

Reliable Water Sources Along the Mt. Whitney Trail

| Location | Mile | Elevation | Comment |
|--|------|-----------|--|
| 1 Carillon Creek stream crossing | 0.5 | 8600 | From the slopes to the north |
| 2 North Fork LP Creek stream crossing | 0.6 | 8800 | From Lower Boy Scout Lake |
| 3 Cascade by downed log, below LP Lake | 2.5 | 9900 | Stream from Bighorn Park |
| 4 South side of Bighorn Park | 3.7 | 10360 | Spring from the north slopes of Candlelight Peak |
| 5 Outpost Camp | 3.8 | 10360 | From Trailside Meadow; see 7 below |
| 5+ Outpost Camp | 3.9 | 10360 | From Mirror Lake; see 6 below |
| 6 Outlet of Mirror Lake | 4.3 | 10640 | Can have minor organic matter late in the season |
| 7 Stream from Trailside Meadow | 4.8 | 11150 | In spring and summer, most comes from Consultation Lake |
| 8 Trailside Meadow | 5.3 | 11390 | Later in the season, most comes from the Trail Camp area |
| 9 Consultation Lake | 5.8 | 11700 | Actually, off the trail to the south |
| 10 Trail Camp Pond | 6.3 | 12040 | Next to Trail Camp |
| 11 Stream feeding Trail Camp Pond | 6.4 | 12040 | Just west of Trail Camp Pond |
| 12 Spring near Switchback #23 | 6.7 | 12400 | Usually flows late May to September; may freeze at night |

By “reliable” I mean that you can always depend on finding water there (but see the caveat on 12). I don’t filter or treat any of it, nor do any of my many mountaineering friends. Note that filters can malfunction or become contaminated, in which case more organisms may be introduced than removed. So it is particularly silly to filter already-clean water. Above, the purest of the pure are 4, 9, 11, and 12.

I always make it a point to stop at 4. This has got to be about the purest water on the planet, probably better than any city water. A good friend of mine, who is sufficiently paranoid that he filters water from his drinking fountains at work, always stops here on the descent, filling up two or three canteens to take home.

Consultation Lake is off the trail, but sometimes people camp nearby so I have listed it. Also, quite a few people leave the trail at Trailside Meadow and strike up directly to Trail Camp. So they go right by it.

Water in Trail Camp Pond is filtered by almost all campers and hikers, but it is probably OK most of the time. Dust and pollen are often seen on the surface, having been blown there by the winds, and the slow inlet/outlet transfer flushes the pond only slowly. Nevertheless, it is easy to walk 100 feet to the fine clean stream feeding it, which comes from a series of lakes west and north of Wotan’s Throne. So I often avoid 10—not because I fear it, but because 11 is so handy.

The spring near Switchback #23 comes from snow slopes south of the trail. It cascades over the trail several times before going back underground, but I usually get my water from the highest such crossing.

With the approach of fall, especially in low snow years, the flow in some of these streams can slow to a trickle. Then it is probably wise to push on to the next good source.

A word about logistics. Water weighs two lbs per quart. Except for 3, each source is well under an hour's hike from the previous one, so it makes little sense to carry water between rest breaks. Just plan your stops to coincide with one of the streams, use your canteen for dipping and sipping, and carry it empty to the next one.

In the 1970s, a hiking group in Utah came down with Giardia, and the water they were drinking in the wilderness was implicated. The scare immediately went out that wilderness water *could be* contaminated, and a whole industry devoted to water purification developed. Indeed, significant Giardia contamination was detected in many low elevation sources such as swimming ponds and downstream of campgrounds. Later, however, further examination revealed that the 1970s incident was untrue: The hikers had got it from their companions, through food sharing combined with poor hygiene. But the damage had been done. The government's official stand on water quality remains that *any* water source in *any* wilderness *could be* contaminated. In order to avoid lawsuits if someone contracts giardiasis and believes it to be from wilderness water, the dire warnings continue to be made.*

Tests of the water along the Mt. Whitney trail have been made, and continue to be made, on a regular basis. Organisms, such as Giardia and E Coli O157, in amounts that could make you sick, have never been found. The greatest concentration of Giardia in the high Sierra has been measured in a lake west of Bishop, with a level 1/100 of the amount tests show are needed to produce symptoms.

- Bob Rockwell

*See <http://www.ridgenet.net/~rockwell/Giardia.pdf>