

Leak Directly Above and Mouse Shit in the Bed

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The scurrying started as soon as the lights were out and could be heard over the weakly turning ceiling fan with which we were unsuccessfully trying to ameliorate the heat. I flipped a light on and looked around just in time to see a mouse disappear into the burner pan of the stove.

There were mice everywhere. We had anticipated mice; always a problem in remote cabins so our food was stored in the refrigerator. Or in a large pot whose lid was secured with bungee cords, that we refer to as our bear barrel. The mouse problem was just an esthetic one, but watching a mouse crawl into the burner pans was unnerving. We were staying in a cabin just outside of Kings Canyon National Park. Staying in remote places leads to memorable experiences, some good and some bad. This is the tale of the bad ones.

Kings Canyon is in the Southern Sierra Nevadas, adjacent to Sequoia National Park and we were hiking both parks staying in cabins so that we could cook for ourselves as is our usual habit. Our cabin in Sequoia was an unremarkable dump but we had high hopes for our Kings Canyon cabin. The online description certainly sounded enticing. Remote and off the grid with power supplied by solar panels with battery storage for the evenings. It had a private swimming hole in the nearby river and was only a few miles outside the park. There is only one road into Kings Canyon and our cabin was just off it. The road is marginally paved and climbs about three thousand feet in the three miles between our cabin and the entrance to the park known as Roads End. It was early September and should have been cooling off but the area was gripped by a long brutal heat wave. Reality did not match the description. Upon arrival the caretaker, who lived on the property, informed us that the solar panels were not functioning at 100% and that the battery storage was not working properly. Use as little power as possible, she said. She

then took us on a tour of the property. The bathroom was not in the cabin but in an outbuilding. A sign warned you to check carefully for rattlesnakes, particularly at night. We never saw any rattlesnakes; I think the mosquitoes kept them down. There was a private swimming hole although the path to it was steep and rocky and necessitated holding onto a steel cable the whole way down. The water was brown, covered in dirty looking foam and distinctly unappetizing. This we were assured was due to the high tannin content of the redwoods that sometimes got washed into the river. I am sure that was true but it did nothing to help with the esthetics. The caretaker emphasized that this was a private swimming hole. Nude bathing and sex were hinted at, nothing was said about the clouds of mosquitoes eagerly looking for any exposed non-Deet covered flesh. We never used the swimming hole.

The cabin had a propane refrigerator and stove so those at least did not require electricity. There was a ceiling fan for cooling but to conserve power it was on a 15-minute timer making it useless for sleeping. This might not have mattered in a normal September but with daytime highs running close to a hundred degrees the cabin was stifling. Mostly what the cabin had was mice. Hordes of mice. They and their droppings were everywhere. The property did have two very friendly cats, Socks and Pumpkin. Socks was a large orange tabby who came in and curled up by my feet as I made dinner the second night. "This is great," I said to Claudia. "Why just the scent of him will drive the mice away". Wrong, Socks took to hanging out at the cabin but he had no effect on the mice. He did deposit a large lizard on the floor of the cabin one night, which except for missing a tail seemed no worse for wear and promptly ran under the couch. With some difficulty, we chased it out of the cabin.

With the power on the fritz the caretaker was always on our case about using less energy. Then we noticed two things that really pissed us off. There were power lines running directly above the property. So, they were off the grid by choice not necessity. You can pretend to be green but if you are forced to run a heavily polluting diesel generator you aren't. Then we noticed that at night the caretaker had a large TV on in her cabin, while she told us not to use the ceiling fan. We crossed the cabin off our list of places to return to.

The hiking in King's Canyon was good. At the higher altitude, the temperatures were pleasant, the scenery was spectacular and the crowds few. However, the sight at the end of road was strange to say the least. Most of the cars in the parking lot belonged to backpackers; there are few day hikers in King's Canyon. Without exception, these cars were surrounded with crude fences built out of chicken wire, two by fours and plywood. I soon learned why, porcupines frequented the parking lot and porcupines have a fondness for brake and radiator fluid. If you failed to fence out the beasts you would return from your backpacking trip, thinking of hot showers and cold beer only to find your car totally disabled. The lot etiquette was that you left your fencing materials for those who might not have planned for porcupines. Porcupines are nocturnal so they were not a concern for day hikers such as myself. I did a long solo hike through the high country and into the Golden Trout Wilderness, passing a sign on the way pointing the way to Mt. Whitney, which the sign informed me was only 97 miles away. I saw not a soul on the hike. The only large mammal I encountered was a black bear that I stumbled into. It was feeding in high berry bushes and we literally came face to face before either of us was

aware of the other. Scared the crap out of both of us. I backed slowly away and the bear ran in the other direction. Since then I have always been more careful in high berry bushes.

