

Jeeves Hiked the PCT

Timothy Hahn

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Introduction

From May 01, 2022 to October 01, 2022, I hiked the roughly 2,650-mile long Pacific Crest Trail, which spans from the California/Mexico border to the Washington/Canada border.

Through the deserts, mountains, forests, and beyond, I shared this journey with hundreds of other amazing hikers.

Although not everything went according to plan, I had an unforgettable summer and wanted to capture my experience here.

A few quick notes before we start.

First, I'm going to do my best to keep my writing short. Normally, my writing style is quite effusive, but I mostly wanted to share what was unique to my trip, as well as some photographs I took along the way.

I will also focus on highlights from my trip, which means cutting out a lot of hiking, despite it being most of the experience. This will give the impression that the PCT is just walking from town, to point of interest, to another town, which is definitely not the case. It just better matches my memories.

I adapted much of my writing here from a daily online journal I kept. Originally, I planned on simply rewriting it, but found that the level of detail I wrote day by day varied. I also noticed that most entries began with "I woke up early".

To save you from that, I've rewritten the entire experience from scratch. You may also assume from here on out that I woke up early, unless otherwise noted.

Finally, I will be using everyone's "trail names", where applicable. Trail names are a long distance hiking tradition, where instead of sharing our real names, we give each other nicknames based on some attribute or anecdote from the trail.

For example, my trail name was "Ask Jeeves", though most people shortened it to just Jeeves. This is in reference to my habit of always having an answer to a question asked out loud, as well as questions not asked.

You can find the online version of this at <https://www.jeeveshikedthepct.com>

Chapter 1: Mexico to Idyllwild

The day before I started I, like many hundreds before me, made my way through San Diego to the house of Scout and Frodo's: trail angels who have graciously allowed hikers to stay at their place and prepare for the journey ahead.

There, I met Ant Man, Black Widow, Giggles, and Mug, along with many more hikers who I'd meet again on my northbound hike.

On May 1st, we quietly packed our bags well before the sun rose and made our way into the cars of volunteers who drove us down to the Mexican border, where we began. On the first major climb out, the charming and vivacious Flamingo Kid overtook me and quickly out-hiked me.

Carrying an excessive amount of food made this first day one of the most physically demanding for me. After a hot and tiring hike, I finally reached the cool and sheltered Hauser Creek at the base of the ascent to Lake Morena. My shoulders doubted this entire endeavor, and I could barely sit up straight.

Here, I camped with Ant Man, Black Widow, her friend Willow, Giggles, Tiny Dancer, B&E, Flamingo Kid, and Misplaced. Just the day before we were strangers, but that night we started our trail family.

After a quick stop in Lake Morena for hot food, despite still having too much in my pack, I met Dobby, and the rest of the group met Adventure Time. Adventure Time advised us to meet up with him later in the day at Kitchen Creek. After a long day of hiking, we cooled off in the creek, set up camp next to the waters, and slept to the sound of croaking frogs.

We left the desert floor to enter the beautiful pine forests of Mount Laguna where Black Widow, Giggles, and I shared a tiny home, cramming our sleeping pads next to each other, waking with each crinkle as we tossed and turned.

The next day, we stepped north of town and watched the sun rise over the Anza-Borrego desert, where we were about to enter.

Seventeen miles later, we filled up on water at a questionable cistern and ate a quick dinner. As I left, a truck that was zooming by screeched to a halt, where a man poked his head out. Noticing my hiking attire, he asked me if I wanted an extremely cold beer. I declined, but he then tried offering an orange, which I happily agreed to as he got out and opened a cooler full of ice.

This was my first on-trail "trail magic" - an act of selfless giving from someone who just wanted to help hikers on the PCT.

We had one more day to Scissor's Crossing, where we were to attempt

our first hitchhike into the town of Julian. The group got a bit mixed up, however, as several members took the wrong route in the dark of the early morning. We reunited under the bridge at Scissor's Crossing, where hikers sprawled around a water cache maintained by the locals, and slept off the heat of the day.

Eventually, we all got rides into Julian from local trail angels. One trail angel in particular, named Ghost, stood out to me. Once in Julian, we immediately stopped by Mom's, who provided all hikers carrying a PCT permit a free slice of pie, where I grabbed a table with Adventure Time, White Stripe, Little Hamster, and Butters. Little Hamster, whom I had met under the bridge, and I convinced each other that we both had deserved a nice place in town to stay. We grabbed separate rooms at a local AirBnB, while the rest of my gang stayed at the lodge. We all met up later for Cinco de Mayo margaritas and dinner.

A local gear outfitter, Two Foot Adventures, arranged rides for us back to Scissor's Crossing, and unlike the rest of my group, I waited until the sun set to hike. I passed my group setting up camp a few miles later, but as the climb to Third Gate water cache was notably exposed, I hiked well past sunset, almost tripping over Dobby's campsite in the dark. As the wind picked up, my nerves got the best of me and I called my friend from work, Elleen. Eventually, I camped just before the water cache, which was immaculately maintained by local volunteers, including Ghost. _

The next day, we passed the mile 100 marker and a mile past that we celebrated with a trip to Montezuma Market. There, we snacked and drank outside the shop to our heart's content, meeting AKA.

Past the cow fields, we set up camp at a dried out creek bed and agreed to do a quick out and back to Eagle Rock, where we watched the sun sink into the fields and the stars come out.

I'd be remiss to not mention that my stomach was treating me poorly, and I could not eat more than a thousand calories each day. The next few days were painful, as cramps wracked me with every step.

Over the next two days we met Dylan - a wildland firefighter carrying a full-size chainsaw to raise awareness for mental health among firefighters, gratefully got water from caches at Mike's and Mary's, received trail magic from Lifeguard and Zelda, and saw an abundance of rattlesnakes.

After crawling into Paradise Valley Cafe, I ate the largest salad I could stomach, and we received a very kind hitch into the town of Idyllwild, where we reunited with Flamingo Kid. Ant Man, AKA, Black Widow, Willow, Giggles, Little Hamster, and I rented a beautiful cabin in town and planned for our first full rest day.

Chapter 2: Idyllwild to Wrightwood

Idyllwild gave us our first zero, a day hiking zero miles, where we met the mayor - a gorgeous dog named Max. He has unfortunately since passed; may he rest in peace.

On our way out, a man spotted us as he drove to the dump and apologized that he was busy. Once he was done, however, he came back to drive us about an hour out of his way back to the trailhead we got off at.

We climbed up towards the peak of San Jacinto as blowdowns hindered our every movement. Water, which was already tough to come by in the desert, had the unfortunate property of being near the bottom of the mountain. This meant that each time we needed to resupply on water, we scrambled down steep side trails to reach it, causing an onerous return trip.

This Sisyphean task took us to the top of San Jacinto, where we met some tourists from Palm Springs who rode the tram up. On the other side, the rapid descent back to the desert floor punished my knees, but we also received incredible food and drinks from a large Filipino family who was camping near the trail.

The hike from the base of San Jacinto to the I-10 underpass was short, but brutal, with incessant heat and unending winds hampering the slog through sand in sapping our strength. Once we reached the underpass, we stretched out and slept until Elleen and her mother drove from LA with groceries and food for the next leg of our journey. As the sun set, we made our way to the Mesa Wind Farm under the flower moon.

Briefly, we hung out at Whitewater Preserve, a paradise in the otherwise bone dry desert and met Rich and Ben, two Englishmen who were also hiking the trail. At Mission Creek, we attempted to get through the worst of it during the heat of the day. I diverged from the group and let them know I would wait it out until it got dark to catch up to them. This had me route finding through a narrow and confusing canyon in near pitch black conditions, which ended up worrying everyone.

The evening before we reached Big Bear, I was once again behind my group as the sun set. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a figure flash quickly down the trail, about to overtake me. As I stepped to the side to let them pass, I realized it was Jupiter, a Youtuber whose videos I had thoroughly enjoyed over the years. We chatted for a while before he raced ahead. When I caught up to my trail family, who had set up camp right outside a private zoo, they let me know he had mentioned our encounter and that I was about to catch up.

Right before Big Bear, we received some wonderful trail magic, as well as an easy ride into town. Once at Big Bear Lake, I accepted Elleen's

offer to bring me a stove and food that I could more reliably stomach, as my inability to eat was still causing me major stomach pains and fatigue.

We took another zero in Big Bear Lake, with some fantastic bagel sandwiches, before heading westwards towards San Bernardino National Forest. Our first night out had us camping with a clear view of the upcoming valleys.

The trail followed Holcomb and Deep Creeks, giving us our first taste of truly reliable water. This was very much a luxury I did not take for granted. We crossed many high clearance dirt roads that were unfortunately packed with trash.

This trend continued with an early wake up to reach Deep Creek hot springs, which was right on the trail, but unfortunately had quite a few illegal campsites and trash strewn everywhere. We did our best to enjoy it and some nudists buoyed our spirits by coming with trash bags and spending most of the morning cleaning up, as their cars were only a few miles away.

A few miles into the day, we received ice cold beverages, fruits, and medical supplies from Corgi Legs, who set up at a road crossing, and met Floss. A bit after that, our group had our first argument, as a camping ban around Silverwood Lake complicated our camping plans in a few miles. We either would need to go well short of our mileage goals for the day, or well past. With the heat of the day pounding on everyone's nerves, we eventually agreed to find a campsite just before the camping ban boundary.

After Silverwood Lake, our next goal was the hilly Cajon Pass, where you descend from the desert hills to cross I-15. At Cajon Pass, we had our fill at the under renovation McDonald's and spent the night at the local inn before we made the steepest climb of the desert to the mountains overlooking Wrightwood.

Despite carrying 7 liters of water, I found myself running out of water alarmingly fast. There was also no reliable water for this entire section, and worry set in. Thankfully, an overlanding vehicle offered us each a bottle of water and a few miles past that we found a water cache that likely should not have been there, but we were excessively thankful for.

After a day that dragged on, we reached the top of the climb as the sun began to set and the temperature finally started to cool. Below us, the lights of Wrightwood twinkled and I made the decision to not spend the following night in town, meaning I'd be leaving my group behind for some solo hiking.

