California's Fourteeners

Hikes to Climbs

Sean O'Rourke

Cover photograph: North Palisade from the south.
Frontispiece: Polemonium Peak's east ridge.

ISBN 978-0-98557-841-1

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1 Introduction

There are around 70 peaks above 14,000 feet in the continental United States. The majority are found in the Rockies of western Colorado, where high valleys, gentle terrain, and established routes make many of the peaks accessible to people with little outdoor experience. A smooth progression of difficulty leads from the easiest peaks to the hardest. The easy access, abundance of peaks, and gentle learning curve have made climbing these "fourteeners" Colorado's unofficial state sport, and it is rare to have one to yourself on a summer weekend.

Washington is home to one fourteener, Mount Rainier, which rises 10,000 feet or more from its base on all sides, covered entirely in glaciers. Though far more challenging than most Colorado peaks, Rainier is similarly popular, with several companies offering paid guiding to the large population of nearby Seattle. However, Rainier stands alone in Washington, not lying on an inviting learning curve. The state has many shorter peaks, but only a handful of them are similar glaciated volcanoes. Also, most climbs start low in densely-wooded valleys and require significant cross-country travel, making them inaccessible to novices.

The remaining fifteen fourteeners are in California, including the highest, Mount Whitney. Like Whitney, most are found in the high Sierra between Lone Pine and Bishop. The remaining two are White Mountain Peak, the high-point of a dry range across the Owens Valley from the Sierra, and Mount Shasta, a Pacific Rim volcano near the Oregon border.

Thanks to a pack trail built by Gustave Marsh in 1904, thousands of people climb Whitney each year. Most stop there: "fourteenering" has not become the sport in California that it is in Colorado. Partly, this is because there are fewer "easy" peaks to serve as an introduction for novices, and the hardest few are somewhat technical even by their easiest routes. However, there is a reasonable learning curve for California's fourteeners, and climbing them is an excellent introduction to mountaineering in the Sierra and elsewhere.

1.1 Who should read this

This book is intended as a guide to California's fourteeners for someone comfortable on moderate, established routes like Whitney's trail and the easier Colorado fourteeners. The ideal reader should be reasonably fit and eager to explore, but may have less experience and confidence route-finding off trail and on steeper terrain. This book presents the most common routes on California's fourteeners, and how to climb them in order of progressive difficulty, from hikes on well-maintained trails to steep, exposed scrambling. As

California's 14,000-foot peaks provide only a small taste of the Sierra, the guide includes a list of some of the best routes on peaks below 14,000 feet (see "Further scrambling", p. 86).

Rather than briefly describing all known routes, it focuses on the standard route and a few others for each peak, describing each in some detail. In addition to low-resolution maps of each peak's surroundings, it provides full-sized 1:24,000-scale USGS topographic maps and labeled photos of key sections. The routes range from walks along trails, to boulder-hopping, to moderate technical climbing. Unlike most guidebooks, which compile a large number of route descriptions from numerous contributors, all routes are described from first-hand experience by the author, hopefully providing greater consistency.

This book is *not* a general guide to hiking, camping, or trail-running; many such books exist, covering each subject in much more detail than could be provided here. And it is *definitely not* a guide to technical climbing technique or gear. Roped climbing is best learned from an experienced friend or professional instructor. Even those who want to improve their unroped scrambling skills will benefit from some basic climbing instruction and practice at a local climbing area or gym. Also, while the book lists first ascent parties and offers a few historical anecdotes, it does not delve deeply into the fascinating history of exploration and mountaineering in the Sierra Nevada (see "Other resources", p. 90).

1.2 Route difficulty

Each route is given a Yosemite Decimal System (YDS) "class," which roughly reflects the difficulty of its most challenging move. These classes can be described as follows (with the colors used to draw them on maps):

Class 1: A trail or easy cross-country travel.

Class 2: Cross-country travel requiring intermittent use of hands for balance, such as crossing a talus field.

Class 3: Easy scrambling requiring the use of hands for upward motion.

Class 4: More difficult scrambling, requiring some experience with climbing technique. Where class 3 is usually downclimbed facing outward, class 4 is often either downclimbed facing inward or rappeled.

