

Backpacking in the Sierra

By Ellen Wright

After spending nearly four hours trekking up the mountain, the desert rocks gave way to a beautiful babbling creek.

I sighed in relief, realizing that we were close to our final destination, Long Lake.

A group of friends and I decided to go on a weekend backpacking trip in the Eastern Sierra, home of Mt. Whitney, the highest peak in the continental U.S.

So many people visit Mt. Whitney and the surrounding areas, the permits are raffled off each morning using a lottery system.

Long Lake is about eight miles out of the Cottonwood Creek parking area. We woke up early on a Saturday morning to get to the ranger station by 8 a.m. for a coveted permit.

It was early in the season so permits weren't hard to come by.

After having a "final meal" (we were only staying in the mountains one night) we drove up the Horseshoe Meadow Road.

It takes about 45 minutes to get out of Lone Pine and to the parking area.

As the ascent got steeper and steeper, my excitement continued to grow. It was my first time backpacking and I decided to come on a last minute whim.

After slathering on gobs of sunscreen in the parking lot and taking one final restroom break, my friends and I were ready.

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Other hikers were gearing up for the journey and the excitement was palpable.

My boyfriend and friend were seasoned veterans, one having had climbed Mt. Whitney last summer.

I was in capable hands.

One of the most difficult parts about backpacking is carrying the required amount of food and storing it in a bear canister.

In the Inyo National Forest, black bears roam and can sniff out the mildest scents.

Before leaving the car, I emptied my purse and backpack of anything I wasn't planning on eating while in the mountains. Bears can tear up cars so this is an important step. Even candy and gum wrappers are enough to attract the hungry desperation of a black bear.

Once the car was completely scent-free, we set off into the mountains. Starting at Cottonwood Lakes is convenient because the trail begins at 10,000 feet. That means the hike is only about 1,000 feet in elevation gain.

As a San Diego girl, I'm not acclimated at all to the elevation. I was out of breath pretty often but we luckily weren't in any hurry.

We ticked off a few miles in what seemed like no time.

The landscape changes every hour or so, with beautiful surprises around each bend.

The tree canopy dotted with fallen stumps gives way to wide open sunny meadows.

At one point pack mules trotted down, briefly forcing us off the trail.

For the next hour, it lightly snowed, barely dusting the ground. It was a bit surprising for June.

We stopped at a lake to have a lunch of salami and cheese.

While we were at the lake, we could see marmots popping in and out of rocks as if they were part of whack-a-mole.

Marmots are adorable rodents about the size of a small dog. They're the largest species in the squirrel family.

During lunch, clouds started to roll in and a brisk chill settled over us.

It was definitely time to leave and get camp set up. We didn't get rained on during our last portion of the eight-mile hike in, which was lucky.

Settling on a site in Long Lake wasn't easy since other campers had beat us there.

Once we found a place, we put our tents up and scouted a "kitchen."

Since there are bears, it's wise to cook and leave food (in bear canisters) about 100 feet away from where you plan to sleep.

While setting up camp, I felt a light drop. I looked up, only to hear my friend shout, "It's snowing!"

For the next hour, it lightly snowed, barely dusting the ground.

It was a bit surprising for June.

The weather against the mountains created beautiful silhouettes. Shadows from the clouds streaked surrounding peaks, leaving depth where there wasn't before.

For the remainder of the time spent camping, we fly-fished and hiked around the site.

It was a bit chilly and mosquitoes were out but it was a magical trip that I'm not likely to forget anytime soon.