

A Five-Day Fastpack of the John Muir Trail

By Blake P. Wood

It was high. It was wild. It was a moment that I run for – to move out of the dim light of pre-dawn and into the sunlight, and say to myself “It’s good to be alive!” Far below and to the east I could see the miles climbed in the darkness. Ten thousand vertical feet below twinkled the lights of Lone Pine. To the west, the pastel colors of the pre-dawn created a subtle rainbow, culminating in a pinkish band descending toward the peaks of the Great Western Divide. Above and to the north was the summit dome of Mt. Whitney, the highest point in the contiguous U.S., and the southern terminus of the John Muir Trail. I checked my watch – 5:40 a.m. With a bit of effort I might still make it to the top before 6 a.m., in time to see the sun break the eastern horizon. After that I’d be on my way toward Yosemite, over 200 miles and five or six days away.

For many years I had planned to hike the JMT – established in the early years of the century as a high route between Mt. Whitney and Yosemite in California’s Sierra Nevada – John Muir’s “Range of Light”. But with high school athletics, college, a job, grad school, a family, etc., finding 2-3 weeks of precious vacation was difficult. After I started running ultras a few years back, I had a revelation: I could RUN it in a week! This summer would mark both my 40th birthday and 25 years of long-distance running. This was the year to do it!

“Maybe this isn’t the year to do it!” said Brick Robbins when I ran into him on the streets of Silverton before the Hardrock Hundred. “There is still a huge snowpack in the Sierra. You’ll need an ice axe and crampons to get over the passes, and the rivers will very high.” Brick’s warning worried me. Although it wouldn’t be worse than Hardrock’s snow and rivers, at Hardrock I’d have people taking care of me, and could easily bail out if necessary. The JMT would require me to run the first hundred miles and 2 1/2 days entirely without support.

I’d heard of other ultrarunners fastpacking the JMT in 8-9 days, and my Dad, Phil Wood, simply backpacked it in nine days a number of years ago. This didn’t seem to be enough of a challenge – I wanted to do it in a time that couldn’t be achieved without running. Five or six days seemed like a pace that required this, was achievable, but was still enough of a stretch of my capabilities to make it interesting. It wasn’t my intention to attempt some sort of record for the JMT. I don’t know what the record is, but assume someone has probably done it at least a day faster than my elapsed time of 4 days, 15 hours, and 35 minutes from the Whitney summit. My pack weight would have to be kept down to run it, so I decided to leave behind the sleeping bag, tent, and stove. This is not as crazy as it sounds – the bivouac is a time-honored technique in mountaineering that I’d exploited a number of times. However, I’d never tried to do it more than one night at a time, and this would require bivouacs for the first three nights. The trip was planned with all my nights at relatively low elevations (8000’-9000’), so I wouldn’t be too uncomfortable sleeping on a foam pad in the open, clad only in a rain jacket and wind pants over a sweatshirt and tights, with gloves and a balaclava. Despite the unusually warm weather, I still spent each night hugging myself ineffectually for warmth.

My regular running belt and a day pack sufficed. Despite my lack of a stove, I included a lightweight aluminum tea kettle to heat water over a small campfire for instant mashed potatoes. I carried a 20 oz. running bottle, but left it empty, instead relying on a filter bottle filled with about 8 oz. water at a time, which I held in my hand and sipped along the way. This worked really well, and saved a lot of weight compared to treating water 20-40 oz. at a time. I threw in all the normal essentials: mosquito repellent, sunscreen, TP, matches, ibuprofen, chapstick, maps, sunglasses, athletic tape (for blisters), toothbrush, etc. I brought some fishing line and hooks, intending to supplement my food with trout, but never had the time to use them. A big 2-D cell focussing flashlight with extra batteries served for nighttime use. This gear and my warm clothes weighed in at 12 lbs. At the start I carried about 5 lbs. of food for the first three days.

Dad and I drove from his house at Lake Arrowhead up to Lone Pine on Saturday afternoon, stopping there only long enough to check on conditions at the Ranger Station, purchase a fishing license, and pick up a pizza for dinner. We drove to the trailhead at Whitney Portal, packed, discussed our plans, shared a couple beers, finished off the pizza, and did the best we could to catch 3-4 hours sleep in the front seats of Dad’s Mazda. At 11:40 p.m. the alarm went off. We gathered our gear and walked up the road to the start of the Whitney trail, beginning at midnight on the morning of August 9th. The moon, only a day past full, lit up the white granite around us so that we rarely needed our flashlights. It was surprisingly warm, and we quickly stripped off our sweatshirts as we climbed.