Class 5: Technical climbing, where a rope is often used for both ascent and descent. This class is divided into subclasses 5.0 through (currently) 5.15. A novice can generally climb rock up to 5.4–5.6 on a toprope, while an average person with some practice can climb 5.8–5.9. Difficulties 5.10 and above are the domain of serious climbers, with 5.12 and above reserved for climbing's élite.

The system is inconsistent and subjective, with ratings chosen by the first few people to climb a route. This book lists the historic or published ratings, not the author's personal

ratings. Older ratings are generally lower than newer ones: a route rated class 4 in the 1930s might be rated 5.0–5.4 today. Also, California ratings are usually one-half to one class lower than Colorado ones: a class 3 route in California would usually be rated hard class 3 or class 4 in Colorado.

The ratings mostly reflect the climbing difficulty of the hardest move, not perceived exposure, rock quality, length, or average difficulty, all of which can substantially affect the overall challenge of the route. Walking across the room, walking across town, and walking along the edge of your roof are all class 1, but feel substantially different. Where relevant, I have qualified the YDS ratings to reflect this variation, e.g. "sustained class 3,", "exposed class 4," or "loose class 3."

Comfort with exposure – "standing near cliffs" – varies greatly from person to person. Most people start out uneasy and become more comfortable with practice, while a few find it exhilarating, and others never accept it. Fear of exposure is partly rational – if you fall, you will die – and partly irrational – you almost certainly won't fall. Understanding how this balance plays out in your and your partners' minds will avoid many unpleasant situations.

Snow and ice ratings

On routes likely to involve snow or ice in the summer, I have included additional ratings. There is no formal, numbered rating system for snow, and most people are bad at estimating slope angles. I describe routes using the following system:

Easy snow: Low-angle snow that can be traversed by normal, flat-footed walking. Unless it is extremely hard, an ice axe and crampons are unnecessary.

(Moderate) snow: Mid-angle snow, often climbed by side-stepping.

Steep snow: High-angle snow, usually climbed by kicking with crampon front-points or the toes of one's boots.

On moderate and steep snow routes, you should almost always bring crampons and an ice axe, since if the snow is hard, they will be impassable or dangerous without them.

Ice has two rating systems: "AI*n*" for alpine ice and "WI*n*" for waterfall ice, where *n* ranges from 1 to 6 (or higher for WI). Roughly, *x*I1 and *x*I2 correspond to class 3 and 4 rock, while higher grades correspond to class 5. All ice routes require crampons. *x*I1-2 normally require only a standard mountaineering axe, while *x*I3 and higher usually require two specialized ice-climbing tools.

1.3 Route points

Rather than listing routes' mileage and vertical gain, this book uses a system of "route points." One route point is defined as one minute of time spent by the author (including rest stops), in good conditions, carrying a daypack. This reflects a mixture of jogging,

hiking, boulder-hopping, and more- or less-technical scrambling, done at a moderately intense but safe pace. Each route description includes the total route points, either car-to-car or one-way for the indicated section of the route, as well as route points broken down by type of terrain. When not otherwise specified, route points are given car-to-summit. For routes with multiple possible approaches, points are given for either the preferred approach or the "core" of the route. For example, Middle Palisade's classic northeast face (p. 43) is listed as "**250** = 110 + 105 + 35, car to summit." This means that the route from the Glacier Lodge trailhead to the summit is 250 route points, of which 110 are class 1, 105 are class 2, and 35 are class 3.

To estimate how much time it will take you to complete a new route, first determine your rate of route points per hour on similar terrain, then divide the new route's points by your rate. For example, if you completed a 60-point class 3 route in 90 minutes, your route rate for that terrain is $\frac{2}{3}$, and you can expect to complete a 100-point class 3 route in about $100 \times \frac{3}{2} = 150$ minutes. For routes with only the upward route points given, you can compute downward rates in a similar manner to estimate the time required.

1.4 Safety and preparedness

While the Sierra are an accessible and gentle range in the summer, they are still a mountain wilderness, and mountaineering is inherently dangerous. Be prepared for changing weather, unanticipated conditions, and unforeseen delays. On a typical dayhike, you should plan to return to your car if at all possible, and therefore carry the following for safety:

- A headlamp in case you are benighted.
- A poncho (or trash bag) in case it rains.
- Cloth tape in case you are injured.

