

BIRCH CREEK CAMPOUT

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Well now, it's that time of year again — the time of year I love the best — though I really like all the changing seasons. But this is when the nights are clear & crisp, the days warm, but not hot. It's the time when I like to take the trailer out to the center or eastern part of Nevada, park at the mouth of an east-facing canyon, & enjoy life in an easy fashion. East-facing canyons are best 'cause I can watch the sun rise across the valley each morning.

Such are the Star Creek (which I have written about before) & Birch Creek canyons (where I am camped now). We pulled in here on Monday, Rita & I, & quickly settled in. The weather was typical — high cirrus clouds, calm & warm. The stars were fuzzy that nite, through the clouds, and we're in the dark-of-the-moon phase.

The next morning found the sun rising behind these clouds, painting them pink. As I stepped outside the door, I was startled by a "great blue heron" who had been fishing in the creek about thirty feet away, in front of the trailer. The heron was mutually startled I expect, as it immediately took wing, then landed in the top of a lone piñon down stream a ways. I was sorry that I hadn't looked out the window first.

After a four-mile hike & breakfast, we decided to explore up-canyon that day. What a beautiful area! The canyon rises gently for about two miles, but with steep rocky sides, sparsely populated on the south side with piñon & juniper. Along the way, nearly covered by sagebrush, there are partial rock walls & chimneys — remnants of man's mining activities a hundred years ago. The road fords the creek every half-mile or so; the creek which runs crystal-clear this time of year. There is one other camp in the canyon — a group of geologists testing the mountain for ore bodies.

About three miles above our camp the canyon widens & splits.

In the center bottom, a natural meadow winds along for about a mile up the south fork. At most it is three-hundred yards wide, & occasionally narrows to fifty. The view is breathtaking. To the south the rocky crags shoot up two to three thousand feet. There are four or five patches of brilliantly golden "quakies" plastered on the lower draws, contrasted with the dark green mountain mahogany trees scattered about. The upper two-thirds is covered with snow — only the rocks & the mahoganyies showing through. To the north, by contrast, the hills are rounded & brown — being covered with low sage & grasses. And the snow (which came about two weeks ago) is gone from these slopes.

At the narrow space in the meadow, there is a natural "gate" or "dyke" caused by upthrusted rock formations. Erosion over time has left several caves in the rocks, so we decided to explore them. One cave, an arch with openings both to the south & to the north, had a man-made rock wall & chimney from floor to ceiling — probably built by a miner years ago who used the place as a home.

While we were there, the rancher (who owns the Birch Creek ranch at the foot of the creek) rode up to say hello. He had just covered about ten miles across the top of the mountain looking for a bunch of his cattle that had not come down yet for the winter. He said if he didn't locate them, & if they didn't show up in a day or two, he would fly the area. He runs about two-hundred head of cattle — too few to make a living — but he can't get enough grazing rights, to run more. Eight or ten cows are obviously important to him.

We kicked around in the dust of the old shelters for a couple of hours then decided to go on up the canyon. One of the "roads" should go over the top of the range — at least we should get to the top. The first road ended in a slippery, boggy area in some quakies. A good place to get stuck, had it been a little wetter. It also looked like a great place for deer — but we were too noisy in the Travelall to expect to see one.

We got back to the fork and took the steep road to the west. Although steep, it was in good shape — since the miners have been working up there all summer. They cut road spurs in the mountainside, drive their drilling rigs to the end of each spur & drill for ore signs. We drove past all of these spurs to the very top of the ridge — 8700' elevation. We saw three or four drilling rigs, but only one was working that day.

As one can imagine, the top of the ridge is relatively bare. What sage brush is there is extremely short, and only the lee sides & gullies harbor some hardy brush types. To the west in the distance was the Sierra Nevada range near Reno — about a hundred sixty miles away. Virtually at our feet, twenty-seven hundred feet lower, was the Reese River valley; a long, wide, flat valley of mostly sagebrush. Just over the top, as the road started down that side, was an ancient miner's cabin — commanding that view as from an airplane. We marveled that it was still there, having withstood years of hard-driving winds with rain & snow, and directly facing those elements. It was backed up against a solid rock outcropping, and the owner had built a wall of rock out from the front, probably for more security. The cabin itself is of wood-frame construction. If one were to shore a round rock over that wall it would roll for a thousand feet toward the valley before coming to an obstruction.