I’d been up this trail six times over the previous 28 years, five of them with Dad. This was the first time in a dozen years, however, and I enjoyed rediscovering scenes from the past which hovered just beyond my recollection before bursting from my memory as we rounded each corner in the trail. Here was where we’d camped with the Boy Scouts when I was 14. There was where my wife, Rebecca, and I had watched a glorious sunset in 1986....

At 3 a.m., just above timberline, Dad turned back, citing stomach problems and a wish not to hold me back. I thanked him for his help, we shook hands, and parted with a call of "See you in two and a half days!"

Passing through Trail Camp at 3:30 a.m. was eerie. It was very quiet and appeared nearly deserted. In the moonlight, everything was gray, making the tents difficult to distinguish from the rocks. I remembered the small city of people camping around the lake here in the past, back before trailhead quotas were established to help the area recover from years of overuse.

As I climbed the hundred or so switchbacks leading to Trail Crest, Venus rose in the east, winking red, orange, blue, and green as it rose through the invisible layers of haze over the desert. The moon crossed over the crest ahead of me, plunging me into shadow and forcing me to use my flashlight for the first time in hours. Rivulets of water ran down the trail, leaving clear ice on the rocks. At one point I saw two flashlights at Trail Camp, now far below - no doubt hikers preparing for an early start to the summit.

I reached Trail Crest at 5 a.m. It was dead calm, and the pastel glow of the world around me was beautiful! I paused for a minute, trying to soak it all in.

Descending the short section of trail which led to the junction with the John Muir Trail, I discovered a person in a sleeping bag wedged beside the trail. From here, the summit was an out-and-back, so I dropped my day pack and flashlight a few yards from the sleeping form, grabbed a Cliff Bar, and headed off for the summit.

Jogging along where possible, I made rapid progress, and set a goal for myself to reach the summit by 6 a.m., in time to see the sunrise. I ran the final 300 yards, jumping from rock to rock up the gentle slope toward the summit point, much to the amazement of two people standing on the summit. With two minutes to spare before 6 a.m., I just beat the first sunray breaching the desert peaks many miles to the east.

Thirty minutes passed quickly, spent in pleasant conversation with the man and woman who had spent the night in the summit shelter. They were intrigued by plans, and wished me luck. The memory returned of the afternoon I'd first stood here in 1970, a day when over 600 hikers signed the summit register. This calm, quiet morning was a marked contrast. At 6:26 I set off at an easy jog to begin the John Muir Trail.

A half mile below the summit, I passed the fellow who had been asleep by the trail. He was finishing a 12 day hike of the JMT, so I pumped him for information about the condition of the passes. He told me there was snow on all of them through Muir Pass, which was covered over a 5 mile stretch. The rivers were high, but not dangerous. He asked me say hello to a German guy named "Wolf" who was also hiking the entire JMT. I'd probably see him near Forester Pass, later that day.

After retrieving my pack, I began the descent toward Crabtree Meadow. Running down the switchbacks on the west side of the crest, I met a man who was finishing a hike across the Sierra from Mineral King. Two weeks later, I would receive an email from him, mentioning that he had seen my internet posting about the run, and had used it to prove to some unbelieving friends that he really had met a guy who thought he could do the JMT in 5 days.

At this point in the run I felt like a fraud describing my plans. After all, it was only the morning of the first of many days. Therefore, I didn't mention my intentions, but it usually came up anyway due to my obviously inadequate equipment. People would ask where I came from or where I was headed, and after being told, would look me up and down, and ask "Where's your sleeping bag?" or "How long will it take you?"

Just before running out of Whitney's shadow I stopped to strip off my night clothes, put on sunscreen, and get a bite to eat - what became my standard morning break of about 40 minutes. I got surprisingly chilled, and the thumb I'd jammed in a running fall a week earlier ached badly. The sun reached me soon after starting again, just above Guitar Lake, but it gave little warmth in the cold breeze which had sprung up.