Chapter 3: Wrightwood to Tehachapi

Our group decided to try hitchhiking from the road crossing a bit further down the trail instead of taking the typical path into Wrightwood, which involves a steep descent of two miles. While I planned not to spend the night there, I did need some resupplies. We were picked up by a K-Drama obsessed local named Maria, who insisted on calling me “Oppa”.

Once we reached Wrightwood, I somewhat regretted my choice not to stay, as the town was incredibly welcoming to hikers and the restaurants were top-notch. I visited the rental my group chose and quickly showered and did laundry while grabbing food from the grocery store. With the stove that was brought to me, I started to finally eat proper amounts for the level of effort I put in each day.

After my chores, I called Maria, who gave me a ride back out to the trail, and I started the climb to the top of Mt. Baden Powell. This is normally a fairly strenuous climb, but as I was beginning around 7 PM, I was able to make it just shy of the top without too much issue. I set up my sleeping pad in a secluded snow drift – a major shift from the desert I had been sleeping in just until now.

The rest of Mt. Baden Powell was easy in the morning, only punctuated by accidentally dropping my camera off the side of the peak, forcing me to carefully climb down about 75 feet to retrieve it. Miraculously, the camera and lens were still in working condition, just heavily scratched up.

Mt. Williamson was also fairly straightforward, and I ran into AKA, who also decided not to stay in Wrightwood just yet. His friend from the Appalachian Trail was also there, and she had set up trail magic. With a stomach full of burgers and croquettes, I carefully navigated the next dozen-ish miles that strayed from the PCT to avoid an endangered frog habitat and found the only safe spot in a burn to camp that night.

The next day was Memorial Day, which I only realized once I reached a fire station that allowed hikers to rest and refill our water bottles on the side of a busy highway. I chatted briefly with OJ and Buggy, before pushing forward to find one of my favorite campsites of the desert, hidden well off trail and commanding a 360 view of the desert valley below.

Similar to the fire station, the next day brought me to a ranger station where I could refill my water and I met Yeezus, who was struggling hard with his ankles. Refusing to rest, we pushed on together to Acton’s KOA, a major shock to the senses as RVs, campers, and screaming children surrounded us. I ordered some delivery with Yeezus to the KOA’s office, where we were allowed to rest and charge our batteries. The scene

wasn't quite right for me, however, so I packed up as the sun set and met Foxy and Trippy, a married couple, as well as their friend Divebomb on my way out.

That evening I camped several miles past Acton in the canyon that led to Vasquez Rocks, but was unfortunately joined by a distant truck blaring music. Just past Vasquez, I reached the tiny town of Agua Dulce, where Yeezus and his friend Ricochet caught up to me and we ate a massive breakfast together.

On my way out of town, a woman stopped me and asked if I'd like popsicles or cupcakes in a few hours. I wasn't exactly sure what this meant, but I answered honestly. The next 20 miles were brutally dry, but about halfway through, the trail sank down towards a road where I found both a water cache and some popsicles provided by Summer, the woman I had met earlier that day. Yeezus and Ricochet were delighted by this gift and camped there while I pushed on.

Once again, the trail took me by another fire station, where some hikers travel into Green Valley. I had no real reason to stop, so I kept hiking. By 2 PM I was nearly 17 miles in and stopped at a road leading into Lake Hughes, debating what to do next. While I had the energy for more miles, I was feeling the solitude, as I hadn't seen too many other people on trail for the past few days.

Eventually, I continued, only to get a message from my trail family asking if I could contact Dylan. Behind me, just north of Agua Dulce, a fire had broken out and Dylan wasn't responding. Already frazzled, I got a hitch into Palmdale to charge my devices and attempt to contact Dylan while the rest of my trail family figured out where to stay for the evening. Eventually, I was able to make contact and let the rest of the group know he was safe.

I also decided to rejoin them and the next morning found me waiting all day at the road to Lake Hughes. To pass the time, I walked the two miles into town, bought some treats and drinks, and then returned them to the trail. I made this trip a few times, until Floss came by and his parents drove up, intending to take him off trail for some family time, and they were able to bring back a much larger load of trail magic.

After this, I napped in the shade, fending off flies, until a woman stomped through, asking if she could escape the flies here with me. I agreed, and I found out that Cool Rocks had been hiking with my trail family. Eventually, Ant Man, Black Widow, Willow, Giggles, and Dylan, along with newcomer Hawkeye arrived. We stayed at a nearby ostrich farm and enjoyed our reunion.

Past the ostrich farm we reached our 500th mile on trail, deep into a depressing burn, and hiked hard for the next two days to Hikertown.

Hikertown marked the transition area between the Sonoran and Mojave desert, and before us lay an empty expanse of almost nothing, as we would hike by the LA aqueduct, with no water available to us for almost 30 miles.

Many at Hikertown choose to do this hike at night, so we attempted to sleep during the day and marched off into the night, following Hawk-eye, Cool Rocks, and OJ and followed by Foxy, Trippy, and Divebomb, and joined by Wild Child. The night was spent hiking flat nothingness, until we reached the wind farms, where the eerie blinking glow of the windmills brought the atmosphere of a post apocalyptic wasteland inhabited by robotic giants.

At around 4 AM, we found “the perfect” Joshua tree, where we took a photo with our glow sticks turned on. Shortly afterward, we crashed into some rattlesnake-infested bushes.

The next two days led us through some of the windiest parts of the trail, constantly fighting to stand up straight. I had also developed some painful blisters and the final descent into the road where I’d hitch into Tehachapi found me slowed to a gentle crawl. Eventually, somehow, I made it to the road crossing and limped into the town of Tehachapi.

Chapter 4: Tehachapi to Kennedy Meadows

Tehachapi was another zero, and I spent most of the day recovering my feet and popping blisters. Cool Rocks brought over Carnation Instant Breakfast for Ant Man and we hung out in town before saying our goodbyes, as she planned to stay in Tehachapi one more day.

For our final push through the desert, we got a hitch back to the PCT and were thrust into extreme winds and heat advisories. Here, Dylan departed the group, while the rest of us stuck together tighter than ever, due to much longer water carries.

The heat was relentless, but briefly broken up by a few key springs and water caches maintained by a trail angel named Devilfish. The blisters were coming back, but this time I was prepared with additional leukotape and careful attention to my feet. At one water cache, while replacing the bandages on my feet, I turned on my phone to get warnings from Cool Rocks that several of the springs and water caches we had been resupplying from were suspected of causing some sort of illness, either a norovirus or algae outbreak.

Looking sadly at the now suspect water I had been consuming for the past few days, we pressed on, taking care to sanitize our hands more frequently. This, of course, wasn't effective for either norovirus or algae, but it was all we could think to do, apart from boiling our water.

As our morale dropped a few miles before Walker Pass, the only major road crossing in this section, I hiked ahead of the group and get a hitch into Inyokern. The campground at Walker Pass was bleak, so I went to the gas station/grocery store in town and filled a shopping cart with fresh water, beverages, and ice cream as a morale boost for not just my trail family, but some of the other hikers I had been around.

Once loaded, however, I had difficulty getting a hitch back, until Floss, who had been eating at a nearby restaurant, came up to me and asked what I was doing. I explained, and he called a woman who lived in Ridgecrest to come pick us up. We found out that Roadrunner had been caring for many of the hikers who had gotten sick, despite not having any direct connections to the trail itself.

Back at Walker Pass, I shared my goods with the group, as well as Foxy and Trippy, and several other hikers I hadn't met yet. Car campers also joined us, and none of us could get solid rest with the level of noise they brought with them.

The climb out of Walker Pass was one of the most brutal of the desert, with many water sources being marked as poor, either contaminated with uranium, mosquito larvae, or flies. We picked the one surrounded by flies and I barely made it there before running out of water.

At the top of the next climb, I found myself incredibly nauseous, possibly heat exhausted, and for the first time in a while, I wasn't able to eat. Thankfully, the next day brought us to several fantastic water sources. Those, along with brief glimpses of the Sierra Nevadas, let us know we were close to completing the desert.

Our final night in the desert, we camped about 10 miles away from Kennedy Meadows. Despite the heat, biting ants, and brutal landscape, we all soaked in the last hours of our time in the desert section of the PCT.

As the trail briefly turned into roads leading to Kennedy Meadows, I distinctly remembered tearing up, incredibly proud of myself and knowing that if I could make it here, that I could finish the entire thing.

A surprise reunion with the Filipino family that we had met after San Jacinto amplified these emotions, who met us with cooked food and treats, which we gratefully accepted.

Kennedy Meadows, not much more than two competing general stores/restaurants surrounded by ranches, was an odd outpost. As it was the final resupply opportunity before entering the Sierras, however, it served as a chokepoint, and we reunited with many of the hikers we hadn't seen in weeks. While there was very little to do, we spent an extra day here to swap out gear to prepare for the rapid change in environment.

Cool Rocks joined us the day after, and we all hung out briefly before our group once again headed out, this time with the addition of Lefty, who quickly fell into a trail romance with Willow at Kennedy Meadows. We carried out much heavier packs, with long food carries, bear canister requirements, and warmer clothing. With one last look, we left the desert section behind us.

Chapter 5: Kennedy Meadows to Bishop

The first few miles out of Kennedy Meadows felt suspiciously like the desert still. Once we entered Inyo National Forest, however, the landscape changed drastically, with beautiful meadows and creeks pressed up against the Sierras.

Despite the added elevation gain and rugged terrain, entering the Sierra Nevada was a rejuvenating experience. Early on, we met Gibb, who taught us about the flint all around us, as well as Shapes, who shared some incredible banana bread his mother had sent him.

A strong 45 miles into the Sierra Nevada, we pushed up to 12k feet of elevation, where the group finally felt the elevation a bit. The temperature cooled dramatically, partially because of an incoming cold front.

Here, however, we came across our first alpine lake: Chicken Springs Lake. The lake was freezing cold, but I still soaked my feet to help them reduce in size, as my foot size had grown a full size since starting. Ant Man and Giggles dove straight in.

The lake was beautiful, but unfortunately a bit trashed due to being a popular spot. Upon finding fecal remains hidden among the rocks, I quickly discarded my first campsite choice.