One has to have faith in modern machinery when driving around up there. I drove down in a very low gear in four-wheel-drive, dropping 700' in the first mile of switchbacks, 2700' in four miles to the valley floor. Of course we were on the opposite side of the mountain from camp (about 15 miles crow-flight) but we would go about thirty miles around through Austin to save a lengthy gruelling trip back. We made it in time for supper — before six.

Wednesday morning broke with clear skies overhead but with some clouds to the south. As I took my morning hike, the south wind blew over the ridges at about thirty miles-per-hour, portending a storm in the near future. Indeed, within two hours the sky darkened & it began raining slightly — enough to wet the ground but not enough to make big puddles. We sat in the comfort of

the trailer & watched. By mid-afternoon there were breaks in the showers & along toward four o'clock we took a walk up the canyon & back. Just enough exercise to get a good appetite for hamburger with pressured potatoes for supper. And then the skies overhead & to the west cleared entirely. Night fell & the stars appeared, so very bright in a moonless sky. The storm was visible in the southeast only by virtue of the lack of stars in that direction — and by sheets of distant lightning every minute or so, probably about seventy miles away.

During the night the wind shifted again to the south and, after a temperature drop to 28 degrees, it warmed to 32 degrees. The stars got fuzzy & disappeared before dawn. The sun made itself evident by painting a broad strip of orange above the distant horizon. Coincidentally, there came the sound of snow-pellets on the roof of the trailer — followed in a few minutes by silence as the snow changed to flakes.

By then I was dressed, had made a cup of coffee & was comfortably seated where I could watch the ground turn from brown to white. The visibility closed to about two-hundred yards, but was good enough to see a large doe descend from the rim of the canyon, cautiously picking her way to a patch of birches down the creek, a hundred yards from the trailer. I woke Rita to see her, but she disappeared into the birches before she (Rita) made her way to the window. I surmised that the doe was soon bedded down on dry leaves under the dense growth along the creek.

A half-inch of snow was all that we were blessed with in that storm. The ceiling lifted & the wind started blowing again. Now we could watch the squalls marching from right to left (south to north) along the valley floor, and the mountain range across from us. What a peaceful scene! About mid-afternoon the front passed over us — the wind direction abruptly changed from south to west & the temperature dropped appropriately.

It seemed like a good idea to go for a short drive (and on the way by the "Frontier" service station, refill one of our two propane tanks).

Once out in the valley we had a good view of the storms as they, rapidly now, moved across the land. It was as if they wanted to get in their last "licks" before sundown. And that's about as long as they had — for by the time we got back to the trailer, the sky was virtually clear — dark and cold! There were tiny icicles on the trailer shade & the ground was noisy-crisp where the earlier snow had melted — then froze.

Inside was a different story. The contrast was luxurious — warm & snug against the elements. Further (since this day was my birthday) we enjoyed a dinner fit for the proverbial king; steak, baked potato, salad, coffee and cake. Afterward, a pipeful of my favorite tobacco made the day complete.

It was predictable — the sun rose to a clear blue sky. The thermometer registered a low of twenty degrees, but soon the earth responded to the warm sun-rays and it was about forty degrees when I took a four-mile hike before breakfast. I carried both my binoculars and my camera. I had heard some coyote "yipping" during previous hikes, and in fact we drove quite close to a big fellow the day before, so I hoped for a photo. (All I saw was a set of tracks in the snow.)

Fishing was in order after breakfast. I had no angle-worms and of course it was too frozen to find any locally, but I used whatever lures I could find in my creel. The water was slow and exceedingly clear. It was possible to "count" the fish as they darted from one hole to another, but virtually impossible to approach the stream without being seen. I managed to lift a couple of the "brookies" from the water (about eight inches in length) but returned them to the creek as they looked like they needed to be fattened up a bit. One hole — partially hidden by a clump of birches — was the habitat for about eight trout, ranging in size from four to fourteen inches. I tried everything — with no luck! Perhaps I would go back later with some kind of "angle-worm substitute". As I headed back to camp I saw the heron. I wondered if he was having more luck [fishing] than I had.

The day continued warm (in the fifties) and sunny. Except for a patch in the shade of the birches, the snow was gone from the vicinity of camp. We decided to look for some piñon nuts; drove to the top of Bob Scott summit [named for "Pony Bob" of Pony Express fame] where we had seen some cones. The snow still remained under most of the trees, and the trees we picked from yielded only very small nuts. A poor year indeed!

