

Ventana Wilderness, August 1973 – Solo Hike

Biographical Background

The 1972-73 school year was my first full year of teaching. I taught a combination 5th-6th grade class at Ralph Dunlap Elementary in the Orcutt School District, which was just north of Santa Maria. Bobbie and I split up just before the start of the school year, in 1972. I Moved back to Halcyon and commuted to work from there. During that school year, I married Kim Clark (no relation to my sister's family). Kim had a young son named Tobias, who was about the same age as my son Chris (who was by now living with his mother, Sue).

I had a successful school year, and I was eager to continue, in spite of the school district having to lay off a few teachers, due to budget cuts. In order to increase my chances of being retained, I agreed to teach a special education class starting in the fall. I told my principal about a six-week intensive summer session at UC Berkeley designed to train teachers to work with students with emotional disabilities. He encouraged me to take the course with the understanding that I could then be assigned the following year to teach a special education class.

I was fortunate that a friend of mine from my college days had a home in Berkeley, and he asked me if I would take care of it while he was gone for the summer. Kim and I were pleased to stay in Ken's house. It was a great arrangement. It saved us money on rent. Also, I was able to ride Ken's bicycle to campus every day, saving on the cost of gasoline and parking.

By the end of the special session, I was "burned out" on attending classes every day, and doing so much reading and library research. By that time Kim and I were continuing to struggle to forge a good relationship (that's putting it nicely). I was in need of a "breakout" experience. I decided that a solo backpacking trip would be just the thing for me. Kim agreed to help me do this, by driving me to where I would begin my hike, and then three days later picking me up at the end of my hike.

Getting There

The Ventana Wilderness is located in the Santa Lucia Mountain range, along the central coast of California. Its northern boundary lies just south of Monterey and Carmel, and includes parts of Big Sur. Its southern boundary reaches as far south as the Hunter-Liggett Military Reservation (inland) and down Highway 1 as far as the town of Lucia.

To get to the trailhead for the start of my hike, we left Berkeley early in the morning on Tuesday, July 31. We headed south to Carmel, and then south from Carmel on Highway 1 for about ten miles, to Notley's Landing. Just before that landmark is the turnoff onto Palo Colorado Road. We drove eight miles up this narrow, rough road to **Botcher's Gap Campground**. The total drive that morning took at least three hours.

Botcher's Gap Campground was where I began my solo hike into the Ventana Wilderness. Kim agreed to come pick me up at the mouth of the Big Sur River in Pfeiffer Big Sur State Park, three days later on Friday, August 3. Using topographical maps, I had carefully planned out my four days of hiking, timing it so that I would emerge from the wilderness at our agreed upon rendezvous point, at 5:00 pm.

The Ventana Wilderness

(From the Los Padres National Forest website.)

Topography of the Ventana Wilderness is characterized by steep-sided, sharp-crested ridges separating V-shaped youthful valleys. Most streams fall rapidly through narrow, vertical-walled canyons flowing on bedrock or a veneer of boulders. Waterfalls, deep pools and thermal springs are found along major streams.

Elevations range from 600 feet, where the Big Sur River leaves the Wilderness, to about 5,750 feet at the Wilderness boundary circumventing Junipero Serra Peak. Marked vegetation changes occur within the Wilderness. These changes are attributed to dramatic climate and topographic variations coupled with an extensive fire history.

Much of the Ventana is covered by chaparral. This brushy vegetative cover is typical of that found throughout Southern California fire susceptible mountains. The contrast of annual grass meadows and open pine stands may be found throughout the Wilderness. Deep narrow canyons cut by the fast moving Big and Little Sur Rivers support virgin stands of coastal redwood. Small scattered stands of the endemic Bristlecone Fir may be found on rocky slopes.

The Hike

Tuesday, July 31 – Day One, 8 miles.

Started at ***Botcher's Gap Campground*** (2,060 ft); followed ***Skinner Ridge Trail*** up and across the ridge (3,651 ft) to ***Devil's Peak*** (4,048 ft). Then down via ***Big Pines Trail*** to ***Ventana Trail***, to ***Pat Springs Camp*** (3,730 ft).

Wednesday, August 1 – Day Two, 12 miles.

Continued on the ***Ventana Trail*** south from ***Pat Springs Camp***, (3730 ft), around ***Uncle Sam Mountain*** (4740 ft); headed southeast on the ***Puerto Suelo Trail*** down to the Carmel River and ***Hiding Canyon Camp*** (2300 ft). Continued southeast uphill on the Carmel River trail to ***Pine Valley Camp*** (3200 ft), situated at the headwaters of the Carmel River. Just a short walk downstream, to the west, was Pine Falls.