Since cell phones are unreliable in the Sierra and Whites, you should carry a personal locator beacon or satellite phone if you wish to reliably contact the outside world. You should not count on a Search and Rescue, and should absolutely not call for one unless you are clearly in a life-or-death situation.

In addition to the above essentials, you should usually carry the following:

- Warm and sun hats
- Thermal shirt
- Wind shell
- Food and water
- Sunscreen (and bug spray before August)

Leave No Trace

As the world's population and the popularity of mountaineering increase, it becomes more important to minimize one's impact on the mountains, so that future climbers can enjoy

them in a relatively unspoiled state. Gone are the days when early pioneers like Joseph Le Conte could trundle rocks and build 20-foot bonfires at night.

First, leave no marks. Where possible, follow existing trails, both official and unofficial. When traveling cross-country, walk abreast rather than in a line where possible to avoid creating new trails. When camping, use existing campsites and fire rings where available, and camp on durable surfaces like rock or bare dirt. When possible, camp at least 200' from lakes and streams.

Second, keep the Sierra water pure for others. Do not rinse dishes directly in streams or lakes. Bury human waste at least 6" deep, and at least 200' from water. In areas without soil, spread it on rocks where others are unlikely to climb, so the sun will quickly dry and sterilize it. In heavily-impacted areas such as Mount Whitney and Mount Shasta, pack out human waste in a "wag bag."

Finally, do not mark climbing routes with cairns or rappel slings; this robs others of a chance for adventure. No rappels are necessary when climbing California's fourteeners. In a party with less-experienced climbers who wish to rappel, the most experienced member should go last, removing any slings and downclimbing. Please destroy any cairns you find, and pack out any slings like you would other trash. As Daniel Arnold writes in *Early Days in the Range of Light* of his climb of North Palisade's non-obvious Le Conte route,

> It was ugly and discouraging, like finding garbage in a meadow. Uncomfortable, too — climbers had done this; I couldn't even blame it on tourists who don't know any better. The cairns here had just one purpose, to save a mountaineer from the heavy burden of thinking. Now instead of studying the mountain and evaluating the rock and solving the puzzle built into the peak by the work of a million years, one connects the dots, pulls on the rope, rappels off the top, following a track of trash and stones, the line lifted off the guidebook page and laid down on the mountain. I knocked all the cairns down and scattered their pieces. I cut the rope out of the chimney and the webbing off the top. The mountain purred.

Weather

Summer weather in the Sierra is remarkably stable, without the regular thunderstorm cycles that plague the Rockies. When storms occur, they are typically violent but short. Since you can usually count on good weather from dawn to dusk, painful pre-dawn starts are less necessary than elsewhere. However, the weather can still change quickly, and even a little rain or snow will make rock much more difficult to climb. Try not to climb up something you can't descend when wet if the weather looks threatening.

Your best option in a thunderstorm is to seek lower, preferably forested, ground. If you are unable to do so, find a low spot, remove all metal objects, and crouch on your pack to insulate yourself. Hiding under a rock does *not* protect you from lightning.

Water

The Sierra are littered with lakes, tarns, and streams, so one is rarely far from water except in the foothills or high on a peak. It is usually unnecessary to carry more than 1–2 quarts of water at a time, refilling as necessary. While some people choose to treat water from alpine lakes and streams, most Sierra water is safe to drink untreated. At high altitude, the strong ultraviolet light quickly kills water-borne pathogens (this is how a Steri-Pen works), so streams and lakes above tree-line are sterile. With no cattle in the High Sierra, humans and beavers are the main sources of contamination, so to be safe, drink upstream from beaver ponds and popular camping areas.

Bears!

The Sierra are home to black bears from near the valley floor to near treeline, and for the entire length of the range. Unlike grizzly bears, they do not pose a significant threat to humans, so bear spray is unnecessary. If you encounter a bear, stand up straight and yell at it while slowly backing away, and it will usually either ignore you or run off.

However, Sierra bears are unusually habituated to humans, and skilled at taking their food. Unattended food should be protected in a bear-resistant container or hung out of bears' reach. Since effective hanging is difficult – mother bears have been known to send their cubs out on small branches to retrieve hung food – a container is the best choice unless you know what you are doing.

