

# Rock Creek Pack Station

## John Muir Trail – Horseshoe Meadow to Bishop Pass Trailhead

**Overview** This section of the John Muir Trail follows the spine of the Sierra through Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks. You will travel to the top of Mt Whitney, over seven passes, including Forrester Pass, the highest pass on the Pacific Crest Trail, and down the legendary golden staircase. Travelling above tree line much of time affords expansive views of the glacier-sculpted granite peaks and canyons of the two parks. The varied landscape rewards you with trout-filled lakes and streams, cascades and waterfalls, deep forests, and serene meadows.

Rock Creek Pack Station simplifies your experience, preparing gourmet food, carrying your gear, and setting up a comfortable camp each night. You will enjoy hiking the Sierra Nevada wilderness with just a daypack.

**Distance** 118.6 miles, 26,100' total gain and 26,600' loss

**Preparation** Hikers should be able to walk 12 miles, 3,000' elevation gain/loss.

**Meet Up** 6:30 AM at 245 Rocking K Road, Bishop. Leave personal vehicles there.

**Trailhead** In – Horseshoe Meadows; Out – Bishop Pass Trailhead at South Lake. A shuttle will transfer you from the Bishop Pass Trailhead to 245 Rocking K Road, Bishop.

**Wilderness Permit** The pack station takes care of all permits required for the trip.

**Maps** Paper maps:

- Tom Harrison Maps
  - Mt. Whitney High Country and Sequoia & Kings National Parks or the John Muir Trail Series
  - The above maps can also be downloaded onto a tablet or smart phone using the Avenza app.
- National Geographic Maps 322::Mount Whitney and 205::Sequoia and Kings National Parks (small area missing) or 1001::John Muir Trail Topographic Map Guide

Apps for Smartphone/Tablet, such as the following. Be sure to download the offline maps before the trip:

- FarOut Trail Guides (Formerly Guthook's Hiking Guides) for maps and in-depth trail information. It also includes many of the trails that access the JMT from the east side. This is the guide used by most through hikers. One-time charge to download John Muir Trail which includes the section from Horseshoe Meadow.
- Gaia GPS: Download your preferred maps for the area the trip will cover, Basic service is free. Additional charge for Gaia GPS Premium for additional maps and services.
- AllTrails: Charge for AllTrails Pro to be able to download maps.

# Rock Creek Pack Station

## John Muir Trail – Horseshoe Meadow to Bishop Pass Trailhead

### Hiking with Pack Stock: Best Practices

Hiking with pack stock allows you to experience the wilderness while only carrying a daypack. The crew will carry your gear from camp to camp and prepare delicious meals. While you are hiking, the crew will clean up camp, load the stock, travel to the next camp, and set up the new camp. They travel faster than hikers and will usually pass you shortly after lunchtime. You must watch for the crew and stock as you approach the expected campsite area. The following trip descriptions include information on where to expect the camps and what to do if you can't find them.

The packer must consider multiple criteria when selecting a campsite.

- Ranger directive
- Established camp
- Availability
- Water
- Grazing
- Scenery
- Comfort
- Access to the trail

The camps shown in this trip description are the locations usually used by the packers. If there are multiple campsites shown on the maps, the packer will tell you which one is the planned site.

Problems can arise if the camp is taken by another group or the ranger directs the packer to a different campsite. Your best bet is to allow the packer to pass you at some point during the day so you can follow the packer to the camp, either visually or by tracking the stock hoofprints. If camp is difficult to see from the trail, the packer will usually leave a pack tarp or rake where you should leave the trail.

If the packer has not passed you as you approach the expected camp area, we ask that you wait at the “Area Entry” location until the packer has arrived. Then, you can follow the stock into camp.

If you are unable to make it to camp, do not leave the trail. If you do not arrive in camp by late afternoon, the packer will look for you. It is essential that you stay close enough to the trail that the packer can easily see you. The packer will start from camp or a waypoint we have identified past camp you could easily identify, such as a trail junction. The packer will follow the expected route taken during the day until the section of the trail where the crew passed you earlier in the day. Staying near the trail throughout the day lets the packer see the guests as the string passes, assess their progress, and determine if anyone needs assistance.

