Enchanting cluster of 5 lakes worth exploring



One of five lakes along a 5-mile roundtrip hike. Photos/Kathryn Reed

By Kathryn Reed

ALPINE MEADOWS – Small ripples float across the lake in the gentle breeze. A few ducks swim by to check out the four of us – five if you count AJ. She doesn't faze them, even though she acts like they are intruding on our territory.

But where did all the people go?

There had been so many vehicles at the trailhead and several hikers along the way. But suddenly they were nowhere to be found.

Not that we were complaining. A private lunch spot along a lake in the Granite Chief Wilderness on a Sunday in August can be a rare experience. We embraced it.

Getting here was a bit of a climb at the start. The more than 900-feet of elevation gain is mostly at the beginning. It then levels off to where the ascent is hardly noticeable. Switchbacks are gradual so it doesn't feel like you are in a spiral. The decomposed granite proved trickier coming down because it was slick. Poles would have been welcome.

The nearly five-mile roundtrip hike starts at 6,660 feet. The five lakes are at 7,520 feet. Maps call this cluster of lakes "5 Lakes" – they don't have individual names.

One rock outcropping looks like a cumulus cloud made out of granite. Rounding another corner there is a wall of granite that looks like it would be fun if you were into rock climbing, but scary if it were ski season.

With much of the hike being so exposed, we wondered why we started in late morning. Sweat was dripping without exertion. Fortunately, there were shady spots to rest in. But it made sense why we saw so many people on their way out as we were just starting.

The trail starts on private land that separates Alpine Meadows and Squaw Valley ski resorts. Owners of the resorts are getting close to solidifying a deal with the private property owner to link the ski areas.

Chairlifts from both resorts as well as the terminuses are visible from different vantage points. The base lodge for Alpine is a wide spot below us. A reminder of how much snow this slice of the Sierra gets is a sign at the trailhead telling people not to pick up unexploded avalanche shells.

Looking up at all the lifts it proves just how sprawling Squaw is. Plus, it's a reminder this is not true wilderness.

The lakes are in Granite Chief Wilderness.

It was surprising to overhear backpackers talk about the other lakes in a manner that proved they had not seen them. For us, seeing all five lakes was the goal.

There is a distinct fork in the trail as the landscape changes and the tree canopy becomes denser. Go left to make your way around to all five lakes. If you go straight, you get to what we called Lake 5.

The first two lakes are more swampy, but still beautiful. They just don't beckon one to swim. The three other lakes seem more swimmable, with Lake 5 being where people were in the water.

No one was at Lake 3 or 4, which were the two lakes the four of us preferred. Everyone was at Lake 5.

Even in the backcountry there are a couple signs of drought. No water is running in what are now dry streambeds. At Lake 3 the water mark on some of the boulders is about 2 feet higher than the surface.

Still, so much of the area around the lakes is lush – almost tropical. A few wildflowers are still out, but nothing glorious. But the hike itself and the lakes are spectacular. An extensive trail network exists here, including the Pacific Crest Trail.

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Getting there:

From South Lake Tahoe, go north on Highway 89 to Tahoe City. Turn left at the Y into Tahoe City toward Truckee. Turn left onto Alpine Meadows Road. (River Ranch is on the corner.) Drive 2 miles and the trailhead is on the right at the junction of the second Deer Park Drive.

Notes:

• Dogs are prohibited in parts of Granite Chief Wilderness

from May 15-July 15 during fawning season.

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