Poison Canyon, Trinity Alps, July, 2019

Poison Canyon has called to me for over 30 years since I first saw the name on a map. Of course, this Spring, friends rambled down Poison Springs Canyon to the Dirty Devil River in Utah, so Poison crosses state lines. Just look at the Senate!

Ycatapom Peak and Shasta in the distance from upper Poison Canyon, Eastern Trinity Alps
"Poison Camp" in the foreground below the snow

The Poison Canyon trail requires a modest 8 mile drive on a rough dirt road with wheelbarrow sized boulders scattered in the right of way. The trail entry, almost obscured from view, starts directly from the road at 4100' and gains 2000' in the first 2.5 miles, much of it getting brushy. In late July, abundant spring-fed and snowmelt water crosses the trail. The trail traverses Hansel and Gretel darkness, a regenerating climax forest, and high meadows, all under the watchful eye of Ycatapom Peak. The grade moderates the last mile to Lilypad Lake, then zooms up another 1300' to the ridgeline that includes Thumb Rock. From that ridgeline, you can take a 2 mile side trip to Shimmy Lake or complete a walk around the ridgeline, drop back and catch the original trail. That would be roughly 12 miles total, which I did not complete. I lost the trail above Lilypad in the snow, and I couldn't see any safe way to get around some really steep, North-facing, icy sections. All those primordial danger alert neurons in the deep recesses of the brain were firing hard. I probed around a bit, and that turned out to open a door I would have completely missed had I stayed on the trail and insisted upon doing what I originally planned.

I shared this account with my backpacking buddies, with the photos added later.

Once again, snow at a high pass foiled my plans for a longer hike this exceptional summer, but that exigency prompted me to explore a bit and find a splendid place.

No easy way around

Poison Camp from above early in the morning

Well below the trail (or where the trail was hiding under snow), but out of view unless a hiker deliberately wandered sideways, lay a hidden shelf with "feminine" grace, as opposed to the masculine ardor of the edgy high granite. Above the shelf an 800 foot tall, North-facing snowfield stretched up to impassable palisades below a classically toothy Trinity ridgeline dominated by Thumb Rock. The snow blended into a vivid green meadow fretted with clear water channels and punctuated with house sized talus. A dry, glacially smoothed white granite mound rose just above the meadow...surrounded by white pines, foxtails, hemlocks, and red firs. Free running, crystalline snowmelt glistened on both sides, then plunged into a marsh below. Prancing around this sanctuary, a Shasta view popped into a narrow window through the trees to the Northeast. The green, squishy meadow was just starting to pop with shooting stars, corn lily, heather, and fawn lilies.

I had this amazing *deja vu* of wandering around a meadow above Mirror Lake with Robin 30+ years ago. I think that was the chase-the-bear day with the Olympus camera. Every memory of that experience was vividly reprised here, including the logs gradually submerging into soft soil, the breeze drifting through the flowers, and the swirl of clouds as they wrestled with the updraft from the ridge above. It reminded me intensely of how our friendship has been forged in beauty.

