

# Hika for the Pika, Part V

Wednesday, September 16, 2009

By Mike Sweeney

I probably shouldn't have said "You won't shoot me if I go without a permit, will you?" I made it to the Yosemite Wilderness Center at 9:30 a.m. on Aug. 3, after first hiking to the Visitor's Center two miles away to try and get a wilderness permit for the John Muir Trail. It had been a perfect morning hiking into Tuolumne Meadows. An osprey took flight from a fir tree along the Tuolumne River about 7 a.m. and the reflections of trees and mountains in the slow-moving river were magical along the route.

My mistake was going to the wrong "Center" first. At the Wilderness Center, a young employee named Melanie told me there was no way I was going to get a permit to hike the JMT to Half Dome until later in the week. She said the Park Service issues too many permits already and that this section of trail was "out of control." She then said if she found me on the trail she would not shoot me, but she would personally walk me out. We were at a standstill. The line behind me was getting anxious, but I was determined not to leave the office without a permit. Finally, after charm and assertiveness had failed, I resorted to begging. Melanie stared at the computer screen and said, "I can give you a permit for today. You must go at least four miles today or it's not valid. Want it?" You betcha. I felt like I'd just robbed a bank after I aced the little wilderness test they give you before issuing the permit. I bowed deeply to the Park Service as I exited the Center, permit in hand. I had planned to stay at Tuolumne Meadows for awhile, but now it was phone, food, shower and back on the trail.

I camped that night at the base of Cathedral Peak. Ranger Roger had told me that my best bet to see a pika would be to "clamber" up the talus slopes of Cathedral to the 11,000-foot level (my camp was at about 9,500 feet). I couldn't do it. I couldn't "clamber" anywhere. The forest was dense between me and the rocky slopes, and I didn't have the energy to bushwhack through it. I'd backpacked 170 miles from Bear River Reservoir and I was done for the moment. I felt bad (mostly I hated to face Jerry Budrick without a pika photo), but it turned out for the best. I was able to rest up and watch the light change on the mountain as the sun set. It was a very peaceful afternoon, after the hectic time in bustling Tuolumne Meadows.

Next day, it was down the John Muir Trail towards the cutoff to Half Dome. I tried to mosey. I talked with hikers from Japan, England, Australia and Kentucky about the American Pika. I took lots of photos. I even got a photo of a Northern Pacific Rattlesnake (at five feet long with 12 rattles, it was the biggest, yet most mellow rattlesnake I have ever seen). I still got to the junction to Half Dome by 2:15 p.m., and I found lots of people coming down from HD and a few still heading up the mountain. I had promised myself I would not go up in the afternoon because of crowds and thunderstorms, but here I was, thinking about doing just that. I put my tent up and hoped the motivation to summit today would go away. It didn't and I headed up the hill about 3:15 p.m.

I didn't take my hiking poles, as I knew they wouldn't be needed once I got to the cables. I made good time up the trail, until I got to the granite section that leads up to the cables. There were only a handful of us heading up at 4 p.m. A young woman with her boyfriend looked scared as he tried to reassure her where the trail switched from dirt to granite. I went up about 75 yards on the granite staircase, missing my hiking poles every step of the way, and when I heard a thunderclap in the distance, my feet turned around and headed back down. Nothing felt right. Too late, no poles, and thunder activity about 50 miles away. I was back to camp by 5:30 p.m. Perhaps, if I hadn't known about the man who fell to his death in June of this year, I would have continued. Maybe if I hadn't read the book "Shattered Air" I would have gone up. But I did know about software engineer Manoj Kumar, who slipped off the Dome while coming down the cables and fell to his death June 15. I had read about the two young men killed by lightning on the mountain back in 1985. It was good exercise hiking up to the granite stairs, but an excellent decision to turn around.