Hard-sided bear canisters, not bear-resistant kevlar bags, are required when camping in Sequoia and Kings Canyon, and recommended elsewhere in the Sierra. Approved canisters are available for rent at the permit-issuing visitor centers. There are permanent metal food storage lockers at many popular backcountry camping spots, though none are relevant to the fourteeners.

Unlike anywhere else, bears in the Sierra have learned to break into cars to reach anything that smells or looks like potential food (including cooler-shaped items). At many trailheads, one must store all such items in nearby food lockers. The trailheads are patrolled sporadically by rangers, and vehicles containing visible food, or those with broken windows, may be ticketed.

1.5 Climbing season

In an average year the Sierra Nevada accumulate a heavy snowpack over the winter, which begins rapidly melting in May. Many routes can be climbed without avalanche danger in May and early June, and the consolidated snow in couloirs often covers unpleasant talus and scree. However, an ice axe and crampons are usually necessary. By mid-July most rock routes are snow-free, but meadows can be marshy, and the mosquitoes are at their worst. The Sierra are in their best condition in August and September, between the mosquitoes' departure and the first winter snows. Early October can offer fine climbing, but the days are shorter and the weather less predictable. The first permanent snow usually arrives

in mid- to late-October, making travel unpleasant until enough accumulates for skis or snowshoes.

Unless otherwise noted, routes in this book are best climbed in the dry season from mid-July through mid-October. With global warming and winter droughts, the condition of snow and ice routes is becoming less predictable. Classic north-facing couloirs like the U- and V-notches, which were once snow or névé in the early summer and ice in September, may melt down to bare, dangerous dirt and loose rock. In dry years, these routes may only be climbable in early summer, after the winter snow has consolidated but before it has all melted. Either inquire locally about conditions before attempting these routes, or come prepared to climb an alternative.

1.6 Coming from Colorado

Climbing fourteeners is virtually Colorado's state sport, with residents of the Front Range cities working through the list, and many completing it. The sport is popular enough that most standard routes are well-maintained trails, and it is rare to have a summit to oneself on a summer weekend. Most of the peaks require less than 5,000 feet of elevation gain and no technical climbing, making them comfortable day-hikes for anyone with basic fitness.

Though California has more people and fewer fourteeners, only the highest one, Mount Whitney, sees Colorado levels of traffic. One reason may be that many of California's fourteeners require more elevation gain, since most trailheads are below 10,000 feet. Also, many require cross-country travel and scrambling, and a few require moderate technical climbing by even their easiest routes. While a fit person comfortable on rock can summit them all as dayhikes, several of the "days" require hours of hiking before dawn or into the night, and a few require exposed, low-5th-class climbing.

The peaks roughly fall into five tiers of difficulty by their easiest routes:

1. Langley (p. 9), Whitney (p. 18), and White (p. 67) all have trails to their summits, making them similar to Colorado walk-ups like Mount Princeton or Mount of the Holy Cross.

2. Shasta (p. 69), with significant snow travel year-round, is similar to Snowmass with a shorter approach. Split (p. 37) and Sill (p. 48) are long with significant boulder-hopping, similar to Kit Carson. Muir (p. 16) has a small amount of class 3 climbing near its summit, like Wetterhorn with a longer approach.

3. Russell (p. 23) has a fair amount of moderate but extremely exposed class 3; the climbing is about as difficult as Capitol's standard ridge route, but with Little Bear's exposure.

4. Williamson (p. 28) and Tyndall (p. 32) both require nearly 10,000 feet of elevation gain and some moderate third class scrambling. Climbing either is similar to climbing Blanca from the passenger car "trailhead" in the San Luis Valley. Middle

Palisade (p. 42) requires around 6,000 feet of elevation gain, but with much more third class, similar to the Keyhole on Longs, or North Maroon's north face with a longer approach.

5. Thunderbolt (p. 59), Starlight (p. 54), North Palisade (p. 52), and Polemonium (p. 53) all require 6,000 feet or more of elevation gain and exposed fourth or low-fifth-class climbing. They have no equivalent among Colorado fourteeners, but are somewhat similar to Jagged Mountain in the San Juans, with tricky route-finding and mixed class 3-5 climbing.