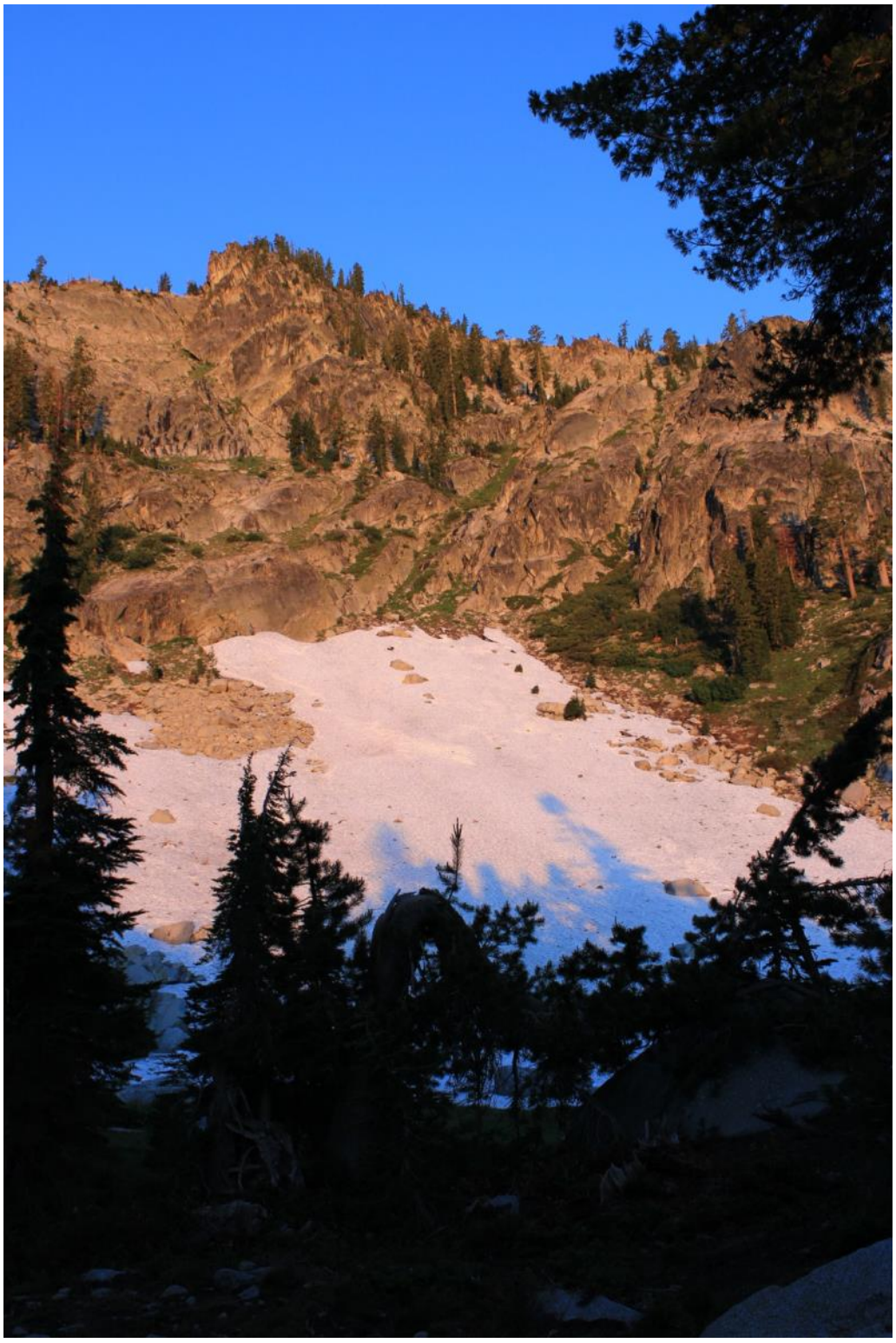
There was absolutely no sign that any person had ever stopped there before. It was way off the trail with no lake to attract swimmers or fishermen. In fact it was not visible from the trail and it was dicey getting down to it. Once there, I saw nary a frond of moss disturbed, no suspicious clusters of rock, no unnatural clearing of pebbles, no charcoal, no plastic nibs, no broken branches...nothing left by even a respectful camper. It really felt like I could have been there 200 years ago, and it would have looked the same.

