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# Trailsplaining

*In the Sierras, four women disprove unsolicited doubts*

**Dianne Fallon**



“YOU KNOW, IT’S *REALLY* HARD,” THE 20-SOMETHING YOUNG WOMAN said to me as we soaked in Edison Lake at Vermilion Valley Resort, a well-known stopover for Pacific Coast Trail and John Muir Trail hikers in California’s Sierra Nevada. She was from Ohio, new to backpacking, and on the trip of a lifetime, hiking the PCT solo.

I was lounging with her on a granite rock, relaxing after four nights of backpacking in the Mono Recesses with three women friends, all of us in our 50s. I had just mentioned that I hoped to hike the John Muir Trail in the near future, that this adventure was a sort of shakedown cruise. Years earlier, I had celebrated my 30th birthday by making a life list, and the JMT has been sitting, uncrossed, on that list ever since.

The way this PCT hiker emphasized “really” and “hard” suggested that she thought the JMT (which coincides with the PCT for a stretch) was probably too hard for *me*. I know that hiking the JMT, or any long-distance trail, is hard. But I had 40 or so years of hiking experience while she had about three months. Maybe her comment reflected her own experiences as a newbie hiker, of learning how challenging climbing mountains could be. Maybe it was hard for her to imagine someone 30 or 35 years older doing something that tested her physical and mental limits every day. Now, at age 57, I wonder why I hadn’t hiked the JMT in my 20s or 30s. I usually had summers free. But most potential companions did not. What I lacked then was the confidence to do a long-distance hike on my own.

Now, it felt strange to have someone else see me as perhaps not capable—especially another woman. A theme was emerging. When we had returned to the resort on the pontoon boat ferry earlier that day, Nancy, the general manager, told us she was glad to see us. “I was wondering how you were doing,” she said when we came into the store to reserve bunks in the tent cabin hostel. “Wondering” as in “concerned,” maybe even “worried.”

Later, John, the resort owner, told us he was glad we’d made it back safely. A hint that maybe he thought we wouldn’t return? That we might have fallen off the log bridge and into roaring Mono Creek? Or drowned after stepping into a chin-deep hole in Laurel or Hopkins Creek? Or tumbled down a snowfield into a steep gully, or into the jaws of a hungry mountain lion?

*The author’s three companions cross a snowfield on the way to the subalpine Laurel Lake, in the John Muir Wilderness.* DIANNE FALLON

We hadn't seen many people on our four-day trek in the recesses, four hanging valleys that drop down to Mono Creek. Our planned route, along Mono Creek toward Mono Pass, is a spectacular but neglected route within the John Muir Wilderness, between Yosemite National Park, to the north, and Kings Canyon National Park, to the south.

It now seems odd that other people thought we might not be up to the task of backpacking in the recesses. I knew that there were moments when I might not *want* to continue walking grueling miles each day carrying everything needed to survive, battling mosquitoes and heat, sleeping on the ground, digging a hole to poop in each day. Those are all good reasons not to go backpacking, but I never doubted my ability to do the hike. What I have always loved about backpacking is that success comes from the simple act of putting one foot in front of the other. Even if I go slowly, as I do when hiking uphill, I know that eventually I will get to my destination.

DURING OUR FOUR DAYS OF HIGH SIERRA HIKING, I MENTALLY VEERED BACK and forth between wanting more backpacking and wanting less. When the going was fairly easy, and we walked on a slight grade through alpine meadows blooming with purple lupine, bell-shaped blue penstemon, and fiery stalks of shaggy Indian paintbrush, I reveled in the beauty. I was *so* happy to be out here, surrounded by granite mountain peaks and colorful wildflowers. I was pumped to start training for a long-distance hike. But then, as any shade disappeared, the grade steepened, and my steps slowed, I wondered why I would even consider hiking the JMT. Why would I put myself through this day in/day out torture for 30-plus days?