Someone who has completed the Colorado fourteeners should have no trouble with the first four tiers, except for perhaps having to camp out for Williamson and Tyndall. However, there is a sharp increase in difficulty between the fourth and fifth tiers. Many people comfortable scrambling the harder Colorado fourteeners will want to rope up for some sections on these peaks; most should first gauge their comfort on one of the Palisades' fourth class routes, like the traverse from Disappointment to Middle Palisade (p. 45) or the standard route on its neighbor Norman Clyde (p. 88).

2 Mount Langley

At a glance	
Elevation and Rank	14,025' (#11)
Prominence and Isolation	1,197' and 4.81 mi. from Mount Whitney
Easiest route	Southwest slope (class 1)
Coordinates	36.5235°, -118.2395°
USGS Quad	Mount Langley (p. 13)
Nearest town	Lone Pine

Mount Langley is California's southernmost fourteener, marking the southern end of the High Sierra. With a high trailhead and a maintained trail much of the way to its summit, it is also one of the easiest. Like its neighbor Mount Whitney, Langley sits on the eastern edge of the Sierra fault-block. As the underlying granite layer tilted upward, its eastern edge formed the sheer east sides of both peaks, while its upper surface formed their gentler western slopes. Thus while Langley appears steep and intimidating from the Owens Valley to its east, its south and west sides are moderate sand and talus.

Thanks to these gentle slopes, Langley was the first Sierra fourteener with a recorded ascent, by William Bellows in 1864, and Native Americans likely preceded him. Since

then, more challenging routes have been developed on the north and east sides. However, by its original route, Langley remains a popular second fourteener (after Whitney).

2.1 Southwest slope

Route points	**205**, car to summit
Difficulty	class 1
Trailhead	Cottonwood lakes (p. 80)
Verdict	A moderate, mostly on-trail hike.
First ascent	William Bellows, 1864

This is the standard route up Langley, a hike along the maintained Cottonwood Lakes trail, up Old Army Pass to the saddle south of the peak, then north along a use trail up sand and scree to the broad summit. The route takes advantage of the 10,000-foot Cottonwood Lakes trailhead, one of the highest in the range (p. 80). It can be done either as a dayhike, or as a 2–3 day overnight, with abundant camping near the Cottonwood Lakes.

From the trailhead, follow the trail as it winds northwest along Cottonwood Creek. At the junction just past Golden Trout Camp, take the right fork as it climbs away from the creek, then left toward the Cottonwood Lakes and their maze of official and unofficial trails. As you approach the lakes, Old Army Pass comes into view as the obvious saddle at the back of a cirque to the west.

Continue northwest, passing between the two northwestern-most Cottonwood Lakes (numbers 4 and 5), to the abandoned Old Army Pass trail, which climbs toward the south side of the cirque, then traverses back north to the pass.[1] Though the trail is still easy to follow, the high cirque can hold snow well into the summer. While a boot-pack usually forms, an ice axe and possibly crampons may be necessary when snow is present, as a slide could be fatal. An early-season shortcut climbs directly up the snow-tongue just north (right) of the pass.

From the pass, a well-defined use trail leads generally north along the sandy plain to the summit, deviating west around a final cliff band. Remember this deviation for the return, as the trail disappears on the broad, rocky summit plateau. The gentle slope ends abruptly to the north, with sheer cliffs rising 2,000 feet from Tuttle Creek, and a long, serrated ridge leading north to Mount Whitney. To return, retrace your steps.

[1] Although many parties now climb Langley via New Army Pass, this route is both longer and less scenic, making Old Army Pass preferable most of the time.

