

# Alpine Island in the Desert

WHEN JULY HEAT  
WAVES ROLL  
ACROSS THE  
DESERT FLOOR,  
IT'S TIME TO  
POINT YOUR  
HIKING SHOES  
TOWARD THE  
TOP OF NEVADA'S  
WHEELER PEAK . . .

HIKERS REST IN SNOW-  
FIELD 1000 FEET BELOW  
SUMMIT IN BACKGROUND.

By LOUISE WERNER

THE 8000-FOOT public campground, shaded by yellow pines, was loud with the clamor of Lehman Creek and its many tributaries that wander past tables and stoves and improvised rock fireplaces. Tall canelike grasses, yellow mimulus and blue penstemons were lush along the crooked little streams. The scent of wild roses filled the air.

A sign reading "Stella Lake, 5 Miles—Wheeler Peak, 7 Miles," ushered the Sierra Club knapsackers onto a path cut through rose thickets, young aspen and mountain mahogany.

A feathery cloud enveloped many of the mountain mahogany trees — a myriad of cycle-shaped wings on which the seeds would shortly escape. Yellow-brown eyes looked up from the depths of creamy mariposa tulips. Grasshoppers clapped their wings, hopping from tall grass to gray sage to scarlet penstemon.

It was the Fourth of July week end, and we were in eastern Nevada on the flank of 13,000-foot Wheeler Peak, heart of the proposed Great Basin National Park — an alpine island in the midst of a vast ocean of desert.

In September, 1955, writer Weldon Heald of Tucson rediscovered a live glacier, complete with bergschrund, crevasses and fresh moraines, in a basin hidden under a lowering cliff on the northeast face of Wheeler. Heald named it Matthes Glacier after Francois Emile Matthes (1874-1948), one of America's most distinguished geologists, and a world authority on glaciers. The ice mass, roughly triangular and about 2000 feet at its greatest di-

mension, has been seen by few, hidden as it is in a pocket in the shadow of the peak.

This icy remnant of an age long past has become the center of a movement to set aside 145 square miles of the Snake Range, including Lehman Caves National Monument, as a national park. Heald and fellow supporters of the park idea point out that the Wheeler Peak area, with its glacier, lakes, caves, easy stream-side trail passing in seven miles through five life zones, and its spectacular views of the surrounding desert, is a worthy candidate for national park status.

The Sierra Club members making this hike all carried these items in their back packs: sleeping bag, some type of shelter (from a mere sheet of plastic yardage to tents), dehydrated food, cooking and eating utensils, sweaters, coats or parkas, matches, first aid and toiletries. We had boiled down our needs to the bare minimum. My husband, Niles,



GERRIT AND MIKI BRATT ENJOY CAMPFIRE.

and I carried 19 and 17 pounds respectively, exclusive of camera equipment. Our down sleeping bags weigh about five pounds each; air mattress two pounds; long woolen underwear for sleeping, one pound; food for two days, two pounds; cooking can, cup, spoon and canteen, one pound; wool sweater and nylon parka, 10 ounces; first aid and toiletries, eight ounces; plastic shelter, two pounds; knapsack, three pounds.

The trail climbed gently through a forest of aspen, the sun sifting through yellow-green foliage to white bark and to red columbines luxuriating underneath. Butterflies hovered over musky-smelling white yarrow and lavender shooting stars. A wall of rock slabs piled in layers looked as if it might come tumbling down if you pulled out one of the lower pebbles.