Near Wright Creek I met my only Ranger, a young woman who was hiking to visit her husband, the Ranger at Tyndall Creek. She seemed unsurprised at my fastpack adventure, and never asked to see my wilderness permit.

Approaching Forester Pass in the early afternoon, I encountered a backpacker with a heavy accent, and commented "You must be Wolf, the German guy." He replied "Yes, I am Wolf, but I'm not a guy." Puzzled, I asked "But you are the guy from Germany, right?" He answered again "Yes, I am from Germany, but I'm not a guy." After going through this sequence several more times in what sounded a lot like Abbott and Costello's "Who's on first" routine, I finally realized he thought I was saying "GUIDE". I don't think he ever understood my insistence that he was a guide.

Crossing Forester Pass at about 2 p.m., I half ran, half glissaded down a mile of steep, soft snow, then began a long run down Bubbs Creek toward my first night's camp.

I was strangely depressed while preparing my dinner in Vidette Meadow - a very unusual thing for me, an eternal optimist. The sobering realization had set in that this run was going to be a lot harder than expected. I had confidently predicted to friends that there would be lots of extra time to fish, nap, and wash off the trail dust. After all, running 42 miles shouldn't take more than 12-14 hours. Today, it had taken nearly 17 hours. Although I do most of my running alone, and am comfortable keeping my own company, I was lonely for someone to share the

day's experiences with. And I knew that in less than five hours I would arise in the dark, and start all over again. My first attempt to build a small fire to heat water was a failure. I did eventually get it started, but didn't boil enough water and ended up with cold mashed potatoes to go with my trail food of dried apricots, beef jerky, granola, and crackers. Following dinner, I stashed my food and gear in the nearby bear box (a chest sized metal box that the National Park Service puts out in selected locations to protect backpacker's food), put on my warm clothes, and laid out on my foam pad. I didn't feel like I slept much, and was surprised to be woken up by the alarm on my watch at 11:45 p.m. Setting off at midnight, I immediately soaked my only pair of dry socks splashing across the creek.

Reaching Glen Pass at 2 a.m., I felt like I was the only person left in this world. It was dead calm and quiet, which contributed to the sense of desolation and loneliness. This left me feeling vaguely troubled, but at the same time, exhilarated. I was on my own, responsible for my own safety and comfort, a shadow passing over the land while the world slept. I recalled another time, 23 years before, standing at the same spot in a wind storm on our annual distance runner's backpack trip, following the end of the high school track season. The same vague sense of dread hit me then too. Was it the impending June snowstorm, or simply the place? Shrugging it off, I began a difficult descent over large angular boulders and frozen snow, with only occasional disconnected patches of trail visible. Below lay the Rae Lakes, famed as one of the most beautiful (and crowded) spots in the Sierra. An hour later, following the trail winding around the glacier scoured lakes in the moonlight, I didn't see a single tent or camp. The surrounding moon-lit peaks were reflected in the still water. I tried to spot fish with my flashlight, but they were too fast for me.

My six hours of travel in the dark every morning took on a dream-like quality familiar to anyone who has run hundred milers – very real at the time, but come day I asked myself “Did that really happen?” The climbs seemed easier, the descents longer, the rivers wider and more menacing.

After walking the long, difficult, wet trail down to Wood's Creek, where I took a short nap until dawn, the ascent toward Pinchot Pass was refreshing. The wildflowers were beautiful: orange tiger lily, purple larkspur, red indian paintbrush. My feet, however, were in pretty bad shape from being continually wet, and this was only the second day out. This would be a major problem if I couldn't figure out a way to keep them dry.

After crossing Pinchot Pass, and traversing the Upper Basin of the South Fork of the Kings River, I sat on a rock a mile below Mather Pass to wring out my socks and clean the gravel out of my shoes, keenly regretting my decision not to bring gaiters. Ascending the final, annoyingly level switchbacks to the pass, I pushed to stay ahead of a group of backpackers who seemed to be keeping up with me through the Upper Basin. How were they doing it with those huge packs? No matter, I'd leave them far behind on the downhill stretch to come. At the top of the pass I caught up with a young man carrying an enormous pack, who was also doing the whole JMT in the same direction as me. We chatted for a few minutes about the two extremes we represented - he had slow, uncomfortable days and warm, comfortable nights, as opposed to my fast days and spartan, uncomfortable nights. Like most backpackers I encountered, it had never occurred to him that there was any other way to do it, and he was intrigued by my approach. I've humped heavy backpacks over many miles myself, and got a secret thrill every time I picked up my day pack and flipped it onto my back with two fingers.

