

Ancient Bristlecone Pine Forest  
Feb 2-4, 2007  
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### **Always arriving in the dark**

Why is it that no matter how early I leave, it's dark by the time I get to where I am going? Perhaps it's the fact that my travel time exceeds the available daylight but perhaps it's something deeper, more sinister. It happens enough now that I make sure to have enough flashlights and headlamps to do whatever I'm going to do when I get there. A distinct advantage to this approach is that while everyone else has settled down for the evening and has to suffer their temporary neighbors, I can choose to avoid anyone annoying, as they usually make themselves very apparent. The disadvantage to this approach is there may be no place to stay at all. That trade has paid off well most of the time. And, the approach doesn't look like it will change any time soon.

Driving up on Fridays through southern California traffic is always entertaining. Inevitably, you will be stuck in traffic no matter how early you leave. The sooner one accepts this, the better life is. You can appreciate the smoggy haze of Los Angeles or the one maniac whipping through stopped traffic, treating the freeway as a private racetrack.

Driving up the US-395 is a rather uneventful activity. Other than the constant fear that someone will try and pass in opposing traffic, permanently delaying your road trip. Daylight headlight sections remind you of this. Once you reach the sprawling town of Big Pine, 1,350 residents strong, state route 168 takes you up into the White Mountains, east of the Owens Valley. The drive takes you straight uphill to White Mountain Road, leading to the ancient Bristlecone Pine forest. Being February, there is still plenty of ice and snow on the upper sections of the road, making the drive more interesting.

The ranger station in Bishop confirmed on Thursday that the upper gate leading into Bristlecone Pine forest is locked. Being testosterone driven and possessing a technical mind, I was forced to confirm the gate was locked. It was.

A quick little drive back to Grandview campground and I find a spot in moments. The campground is empty, save me, with a light breeze as the temperatures hover just below freezing.

### **Why walk uphill when you can push a bike, too?**

When you wake up, it's well below freezing and it appears to be bright and sunny outside due to the moon being up, you know you're camping. Getting up at 4am, I eat a heavy breakfast of oatmeal, powdered milk and dark cane sugar to fuel me for the day. I make sure to prepare snacks, as I don't want to starve while tromping through the frozen White Mountain wilderness.

When going to other places in my travels, I occasionally desire a mountain bike to get me places quicker than by walking. For once, I actually brought the bike. Starting out at 9,000' after coming from sea level the day before takes a bit out of you. Riding

uphill with patches of ice and snow on the ground, I found my lungs desiring sea level air. So, I spent time alternating between walking and riding up the last 2.5 miles to the visitor's center. I had the foresight to bring a cable and lock to prevent the local marmots and squirrels from joyriding my wheels. The last half mile was shin deep snow, so getting to the visitor's center took longer than I'd hoped but I arrived just in time to enjoy the eastern desert sunrise behind some trees. The sparsely strewn clouds reflected a raspberry red while the snow was bathed in a silky blend of pinks and cold blues. While this silent color concert played out, the ancient forest I now stood in paid me no attention, as I was a mere blink in its 5,000 year history.

### **Enjoying snowshoe hares**

The snow-covered frozen ground sapped the heat from Smartwool socks sheathed feet purportedly protected in waterproofed Merrell leather boots. The age and waterproofing is questionable at this point. It was necessary to stand on the rough hewn park bench while dredging my camera and the multitude of lenses out of my too-heavy backpack.

While I was fiddling, two white snow shoe hares raced across the clearing, stopping to see what the commotion was. They silently watched a crazy human laden with gear where normally only the depths of winter keep them company. Seeing animals in colors I had never seen before, I began reaching for my telephoto lens to capture this little drama. Then, realizing that the hares would be gone before I could turn around, I just stood there and stared back at them, separated by a few feet and yet conceptually as far apart as Earth and Mars.

On digging through my backpack, I noticed that my snacks were missing. I figured they were just buried in the bottom and, not wanting to miss the hay colored morning Sierra light, I stuffed everything back in and tore through the Discovery trail as quickly as possible to find the Bristlecone Pines.

