

A Short Trek in the Yolly Bolly September 29 — October 2, 2008

My curiosity about the state of affairs in the post-fire wilderness overwhelmed me last Monday, and because I now have so much free time on my hands, I made no effort to resist the urge to go up there. I left Mendocino at 10 Monday morning and, after shopping for a little food to take with me, was at the George's Valley trailhead at 3. On the way up my fears about how bad the fires had been were somewhat allayed because there were no burn signs anywhere along M-1. The drive was pleasant and uneventful, albeit quite invocative of memories of past trips up that 28 miles of Forest Service road, and all the things that had happened before getting there, events that had actually occurred on the road, and what happened after we left the wilderness. (I think there's a book in there somewhere. The road may be that "crack in the worlds" that Castaneda talks about. Interestingly, I had the first book, *The Teachings*, with me. Uncle Ron and I have given us the assignment to reread the first four books in the series in the next four months. A blog will no doubt be the inevitable result.) The forest was dry, but in good shape. The day was bright and beautiful, warm and ideal for a short, fall trek in the Yolla Bolly Middle Eel Wilderness.

Within three minutes of leaving the car, the scene changed dramatically. From the overlook of the Balm of Gilead north toward Wright's Ridge I could see large dead zones where the fire had scorched the forest. It appeared from afar that the fire (at least in this section of the wilderness) had begun down in the canyon and worked its way up the ridge, spreading out like a fan as it burned. But on the south side of the creek, the side I was hiking down, the fire had not burned. I made the decision at that point to not head into the fire area that afternoon but to camp at the bottom of the hill where I knew there would be a good source of water. I'd explore the ridges and Wright's Valley the next day. At this point I still could not truly appreciate how extensive the fire had been. I hoped I was seeing the bulk of the damage, but my fear was that I was seeing only the tip of the devil's pitchfork.

The Balm was just like it always is: serene and a good place to shelter up. It still had a nice flow of water trickling over the rocks in quite a few places, so I made camp and enjoyed the rest of the afternoon listening to the birds and watching the thunderheads evaporate. Tons of birds were active in this area. A pair of pileated woodpeckers kept up a constant hollow tree drum beat overhead while the jays and juncos cavorted about the canyon. High-octane ground squirrels chattered and frantically scampered about the forest raising quite a ruckus. (After my hike the next day I concluded that some of this concentrated bird and animal activity at the Balm oasis is a result of so very much of the wilderness being badly charred. The critters that survived have no place else to go.) After a short hike up to Lower Glade to see where the fire started on the ridge above me, I came down and hunkered in for the joys of the dark range at night.

I slept off and on the first night. Through the long dark hours owl calls reverberated up and down the canyon. Things shifting around in the darkness moved rocks on the riverbed and generally kept me thinking, in moonless conditions, how blind I really am. I longed to see what was really going on out there.

Morning brought clear skies and the promise of a warm day. I headed out early with hopes of making it to Shell Mountain. It would be a long day, but I was up for it. Within ten minutes of

hiking I knew I'd never make it to the top of the mountain. Everything is completely different now on Wright's Ridge. The forest that we had so loved, our precious old-growth pine, fir, and cedar groves are no more. The fire left *miles* of burned hillsides. From Lower Glade to the Hayne's Delight/Wright's "Rideg" fork the destruction is total. Very little is left alive. Over the ridge I went toward Hayne's Delight. It got worse as I headed north. Whole sections of that once fine forest are dead and blackened. Ugly sticks of barbecued trees point hopelessly skyward into a memory of the extensive canopy that existed here before June 21st.

In a few places the fire is still burning. There's not much chance of these leftovers catching too much on fire because the vast quantity of fuel has already been used. I tried rather feebly to put out the first flare-up I found, but since I had no shovel and no extra water, I soon gave up, took a few photos, and headed back toward the trail.

As one might imagine the trail situation is bleak. Ashes and fallen debris from snags and burned trees obliterate much of the way. Had I know the trail any less, I think I would have been quickly lost. But because of the time spent on this trail over the years, I had a good sense of which direction to head to get to Hayne's, so using my best sense of direction and carefully following the footpath impressions (where it still existed) I forged on to the crossing at the Middle Fork. It was a sobering hike, to say the least. In places the fire had followed the roots of stumps four or five feet into the earth, causing weird craters to exist in the forest floor. (Just one such firepit evidently took the life of a firefighter during this whole crazy fire event in another area when he fell into it and could not get out quickly enough.) Burns were seen eighty to one hundred feet up dead snags. Five foot diameter pines and cedars left standing still had their needles, but they were brown and dead now. These dead needles were gently drifting back to the earth in the morning breeze, carpeting the forest with a new layer of cover that will take generations to replenish to the original depth.

The Live Oak trees reacted immediately. They have, in some places, already sent out new sprouts of growth: the green in sharp contrast to the black. One of the most unusual features of the fire was the way the larger oaks burned. Their trunks turned ghost white in the aftermath. That, and the sparse new oak growth, provides the only other color differentiation in this monotone landscape.

The river, thankfully, is still there. How good it felt to swim amid green willow and alder in the pool below Hayne's Delight. From the south ridge I had had a shot of what's happening on Buck Ridge across the river. It did not look good. Hayne's Delight, and the meadows above it, all are entirely burned. It looked like the fire went directly up the hill toward Water Trough and then on toward Shell. Because there are no trees to block the view, I could see quite a ways up Buck Ridge. What I saw made me rethink making a long, dirty hike up to the summit, so I turned west and headed downriver toward Wright's Valley. When in doubt, follow the river.