The next morning was cloudy and frigid. This was the first day on trail without clear blue skies and we were glad for our warmer clothing. I unfortunately realized that I had eaten through my food much more quickly than I had expected, and while the exit to Bishop was only a few days away, we also wanted to add the optional trek to Mt Whitney - the highest point in the continental US.

At the junction to Crabtree Meadow, we took the turn towards Mt Whitney and set up camp at the base. We originally planned to do the climb shortly after midnight to reach the peak at sunrise, but as the temperature plummeted quickly to 20 degrees and multiple climbers of Mt Whitney the day before our ascent required medical assistance due to hypothermia, we thought better of our original plan.

Instead, we woke to a frozen meadow and gingerly packed every extra layer of clothing and insulation we could as we began the steep climb up to the peak of Mt Whitney. Running out of food, I ate a single poptart and saved the rest of my food for the following days and used what little energy I could muster to trudge up Mt Whitney, desperate for the sun to come out.

On the way up, I met quite a few John Muir Trail hikers, as Mt Whitney is the southern terminus of that trail, and I did my best to keep a smile on my face as I congratulated them for being so close to the end. Past

Guitar Lake, we climbed up an endless series of steep switchbacks and cut across a ledge covered in ice.

At the top, we reached 14,505 feet and the sun finally warmed us up. I found Foxy and Trippy cuddled up under a sleeping bag, crying to their favorite soundtrack. All of us rested for a moment, exhausted, but before too long, we needed to get back down as the weather worsened.

Once I returned to Crabtree Meadow, I briefly reunited with Cool Rocks before I weakly attempted to continue to the PCT. I hiked a few miles on my own before setting up camp.

The next day grew even colder, cold enough to kill Ant Man's phone, and we trudged on towards Forester Pass, the highest point directly on the PCT. The stunning views from the top rewarded us for the day, while I tried not to think about how I only had one more meal in my pack, with no other food.

After a quick descent to King's Canyon, we needed to climb up towards Kearsarge Pass, stopping at one of the last campsites on our way out. That evening, I made the most of my last meal and miraculously found a few extra snacks, which I then shared with the rest of the group.

The next morning we reached Onion Valley trailhead and were able to get a ride down to Independence, where I ran into Flamingo Kid once again, but struggled to get a ride down the highway to Bishop. Once we did, I immediately ran over to the local car rental and borrowed a car. I then found hikers in Bishop, who needed a ride back to Onion Valley. One such hiker was Misplaced, who I hadn't seen since the early days of the PCT.

For the next few days, we rested in Bishop while I drove multiple groups of hikers between Onion Valley and Bishop. The crowning achievement was when I was able to surprise Cool Rocks at the trailhead and take her into town. I also ran into Sweet Cakes, who I hadn't seen since Julian.

This gave us time to talk, and we agreed to hike the next section together. My trail family wanted to leave Bishop almost right away, but I needed some time to recuperate. I also wanted to take the next part of the Sierras slowly, which aligned more closely with Cool Rocks' goals. Finally, Cool Rocks had been hiking alone for most of the early Sierras and with her birthday coming up, I wanted to be there to celebrate with her.

I gave Gibb a haircut, dropped off my trail family off at the trailhead the day before I intended to leave, and hung out with Cool Rocks as we watched a storm roll in over the Sierras.

Chapter 6: Bishop to Vermillion Valley Resort

Getting a hitch back to trail was a challenge once we got back to Independence, which made me all the more glad I had provided so many rides of my own while I was resting in Bishop. On our way over Kearsarge Pass and back to the PCT, we ran into quite a few hikers who had struggled through the snow, hail, and lightning over the past few days. All of which I was happy to have avoided.

To avoid a slight chance of bad weather of our own, however, we hurried over Glen Pass and as we neared the top, the sky turned from pleasant to warning of an imminent storm. Below us lay the gorgeous Rae Lakes, but we barely noticed them as thunder started to roar in the distance and hail began.

We ran from tree to tree, trying to get out of the hail, until the thunder became perilously close. At that point, the safest point was to get lower to Middle Rae Lakes, and we ran, hearts pounding, to get to safety as lightning struck nearby slopes and bodies of water.

Despite a few close calls, the storm eventually passed and a group of hikers who had the same idea stepped out of their shelters to enjoy the beauty of the lakes. This enjoyment was quick, however, as the mosquitoes came out in force and the sun set. We hid in our tents and attempted to dry off.

Pinchot Pass was only 14 miles away, but the mosquitoes and creek crossings slowed us down. We carefully climbed towards treeline and were optimistic until dark clouds once again appeared on the horizon around 1 PM. Unsure if we would make it over the pass in time, and seeing plenty of evidence of lightning strikes at higher elevation, we sheepishly set up camp in a slightly safer spot just below treeline.

For the next few hours, we felt silly, as the surrounding sky was still calm. A hiker who joined us when we first hid decided the coast was clear, packed up, and continued the climb up. Not ten minutes later, we heard the first peals of thunder, and ten minutes after that, a heavy downpour caught us, with lightning crashing uncomfortably nearby. Cool Rocks and I hunkered down for the evening and decided to make up the miles over the next few days.

We cleared Pinchot early the next morning and met Aquawoman. Tackling the pass early also meant we could press on towards Mather Pass. Before too long, Cool Rocks and I found ourselves caught up to a crowd climbing Mather. Mather was the first patch of snow I had encountered in a long time, but it didn't seem bad enough for me to put on my microspikes. Instead, I dodged the snow by jumping from boulder to boulder, only to have one slide out from under me.

In order to avoid slipping down the side of the pass, I slammed myself down, landing hard on my knees, scrambling, and landing hard on my knees again. Instantly, the world grew dark and my head felt as though it were on fire. I lay down, with my head firmly stuck in the snow to cool off, and Cool Rocks made sure I was okay. Eventually, the adrenaline wore off and when I finally made it off the side of Mather Pass, fatigue hit me like a freight train.

I was able to stumble to Lower Palisades Lake, where everyone checked on me again. I insisted I was fine, and napped while the others fished nearby. When I awoke, it was dinner time, and we all set up camp at the lake, with thankfully fewer mosquitoes. As the night grew dark, Cool Rocks and I took a picture at Palisades Lake, looking back towards the pass.

The next morning I felt better, and we climbed down the Golden Staircase to the King River. As we started our climb to Muir Pass, we chanced the freezing water to swim in the river for a bit. The rest of the climb to Muir Pass was long and strenuous, with both of us needing to stop for the occasional break. About 4 miles from the top, near mid-afternoon, we reached a beautiful meadow and felt tempted to stop, but we decided to send it.

Snow completely covered the final mile to the top, making it hard to find the trail. Several times I post-holed through snow to nearly fall into the river below. Thankfully, another group of hikers, including one named Bandit, were always around me, so I felt relatively safe, if deeply fatigued.

On top of Muir Pass, I crawled into one of the few huts on the entire trail, and we all caught our breaths after an incredibly tiring day.

The next day we walked through the Evolution Basin and wanted to take our time, but instead suffered through intense mosquitoes. We were joined by Guppy, who borrowed some of my bug spray. Shortly after, we also had our only real water crossing of the Sierra Nevadas this year.

Near the border between Kings Canyon and Sierra National Forest, I was waiting for Cool Rocks and hung out with Clementine and Abby - two hikers who I had seen a few times but hadn't gotten to know yet. Before leaving, they let me know to keep an eye out for Brumby, whom they missed.

Cool Rocks and I tackled one last climb for the day and passed through a ferocious mosquito cloud as we did so. As we set up camp just past the mosquitoes, Bandit appeared from the trees where the mosquitoes were clustered. With a shell-shocked look on her face, she asked us simply, "what the fuck was that?"

The next day was the evening before Cool Rocks' birthday, so we took

a dip in Heart Lake just below Selden Pass. Back at the top of the pass, we met Fish and Brumby. The pair chose to try to make it to the shuttle to Vermillion Valley Resort, which left at 5 PM. Cool Rocks and I were in.

Looking at my maps, we found a shortcut that led Bear Creek Trailhead, where we could catch the shuttle and was separate from the Bear Ridge Trail that most people took to VVR. Determined, we pushed hard that day and kept a solid 4.5 mph pace, despite a fair amount of elevation gain and loss.

After taking no breaks for almost 8 miles, we reached a junction between Bear Creek Trailhead and Bear Ridge Trailhead. Because we believed Bear Creek Trailhead to be a valid alternate pickup spot, we took the shorter route to Bear Creek Trailhead, only to get there and realize there was no way a shuttle could make it to this 4WD and high-clearance only trailhead.

As our hearts sank, however, a high-clearance vehicle made its way to us and a group who planned to camp here that night and hike the next morning let us know we were really looking for Bear Creek Cutoff Trailhead. With us looking pathetic, the driver, Gary, gave us a ride over the steep technical road. We found out he was an environmental scientist whose wife had just passed and had come out here to remember her.

After a bumpy drive, we reached a dirt road where Gary flagged down a line of horses and mules. A pickup following the line allowed us to ride in the back, as the driver, Zosha, was on the way to VVR. At VVR, we reunited with Guppy, Aquawoman, Divebomb, Foxy, and Trippy, and together we celebrated Cool Rocks' birthday.

As the birthday celebration raged on around me, however, I worried about my trail family, as it sounded like they were having their own struggles and challenges. Despite how much I enjoyed hiking with Cool Rocks, I missed my trail family and decided that, due to them planning to take a side adventure to Yosemite, I could catch up to them.

Chapter 7: Vermillion Valley Resort to South Lake Tahoe

In order to catch up to my trail family, I would need to hike about 25 miles a day. Unfortunately, the Sierra Nevadas had some of the most elevation gain and loss on the entire trail, outside of parts of Washington. With that in mind, I practically ran out of Vermillion Valley Resort, towards Goodale Pass, and met Zosha on one of her horses. We chatted briefly, but I had a goal in mind and bid goodbye.

My friend Elleen, who had helped me out so much early on the trail, was doing the John Muir Trail southbound. As the PCT and JMT intersected for significant portions, I knew that if I made it 20 miles that day, despite not starting until around 11 AM that day, I could reach Purple Lake, where we should be able to meet up.