There are many theories for the makings of a good pine-nut harvest. An old Indian tale says that a good harvest precedes a hard winter. [By the same token, I know of an old Indian who foretells a hard winter if the "white-eyes" have put up a lot of firewood.] Others claim the harvests come in specific cycles of years — but I've known areas to repeat year after year, while other areas go barren. Two years ago the whole state was devoid of a crop. Personally I believe it has to do with the conditions of precipitation and temperature during the year preceding the crop. Unfortunately, I don't know what the necessary conditions are. This year — although not barren — is not a good year. We soon tired of picking the small nuts.

The canyon road was unusually busy with traffic that evening. Deer hunters finding camps for the weekend hunt. Trucks, with trailers — motor homes, trailing jeeps — all manner of vehicles. Not until about ten o'clock did the canyon quiet down for the night, which — by the way — produced a sliver of moon for a few minutes.

Sound sleep was disturbed by a loud sound just before sun-up. The sound of a high-powered rifle near our camp. An early-to-rise hunter was rewarded with a deer just above camp. Well, it was time to get out of bed anyway. I wanted to get a photo of the blue heron, and now that I had located his hang-out I thought I could do it. About a half-mile down the creek, there is a catch-basin or pond. The head-gate for the Birch Creek ranch irrigation system. "Old Blue" seemed to like to fish there — so there is where I headed.

Working my way down the creek wasn't easy — because of the tangle of brush and a pair of "bob-wire" fences — but I thought I was doing well. Hardly a twig snapped under my feet — I kept to the shadow side of the brush, crawled through a dry-wash till I was within a hundred feet of the pond, but the bird wasn't there. I widened my angle of search and, sure enough, there he was on the sagebrush covered bench to the south of the pond — watching me! Or at least watching for me. Concealing myself in the brush I decided to wait for him to make the next move. He was a bit far away, even with my telephoto lens, to get a good shot; and now all that showed above the brush was his neck and head.

It was a standoff — and when it comes to patience, man has less than most other animals, and birds. I gave in first. Showing myself, I walked toward him — camera ready. He sneaked behind the sagebrush, out of sight, but when I got to the top of the bench, there he was — standing on top of a rock like a statue, about seventy yards away. I released the shutter, rewound while he started to get himself airborne, then took another shot — a "going away" shot. Now I could get back to breakfast.

Even though it wasn't exactly sun-bath weather, it was a great day for lounging. A cup of coffee, a pipeful of tobacco, some snacks — and plenty of time for a nap. What a life! The temperature was in the sixties, still no clouds, and virtually no wind. Mother nature was in a patronizing mood. I thought again about the trout in the stream and rigged up a line with some ham strips (hoping to immitate angle-worms) but alas — the water was too clear & shallow. I soon gave it up altogether, rationalizing that the darn fish were virtually dormant anyway in that frigid water.

By now it was actually Halloween. Rita had brought and fashioned a great pumpkin into a jack-o-lantern, complete with a bright candle. We faced it toward the east, overlooking the valley from the front window of the trailer. It worked! Not one ghost, goblin, or spirit of evil intent came anywhere near our camp. [In fact, no one passed by that evening.]

Sunday morning — before sunup — I got out of bed. It was perfectly clear! Not even any high thin cirrus evident. A good time to check out something Glen had told me about the sun as it rises (or sets). Because of the bending of light rays around an object, in this case the earth, it is possible to see a green bar of light just before the upper rim of the sun appears. I waited with my binoculars trained on the rim of the mountain across the valley. At first the rim turned to a brilliant silver thread, then — for about one second — there it was! A brilliant green arc! It's amazing how such a natural phenomenon can cause one to feel an excitement, if one makes the little effort to observe it.

Rita & I both walked down to the pond then for one last look at the "big bird". Sure enough, there he was; probably wishing we would go away & leave him to his own habitat.

And all too soon we did just that — removed the jacks from under the trailer & hitched up for the journey home. We stopped long enough at "Bob Scott" summit to pick up a few pounds of pine-nuts, then westward two hundred miles to Sparks.

It was a week of simple pleasures — a far cry from the hustle of the city. Not as exiting perhaps as a journey to the cities with their museums, gourmet restaurants, tourist attractions et al, but rewarding all the same — in a different way. A chance to explore, relax, reflect — and to read, & write. A chance to give thanks for so many things good.

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