In many places the fire had entered the river canyon from the south and walked right up the other side, taking out huge swaths of forest as it went. There were places where it seemed to have jumped over the river and there is still some riparian cover left. Happily I saw many trout still thriving in almost every pool and riffle along the way! But the feeling is somber once a glimpse of the hillsides interrupts the meditation of the mind on things wet and watery.

At the camp we made last year, between Wright's and Hayne's where the big rock has the old log cradled in its arms, I found the little altar that Autumn had left at the base of a tiny pine. It's toasted now, but the memories were still strong. That whole area is burned over, as are most of the nice camping benches along the way. Interestingly, as I emerged from the narrower part of the canyon and walked out onto the larger floodplain of upper Wright's Valley, isolated driftwood logs sitting dozens of yards — maybe over one hundred feet — from the fire, were completely burned. The fire must have been so hot at some point that these tinder dry logs, some of which had been there since the 1964 flood, spontaneously combusted. Their dark skeletons litter the gravel bed by the score. Of course, the river is dry here at this time of year, so the effect of these burned logs against the parched riverbed is quite apocalyptic.

Miraculously, our favorite campsite at Wright's Valley was mostly spared. The fire entered there, but for some reason didn't burn much. The big pine in the center of camp has a small burn on its base, but the trees and flat are in good shape. Above, and across the river, the story is much different. Aesthetics left with the passing firetrain.

I couldn't help thinking as I walked down the valley of the time when Kingsley Robson started the fire on the north hillside here. That was so intense, and even now twenty years later, I still shutter to think what would have happened if we hadn't shoved that devil back inside its box. But it was rather ironic to walk past that hillside and look at it now. The only good thing (beside the fact that this is a natural process and it had to happen sooner or later) is that we didn't cause it to be the way it is now.

The waterfall at Wright's Valley is as beautiful as ever. Nothing has changed down there. Still plenty of good water here. No sign of fire. A swim and a bite to eat, and then I'm on the long, steep hill out of the valley heading back to the Balm. Same situation as on the trail to Hayne's Delight. Total destruction and a messy trail to try to follow. Actually missed the turn to Upper Glade and ended a ways up Wright's Ridge because the landscape is dramatically altered and the trail just disappeared. Smoke coming from a hot spot across the canyon over toward Morrison Camp looked fairly substantial, but it was a long ways away and there wasn't anything I could do about it, so I just trudged through the dust and ashes and headed back to camp.

It was almost sundown over the ridge when I got back. Swam in the nice pool below the crossing where I'd set up my spot. There was a weather change in progress and I wrote in my journal, read a bit, cooked dinner, and crawled into my bag to watch the pressure gradient collide with the high pressure ridge above my head.

So, that's the report on the fires. The rest of my time, all day Wednesday, I read, wrote, hiked a ways up the Balm of Gilead Creek, sheltered up for the rain I knew was heading in, and had plenty of time to contemplate the cycle of nature and plan new adventures. Rain came right on schedule about 4 in the morning. It lightened up enough for me to break camp and be back at the car by 9. Drove home in a nice soothing rain. Deer season had brought out numerous hunters who were bravely road hunting the Forest Service roads in their humungous four wheel drive vehicles. They appeared to be looking for a chance to test themselves and their manly instincts, and/or to prove that buck fever is for whuses. Dressed in sneaky camouflage so deer couldn't see them behind the wheel, they no doubt were going to be pulling for their friend Sarah in the VP debate that night.

My favorite literary moment of the trip: reading this quote in *The Teachings*. “All paths are the same: they lead nowhere. They are paths going through the bush, or into the bush.” (p.76)

Actually, I can't wait to get outta da Bush.

Best night sound: Something like a harsh raspy bark. Owl? Fox? Justine thinks Sasquatch. Maybe so. I'd never heard anything like it.

Favorite thing heard or seen: Spotted Owl hooting in a tree above my camp all night.

Will I go back? Of course.

Will it be different? Yes.

Should we be sad? Maybe a little bit. But things change (obviously) so what's the big deal. The fire was a major event and it happened in our lifetime so maybe we should be happy we got to witness it and the inevitable rejuvenation that is to follow. On the other hand, it's hard to think that we'll never see those magnificent forests at top form in our lifetime. But there is still much to explore. Many questions to ask and seek answers for. Like: is the old-growth forest along the North Fork trail gone? How about Willow Basin and Frying Pan? Last Camp? Will the Forest Service restore the trails? Did anyone take a picture of the “Buck Ridge” trail sign? I took one of what left of it = just the scorched bolts. Will such a fire event ever happen again? When?

All in all, I'm very happy I got away for a few days and went up there. As devastated as it is, there is still a sense of freedom, mystery, and solitude that I haven't found anywhere else in my travels. (I saw no one in the wilderness, and no one had signed in for almost four months, but of course it's been closed from June 21st to September 15th). The place is so a part of me, and I just want to say once more Thank You to you, Robert, for taking me there, teaching me so well, and for being such a great friend all these years. The wilderness experience is a big part of what got me through 35 years in the front of the classroom. I hope that sometime, someday we might hike the hills again together.

I truly hope that we don't start thinking we cannot go back there and that all the wonderful times are over. I know there are places left to explore that are still as beautiful and as special as ever. Sure, it's a different place in many ways, *but it's still there!* And I know we will all one day meet there again, to sweat, to sing, and to make merry. Because that's what we are supposed to do. After all, it is the place we have been given. I think you will all agree it is our sacred spot, burned or unburned. And as Justine said to me on the phone yesterday, “If we go someplace else, then *we'd* be the Outlanders.”

Now that's a scary thought.

Happy trails. My best and love to all.

B

PS: I'll post my photos at a site where you can see them soon. I'll send you the link later.