Next morning, I was up at 4 a.m. to join the early birds on the two-mile trek to the top. I brought the hiking poles and felt much more confident with them in hand as I started up the granite staircase. It was windy, but not too cold, when I got to the cables about 5:45 a.m. I didn't look around much on the way up and was relieved to be on the cables with only one other person. I made it to the top right at sunrise, the clouds orange and black. There is no more spectacular view in the world. You look down on Yosemite Valley and across to Yosemite Falls and El Capitan. Amazing.

I met a group from the Tuolumne Camp of Berkeley and, of course, being from Berkeley, they all had animal hats on. I asked what the deal was and they said their theme was "animals on parade up Half Dome." They were all working shifts later in the day at this family camp that began operation in 1922. They were a fun and energetic group. They promised to ask their seamstress to add a pika hat to the parade.

I didn't spend a lot of time on top. It was still windy and I wanted to get down before the cables got clogged with people. As I went down, there was again only one person on the cables below me. I must have looked like a big bowling ball to him, but it all went well and I was back in camp by 8:45 a.m.



Cutest picture of a pika yet.

Photo by: [Courtesy to the Ledger Dispatch](#)



Hikers from the Berkeley Family Camp joined Mike at the top of Half Dome. They promised to add a pika to their future hat selections.

Photo by: [Courtesy to the Ledger Dispatch](#)



Mike's Rescue Team comprised Patty Porter-Redkey, flanked on the left by Skyler Redkey and on the right by London Redkey.

Photo by: [Courtesy to the Ledger Dispatch](#)

I passed hundreds of people as I hiked the JMT down to Happy Isles on the valley floor - people from all over the world. "Out of control" for sure, but they all want to experience this famous trail one way or another. Some headed for the Dome; some to Mount Whitney, 222 miles away; some just to the first view of Vernal Falls, a mile up from Happy Isles. I made one last tactical error in taking the Mist Trail "shortcut" down. Why I thought it made sense for a 57-year-old man with bad knees and a backpack to go down the Mist Trail I'll never know. The "shortcut" saved me about a half mile but took an extra hour as I gingerly hopped from rock to rock on this treacherously steep track.

I took the shuttle from Happy Isles to Curry Village and, when I got off the bus, the rescue team of Patty Porter-Redkey and granddaughters Skyler and London was right there. It was time for bike rides (ouch), and snacks. We finally saw an American Pika in the Yosemite Natural History Museum - a great end to a fun hike.

What can we do to save the pika? We have to be creative in our approach to our energy challenges and willing to try new solutions. We need to be mindful about developing open space, as trees are one of the best tools we have for combating global warming and maintaining biological diversity. We need to educate our children about these challenges, as they are our best resource for truly creative solutions.

My next step was to purchase a membership with the Center for Biological Diversity (1-866-357-3349 or [www.biologicaldiversity.org](http://www.biologicaldiversity.org)). They have been fighting for the pika and the polar bear for many years. They need our help if we are to maintain diversity in the biology of the world. If we don't change current trends, we stand to lose a third of the species on earth by 2050, and up to 70 percent of the species by the end of this century. We can't let this happen. We have to do a better job to save the pikas, to save ourselves.



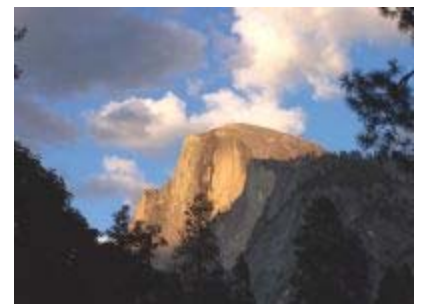
Cathedral Peak, known to be a home for a colony of American Pika.

Photo by: [Courtesy to the Ledger Dispatch](#)



Cables provide protection for climbers at the end of their trek to the top of Half Dome.

Photo by: [Courtesy to the Ledger Dispatch](#)



Mike's goal - Half Dome - from an excellent vantage point.

Photo by: [Courtesy to the Ledger Dispatch](#)