Goodale Pass was short, but surprisingly steep, and on the descent I slipped a few times before reminding myself to be careful as I was now on my own. As I pushed myself hard to make up the miles to Purple Lake, almost running on some ascents, I got a satellite message from my trail family that they weren't going to Yosemite and that I shouldn't ask why.

As I was too proud to ask them to slow down for me, I said nothing about my plans to catch up to them and recalculated that I'd need to be pushing over 30 miles a day to catch them before Sonora Pass. I arrived at Purple Lake as the sun set, and Elleen and I caught up before exhaustion sent us to our tents.

The next morning's sunrise found me racing down towards Red's Meadow, my knees pounding. Many hikers get off at Red's Meadow to resupply at the ski town of Mammoth, but as I had resupplied the day before at VVR, I packed out extra burgers and only gave myself a little of time to catch my breath.

I threaded my way through the crowds who were visiting Devil's Postpile, and the dusty trail clung to me, filling my nostrils. On the long climb up to Thousand Island Lake, I passed by Bandit and her group. I was also briefly joined by Shapes, who I hadn't seen since the beginning of the Sierras, and his friend Zorro, who asked me to join their group. Determined, however, I continued hiking well past them, even as the sun set.

Just as the darkness settled, I met a woman stomping down the trail to me. I asked her how the campsites were at Thousand Island Lake. In reply, she demanded if I had seen "them". I had no idea who she meant, and she introduced herself as Pitstop, looking for her fellow hikers Moo and Danger Noodle. They had planned to camp together just ahead, but

the other two hadn't shown up.

I had nothing to offer, so I continued my climb up the pass, exhausted beyond belief. As I climbed, I ate the food I had packed out. If anyone would have seen me, it would have been an amusing sight - with me huffing and puffing while eating a burger. Instead, the darkness hid me well, and I didn't see any traces of other hikers until I made it to the border of legal dispersed camping at Thousand Island Lake. This was my first day hiking over 30 miles and setting up camp was a challenge because of exhaustion and wind.

Island Pass flew by, as did the climb to Donohue. This marked the entry to Yosemite, as well as the beginning of the end of the Sierras. On top of Donohue, I ran into Wild Child, and we reminisced a bit before I continued my way down to Tuolumne Meadows, grateful for the gentle trail.

Past Tuolumne Meadows, I carefully ran across a busy road carrying 4th of July celebrators. As there was a camping ban around Tuolumne Meadows, I needed to push myself once again to make my miles. Just past the camping boundary I spotted a small path leading up to a ledge. On the ledge was a perfect little campsite, and I crashed into just my sleeping pad and bag, grateful to be in bed before it got fully dark.

The next day started optimistic, but reality caught up to me as a few climbs later I was finding my pace slow dramatically. I took one of the first breaks I took on this stretch of trail and a hiker I had briefly met back at Kennedy Meadows, Cooking Mama, caught up to me. We hung out for a bit before he raced ahead and I crawled my way up Benson Pass.

I saw almost no one for the rest of the day until I neared the top of the pass. A short distance from the top, a young woman caught up to me and, seeing me struggle, cheered me on. Once we reached the top, we found Cooking Mama, who introduced the young woman as his hiking partner, Magma.

Magma, Cooking Mama, and I chatted for a while, and they also asked if I wanted to join them. While I thoroughly enjoyed their company, I needed to keep pressing on. When they pulled off to camp at the beautiful Smedberg Lake, I tripped my way down the other side of the pass and camped in what was definitely the birthplace of all mosquitoes.

Cooking Mama and Magma caught up to me early the next day, and the next two passes, Seavey and Dorothy Lake, were mercifully gentle. I had planned to camp just past Dorothy Lake, but the lake itself was so stunning that I cut my day a few miles short and enjoyed my evening for the first time since leaving VVR.

Just past Dorothy Pass was the 1,000-mile marker on the PCT. I wanted

to celebrate this achievement, but the mosquitoes had come back in fury, so I instead focused on making it to Sonora Pass. Looking behind me I could see Yosemite, and behind that the High Sierras. Looking forward, I could see the reddish mountains of Northern California.

The approach to Sonora was treacherous, covered by snow on slim ledges, but the thought of catching up to my trail family pushed me forward. At Sonora Pass, I was lucky enough to get a quick hitch to Kennedy Meadows North, where I was able to surprise Ant Man, Black Widow, Willow, and Giggles. I was also able to grab dinner with Floss before I found out that my group was already planning to leave on an earlier shuttle back and I'd need to catch up again.

While I waited at Kennedy Meadows North to shuttle back to trail, Cooking Mama and Magma showed up. Once again, they asked if I'd join them, but I decided that I'd keep pushing forward, catching the group again at South Lake Tahoe.

Despite my best efforts, Cooking Mama and Magma caught up to me again at the saddle between Stanislaus and Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forests. Northern California welcomed us with the heavy smell of wildfire smoke, which made hiking tough. Despite that, I was hopeful I could catch up to my trail family, as I had pulled off some very high mileage days. Instead, I found out that they were still another 5 miles ahead of me when I finally called it for the evening.

The next few days repeated this loop, with me pushing my hardest to catch up, only for my trail family to be just ahead. Again, I knew I could have asked for them to wait for me, but my pride pushed me into telling them to "make it a challenge", one that I kept failing. Instead, I ended up hanging out more with Cooking Mama and Magma, whose incredible hiking speed always had them passing me each day and setting up camp well before I was done for the day.

Despite basically running out of food, I was also thankfully able to meet two day hikers on the other side of Carson Pass, who gave me trail mix and granola bars. This would be enough to get me to Highway 50 and a hitch to South Lake Tahoe.

The trail again became swarmed by mosquitoes as I joined the Tahoe Rim Trail along the Upper Truckee River. I pushed through, driven mad with itchiness and smoke inhalation. As wildfires had intensified, many hikers I met in this section announced their intentions to quit once they reached South Lake Tahoe.

Eventually, however, I made it to Highway 50, and a minivan dropped me off at the hostel my trail family was staying at. The reunion was joyous, but brief, as we swapped plans and realized we'd be splitting up once again..

Chapter 8: South Lake Tahoe to Chester

In 2020, over 300,000 acres of Northern California were burned by the Bear Fire. In 2021, an additional 950,000 acres burned in the Dixie Fire. Combined, they led to several fatalities and injuries, while upending the lives of many people who called Northern California their home.

More than a hundred miles of the PCT ran directly through these burns from Quincy to Old Station. While they had since reopened, hiking through wasn't officially recommended. In general, hiking through a burn is technically risky, with collapsing trees and falling branches being responsible for quite a few deaths. Sleeping in burns is an even riskier proposition, as most campsites are directly at risk of trees falling on you.

While we had hiked through several burns at this point, most were relatively short. This meant that we could simply plan our hiking through these sections to avoid the most dangerous campsites. This burn, however, would require several days to hike through, leaving us at risk for several days.

Willow and Lefty were undecided about what to do. Ant Man and Black Widow wanted to skip some of the worst parts of the burn. Giggles, however, wanted to do all of it. Surprisingly, I also wanted to.

While Giggles and I didn't always see eye to eye, the trail family felt more comfortable about us hiking through the burns if we hiked together, so after grabbing dinner with a coworker, Giggles and I left South Lake Tahoe and entered the Desolation Wilderness.

For a few dozen miles, we followed the Tahoe Rim Trail, along the shores of Aloha Lake and Lake Tahoe, before turning northwards. Here, my mosquito protection failed me and I reached our first campsite, driven mad by their bites.

Leaving the Sierras, the views were still beautiful, but lacked the grandeur of the lofty peaks I had just spent the last few weeks hiking through. The trail led through meadows and out of season ski resorts, where we set up camp under some ski lifts..

The day after we reached the infamous Donner Pass, where hikers are offered a free 40oz from the ranch. The ranch also had a buddy board, where people could leave each other drinks. I left a few drinks for hikers I hadn't seen in a while that I knew were behind me. Giggles and I trudged through sewage filled tunnels underneath Highway 80, before climbing towards the Peter Grubb's hut. As we did not have a reservation, we quickly peeked inside before camping at the springs just past it.

Giggles and I pushed hard to try and get to her first 30-mile day, but the day found us taking longer breaks than we thought. I also was bitten by an unleashed dog, but as it didn't break skin, I let the owners know I was fine and we hiked on. Shortly after this, the trail became mostly scree, and every step went from manageable to excruciatingly painful.

The scree continued until Sierra City, where we walked down the road into town and I found that my resupply box was missing. I did my best to resupply at the local store, but finding solid sources of protein was difficult. Giggles and I were planning to next resupply at Chester in 6 days, but I was skeptical about my chances. I made the best of the store, however, and purchased ice cream for the other hikers sitting outside the store.

While we cleaned up a bit, I was reunited with Aquawoman, who I last saw at VVR, and Butters, who I last saw in Julian. We hiked out together and once again returned to incredibly painful scree.

By evening, the other three were well ahead of me, so I navigated by myself around some furious campers as I got close to the top of the hill. On the other side, as darkness settled, I heard a voice call my name out, and Giggles guided me to where we were camping for the evening.

Much later in the evening, we were awoken by two headlamps, who then set up camp right in between myself and Butters. They also prepared and ate dinner next to us, meaning we were kept up fairly late. This led to some trail drama between Butters and the two hikers, Mc-Mansion and Honeybee, that I'd hear about for months.

Northern California was shaping up to be surprisingly tough due to the scree, but some well-positioned trail magic lifted my spirits. Aquawoman was also gifted half of a massive watermelon and did her best to scarf it down on her own. As a tiny petite woman, she ended up looking as though she had grown pregnant overnight.

The next evening, as I was a few miles back from the rest of the group, I turned the corner, only to be stopped by an extremely loud noise. I had initially thought this was a car backfiring, but soon realized that someone was firing into the woods, likely target practicing. I called out a "cease fire", as the shots were crossing near the trail, but was only met with distant laughter, followed by continued shots.

Panicked, I climbed far up the ledge to my left, and though the shots eventually stopped, I set up camp on some rocks well above the trail. I messaged Giggles with what had happened and tried to coax myself to sleep.