Hike leader Dick Kenyon set a slow pace at first to allow us time to get used to our packs, but the rise in elevation was so gradual and the trail in such good condition that fast hikers were allowed to forge ahead. Desert Peakers usually stay behind the leader if there is any question about the route. In cases like this, however, where the route is known to be uncomplicated by forking or disappearing trails, hikers who prefer a fast pace are allowed to go on—provided the leader feels they are capable of looking after themselves. Some hikers keep their eye

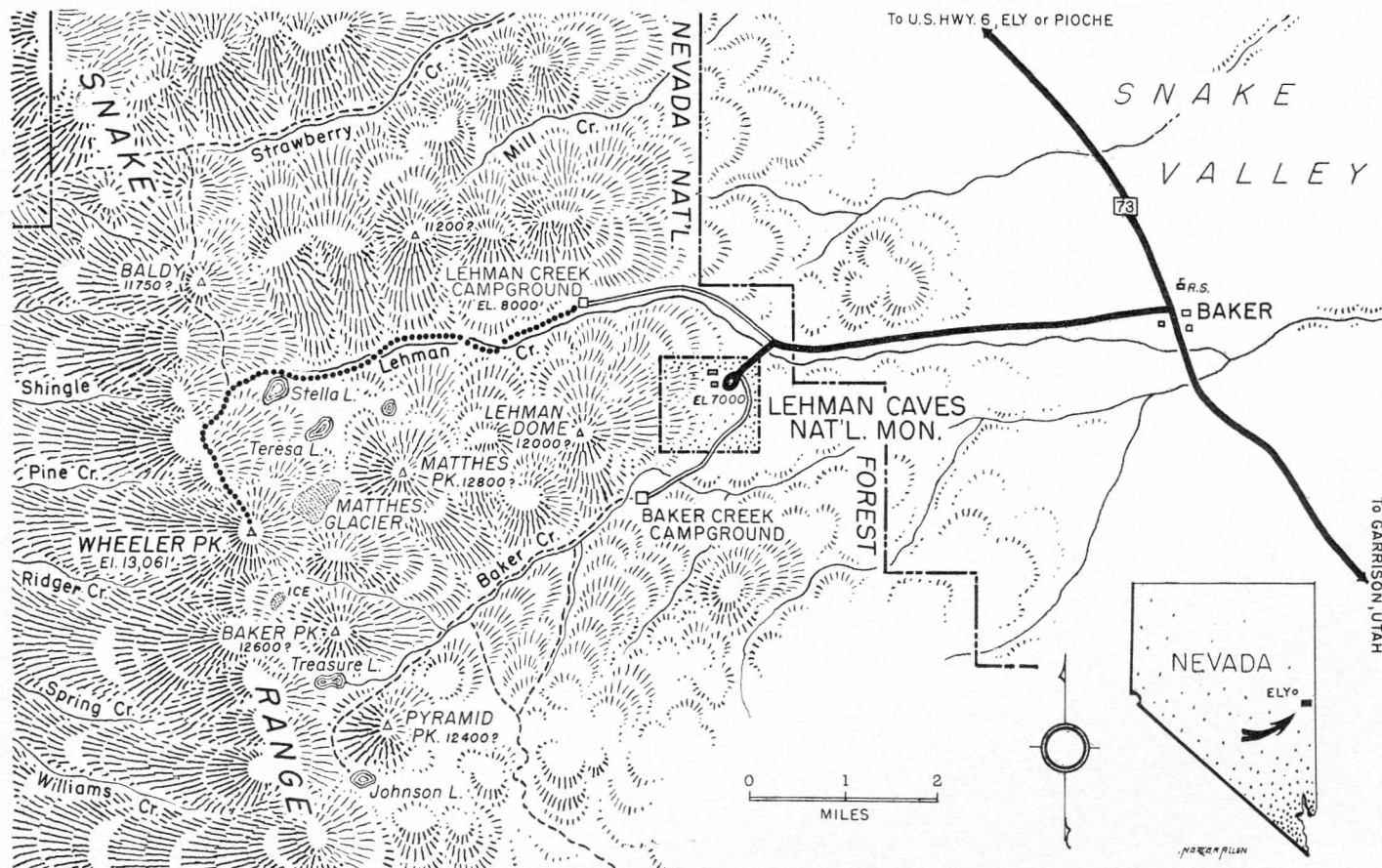
## Nevada's First National Park Soon May Be A Reality • By WELDON HEALD

In April the National Parks Advisory Board recommended to Secretary of the Interior Seaton that eight new areas be included in the National Park System. Among them was the Wheeler Peak-Lehman Caves region of Nevada's Snake Range. The reasons given in favor of the Wheeler area: "... its recognized scientific values and ... findings that have determined it to be representative of the numerous Great Basin mountain ranges and as such of national significance."

