



NATIONAL PARK SERVICE  
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR  
MOUNT WHITNEY ELEVATION 14,935 RH FT.  
JOHN MUIR TRAIL — HIGH SIERRA TRAIL  
SEPTEMBER 5, 1930  
THIS TABLET MARKS THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE HIGHEST TRAIL  
IN THE UNITED STATES. BEGUN IN 1928, IT WAS COMPLETED IN 1930  
UNDER THE DIRECTION OF THE NATIONAL PARK SERVICE WORKING WITH  
THE UNITED STATES FOREST SERVICE.

**Mount Whitney**  
**via Cottonwood**  
**Program Notes**



# Mount Whitney via Cottonwood

At 14,505 feet Mount Whitney is the high point of the lower forty-eight states and the goal of many. The Trail Route is the standard trip but obtaining a permit can be problematic and you need to get an application in by March. The Mountaineers Route requires the ability to travel off trail as well as rope work and belayed climbing. Our route from the Cottonwood Pass Trailhead crosses over the Sierra Crest at the Cottonwood Pass. From the Pass we drop westwards to the Kern River and then loop to Guitar Lake below the western slopes of the peak. We like this route for a number of reasons:

- It is beautiful with high alpine lakes and expansive views
- There are far fewer people than on the regular Whitney Trail where there can be hundreds of people.
- Rather than a rush to the summit this route offers a fine hike in its own right and the summit as a bonus
- We have adapted our trip now to include an educational component that gives you a greater understanding of the beauty and natural wonders of the Sierra Nevada. Our knowledgeable and skilled guides will discuss a wide range of topics from geology and glacial landforms to the history of the first ascensionists of the peaks.
- To make it a truly relaxing trip we use the services of Cottonwood Pack Station to carry equipment while we hike with a day pack. This also enables us to take along a few extra luxuries for a complete vacation. Our itinerary allows for acclimatization time and makes the last day as short as we can. Yes, this does take longer and cost more - but it makes the trip a lot easier and with a far greater chance of getting to the top we think it is worth it.

## **Itinerary**

### *Day 1*

We meet for a trip orientation at 5.00 p.m. at the Cottonwood Campground, set up tents and have dinner before settling in for the night.

### *Day 2*

We get our equipment sorted and to the packers before hiking from the Cottonwood Pack station up and over Cottonwood Pass and descend a little over about a half mile to Chicken Springs Lake, our first night's camp. This day is about 4 miles long with about 1400 feet of elevation gain and makes for a great break-in day further improving your acclimatization to the elevation. There will be plenty of time in camp to relax and enjoy the surroundings.

### *Day 3*

We leave camp and, after a short initial climb, much of the day is relatively flat or downhill. We contour above Big Whitney Meadow with views towards the Kaweah's. After entering Sequoia Kings National Park, we continue to the lower crossing of Rock Creek. This is about a 10 mile day.

### *Day 4*

Our day starts with a climb over Guyot Pass and into the wide open spaces of Guyot Flat. Staying near treeline, we climb and contour around into Crabtree Meadows. We now turn towards Mt. Whitney and steadily climb to camp overlooking Guitar Lake (11,460'). The pack stock leave us here and return to Crabtree Meadows to overnight the mules.

### *Day 5*

We allow all day for the ascent to the summit and the return to a lower camp. There are numerous switchbacks up to Trail Crest (13,550'), where we meet others coming up the east side trail. The summit comes into view but the thin air limits our ability to move speedily. With slow but steadily progress, before long we will be on top and enjoying the views in all directions. After summit photos and maybe even relaxing on top, we retrace our steps down the mountain. We camp closer to Crabtree Meadows, where again we have views of Whitney.

### *Day 6*

We retrace our steps back to Rock Creek, then follow a different trail along the creek to Rock Creek Lake. Our last camp is perched above the lake with views of Mt. Langley.

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## Day 7

This is another full day so be prepared for an early start. We will hike back towards Chicken Spring Lake and eventually the pack station. We plan for a mid-afternoon return to the trailhead.

### Meeting place and time

We meet at the Cottonwood Campground at 5:00 p.m. the day before we start hiking. We'll do introductions, a pack check, a group orientation, set up tents and have dinner. The Campground is some 45 minutes from Lone Pine so you need to have checked and double-checked your gear since there will be no opportunity for "last minute" shopping for forgotten items. See our driving directions below.

### Lone Pine Accommodation and Showers

The Whitney Portal Hostel and Hotel. This is a great place to stay in Lone Pine and prices are reasonable. They also offer showers so if you want to clean up before heading home stop by and grab one for a few dollars. Contact them at 760-876-0030 and look on line at [www.mountwhitneyportal.com](http://www.mountwhitneyportal.com)

### Dates and Prices

Check the latest brochure, call us or go to our web site for dates and rates. Should minimum participant numbers not be reached you will be given the option of paying our private rate, rescheduling, or canceling. Price includes guiding, permits, all necessary group gear, tents, packstock and packers, kitchen gear and breakfast, lunch and dinner daily (You bring hot/cold drinks and snack items). Scheduled dates include USFS trail fees. Private programs do not.