With several days of poor sleep, I was starting to notice the lack of recovery. My feet were trashed, and every step was pure agony. As we were still a few days away from Chester, I let Giggles know I needed to

pull off trail to the town of Quincy, and we parted ways. The rest of the trail family was nervous, but I reassured them she was in good company with Butters and Aquawoman.

In Quincy, I was briefly reunited with Yeezus, who helped me bring my groceries back to my hotel. I rested an extra day, and on my way out I saw Cooking Mama. He had temporarily been joined by his girlfriend and Magma had temporarily been joined by her father, so they weren't hiking together at the moment, but planned to reunite later down the trail..

I left Quincy and almost immediately walked into the burn. The effects of the burn were severe, and in some ways this was a positive in terms of safety. So much had burned that there was little to fall on me. The trail went steeply downhill to the tiny outpost of Belden, only to climb steeply out the other end through more burn and plenty of poison oak.

My feet were still aching, so I took the next few days slowly, with Ant Man and Black Widow eventually catching up and passing me. At some point, I left the geologic end of the Sierra Nevada and entered the Cascade Range, which would make up the rest of the PCT.

The burn was deeply depressing, and most nights I camped alone in spots where I wasn't entirely sure if I was safe. A few miles before I would reach Chester, my original campsite plan of Soldier Creek turned out to be a bad idea, as trees threatening to collapse at any moment surrounded it. Oddly enough, someone had set up a tent there, and I quickly left once I heard them cackling to themselves.

Just past the creek, I crossed the midpoint of the PCT and did my best to take a celebratory photograph at the halfway mark of my journey. I was still a little rattled by the camper at Soldier Creek, however, and my feet were killing me. I was also very nervous about where to camp that evening, as much of the remainder of the trail between here and Chester were off-limits for camping.

Passing through private cow fields that graciously allowed hikers to pass through, I entered National Forest territory and checked my map for what sections I could camp on. Eventually, I found a tiny spot that would fit me, though it was still under some trees that I could not discern the health of. The evening settled in, and I was treated to demonic cows mooing their displeasure, wolves howling their intent to feast, and the farmer's dogs barking back their warnings.

The next morning, I reached the road leading to Chester and quickly got a hitch from the owner of the Antlers Motel, who was dropping Floss off. We joked about how we never actually saw the other person on trail. At this point, the majority of the burn areas were finished, and I just needed one last burst of energy to get me through.

Chapter 9: Chester to Mt Shasta

After leaving Chester, I immediately entered another intense burn, this one owned by a private logging company that was actively removing burnt trees as I walked through. The trail itself, however, was pleasantly flat. This was incredibly welcome for my feet, which were still healing.

A few miles in, I came across a fork of the Feather River, with a sturdy bridge going over it. I decided that eating an early dinner would be a great idea, to avoid carrying extra water until Lassen National Forest, and took up position under the bridge.

As I prepared my ramen, several hikers passed, and I had pleasant conversations with many of them, but before too long my food was ready and I was alone. During my first bite, however, I heard one more hiker walk across the bridge, not having spotted me, and drop their pack on their other side.

I didn't see them again for a few minutes until, on the other side of the river, a woman in just her underwear popped out of the trees on the other side. Since she still hadn't spotted me, I did my best to gently notify her of my presence without scaring her.

Moo was a bit surprised by my gentle "hi", but she waved back and did her best to bathe in the shallow waters I was eating my dinner by. She had had a tough day and was looking forward to this chance. We chatted for a bit until another hiker stomped across the bridge. This was Pitstop, who I last saw in the Sierras, demanding if I had seen Moo or Danger Noodle.

I continued on my own towards the boundary of Lassen National Park. Due to there being very few safe camping spots in this area, when Moo and Pitstop showed up later that evening, I made room for them to sleep next to me.

Lassen National Park had been heavily burned by the fires, and despite the flat trail, hiking was miserable, punctuated only by tepid and gross ponds for water. I heard that Magma was just ahead, however, so I pushed on to attempt to catch up to her.

At Old Station, I hung out with Clementine and Abbey, who I hadn't seen in over 500 miles. I then tackled the intensely hot Hat Creek Rim, nearly succumbing to heat exhaustion due to an ill-advised attempt to wait out the worst of the day in an extremely exposed position with minimal cell service. I was taking this opportunity to order new shoes to the next town, which I desperately needed, but the infuriating spottiness of my cell service made this difficult.

Eventually, Hat Creek Rim ended, aided by the incredible water source “Cache 22”. The evenings were difficult, however, as the muggy heat never dissipated.

On my way into town, I came across Moo and finally met Danger Noodle. A few miles past that, I caught up with Magma and we got a hitch together into Burney, where I convinced her to hang out in town, especially with a record heat wave about to reach us.

In Burney, I found Sweet Cakes, as well as Floss, and again we joked about never actually meeting on trail. We did our best to wait out the heat of the day, but eventually I had to go back out into 112 degree weather, despite running into Guppy, who tried to convince me to stay and play with water guns in town.

I rushed past Burney Falls State Park, wanting to make up for time spent in town, but still rested at each creek I could, as the heat was oppressive. At the final creek for the day, I sat down for dinner before being joined by Rich and Ben, who I last saw early in the desert. As we hiked on a bit more, McMansion and Honeybee caught up to us.

The next day we were climbing over a ridge when wildfire smoke overtook us. I checked my phone to learn of the McKinney fire, which had just broken out on the PCT north of us. This meant that the rest of Northern California after Soda Springs Road was now effectively closed. We digested this information over the next few days while we all made plans on what to do.

The day before making it to Soda Springs, where I planned to hitch into Mt Shasta, I learned there was another fire in central Oregon, meaning that most of the trail in Oregon was closed, albeit in spotty sections, and the Lionshead burn from 2021 still closed parts of Northern Oregon.

I decided I was going to attempt to skip past almost of all of Oregon to Timberline Lodge, finish out Washington, and then come back to clean up any miles that reopened after I finished. When I encountered Moo and Danger Noodle, I let them know my plans. I also had booked a hotel room in Mt. Shasta and invited anyone who needed a place to stay, as most hotels in town were fully booked.

Danger Noodle had family in the area she was going to stay with, but Moo asked if she could join me. Soon after, Pitstop joined us and asked me what my plans were. Behind her, Moo gently shook her head, and this confirmed my long held suspicion that Moo and Danger Noodle had been trying to lose Pitstop for quite some time. I gave a non-committal answer and wished Pitstop the best of luck.

In Mt. Shasta, I found Floss and Magma and invited them to stay with Moo and I. Magma also invited Shapes, who I last saw the day I first met

Pitstop, and the six of us crammed into the same hotel room, doing our best to make the best of the situation.

While I offered to go and do the group's laundry, I contacted Little Hamster. She had quit the trail back in Idyllwild, but later rejoined for parts of it. Her leg injuries, however, eventually took her out. Despite that, she was still hanging out around the trail, working and providing help whenever she could.

Washington has almost no towns to resupply at, so I needed to send resupply boxes in advance. The closest major city was Bend, Oregon, which has always been a favorite of mine. We coordinated a car rental and house rental in Bend, and she drove down to pick my new group up.

Intermission 1 - Mt Shasta and Bend

Once in Bend, we went over to the local Fred Meyers. As Bend is by far a much larger city than anything else I had set foot in over the past few months, this experience was overwhelming. We decided to make the most of this time together, however, and enjoyed cooking for each other, as well as ordering meals we had been dreaming about every day on the PCT.

I also had the pleasure of meeting Morgan, of Blaze Physio, who crashed with us for a bit, and was also reunited with Dobby. As I had shipped out my resupply and was ready to start hiking again, however, I soon said goodbye.

Little Hamster graciously drove myself, Floss, Magma, and Shapes to Timberline Lodge, dropping Floss off at Government Camp on the way, where we once again restarted our hike northbound.

Chapter 10 - Timberline Lodge to Chinook Pass

Shapes, Magma, and I left Timberline Lodge after high-fiving the sign outside. We hiked together to Ramona Falls, and to my surprise, I found Foxy, Trippy, and Divebomb there. Traveling north together, the trail became more and more crowded, as many others also skipped ahead to northern Oregon. Hikers who had already made it to northern Oregon by this point before the fires were vocally annoyed by the crowded conditions.

Due to every reasonable campsite being taken, Magma, Shapes and I chose to spend most nights sleeping in the bushes without setting up our tents. This was a challenge at times, as I was particularly attractive to the mosquitoes that swarmed at sunset. This practice, cowboy camping, was something I did do here and there, but the bugs had been too rough lately for this.

We took a side trail to Tunnel Falls, where Magma and I found a nice swimming hole just before Cascade Locks and made the call to spend the night there. We originally hoped to finally set up our tents before two hikers apologetically asked if they could squeeze in with us. As Sensei and Fluffy had a massive three person tent, we instead cowboy camped along Eagle Creek.

Cascade Locks had a small store and way too many hikers, so I purchased snacks and ice creams for everyone. Together, Magma, Shapes, Foxy, Trippy, and Divebomb walked over the Bridge of the Gods, leaving Oregon for Washington.

The trail remained crowded, and a few miles past our original campsite target Magma, Shapes, and I did our best to find any place we could squeeze ourselves in to sleep in. We started a rhythm where Magma would hike incredibly fast, but take a long nap around noon. Shapes would take lots of breaks because of knee troubles, but hike fairly quickly when he could. I instead took a more leisurely pace, but hiked from sunrise to sunset. Somehow, this perfectly worked out with us camping most nights together and getting chances to eat meals together.

When we got to Panther Creek Campground, there were designated PCT hiker campsites that were free, but as the campsite was overflowing, I paid the hosts for extra campsites that were empty that evening and told them to direct other PCT hikers to any of the now reserved sites. Despite this extra capacity, Magma, Shapes, and I stuck to cowboy camping next to each other, as we only relieved the crowding a slightly.

Early the next morning, I ran into Yeezus and we hugged after not seeing each other for almost a thousand miles at this point. This was also

my 100th day on trail, so I decided to see how hard I could push myself. Additionally, the mosquitoes were infuriating and the mediocre lakes only made things worse.

I aimed for at least 35 miles, to put myself into a good position to get into Trout Lake early, and hiked well into the evening, leaving Magma and Shapes behind. Just shy of 40 miles, I reached Mosquito Creek just before midnight. Exhausted and thankful that Mosquito Creek was shockingly bug free, I crossed over to the other side on the bridge and fell asleep to the distant screams of a mountain lion.