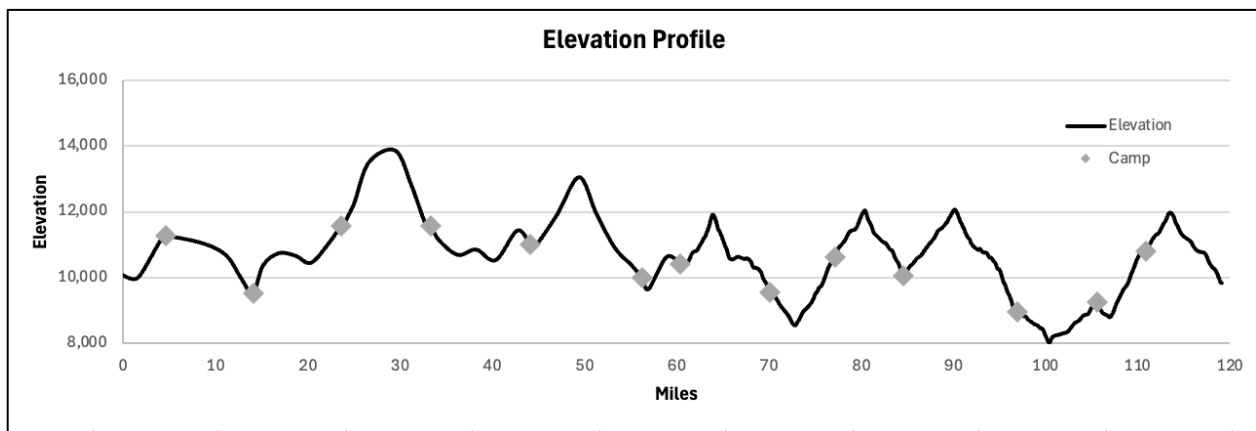
This document also describes some of the side trails you might accidentally take and how to determine you have taken a wrong turn. In this case, we ask that you turn back and return to the John Muir Trail. If you are too tired to continue, wait by the side of the JMT.

Finally, please bring a GPS device, such as a cell phone or Garmin InReach. Setting the phone on airplane mode will save the battery, but you should bring a portable “power bank” to recharge it during the trip. Downloading maps onto a cell phone using apps such as the FarOut/John Muir Trail, GaiaGPS, AllTrails, Natural Atlas, or Avenza/Tom Harrison maps that show your location at any time is invaluable to your safety in the backcountry.

# Rock Creek Pack Station

## John Muir Trail – Horseshoe Meadow to Bishop Pass Trailhead

<i>Day</i>	<i>Camp</i>	<i>Distance</i>	<i>Gain, ft</i>	<i>Loss, ft</i>
1	Chicken Spring Lake	4.7	1,400	300
2	Lower Rock Creek	9.6	600	2,400
3	Guitar Lake	9.7	3,100	1,100
4	Summit Whitney - Guitar Lake	9.6	3,200	3,200
5	Frog Ponds	10.6	1,700	2,200
6	Bubbs Creek	12.2	2,300	3,500
7&8	Charlotte Lake	3.9	1,300	800
9	Baxter Meadow	9.8	1,800	2,800
10	Twin Lakes	6.8	2,100	1,000
11	South Fork Kings River	7.6	1,500	2,200
12	Deer Meadow	11.9	2,200	3,200
13&14	Big Pete Meadow	9.0	1,400	1,100
15	Dusy Basin	5.3	2,100	500
16	South Lake	7.9	1,400	2,300
Total		118.6	26,100	26,600



# Rock Creek Pack Station

## John Muir Trail – Horseshoe Meadow to Bishop Pass Trailhead

### Day 1

#### Horseshoe Meadow over Cottonwood Pass to Chicken Spring Lake

*4.7 miles, 1,400' gain, 300' loss*

*Reliable water: Horseshoe Meadow, Chicken Spring Lake*

The day will start at Cottonwood Pack Station where you will meet the crew and enjoy breakfast while they weigh your gear and start loading the mules. You will be given a sack lunch to tuck into your daypack before starting your hike toward Chicken Spring Lake. The crew will follow once the gear is loaded.