The Discovery trail winds  $\frac{3}{4}$  of a mile around the south hill where Dr. Edmund Schulman first discovered some of the oldest living things on the planet. On an off-hand trip based on a rumor, he and a colleague explored and discovered gnarled trees, living in terribly alkaline soil, with little moisture. However, they have been around since the Old Kingdom in Egypt! Today, my walk would be just as spectacular for me, as I had always wanted to visit this place and commune with the ancients.

The next hours were consumed with polarizing filters, lens changes, explorations of light, f-stops and exposure delay modes, exposures and awkward positions, all the while surrounded by cold, biting air that chewed into exposed skin. It was a photographic nightmare. Why? Because you only have a good hour or two before the gold and straw colored light turns to harsh blue at high altitudes. You are unfamiliar with the lay of the land and what the best angles are. And, you have an infinite variety of subjects and composition to exploit, all while jogging uphill in the snow at 10,000 feet. This is the nightmare where you are surrounded by gold nuggets but are unable to collect them all before they are washed away by a surging tide.

### **Timing your entire day to a malfunctioning watch while starving**

As the light turned to a cool white and then a harsh skylight blue, I figured I had extracted the best I could without unleashing a flurry of complicated, and unavailable, equipment to keep going. My stomach had been rumbling for some time now, making bounding up and down hills just a little more challenging.

Digging into the bottom of my bag, I discovered only lenses and batteries...nothing edible. After shuffling around twice inside, I realized my snacks must be sitting safely inside of my truck, 3 miles and an hour away. Good thing I didn't realize this before. Forgetting things always dulls the enjoyment of exploring a new place. Looking at my watch, I noticed that it was nearly noon. That's impossible, as it can't be much later than 9am. After taking a closer look, something must have happened at night and the entire watch reset itself. Somehow, I had woken up at the right time and the watch just happened to be reasonable in the mind fog of early morning. That was disturbing, as I went to great lengths to be in the right place at the right time, only to be nearly thwarted by a simple watch.

Riding downhill on partially melted ice and snow from Schulman Grove to the truck was a great experience. It even occurred to me to video most of the ride down. Commanding a bike with one hand, filming in the other and riding through treacherous conditions all the while flirting with certain destruction flying off a cliff side has a certain appeal.

Lunch was an unremarkable sequence of tuna, peanut butter and jelly and fruits over the course of a few hours. Having nothing to eat for 6 hours while bounding up and down mountains makes one quite hungry. Knowing that great light was hours away, I napped and replenished myself.

### **I didn't get enough of pushing my bike uphill in the morning**

If I didn't get enough of riding and pushing a bike uphill in the frozen morning, I got enough of it in the afternoon. It was much easier going this time, as the snow and ice had partially melted. I encountered a couple hikers and they asked me if I was just going to walk up and ride down all day, as they had seen my tire tracks in the snow. No, I explained, I just wanted to catch the light at the best possible times. They appreciated this, as they, too, were out on a photo jaunt.

Now that I had a first impression of the forest, I had a much better idea of where I wanted to go to catch the last dusky sun beams in twilight descending on the ancient Bristlecone Pine forest. Coming back to a place more than once makes getting better shots possible.

### **When focus isn't focused**

I wanted stars swirling around the silhouette of a Bristlecone. I had a mental vision of the image and had a short time to get it. The moon was rising an hour after the

sky blackened, ruining star imagery. I know my zooms focus well past infinity but it did not occur to me to check that my prime lenses did not do this. To a photographer in the dark, this is a problem. There are esoteric and good reasons for them to focus past infinity, but it makes shooting while below freezing in near pitch black that much more challenging.

I adapted and figured out a way to focus my camera on things my eye was unable to make out, but it ate up precious time. As the sky was hazy, the sub-horizon moonlight quickly washed away my twinkling star field, saving me from staying out far into the night. Normally I have plenty of time to get the shots, but with thin Cirrus clouds providing a reflector for an otherwise unseen moon, the star capture time is limited.

