

Road Romp 2004

Day 8: Thursday, 17 June 2004

FOCK 1: Two Parks in One

What a great, great, great night's sleep. So dark. So quiet. So comfortably cool.

Waking up was even good, and that's rare for this Snoozer.

Energized by the crisp air and brilliant sunshine, and misled by the All Is Well sense that pervaded the area, I decided that a morning run was in order. I should know myself better by now, shouldn't I? Any such morning activity is never in order for me. But, content in the knowledge that I would not be seen by anyone I know, I headed out.

I was immediately reminded of how hard I had been gasping as I had finished the previous night's jaunt. My mind had been preoccupied then by the need to find my way home, and the shortness of breath was more or less shoved to the back of my attention span.

This morning, however, it stepped right up and waved its hand in my face. Not eight minutes into my endeavor, my "run" turned into a jog. Not even six minutes later, my jog turned into a walk. But, you know what? I didn't give a monkey's mandible. It was a gorgeous morning for a walk in the woods.

It was a nice morning for a run too, but when I was making the pretense of running, my focus had to be on the path, scoping out each footfall and avoiding roots, rocks, and whatever other treachery the Wood Nymphs had laid out for me.

Now that I was walking – and I was even doing that at a very lazy pace – I could soak in the whole scene: the soft ferns and small colorful flora that decorated the forest floor, the deep brown trunks of all the sturdy trees that jutted straight up a hundred feet and more, the many shades of deep green that thickened as my line of sight rose, and the fleeting splashes of sunlight that darted between the wind-blown upper branches, and the occasional glimpse of the light blue High Sierra summer sky. It was marvelous. There is nothing like being in a big, healthy forest.

My conscience wanted to rag on me for "quitting" my "run," so I rallied for a few minutes as I came out onto pavement (and back into plain sight) and wheezed my way back to the Mobe. He just sat there in the shade, smirking at me. I was a tad ashamed that I had performed so poorly – I mean, come on, I lasted barely a mile – until I looked at the park map and saw that my campsite was at 6720' elevation. Oh. That air thing. Not quite the same as the thick, sea level breaths I can take in Key West.

I did the jug shower in the bright sunlight and let the sun and breeze dry me. I felt clean and dandy. Yesterday's scenery seemed like a mugfull, but that was just in three hours or so. This day, and the two that followed, would be FULL days of really good shit.

When I had awoken, there was a tag on my windshield, a gentle reminder from the park staff that payment for my campsite would be expected at my earliest convenience. Well, I had no problem with that. It was only \$20, and for that campsite, it was a real bargain.



I got all my goodies out of the bear box, packed up, and headed out, stopping at the ranger booth on the way.

Sometimes, being polite is the wrong course of action. I got to the window at the same moment as these other two guys, but somehow, they seemed to have the right of way, so I deferred and gave them an amiable go-ahead hand motion. Dumb. I was a quick *here's your money, thanks!* and I let people go ahead of me? These two guys must have asked about every goddamn square inch of every trail in the park: was it steep, was it rocky, did it have a good view, was there any water, were there any sequoias, how long would it take to do this way, how about if we did that way, what if we stopped and played with ourselves a few times?

COME ON!!!!!! My twenty was getting crumpled, and my scenery time was wasting. I stepped aside and knocked on the open doorway to get the attention of the woman – the Assistant Ranger, I guess – who was sitting at a desk doing nothing. I held out the \$20 and said, “Hi, I just want to pay for last night. This is for campsite 142.”

She had this new-on-the-job, unsure-if-that-was-OK look on her face, and she tried to sound knowledgeable as she said, “Oh, he has to take that.”

“Fine,” I offered, in a patient and still-almost-friendly way, “can you give it to him for me, please. Site 142.”

“Oh, no, I can't,” she kinda shrugged, kinda cringed, “he needs to put it in the computer.”

I gave her a look that said, “You can't put money in a freaking computer, you moron,” and then nodded, rolled my eyes, and returned to stand behind the Inquisitive Pair again. I should've just left. Only an uncharacteristic twinge of honor -- out of respect for the National Park system, I guess -- kept me from just driving away. My wandering eyes spied a marker board with the words, “High 72°, Low 46°” written on it, and that made me smile a bit. I thought it had seemed a tad chilly last night.

FINALLY, I got to the window. I handed Mr. Ranger Sir my \$20, said “Campsite #142,” and turned to depart.

“Excuse me,” he said without looking at me, and clicking up a fresh screen on his computer. “I need your information. Name?”

I had had enough. “All you need is my money,” I said to him. “I didn't leave a scrap at the campsite. I'm outa here. Get my tag number as I leave if you need to.” He was saying something as I walked away, but I ignored him. I was feeling a trifle bitter about finding such technocracy amid Nature's serenity. It was if is Big Brother needed to know where I was, and I was just not in a mood to be located, thank you. You come out here to be away from all that, and then the government wants you pinned. Fuck that.

Just after noon (500 CT), I reached a junction with Route 180, and Generals Highway was no more. I made a note of this intersection because I would have to be returning to it later in the day.

A provisions stop was in order, so I pulled in at Grant Grove, at the north entrance to the park. It was a very pleasant place, with a very pleasant lady, made out of large logs. (Commas make a big difference in that sentence.)

The General Store sold Flying Dog Snake Dog IPA, a **new** one from the good folk of the airborne canine! I bought their entire stock (four six-packs), and cheerfully anticipated their hoppy flavor upon my palate. I may have been drooling when I reached the register.

I also procured some ice. It cost \$2.95 for a seven-pound bag! More than 2.6¢ an ounce! Yikes! That was at least double the highest price I had ever paid for a bag that size. It was the principle of supply-and-demand at work, I reckon. Capitalism, baybee. Yes in-goddamn-deed. But I'll bet all those good Republicans still bitch about the price.