The walk begins with a brief descent to the junction with the Cottonwood Pass trail. Turn right to begin a west trending gentle ascent beside the meadow. The trail enters open forest at mile 2.5 to climb steadily to 11,160' Cottonwood Pass by mile 4.1. Turn north onto the Pacific Crest Trail, walking another 0.6 mile before leaving the trail to follow the creek a short distance up to Chicken Spring Lake.

### Day 2

#### Chicken Spring Lake to Lower Rock Creek

*9.6 miles, 600' gain, 2,400' loss*

*Reliable water: Chicken Spring Lake, Rock Creek*

Returning to the Pacific Crest Trail, the path climbs briefly, gaining 300' in the first mile and then undulates along the side of the mountain with good views of Big Whitney Meadow to the left. The trail enters Sequoia National Park in three miles, dropping steadily through open forest the rest of the day. Continue straight on the PCT at the Siberian Pass junction at mile four and the Upper Rock Creek Trail junction at mile 8.4. Pass the trail to the Ranger Station in another 0.7 miles and reach the Rock Creek crossing in another half mile. Our camp is on the north side of Rock Creek.

Most of the seasonal streams in this area will be dry with no reliable water until the route approaches Rock Creek at the end of the day. Leave Chicken Spring Lake with plenty of water.

### Day 3

#### Rock Creek to Guitar Lake

*9.7 miles, 3,100' gain, 1,100' loss*

*Reliable water: Rock Creek and Whitney Creek*

The day starts by returning to the Pacific Crest Trail, turning north. The trail begins to climb steadily out of the Rock Creek drainage crossing seasonal Guyot Creek at mile 1.3 to eventually climb 1,400' over 2.5 miles to achieve 10,900' Guyot Pass with views to the south of Forgotten Canyon. Dropping down from the pass, the trail traverses the hillside on a sandy trail. Twisted foxtail pines frame views of Red Spur across Kern Canyon. There is a brief climb into the Whitney Creek drainage, before starting to drop briefly on rocky switchbacks to cross Whitney Creek and arrive at the Whitney junction near the creek at mile 5.8. This is an important junction and you must turn right to leave the PCT onto the Crabtree Meadow trail toward Mount Whitney, following Whitney Creek and passing the ranger station before joining the John Muir Trail in 1.2 miles. Turn up canyon toward Mount Whitney, passing out of the trees in 1.4 miles at Timberline Lake and finally stopping in another mile at our camp above Guitar Lake. Mount Whitney towers 3,000' above us to the east.

The next reliable water is in 5.8 miles at Whitney Creek. Leave camp with a good supply of water.

# Rock Creek Pack Station

## John Muir Trail – Horseshoe Meadow to Bishop Pass Trailhead

### Day 4

#### Summit Mount Whitney

*9.6 miles, 3,200' gain and loss*

*Reliable water: Guitar Lake only*

Mount Whitney provides several hours of shade after sunrise making the long climb to the top in the treeless landscape less daunting, so plan to leave camp at dawn. The trail starts off up the canyon to the southeast for about a mile before starting to climb the steep wall on many long, moderate switchbacks. Look across Hitchcock Lakes to Mount Hitchcock to gauge your progress up the mountain, as Trail Junction, at 13,484 feet, is only 300' above Mount Hitchcock. Go left at the Trail Crest junction to follow the narrow trail cut into the rock on the west side of the pinnacles. There are several “windows” providing stunning views to the east. Another 1.9 miles and 1,000' elevation gain takes you to the top. Enjoy your time at 14,505 feet before leaving the top to retrace your steps to our camp above Guitar Lake.