### **How to crash riding your bike on ice and snow**

Being content with the shots I got, I crunched through the now rock hard snow to retrieve my chariot and head down the hill. While I was shooting my star shots, my headlamp hinge came loose, making the light flop around uncontrollably. This was a problem as I was completely reliant on that light and did not want to wait another two hours for the moonlight to strike the road.

Walking a bike downhill is uninteresting, so I mounted the saddle and forged on. Three minutes into the ride, I enjoyed my first, single, crash. Frozen tire ruts make great crashes possible. Being swathed in three jackets, shell pants and heavy boots made tumbling into sheet ice and snow pain-free. It was more of a good laugh than anything. It was the best crash I had ever had in my life. The forest was permeated by my maniacal laughter stemming from the sheer insanity of the activity.

The rest of the way down, I made sure to stay out of the now icy truck ruts in the snow.

That ride was one of the most surreal and enjoyable in my life. Bombing downhill in the dark, a headlamp barely illuminating the road ahead, while feeling the wind chill burn my skin, was awesome. Riding while watching moonlight stream down the eastern Sierra face added a certain flourish to the experience. Knowing that one patch of unseen ice or an uncontrolled turn in hard snow will send me careening down a rocky cliff with no one knowing where I ended up added a euphoric adrenaline rush.

### **Moon dogs**

Have you ever seen a moon dog? I never had until the night of February 3, 2007. It's a peculiar optical effect of six-sided ice crystals, called diamond dust, in the upper atmosphere. This diamond dust refracts moon light at 22 degrees from the moon's center, creating moon dogs. Their proper name is paraselene on the same side of the sky as the moon and, if it's off the 90, 120 or 140 degree mark, parantiselene. Aside from the technical explanation, the effect is rather beautiful, with two bright spots far off to the right and left of the moon. Once one knows the conditions and where to look, moon dogs become your nighttime canine companions.

### **Enjoying the Sierra sunrise and moonset**

After returning to Grandview campground and making home for the night, I had a debate. It was 10pm by the time I finished supper and was ready to bed down for the night. In the morning, do I go back up to Schulman Grove and hike out to Methuselah Grove or enjoy the sunrise and moonset here, then head down to Owens Valley to explore? Since I had to wake up at 3am to even have a chance of making Methuselah Grove by sunrise, I nixed the idea this time and opted for a wider exploration of the area. The oldest tree in the world will wait for my return. Since the oldest tree is not marked, for its own protection, I will only know that I was near something 4,700 years old.

I captured time lapse footage of the sunrise and moonset but had difficulties with my lens aperture. The camera is not being precise enough to keep the exposure consistent through the image sequence. However, I didn't realize this until I returned home, making my hours of shooting for movies effectively worthless. Now that I know the causative agent and remedy, my future time lapse shoots will be limited only by my imagination. The Owens Valley awaited me...

### **The first transcontinental road to California**

Driving down the state route 168 into Owens Valley brings you through the Westgard pass, along the original transcontinental route scouted in 1913 into California. The Midland Trail, also known as the Deep Springs Valley Toll Road, was the last privately owned toll road in California, stopping just west of the sheer rock single-lane section of the 168. This little tidbit is found on a lonely sign far off the roadway, easily missed as you drive the meandering highway. These are the things I enjoy.

Coming out of the canyon into the Owens Valley is a dramatic experience. All at once, a massive vista opens to the eastern Sierra face. It is like coming from a proverbial dark forest into a sunny meadow. Just ahead of you is the community of Big Pine, where the average resident is 47 years old. I spied what appeared to be satellite watch dishes just to the north of the 168. These piqued my interest. At the first cross road, Leighton Road, I headed in their general direction.

### **Very large antennas**

In the middle of Owens Valley is the Caltech Owens Valley Radio Observatory, part of the National Radio Astronomy Observatory Very Long Baseline Array. The Owens Valley facility is one of 10 spread across the North American Continent, Mauna Kea, Hawai'i and St. Croix, Virgin Islands, creating a simulated virtual radio antenna 5,000 miles wide.

