

SEQUOIA & KINGS CANYON NATIONAL PARKS

& SEQUOIA NATIONAL FOREST/GIANT SEQUOIA NATIONAL MONUMENT

SUMMER 2008 GUIDE



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Surprises in the Wilderness

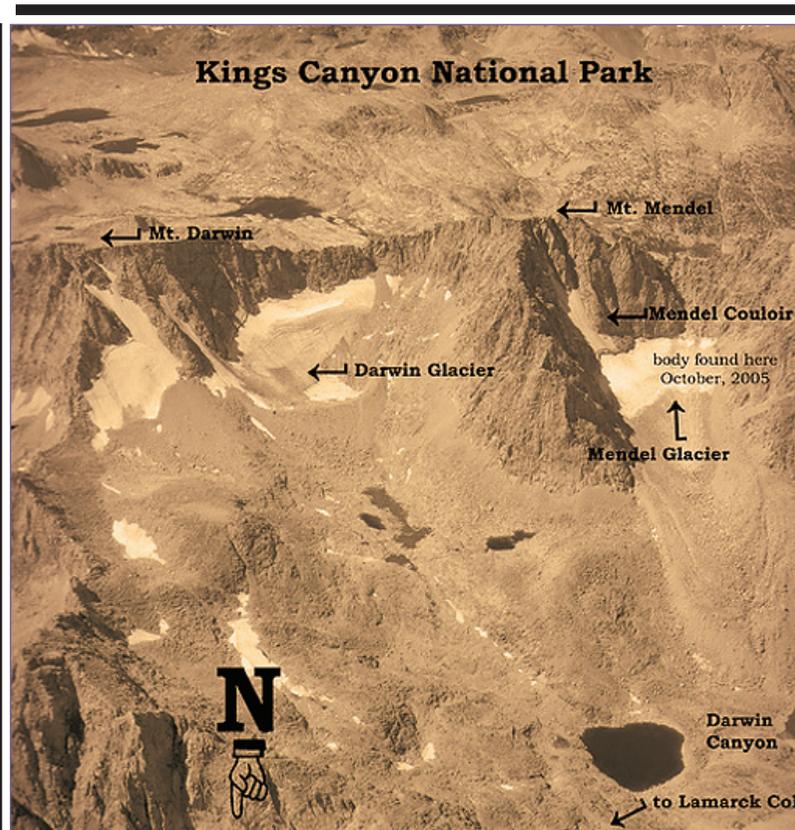
Uncovering the secrets and surprises of wilderness draws 80,000 visitors every year to the backcountry of Sequoia & Kings Canyon National Parks.

Some secrets are botanical: Why do foxtail pine only grow at high elevation? Some are avian: What is it about snow-fields that attract rosy finches?

Other wilderness surprises amaze and delight people: A slow-moving stream quickly becomes a rapid torrent with many waterfalls. A boulder field suddenly opens up to disclose a “pocket meadow” overflowing with teenie-weenie yellow monkey-flowers. A back bear saunters past your kitchen at dinner time, ignoring your precious food supply to forage for wasps in a rotten log.

Sometimes, surprises are historical. In 1942, a military navigation training flight went terribly wrong and the airplane, a Beech 18 AT-7, crashed in northern Kings Canyon National Park. It wasn't until 1947 that the wreckage was discovered, and not until 2005 when climbers chanced upon the remains of the first of four crewmembers from the missing aircraft. Then, in 2007, another of the crew was found — by me.

It surprises people that, in the most populous state in the union and in a national park that sees nearly two million visitors every year, victims of an airplane crash could go undiscovered for so long. But wilderness is like that. The terrain in Sequoia & Kings Canyon's craggy



The rugged landscape where the plane went down in 1942 may reveal more secrets as its glaciers shrink. ©Peter Stekel

backcountry is commonly vertical. What isn't forest, lakes, meadows, and streams is covered by rocks or house-size boulders, snowfields, glaciers, and slabs of rock. Wilderness isn't simply big. It's huge. Little things get lost very easily.

Something else about wilderness: There are times when you are so alone, so completely isolated, knowing for certain that not another pair of human eyes are enjoying this sight. You own it all — water, earth and sky, forest, wildflowers, trails, rocks, marmot and cony, and the rosy finch and occasional raptor that come up on a thermal to look around before soaring home in their slow, methodical, business-like way.

But it isn't the lack of human contact that seeps into your bones in wilderness. It's the surprising feeling of completeness. No longer just a speck in the world, you feel part of something larger than yourself, a piece of something important.

Wilderness reminds us that home is more than a building with four walls. Home is a place where you belong. Over the years, millions of people have visited these national parks. Each has come to love and understand something different about the Sierra Nevada. Isn't it grand? That's another of the secrets and surprises awaiting us in these national parks.

by Peter Stekel, author and frequent visitor to the park wilderness