



Ionian Basin

IN THE LAND OF ROCKS

By Peter Stekel

The first recorded visit to the Ionian Basin was by a young man from San Francisco. Theodore Solomons was all of 25 years old when he concocted the crazy notion that a trail linking Mount Whitney and Yosemite should be constructed and named in honor of his hero John Muir. He resolved to survey the route and prove it could be done.

After climbing Mount Goddard in a snow storm following his third foray into the Sierra Nevada, Solomons wrote, "At half-past one this gorge lay directly south of us, and in an hour we had descended to its head, which we found was guarded by a nearly frozen lake, whose sheer ice-smoothed walls arose on either side, up and up, seemingly into the very sky, their crowns two sharp black peaks of most majestic form. A Scylla and a Charybdis they seemed to us, as we stood at the margin of the lake and wondered how we might pass the dangerous portal."

Solomons, along with his companion Ernest Bonner, were pioneering the route between Mount Goddard and Simpson Meadow. The year was 1895. On the same trip they christened the Evolution Valley (and its circle of peaks named for prominent geneticists), Enchanted Gorge, and Disappearing Creek. For many years I looked at the old 15 minute Mount Goddard quad, read the names, and dreamed of trips. With those kinds of names, who wouldn't want to visit the area? Smack-dab in the middle of the map lay the Ionian Basin, a steep-walled gouge in the rock, with sheer, ice-smoothed walls and a nearly frozen lake. The Goddard quad is gloriously devoid of green. It is a land of rocks and little else.

The Ionian Basin, in Kings Canyon National Park, must be one of the most remote areas in the Sierra Nevada. By some accounts, fewer than 50 people a year get in there. Inaccessibility is the reason; Ionian Basin is just plain difficult to get to. It is a hard, three-day hike—minimum—from any direction. Maybe that's why I've gone there three times over the past 20 years.

The fastest way in is from the South Lake trailhead (elevation 9,760 feet) over Bishop Pass (11,972 feet) and down into LeConte Canyon (8,700 feet), then up to Helen Lake (11,595 feet) just below Muir Pass. That's 15 miles before the cross-country hiking begins. From there, follow Black Giant Pass (12,200 feet) into what Solomons called "The Rotunda."

You can also try taking the ferry across Florence Lake (7,238 feet), hiking to McClure Meadow (9,600 feet), and then up Evolution Valley (10,993 feet) to Muir Pass (11,955 feet). That's about 25 miles, but with less up and down. However, there is the difficult drive to Florence Lake to be considered. It's not for the fearful or for automobiles in poor condition.

Then, there is always the route Solomons and Bonner took out of the Basin. Down Enchanted Gorge from nearly frozen Chasm Lake (11,400 feet), bushwhacking

along Disappearing Creek to the willow and whitethorn thickets above Simpson Meadow (5,910 feet). The easy way out from there is over Granite Pass (10,673 feet) to Cedar Grove (4,635 feet). That's certainly not the best route in, or out, and people have been known to break things going that way: pack frames, arms, legs...

I've done the first two routes (they are hard enough) and never the third. Maybe I'm not tough enough. That's OK.

Once you are in the Basin there isn't much you can do except climb the peaks and marvel at their majesty. I've never been as scared in my life as the time I climbed 13,091-foot-high Charybdis (moderate class 3). We had ascended the wrong couloir and gained the ridge about a half mile too soon. Our only route towards the peak was to straddle the knife-edge ridge. Looking down I could see a thousand-foot drop on either side of me. Talk about sliding down the razor blade of life! I thought of Homer's words describing the original Charybdis, a whirlpool of black water, "Don't you be there when she swallows! No one could save you from destruction!"

Scylla (12,939 feet) is there too, and she's a solid class 2 climb. The Three Sirens, pinnacles east of Scylla, are class 4 and no fun. The Enchanted Gorge gives access to Black Divide and Devils Crag. This long series of pinnacles and arêtes is challenging and deeply dangerous for the inexperienced mountaineer. During my 1978 trip to Ionian Basin, I crossed Black Divide by way of climbing Mount McDuffie (13,271 feet) to Ladder Lake. Looking at it last year, I could not see how I did it or which route I took.

The Ionian Basin, The Rotunda, is so small that you can cross it easily in half a day; but, you would miss the fun of exploring

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Chasm Lake is a narrow finger of water that marks the entrance to Enchanted Gorge.

Photo by Peter Stekel

the lakes, which sit on edges of ledges, much the same as markers on a 3-D checker board.