Each of these 260 ton, 82 foot dishes are remotely controlled from Socorro, New Mexico, and together are able to resolve one thousandth of an arc second. What that means is radio astronomers have the ability to see the equivalent of a football on the surface of the moon.

Making a few images with a polarizer on to balance out the extreme white of the dishes against the blue sky placated me for the moment. However, my vision was to have the dishes against their primary subjects – a star field. Now that I knew the dishes were here, it was only a matter of timing and a little luck to be out here at dusk capturing these metal monstrosities against stars.

As the day was rapidly progressing, I didn't want to spend my whole time at Science Central and opted to visit Mountain Light Gallery in Bishop. Not wanting to retrace my long drive up from the 168, I chose a dirt road leading 11 miles north to Bishop. Relying on a single sign, I headed north. The drive was a tad bumpy. But, it was eminently more entertaining to dodge cows and mud pits rather than other drivers hurrying along the US-395.

### **An afternoon in Bishop at Mountain Light Gallery**

It has been 5 years since Galen Rowell and his wife Barbara Cushman-Rowell perished in a small plane crash outside Bishop and it has been 4 years since I had visited last. I wanted, no, strangely needed, to see how things were going there. According to Barbara, Sunday's gallery operator, things have been going very well. The gallery supports talks, arranged tours and visiting artist showings throughout the year.

It was great to spend time visiting the premiere Sierra photographer's gallery. It gave me pause to ponder my own work, which still pales in comparison. Another photographer had his work in bins, available for sale, allowing me the opportunity to compare their two works with mine. I saw the difference and have a new target to strive for.

Also, I had the pleasure of chatting with Barbara throughout the afternoon. It was fun to meet and learn about someone new. She showed me her 60 mile running routes through the Bishop area and her friend's bike riding routes throughout Saline and Death Valley. There are some stunning athletes up there.

My stomach complained and compelled me to move on. Barbara suggested Whiskey Creek Restaurant, just north of the gallery. I could not resist a good recommendation. The wings and Sierra salad were excellent, as suggested. The local port beer was pretty tasty, too. I caught a tiny bit of the Super Bowl, as that television event was on at the time. My plan was not to eschew my travel for watching television, so I downed the food and drink and headed on my way.

### **Revisit the very large antennas**

By the time I arrived in Big Pine, the sky turned dusky. Just then, I realized that now was an excellent time for large antenna photography against night sky. There were sky hazing cirrus clouds present, so I bet that the upper level winds might blow them away by the time I arrived at the Caltech facility. My gamble paid off.

A good hour of photography was available before the moon began illuminating the sky. The most difficult part of shooting these dishes is that they move, unpredictably,

throughout the night. I fired off a shot just after a dish stopped moving, getting some good images, but not as good as I envisioned.

I really needed my 20mm and 24mm Nikons lenses for this sort of shooting. Those are safely home, as I didn't anticipate needing them on this trip. As it was already 7pm and I was staring down a 5 hour drive home, I made one last image and headed off.

### **The best way to make your butt hurt – travel 680 miles in a weekend**

Connecting back with the state route 168 and back on US-395, I headed south. Fueling up in Lone Pine ensured I had enough gas to make it home without stopping while making the run back down to Temecula. The drive was uneventful. With a low traffic load, I had little to slow me down and arrived home without any excitement.

It was an unmatched experience to ride in the dark, in treacherous conditions, through a forest older than most religions of the world. The best part about traveling solo is the ability to make changes a whim, like visiting satellite dishes in the middle of nowhere. And, being solo allows you to stay and chat for hours, making new friends in far off places, without the pressure of having someone else with you. But, there is no one to bounce ideas off when a debatable travel decision comes up. And, as female friends in San Diego pointed out, it can be sometimes scary when you don't know what is crunching around outside your tent, be it crazy people or mountain lions. Usually the sounds are coyotes. But, when you are crazy enough to tear around by yourself, those wild thoughts pumping adrenaline through your body only adds to the experience.