This is a major advance for the proposed Great Basin National Park, a project that has state-wide backing in Nevada and is warmly endorsed by several national conservation organizations. However, some opposition has been expressed by stockmen, sportsmen and, tacitly, by the Forest Service, which recently countered the park proposal with a Wheeler Peak Scenic Area. But the protests are largely due to misunderstanding and in most cases differences have been settled satisfactorily.

A bill for the creation of the park is being written in cooperation with the Interior Department and will be introduced in Congress by the Nevada delegation. It provides an area of about 145 square miles and includes Lehman Caves, Wheeler Peak and the Matthes Glacier. Within the boundaries the terrain stretches from the desert valleys, with their antelope herds, to the arctic-alpine zone, above timberline. In fact, one authority emphatically stated that "The Wheeler Peak area has a greater variety of outstanding scenery than any existing national park."

However, the preservation of this magnificent piece of original America is far from accomplished. Those who are concerned with our rapidly dwindling scenic resources can help by joining the Great Basin Range National Park Association. The annual dues are \$3, sent to Glenn C. Osborne, Treasurer, Garrison, Utah.





steadily on the day's goal, others saunter along as if each moment holds all there is.

On our left, Lehman Creek babbled by. A couple of zigzags brought us to the top of a ridge where we stopped to look back over our route. Our eyes followed the creek down to the wide Snake Valley.

We crossed the stream on a log, admiring maidenhair ferns and a clump or two of heuchera whose heart-shaped leaves drooped to catch their reflection in the water. The top of Wheeler Peak came into view through a break in a dense stand of Engelmann's spruce. Busy clouds were drifting up behind the rocky mass.

The sight of our destination was a good excuse for a rest stop. We took off our packs, which were beginning to feel somewhat heavier, and dug out some lunch: dates, cheese and crackers, nuts and hard candy. Elevation here was 9500 feet.

After his third cup of sparkling water from the creek, Niles observed that he had seldom seen a mountain stream as accommodating as Lehman Creek—always within reach, never running away to tantalize the thirsty hiker with liquid sounds from unreachable canyon depths.

The boiling clouds reminded us of the mountain's reputation as a rainmaker. Reluctantly we shouldered our

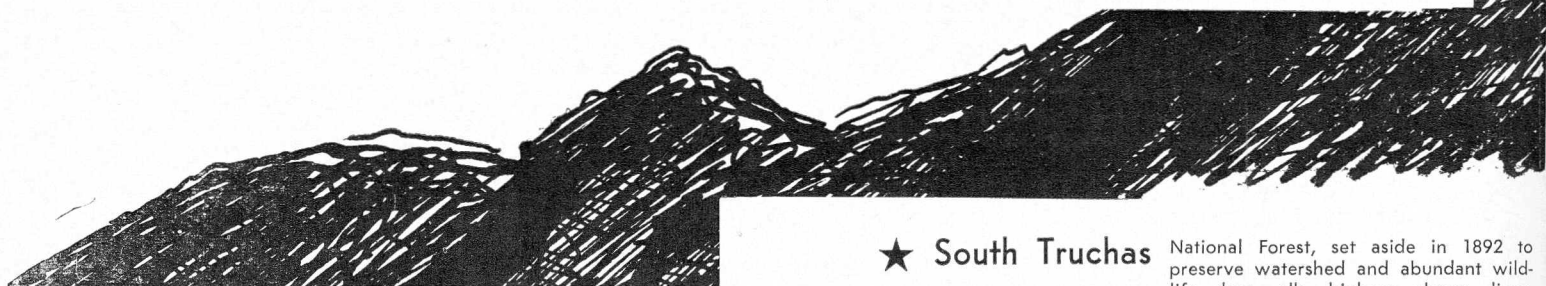
packs and started up the last thousand feet to Stella Lake.