### Day 5

#### Guitar Lake to Tyndall Creek Frog Ponds

*10.6 miles, 1,700' gain, 2,200' loss*

*Reliable water: Wallace Creek and Wright Creek*

We now follow the JMT 2.6 miles back down the trail past Timberline Lake to the Lower Crabtree Meadow junction, but this time we follow the John Muir Trail to the right for 0.8 miles to merge with the Pacific Crest Trail. Turning north, there is a short climb to a broad ridge and then the trail soon skirts the east side of Sandy Meadow with views to the west of Red Spur. The trail climbs a low ridge before dropping down to Wallace Creek which can usually be crossed on rocks. The creek runs through an open meadow surrounded by pines and the crossing is a pleasant lunch spot 6.8 miles into the hike. Continue north past the Kern River junction to climb up a ridge to the meadows of Wright Creek with stunning views to the east of the Sierra crest including Mount Whitney. The 1,000' ascent out of Wallace Creek tops out at the treeless Bighorn Plateau with views of the Kaweah Range and the Kern River Basin to the west before dropping down to our camp east of the trail at the Frog Ponds near Tyndall Creek.

### Day 6

#### Tyndall Creek Frog Ponds over Forester Pass to Bubbs Creek

*12.2 miles, 2,300' gain, 3,500' loss*

*Water: There is reliable water at Tyndall Creek, the lake at the base of Forrester Pass, and creek crossings on the north side of the pass*

The route drops ½ mile down through open forest to the Tyndall Creek crossing. Ignore the trail that follows Tyndall Creek downstream and, in 0.1 miles, another junction to Shepherd Pass where you will follow the JMT/PCT to the left to cross Tyndall Creek in another 0.1 miles. Continue straight in 0.2 miles past the Lake South America Trail junction. The route then climbs 2,200' over 4.7 miles to the top of 13,153' Forester Pass, the highest pass on the John Muir and Pacific Crest Trails. The trail begins through alternating forest and meadows. The landscape becomes more austere as the trail approaches Forrester Pass where the trail is cut from the headwall of the Kings Kern Divide. The path steepens at mile 4.6 as it begins to switchback up the right side of the pass before crossing over to the left side with

## Rock Creek Pack Station

### John Muir Trail – Horseshoe Meadow to Bishop Pass Trailhead

tight switchbacks over the final grade. One is rewarded at the top with spectacular views of the Great Western Divide, the Kaweah Range, and the tall peaks north of Mount Whitney. Turning north, the trail enters Kings Canyon National Park, dropping down 2,600' in 4.5 miles on switchbacks to the Bubbs Creek crossing as the rocky terrain gives way to forest for a pleasant walk along Bubbs Creek to camp. The distance shown is to the 10,000 Foot camp.

#### Days 7&8

#### Bubbs Creek to Charlotte Lake

*3.9 miles, 1,300' gain, 800' loss*

The trail continues to follow forested Bubbs Creek for 1.3 miles to the Lower Bubbs Creek Trail junction which is signed to Cedar Grove (36.76026, -118.41226). Follow the JMT/PCT to the right to climb 1,000' in 1.1 miles to the Bullfrog Lake Tail junction (36.76815, -118.41146). Continue left on the JMT/PCT to ascend another 200' on tight switchbacks 0.2 miles and then follow the flat sandy trail for another 0.2 miles to the Charlotte Lake/ Kearsarge Pass Trail Junction (36.77062, -118.41623). Turn left off the John Muir Trail to drop 350' in 0.6 miles to the east short of Charlotte Lake. The trail then follows the north shore of the lake for ½ mile to our comfortable camp near the far end of the lake. The distance for this day is from the 10,000' Camp. If one of the Upper Bubbs Creek camps is used, add between 1.9 and 2.3 miles to the hike.

