

Columbine and Polymonium

By Liz Bibby

I groaned inwardly, not for the first time on this trip. But I gritted my teeth and stomped reluctantly upwards. You see, Scott is six foot two with legs to match, and I am five foot four with legs to match. Not a fair contest. This was the twelfth day of our walk along the John Muir Trail, southwards through the Sierra Nevada mountains of California - the "range of light". It finishes on Mount Whitney, the highest peak in the lower forty eight.

Tomorrow, we were to rendezvous with Phil, our "link man" to pick up a further ten days supply of food, but for now, a final push up the two and a half thousand feet into Dusy basin, a hanging valley high above the John Muir trail. A virtually treeless plateau of rock and scrub - no fire to cook on tonight. Most nights we had the pleasures of camp fire cooking, much quicker than a petrol stove, though I guess my pans will never recover from the thick layer of soot and tar they got coated with! That wonderful smell still lingers....

We pitched the Saunders on a flat gravelly area - camping on the grass is not allowed. I struggled to light the temperamental stove, cursing the lack of wood. Eventually, our customary pasta and lentil stew was ready and quickly dispatched. Both of us were inwardly drooling at the thought of some fresh food the next night. (We were both to lose a lot of weight this trip!) A quick wash to remove the dust from our brown legs (not much cellulite on these thighs, I thought, pure muscle....) before squeezing into the Dalomite and instantly falling asleep. No coyotes or bears tonight - back at Thousand Islands Lake, we had heard the eerie howling of a pack of coyote only a short way from our camp as we lay on the still-warm rocks and gazed at the bright stars. Above the treeline, bears were rarely a problem, but most nights we hung our food high on a branch using a counterbalance system - I'd practised the technique back in Fife, much to the amusement of my neighbours, who watched my antics as I tried to throw a weighted line over a branch on the horse chestnut.

A cold overcast morning, we had our thermals on as we headed down Bishop Pass to South Lake under the chaotic mass of Mount Agassiz. The Sierras are full of the names of famous scientists - Darwin, Wallace, Haeckel, Huxley, Goddard. In the distance, we spied a genuine cowboy. He was leading a pack-horse laden with food for the organised camp we had passed yesterday. Soon we caught up with some venerable members of the Sierra Club, including a lady of seventy in long flowing skirt and floppy hat. They had gladly shared with us their wide knowledge of the Sierran flora as we had walked down together from Muir Pass, two days earlier.

"How's it going?" greeted Phil in his inimitable Irish drawl. Beers were gratefully downed as he told us of the bear attack on the car. The paintwork was deeply scored with claw marks and the back door had been partly bent out of its frame. A hungry bear will do anything to get at a Vesta Beef Curry! Steak, tatties, tomatoes, mushrooms and two litres of red wine later, we sat round the fire and swapped tales. Phil had been doing his own thing since leaving us at Thousand Islands Lake a week before. The three of us were going to spend the next few days in the Palisades, climbing peaks in this treeless wilderness of clean granite.

Restocked with our last ten days supply of food, we staggered to the upper reaches of Dusy basin to camp. It was a wildlife haven, not much visited. A long-eared mule deer picked its way delicately and unafraid past our camp, and below, amongst the shattered boulders, we watched as a coyote caught a ground squirrel and dragged it into its den. Trout abounded in the streams and rivers. A long haul over boulders and scrub to Knapsack Pass, where we met a couple with three and a half boots between them- the rough granite had taken its toll! The shapely cone in front of us was Columbine, only a thousand feet above the pass. We dumped our sacks and feeling positively weightless, we drifted up the slabs and blocks to the airy summit, a prow of slender granite with only room for two.

Suddenly I felt shivery and lethargic. I struggled to keep up with Phil and Scott as we headed over the trackless chaos and down the steep granite slabs, overbalancing with the weight of our packs. I collapsed into my sleeping bag, too shattered and cold to do much until I had eaten. Phil and Scott foraged far and wide to find enough scrub to light a fire. At eleven and a half thousand feet, this was our highest camp. One ancient tree we stumbled across was no more than two feet high, growing contorted in a fold of rock. Its thick trunk betrayed its true age. No fire fodder this.

Teetering delicately over a huge boulderfield of mammoth blocks, we gingerly navigated onto the moraine beneath Mount Sill. It looked intimidating to shorty-legs here, but the temptation of friction-full granite overcame my qualms. We clambered on and up to the summit ridge, feeling distinctly underdressed in shorts and T-shirts when we came across a fully-clad Alpine party, complete with axes and crampons. They had come from the North, over the Palisade glacier. The views down into the Owens Valley were hazy, but to the south we glimpsed our first view of Mount Whitney!

Our names were duly written in the summit book, photos were taken, lunch was eaten and a lazy hour's sunbathing had before the descent along a blocky ridge. Scott couldn't resist shooting up the next peak along. It's called Polymonium. Named after another beautiful flower typical of the Sierras, its English name is Sky Pilot. With legs like his, perhaps Scott should also be renamed....?