Young aspen bowed to the ground, prostrated by last winter's snow, patches of which still remained. Dead logs lay about, in varying states of decay. Armies of ants, driven by a compulsive urgency, marched endlessly in and out of dust piles left by decaying spruce.

Clouds overtook the sun; gloom overwhelmed the forest, and suddenly we missed the warblings of birds. Faint thunder rumbled upcanyon, and a few drops of rain fell. Then the sun came out again, more brilliant than ever, or so it seemed.

Coming upon a lake in a desert mountain range was a new experience for me. My California desert mountains boast no lakes, not even the White Mountain Range which rises to 14,242 feet, and is the highest desert mountain range in the U.S.

Stella Lake, at 10,500 feet, and Teresa Lake, a few hundred feet higher, are not large or deep when compared to Sierra Nevada lakes at this elevation, but in this desert setting they were a rare find—at least so they seemed to me as we searched the slopes surrounding Stella Lake for level campsites. A robin was combing a large snowfield for insects. A grosbeak's fine little melody, heard from the top of a tall spruce, was scoffed at by two crows, and a



## Here are more "Alpine Islands" for you to explore this summer

### ★ Kings Peak

El. 13,498 ft. Highest point in Utah. Uinta Mountain Range, northeastern part of the state.

**APPROACH by car:** From Urie on U.S. Hwy. 30S, in southern Wyoming, drive south and east to Lone Tree, near the Wyoming-Utah border. Turn right on road up Henry's Fork (of the Green River). Leave car where road peters out to a trail.

**HIKING:** Trail continues up Henry's Fork to a series of headwater lakes at the northwest base of Kings Peak. Peak may be climbed from these lakes or trail may be followed skirting the peak on the northeast.

**CAMPING:** Carry an overnight knapsack and camp at one of the high lakes so as to reach Utah's highest point early in the day while visibility is at its best. Kings Peak stands near the Four Corners, overlooks not only the forested canyons and meadows of the Uintas, but also the headwaters of the Green River coming down from Wyoming's Tetons, a bit of the southwestern corner of Idaho, and the western slope of the Rockies in Colorado.

### ★ San Geronio

El. 11,485 ft. Highest point in Southern Calif.

**APPROACH by car:** Redlands, through Mentone, up the Mill Creek Grade to Camp Angeles. Barton Flats Road to Jenks Lake turn-off. Pass Jenks Lake and continue up dirt road to its end at Poopout Hill (7500 ft.).

**CAMPING:** Designated campsites a mile below Poopout Hill and at Dollar Lake. Wood and water. Fire permit required.

**HIKING:** 8 miles one way up a good trail, 4000 ft. gain in elevation. Trail through tall forest, follows South Fork of the Santa Ana River to So. Fork Meadow, then cuts right, up the slope to Dollar Lake (9000 ft., 4 mi.), good place to camp.

**ALTERNATE route:** 11 mile trail to summit takes off from Mill Creek Road 2 miles east of Forest Home Lodge. (The Mill Creek Road forks right from the Mentone road at Igo's Store.) Road climbs the mountain from the southwest, up Falls Creek Canyon to knapsacking campsite at Plummer Meadow (9000 ft., 7 mi.). Thence the trail continues to Dollar Saddle, meeting the previously described trail which comes up from the north.

### ★ South Truchas

El. 13,102 ft. Highest point in the Pecos High Country of northern New Mexico.

**APPROACH by car:** For a weekend knapsack trip over less-frequented route, drive from Truchas (True-chas) 5 miles east up Valley of the Rio Quemado.

**HIKING:** Carry overnight knapsack. Follow south side of irrigation ditch for two miles, cross to the opposite bank on log bridge and pick up the trail along the north side of the Rio Quemado for 3 more miles to Truchas Falls. Trail then climbs north from falls area and crosses the stream into the Lower Truchas Amphitheatre, fine for camping; or continue another half mile to timberline spring in Upper Amphitheatre and camp in full view of the peaks, at 11,500 ft. Gain in elevation, 2000 feet in 6 miles.