#### Day 9

#### Charlotte Lake over Glen Pass to Baxter Meadow

*9.8 miles, 1,800' gain, 2,800' loss*

*Water: There is plentiful lake and stream water Rae Lakes on*

Backtrack along Charlotte Lake to climb back up to the JMT/PCT junction before turning north toward the narrow ridge of 11,978' Glen Pass. Continue past another trail junction to the right toward Kearsarge Pass (36.77330, -118.41788) in 0.2 miles. The day will start in forest, but the route soon leaves the shade to rocky slopes as the trail ascends 1,250' over two miles to the pass. Pause at the top to celebrate the climb, but stay to enjoy the impressive view. The path drops down 1,400' from the pass to approach Upper Rae Lake and the Sixty Lakes Basin Trail junction (36.80328, -118.40280). Continue right where you will soon cross the outlet of Upper Rae Lake. The peninsula between the upper and lower lakes is a great place to enjoy a view-filled lunch. The route levels out for two miles as the trail continues along the Rae Lakes before starting to begin a descent to Arrowhead Lake. The trail crosses the outlet creek below Arrowhead Lake, at yet another great view spot and soon passes Dollar Lake and the Baxter Pass Trail junction (36.83494, -118.40778) as it begins to drop 1,000' in two miles to our camp at Baxter Meadow.

#### Day 10

#### Baxter Meadow to Twin Lakes

*6.8 miles, 2,100' gain, 1,000' loss*

*Water: Reliable water at several creeks along Woods Creek.*

This is a quiet day after the triumphs over Mount Whitney, Forester Pass, and Glen Pass, but the views and sounds of cascading creeks surrounded by rocky canyon walls make this a great day of hiking. The trail continues to drop 950' in 2.5 miles through forest and occasional meadows to Woods Creek. Keep

## Rock Creek Pack Station

### John Muir Trail – Horseshoe Meadow to Bishop Pass Trailhead

an eye out for one of Shorty's cabins off to the right shortly before reaching the Woods Creek bridge. The JMT/PCT turns right at the Woods Creek Trail junction after crossing the suspension bridge and follows the creek up the through mostly forested slopes to gain 1,900' in 3.5 miles. Watch for cascades and small waterfalls as you work your way up the canyon. The trail reaches the junction with the Sawmill Pass Trail on the right at mile six. Follow the JMT/PCT to left for another ½ mile to our camp between the two Twin Lakes.

## Day 11

### Twin Lakes to the South Fork of the Kings River

*7.6 miles, 1,500' gain, 2,200' loss*

*Water: There is reliable water from Lake Marjorie on*

The hike starts near tree line, so most of this day will be hiking in open alpine meadows and on rocky slopes surrounded by multicolored rock walls along the way to 12,130' Pinchot Pass. The route trends north for 1.6 miles, climbing 700' before leveling out for ½ mile as the trail swings west to avoid a marshy area at the base of Pinchot pass. The final 600' ascent of the pass is on switchbacks over one mile. The straightforward descent along the northern flank of Pinchot Pass traverses a succession of lakes. The trail easily descends the north side of Pinchot Pass, passing several lakes before entering the forested area above the South Fork Kings River. The Lake Marjorie shoreline, at about mile 4.8, and the stream crossing in another ½ mile are two great lunch spots. A side trip just before the drop to the Kings River to beautiful Bench Lake is worth the 250' drop and return ascent over 3.4 miles. Then again, you might want to save your energy for the long hike on over Mather Pass to Deer Meadow.

The JMT/PCT passes the Bench Lake Trail junction (36.96105, -118.43919) to cross the outlet creek from all the lakes you have just passed. The JMT/PCT turns left at a junction (36.96209, -118.43876) 100 yards from the creek crossing to switchback down to the Kings River. The trail crosses a fast creek (36.96913, -118.44186) coming from the meadows below Taboose Pass and WL 11388 in one mile before the slope eases and the route approaches our camp on the Kings River ¼ mile later.