2.2 Tuttle Creek

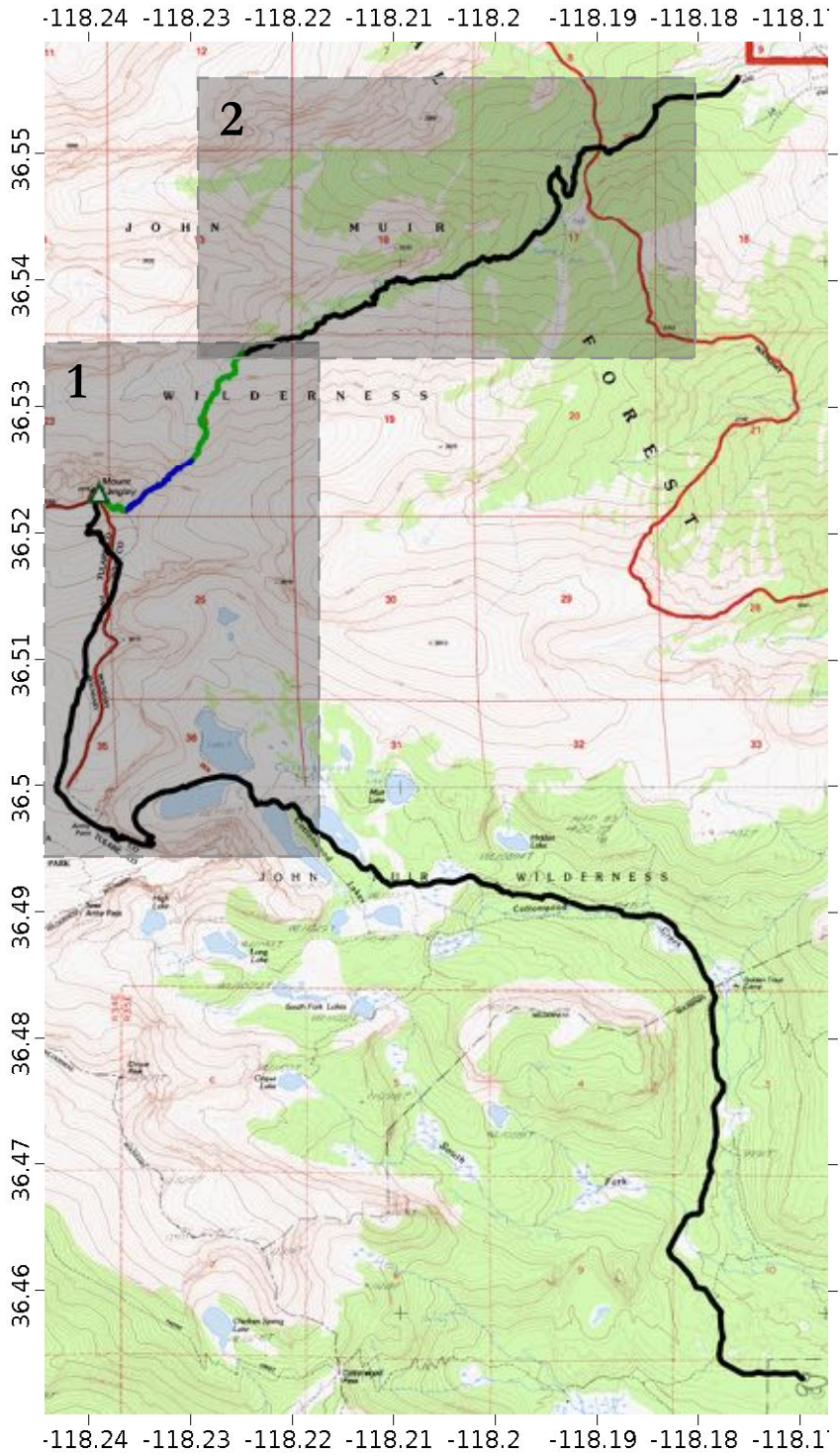
Route points	**265** = 110 + 35 + 120, car to summit
Difficulty	class 2–3, snow
Trailhead	Tuttle creek (p. 80)
Verdict	Best done as a spring snow climb.
First ascent	Clarence King, June 1871?

This route may actually have been first climbed by Clarence King who, attempting to climb Mount Whitney from the town of Lone Pine, mistakenly followed Tuttle Creek instead of Lone Pine Creek. While it can be done in the summer, it is best as a snow climb in April or May, after the snow has consolidated in the northeast couloir but before it has melted out to expose the underlying scree. For those seeking more challenge and solitude, this is a moderate alternative to the standard route. Though it shares an approach with the big technical climbs on Langley's north face, you are unlikely to have company before reaching the summit.

From the Tuttle Creek trailhead (p. 80), follow the trail up to just before the old stone ashram, then continue west along a climbers' trail on the right-hand side of the creek's right-hand fork, with minor bush-whacking. The trail generally stays just above the dense brush in the creek-bed, though it switchbacks away from the creek below a sparsely-treed flat. Above this flat, the trail becomes fainter and crosses to the left-hand side of the creek. Where the creek forks, take the left branch, aiming for the prominent chute on Langley's northeast side.

