

Marble Mountain Wilderness

Northwest Corner

28 June 2002 -- 2 July 2002

Trailhead at Sulphur Springs, North Western corner of Marbles near Happy Camp.

Route: Sulphur Springs, Granite Lakes, Cuddihy Lakes, Onemile Lake, Ukonom Lake, return.

Maps: USGS - Ukonom Lake 7-1/2 minute, 1980 (essential for topography),

Wilderness Press - Marble Mountain ~30 minute map (trail identification)

US Forest Service - Marble Mountain ~30 minute map (trail identification optional)

Getting Ready: Spent the night before the trip at Curly Jack campground (\$10/night), it's on Elk Creek Road (the one to the Sulphur Springs trailhead) and is essentially in Happy Camp allowing for a last regular breakfast before heading out. I made it to the Frontier Cafe at 6:00 AM and immediately felt I was flashed into the movie "The Last Picture Show." At that hour, there were two lady employees, one as cook and the other as waitress, there was a pool table in the bar connected to the restaurant, and there was a guy sweeping the street out front (although I don't think his name was Billie). Anyway, I overheard some juicy conversation between the two ladies, "Yesterday I saw the most magnificent butt," then after a short pause she continued "four points and still in velvet"; well I guess I really need this trip! The breakfast was very good.

Day 1: At 8:00 AM, I was ready to start from the Sulphur Springs Trailhead. Although another trailhead, Norcross also on Elk Creek Road, is one mile further down, it requires fording Elk Creek (about 20 feet wide and up to 18 inches deep) rather than the easy Sulphur Springs bridge crossing. The hike to Blue Granite Lake initially follows Elk Creek and then Granite Creek. The first part of it was a rather easy grade, where upon after 1-1/2 hour I reached a nice campsite along Elk Creek complete with log carved tables/chairs and easy creek access; a nice place for a break. After a relaxing hour break, I continued but now at a slower pace since the trail became more steep. At 2:00 I reached Bridge Camp (located halfway between the junction of the Tickner/Granite trails and the turnoff to Blue Granite Lake) and again I took another break (45 minutes), this time for a late lunch. Rejuvenated, I continued upwards reaching the Blue Granite trail junction (not marked very well) in about 45 minutes. Beautiful Blue Granite Lake was yet another 45 minutes up hill and was complete with a nice campsite capable of supporting a medium-sized group. Although I brought fishing gear, I did not have the energy to wet my line; the shoreline nearby the campsite seemed too shallow for good fishing, but the prospect looked better near the stream outlet below at the far end of the lake. During the hike up, the weather was very palatable, some clouds, sometimes a pleasant breeze, not too hot; also the hike up presented itself with many photo opportunities of wild flowers, which I felt compelled to take since wild flower habitats are often unique to very small locales. Setting up camp presented itself with an obstacle, the tent pole of my new Sierra Designs ultra light year CD tent failed; so much for light weight aluminum/carbon fiber poles; but a little duct-tape and a tent stake made a suitable splint lasting the entire trip. Dinner consisted of a not so good freeze dried Tequila Chicken, but when you're hungry you eat. Went to bed early (8:30) only to be woken up in the middle of the night by the pitter-patter of light rain. First the tent poles, now the rain, I hoped bad omens don't come in threes.

Day 2: Got a slow start in the morning, up about 8:30, literally in a fog. The light rain had stopped, and the hanging food, the pack, the tent, and the kitchen all seemed fine. Had breakfast, packed, and was ready to go exploring by 10:40. It looked like the fog was going to clear. Down the hill from Blue Granite Lake I went, the trail junction missed; I realized my mistake after a 10 minute overshoot. Wanting to explore rather than miss the companion Granite Lakes, I counted the number of left hand switch-backs from the Blue Granite Lake trail junction; the map indicated five, I counted six, and the trail junction to Green/Gold Granite Lakes was there. I saw only one of the two lakes, Gold Granite Lake was my gut feeling (from the topography): There is a discrepancy in the USGS (or Forest Service) and Wilderness Press maps and I believe the latter is incorrect about the end point to Green/Gold Granite Lakes. Gold Granite Lake was small and cute as a button. I found a nice campsite on the east side of the lake via a fairly well traveled marsh trail. The lake was a wonderful stop for lunch and I guess a good time to be buzzed by humming birds (maybe an enticement from my red shirt). I didn't fish there, but did see abundant fish jumping. After lunch, I was on my way to the Cuddihy Lakes. At first there was a lot of steep up hill, but the rewards of grand views was the payback. At 5:00, I arrived at #1 Cuddihy Lake; another long day. There were at least two good campsites for large groups, I choose the second one which is closest to the north side stream inlet. This campsite, just like the previous, was well used and was not kept as clean as it should. Although this and all other campsites had steel grills and camp fire rings (nice), there was also various trash laying around such as broken ropes, plastic grocery bags, and miscellaneous other stuff (not so nice). After a dinner of soup, Chile Mac, and my homemade peach surprise (excellent), I took out my fishing gear and proved that it does work. My fishing was catch and release, the fish size was in the 8 inch range. Besides the fish, #1 Cuddihy Lake also had a camp deer which would eat anything, including trash left behind by others. I turned away for a minute, and it stole a bag of wasabi peas from my food sack, and although I retrieved it, the value added by the deer's wet lips made them less than palatable. Crawled into my tent at 9:00, it was still light outside. Sometime in the middle of the night I heard a ruckus in the camp area, I suspect it was my old friend the camp deer, the morning confirmed this.

