

Klamath Crew: Kirstin Underwood

I am writing this essay about one week before the Backcountry Program will be over. It's so bizarre to think about going back into the world, with hot showers and washing machines and all of the other "necessities" or luxuries that have been absent from my life for the past 5 ½ months – and haven't really been missed too much until now.

I guess that's what happens out here. You get accustomed to the daily routine so quickly that you almost forget the things that seemed strange at first. Jumping in cold water to get clean (without soap) every day after work; "washing" your clothes in a stream; wearing the same thing every other day; waking up cold and piling on layers to go to camp and pack your lunch; being outdoors 24/7 and doing physical work every hour of the workday – all of these things seemed normal after the first week.

Looking back, we've definitely done some crazy things out here. Who hikes miles into the backcountry, carrying everything they'll need for the next 6 weeks on their backs and 2 tools, anyway? I guess the same people who get up every morning not really knowing what's in store for them... we wake up by 5:30 AM, only knowing we'd better rush to camp and get our lunches packed before the food gets put away, then wait until after PT to take off and work for the day. I was in a traveling crew, so we went to a variety of places and did a variety of work. Some days in Los Padres, a big chunk of the work day was taken up by the hike to and from the work site. In Yosemite, the whole day seemed to be hiking, stopped every once in a while to spend 20+ minutes digging a perfect swale. In the Klamath, we had long hikes mixed with days of brushing, re-routing, some rockwork, and a little bit of bridge construction; in Kings Canyon, we had a few long maintenance runs, but most of our work was a short hike away from camp, which made for a long day of rockwork.

Sometimes the challenge was mainly physical, pushing your body to its limits during a workday or a weekend hike. Mostly, though, it was more of a mental; challenge than anything else: keeping a steady head when the work became tedious or frustrating, or when crew tension was running high.

Speaking of the crew, I think that one of the most important aspects of this program is getting along and being able to work with people. You live and work with the same people for 5 ½ months straight; there is no getting away from each other. If people can't tolerate one another's differences or address their problems in the open, it's going to be a rough time out there. I feel that it may have taken my crew a longer time to come together than others; every camp move seemed like starting over again. At this point in the season, I have made a few friends that I plan to stay in touch with for a long time, and it's finally starting to feel like we are a family – but it took a long time to get there, and there were a lot of rough patches. However excited I am to see friendly faces and grab some alone time at home, though, it's going to be strange to wake up in the morning without these people. I will definitely miss the familiarity of everyone here.

Overall, this was a very unique, interesting, exciting, and challenging program. I would definitely recommend it to anyone who wants to do it. It has definitely made me feel like a more competent person. "I can't" is a phrasing that doesn't last out here; you look at the task in front of you and feel like it's impossible, then before you know it, it's done and you're moving on. You don't really have a choice –

you either try until you get it, or you give up and go home. In my opinion, the determination to try and make it through out here is more important than anything else. If you really want to do this and don't see giving up as an option, then it won't be, and you'll gain a lot from this experience.