From the summit of Mather Pass, I looked back to the south, and could see the peaks surrounding Glen Pass, fading into the blue distance. I patted myself on the back for making such impressive progress. Twenty five years ago I had stood here during a nine day backpacking trip with two of my high school friends. Today, I would run by four consecutive camps we made on that trip - that's progress!

My day's run ended with a long, hot, tiring trek down Palisade Creek and past Grouse Meadow, looking for the bear box I never found. It was 6 p.m., an even longer day than the first, although I had covered the same 42 mile distance.

I arose an hour earlier, my third day out, after deciding at 11 p.m. that I was only going to get colder and more uncomfortable, and so might as well put some miles behind me. Figuring I owed myself a nap, I stopped at 1 a.m. and caught a surprisingly comfortable hour of sleep, stretched out across a white sloped rock in the bright moonlight. The perfect amount of sleep – refreshing, yet not long enough to get seriously chilled. After an unwelcome stream crossing, for which I stripped off my socks but left my shoes on to protect my feet, I soon reached the first snow on my ascent of Muir Pass. It was rock hard, and very slippery. Skirting it, I lost the trail and set out cross-country, high above the stream. My position became more exposed; it was finally time to put on the instep crampons I'd carried for more than 90 miles. Accompanied by the crunch of frozen snow and the clatter of steel against rock, I continued up, pausing occasionally to check my bearing by the topo. To my surprise and chagrin, I got confused about which lake was which, and endured the cruel joke of discovering that what I thought was the final pitch up to Muir Pass had actually placed me at the outlet of a large lake a mile and hundreds of feet vertical below the pass. The lake was still frozen over from the winter – an amazing thing to see in mid-August. Now at least I knew where I was. The going became more difficult, as the snow developed 1-2 ft. deep suncups.

Walking on the ridges of the cups was like balancing on an icy picket fence, but was much easier than laboriously stepping into and out of each cup.

From the pass at 5 a.m., the brightening sky in the east silhouetted dark, jagged peaks. I resisted the urge to enter the beehive shaped rock shelter, not wanting to wake up anyone who might have spent the night there. Starting down the slope toward the lakes of the Evolution Basin, I could see that those in the upper two miles of the basin were frozen over. It was exciting to be over the pass - it meant that it was all downhill to where Dad was waiting for me near Blayne Meadows, 21 miles ahead. The time was a concern, as it was obvious that travel would be slow over the snow for at least the next two miles, and maybe more. I had expected to make very good time running downhill. The Evolution Basin has always been one of my favorite spots in the Sierra, with blue lakes, green meadows, and wildflowers in a thrillingly desolate location. Now, it was snow, wet trails, and frozen mud - I felt a bit cheated.

The trail down the South Fork of the San Joaquin River was beautiful, with a roaring blue-green river cascading down a narrow, deep canyon of dark metamorphic rock. Now that the trail was fairly level, however, it was hard to keep running. I was tired from my 12 hours on the trail, and still had a long way to go today. However, I kept running on, anticipating Dad waiting for me with food, dry socks, and companionship only a few miles ahead, and knowing that this was the half-way point in my trek. At the bridge across Piute Creek, I wrote a brief note to Dad on a tag which I tied to a trail sign - something Dad and I had agreed to do before the run to ensure we didn't miss each other. I looked for a tag from Dad, but didn't see one. Two miles further on at the Blayne Meadows trail junction, I found the tag. "100 yards ahead, on the left in the bushes", it said. Trotting down the trail, I found Dad leaning against a tree, sound asleep. It was quarter to noon, less than two hours later than I'd estimated I might arrive when starting my run two and a half days earlier. Dad and I briefly filled each other in on our respective adventures. In a perverse display of sympathy and solidarity, Dad had backpacked in without a sleeping bag, and spent the previous night sleeping only in his clothes, as I was doing. I immediately set to exchanging my smelly shirt and wet socks for clean ones, sorting my food, collecting my trash, and eating what additional food looked good. Surprisingly, I had a large portion of food left from my first three days - I only seemed to be consuming about 3000 calories/day instead of the 4500 I'd planned, yet had never felt hungry nor lacking of energy. I didn't linger, having to get over Selden Pass and down onto Bear Creek that afternoon, so I set off again after only an hour. I told Dad to expect me in Red's Meadow between 4-5 p.m. the next day.