Trout Lake was a short hike from Mosquito Creek. I booked a hotel for the evening and slept off the intense day I just had. I was awoken later by Shapes, who just made it into town and he joined me in the hotel, while I sucked down huckleberry shakes.

We found Magma in Trout Lake the next morning, having just made it in. As I had already been in town a full day, I got a hitch back to the trail ahead of them and climbed around the base of Mt Adams. The water here also became challenging. Despite plenty of glacier flow, much of this was contaminated by fine granite particles, which made the water awful for our filters and for our stomachs.

I pushed up towards Knife's Edge, one of the more treacherous points on trail. Fully intending to tackle it that day, I hiked hard, only to find the most perfect campsite just under Cispus Pass in the early afternoon. I knew I made the right choice to chill for the evening when every hiker who passed mentioned how jealous they were. In deep pain from the last few days, I finally took my first Ibuprofen on the entire trail.

After a quick side trip to Old Snowy Mountain, Shapes and Magma caught up to me and we hiked together once again. Eventually, however, Shapes wanted to head on to White Pass, whereas Magma and I needed a nap. Upon waking up, I was feeling ill, but assured Magma was fine, and she hiked on ahead.

I slept that night on top of an incredibly windy ridge, with incredible views of Mt. Rainier. Waking up, however, I felt even worse, so I slowly made my way into White Pass, where hikers congregated at the gas station.

As the next day was my birthday, Shapes and Magma offered to join me in Packwood, at least for a celebratory meal, but I could not stomach anything. I crashed at a motel in Packwood and despite both of them insisting they would make a few more miles that day, we all picked up a massive dinner I also couldn't eat and settled in for a peaceful night.

The pair wished me a happy birthday upon waking up and I noticed Magma sneak some cans of beer into her pack. We climbed into Mt. Rainier National Park, with my stomach having mixed success. The

mosquitoes intensified again, though not as bad as the Sierras, and we finally set up our tents. Despite not feeling well, I accepted Magma's birthday gift of a beer, and I did my best to drink it while lying down.

Climbing up and over to Chinook Pass, I was exhausted from being unable to eat, yet nausea got worse with each step. I once again called Elleen, who was traveling from Portland to Chicago, and at Chinook Pass I said my goodbyes to Magma and Shapes.

After a few hours, Elleen arrived with her dog Bean and ran over to check on me. As I approached the car, Bean jumped up to greet me and I pulled on the passenger side door. I called over to Elleen to ask if she could unlock the car, and she looked over at me, confused.

Eventually, we realized her dog had somehow manually locked her fairly new RAV4 from the inside. Her keys were unfortunately inside, and the day was growing warm. We ended up calling every authority and ranger we could, but after a few hours no one had showed up.

We then attempted to break into her car window, startling the surrounding tourists until they realized what was going on and they also promised to go get help.

Another hour after that, we were still trying to break in, though with meager success. I had just broken my trekking poles on her windows when a truck pulled up behind us. Miraculously, the driver of the car was someone who specialized in repossessing cars, though he was just there to take his mother to see the wildflowers. He looked at the situation and apologized for doing something so terrible to Elleen's beautiful RAV4.

He pulled out a wrench and easily shattered one of her rear windows, and we reached in to free Bean. The man brought out Gorilla tape and skillfully patched together what was left of her rear window and we thanked him profusely. Elleen drove me, who had wanted to vomit this entire time, to the town of Yakima, where I could go to urgent care. I sent her some money for her car window and thanked her for again saving me. I booked a hotel for a few days and booked a doctor's appointment.

Intermission 2 - Yakima

In Yakima, I finally had a chance to get checked out and found I had mild stomach bleed. With a few more tests and probes, we eventually realized that the Ibuprofen I had been taking since Cispus Pass was causing issues for me. I've always had problems with NSAIDs, but I thought such a small amount of Advil, especially taken with food, wouldn't be an issue.

I ended up spending two full days of rest in Yakima and I gradually regained my appetite. It wouldn't come back fully for another week or so, but the rest did me a world of good. I was sad that I was no longer hiking with Shapes and Magma, but grateful for friends like Elleen who went to so much trouble to help me out on trail.

Chapter 11 - Chinook Pass to Stehekin

I found a Lyft driver who was willing to drive me back to Chinook Pass from Yakima, despite the considerable distance. Since I knew I'd be out of internet service when we got back to the pass, I made sure to bring enough cash to tip generously.

Leaving Chinook Pass I passed several lakes, but skipped them as water sources. I rarely trust stagnant lakes near trailheads, as they are often where illnesses thrive.

The trail was surprisingly empty when I returned, due to PCT Trail Days happening back in Cascade Locks. As a celebration of everything about the trail, people up and down the trail made the effort to hitch to Cascade Locks. After losing several days in Yakima, however, I continued hiking.

Passing the Mike Ulrich hut, I found a few other hikers, but otherwise, I hiked alone through forest roads. I barely had the energy to struggle up even these relatively small hills, but my stomach was able to keep it together.

As I approached Snoqualmie Pass, the trail increased in rockiness. Despite being mostly downhill, my feet were getting torn up and had once again swollen another shoe size past what they already had swollen to.

I also came across many day hikers, which wasn't common so far on the PCT. Because of this, I made extra precautions to avoid the lakes and stuck to running inlets as my water sources.

At Snoqualmie, I hobbled down the ski slopes, wishing I could have used the lifts, and decided on a hotel room instead of the hiker hostel. This ended up becoming a good idea, as quite a few hikers between White Pass and Snoqualmie had come down with something like norovirus. At the hostel, this became somewhat of a disaster. Floss too became ill just ahead of me and needed to get a ride to Seattle to recover.

Despite how much more difficult the trail's elevation and scree fields became, I was still flying past the day hikers, allowing me to see how much stronger I had become over the past few months. The blowdowns in this section intensified, but I was able to make significant progress.

Wanting to catch up to Shapes and Magma, I ignored the pain in my feet, once again returning to 30+ mile days, but this time with a significant amount of elevation gain and loss. This required night hiking, which was a poor idea due to quite a few risky water crossings, but eventually I drew near Stevens Pass.

After racing up one last climb of 1,000 feet of elevation gain in less than

a mile, I enjoyed Stevens Pass' ski lifts and got service again. I found out that Magma was actually behind me, after she went to Trail Days, but Shapes was in Leavenworth, just down the highway from Stevens Pass. His family is from Washington and they picked me up from Stevens Pass and brought me to the Bavarian themed town of Leavenworth.

Shapes and I took two zeroes in Leavenworth after being pretty beat up by the trail after Snoqualmie. We also knew that the trail would remain difficult until the Canadian border, so we stayed off our feet and ate as much as we could get our hands on.

Shapes, having already been in Leavenworth for a day longer than I had, went on ahead of me, expecting that I would eventually catch up. For my final day of rest, I found Foxy, Trippy, Divebomb, and Floss, where I found out that instead of going back to finish up the pieces of the trail that they had missed, they were going to consider their time on the PCT finished for this year once they reached the northern terminus.

While this made sense with the fires in Oregon worsening and not likely to ease up, I was hoping to go back and do as much as I could. As the others were planning to spend an extra day in Leavenworth, I got a hitch out of town from a man who was heading to Seattle to visit his father on his deathbed. Stunned by the man stopping to pick me up, I thanked him profusely and jumped out of the car as soon as I got back to Stevens Pass.

Leaving from Stevens Pass, I almost immediately ran into a group of thru hikers I had briefly met at Timberline Lodge. They explained they were quitting, especially with additional wildfires up north threatening to close parts of the PCT and the wildfires down south still far from being under control. This shook my confidence, but as there were still multiple options to leave the trail coming up, I continued.

I only packed out about 3 days of food between Stevens Pass and the cutoff to Stehekin, but had about a hundred miles to make. I hiked deep into the night, scrambling over rough terrain.

The next day, I carefully made my way across Milk Creek. From other hikers I had heard, this next section was one of the most challenging, with an excessive number of downed trees and deteriorated trail conditions. I spent a significant portion of the day on my hands and knees. I planned to target Fire Creek, but a southbound hiker let me know that Fire Creek was packed for the evening, so I cowboy camped in the trees just south of it.

Early the next morning, I approached Fire Creek for water, only to find it completely empty. I then reached the top of the next pass and immediately regretted not camping up there, as the views were spectacular and the ground was flat.

The trail continued to physically crumble underneath me and lead through mazes of downed trees. I normally targeted about 20 miles by early afternoon to make 30 miles for the day, but without food, I found myself at around mile 17 by the time the sun was setting. I attempted to push on, but multiple days with little sleep left me exhausted and a few more miles in, I surrendered to my fatigue.

After a few more deadfall puzzles, I made it to the junction between the modern PCT route and the old route. While the old route used to be a fun diversion, the fact that the PCT I had already walked on was so under maintained left me completely uninterested in another side trip.

Crossing the Suiattle River, the trail became much smoother, and even with 4,000 feet of elevation gain that morning, the day felt much easier. I ran into weekend hikers coming south, who were navigating some rather mild blowdowns ahead of me. The lead of their hike assured them that this was the worst of the blowdowns and when I was about to correct him, he shot me a dirty look.

The rest of the day was a gentle descent as fighter jets practiced overhead. I ran into Misplaced and White Stripe, neither of whom I'd seen in months, who introduced me to Stellar Jay, and we made it just shy of the cutoff to Stehekin.

Chapter 12 - Stehekin to Rock Pass

Stehekin is inaccessible by roads and rests on the western shore of Lake Chelan. Typically, visitors take a ferry or seaplane from the eastern side, but hikers can walk in from the trail, which is on the west side of Stehekin. As the walk into town is fairly long, Stehekin provides a free shuttle from the trailhead, which I made just in time. It briefly stopped by Stehekin Valley Ranch, as well as the legendary Stehekin Bakery. Both were exceedingly welcome stops, as I had run out of food the night before.

