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PHOTOS: **PATRICK GODDARD & CHRIS HERON**

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The Big Bear-a-thon was scheduled for June 23-25 but as with all events, being a day or two early means a few options are always available.

Thursday 6/22

Although Thursday was not an official club run day, Rich and Katelyn, who were in their 40, met with me in my 80 just before noon and we headed up to camp. Our camp location was ideally suited for our group size with only one camper and was still close enough to pavement that enabled a couple of participants to seek accommodation in town and join us for the Friday and Saturday runs. We officially secured our campsite, complete with a posted sign for SoCal-TLCA.

Rather than set up camp right away, we dropped some gear and immediately set out for some fun. We began on a side trail from camp on 3N07A and meandered our way through the rocks and trees to 3N10, aka John Bull Flat Road. We turned left after Rich convinced me that my 80 with tires two inches smaller than those on his 40 could make the trail. Sensing that I might need more convincing, he said, "A friend of mine made it in a stock Jeep on street tires." Time to go. Right at the gatekeeper, I immediately hung up on a boulder. I struggled but Rich saw the right line and gave explicit instructions to back up and reposition. I was freed to continue climbing the

rocky slope. Rich skillfully navigated through the eastern gatekeeper. As I crested the rocky slope and hoped for flat ground...nope. More rocks, boulders, and trees. More fun as we pushed on. At one point, I took what I thought was an easy line and found myself high-centered on top of a boulder. I may have sustained gashes on my rear driveshaft. "Hard driver, back up, get around the boulder," Rich instructed and soon I was again moving forward. We continued carefully navigating the various-sized rocks/boulders/trees until we got to an interesting drop where I really used my passenger-side slider and Rich verified his 40's center of gravity with gusto. We found our way to the western gatekeeper where we met a couple of modified modern Jeep Wranglers. My 30-year-old rig looked old in comparison but there we were - Rich and I were in our time capsules, Rich's 40 decades older than my 80. As we exited the trail, my desire for rocks had subsided; we headed back to camp and finished setting up. There was still plenty of daylight, so we took a stroll to visit Van Dusen Cabin (34.30137, -116.88610). Well, since I could hardly spot a good trail if my life depended on it, I led the three of us through a meandering path of gravel, sand, and sagebrush to the cabin. I only learned of my grade C trail leading skill when on the hike back, Ron and Evelyn arrived in their magnificent 60, having decided to join us using the well-worn path straight from our camp across the meadows to the cabin. We spent time checking out the cabin with its two windows, two entryways, the rough-hewn log walls, burnt rafters, and other time markings before heading back to our camp for dinner. Afterwards, we huddled around a couple of canned candles and discovered that water and wax make a crackling fire! The night soon got cold and windy, so we went to warm our beds...

Friday 6/23

What a glorious morning! I made my way to the rendezvous point and met up with Chris in his 40, Patrick in a Toyota Sasquatch T100 (priced for its rarity), Carlos and Carlos in a well-lifted but fully stock 100 series, Dave and his GX460 pulling an Airstream Basecamp 20X, Brent riding in his shiny and well-documented 80 (for sale BTW), and Margie bringing her evolving 80 (and soon to be on 35s?). As we got ready to move out, Craig and Bonnie joined us in their cool blue 40. Our itinerary originally included Little John Bull and Gold Mountain. However, the size of the group called for a shortened itinerary to attempt Gold Mountain Trail only.

Patrick's T100 stayed at camp, and he rode with Chris to lead the convoy. Following behind were two more 40s, then the rest of the four-door wagons. We headed east on Holcomb Valley Road 3N16 and turned onto Gold Mountain Road 3N69. Our pace dropped to a crawl as the trail meandered between the trees and up the mountain. There were a few obstacles on the trail that required Rich's expert spotting. Thank you, Katelyn, for driving to free her dad for the spotting





duty. I enjoyed having the 40s leading the trail and scouting out the terrain before the wagons got there.

At one point, the trail split into an east branch taking the scouting 40s into the Bone Yard. The distinctive crunching sound of loose rocks grinding under the rolling tires could be heard from a distance. I had held up the convoy waiting for a scouting report from those in the 40s. Within minutes, the 40s radioed that the challenging conditions in the Bone Yard would not be suitable for many of the wagons. A close look at the rock garden and we concurred. The remaining rigs opted to continue on the west branch to the other end of the Bone Yard. Some of us took a short walk on the rocks and discovered that every rock we stepped on was loose. The two branches joined up and we stopped for lunch before eventually venturing on. Two obstacles remained, the waterfall and the gatekeeper. The waterfall is a rocky ledge that requires precise tire placement to drop down a rocky ledge, then squeeze between two well-placed trees to complete the obstacle. The gatekeeper is easier going down! I surmise that many of us would have turned around at the sight of the closed gate and the first step up. One by one, we took turns on the rock pile and dropped onto flat ground alongside the "Trail Open" locked gate.