Day 3: Got up at 6:15, took a few photos of the trees and granite reflecting in the mirror-like lake, had breakfast, packed camp, and was ready for another adventure by 9:30. The climb out of Cuddihy was somewhat steep and a bit confusing finding the main trail up, but by 11:00 I had reached the ridge trail junction to wonderful views. Headed south along the ridge to panoramic views of the entire set of Cuddihy Lakes, another nice time for a photo shoot. Onward I pressed until the trail was blocked by a patch of snow; couldn't go over it (too steep), couldn't go below it (a small pond), thus I went over it (not my idea of fun), it was a short 250 feet with a slight up hill grade and was firmly packed. Soon I reached the trail junction to Onemile Lake and down the trail I went. I reached beautiful Onemile Lake at about noon. If I had to pick a favorite, Onemile Lake would certainly be it. The lake is divided into two areas separated by a small channel of about 15 feet wide and about 100 feet long; a couple of Nature's well placed downed trees makes for an easy traverse across the channel. There are ample areas to set up camp (even for large groups), I choose the second official site nearest the channel. After setting up camp, I had a very relaxing afternoon; I think I needed it. Lots of shade, bugs not bad, in fact non-existent in the afternoon and only a minor problem in the evening. Paradise. Unlike the other lakes, the fish here were jumping most of the afternoon (until about 4:30). I got out my fishing gear and caught a few, released all but one which was badly hooked and now a dinner treat. Cleaned and cooked the fish, and although it tasted spectacular, the effort and especially the mess was much to much, so I decided to hang up fishing for the remainder of the trip; I guess I'd rather read a book in a hammock.

Crawled into my tent before sundown again (8:30), which I believe allowed me to take a glimpse at two bucks in velvet prancing through camp, kick up some lake water, and saunter away.

Day 4: Got up early again, did another photo shoot of the mirror-like lake, had breakfast, packed camp, and was ready to head onto Ukonom Lake. I reached the first of two springs (see 7-1/2 minute USGS map) crossing the trail in about an hour. To that point the trail was moderate up hill, but after the second spring the trail started going straight up. Who ever laid out this trail should be shot; at places the climb was between 30 and 45 degrees; I ain't no billy goat! After about 2 hours along the Onemile to Ukonom Lakes trail, I had views of Ukonom Lake. The lake is huge, dammed at the west end, not as many interesting features as natural, glacier formed, granite cirque lakes. At about 12:45 I reached what is identified on the USGS map as "campsites." Not for me, these sites were horse shit (both aesthetically and literally), they were full of ancient camper's clutter, and the obvious water access was contaminated by that horse stuff again; I guess this is what is meant by a dammed (or is it damned) lake. I thus made the executive decision to plow ahead shortening the trip by one day. After a lunch break, I started out to the ridge top saddle near Tickner Peak. On this section of trail flying high in the sky was a Red Tailed Hawk shrieking as it flew. Although the trail to the saddle was steep, it was reasonably laid out with a few switch-backs at the steeper sections. Once on top, the views were stunning, especially looking north towards Tickner Hole; the first pond in the series was clearly visible. From the top, the trail went down very steeply, but again there were well placed switch-backs. The only problem was a few snow patches on this northern slope; most I was able to side step, although one was much too large and steep so I chose to cross-country downhill where I met up with the next lower switch-backed trail. At the first pond in the Tickner Hole series, I met up with the first other backpackers since my start; two guys from Yreka playing chess who essentially followed my route but typically a day ahead. The small campsite at this pond looked very relaxing and was suitable for a small group (maybe 4); the only downside is that the elevation loss to the Sulphur Springs trailhead is about 4300 feet. After a bit of chit-chat, I continued downhill, the terrain and views continued to be wonderful. Just before reaching the lowest pond in the Tickner Hole, I crossed a creek and came upon a tiny campsite straddling the trail; this must be home for the night, a site I subsequently named "Mosquito Penitence." I could never stand still at this campsite for fear of being eaten alive. Setting up camp, cooking dinner, chowing down, was all done on the move so as to keep the bugs somewhat confused. After dinner at 7:30, I could take no more, so I quickly jumped into my tent for relief; the mosquitoes were swarming outside.

Day 5: It was 5:15 in the morning, I had hoped that by then the cooler temperature would quiet the mosquitoes down, but they were still buzzing. Knowing that the bug problem would only get worse as morning progressed, I got up, had a cold breakfast, packed camp, and was ready to go in record one hour time. Once past the flat terrain on either side of this Tickner Hole pond, the bug problem ceased. Maybe the bugs were worth it, for in this area I viewed my first ever ringtail (aka miner's cat), it was absolutely cute; for knowing that it is nocturnal, I probably would never have observed it unless I was either up all night or up at the crack of dawn. The trip down from Mosquito Penitence (5500 feet) to Sulphur Springs (2100 feet) was uneventful; I took two breaks along the way, the first at the junction of the Tickner trail with the Granite trail and then the other at the same campsite I stopped at on the way in with log cut tables/chairs. I crossed the bridge at Sulphur Springs and arrived at my car at 12:45, wherein I got a towel and a change of clothes only to cross the bridge again so I could relax in the warm sulphur spring; ahh, that felt good! After cleaning up, I drove back to Happy Camp and had a great lunch at the Frontier Cafe. All in all, it was a great trip, although a little company would have been very nice.