From the summit of Selden Pass, just after 4 p.m., I discovered that having a long range view cuts both ways. On Mather Pass, it had been satisfying to see how far I'd come, but from Selden Pass, I could see Ritter and Banner Peaks impossibly far to the north, and realized that I had to be nearly among them by this time tomorrow. Very sobering. It had clouded up during the climb, and I could see rain falling to the north. I prayed that it wouldn't reach me. It was nearing the end of a long day, and the combination of tiredness, gloomy weather, and the late hour left me a bit down. As I descended past Marie Lake, I watched with envy a group of backpackers having what looked like a grand time at their camp on a finger of land sticking into the lake. I wished to be with a group of my friends and family, joking around a campfire, with a warm, dry bed awaiting me in the night. Well, it wouldn't be long now - tomorrow night I'd spend with my Dad, and the day after that might see me in Yosemite Valley.

For some reason, the area around Bear Creek had always seemed dreary and foreboding when I examined it on the topo map, and it felt that way when I arrived in a light rain to spend my third night, tired from another 42 mile day. Once the rain stopped, however, it was beautiful, with a bright river flowing through meadows dotted with outcroppings of bare, glacier polished granite

I trotted down the trail by flashlight at midnight, as usual, to start my fourth day. I was thankful to be doing the difficult climb over Bear Ridge in the coolness of the early morning, but at the same time felt sorry not to see the beautiful terrain around me better. The moon was now almost five days past full. It cast distinctly less light than on the first night of my run, and the thick pine forest absorbed what light there was. Following a long, switchbacking descent into Mono Creek, which the trail crossed on a constructed bridge, I faced a tricky ford of its North Fork. It was running wide and fast, and in the darkness of 4 a.m., it was hard to guess how deep it might be. I stood around for a few minutes debating whether to wait until it was light, but didn't want to lose the two hours of time on the trail. I decided to go for it, and after removing my socks to keep them dry, discovered that it really wasn't that bad. I wished I had removed my shoes as well, since keeping my feet dry was becoming one of my top priorities as they blistered more with each passing day. A few miles of steep climbing later I had to cross the North Fork again, this time in a narrow, steep canyon. Although it was not wide, it was very swift, with dangerous cascades above and below the trail crossing. It was now 5:30 a.m. - not long until first light. I was getting pretty punchy and had begun staggering around in sleepiness, so it was an easy decision to pull on my extra clothes, lay down on my pad beside the river, and take a welcome nap. Thirty minutes later I awoke in the dim twilight, much refreshed, and after

probing a few hundred feet upstream for a dry crossing, returned to wade the river in my bare feet. Once again, it was not nearly as difficult as I had imagined it might be.

The final pitch up to Silver Pass was partially snow covered. The sun was on the surrounding ridges, but the cirque I was climbing through was still in shadow. I tried to take a shortcut across a snowbank to avoid a marshy area. Whoa! Wham! "Man, this snow is slippery!" I got back to my feet, took two steps, and did it again. After falling for the third time, I noticed the brick red stain on my hands, water bottle, and map. Not blood, but a fungus that lives in old snowbanks. I'd seen this many times, but had never gotten it on me before. It appeared to be quite indelible - I couldn't wash or scrape it off! Later in the day I noticed that the color gradually faded and disappeared where exposed to the sun. Was it dying or simply bleaching out?

Silver Pass greeted me with bright morning sun and a fantastic view of the Ritter Range to the north. Most of the day's route was visible - it looked like a long way, but by now I was calibrated to how much territory could be covered in a few hours. I found a comfortable rock, and spent a luxurious 55 minute morning break soaking up the warm sun, looking at my maps, eating, drying out my socks and shoes, re-taping my feet, and applying sunscreen - the usual routine. I was in high spirits - today I'd see a lot of territory I'd always meant to visit, and tonight I'd get to relax with Dad. There was still plenty of climbing from here to Red's Meadow, but no more high passes - easier terrain than in the previous three days, and a "short" day of only 39 miles.