Thursday, August 2 – Day Three, 12 miles

From **Pine Valley Camp** (3200 ft) hiked up to **Pine Ridge** (4500 ft) in about five miles, following the Bear Basin Trail. From Pine Ridge hiked downhill following the Pine Ridge Trail to the **Big Sur River**, then on to **Sykes Camp** (1320 ft), near Sykes Hot Spring.

Friday, August 3 – Day Four, 12 miles

Hiked a gradual downhill to Big Sur, on the Pine Ridge Trail, roughly parallel to the Big Sur River.

Total for four days of hiking: 44 miles.

The Story

Most of the story told here is taken directly from my detailed notes that I wrote during my hike. My notes filled 42 pages of a steno notepad, and appear in the story as indented paragraphs. My memories serve to embellish or clarify the story as appropriate.

Tuesday, July 31 – Day One

Nine miles to Pat Springs Camp, first one-half of the journey straight up and hot. I thought I would black out, or that my heart would stop a few times. What a climb!

The climb was through open country, low brush, and rocky trails. Devil's Peak is named appropriately. After climbing that big guy, the trail went merrily down, with a lot of shade.

With about two to three miles to go to Pat Springs, tall pine trees became thicker. Pretty green ferns and other thick foliage sprang into view all around. The forest carpeted with yellow, pink, and brown leaves. The bright-red/brown bark of the large manzanita-like trees [madrones] make an impressionistic painting with the light to dark shaded green leaves. Sun rays glistening off branches, leaves, or clumps of small pines here and there.

Where I am, Pat Springs Camp, there is a miniature pine forest. It is very thick but the trees are narrow and short. I am underneath two huge pine trees and a sprawling madrone with its bright red, smooth bark.

The trip took me 4 and ½ hours. The climb was from 2,000 feet to 4,150 [Devil's Peak], then to 3,800 feet at camp. Total distance: nine miles. Now I must walk up the trail and hope the spring is producing [water]. Got to get my water – my feet hurt!!

Tomorrow's plans: to hike to Hiding Canyon Camp by lunch time – 12:00 or 1:00, about 8 miles. Have a real good rest there and journey up the trail maybe 4 more miles or so, to camp for the night. That way, I could get to Redwood Creek Camp easily, for my last night.

Good! Beautiful water! A spring with a pipe feeding into a large oaken barrel, with a pipe coming from that, gushing out cold, beautiful water. I drenched my head, arms, etc. then filled up the water container.

After getting my water, I climbed up the peak a bit further to a spot where I could sit comfortably, and read my maps. While looking out at the vastness of this territory, and using my topographical map and compass, I could identify the names of the landmarks that I was viewing. This was something that I greatly enjoyed doing, whenever on a hike.

The sun is very hot. I am now sitting on a ledge about 3,900 feet. Below me is a wide, gaping valley. These hills are really amazing. They don't have the rock slabs or foliage of Yosemite, nor the snow or flowers, but there is so much *form*, here. It's as if a sculptor deliberately came along carving wedges, peaks, points, cracks, canyons and all that as if he were to enter it in an art show. But it is even more beautiful than any man-made thing – it encompasses so much, with such detail ... and there is so much variety of life tucked away beneath the solid green that hits one's eyes.

The canyon below me drops 2,000 feet, and stretches out quite a ways. Then abruptly ahead is a mountain rising immediately 1,400 feet. It is part of a razor back ridge extending upward to one of the Ventana Cones at 4,600 feet. All of this before me within a sight of five miles. To the left of the first cone is another, 4,850 feet high. It really looks rocky, treacherous, and steep. It is part of another ridge sloping downward and just to my left only 1 and ½ miles. It slopes down to an average of 4,100 feet.

After checking my topo map, I can see many more landmarks for the benefit of my hike. Eight miles away, by sight, is a high peak where I plan to be on Thursday – early, I hope – it looks high, and big, and scary. It is South Ventana Cone, 5,000 feet high. But I should be on this side (west) of it walking at about 4500 feet. I can see a pass where I will walk through, but cannot see the ridge I will travers downward (southward) on the other side.

Tomorrow's view and walk should be more dramatic than this, even, if I read the topo map correctly.

Oh, don't forget. I can see the fog over the ocean from where I sit too. [Like] a massive cotton blanket keeping someone still.

Time for dinner. It is 6:30 and the sun is still blazing hot; a wet bandana on my head and flies buzzing me constantly. I love it.