### Ratios

We keep the ratio of one guide to five participants to ensure speed and efficiency while climbing. We need to be off the peak early enough to avoid encounters with afternoon thunderstorms.

### Prerequisites

Good hiking shape is the main prerequisite. Climbing skills are not needed, but you should be able to hike, with a day pack, up to thirteen miles a day with 3000 feet or more in elevation gain. While we use packstock to carry the loads, the distances to be covered each day are not insignificant - do not think of this as a much easier option to the regular Whitney Trail route. You still have long hiking days, so come prepared and in good condition.

### Camping Directions

There are a number of roads and two trailheads here, making our meeting place a little confusing. So here is where to go. In Lone Pine, at the intersection of US Highway 395 and Whitney Portal Road, take Whitney Portal Road west and go 3.2 miles to the Tuttle Creek campground sign. Turn left at the sign onto Horseshoe Meadow Road and go 20 miles up the steep road with many hairpin bends to the New Army Pass sign. Turn right after sign and go 0.25 miles to a sign for the campground on the right and the Cottonwood Lakes trailhead. Park here and walk back to the campground and dinner.

### Special Notes

The above itinerary is our ideal one. However since we are working with packstock things can change. The packers are limited by the park service for grazing and this changes over the season so our campsites might well have to adapt to stock forage. Weather can also change things. Be understanding and be prepared to change if plans need to adapt.

For maps use the Mt. Whitney, Mt. Langley and Cirque Peak 7.5 minute maps. The Tom Harrison Mt. Whitney High Country Map covers most of the route and the Whitney Zone one gives detail of the peak area. Ninety percent of our unsuccessful attempts fail due to problems with altitude (And the balance due to weather). This trip is paced to allow plenty of acclimatization time but if you know your body and require more time then take it. You could stay in Mammoth or camp out at the roadhead an additional night if required.

Bears are a problem at the Cottonwood Trailhead. Do not leave food or scented items (deodorant, soap etc.) in your vehicle. There is limited storage so do not bring extra items with you to the trailhead. Clean up all trash prior to your trip. Failure to take precautions can cause the vehicle to be ripped apart by a bear and the added insult of a fine from the Forest Service.



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## **Distances and Elevations**

We have used a GPS to map our route as accurately as we can so you know what you are getting into.

Day 2 to Chicken Spring Lake 5.3 miles Elevation Gain 1405 feet. Estimated hiking time; 3 hours 35 minutes

Day 3 to Rock Creek Crossing 10.5 miles Elevation Gain 620 feet. Estimated hiking time; 6 hours 43 minutes

Day 4 to Guitar Lake 10.3 miles Elevation Gain 2985 feet. Estimated hiking time; 7 hours 10 minutes

Day 5 Mount Whitney then back to Crabtree Meadows 14.4 miles Elevation Gain 3405 feet. Estimated hiking time; 12 hours 5 minutes

Day 6 to Rock Creek Lake 11.3 miles Elevation Gain 2020. Estimated hiking time; 7 hours 10 minutes

Day 7 back to pack station 11.4 miles Elevation Gain 1435. Estimated hiking time; 7 hours

**Total 63.2 miles Total Elevation Gain 11,870**

# Equipment List for Mt. Whitney via Cottonwood

The following list is a guideline to assist you in packing for your adventure! Please contact us with any questions regarding gear. Also, consider the time of year and expected weather when choosing sleeping bags and layering systems. While this is a pack supported trip you will be carrying a daypack with essentials such as food, water, and required clothing. The mules will be carrying equipment that is not required to be in your day pack: extra clothes, camp shoes, sleeping bag, and any personal equipment approved on the list below. Personal gear in the duffel that the mules will carry is NOT TO EXCEED 20LBS. Personal gear duffels will be provided by Sierra Mountain Center.

## Essentials

- ❑ Footwear. You will be hiking roughly 5-14 miles per day for 6 days. Please bring sturdy hiking boots that you have broken in, or trail shoes that you have worn heavy packs with. The main difference between trail runners and boots is foot support vs. blisters. If your feet blister notoriously please consider wearing a trail runner. If you have weak ankles or need additional foot support please wear boots. Again, your feet are your transportation and can make the difference between surviving this trip and thriving.
- ❑ Camp Shoes for around camp. Sanuk sandals, Crocs, or light tennis shoes are all appropriate. The camp shoes will make hanging out in camp more comfortable, and lessen the impact we leave on the sites. Open toed flip flops are not acceptable.
- ❑ A day pack. We recommend a 25 to 40L pack. You will be required to carry water, a headlamp, additional layers, snacks, and other personal items you want throughout the day. It is better to have more room than not enough. No "bookbag" style backpacks please.
- ❑ Most people will be warm enough in a 25 degree Fahrenheit bag. We recommend down bags as they are lighter (around 3 lbs). If you sleep cold please consider getting a sleeping bag liner (usually silk) as they add significant warm with little bulk or weight.
- ❑ Sleeping pad. We recommend a full length Thermarest with an additional foam pad. If bringing an inflatable pad also bring a repair kit to fix leaks.

## Clothing

- Consider layering when packing, and how you layers fit on top of one another. Check weather a day before the trip and ensure you are prepared for the conditions; make additions or changes accordingly.