Like many women, I placed backpacking at the bottom of the priority list after I became a mother. Time to get away was scarce and precious and involved lots of coordination. Instead of backpacking, I began to hike New Hampshire's 4,000-footers because I sometimes could get away for a day. Or I might spend a night or two in an Appalachian Mountain Club hut, sometimes with the family, sometimes solo. But several years ago, as our kids grew into teenagers, my California-based friend Natasha and I decided that we would start backpacking again. We celebrated her 50th birthday in the Desolation Wilderness near Lake Tahoe. We knew that we probably couldn't yet do a trip every summer, but it was a good goal.

Four years later, we were here in the Sierras with two other friends, Vanessa and Amy. We had planned a 28-mile round-trip hike up to Fourth Recess Lake, at 10,132 feet, where we would camp for a couple of nights and day hike.

But a record snow year in the Sierra meant that now, in July, all the creeks were running high and fast. Our route called for us to cross Mono Creek once, and then eventually to cross over Laurel and Hopkins Creeks. Whether we could cross any of the creeks remained a question as we set out.

We began our journey at Vermilion Valley, setting out on the 9 A.M. pontoon boat ferry across Edison Lake to the trailhead. Almost all of the other hikers were heading back to the PCT. We had enjoyed listening to their trail adventures and tips around the campfire the night before. One had taken a tumble with an ice ax down a snowfield. Another described the recipe for “ramen bombs” (a mix of noodles and instant mashed potatoes). One young woman, a scientist working at a start-up pharmaceutical company, had been granted an extended leave of absence to hike the PCT after she shepherded a possible breakthrough cancer treatment into the first steps toward Food and Drug Administration–approved human trials. A middle-aged man, focused on mending a hole in his trousers, had set out on the trail on a quest for a different kind of life: He had quit drinking, lost weight, found community.

They all continued on their adventure north while we headed south on a short stretch of the PCT/JMT, following this well-trodden path through the Sierra forest, to a junction where we would turn onto the Mono Creek Trail toward the Second Recess, our destination for that evening.

The hike started off relatively easy, on a gentle grade through a forest of Jeffrey pines. We knew that after a mile or so we would have to cross Mono Creek. When we arrived at the crossing site, the log stretched across the rushing waters of the boulder-filled creek did not inspire confidence, as it had many jutting branches to be negotiated and stepped over as the powerful creek waters tumbled below. Fortunately, Amy had information about a second and easier log a bit further up the creek. After some bushwhacking, we found that log, which ran parallel to another dead tree that offered something to lean toward and grab if one of us lost our balance. Although the crossing was nerve-wracking, all of us easily stepped along the log to the other side.

After the crossing, we hiked steadily uphill toward the junction. The forest opened up into meadows and vistas of many jagged-edged granite peaks. The California sun was hot, and we welcomed the shade when the trail dipped back down into the forest. But among the trees, especially near the creek, the newly hatched mosquitoes were ruthless. We pulled on head nets, and slathered DEET on our arms.

As we hiked along the wet and squishy forest trail, we were startled by a large pack of female hikers: a teenaged Girl Scout troop hiking towards us

with their middle-aged chaperones. The girls, all carrying heavy packs, were chatting and laughing. At the sight of us, they asked us who had won the Women's World Cup final. It was great to see teenagers—especially girls—out in the wilderness. But the leader told us they'd had to change their plans because the creek waters were running too high to safely cross. She said we might be able to get across Laurel and Hopkins Creeks if we did it early in the morning, before the day's heat melted more of the snowpack. The Girl Scout troop was backtracking to the JMT and hoping to camp further south, at Mott Lake.

We continued on. The four of us were tired. We hadn't come all that far—about six miles—but we were hiking at about 8,500 feet after coming from sea level the day before. When we reached the cutoff for the trail to Second Recess, we decided to make camp there, by Mono Creek. We definitely were not going to hike up to Second Recess, as that would have required crossing the creek, which was impossible now.