An entertaining game was predicting how long it would take me to get to the next lake, trail junction, or stream. I was getting pretty good at this, using a simple rule of thumb: 2 mph uphill, 4 mph downhill. This pace was remarkably consistent, even at night, regardless of the altitude or steepness of the trail. If this doesn't sound very fast, think of it as a respectable 37 hour pace at Hardrock - the JMT is approximately two Hardrock Hundreds, back to back. My instantaneous pace was faster, since this pace includes breaks (typically 5-10 minutes every hour), stream crossings, and sections of rough trail that I couldn't run. I ate almost continuously during the day, filling my pockets with dried apricots and beef jerky, and gnawing off hunks of a maltodextrine/dextrose "brick" when I needed a quick energy fix.

The last few miles of the day were very hard, due to my tiredness, even though they were downhill. I counted them down, thinking of where each would put me in relation to my house on one of my regular workouts. At quarter after four I reached a service road, and found a note Dad had tied to a trail sign, directing me to where the car was parked.

This was the life - relaxing outside the Red's Meadow store, sharing sodas, cheese, salami, and crackers with Dad! The difficulties of the day were forgotten. After dinner, we went to the campground for a scalding hot shower, piped direct from a hot spring. Tomorrow would probably be my final day on the trail. I didn't say that definitively, wanting to leave open the option of stopping for the night at Tuolumne Meadows, but I would have to be hurting badly to do that.

Dad walked me down to the trailhead at midnight, after a night spent sleeping in the front seat of his car. I traded the NB800's I'd used thus far for my NB876's, hoping that a different pair of shoes would give my feet some relief. It didn't help - my blistered feet hurt so badly I could barely walk. However, I knew from experience that after an hour or so the swelling would be pounded down and they would feel better, and that's exactly what happened. Since it was a warm night, and Dad would be waiting early that afternoon in Tuolumne Meadows, I left most of my warm clothes and camping gear in the car, managing to cram everything into my running belt so the daypack could be left behind. I had a bit of trouble finding the bridge across the roaring Middle Fork of the San Joaquin River, and the trail paralleling the Devil's Postpile beyond was miserable - soft, loose, dusty pumice. I started getting very sleepy, and recited poetry out loud to keep on my feet: Kipling, R.W. Service, and Lewis Carroll. The area around the Ritter Range is one of the most beautiful in the entire Sierra. I'd only been in it once before, peak-bagging with Dad a decade ago, and regretted missing so much of it in the dark. Four a.m. found me paralleling Shadow Creek, which roared and foamed off to my left, half felt, half seen in the dim moonlight. A meteor of the Perseid shower streaked across the sky, leaving a green phosphorescent tail which lingered for seconds.

I took my morning break at just past 6 a.m., at the top of the divide between Garnet and Thousand Island Lakes. As I sat there, the summit of Banner Peak, an inspiring pinnacle of dark metamorphic rock at the head of Garnet lake, burst into flame with the first rays of the rising sun. I watched in wonder, forgetting for a moment my morning "chores", as the orange light spread down the rock face, turning pink as it lit up the glacier at its base. In the foreground, Garnet Lake reflected the scene, rings in the water marking where trout leaped for their breakfast among the rocky islands. It was one of the most beautiful sunrises I'd ever seen! I resolved to someday bring Rebecca back to this place to see this wonderful sight.

The basin between Thousand Island Lake and Donohue Pass reminded me of a Japanese rock garden - granite boulders set among stunted, twisted pines and beautiful wildflowers, with clear streams meandering through small

grassy meadows. Beautiful, but difficult running – although there was little net elevation change, there wasn't a flat yard of trail to be seen.

Throughout this trip I enjoyed the reaction of backpackers to my spartan gear and high mileage. Climbing Donohue Pass, I passed a group of high school kids on a backpack trip. One of them quizzed me about where I was going. When I told him that I left Red's Meadow that morning and would be in Tuolumne Meadows by early afternoon, he collapsed back against a pack that looked almost as big as he was, and groaned "Oh God! I wish I could do that in one day!"

