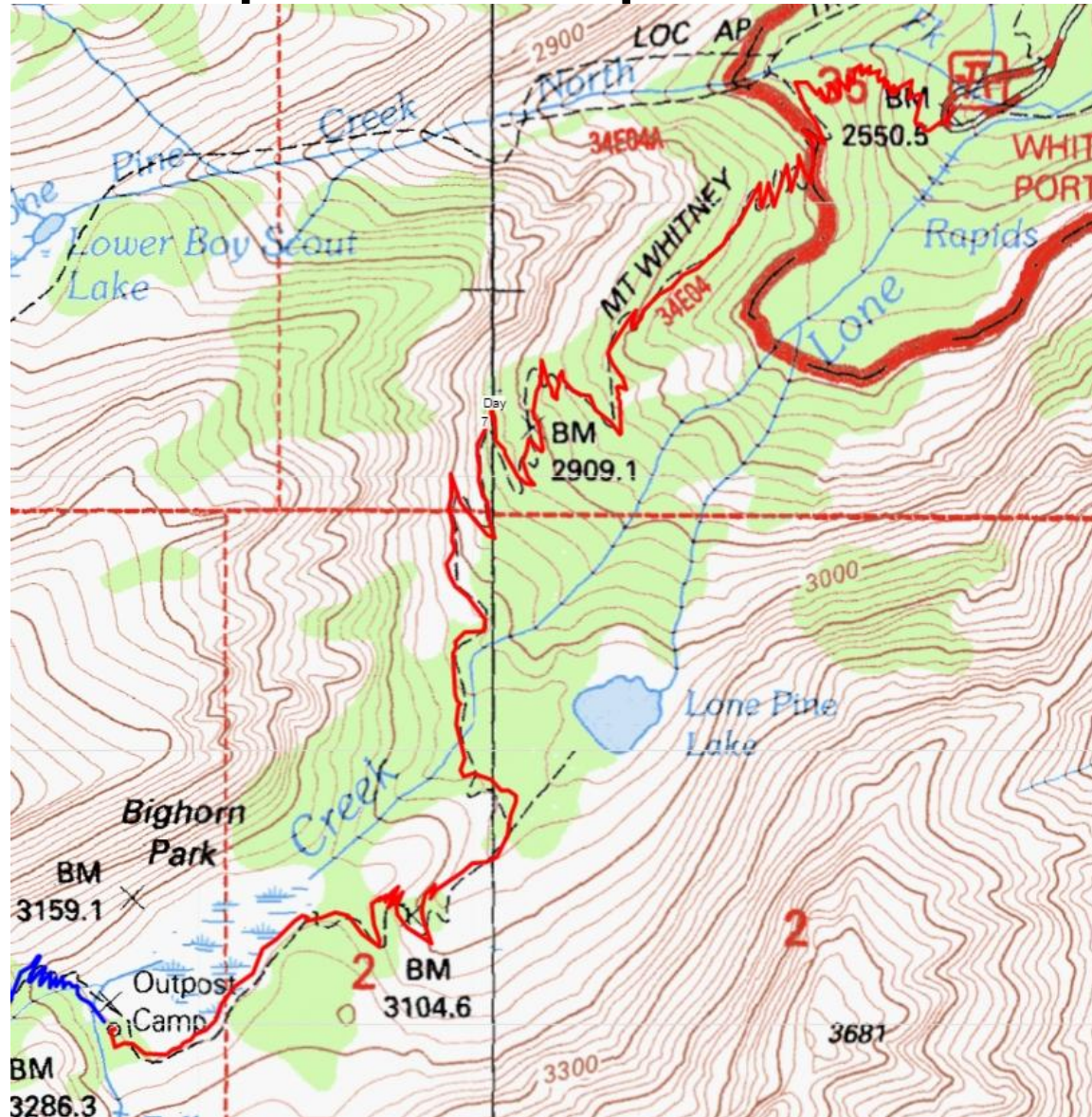
It's Been a Long, Hot Day



Camp 6: Outpost Camp: Elevation 10,400 ft.



Day 7: Outpost Camp to Whitney Portal



Day 7: To Whitney Portal



The Whitney Portal Trailhead



The National Park Service is serious about “carry it out” and Leave No Trace. We all must do our part to keep the wilderness pristine and clean for future generations to enjoy.



Burgers at the Whitney Portal Store



Camp 7: The Lone Pine Hostel



Day 8 – Bus to Reno Airport



DAY 8 – Fly Home