We made an unexpected stop to change a cut tire on Brent's 80. A Hi-Lift jack securely bolted to the front ARB bumper provided the necessary lift point. A few pulls on the jack and we were clear to change the damaged tire. A properly aired-down spare let us trek forward. For the day's run, we traveled from camp, then Gold Mountain Road 3N69, spent a short drive on pavement and then dirt tracked back to camp; you can follow along with more pictures at the SoCal TLCA website. At camp, Dave provided a propane-powered campfire, and we huddled around past the midnight hour.

Note: I used Gaia GPS and a paper forest service map to track my routes around the camp, we did not drive off the established trail. It is critical for continuing trail use that we always stay on established trails. The forests residents were happy to see us!

Saturday 6/24

Another morning of mountain air. I drove down to the Fawnskin Fire Station to meet with Earl and Randy in their newly modified 40, Brian in his gold 100, Jamie in a shiny 200, and Marc in his trusty 80. We arrived back at camp as everyone had finished breakfast and were ready to move out. The three 40s took the scouting position and the wagons followed. Similar to the previous day, the size and varying capability of the group called for a change of plans. We headed westward and soon found ourselves riding on Holcomb Creek 4x4 trail. As we came up to a water crossing, Marc radioed concern about the next corner. The obstacle was a rocky water crossing with a 90-degree



right turn. A Jeep had travelled down in the opposite direction with useful information on trail conditions. Two of our group's three 40s crossed the obstacle, then performed a multi-point U-turn and returned. Two Toyota mini trucks (not part of our group) followed and passed the two 40s to continue onward. We decided to turn all the rigs around in the interest of time. The group stopped for lunch while we plotted a new route back to camp. Three rigs split from the main group to head to Running Springs, one returned to camp, the rest of us headed east for Little John Bull. Chris and Patrick in their 40 led the way, followed by Earl and Randy in their 40. The rest of the wagons followed as we meandered through the Little Bear Springs area toward John Bull Flat. We stopped and watched Earl's 40 attempt the east gatekeeper at John Bull. It challenged both man and machine. Sticky tires helped machine, while lesser-shoed man went down on the dusty slick rocks but thankfully sustained no serious injuries.

We regrouped and headed toward Little John Bull. The trail progressively narrowed and began to climb. The two scouting 40s stopped. I inched forward and stopped at what I thought was the end of the obstacle. Nope, it was just the beginning. While the rest of the group decided to turn around, there was only one option for the first three rigs. Two 40s and my 80 were committed. The main group backed down the trail, turned around, and headed back to camp. Dave in his GX, having been on the tail harvesting dust all day long, was suddenly in clear air leading the way to camp. Like a pro, he was able to backtrack and took everyone to camp. Thank you, Dave. The three remaining rigs pushed through Little John Bull and headed back to camp.

Sunday 6/25

We rose into a mild morning wind that had begun as strong wind gusts before sunrise. Everyone started cooking breakfast and/or packing up, but that soon turned into a cookout with Carlos the Great being the main chef, while Margie brought some breakfast delights, I brought over what was left of my provisions, others contributed what they had, and we made good use of Chris's propane can with a stuck valve to power Carlos's griddle. We had our fill before airing up and headed down the mountain shortly after brunch.

Concluding remarks

A couple of us, including myself, had plans to be at Rubithon for the third week of June. This year's run was especially poignant as it has been dedicated to the life of Marlin Czajkowski. Marlin was a pioneer in his time and his work lives on in the family-run Marlin Crawler. With Rubithon 35th postponed to September, the idea for Big Bear-a-thon was born. The Forest Service had just reopened the Mountain Top Ranger District in late May, so the timing could not



have been better. Big Bear Mountain has something for everyone. My attempt through John Bull Trail was made easier with Marlin low gears in the t-case and his company-built differentials in my 80.

As for the Big Bear-a-thon, I am beyond ecstatic at the turnout. It was impressive that we had four 40s piloted by the veterans of the club scouting our daily excursions. To be able to scout the trail in real-time with very capable vehicles and drivers provided an added safety margin for our travels. Three nights and four days in the mountain air just did not seem like enough to enjoy the company of like-minded souls. Those who could not be there were missed as we surrounded the modern campfire. I enjoyed every minute and wish the weekend would last longer. 🍷