Once over Donohue Pass, I dropped steeply down to the Lyell Fork of the Tuolumne River. From there to Tuolumne Meadows would be a flat, straight, 10 miles on a smooth trail. Good running. However, without the distractions of interesting terrain, it turned into something like a death march in the noontime heat and blazing sun. The trail paralleled the clear, cool, smoothly flowing river, which beamed me to stop this nonsense and enjoy a refreshing swim. I knew now, however, that I would continue down to Yosemite Valley this afternoon, and wanted to minimize my nighttime travel – I'd hiked this section of trail before, but not the section down to the Valley. Although I was hot and tired, the good trail allowed me to push the pace, but I could tell my legs were being burned up doing it, and something had to be left for the 6000' descent into the Valley. Remarkably, my legs hadn't started feeling the miles until the end of the fourth day, but they would be plenty sore by the time I finished this, my fifth day. I took periodic walking breaks to keep my pace at the 4 mph level.

After missing the trail skirting Tuolumne Meadows, and wandering around the campground for a while trying to find it again, I finally reached the Visitor Center, where Dad was waiting for me. It was 2 p.m., right on schedule. I sat in a folding chair next to Dads' car in the parking lot, enjoying lunch and doctoring my feet. There were still 22 miles to go, however, so out the relaxation couldn't be drawn out too much. Just before 3 p.m. it started to sprinkle, and I took that as a sign it was time to go. I estimated it would take me seven hours to reach the Valley, plus or minus an hour, and agreed that Dad would be waiting in the car as close to the end of the road as possible.

"Dad, do you have a double-A flashlight I could carry instead of my heavy one?" Dad found one and flicked it on. In the daylight it looked okay. "How about some spare batteries?" I asked. "Here, I think these are new. Do you want to test them?" "No, I'll take your word for it. I'll only need the flashlight for a couple hours, and probably won't even use the spares." I had sworn off these little flashlights for running years ago – they just don't throw enough light to run by. But I was tired, and was looking for any way to ease the final leg of my run.

It rained off and on during the climb toward Cathedral Pass, finally coming down hard with lightning and thunder at the top. I didn't care - I was on my way out. I hiked for a while with two brothers who ran sprints in Masters track meets. When they found out what I was doing, and that I turned 40 in two days, they commented "Now you can run that Great Western Race, you know, the one from Tahoe to down near Auburn." They meant Western States, of course. I've heard reference before to WS100 as a run that you had to be over 40 to compete in. Anyone know where this myth comes from?

The character of the Sierra was very different here than in the south – the terrain was smaller and more intimate, with a classic Yosemite alpine combination of sharp pinnacles and rounded granite domes. Beautiful! Following a gradual descent through some picturesque meadows, the trail makes an incredibly steep descent toward Little Yosemite Valley. This took a lot out of me and churned up my stomach, and although I made very good time running downhill, I felt terrible at the bottom. The setting sun turned the granite domes of Little Yosemite Valley a warm orange color. I no longer saw hikers on the trail – everyone now was in camp preparing dinner. By the time I reached the Half Dome trail junction, with six miles to go, I was totally exhausted from the 52 miles already covered that day. Unfortunately, the trail took a turn for the worse. The trail was constructed of rocks carefully placed to reduce erosion, and tens of thousands of feet mixed with abrasive trail dust had polished the rocks so they might as well have been coated with ice – very slippery. I couldn't have run this even if fresh, but the excuse to walk was welcome all the same.

I broke out my flashlight at the outlet of Little Yosemite Valley, where the Merced River began its steep descent to Yosemite Valley, including the spectacular Nevada and Vernal Falls. Here, I had a choice: take the stock trail, which was blasted out of the cliff high above the falls, or follow the shorter foot trail, which was a pretty good approximation of a rock staircase switchbacking down a near vertical gully next to the granite dome of the Liberty Cap. I chose the latter. It was a treacherous trail in the fading light of evening – not only slippery like the trail above Little Yosemite Valley, but also very steep. I picked my way down gingerly, catching glimpses of booming Nevada Fall through the oak and pine. At the bottom of this section, now in the full darkness of night, I lost the trail. I was in a flat area with footprints in the dust going off in all directions. Where was the trail? Suddenly realizing that my flashlight was nearly dead after only one hour of use, I dug out my spare batteries, and swapped them by feel in the darkness. When I flicked my flashlight back on, it faded to a dim orange glow in seconds. My blood went cold. "Dad, these batteries are no f***ing good!" I said out loud, but was immediately ashamed – he'd

done his best to fulfill my spur-of-the-moment request, and I hadn't bothered to check my equipment adequately. No, it was my own fault. I couldn't believe this was happening to me – to be this close, and get tripped up by a stupid mistake! I swapped back to the original, weak batteries. The short rest allowed them to put out a few seconds of bright light, and by following the direction with the fewest pine needles on the ground, I was able to regain the trail.