## Day 12

### South Fork of the Kings River Over Mather Pass to Deer Meadow

*11.9 miles, 2,200' gain, 3,200 loss*    *Water: There are several creek crossings on each side of the pass*

Return to the JMT/PCT and cross the Kings River. The trail soon leaves the forest to a series of lovely alpine meadows and finally into a barren rocky landscape with some scattered ponds having ascended 1,500' in 4.2 miles to the base of the massive wall that hides Mather Pass. The route traverses the lower part of the wall then turns into tight switchbacks to climb to the 12,100' pass at mile 5.5. This is a perfect place for a quick snack while you enjoy views of the trail to the south and the classic glacial walls of the Palisades drainage to the north. Take care leaving the pass as the path drops steeply on large steps and lose rubble before turning to dirt more than a mile below the pass. Be sure to stop at the creek running into the east side of the upper lake to enjoy a small waterfall, wildflowers, and a great foot soak. The route descends above the lakes along the base of the Palisades to finally reach the west end of the Lower Palisades Lake, 2,100' below the pass at mile nine. This is another great place to soak your feet before starting down the Golden Staircase. Leaving the lake, drop 1,200' in two miles, first gently and then more steeply down tight switchbacks to the Deer Meadow Camp.

# Rock Creek Pack Station

## John Muir Trail – Horseshoe Meadow to Bishop Pass Trailhead

### Days 13&14

#### Deer Meadow to Big Pete Meadow

9.0 miles, 1,400' gain, 1,100' loss

*Water: There is ample stream water throughout the day*

This is a serene day after the demanding trek over Mather Pass. The route remains in the forest much of the day as it follows Palisade Creek to drop 1,200' in 4.5 miles to a pleasant spot for a snack at the confluence with the Middle Fork of the Kings River and the Middle Fork Trail junction. The JMT/PCT now turns north to follow the Middle Fork up into Le Conte Canyon and soon passes Grouse Meadow. If it is a warm day, there are some deep areas in this slow-moving section of the Middle Fork that are the perfect place for a dip. Continuing up the trail, climb another 1,200' to the Bishop Pass Trail junction and a nearby ranger station at mile eight. Continue north on the JMT/PCT for another 1.5 miles, passing through a drift fence shortly before our camp at the south end of Big Pete Meadow. The Big Pete Meadow camp is a perfect layover day camp with some great bathing pools and a mix of sun and shade to dry washed clothes and relax with a good book.

#### Day 15

#### Big Pete Meadow to Dusy Basin

5.3 miles, 2,100' gain, 500' loss *Water: There is water at multiple stream crossings and the upper lakes*

Retrace your steps 1.6 miles to the Bishop Pass Trail junction. Turn left to leave the John Muir Trail and switchback up first through forest and then rocky meadows with wonderful views across Le Conte Canyon. The trail climbs steadily to gain 2,000' in three miles before arriving at the beautiful meadows surrounding the lakes of lower Dusy Basin. Camp is usually to the right of the trail and east of the string of small, unnamed lakes anchored by Lake 10742.

#### Day 16

#### Dusy Basin to South Lake

7.9 miles, 1,400' gain, 2,300' loss

*Water is readily available throughout the day*

This is the way to finish a stay in the Sierras. You may be tempted to rush out to the trailhead, but take time to enjoy the incredible beauty of Dusy Basin and the lakes below Bishop Pass.

Return to the trail and begin the 1,200' ascent over 2.6 miles to Bishop Pass past lakes, rocky slopes, and alpine meadows surrounded by the magnificent peaks of Dusy Basin. Leaving Kings Canyon National Park, the path descends easily for 1/4 mile before tight switchbacks navigate the steep face of Bishop Pass. Bishop Lake, 1.2 miles and over 700' below the pass is a great stop for a quick snack before continuing through a series of meadows, open forest, rocky slopes and along a chain of picturesque lakes to reach the trailhead near the north end of South Lake, 5.3 miles and 2,300' below the pass.

Drivers will arrive at the Bishop Pass Trailhead parking lot at the north end of South Lake at the agreed upon time to shuttle you back to Bishop.