

# The Sequoia Squawk

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Independence Day, 2010

Sequoia National Park, California

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**An American black bear – *Ursinus americanus* – celebrates the 234<sup>th</sup> birthday of his/her native land with a grass salad along the Marble Fork of the Kaweah River in Sequoia National Park. (Photo by Rayyan Khan)**

## Snowed out of July 4 plans

"We saw a bear," said the woman we met on the trail. "Back there."

She pointed along a trail that led through trees 300 feet tall with trunks as thick as a car is long.

"Let's don't head toward any bears," someone in our party said.

But we did, for the same reason fingerprints are nearest the wet paint signs.

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Walking through Sequoia's Giant Forest

# Snowed out of July 4 plans

– *Continued from Page 1*

We hadn't planned to be in Sequoia National Park anyway. Lassen Volcanic National Park was our intended destination. Ken Henry, pastor of our church, and I climbed 10,500-foot Lassen Peak last July 6, and Emily and I were going to do it again as a new holiday tradition.

But winter 2009-10 was good to California. After several years of subnormal snowfall, most of the mountains got above-average snow and we are dealing with the effects this summer. The road to the trailhead at Lassen won't be completely plowed until Friday (see next story).

We turned our national park hiking plans to the southernmost of the big California mountain parks, Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks – the parks that we had visited least recently – even though snow there would keep us below 8,000 feet.

In Sequoia that meant we were confined within an altitude range that is the habitat of the world's biggest trees and

California's signature beast, the American black bear.

Over a Saturday and Sunday of easy hiking we found sequoias by the dozens and black bears by the – to be precise, we encountered bears twice each day and saw five animals total. The first was the one that the woman told us about during our three-mile walk through the Giant Forest.

Not 10 minutes after we parted, we reached a part of Crescent Meadow called Bear's Bathtub, a lush, green sink this time of year watered by snowmelt. The bit of black a hundred yards away amid the tall grass and corn lilies could have been anything – a fire-scarred stump, a muddy bit of creek bank – but then two ears popped up and the black shape moved.

Bears do little during their seven to nine months of wakefulness each year but eat to build fat for their winter hibernation. During the snowmelt, their diet is primarily grasses and leaves. As the

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# Snowed out of July 4 plans

**- From previous**

summer drought sets in, they switch to insects and grubs that they dig out of the rotting wood of fallen trees until berry season. They also like carrion.

This one was nearly submerged in a sea of salad, and we decided to retreat and follow another trail.

Later Saturday afternoon as we were driving out of the park, we encountered the telltale signs of another bear: cars stopped along the roadside and people armed with cameras on the perimeter of a meadow.

This was the only bear that we ventured a sex guess about. Her cub, it turned out, had climbed to the top of a 100-foot red fir next to the highway. Neither was concerned about the other; bears are expert tree climbers and occasionally nap during the daytime on a branch.

To celebrate the Fourth, we set out on a 3.4-mile roundtrip hike up a fork of the Kaweah River to Tokopah Falls, a 1,200-foot waterfall that drains the high country. The trail begins in the Lodgepole Campground, and the bear was roaming the riverbank in sight of the tents.

Rayyan Khan, the friend who accompanied Emily and me – Iffat and their girls are on their annual summer visit to the in-laws in Pakistan – got the best pictures of this critter.



**Emily, Rayyan and a sequoia**

"Twelve megapixels!" he screamed.

We met our last bear on the way out of the park Sunday afternoon in the same meadow where we saw Mom and her cub. This one was a blond(e), and after finishing some creek bank greenery, it climbed a dead log and ascended a sugar pine.



**Honest, that's a bear in the bathtub**



Shanda Ochs / U.S. National Park Service photo

The trailhead up Lassen Peak, June 24, 2010, when the snow depth was 106 inches

# What we originally planned

California Highway 89, the primary access for visitors to Lassen Volcanic National Park, is expected to be completely open and cleared of snow Friday. This season's last significant snow was May 11-12, when 2 feet fell overnight.

The highway runs for 29 miles through the park and climbs as high as 8,512 feet on the flank of Lassen Peak itself.



Lassen Peak on July 6, 2009

## Opening and closing the Lassen Park road

### THIS SEASON

**Road closure:** Nov. 18, 2009

**Start of plowing:** April 19

**Expected opening:** July 9

### 30-YEAR RECORDS

**Earliest start of plowing:** March 11, 2004

**Latest start of plowing:** April 23, 1984

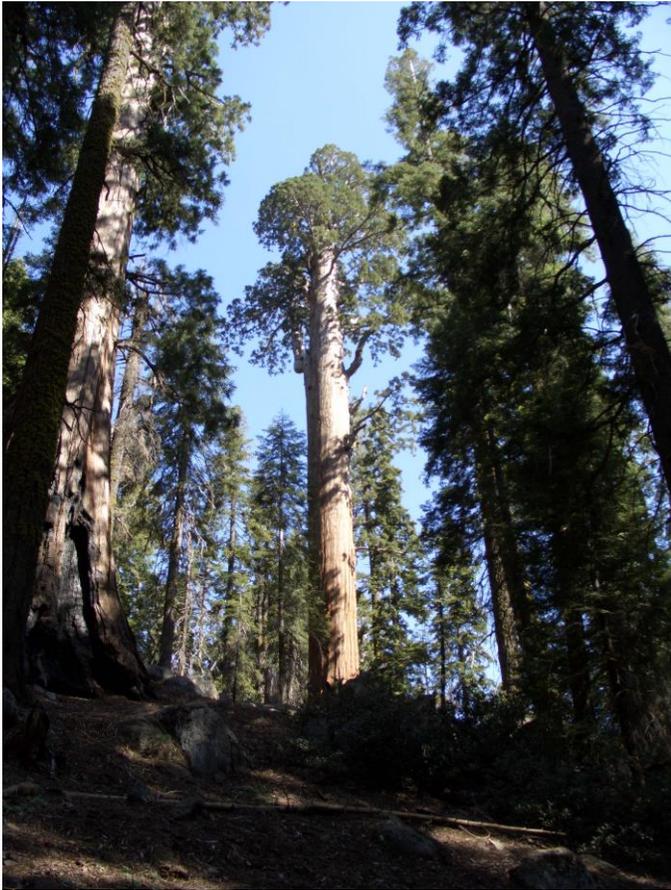
**Earliest road opening:** April 28, 1990