After heavy winters, late September still finds a snow bridge extending across the mouth of Chasm Lake, that narrow body of water that marks the entrance to Enchanted Gorge. During a lightening storm, I saw a bolt of electricity come straight down out of the sky and split in two. One branch struck the ice-smoothed walls on the east side, and the other walloped the west side of canyon above the snow bridge. The crash of thunder jarred my senses, and the echo rolled around The Rotunda for a full minute.

Camping spots are limited and of poor quality. I suggest you choose your campsite based on view. After finding your place, early the next morning take an extended day hike and climb Mount Goddard (13,568 feet). Solomons described the peak as, "a greenish-black, ugly monster of a mountain, looking like some shaggy buffalo seated on its haunches..." The southwest ridge is class 2; the view from the summit is "to die for."

Getting there is fun, exhausting work. Follow your map and compass west of Chasm Lake over the only possible route that presents itself. Climb to Lake 11,700+, then to Lake 11,824. Cross this divide and descend to Lake 12,000+, a deep, long, rectangular body of water that holds ice and snow well past summer and into fall. Note along the way the lack of any vegetation taller than your ankle. The black rock shimmers in the heat of day. Bring an ice axe if you get nervous on steep, snowy, slopes.

The mass of Mount Goddard is clearly visible to the north, as is an obvious saddle to its right. Once clear of Lake 12,000+, the real work begins: nearly 1,500 vertical feet of scree, sand, and talus up to and above the saddle. Take your time, breathe deeply the thinning atmosphere, and you'll get there. North is Evolution Valley; and on a clear day, Mounts Ritter and Banner in Yosemite are visible. East is the Sierra crest, south is Kings Canyon, above is the azure sky, and west is smoggy San Joaquin Valley.

All that is left after this is to find your way home to camp and boil water for dinner.

Every time I've visited Ionian Basin there has been that mix of weather so defining of the Sierra. Frigid, frosty, nights that yield slowly to mornings where the refrigerated air is so still that a flaming match does not flicker.

As the sun rises, it eventually surmounts the rim of canyon peaks, and now begins the slow drip, drip, drip of water melting on the black rock. Finally, in the full glory of afternoon, it is so hot and dry that your sweat is gone before your shirt is wet.

You are fooled into a leisurely lunch atop the peak. Clouds begin to form (don't they look so pretty!), and by late afternoon the puffy white things have joined hands with their brethren to create thunder-boomers. The heavens open up with torrents of rain. Hail, the size of lima beans, pelts you. Then, with a huge breath of wind, it all blows away and leaves the sun shining once more with just enough time before sunset to dry your gear.

Travel to the Ionian Basin is not for the inexperienced. If you are to be among the lucky 50 that make it, it will take time and planning and the ability to follow map and compass over rough and tumble terrain. The lakes are there, and so are the peaks. Make sure your passing is like that of others who have journeyed there before you. Let no one ever know your feet have trod this land of rocks.

Peter Stekel makes it a point to hike as much as possible in the "Three K" drainages of the southern Sierra Nevada: Kings, Kern, and Kaweah.

GETTING THERE Ionian Basin

From east of the Sierra: Take Highway 395 to Bishop. Follow State Route 168 east towards Lake Sabrina and turn onto South Lake Road in about 15 miles at a well-marked intersection. After six miles and passing numerous small USFS campgrounds and a few lodges and resorts, arrive at the South Lake trailhead for Bishop Pass. Overnight parking is limited.

From the west: Don't forget an excellent highway map and bring along your best driving skills. Take State Route 168 (yes, I know, "but it doesn't go all the way through") west from Fresno, past Shaver Lake, to Huntington Lake. Turn onto Kaiser Pass Road. After about 15 miles, the road narrows, then forks and quality begins to deteriorate. Take the right fork and drive about seven miles to Florence Lake and the Blaney Meadows trail.

From the south: Enter Kings Canyon National Park on Highway 180 from Fresno at Grant Grove (entrance fee required). Continue on Highway 180 to where it ends (a few miles past Cedar Grove) at the Granite Pass trailhead.

The town of Bishop has markets, gas stations, restaurants, camping, and lodging. Services are limited at Cedar Grove to campgrounds, a small hotel, and an even smaller market. Nearest gas is at Hume Lake. There isn't much at Florence Lake, but check their web site before you leave home. <http://www.muirtrailranch.com/Florence.html>. For: trail conditions, permits, etc., contact:

Sequoia-Kings Canyon National Parks
559/ 565-3341

Distance: Approximately 24 miles from Chasm Lake by way of Bishop Pass and Dusy Basin (most direct route)
Elevation: Ionian Basin at Chasm Lake is 11,050
Maps: USGS Mt. Goddard 7.5 Min.

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