Cleanest Water in North America

Corn Lilies first up when the snow melts

Sky shows above Poison Camp

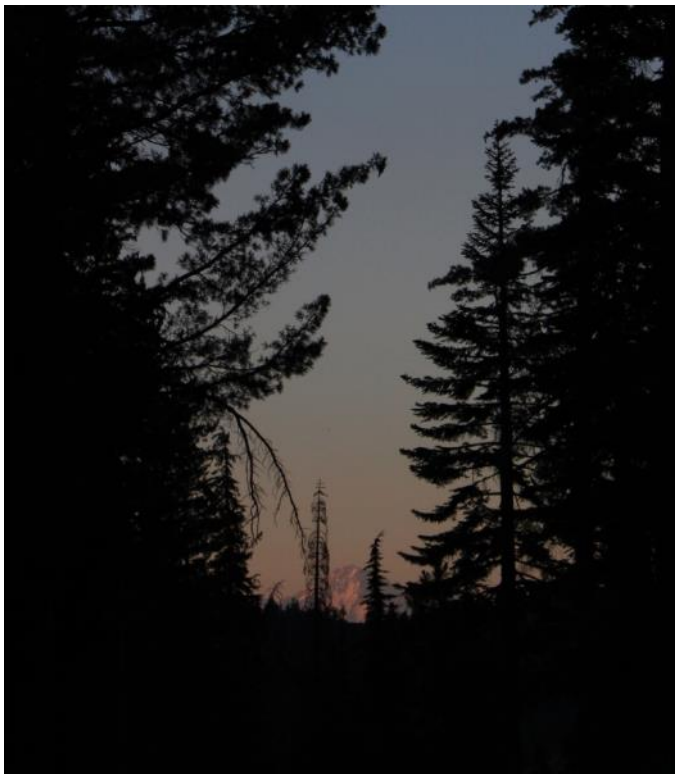
4 Posion Canyon in 2019



Thumb Rock at Dawn above Poison Camp

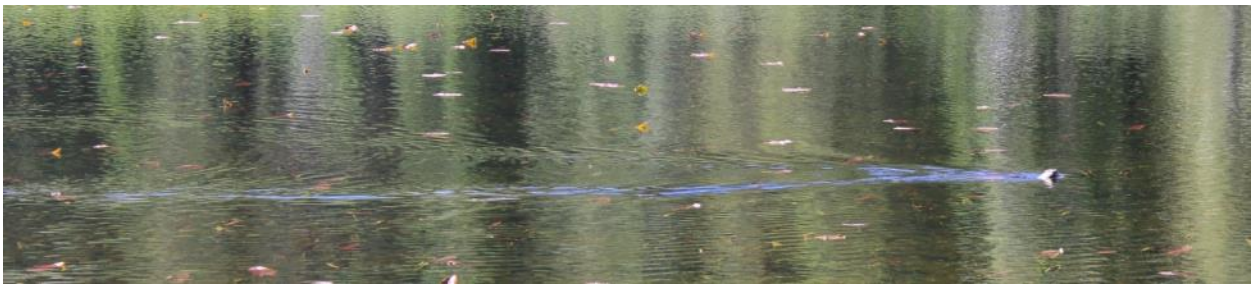
6 Posion Canyon in 2019

Meal of the trip: Rotini pasta with wild onions, rehydrated porcini mushrooms, blended with a chunk of Pt. Reyes Blue cheese, enjoyed by firelight with Shasta in the gloaming.



8 Posion Canyon in 2019

Before this discovery, I passed the forlorn, mosquito infested, swampy Lilypad Lake with no alternative to two nasty wrecked campsites. *Never mind the diss!* I saw what I'm pretty sure was a pair of otters! I thought at first beavers, but these were smaller, sleeker, and faster. They were also incredibly curious...diving under to pop up closer, craning their necks to get a better look at the critter on the shore. That just reminded me of the way sea otters do that.



And there was another hopeful thought from this walk. This section of forest probably started about the same time our country was born, and then something catastrophic happened to it. Fire, drought, insects...it's not hard to grasp the metaphor. But Nature doesn't surrender easily, and neither shall we.

Also remember that when you are camping alone in the woods where nobody knows you're there, you are likely to meet interesting company.

Cheers,

Wells Shoemaker MD
July, 2019