

# Rock Creek Pack Station

## John Muir Trail – Horseshoe Meadow to Onion Valley

- Overview** The John Muir Trail follows the spine of the Sierra through Sequoia, Kings Canyon and Yosemite National Parks as well as the John Muir and Ansel Adams Wildernesses. This section of the John Muir Trail will take you to the top of Mt. Whitney and over the highest pass on the Pacific Crest Trail. The stark granite peaks, lush meadows, deep forests, rushing creeks, and placid lakes will nurture your soul as you pass along the trail.
- 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** 68.6 miles, 15,100' total gain and 16,200' loss
- Preparation** Hikers should be able to walk 12 miles, 3,000' elevation gain/loss.
- Meet Up** 7:00 AM at Cottonwood Pack Station where you will park your personal vehicle.
- Trailhead** In – Horseshoe Meadows; Out – Onion Valley. A shuttle will transfer you from the Onion Valley trailhead to the Cottonwood Pack Station.
- 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 Kings Canyon High Country 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. 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.

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### 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.

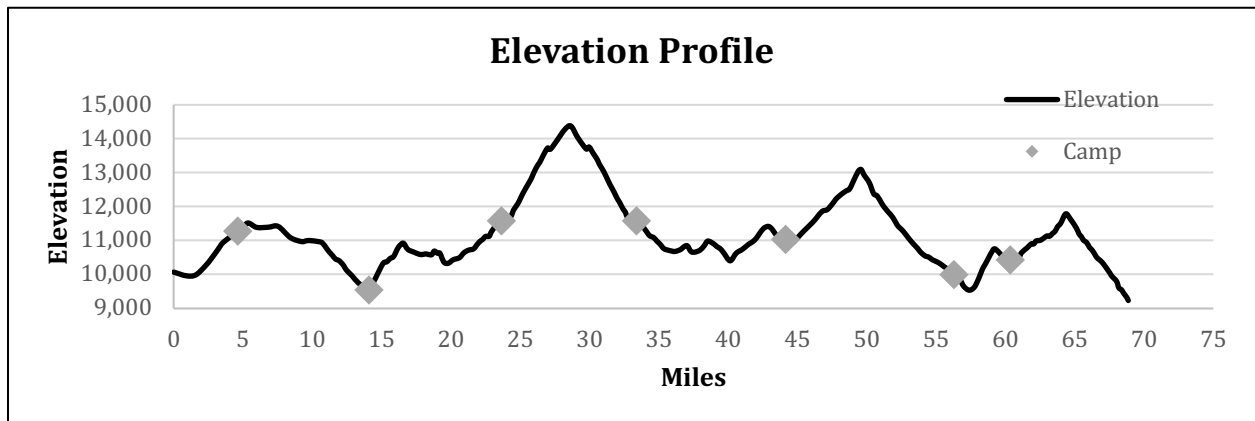
This document also describes some of the side trails you might accidentally take and how to determine you have taken a wrong turn. In this case, we ask that you turn back and return to the John Muir Trail. If you are too tired to continue, wait by the side of the JMT.

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.

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<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	Charlotte Lake	3.9	1,300	800
8	Onion Valley	8.3	1,500	2,700
Total		68.6	15,100	16,200



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## John Muir Trail – Horseshoe Meadow to Onion Valley

### 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.

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### 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

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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

#### 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 8

#### Charlotte Lake over Kearsarge Pass to Onion Valley

*8.3 miles, 1,500' gain, 2,700' loss Water: There is poor access to water until Flower and Gilbert Lakes*

Head back along Charlotte Lake to return to the JMT/PCT junction. Continue straight, following the trail to Kearsarge Pass. The route climbs across a sandy stretch and into the forest to another junction in 0.2 miles. Continue right toward Kearsarge Pass to hike through open forest as the trail climbs 650' in 2.2 miles to pass the junction with the Bullfrog Lake trail. The route soon leaves the trees to climb another 400' in 0.4 miles to Kearsarge Pass. Take time to enjoy the view and say goodbye to Kings Canyon National Park before starting down the barren slope above Big Pothole Lake. Consider stopping for a snack as you approach the sparsely forested outcrop above Heart Lake at mile 5.1. There is a short side trail down to Flower Lake at mile 5.9, 1,300' below the pass, and the trail again approaches water at Gilbert Lake in another 0.3 miles. The route now steadily descends on switchbacks for 1,200' in 2.1 miles through open forest and scrub to the Onion Valley trailhead.

Drivers will arrive at the agreed upon time to shuttle you and your gear back to your vehicle at the Cottonwood Pack Station.