I intended to resupply in Stehekin, but once we reached Stehekin proper, the town was absolutely packed. It had gotten to where rangers were asking any hikers who could leave to do so. I knew that in about a day, I'd reach Rainy Pass where I might be able to get a hitch to the tiny town of Mazama, so I packed out some extra bakery goods and returned to the trailhead.

The rest of the trail between Stehekin and Rainy Pass was in North Cascades National Park, which only allowed PCT hikers to camp in two specific campsites. I picked the one I thought I could make it to with the amount of day I had left. Upon reaching there, the campsite was also packed with hikers, so I found a small spot on the edge and planned to wake up early.

Compared to the previous sections of trail, the final 15 miles to Rainy Pass were a breeze, and before too long I ran into Honeybee, sans-McMansion, and we hitched into Mazama. I stopped by the bakery and enjoyed it much more than the one in Stehekin. It was already late afternoon, so I stayed in Mazama for the evening and went over to Lion's Den. Lion's Den was a home owned by a former PCT hiker who allowed hikers to stay during the PCT hiking season. With the fires causing havoc, this generosity was extra appreciated.

Knocking on the door, an older man opened the door and invited me in. I blinked and realized that it was Ghost, a trail angel I had met my very first week of the PCT. He and his wife were supporting another hiker and planning to drive her back down to San Diego when she finished.

I showered, did my laundry, and walked back into town, where I hung out with Rich and Ben. They had been just ahead of me for the past few weeks and they had just returned to Mazama after reaching the Canadian border. As I went back to Lion's Den, I heard someone softly call out my name, and I was reunited with Bandit. We hung out for on the side of the road well past dark, chatting before bed.

As the fires north were intensifying and threatening to close the PCT, I left early the next day, intending to get to the border the day after. After

Rainy Pass, the trail was beautiful, but the wildfire smoke was settling in the valley and anxiety ran up and down the trail.

I made it to Grasshopper Pass at sunset and setup for the night. I was only 37 miles away from the border and vowed to finish up the rest of Washington the next day.

Harts Pass, a difficult to reach pass by vehicle even in the best of times, had rangers organizing cars as a recent landslide had made access challenging. The rangers were also nervous, but optimistic about the fire situation, so I trekked northwards. As entry into Canada from the United States was closed this year, hikers returning from tagging the border cheered me on as they returned to Harts Pass. The first of which was Mug, who I last saw on my very first day. He had been ahead of me almost the entire trail and wished me the best of luck, warning that the smoke would get worse.

Walking into the Pasaytan Wilderness, I looked at the border, where the smoke clouds made an eerie scene. I congratulated a few more hikers I knew on their way back to the border, including White Stripe, who decided not to stay in Mazama.

Around 15 miles from the Canadian border, I was making great time when I saw a hiker I had been around for most of Washington. I was about to congratulate him on reaching the monument when I noticed his sullen demeanor, and he informed me that the trail north was now closed. I hiked on, as he told me to confirm with the rangers that were up ahead, where I found them comforting a woman who was sobbing. They let me know that fire was visible from the trail just up ahead. Apologizing, they let me know that I'd need to turn around, since I was technically inside of a fire closure.

I was sad to have to turn around, but the mood as I made my way back to safety was extremely somber. I did my best to be there for others, but as I wasn't as heartbroken as many of the people around me - especially as this wasn't the end of my time on the PCT - I felt less than effective and instead camped on my own that evening. The next day, I ran into Shapes, who had been just behind me. He planned on at least making it to the edge of the fire closure, but let me know to wait for him at Harts Pass.

At Harts Pass, locals from Wenatchee had set up a kitchen, providing pancakes and hot chocolate. Because Harts Pass was the closest road to the border, many hikers who were behind me stopped here. With that said, the difficult access to the road meant that getting hitches took a significant amount of time. Several hikers flagged down every vehicle they could find that was willing to drive hikers down from Harts Pass, while I kept a list of hikers and the order they signed up for a hitch.

Here, I ran to hug Magma, and we caught up as the number of hikers stranded on Harts Pass diminished. After returning from PCT Days, Magma had found a new group she was tight with, and they planned to return to Cascade Locks and hike south. I also glimpsed Misplaced and Stellar Jay, before they found their ride down.

When Shapes returned from the border, he let me know that his mother was on her way. Before too long, I had my ride not just to Mazama, but all the way back to Seattle. I left my list with some other hikers and walked them through the process, and we took the next few people on the list down with us. We did a pit stop in Mazama, relishing the bakery goods one more time, and began the long drive to Seattle.

Intermission 3 - Seattle, Ashland, and Mt Shasta

When we reached Seattle, we helped the hikers who rode in with us find accommodations. I had booked a hotel near the airport, so Shapes insisted on driving me personally from his home in Marysville. We picked up some food on the way back and we hugged goodbye, as we had different plans on how to tackle the remaining miles on the trail.

Bandit and I had planned to reconnect once I reached Seattle, so we hung out with one of her friends. Interestingly, I found out her friend was not only a coworker, but someone I had guided through the interview process a year before. I also met up with another coworker who had just started on my team who lived in the area.

Surprisingly, all of Northern California and most of Oregon had reopened. With this in mind, I originally planned to fly to Redding or take the train back to Dunsmuir/Mt. Shasta. Checking on a whim, however, I noticed that a rental car from Seattle to Redding was just a few dollars a day. I rented the car and first drove down to Ashland.

I would return to Ashland before too long via the trail, but this time was just to plan for my final leg of the journey and to spend the night before continuing back to Northern California. After dropping off my car in Redding, I got a ride back to where I had left the trail in Mt. Shasta. I took an extra day to rest in Mt. Shasta, as a heat wave brought 100 degree temps and intensified the fire and smoke along the trail.

Chapter 13 - Mt Shasta to Ashland

I attempted to take a bus back from Mt Shasta to the trailhead instead of a hitch. This ended with me walking along the shoulder of the busy-ish I-5, hoping I didn't join the roadkill or get pulled over by a cop.

Making it back to Soda Springs Road, I looked at where I had left Northern California, in what felt like a lifetime ago. Then, I turned back north, climbing into Castle Crag. The smoke was much better than yesterday, and I felt as though I could at least hike without coughing.

As I ascended Castle Crag, the world behind me disappeared and I soon found myself eerily alone on the trail. On even the most obscure sections of the PCT, I'd at least see one or two other thru hikers during the day, but I hiked for hours without seeing anyone.

This worked out in my favor, as I swatted away biting gnats, slapping my face as they entered my nostrils. I then panicked as a sudden storm appeared as I was about to reach a very exposed saddle and ran back down to relative safety.

After the storm passed and I collected myself, I reluctantly climbed back up. The heat had only intensified during the storm, and I ran out of water with few water sources remaining ahead. One of the best sources I found was quite fascinating, as carnivorous cobra lilies surrounded it, but the rest of the trail between here and Etna had little reliable water.

The heat brought out the rattlesnakes, who welcomed me back to California, but the beginning of September also saw the bears more active, as they attempted to find food before winter came. The sight of Mt Shasta kept me company, as the bears and I rode the ledges north into the Russian Wilderness.

This section had me at an all-time low, as isolation and discomfort sunk deep into my soul. At one point, I broke down and had to talk myself into continuing, as I was too tired to feel motivated on my own. After messaging Elleen on my satellite device, I had enough strength to push on. As I crossed a dirt road trailhead, I predictably saw nobody and my heart sank further, as I was dying for any conversation.

On the other side of the trailhead, I noticed someone had formed an arrow out of sticks, pointing to the right side of the trail. I followed a few more arrows about 20 feet off the trail and found a lockbox someone had left full of Gatorades, snacks, and medical supplies. This brought me incredible joy and tears to my eyes.

Over time, the air began to clear, but the stinging insects came out in force. I had gone from never in my life being stung by any bee, wasp, or

hornet to having several in a few hours. Still having not seen any other people for two days, I was worried about having a reaction. Thankfully, I was about an hour out from a road that an emergency vehicle could likely reach.

At the road, I finally met another person - a couple out on a day hike. They lived in Etna, the town I was going to next, and the husband, Jerry, had hiked the PCT a few decades ago. Knowing they lived in Etna, I asked them for a favor. The gear store closed early afternoon on Saturday and would be closed until Monday. As I was likely to reach Etna around Saturday, but was unsure if I'd be able to find a hitch on the low traffic road that led to Etna, I asked if I could pay them to purchase a fuel canister I needed and drop it off at the front desk of the motel I was planning on staying at.

Jerry smiled and said "No, but I can buy one for you, not take your money, and give you a ride into town myself". With his number in tow, I continued, thankful for this interaction. That evening, I found a campsite that absolutely would have been packed normally, as it was in a perfect little nook of the woods, next to a beautiful creek. Instead, it was eerily silent.

A few turns on the trail before Etna, I met Janika, who also was deprived of human contact for the last few days, and she spoke nonstop for hours as we hiked together. She had already resupplied at Etna, back at the road where I first met Jerry, so she was planning on continuing. When I arrived at the usual hitching spot to Etna, the road was empty, so I called Jerry.

About half an hour later, Jerry arrived at the trailhead with a fuel canister, ice cold sodas, and a few candy bars. I gratefully accepted his gift, though I gave the sodas to the parched Janika, and we drove into the town of Etna. Here, I learned that there was a supposedly a new fire north of Seiad Valley, my next destination. Expecting this to close off the last bit of Northern California and with the fires still raging in Oregon, I figured that this would be the end. I was so sure this was the end that I announced to some friends that I was done with the PCT.

Derek, who worked at the Etna motel, heard me out as I explained why I was quitting. He told me to wait while he contacted some CalFire workers who were staying in town. They informed me they didn't think the fire reported above Seiad Valley existed and was instead an incorrectly filed report. That evening, it also rained heavily in Oregon. These two factors gave me the tiniest sliver of hope and with that, I left Etna to see what the conditions were like in Seiad Valley.

The trail once again had no people, but brought even more bear encounters. They weren't interested in me, however, and made a run for it as I approached, as they searched for more late season food. On the way

to Seiad Valley, the trail became overgrown with poison oak, and avoiding the poison oak required keeping an eye out for rattlesnakes that hid right off the side of the trail.

Eventually, I made it past the poison oak to an established campsite right outside Seiad. The campsite was large and well-used, but was completely empty when I spent the night there.