**CAMPING:** Primitive, unrestricted, wood and water in abundance.

**CLIMBING the peak:** From Upper Amphitheatre you can see Middle Truchas Peak to the south, on a spur leading west off the main north-south ridge. A fairly easy rock scramble up the ridge to the west of Middle Truchas Peak brings you to the summit of 13,066 foot Middle Truchas.

Continue east to Useless Truchas where the Middle Truchas spur joins the main north-south ridge—halfway between North and South Truchas peaks, each about a mile away. An easy hike along the ridge to South Truchas affords magnificent view of Pecos River headwaters, fir, spruce and aspen forests, and Truchas lakes.

Pecos High Country is second oldest

National Forest, set aside in 1892 to preserve watershed and abundant wildlife—deer, elk, bighorn sheep, lions, beaver, wild turkeys, many others.

Return by same route. Top of the ridge presents no problems, but short-cuts lead to dangerous drop-offs. Ridge to North Truchas Peak is more difficult, bordering on the need for a rope.

**ALTERNATE route:** State Hwy. 63 ends near Cowles, 20 airline miles south of Truchas Peaks. There are improved campsites in this vicinity, as well as cabins and pack stations. You can ride a horse to within four miles of the summit of South Truchas Peak. Remaining distance is a fairly easy trail-less boulder scramble.

**REFERENCE reading:** "Beatty's Cabin," by Elliott S. Barker, gives fine introduction to the wildlife, geology, history, weather, etc., of Pecos High Country.

### ★ Mt. Humphreys

El. 12,794 ft. Highest point in Arizona. The San Francisco Mountains.

**APPROACH by car:** Drive north out of Flagstaff to Snow Bowl, a ski area on the west slope of the peak, 15 miles. (An old toll road climbs from near the Flagstaff City reservoirs up the south slope, ending at 11,900 ft., 17 miles from Flagstaff. At last report it was blocked by windfalls and rock slides. The end of this road is within two miles of the summit of Mt. Humphreys, and passes within a mile each of two other high points, Agassiz Peak, 12,340 ft., and Fremont Pk., 12,000 ft.)

**CAMPING:** Kit Carson Public Camp-



ground, 3 miles west of Flagstaff on Hwy. 66. Water but no wood to burn.

**HIKING:** 5 miles one way, gain in elevation 3500 ft. From Snow Bowl the summit of Mt. Humphreys can be seen. Pick your own route up the trailless slope, through aspen lanes and corridors of pine, spruce and fir, to the volcanic rocks of the upper ridge, and thence to the top. The going is nowhere difficult.

Isolated San Francisco Peaks are of volcanic origin, dominating extensive areas of forest, desert, volcanic craters and lava flows. On an average day Black Mesa, on which lie the Hopi villages, can be seen 75 miles to the northeast, while on a very clear day visibility may reach 200 miles, to Mt. Delano in Utah.

## ★ Blue Bottle Peak

El. 9400 ft. Highest point on the Great Western Slope of the Sierra San Pedro Martir, Baja Calif.'s highest mountain range.

**APPROACH by car:** 85 miles south of Ensenada, on Baja Calif. Hwy. 1, turn left on dirt road (large sign on the left of the highway reads "Hacienda Sinaloa," and small sign on the right reads "Rancho San Jose") and drive 32 miles to Rancho San Jose.

**ACCOMMODATIONS:** Rooms, board, riding horses, guides and pack animals at Hacienda-type rancho at 2200 feet in the western foothills of the Sierra San Pedro Martir; rancho owned by Meling family.

**RIDING and hiking:** A day's ride up through the chaparraled foothills brings you to the lower edge of Baja Calif.'s only real stand of timber—oak, pine, fir, juniper, aspen, cypress and cedar—a forest 60 miles long and 20 miles wide between elevations 6000 and 10,000 feet, recently set aside by the Mexican government as Baja Calif.'s first national park.

