



Sierra Club members at the summit of Rabbit Peak, in Southern California's Santa Rosa Mountains. Assistant Leader John Delmonte, in parka and muffler, stands alone on rock in center of picture.

We Climbed Rabbit Peak

A slow, steady pace with frequent short rests—that is Bill Henderson's formula for the strenuous climb to Rabbit Peak, in the Santa Rosa Mountains above Southern California's Borrego Desert. With Bill as their leader, 23 Sierra Club members reached the peak's windy summit one cold weekend last December. Louise Werner writes of the fun and thrills of a Sierra Club hike and gives *Desert Magazine* readers helpful suggestions for planning their own desert mountain recreation.

By LOUISE T. WERNER
Photographs by the Author

OUR CARAVAN—an army weapons carrier and four town cars—stopped one chilly Saturday morning last December on the Borrego Desert near the eastern tip of Southern California's Santa Rosa Mountains.

This was Pegleg Smith country—the region where the fabled three hills topped with nuggets of black gold are said to be located.

But we had not come to search for Pegleg's gold. We planned to explore a new route to the top of Rabbit Peak.

There were 25 in our party, members of the Desert Peaks section of the Sierra Club of California. We seek the tops of desert mountains because we find there a vast and friendly solitude. Occasionally we feel the need of such solitude as an antidote for city living.

From our cars we could see the route we would follow on the skyline to the east—a ridge beginning on the desert floor at an elevation of 1500 feet, and rising gradually to the summit 6650 feet above.

"According to the map," said Bill

Henderson, trip leader, "the distance is about 10 miles in an airline. We'll try to stay on the backbone of the ridge all the way."

We had driven about 10 miles northeast from Borrego postoffice, passing Clark's Dry Lake and continuing in a pair of sandy ruts that climbed the bajada toward the base of the Santa Rosa Range.

Near our parking place Bill Henderson, a graduate student at U.C.L.A. and Assistant Leader John Delmonte, a plastics manufacturer of Glendale, California, found the neck of a broken olla and some pottery sherds. This was once the range of desert Indians.

We weighed our packs with a scale Bill carries in his weapons carrier. Weights ranged from 25 to 57 pounds. The heavier loads belonged to gallant husbands who had lightened the packs of their wives.

The line of backpackers strung along, past graceful ocotillo with leaves of a lovely autumn red and up the backbone of the ridge, among deer-horn, beavertail, barrel and cholla cacti and little seashells lying among the rocks. The creosote bushes were waxy green and agave lifted tall stalks all around. Two of them displayed their yellow blossoms out of season. The vegetation obviously had enjoyed the early fall rains.

The climb was gradual, and the wide-open view from the backbone of the ridge almost made us forget the weight of our packs. On the left, we overlooked Clark's Dry Lake and on the right, a deep gully that separated us from another spur of the ridge. Ahead was interminable upness.

After four and a half hours of backpacking, including a lunch stop and several generous rest stops, we reached a little plateau. Bill said, "We might as well camp here." We had come a good three and a half miles, and had gained about 2000 feet of elevation.

We were happy to drop the packs. A minimum pack for such a trip contains sleeping bag, food for one dinner, two lunches and one breakfast, a cooking utensil, cup and spoon, sweater and parka, flashlight, matches, lip salve, dark glasses, and a gallon of water. Most of us added a nylon ground cloth. Camera fans, of course, added camera equipment. John carried first aid.

We had a scant hour of daylight left. The men built fires with the plentiful agave windfalls, while the women unpacked the food. On a desert climb, where there is little water enroute, experienced climbers carry foods with a high liquid content. Dry foods are lighter to carry, but when you must carry every drop of your water on your back, canned foods have an advantage.

The Hendersons heated hamburgers with chile beans; Jon Gardey and Dick Apel, two U. C. L. A. students, heated up a can of spaghetti and some Vienna sausages. We had a can of vegetable beef soup with a can of corned beef thrown in. A one-dish meal like this, supplemented with a can of fruit and as much tea as the water ration will allow, takes on a special flavor after being carried for several miles on one's back. The zest with which climbers savor such a meal, eaten from a tin cup, is something seldom experienced at a well-appointed table with linen, silver and fine china.

A red and gold sunset splashed the sky over Coyote Mountain as we cleared the rocks out of our bedsites. The moon came up, and little clusters

of lights twinkled in the Borrego Desert. No doubt some of the residents there saw our fires, 3500 feet above them on the ridge.

We gathered 'round a big central campfire of dry agave for fellowship, and to sing such songs as: "All day I've faced the barren waste, without a taste of water." Leader Bill announced reveille would be at 2:30 a.m. "It takes a 15-hour day to climb from here to the summit and back here again, to pick up our packs and return to the cars," he said.

It was a cold weekend on the ridge, and some of us were none too warm in a minimum sleeping bag. The wind tore at the ground cloth. Ordinarily

we enjoy gazing up at the unbelievably bright desert stars, for a while before going to sleep. But high on the ridge of Rabbit Peak, we pulled the ground cloth over our faces and burrowed deep in our sleeping bags.

At 2:30 a.m., Bill sounded off. The camp came to life, and somebody started the fire. At three we were gathered round the flames, muffled in all the clothes we had. Those who had considered long woolen underwear worth its weight in a pack were the most comfortable.

It felt good to be moving up toward the crest on the ridge above camp. We could see its outline in the moonlight. The wind whooshed about our parka hoods, making conversation a lost ef-

Bill Henderson, Leader of the Rabbit Peak climb, found the skeleton of a bighorn sheep. The animals are protected in the Santa Rosa game refuge.



