



Coast Range Chronicles 15: “Summit”

by

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We start along the creek in the morning. The air is crisp, patches of frost coating the thick alluvial soil. The trail is narrow and straight. Water rushes through the canyon, the sun hidden behind the riparian canopy.

Our pace is leisurely and we worry about nothing. The conversation is easy. We laugh. We drink coffee. We feel good, our legs strong. The summit lurks in the distance, a moderate hike.

The trail leaves the creek and switches back up the slope. As we climb, riparian forest yields to scattered Douglas-fir, madrone, and coast live oak and then to coastal scrub: sagebrush, monkeyflower, coyote brush. The sunlight shines bright and strong, the air suddenly warm.

As the pitch steepens, conversation fades to sweat and strain and the first hints of fatigue. We hike throughout the morning, mostly in silence, boots pounding on the rocky soil. A few vague comments about passing wildlife.

The sun is overhead when we stop for lunch. We chew and drink and gaze down the canyon. A red-tailed hawk soars on invisible thermals. A gopher snake slithers through the scrub.

We continue up the trail. The summit draws closer. The dull ache in our limbs surges to throbbing spasms, but the impending goal propels us forward. We crest a ridge and see that we've been salivating over the wrong peak. The real summit looms behind it.

We stare in disbelief. We check the map: serious ground to cover and not much time to cover it. We shrug and grumble and resume hiking.

The trail narrows and disappears into tall scrub. As if the trail crews just gave up and headed back down. For a time we bushwhack in irritated confusion. We curse and mutter. The trail reemerges but we're starting to worry about daylight, question whether to turn back.

But we're too close to give up. We push on.

The trail vanishes again and we scramble over bare rock. We suck wind and force ourselves upward, fighting collapse. There seems no obvious path to the summit. Rock cairns are scattered around but arranged in a pattern that defies reason.

We follow the most logical topography and finally reach the summit.

The view is tremendous. Mountains to the north, south, and east, ocean to the west, stringers of forest in the canyons, scrub-covered slopes. We exchange high-fives, offer token platitudes that evaporate quickly in the mountain air.

The sun is disturbingly low for comfort. After all the uphill travail we spend an even five minutes on the summit.

Reluctantly we hoof back down. Our bones feel like glass. The sun drops lower. We do calculations of time and distance. We don't like the product of the calculations. Our exchanges get testier. An old beef or two is trotted out and argued over and then shoved back in the closet. We're out of food and water and we've mismanaged the whole hike.

Last night we checked the topo map, but only in half-assed fashion. This morning we tossed provisions into our packs in equally half-assed fashion.

We're half-assed individuals.

We hike faster now. The sun sets over the western ridge. We hurry through the twilight. The rock and scrub fade to gray. We stumble over loose ground, plow face-first into branches, nearly step off a cliff.

The sky is black when we reach the campground. We're scraped and bruised and hungry and thirsty and exhausted.

We head straight for the cooler and the chilling beer therein and halfway through the first cold ale we're planning the next hike.

Something tougher.