A day's ride up through this forest brings you to Picacho Spring, 8500 feet, which is about as high as your horse (and guide) will go.

A word about guide service: A first-

timer, trying to find his way around this virgin country without a guide, can run into serious difficulty. Trails crisscross with nary a trail sign; landmarks are few and confusing; maps with topographic detail are not available; water is where you find it. With a guide this primitive wilderness becomes safe and immensely rewarding.

Blue Bottle summit is visible from Picacho Spring as the highest point on the horizon to the east, about a mile of trailless scrambling away. It affords not only a sweeping view of the forest and the entire western slope to the Pacific Ocean, but also overlooks the desert to the east, Gulf of California and the mainland of Mexico. El Picacho del Diablo, Baja Calif.'s 10,100 foot high point looms close, cut off by a 3500 foot gorge. (El Picacho is a strenuous climb best approached from the east side of the range.)

Though your guide may scorn to accompany you to the top (because why should a man want to go where a horse can't?) if you have gotten as far as Picacho Spring, don't go back to the flatlands without having stood on the top of Blue Bottle Pk. A word of caution: make frequent rock piles (ducks) on your way up, so you'll have no trouble finding way back.

**CAMPING:** Utterly primitive, usually by some spring or waterhole known only to the guides. Water sources, though sufficient and safe, are not plentiful. Wood plentiful.

## ★ Santa Rosa

El. 4800 ft. Highest point in the Ajo Range of southern Arizona.

**APPROACH by car:** From the headquarters of the Organ Pipe National Monument (State Hwy. 85) the cone-shaped summit of Santa Rosa Mountain can be seen to the southeast, separated by a saddle, from a massive rock face on its left.

Drive 4½ miles (preferably with jeep or desert-going truck) south on the Sonoyta road from the Monument Headquarters, turn east on Border Patrol road toward Gray's Ranch, 3 miles. Turn left on obscure truck trail and

follow this for 11 miles to an old concrete dam.

**HIKING:** From the dam work up the left side of a wash in a northeasterly direction to pick up an old Indian trail that leads up the gradually narrowing canyon to White Horse Pass. Just before the Pass an iron fence divides the Monument area from the Papago Indian Reservation. On the flat above the gate, leave the trail and go left (north) over a low ridge, then over a higher ridge. A third east-west ridge surmounted by two prominent pinnacles now comes into view. The pinnacles may be by-passed by easy ledges. Follow the ridge to the main north-south crest of the Ajo Mts. and proceed to the yellow-rocked summit visible to the north. Carry canteen. Allow a full day for the round trip from the Monument.

**CAMPING:** Headquarters of the Organ Pipe National Monument. Water available. Bring gas stove. Vegetation encountered: organ pipe, senita, cholla and saguaro cactus, ocotillo, palo verde, mesquite, lupine and poppies. Wildlife: horned lizard, banded gecko, javelina, many birds.

## ★ Mt. Charleston

El. 11,910 ft. Highest point in the Spring Mts. northwest of Las Vegas, Nev.

**APPROACH by car:** Hwy. 95 14 mi. N.W. of Las Vegas, turn left on Kyle Canyon Rd. and continue 21 miles to end of road (el. 7500) in Charleston Park. Hard surfaced all the way.

**CAMPING:** Improved campsites with wood and water, among tall pines, along upper part of the road.

**HIKING:** Good, posted trail to Mt. Charleston (9 mi. one way, 4400 foot gain in elevation), begins near the end of the road. Passes through beautiful pine and aspen forest, zigzags up a wall of sedimentary rock to meadowed shelves and ledges, finally contouring up bare slopes to the top. Rock here is highly fossilized. Good display of fossilized shells found by leaving the trail ½ mile before summit, scrambling up to the top of the ridge and following it to the summit. Deer are commonly seen in the meadows. Carry canteen.

## ★ White Mtn. Peak

El. 14,242 ft. Highest desert peak in U.S., east of Owens Valley, Calif.