**Latest road opening:** July 21, 1995

**Earliest closure:** Oct. 18, 1996

**Latest closure:** Dec. 12, 2008

# Today's picture pages



Although the exact origination of the name of the giant sequoia trees isn't known, the idea that they were named for Chief Sequoyah, who invented a way to write the Cherokee language, probably isn't correct. However, the tree on the left in the Giant Forest was named for Chief Sequoyah. I shot the picture below on my visit last fall to Great Smoky Mountains National Park in North Carolina where a marker atop Clingman's Dome illustrates Sequoyah's writing.



Emily approaches 1,200-foot Tokopah Falls, end of the trail in a glacier-carved canyon



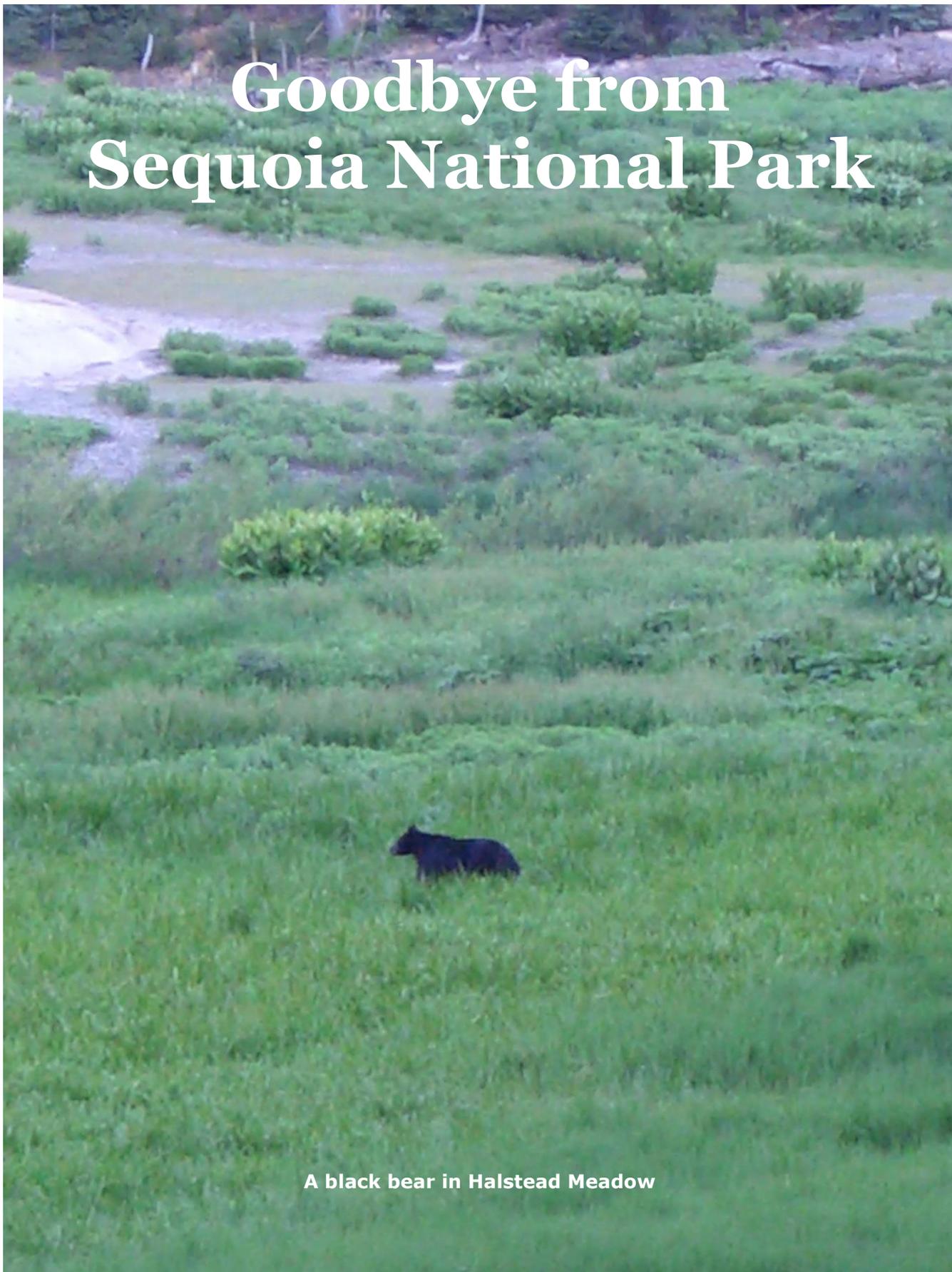
<<< There is more flora in the Giant Forest than just sequoias. The Pacific dogwood, *Cornus nuttalli*, has six petals (bracts), unlike the dogwood found on the East Coast, *Cornus florida*, which has four.

Pinedrops, *Pterospora andromedea*, grow at the base of a giant sequoia >>>



<<< Mustang clover, *Linanthus montanus*, covers the forest floor. Each flower is about the diameter of a dime.

# Goodbye from Sequoia National Park



A black bear in Halstead Meadow