

IN THE MOUNTAINS

Sierra Sojourn

Heidi Vetter spends three-months on a solo journey in the Sierra with her large-format camera

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Sometimes a person will carry a dream for a lifetime and never see it fulfilled. Not so Heidi Vetter.

Four years ago, the 44-year-old Oakhurst photographer and owner of Heidi's 1 Hour Photo found herself redefining her life after heart surgery.

Having lived in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada most of her life, she had always longed to photograph the "beloved mountains on a deeper, more intimate level," she relates. With a new focus, she decided, "You have to go for your dream. If you sit around and wait for things to happen, nothing is going to happen."

It was time to make a commitment to that dream. And so, in the summer of 2001, she set a date one year hence — June 30, 2002 — to begin a three-month "sojourn", exploring and photographing the Sierra alone with her 4-by-5, large-format camera.

"It wasn't until I set a date, that it fell into place," she says. Then the year went by "incredibly fast."

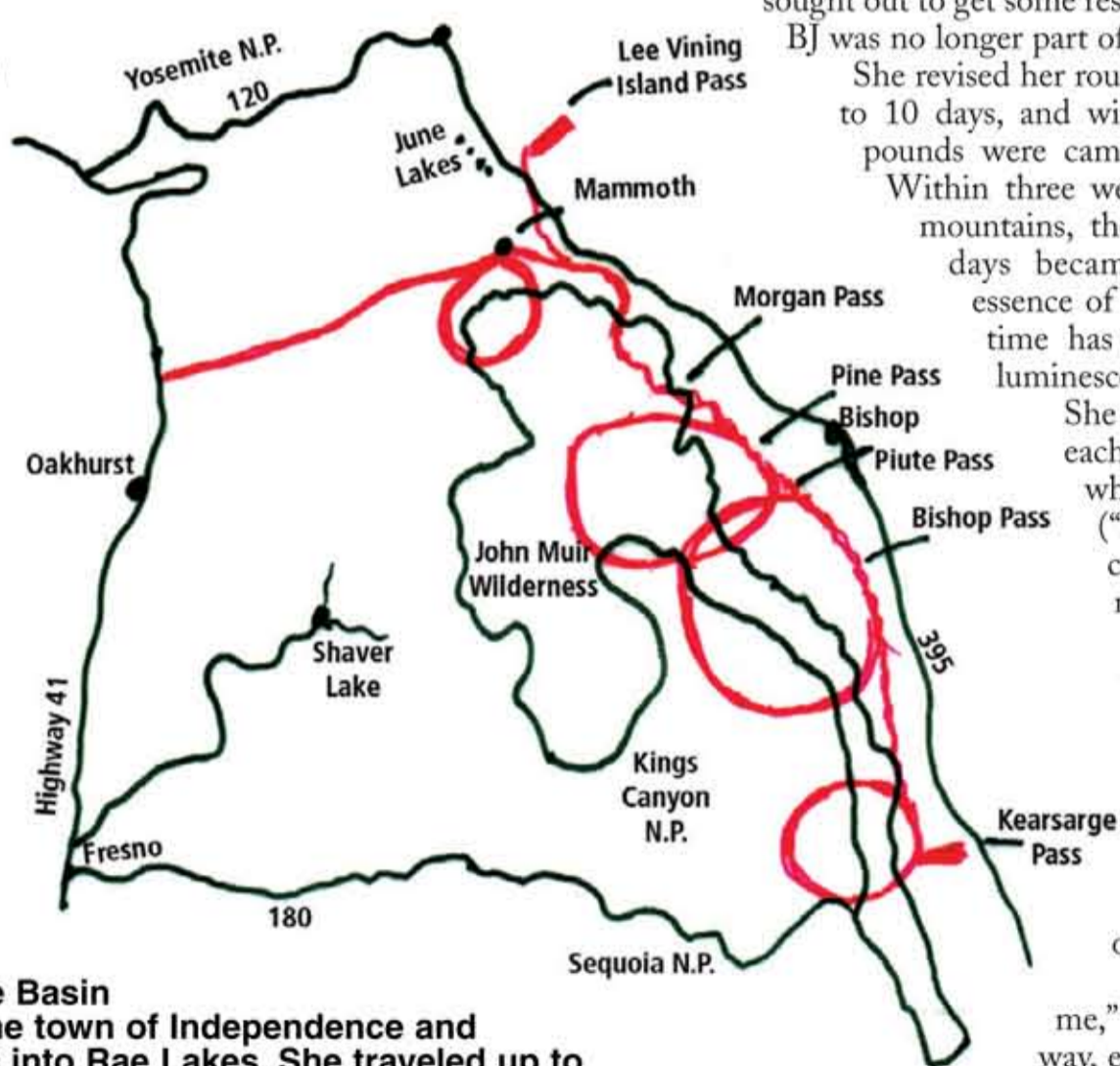
She had to take first-aid classes, read journals of other hikers, get sponsors. She learned how to dehydrate food as she pre-prepared all her own meals for the trip. She studied the 53 "topo" maps she purchased — topography maps that detailed the trails, streams, and elevations of the Sierra. She successfully lost 20 pounds with the counsel of Coarsegold chiropractor and clinical nutritionist, Art Capperault, who put her on a diet devoid of flour, sugar and dairy products.

Her plan was to pack in 10 to 14 days of provisions at a time and then meet her husband, Ray, at a trailhead, where he would re-supply her with more food and film. The idea of packing 60 pounds of provisions led her to take advantage of a retired pack mule, BJ, that was offered to her, which might even allow her a few amenities.

She also had a cell phone (which made Mr. Vetter more comfortable) — loaned to her by Globalstar in the Bay Area — that relayed its signals from satellite plus a GPS [global positioning system] locator.