The campsite was OK, but a little gloomy. It lacked the expansive vistas we'd enjoyed earlier. A short distance away, the creek roared, a nice sound, but the mosquitoes were relentless. That evening, we ate our heaviest meal, weight-wise: pesto tortellini with artichoke hearts vacuum-packed in water, plus sun-dried tomatoes and pine nuts. I didn't regret carrying the food up the trail because the deluxe meal provided an antidote to our weariness. But we finished dinner and cleaned everything by 6:30 P.M. It was too early to go to bed, but there was no place to go, and nothing to see except trees and mosquitoes. We retreated to our tents, planned the next day's hike, and fell asleep. When I came out of the tent at 9 P.M. to pee, the stars were brilliant, and the mosquitoes had gone to bed. I wondered if every night would be like this. How could we pass the time between peak mosquito biting and the starlit night?

We were worried about crossing Laurel Creek, about a half-mile from our campsite. After the Girl Scouts, we'd met two other hikers who had hiked over Mono Pass from the eastern side of the Sierra. They said the creek crossings were possible. But they were men, taller and beefier than us. Nearby, a third party of hikers was camping with a dog. These two men, who seemed to have lots of Sierra experience, told us they had decided against the crossings, especially since they were traveling with a dog. Too risky. Instead they had climbed up to Laurel Lake to fish for trout.

We decided to follow their example and hike alongside Laurel Creek up to its namesake subalpine lake, set in a dramatic bowl at 10,300 feet. We could camp there and maybe hike up to Grinnell Lake, tucked behind Laurel in

another bowl. The map showed that the trail climbed steeply before leveling off in a narrow valley, gaining about 1,200 feet of elevation in a mile or so. Thanks to my years of hiking in New Hampshire's White Mountains, I knew we could do it.

We hiked steadily uphill, stopping to rest or to inspect the many varieties of wildflowers, now at their peak: white and magenta mountain phlox, alpine daisies, and clusters of ruby red snow plants, sprouting from the earth like oversized snow cones. The hiking was hard, but no harder than what I was used to. I counted steps: Hike 100 steps and stop for a few seconds; go another 100 steps, then take a ten-second rest. In small increments, I would get to 10,000 feet. These small goals became a sort of walking meditation that had carried me up mountains around the world.

As we climbed higher, we enjoyed magnificent views of the Second Recess, a snow-covered cirque that reminded me of a larger and more remote Tuckerman Ravine. This vantage point offered a far better view of the recess than if we were climbing up or alongside its slopes, where plenty of avalanche danger still lurked.

After a couple of hours, we reached the narrow green valley carved by glaciers and still being shaped by Laurel Creek. Rock-strewn slopes rose up on both sides. Looking at the map, I could tell that we needed to cross the creek to follow the trail. But where could we cross? The creek was running fast and deep.

"Can't we just follow the creek?" Natasha wondered out loud.

We could, but I knew that the trail had been placed on the other side to make getting to the lake easier for hikers.

Suddenly, Vanessa felt a migraine headache coming on, one that might impair her vision and balance. Natasha had some over-the-counter anti-migraine medication in her pack. We stopped for lunch among some boulders that offered good seating, and we rested until Vanessa's headache dissipated.

We continued up the creek. By now, we realized we had definitely lost the trail, but also knew that the creek would get us to the lake. The grassy bog along the creek, however, gave way to a sloped field of rocks, and we found ourselves climbing up and over granite boulders and rock slabs.

Natasha's problem knee was starting to twinge a little and she wasn't sure if she could continue. But near the top of the boulder field, Vanessa discovered a spot where some large rocks made it possible to cross the creek. I left my pack with Vanessa and climbed back down toward Natasha to grab her pack, to make it easier for her to get to the crossing.



Once we crossed Laurel Creek, we continued to climb along the creek, but we still couldn't find the trail. We knew it was there because the map said so, and because from the other side, we had seen a wooden sign that might be a trail sign. We climbed high above the creek, but looking at the map, it felt like we were too high. Where was the damn lake?

Finally, as all of us were feeling discouraged, frustrated at our inability to locate the trail but certain it had to be nearby, I laid my pack under a tree and scouted ahead to see if I could discover any evidence of the lake. I climbed higher, certain I would see the lake over the next rise, but then, no lake. So I climbed higher, confident that we might see the lake just over the next pitch. But, again, no lake. Instead, a snowfield. Not a scary steep snowfield, but a clue that the lake was further along—not just around the corner. I turned back to hike down to the others, and on the way, I saw the packed-down dirt of the trail we had lost.