To my dismay, the General Store was out of AA batteries. Even more to my dismay, so was I. With Kings Canyon NP imminent, and Yosemite NP to follow, this would not do. My camera would run out of juice in no time at my current pic-click rate. It was almost panic time. The very pleasant lady, who, as I'm sure you realize, was not made out of large logs, saved the day by suggesting that the Visitor Center next door might have some. They did. Bullet dodged. And the batteries were cheaper than the ice.

Just beyond Grant Grove was the turnout for the General Grant Tree, the second largest sequoia in captivity. It was tabbed The Nation's Christmas Tree, but I saw no explanation offered as to why. It had no ornaments or lights on it. Not even any tinsel. It was damn big though. It'd be a bloated bitch to decorate that mother.

Minutes later, I left Sequoia National Park and entered Sequoia National Forest. I was excited at the prospect of seeing trees. Would there be more trees in the NF than in the NP? Oh, the suspense!

At one of my first turns, I encountered two groups of three enormous redwoods. One group formed a triangle, with a cool hangout room in the middle. They were so close that the bark had actually fused two of them together for the bottom ten feet of their trunks. The other group was like the Boy Scout salute, three tall columns standing very close together – maybe 3' apart – and shooting straight up for 200' or more.



With no gas sold within the National Park boundaries, anyone who had not thought ahead pretty much had to stop for gas at Kings Canyon Lodge, where regular sold for \$2.999 a gallon, and premium was an immodest \$3.199 per. Double yikes! That supply-and-demand thing was rearing its ugly head again. This was turning into an Economics 101 field trip.

Route 180 goes by the name Kings Canyon Scenic Byway. That had a very appealing ring to it. And, sure enough, it led into Kings Canyon National Park.

KCNP abuts SNP, and, in some circles, are treated as one park. The National Park Service, for instance, issues one map to cover both parks. Sequoia is one of the oldest NP's and Kings Canyon is one of the newest.

KCNP and SNP may come across like a single, large National Park, but it's very easy to appreciate the distinction. While SNP was about long-range scenery and big old trees, KCNP was about seeing the scenery from within. The initial view of Kings Canyon lets you know where you're heading, then the roads take you down into it.

Before you even get into the park, winding roads give long-range views of the Kings River, and then you work there along serpentine roads. Sometimes, dramatic rock formations conceal the turns and then step



back to reveal another spectacular vista. Parts of this road must have been brutal to build.

The soul of KCNP is definitely the river. Creeks and springs and waterfalls from all the surrounding mountains merge to create the gush of water that carves its way through the solid stone of this valley. The river is alive with rapids, frothing and roaring across the canyon floor. Only the largest rocks – a lot of them much bigger than the Mobe -- stand firm against the river's rush.

Cedar Grove Visitor Center offered a chance for a guided tour of some caves. I wanted to take a quick solo spelunk, but I was told that I would have to wait for the next tour, which was about a half-hour away. Well, buck that, I decided; after Carlsbad, how impressive could these little holes in the mountain be anyway?

The Scenic Byway hugs the bank of the river deep into Kings Canyon. The ride is fairly flat. At times, looking to your right, you wonder if your tires are still on the road because it drops purdy dang quickly.

The canyon itself features towering granite cliffs on both sides. When the road ends at the cleverly named Road's End area, the Grand Sentinel looms 3500 feet straight up on the south side, and North Dome (photo, right) rises 3700 feet almost dead vertical across from it.

I had not worked up any kind of a sweat today, and I still felt clean from my jug shower, but it is standard ramack procedure to take a natural cleanup when practical.

There was a turnout at a spot labeled Zumalt Meadow, almost directly under Grand Sentinel. A thick and shady grove of cedars stood nearby, with an invitingly low riverbank. I strolled thither for a refresher. Toothbrush and razor in hand, I approached the river with a purpose.



It was a flat stretch, and the water flowed by evenly. The current was fast, but an indentation in the shoreline had created a natural, slowly swirling pool. It looked like the perfect place to lounge in the shade for a while, and casually attend to grooming.

There was no slope to this pool, so I placed my accessories and my beer in a convenient spot, and dropped myself in.

HOLY SHIT was it COLD!!! JAYZUZ ICE-SKATING KEEE-RIST, it was FREEZING!! This had to have been in a glacier just hours ago. I have NEVER been in such cold water in my life! OH MY GAWWWWWWD!!

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Usually, the initial shock fades and, with some vigorous moving about, you can get yourself used to it. NFW with this place! It just kept feeling more and more frigid.

Out I clambered, and stood shivering on the shore. I don't know if I have ever been that awake either. I was still breathing in gasps, as my heart struggled to regain its rhythm. It was mad at me. I could hear it muttering as it beat, "ass-HOLE, ass-HOLE, ass-HOLE, ass-HOLE..."

Maybe if I had just come from some brutal exertion, my system would have been armored up for such a blast, but coming from Moby's Comfy Chair, with a casual buzz on, I had been in classic Lazy-Ass Mode. My heart rate must have been about 45 BPM when I made the dunk. It was at least 145 as I scrambled out.

So I did my grooming dip-and-splash style. Then I just hung out for a while, sat on the bank, watched the water stroll by and finished my beer in peace and quiet. I knew that some pounding rapids lay ahead for this smooth-looking flow, and I wondered if the water would enjoy the bang and blast of them, or it would be terrified and in pain.

Then I realized that that was a pretty dumb thing to think about, so I moved on.

This park would be a fantastic place to spend a hiking and camping vacation. So would Sequoia. If I lived in Central California, I'd be up here a lot for long weekends.





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