Her husband, who "thought I was a little crazy" when she first suggested the trip, "had no doubt that I would do it," she says. Nevertheless, "there was no way I could have done the trip without him." Her two children, Shaun, a college student, and Ashley, a jun-

This map shows the general areas (in red) that Heidi Vetter photographed and explored on her three-month sojourn into the Sierra. She started at Fish Camp and took the Old French Trail to Mammoth Lakes where she hiked a loop around the lakes. Then it was south to Rock Creek and a loop to Pioneer Basin. She crossed over Morgan Pass into Pine Creek and its pass into North Lake, and then a loop to Sailor Basin. From North Lake she walked to Evolution Valley and to Bishop and Piute passes. Then it was down to Big Pine Basin for a loop, south to the town of Independence and on to Kearsarge Pass into Rae Lakes. She traveled up to Mammoth to do her final solo at June Lake.



Labeled by Heidi as "one of the most stunning passes," she pauses on Labor Day weekend at Kearsarge Pass with its pinnacles in the background.

ior at Yosemite High School, were supportive. In fact Shaun joined her for the first four days of the trip.

She spent a lot of preparation time fine-tuning her pack. Clothes for warmth like long johns, long pants, two jackets, long-sleeve shirt and clothes for hiking like shorts, short-sleeve shirt. She had a two-person tent, a sleeping bag, a backpacking stove and maps. For entertainment, she tore three alphabet letters worth of definitions from a dictionary for each 10-day leg. "There wasn't a lot of spare time," she says. She learned how to pack a mule.

She prepacked all 90 days worth of food, maps, film and other provisions, so all

Mr. Vetter had to do was prepare the next box. The two visited all the trailheads in May, so they could pre-visualize each area. "Oh, we will meet by the stables here," or "by the campground," she remembers planning at the different sites.

She started the trip in Fish Camp and took the Old French Trail to Mammoth Lakes. When Shaun left on the fourth day, she was on her own with BJ. Six days into her dream, she had not taken a single photograph, as her time was tied up with managing BJ — he had never experienced hobbles, so she hand-held his lead rope as he grazed. He whined and pawed at night disturbing her sleep, he wouldn't drink when given the opportunity. At a pack station she sought out to get some rest, BJ kicked her two times. Sadly, BJ was no longer part of her dream.

She revised her routes to shorten re-supply intervals to 10 days, and with 60 pounds on her back (25 pounds were camera gear), she continued alone.

Within three weeks, she had acclimated to the mountains, the weight and the routine. "My days became dreamlike, filled with the essence of the mountains, the space where time has no relevance, and the light is luminescent," she later wrote.

She ate pretty much the same thing each day. Breakfast was tea, oatmeal which later gave way to Cliff bars ("Much easier. I didn't have to cook."), fruit-leather and vitamins.

For lunch it was an albacore tuna pack, nuts and Gu Bar. Dinner was dehydrated hamburger and vegetables and a choice of spaghetti, potatoes, or beans plus vitamins. She always drank filtered water, realizing, "If I got sick, it was over."

"Routine was very comforting to me," she says. "I would pack the same way, eat the same way. I learned to do one thing at a time. When I ate, I ate.



At Humphrey Basin Heidi refers to one of her "topo" maps, produced by the U.S. Forest Service, detailing lakes, streams and elevations of the areas she was hiking into and photographing.

When I walked, I walked." Her walking stick doubled as a tripod, used for taking self-portraits with a point-and-shoot camera.

She traveled four to five miles a day, getting to her next camping site, usually near a lake, by about 2 or 3 p.m. She set her camp up where she planned to photograph. She'd eat dinner, do her shooting before sunset and was in bed at dark. Most of her photographs were shot on the edges of the day, when the morning and evening light enhanced the scenery. She set her alarm to awaken "while the sky was still full of stars the next morning" to capture the sunrise. After photographing, she ate breakfast, packed and was off to the next lake.

For the first time in her life, she was rationed on film, having 60 to 80 sheets between re-supplies. But "very subtly it was no longer about the photograph, it was about life, showing up for it and being totally present to what was happening around me," she wrote. "If I caught it on film, wonderful — and if I only held it in my heart, that was wonderful, too."

Sometimes, when she met Ray, they would drive to another trailhead to start the next leg. She admits to craving vegetables and salads, which he would bring along with a much-appreciated steak that they cooked in the camper.

She stayed on established trails, but seldom ran into other packers except when she was on the John Muir Trail and never saw a bear. "I was used to having the whole place to myself," she says. She never got lonely. In fact, she only became apprehensive when she approached trailheads where there were more people. She spent most of her time at the 10,000-foot level, having fallen in love with mountain basins. Without the mule, she was able to divert to explore different loops of areas. She also shed another 30 pounds on the trail.

When she walked out after 82 solo days, she felt no longer separate from the mountains and, given the chance, would return in a minute. "There will never be another first, and there is no way I can duplicate how wonderful this experience was. My days in the Sierra are not over," she says with determination.

She finds since returning, she is not as "hyper" about things and can more easily let things go. "I don't spread myself as thin as I used to."

The photographic images she has brought back for those left behind seem of less importance now, she says, "for the days are etched in my soul and the images are just the echo."



On the first day of the trip, Heidi and her son Shaun pose for a photo with BJ, a pack mule that she used for the first six days.



Because it was one of her favorite places, Heidi stayed for several days at Sailor Lake out of Sabrina Basin at about 10,000-foot elevation.



Her home away from home was this 2.5-pound Stephenson two-person tent. Here she's pitched it on a ledge, 100 feet above the water of Fourth Lake out of Big Pine.