Later in the evening I wrote an additional note.

There's more!! I come back to camp and there are two huge black wild boars roaming around. I hope they are leaving and not stalking.

This is a good place to tell the story of how I prepared my campsite to protect myself from the wild boars. When I came upon my campsite, I felt violated because the two wild boars were *in* my camp.

I waited several minutes until they foraged their way to about thirty yards or so from where I had my gear and sleeping bag rolled out. Then I cautiously retrieved two of my metal pots to use as noisemakers. I banged them together (dented one) to scare away the boars. At first the noise had no effect. Then several seconds passed – they both looked up and over in my direction. Then they bolted out of there in a hurry. I thought it was amusing that it took them so long to respond to the noise.

Next, I had to prep my sleeping area. I thought that if the boars came around while I was sleeping, I wanted them first to stumble on something that would alert me as to their presence. I dragged several large logs from the forest over to my site. Then I lined my sleeping area with a large rectangle of logs. I thought that if they came foraging for food, they would first stumble on one of the logs, thus waking me from sleep. I wasn't satisfied with just one layer of logs. I found more logs and stacked them up so that I had a low "wall" surrounding my sleeping area about three logs high.

That night I didn't sleep much, due to worrying about the wild boars. But none came around. Or none that I was aware of, anyway.

Wednesday, August 1 – Day Two

I had no trouble with the boars; they left. But even though I was dog-tired, I think I didn't fall asleep soundly until 2:00 a.m. Last night I was too hot and dry to sleep. All my thoughts were tied in, in a weird way, with my attempts at finding a sleeping position.

The sights and sounds this morning are gorgeous – stillness – wind through the trees – an occasional bird calling and squirrels responding ... it is quite a peaceful symphony.

Actual mileage to **Hiding Canyon Camp** was 7 and ½. I left at 9:00 a.m. and got there at 2:00 p.m. It would have been an hour sooner if I had not missed the trail at one point. It crossed the creek a few times and mingled with the gaping trails and burrows in the earth from so many wild boars. I did not see any, but this narrow canyon with five creeks draining into it was well-routed out. It had a lot of vegetables, too.

I realized I really lost the trail, when I kept following the creek, expecting to see [the trail] again. Numerous boar trails – people trails, none. Then I rounded a corner and came to a waterfall which I was not about to climb down ... and assuredly this was not the trail. I looked at the topo map, studied where I was and where the trail ought to be ... I found out the trail was high above me on a hill. After back-tracking and scrambling up hillsides, through poison oak, I hit the trail.

From there I went up and over a small hillside, around the other side, where I got another look at my journey's countryside of the next two days. This time it was closer. The peak where I'll be tomorrow even more awe-inspiring and the valley below it was like an oversized crevice of an earthquake which had been splotched green quite thoroughly over thousands of years of growth.

I made it to ***Hiding Canyon Camp*** quite exhausted. I had walked 7 and ½ miles so far ... rough, even though downhill. I took a bath in the creek and washed my shirt. Had lunch, then headed out for ***Pine Valley***. That was five miles more. However, it was all uphill, and I was totally exhausted when I hit ***Pine Valley*** at about 5:30 p.m.

The hike up [to Pine Valley] was hot, steep, but mostly shady. As I ascended, I could spot the change of foliage again. A few more pines scattered about, less creek bush and poison oak, and there seems to be a zone where the madrone are most prevalent. I passed above that zone and finally reached the top. I really pushed to get there.

Then, only one more mile and that would be downhill. Suddenly I came upon a most gorgeous meadow! Fantastic! Moist, short green grass, all surrounded by tall pines. Off to one corner stood big group of rocks – massive boulders – three of them, each about 100 feet high. These marked the power of the meadow, as though three angels were to look down and guard the sacred, quiet and peaceful atmosphere of the meadow.

At camp: Oh well, can't win 'em all ... it is filled with people: four sites filled, and one group is a very noisy bunch of young boys. However, I met Bob and Connie and their two-year-old. Shared a campfire and chocolate with them. This camp is only six miles in from China Camp, which you can drive to [from Carmel Valley]. Tomorrow, I ascend a peak south of here. The hardest part of my journey is over with. The rest can all be taken easily, enjoying more stopping times.

The best parts of this kind of backpacking still, are the majestic views of razorback peaks and narrow canyons, and the stillness and peace within a grove of trees ... falling asleep to the stars and quiet forest sounds, and not having anyone disturb your mental equanimity and physical rhythm.