We decided to hike down that trail to the meadow, spend the night there by Laurel Creek, and consider our options. Finally, we passed the sign we'd seen before—reminding us that we were at 10,000 feet, where no fires were allowed. The weather-beaten sign felt like a sign of civilization. Even though we were alone in this remote valley, somebody *had* been here before us. But now, nobody knew we were here—a strange yet wonderful feeling. We pitched our three tents close together so that we could enjoy “story hour” together later, and then stripped off our sweaty clothes for a brief dip in the freezing waters of Laurel Creek. Afterward, we dove into our shelters, seeking refuge from the swarms of mosquitoes. As the afternoon sun blazed upon our tents, we lay inside resting, and pretended that we were at the beach.



*The author in a head net stands in the meadow by Laurel Creek. The mosquitos were voracious, even in the hottest part of the day.* VANESSA SPANG



Eventually, we emerged from our tents for tea and dinner. The sun had fallen behind the mountain, cooling down our campsite, and our rain gear proved to be a sweaty fortress-like barrier to the penetrating proboscises. We were settling in.

For reading material, I had brought a couple of issues of *Appalachia*. As the darkness fell, we nestled into our tents for story hour. I read the Accidents report about a middle-aged female hiker who found herself lost on the side of Mount Washington in January after climbing Mount Monroe. She used her gear, experience, and her outdoor smarts to survive the brutally cold night. The Californians marveled that anyone would be out hiking when it was 20 degrees, and I assured them that in the Northeast that was considered a pretty mild day for winter hiking.

The next day, the mosquitoes woke up shortly after we did, but in our rain gear and head nets, we barely noticed the insects as we lingered over coffee and oatmeal on another sunny blue-sky Sierra day. We learned that we could drink coffee through a net but that oatmeal needs to get spooned *under* the net. We decided we would try for the lake again but leave our camp set up in the meadow. We did pack the stove and our dinner, though. If the lake was mosquito-free, we could spend the afternoon and early evening there.

This time, we followed the trail up through the forest and then up higher where trees became scarcer. We easily crossed over the first snowfield and frequently checked the map to see if we were approaching Grinnell Creek, which we would have to cross before again crossing Laurel Creek to get to the lake.

As we climbed higher, the mountains opened up behind us: green meadows, wildflowers, and snow-covered peaks. I didn't feel middle-aged as we stepped our way across several snowfields and then dropped down to Grinnell Creek, which was easily crossed at a wide squishy wet spot. Shortly afterward, we found a couple of boulders nicely lined up for crossing over Laurel Creek.

The journey up to the lake seemed long, but I knew it wasn't that far from the campsite—about 1.5 miles. Eventually, we reached the lake, a deep blue pool set in a granite bowl at 10,300 feet. Above the bowl, jagged sharp-toothed peaks of the Silver Divide rose into the deep blue sky. As we ate lunch in a shady nook just above the shore, we talked about hiking the lake's perimeter. On the other side, below the steep granite slopes, was a flat area of pine trees that looked like a great camping spot.

But over to the west, from where we'd come, clouds began to form at the far end of the valley. Summer clouds signal changing weather, which can



*The author's friend Natasha Haugnes pauses above Laurel Creek's glacial-sculpted valley.*

DIANNE FALLON

happen rapidly in the Sierra. Instead of exploring further, we opted to head back down the trail so that we could cross the snowfields and the creek before any storm rolled in. If the weather didn't turn, we could stop somewhere for afternoon tea.

About an hour later, with the clouds lingering, but no evidence of storms, we set up the stove in a shady spot just off the trail to enjoy a mosquito-free tea break. We lazed around, enjoying the wildflowers, and idly talking about work, children, husbands, retirement goals, future hikes. Eventually we packed up and made our way back down to the meadow campsite.

In the meadow, the mosquitoes were out in full force, but had become barely noticeable to us. We enjoyed a meal of freeze-dried beans and rice and lingered over tea. For story hour, we patched together the ripped pages of a *New Yorker* magazine to read a short story set in New York City about a washed-up movie producer and his estranged son. The story felt far away and foreign but was strangely compelling. It was a long story and we decided to finish it the next evening. As I fell asleep, I hoped the old man would reconnect with his son.