- ❑ 3 pairs of socks. Blister prevention is crucial so the clean third pair for camp is excellent preventative care. Having 2 pairs to alternate hiking in also gives the opportunity to rinse and dry socks. A mid-weight, non-cotton sock is ideal, such as a Smartwool or Darn Tough hiking specific sock. Please do not bring low-cut ankle socks as they can lead to rubbing on the heel.
- ❑ 1 mid-weight long-sleeve top. Capilene, Merino or other synthetic.
- ❑ 1 pair of long-johns or tights. Capilene, Merino or other synthetic.
- ❑ 1 warm pants, tights or expedition weight Capilene.
- ❑ 1 warm shirt. Synchilla or 200 weight works well.
- ❑ 1 warm jacket. A down jacket is preferred with around 800 fill.
- ❑ Waterproof Jacket and Pants - Lightweight and non-bulky. Side zips on the pants should be long enough to slide on over boots. Jacket must have a hood.
- ❑ 1 pair of hiking pants. Convertible pants that can convert to shorts can also be nice to have on the trail.
- ❑ 1 pair of shorts. Nice for swimming.
- ❑ 1 long-sleeve sun shirt. We recommend a "hoody" style though anything that covers your arms and is synthetic is great.
- ❑ 2 short-sleeve T-shirts. Synthetic, not cotton, so it can dry quickly and wick sweat from your body on sweaty, but windy, days.
- ❑ 1 lightweight pair of polypropylene or similar gloves.
- ❑ 1 warm hat/beanie. Synthetics are less itchy than wool.
- ❑ Sunhat. Better to cover up than just rely upon sunscreen.

## Etc.

- ❑ Sun glasses. Good quality. If using prescription lenses consider a backup pair.
- ❑ Water carrying system with a capacity of 2-3 liters. A combination of a bottle and hydration system works well. We recommend a 2 liter bladder for daily trail use and an additional Klean Kanteen insulated bottle for drink flavoring, coffee, etc. This can be your thermos and additional water bottle.
- ❑ Headlamp. With a spare set of batteries.
- ❑ Eating and drinking equipment. An insulated backpacking mug, with a lid.

Small bowl or plate. Fork and spoon.

- ❑ Swiss army style knife. No giant "multi-tools" tools!
- ❑ Travel size toothbrush and toothpaste along with baby wipes and floss is sufficient. Supplement with what you need, but try and use less cosmetics while camping as bugs and bears are attracted to scents. Keep it minimal.
- ❑ Hand sanitizer- a personal travel size bottle.
- ❑ Toilet paper- Please bring your own TP supply for the week; we will provide some each day, but bring your own supply just in case. Bathrooms will alternate between pit toilets, established pit toilets, or carry out bags in the Whitney Zone on Days 3, 4 & 5. Guides will inform you about the different practices.
- ❑ Sunscreen and lip screen. SPF 30+. A 1oz. bottle will be enough. Make sure the lip stuff actually contains a sunscreen.
- ❑ Basic first aid supplies such as ibuprofen, moleskin, and tape. Your guides will have extensive first aid kits so please don't go overboard with your personal kits. If you tend to take NSAID's regularly please bring your own, or if your feet require constant blister attention please bring tape and moleskin.
- ❑ Camera, a spare memory card and battery.
- ❑ Ear plugs are great to have in a noisy tent.
- ❑ Bug repellent. Only needed in the early season.
- ❑ Trekking poles. These are not essential, but can be handy on the trail. It is your choice, but they do save wear on the knees.
- ❑ Reading material, journal or Kindle. Do not bring "War & Peace"
- ❑ Trash bag. Handy for keeping gear in outside the tent should it rain.

## Food

- ❑ We provide breakfast, lunch and dinner when on the trail. (No breakfast on Day 1 or Dinner on Day 6). Please bring snacks for the trail such as trail mix, Clif bars (or similar), chocolate, gummy bears, goldfish, etc. These should fit in a gallon Ziplock bag (or smaller); please label with your name. These must be stored in the group bear-proof panniers overnight.

## Shared Equipment Provided by SMC

- ❑ Duffel bag. Use this for packing gear onto the mules. We use our own since they fit the saddlebags well.
- ❑ We provide tents and may pair people up as necessary. If you have your own, please contact us before the trip. To reduce weight and campsite impact we pair people up where possible.
- ❑ Stoves, kitchen and cookware.
- ❑ Water purification. The group will have access to a variety of different ways to treat water. Chemical treatment, such as Aquamira or Iodine, will be carried by the guide. Gravity filtration bags will be distributed amongst the group for use in camp. If you have "water-stress" then you could bring a sterilization/UV pen, rather than carrying excessive amounts of water in your pack.
- ❑ Bear Canisters. The mules carry panniers that are bear proof. These carry all of our food and hold our personal snacks overnight.

## You specifically don't need

- ⊗ Cell phones. If you use your phone as a camera keep it on airplane mode.
- ⊗ Big first aid kits (we have a comprehensive one).
- ⊗ Deodorant or any toiletries beyond those listed above.
- ⊗ Items that are not on this list.