Early in the morning, I was packing up and perked up to the voice of Stellar Jay coming down the trail behind me. She introduced me to her hiking partner, Unfiltered, and I realized I had already met Unfiltered. Not on the PCT, but during a winter hiking skills course in Colorado earlier that year.

We walked down to Seiad Valley, chasing off the neighborhood dogs who desperately wanted to bite us, ignoring the stares of the less than hospitable locals. The general store, despite being partially closed from one of the workers falling ill, was much more welcoming, and we hung out at the picnic tables until the worst of the heat passed.

The ridge climb out of Seiad Valley was a challenge, but before too long, we found a large flat area above a spring and spread out our camping gear for the evening. Late in the evening, some southbound hikers joined us and we congratulated them on making to California, and they congratulated us on almost finishing.

I got stung several more times on my last day in California, which left me semi-delirious. This surreal feeling was only heightened when I suddenly heard bells all around me, with no apparent source in sight. Eventually, I realized the trail went through a cow field, and the creepy bell noises were actually from cowbells.

As I made the ultimate last climb out of California to the Oregon border, I found Janika sitting at the sign. We sat in relative silence for a prolonged time until Unfiltered and Stellar Jay joined us. After reflecting for just a bit more, we raced out of California and the trail eventually took us to Highway 99, where we rode into Ashland

Intermission 4 - Ashland

Upon arriving in Ashland, I found out that my previous hiking partner, Cool Rocks, was also in Ashland, albeit going southbound. I wanted to meet up with her, but I had slightly inflamed tonsils and a sore throat, so before hanging out I got a covid test. It came out negative, and she insisted it would be alright, so later that evening we ordered pizza to her room and caught up on everything that had happened since we last hiked together.

The next day, I was supposed to get a ride with Cool Rocks out of town, but my throat hurt even more, so I texted her to go on without me. I visited a local doctor who verified I was negative for both covid and strep. While he confirmed my tonsils were slightly enlarged and my throat was irritated, he also said he doubted I had an illness, and figured that breathing in wildfire smoke had caused my issues. As rain was continuing to fall on Oregon, he assured me that the air quality should improve soon and encouraged me to continue hiking.

Chapter 14 - Ashland to Timberline Lodge

I returned to the highway where I had ridden into town just as a storm started. Despite the dismal weather, I still ran into several dayhikers enjoying a trip to Pilot Rock. I needed to press on, however, as Hyatt Lake Resort, where I had sent one of my resupply boxes, was over 20 miles away and closed at 8 PM.

Pushing myself through a terrifying storm, as well as through fields that created micro-tears on my hands and legs, I made it to Hyatt Lake by 6:30, ecstatic to have made it in time. I ran into Sensei and Fluffy, who let me know the office was about a mile and a half away from the hiker's campground, and ran to the office as fast as I could, only to find it had closed early that particular day.

I returned to camp, dejected, and did my best to warm up as the rain started up again and the temperature sank.

The store opened at 8 AM the next morning, which was usually a few hours after I had already started hiking, so I was waiting outside for quite some time. Eventually, however, one owner invited me in and brought out my box. She also offered to make me breakfast, which I gratefully accepted before heading out for the day.

The rain let up a bit, and reliable water sources were lacking for this next section. Constant droughts in southern Oregon had caused once reliable springs to dry up.

Climbing one of my last hills for the day, I spotted a familiar face hiking down to me. Magma and I hugged, both of us soaked and her exhausted beyond belief as she was trying to see how far she could hike if she hiked for 24 hours non-stop in a single day. She was already at mile 40 and would make it another 12 miles by the time her 24 hours were up.

She sat down and we briefly caught up, sharing plans for what we'd do once we returned to society, but she eventually needed to continue before the rain got worse. On the other side of the hill, I ran into her hiking group, also attempting this challenge. As we were traveling in different directions, the reunions with Cooking Mama and Ricochet were short, but sweet.

As the rain let up, I reached the South Brown Mountain shelter. Inside, however, quite a few hikers had already claimed most spots. The weather was improving, so I decided to set up my tent outside and made use of the fantastic water spigot in the shelter.

That evening brought a deluge, and I woke up several times to water splashing me awake. This wasn't water leaking through my tent, but rather the rain becoming so heavy and humid that condensation built

up on everything.

When the rain finally let up, it was morning, and I began to pack. I briefly opened my electronics dry bag, which had held up through the night. When I opened it, however, the condensation immediately built up inside and I was suddenly holding a bag full of water. The batteries I used to charge my phone and camera were completely waterlogged and the despair was palpable.

Shortly after leaving the shelter, the trail turned into the infamously painful lava rocks of central Oregon. I barely noticed, however, as I needed to figure out how to replace my battery banks. 10 miles later, I crossed Highway 140, which hikers normally ignored, as it was a long drive to Medford to the west and Klamath Falls to the east. There also was a resort nearby that hikers normally resupplied at, but it was closed at this point in the season.

Expecting nothing, I stuck out my thumb on the westbound side of the highway, doing my best to show how pathetic and soaked I was. Before too long, a woman picked me up on the condition that I'd monitor her puppies in the back seat. She drove me to Medford, where I was able to pick up new batteries and dispose of my old ones properly, and paid for a very expensive Lyft ride back to trail.

The climb up towards Mt. McLoughlin was enjoyable until the sky grew dark as I left tree cover. Extremely close lightning strikes sent me back down to the tree line. My map showed that the next few miles were at higher elevation, so I hunkered down until the storm weakened.

A hiker coming from the north spotted me and I waved back at him. I asked him if the next few miles were better sheltered than the trees I was in and he said that there was a brief mile long gap that was exposed, but everything after that seemed much safer than where I was. I thanked him and continued, attempting to run past the exposed section as fast as possible. As I reached the end of that section, the storm came back with hail and lightning and I reached the "safer" section, only to realize that I was now in a burn, which was significantly less safe than where I was previously hiding out.

The next section on the map went up and over a peak and heading back through the exposed section was not an option, so I got as low as I could and waited out the worst of the storm. As the storm ended, I climbed back up to the trail and set up camp in the middle of the burn, with too little energy to worry anymore.

Morning came as a cold shock and I hiked through the lonely burn, towards Crater Lake. Once again, I needed to make it to my resupply at Crater Lake National Park before it closed, so I did my best to ignore my fatigue and the cold and hiked as fast as my body would allow me.

On the way, I ran into Moo coming southbound and we caught up briefly, before I let her know I needed to make it to Crater Lake and she ushered me on. I walked through more burns, until I reached the roads that would lead me to Mazama Village, where my resupply package was.

The next day I enjoyed a walk alongside the roads of Crater Lake until I rejoined the PCT near the northern border of the park. This next section was extraordinarily dry, but Devilfish, the same trail angel who maintained water caches in the desert, also had several water caches here in Oregon. His herculean efforts to keep these caches filled with water likely made these otherwise miserable sections much more bearable.

Before the day was over, I ran into Yeezus going southbound, and we traded advice on the next sections. Soon after, I crept down to Thielson Creek and watched the stars under a frozen night. The next morning, I crossed paths with Lefty, who updated me on some of what my trail family had gotten up to since we were all separated by the wildfires.

I had gotten new shoes at Crater Lake, and the new shoes were unfortunately causing major blisters. As I was so close to the end, however, I ignored the pain and a two days later I made it to Willamette Pass where Little Hamster, who had just moved to Portland, was waiting for me.

The next section was now closed by a new fire, so she drove me to Sisters, where I picked up my resupply and I returned to the trail at Santiam Pass. This technically skipped some open sections of trail between Devil's Lake Trailhead and Santiam, but as I had hiked through the Three Sisters Wilderness many times before, I wasn't too concerned with missing these miles.

For the next few days, I hiked through what felt like endless burns. The only part of the landscape that changed was the towering figure of Mt. Jefferson as the trail went around it. Most days were eerily quiet and multiple times I awoke with a start, not because of a noise, but from the realization that it was too quiet. Several nights I slept by a pond, hoping for the slightest sound to prevent me from going crazy, but there was only silence.

Past Ollalie, which was closing for the season, my feet went from excruciating pain to something even beyond that. There was no way to prevent blisters and the constant downpour made me concerned about trench foot. I reached Highway 35 in the dark, rain still pouring. I was only five miles away from Timberline Lodge, but as a car passed by, I stuck out my thumb, not expecting much.

Instead, the car screeched to a halt, and the driver ushered me in. He took me about six miles down the road to Government Camp, where I thanked him for picking me up and I booked a hotel room to dry off.

While this stay was extremely unnecessary, allowing my feet to get some rest made the world of difference and the next day I walked the road from Government Camp up the hill to Timberline Lodge.

At Timberline Lodge, I walked up to the sign I had skipped up to several weeks prior and gently rested my hand on it. With this, I had finished up every mile on the PCT that wasn't closed and I walked into the Timberline Lodge buffet to wait for Little Hamster to pick me up and take me to the Portland airport.

Afterword

Whenever things got really hard on the PCT, I would use this trick where I would imagine that I was already done. When I imagined the end, I expected it to be at the Canadian border. I saw myself surrounded by friends, with having completed every single step of the PCT.

When I actually got to the end, none of that was true. I showed up to the Timberline Lodge parking lot. It was filled with tourists and of the 2,650 miles of the PCT, I had to miss about 63 miles due to fire closures.

And yet, that single trick carried me so much farther than I ever thought I could make it.

Even better than imagining the end, the PCT has given me a new trick - remembering what I've gone through. I'm writing this more than a year since I finished my hike of the PCT and I'm surprised by how well I can remember each and every moment.

A lot of it sucked. I've included some of the worst days, but I've also cut out the banal, monotonous suckage. My friends can attest to how often I complained about the same stupid things again and again and again.

I also didn't include every meaningful person I met, rather focusing on my main companions, as well as a few special guests who intertwined themselves into my story in interesting ways. And despite many rounds of editing, focusing on removing the unnecessary, this still ended up longer than I expected.

With all of that said, if I have conveyed anything to you, it's that the PCT has meant everything to me. If I can convince a single person to go out for a really long hike, I will have succeeded here.

If you do, I hope that your long hike means everything to you too.

– Ask Jeeves