



AAC Publications

The King Spur Traverse

United States, California, Sierra, Kings Canyon National Park

Looking south from the summit of Mt. Clarence King early on the second day of the King Spur Traverse (VI 5.8). In the foreground, crisply silhouetted, is the remainder of the route, first running straight away from the camera over Mt. Cotter and then hooking right on the ridge crest to Mt. Gardiner. The horizon is partially obscured by smoke from the first days of the KNP Complex fire in September 2021. Photo by Jediah Porter.

In 2002, the same year I first visited the High Sierra, Claude Fiddler provocatively wrote in *Climbing California's High Sierra*, "Off the top of my head I can think of... two grand traverses still waiting to be done!" Fiddler didn't name these traverses, however, and his words prompted a decade of map scouring and AAJ investigations.

In 2012, I finally found a contender for one of the mystery traverses: the entirety of Kings Canyon National Park's King Spur. This is the ridge crest that starts near the John Muir Trail (JMT) suspension bridge over Woods Creek, summits Mt. Clarence King (12,861') and Mt. Cotter (12,719'), and finishes on Mt. Gardiner (12,907'), staying on the crest the whole way. [Editor's Note: Fiddler confirmed in an email that this was one of the traverses he had in mind.] I tried it that year with Alex Few, but we bailed for time and weather reasons before reaching Peak 3,760m, en route to Mt. Clarence King.

I didn't get back to finish the King Spur until September 2021, this time with Dave Riggs, whom I guided under the auspices of International Alpine Guides. Dave's history with Sierra traverses is way longer than mine. Between 1993 and 1997, he and three others did the complete Palisades Traverse and a long version of the Minarets Traverse.

The first half of the King Spur follows the complete north ridge of Mt. Clarence King. Dave and I left the JMT about 0.8 mile south of the Woods Creek bridge and climbed the crest over Peaks 3,722m and 3,760m to the summit of Clarence King. This section took us a day and a half and included a couple of dozen pitches up to 5.8, two fifth-class summit monoliths (one 5.6, one 5.8), two really cool-looking towers that we couldn't figure out how

to summit within our risk tolerance, one super-loose downclimbing section, and a lakeside bivy 500' off the crest. (Note to future parties: It would be wise to rappel the loose downclimbing segment; bring something more than a single 30m rope.) The only description of any of this terrain we could find in an extensive literature review was R.J. Secor's notes on the north ridge of Clarence King (5.4), in *The High Sierra: Peaks, Passes, Trails*, describing the last 10 percent or so of what we did.

The coolest part of the route was the full north ridge of Mt. Cotter, most of which was not described anywhere we could find. We climbed and rappelled through three spectacular towers and navigated the best ridge pitch I've ever done in the High Sierra: Picture the knobs of Lake Tahoe's Phantom Spires, but untouched and in the middle of silent Kings Canyon's wilderness. None of it had signs of prior travel. The traverse from Cotter's north peak to its true summit is described in guidebooks and online, and is as spectacular as the rest.

After Mt. Cotter, we followed the crest, mainly via walking terrain, passing dozens of bighorn sheep beds. We had another lakeside bivy (also off the crest by 500') as our route hooked past the end of the actual King Spur and eventually joined Mt. Gardiner's amazing east ridge (4th class). Gardiner was

our final summit. We walked out the long way, through a deserted 60 Lakes Basin and the smoky trails of Upper Woods Creek and Paradise Valley. In all, we spent six days in the mountains, from September 11 to 16.

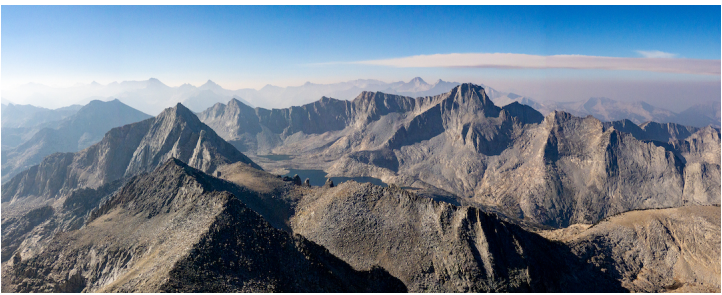
Compared with other High Sierra traverses, the King Spur Traverse (VI 5.8) is a step up from Thunderbolt to Sill, but not quite as long or hard as the Evolution Traverse. It covers seven miles and has 8,300' of vertical gain. The availability of lake water near the route makes it a suitable late-season alternative to some of the higher and drier options. Its approach and exit, no matter which side you use, are longer than those of any of the modern traverse classics.

— **Jediah Porter**

Images



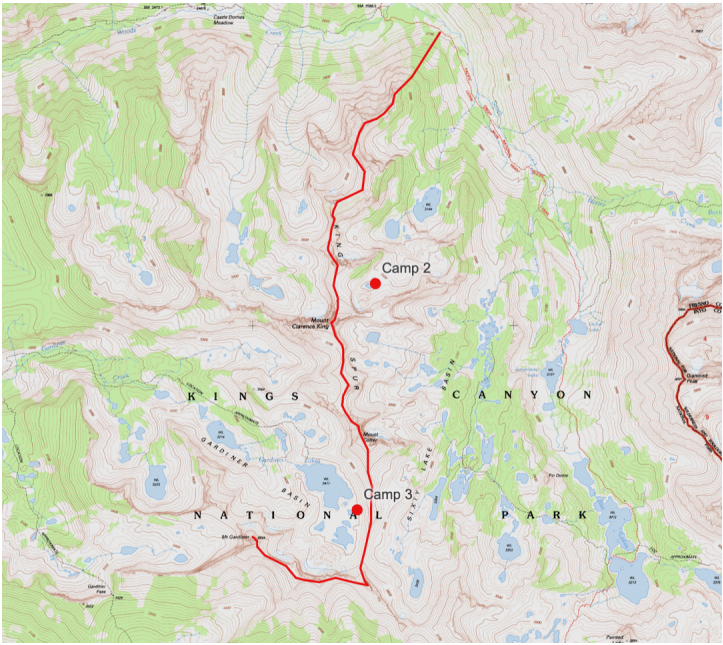
A smoky view to the north during the King Spur Traverse (VI 5.8) in September 2021. The mountain in the foreground is the north peak of Cotter, while the farther one is Mt. Clarence King, both of which the climbers had already crossed.



Looking south from the summit of Mt. Clarence King early on the second day of Dave Riggs and Jediah Porter's King Spur Traverse (VI 5.8), Kings Canyon National Park, California. In the foreground, crisply silhouetted, is the remainder of the route, first running straight away from the camera over Mt. Cotter and then hooking right on the ridge crest to Mt. Gardiner. The horizon is partially obscured by smoke from the first days of the KNP Complex fire in September 2021.



Dave Riggs following the "Phantom Spires" pitch on the north ridge of Mt. Cotter's north peak, on day two of the King Spur Traverse (VI 5.8), Kings Canyon National Park, California.



The King Spur Traverse (VI 5.8), Kings Canyon National Park, California.

Article Details

| | |
|----------------|------------------------|
| Author | Jediah Porter |
| Publication | AAJ |
| Volume | 65 |
| Issue | 97 |
| Page | 157 |
| Copyright Date | 2023 |
| Article Type | Climbs and expeditions |