A bit above the top of Vernal Fall there was another trail junction, one branch leading back up to the horse trail, the other climbing down the Mist Trail beside the fall. I paused here in the dark, and pondered my options. The longer, unfamiliar horse trail was unappealing. I could wait until after midnight when the moon rose, but it wouldn't directly illuminate the trail on the north facing cliff, and a half moon doesn't throw much light anyway. I could spend the night here, and wait for morning. That option taste like ashes in my mouth – I was only two miles from the trailhead at Happy Isles, and could still be there by 10 p.m. if I kept moving. Dad would be worried by morning, and, being this close, I wanted to finish in five days, not six. “Well, Blake, what'll it be? Play it safe, or take a risk?” I decided to take the risk, despite a nagging feeling of doing something stupid, for selfish reasons. I was familiar with the Mist Trail, although it had been many years since I'd been on it, and told myself that if I got stuck, I could just sit down and wait for morning, all the while knowing I'd never do that. This was no joke – I couldn't count on someone coming along behind me, like in a hundred miler. The trail was deserted, and would remain so until morning. I was honestly afraid, wandering around on these cliffs in the dark.

A couple hundred yards of stumbling down the trail brought me to the lip of Vernal Fall. In the starlight I could vaguely see the dark, smooth water flow over the precipice, turning white at the moment it disappeared. I could hear the roar below, and feel the mist on my face. Pulling myself up the railing along the cliff edge in the dark, I was thankful to spare my flashlight. A hundred feet up the bare granite was the beginning of the Mist Trail, marked by a sign on which, in a split second flick of my light, could be read the word “hazardous”. I thought of the thousands of tourists who hike past this point every week, and cursed the difficulty I was having in what by day is a beautiful and awe inspiring spot. Picture a wet, water sprayed, narrow, steep staircase without a handrail, clinging to the face of a sheer cliff, and you have a pretty good picture of the Mist Trail. I quickly realized that I wouldn't be able to stop here – it was too wet and cold. I was committed. It's wonderful what a little adrenaline will do for you – 30 minutes before I had been sleepy, terribly sore, and beyond exhaustion. Suddenly, I was tuned in, aware, and without a pain! My flashlight would dimly illuminate two steps at a time if I held it close to the ground, but it seemed to be holding out. I was concentrating intensely on the trail, unaware of time. Finally, the trail leveled, and felt different beneath my feet. I examined it more closely – pavement! Hallelujah! I was down! THIS I could do safely in the dark!

On the final mile of paved trail I realized how tired and sore I was. While descending the Mist Trail, I had wondered why it didn't hurt to stub my blistered toes. Now I found out – it hurt like hell, but had been masked by the adrenaline. Stumbling down the path by occasional flicks of flashlight became a strange dream. I had been warned that it would be difficult to run this final section due to the crowds of tourists on the trail. How different this was!

I reached the trailhead at 10:01 p.m., and walked slowly down the final $\frac{3}{4}$ mile of road, accompanied by kids on bicycles and small groups of strolling campers who shined flashlights in my eyes. People yelled at me to watch out for a large bear that had been chased from a nearby campground and had joined me on the road. He could eat me for all I cared. I was REALLY tired.

Doing the JMT in five days was an interesting challenge, and I'm glad to have done it once. I tested my limits, and pushed them back a long way. I don't think I'll ever try doing it that fast again, however. Too intense and too lonely. Taking an extra couple days would have allowed me to relax a bit and enjoy the beautiful surroundings all the more. Also, I hadn't anticipated how much I would miss having another person along to discuss the things I was seeing. Rebecca and I plan to return in two years to backpack the whole thing in a couple weeks for our 20th wedding anniversary. Now THAT will be fun!