Thursday, August 2 – Day Three

The climb up was not too bad [from 3200 ft up to 4980 ft], and the views from Pine Ridge are amazing! I could see all the way to Monterey ... and the coast range north of there ... brown, small sparse looking hills just the other side of this wilderness area ... perhaps Carmel Valley.

I could look back and see where I was two days ago on Devil's Peak ... and followed my journey to Pat Springs then around Uncle Sam Mtn. I could see the trail down from there into Hiding Canyon, then up the ridge again to the topmost trees and rocks of Pine Valley. This was all to my right and center.

To my left and center rose the giant and rocky Ventana Cones ... nearly 5,000 feet high. The sides of these peaks fell down into the green canyon almost like jagged cliffs – gray and protruding, sinking into the green and softness of the valley.

One of the peaks continues on a ridge, northward, to my right, sloping down a bit, then up to Uncle Sam Mtn. I crossed through that sloping gap into this valley from the one I described on the first day.

So many beautiful sights across valleys and into forest glens ... all of it very captivating, relaxing, and fulfilling. So many different smells ... hot sage and rock, toasting pine needles, a breeze brings you a scent of something sweet.

The sounds ... constantly leaves falling, squirrels scampering about rustling the leaves in flurries ... three or four different types of bird calls at each spot in the forest ... lizards everywhere. I passed a deer this morning ... beautiful animal. I stopped and exchanged stares with a squirrel only three feet away.

The view to the southeast was almost as neat ... but there, I could not get the satisfaction of seeing the land and peaks and valleys I traveled. I could see to a peak high and in the distance, even beyond Arroyo Seco [popular hiking area west of King City]. I could see the area where Tassajara Springs is, and the road going to it. Continuing west from that tall peak, and Arroyo Seco, was Black Cone ... then following the same ridge, looking directly to my south, where I will be tonight, down in a narrow canyon where the Big Sur River flows.

Five miles, straight down. I think the mileage to this spot was five miles, so the total for today will be ten miles. But the rest is downhill.

Then I reached the Big Sur River.

Well, here I am on the Big Sur River – end of my third day – at Sykes Camp. I went past Redwood Creek, because from there it was 15 miles to Big Sur; now, I just have to walk 12 miles tomorrow. That will make the total mileage 8 – 12 – 12 – 12. I think I may have to chug tomorrow's walk to meet Kim no later than 5:00 pm.

I really don't want to leave. I enjoy this so much. I get sad when I think of going back ... but, plenty to do and keep me busy. Look for furniture, pay all my bills, balance budget out, tires for the car. A new plan which is important to me: stop cigarettes! Meditate in the morning and do tai chi in the afternoon. I must carry this through.

This spot is fairly nice. Right next to the river – or large creek. A hot spring is down the trail $\frac{3}{4}$ mile ... I'll hit that in the morning on my way out. I had a cold, refreshing swim just a few minutes ago. Ahh, comfort!! Here, in the woods; simple ways!

This time (dinner) I didn't mess around trying to warm up the falafel ... right in with the rice and vegetables ... altogether, what a stew! What a dinner! I could have gotten by with just half of all my dinner portions. I've been eating well.

The climb down from Pine Ridge was beautiful! Steep and hot ... I'm glad I was not going up in that direction. I could see most of the trail below me, winding from one side to the other of this descending giant ... and right into the bottom of the canyon with tall redwoods sheltering gentle life from the sun.

Ahh, what a pleasant feeling to suddenly smell redwoods and be amidst coolness ... then to dive for the sparkling water in the gushing stream. All this taking place beneath the cover so well laid down, when you look from the top: just green and forms, and rock and ridges.

Once again, from Pine Ridge Camp today, I could see the canyon I would follow out to Big Sur. It sort of pointed west with the life sources of the canyon nestled in the huge pocket below me. I walked over steep cliffs that must have been close to 1,000 feet down. And I'm nearing the end of this journey – I don't want to stop!

That evening I wrote three pages of notes comparing my original plans and estimates of distances with what I actually did.

I noticed that using the large topo map, my estimates were greater than actual. Where I had to shift to different maps or different sizes, estimates ran short of actual distance. Total for four days: 44 miles.

About water: There was good water at every place I camped – and had lunch – no problem: springs were at regular walkable intervals. However, the Big Sur River is polluted ... no water from it after Sykes Camp. From Pat Springs to Uncle Sam Mountain, I estimated six to eight miles without water. It was only four miles.

Friday, August 3 – Day Four

Today I have to hike out ...