**APPROACH by car:** Hwy. 395 in Owens Valley, to Big Pine. Fill gas tank—none available beyond Big Pine. Take Westgard Pass road, turn left on Navy road to camp at McAfee Meadow, 11,500 ft. Motor, brakes and tires should be in good condition for steep grades on unimproved road along the backbone of the White Mountains. Be prepared to drain the radiator as it may freeze at this elevation.

Some specimens of bristlecone pines along this road. Many acres of these trees in White Mountains were recently set aside for special protection after scientists declared them to be the oldest living things, older even than giant Sequoias.

**CAMPING:** McAfee Meadow, or as near there as your car will take you. Primitive camping; there is no official campsite. Bring water and wood (or gas stove).

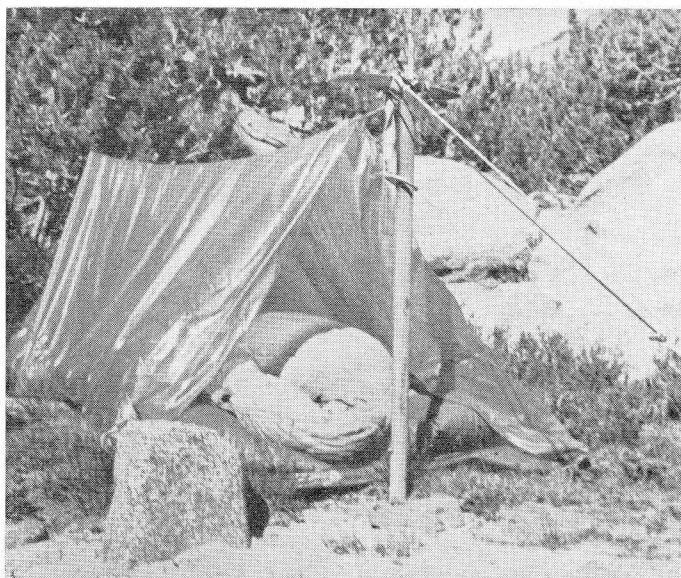
**HIKING:** 7 miles, one way; 2800 foot gain in elevation. Entire climb is above timberline, with spectacular views of the Sierra Nevada across Owens Valley to the west.

The Navy has built a station for high altitude research near summit, where scientists are studying the effects of cosmic rays and other high altitude phenomena, on humans and on animals. Trail to the highest buildings takes you to within an easy scramble of the summit.

Allow a long day for the 14-mile round trip. Hiking will be slow at this elevation. The average person will get along better by maintaining a pace slow enough to keep going, than by a stop-and-go routine with frequent rests. If altitude sickness is a threat, eat a light breakfast avoiding fat and other food that has, at times, upset your digestion.

From the summit you look down on the surprisingly lush stream-filled canyons on the east side of the White Mountains, and across Fish Lake Valley to the Nevada desert, punctuated here and there by desert mountain ranges.





HIKERS ON THIS TRIP WERE PREPARED FOR WHEELER'S FREQUENT RAINS. HOMEMADE PLASTIC TENT ABOVE WEIGHS TWO POUNDS, DOUBLES AS A "PRIVATE" OUTDOOR SHOWER.

light brown bird sitting on a low limb kept saying, "thrt, thrt, three-o-wheat," as if adding a commercial.

There was plenty of firewood at hand and Niles soon had the tea water sizzling in a pound coffee can—one of two that constituted our entire set of cooking utensils. A pound coffee can, with its broad bottom, allows food to heat quickly, is about the right size for a one-dish hot meal for two, and is expendable. We long ago reneged at bringing home blackened pots to clean.

Raindrops hissed on our fire and splattered into our corn chowder—a dish containing dehydrated corn, potatoes, milk, onions and seasonings. At this elevation it required about a half hour's simmering. Our ounce packages of pre-cooked dehydrated beef being new to us, we nibbled right out of the package. It tasted so good we sprinkled the remainder on top of the chowder after dishing it up, rather than dumping it into the pot and losing sight of it. A sauce of dried apricots (we cooked enough for breakfast, too) made a fine dessert.