On Friday, with most options closed off because of the high water, it was time to head back toward Vermilion Valley Resort. We could catch the 4:45 P.M. ferry that afternoon or the 9:45 A.M. ferry on Saturday. It didn't matter which, as we weren't expected back until before Sunday, when I was taking a red-eye flight back to Boston.

We took our time packing up camp, airing out sleeping bags and drying tents and tent flies soaked by the humidity that the creek generated. The next humans who passed this way would find no sign of our presence in this valley.

The night before, we had found the trail's creek crossing: a perfectly formed log just above the lip where the creek began its steep drop to the Mono Creek valley. We easily stepped across the log and began the descent. Despite concerns about problem knees, going down was much faster than going up. After a short rest stop at our first night's campsite, we continued down Mono Creek trail. For several stretches, the trail wound uphill above the creek, only to travel back down, and then up again, and down. But we were definitely heading downhill.

The July sun beat down upon the dusty trail. Alone with my thoughts, I wondered if I still had it in me to hike the John Muir Trail. I could, I know I could. But did I want to, as I approached 60? Yes, I did, I thought as we hiked beneath shady trees, and swatted away mosquitos. No, I didn't, I reconsidered as, guzzling electrolyte-laced water and sweating, I slowly hiked uphill under the California sun. Really, why would I choose to endure day after day of hiking, setting up camp while exhausted, digging holes, worrying about bears? But then, as I turned a corner, the trail leveled out, and another glorious vista of mountain peaks opened up. Who wouldn't want to spend a month or so just being in these mountains?

At one point, Natasha tweaked her knee and she knew she had to stop and soak her body in ibuprofen to keep going. We rested against a rock. "I can't hike the JMT," she said. "But I think you should."

We steadily made our way to lower elevation, and eventually turned left onto the JMT, which would take us to Edison Lake. A 50-something dad and his teenage son were taking a trailside break after having hiked down from Selden Pass. "It was tough," the dad said. "Lots of snow. We're only hiking nine miles today."

Only nine miles. That sounded like more than enough. As we approached the Mono Creek crossing, a pair of European hikers pointed us toward the log crossing—the not-so-great log with lots of spikes. The father-son pair stepped away to confer; I could tell the son was not happy about that log. We

were happy to direct them to “our” log, further up the creek, and everyone crossed safely.

Now, in the final stretch toward Lake Edison, we began to encounter the strung-out group of southbound PCT/JMT hikers who had come off the 4 P.M. ferry. The knowledge that we could end our day with a soak in Edison Lake kept our boots moving. We pushed on down the trail, found a boulder-surrounded campsite near the lake’s shore, then stripped off our clothes and settled into the cool but not freezing waters of the lake.

A large group was camped on the opposite shore, about 150 yards across the cove. But I didn’t care about the lack of privacy, and the water felt great on my bare skin.

That night, after a homemade freeze-dried pasta meal, we settled into our tents for story hour. The *New Yorker* story about the washed-up movie producer had an ambiguous and not-satisfying ending. But when darkness settled over the campsite, we were still awake for the starry night.

On Saturday, the ferry returning to the Vermilion Valley Resort was loaded with PCT and JMT hikers from around the country and world: California, Ohio, Texas, Italy, China, Germany, South Africa, all of them young, hungry, and ready to drink beer. At Vermilion Valley, we booked four beds in the tent hostel, pretty certain that we wouldn’t acquire any roommates. The young hikers preferred the free tent sites.

We pulled swimsuits from our bags in the car and headed down to the lake, where I swam out to the rock, and was joined by the young woman from Ohio.

Yes, the John Muir Trail would be “really hard.” At the Vermillion Valley store, I bought the four-foot long poster map of the John Muir Trail. Back at home, I began to study its valleys, peaks, and passes: Donohue Pass, Red’s Meadow, Evolution Valley. Eleven high mountain passes, 214 miles, 47,000 feet of elevation changes. I take a step closer to that trail every time I pass this poster.

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