

Exploration

Conifer Island: The Heart of Inyo National Forest

By Paul McFarland

This place I'm sitting, at the base of a towering Jeffrey pine surrounded by the duff and cones of centuries old pines, has been called many things. The Jeffrey pine forest, the timber base, where I get my firewood, Bald Mountain, the core timber management area, the Glass Mountains...

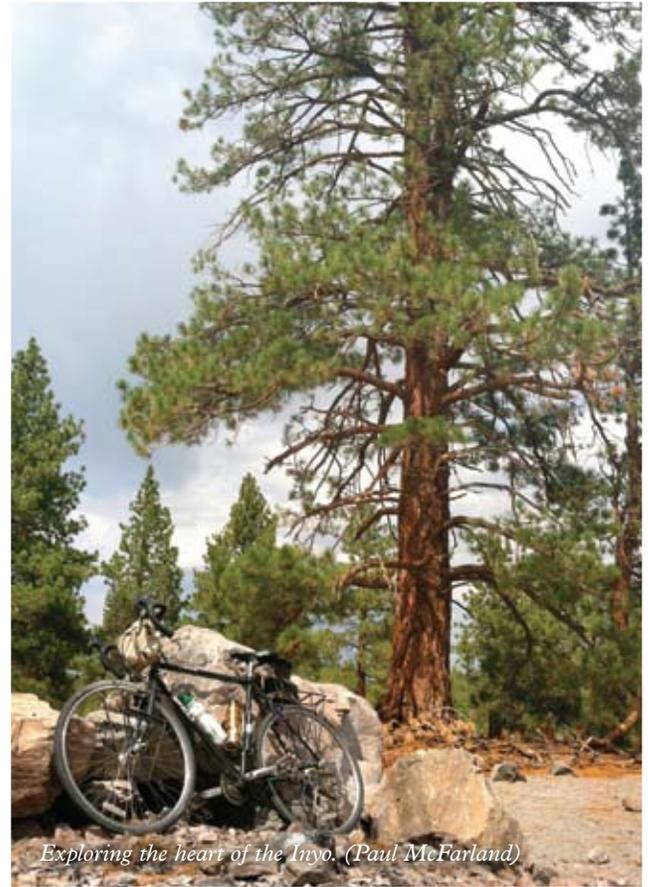
Call it what you will, but the more time I spend out here, the more I grow to think of this place as the true heart of the Inyo National Forest. Sandwiched between the granite wonderland of the Sierra crest and the ancient desert ridges of the White Mountains, like a sagebrush and pine needle veggie burger, this landscape of subtle surprises is defined by Highway 395 on the west, Highway 120 on the north and the Benton Crossing road on the east and south.

An island of conifers in a sea of high desert shrublands, Pacific storms funneling up the San Joaquin River drainage pour through the low gap in the mighty, moisture-robbing Sierra from Mammoth Pass to Deadman Pass to nurture this forest. You can watch these storms tumble through the crest to form counter-clockwise swirling bands of clouds dropping rain and snow right into the thirsty needles of these pines.

Every exploration into this heartland yields new surprises: a cathedral-like patch of old-growth Jeffrey pine just two minutes walk off 395; an old paved highway in the middle of nowhere; an explosion of fat and furry Pandora moths emerging from the duff; a secret meadow splatter-painted with flowers and butterflies; or hidden cliffs nestling aspen-choked canyons.

Leave the hardcore mountain busting to places with guidebooks. This is a land inviting unlimited meandering. By foot, bike, motorcycle, skis, snowshoes, horse or truck, every nook and knob, forested or bald, has left me thinking "rad spot" and wanting more.

It'd be easy to rattle off a list of recommended places with flowery descriptions of what's to be seen with detailed directions on how to get there, but this forest is one to discover on your own. Spend some time with a good map (or even a bad one), draw out a loop or throw a bottle cap down to pick a spot. Or, like I find myself doing, pull off the highway, shut off the radio and listen to the trees and woodpeckers tell you where to go. They know this place; they've been here, at the heart of the Inyo National Forest, for a long time.



Exploring the heart of the Inyo. (Paul McFarland)

Conifer Island: by the numbers

- 2** Research Natural Areas
- 2** Inventoried Roadless Areas
- At least **9** species of conifer
- 4** historic Forest Service campgrounds
- Over **950** miles of designated roads
- 0** miles of designated foot trail
- Lots** of trees