Our entire dinner—including tea and sugar—only weighed six ounces per serving in our knapsacks. Improved dehydrated foods like these, along with plastic shelters, down sleeping bags and nylon parkas, have revolutionized knapsacking. Today you can go into the mountains for a long week end with less than 20 pounds on your back and be better equipped than was the knapsacker of 15 years ago who carried 50 pounds.

Now and again, during our meal, showers sent us running for our plastic shelter. Clouds hung low when we

got together around the campfire that evening. Bedtime comes early for knapsackers, and at nine o'clock we dispersed—happy to see quite a few stars against patches of cobalt blue sky.

After a breakfast of coffee, frosted flakes with powdered milk and the left-over apricot sauce, we joined the group on the trail. The hikers left most of their gear in camp, I carried a lunch, quart of water, parka, first aid and camera.

Thin ice edged the lake in places, and most of us were puffing when we clambered up the slope beyond the lake. Large snow fields were numerous now, and the spruce was becoming more and more scrubby in this "alpine island."

On top of the ridge we found remnants of an old trail used more than a hundred years ago when the top of Wheeler Peak served as a heliograph station. The flashing mirrors of the heliograph sent messages in Morse code before the telegraph came into use. These messages were relayed as far as 200 miles—from one mountaintop to another. Wheeler was an intermediate station between Mt. Nebo in Utah and an unknown peak to the west. Historians have pretty much neglected this form of early-day communication.

Although the old heliograph trail appeared and disappeared, we needed no path to the summit of Wheeler. We followed the backbone of the ridge all the way. At 12,000 feet we were breathing hard, barely putting one foot in front of the other. Patches of pink phlox and white phlox seemed to find the thin air invigorating. There was a bite in the wind that came over the ridge in little puffs to slap us in the face. We stopped to put on our wraps. As noon approached, clouds were gathering about us.

At 13,000 feet lavender-blue polemonium hugged the rocks. Looking back over our route the ridge curved down to a snow-corniced edge above Stella Lake. To the right Teresa Lake had come into view. Far beyond Lehman Creek Canyon the highway threaded the flat toward Sacramento Pass to the northwest.

On top of Wheeler we found remnants of the old stone walls of the heliograph station. The attendant's job must have been a cold one. For years after the station was abandoned a little wood stove had remained in the shelter until an "antique lover" hauled it away.

Eager to glimpse Matthes Glacier, we edged as close as we dared to the 2000-foot precipice that overhangs the cirque. All we could see of the glacier from this vantage point was a ragged edge of snow on the ice mass far side. To properly view the glacier you have to make a different approach, perhaps over the rugged ridge above Teresa Lake—and the best time to do this is in September after the year's fresh snow has melted off of the crevasses, fresh moraines and bergschrund.

When we returned to the summit it was snowing—in the very heart of the Desert Southwest—on the Fourth of July!—END

## A Forest At Our Feet...

"Step by step we forced our way along, now stopping to take breath, now lying down on the sloping snow or rugged rock to rest. At last the flat summit (of San Gorgonio) was clearly outlined before us.

"A few more gasps, a few more struggles and we were on top. I had purposely kept my eyes from

looking out before I was fairly on the summit. I wished to see nothing until I could see all. In a moment the great vast scene was given to me. It was mine to enjoy, to wonder over, to study, and to feel its gigantic power. The first impression was that it was not, could not be real. It was so wonderful, so vast, so extensive,

so diverse, and everything was so magnified—space, distance, sandy wastes, flat plain, water—that it seemed as if it was one of the opium or hasheesh dreams of DeQuincey or Fitzhugh Ludlow. It was monstrous, enlarged beyond conception, terrific in its power. Then, too, it was so strange, so foreign. It was desert, yet at our feet was a great forest."  
— George Wharton James' "The Wonders of the Colorado Desert" (1906)