From where the chute narrows and steepens around 12,000 feet, climb 2,000 feet of either snow or loose scree to the summit plateau. If the snow has melted out, climbing the class 3 rock to one side of the couloir may be preferable to slogging up the scree. The couloir branches near the top; either branch will lead to the summit plateau. The highpoint is a short walk to the west. To return, retrace your steps, either plunge-stepping or glissading if the snow is soft enough.

Langley from upper Tuttle Creek.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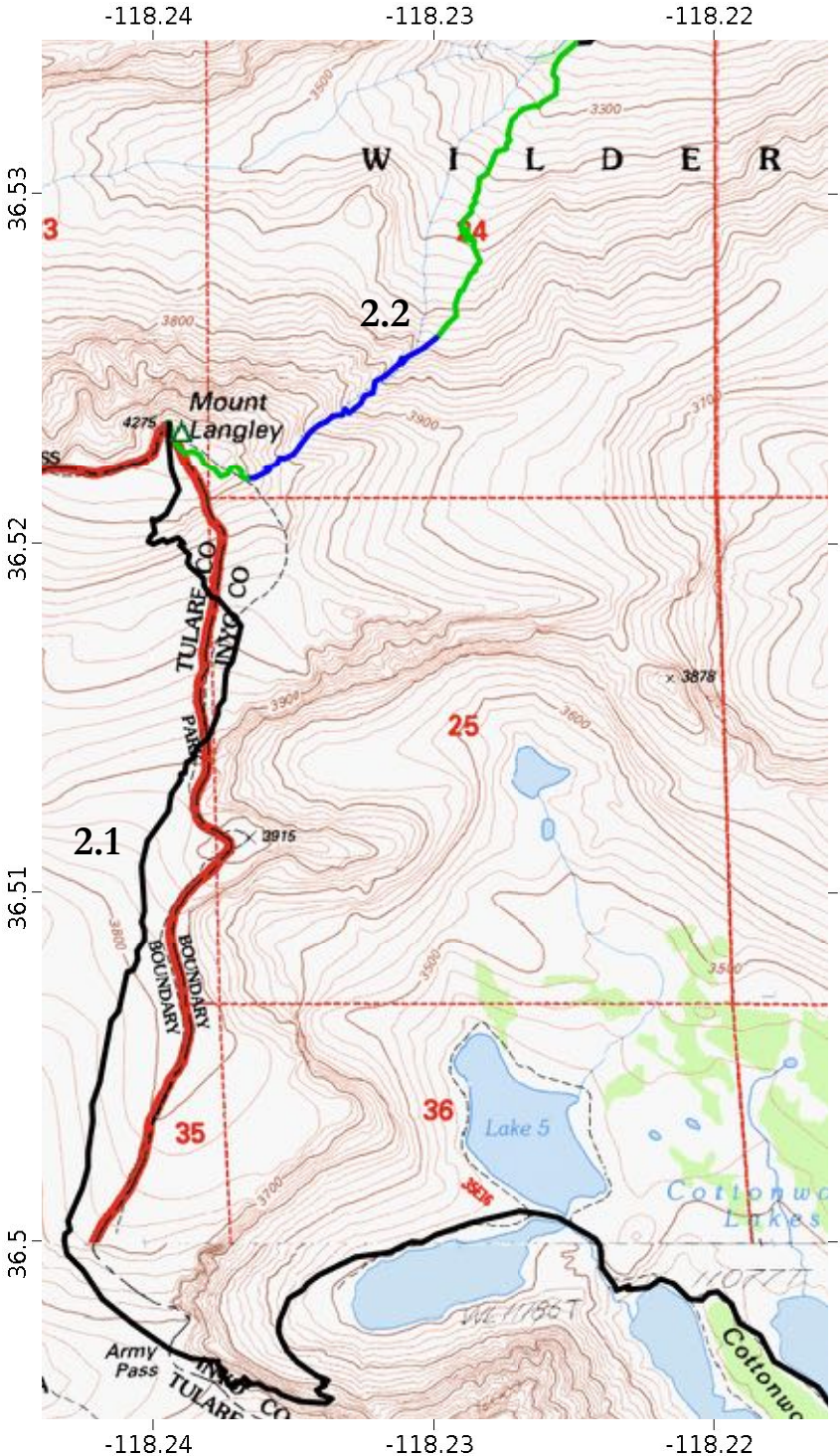
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Army Pass
TULARE CO
INYO CO
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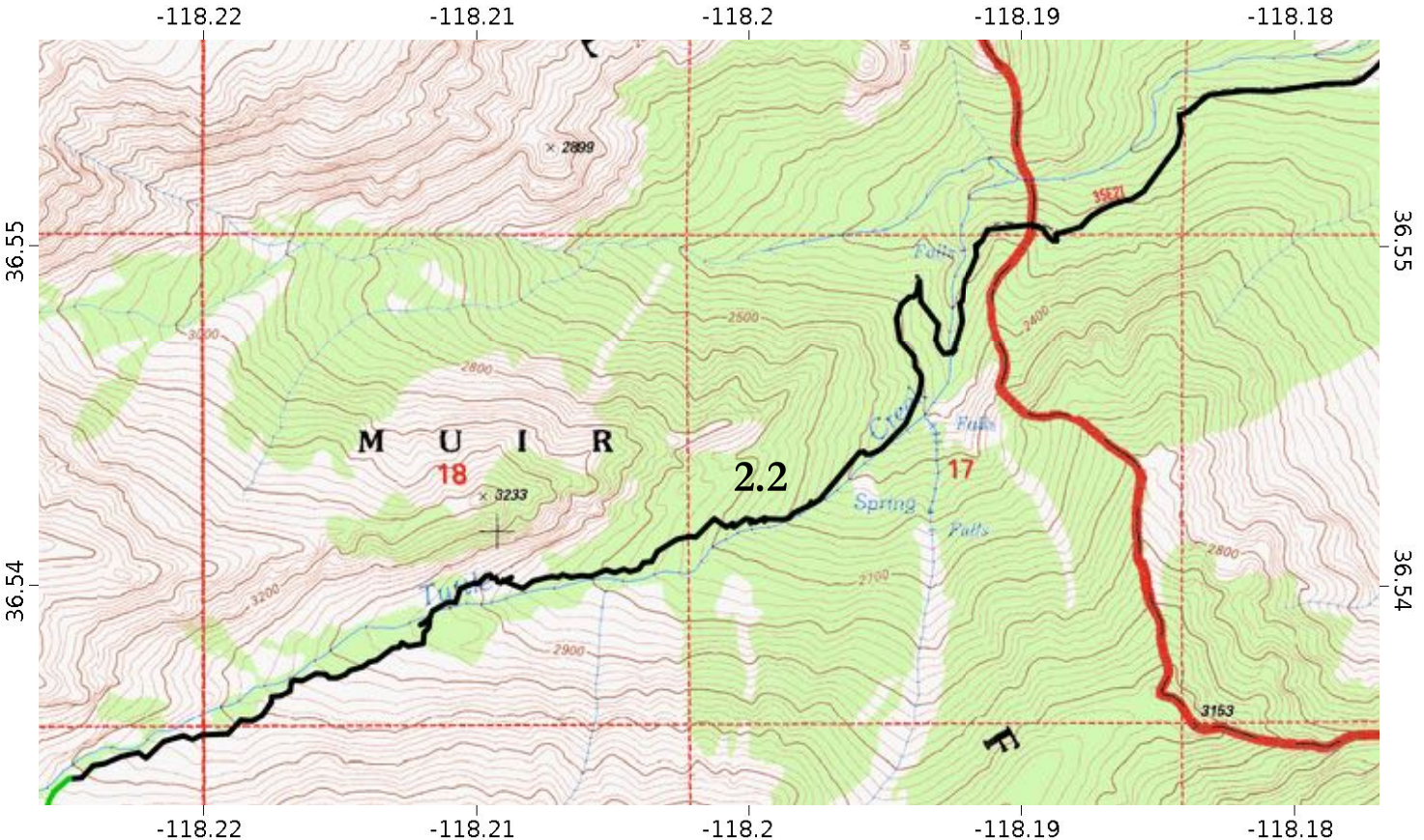
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