We drove the road into King's Canyon daily and we noticed a hubcap hanging on a dumpster by the side of the road. Passing it day after day we wondered why the owners had not retrieved it. Were they inattentive, lazy, who knew? While driving a rough and isolated dirt road we encountered a car full of shady looking characters. Claudia took one look at them and told me to drive away. As I did so, we heard a noise and I stopped the car and got out to investigate. I found a hubcap. One of our hubcaps. In fact, we were missing two hubcaps and I realized whose hubcap we had been passing. We returned the rental car with the two hubcaps in the backseat and the rental company never said a word about it. It is the only time I have ever lost a hubcap, let alone two.

Some years later we found ourselves in Seward, Alaska. We had come from the wilderness of Wrangell-St. Elias, and Seward and the Kenai Peninsula promised the comforts of civilization, at least by Alaskan standards. We had a cabin with a view of Resurrection Bay. At least we thought we did. There was no view of the Bay. The cabin advertised, as on the bay, was only close to the bay. Disappointing, but we only had to walk across the street to get to the bay, which is ringed by snowcapped mountains and home to numerous sea otters. The guy we had rented the cabin from had gone on a cruise to some place warm but we had the number of a relative to call if need be. Like most of the houses in Seward the cabin was a modest bungalow with a very odd

gas pipe connection. All the houses had them. The connections from the outside gas line to the houses all looked homemade and appeared to have fashioned from old tin cans. Since every house had the same set up I had to assume the fittings were commercial but I am sure that Duke Energy would take one look at them and shut the gas off to the whole neighborhood. The connections inside the house to the furnace did not inspire confidence either. That evening as we cooked dinner what I assumed was the smoke alarm went off. I was not concerned. I knew there was no fire and I assumed that cooking had set off an overly sensitive alarm. I went over to remove the batteries and shut the damn thing off and discovered it was a carbon monoxide detector. Now, I was concerned and we starting opening windows. The stove and hot water heater were electric so the only possible source of carbon monoxide was the furnace. Maybe the detector just needed new batteries. No such luck, even reading the manual did not help. The damn thing just kept going off. It was in the forties and raining but there was no choice. I shut off the gas to the furnace and sure enough the alarm went silent. It was time to call the owner. We got the owner's sister who said the owner was not immediately reachable since he was still on a cruise but that she would have him call us as soon as possible. We did in fact get a call from the owner and surprisingly quickly. He suggested that we change the batteries; I told him we had already done so but to no avail. He said that he would call the fire department. We never heard from the fire department and we never had heat during our stay. We later learned that the fire department had suggested that we change the batteries and had assured the owner that everything was probably fine. Only in Alaska. So, for the rest of our stay we froze our ass's off. The Kenai Peninsula does have its rewards, wildlife, caving glaciers and what maybe the best hike in North America. The Harding Icefield Trail. Its only eight miles round trip

but you do gain 4000 feet. The trail starts at the toe of the Exit Glacier and ends at the edge of Harding Icefield. Although it rained almost every day it was clear and sunny when I did the hike. I took crampons and an ice axe since I hoped to walk on the Icefield if conditions were right. I had stunning views of the Exit Glacier for the first part of the hike before entering wildflower filled meadows where I saw two black bears. Close up but not too close. I had the trail all to myself. What had been rain in valley was snow up higher and the last mile I walked through fresh snow. The icefield is spectacular, ice as far as the eye can see broken only by the tips of mountains poking out of the ice, their bulk buried in thousands of feet of ice. One look at the icefield told me I would not be walking on it. There were huge deep cracks, partially covered with fresh snow. It didn't look very safe even with a partner and a rope let alone solo.

I would like to go back but we will stay someplace else next time. Or maybe not, all the houses had the same homemade looking furnace connections. We got a call from the owner after we got back to Cincinnati, a rather sheepish call. He had the furnace looked at when he got back. There was a crack in the combustion chamber and carbon monoxide was pouring into the house. We had been cold but the carbon monoxide detector may well have saved our lives.

A few years later we returned to Alaska, this time to Fairbanks to go to Denali National Park. The trip got off to a bad start months before we left. We had round trip tickets from Cincinnati to Fairbanks. Then Delta changed our flights. Our new itinerary had us flying into Fairbanks but leaving from Anchorage a mere six-hour drive away. Delta wanted a thousand dollars per ticket to change the flight. We appealed to reason but to no avail. We asked to speak to a supervisor

and were told we could not. After some hours on the phone, much of it on hold we gave up. The next day Claudia went to the airport and a friendly Delta ticket agent changed our tickets at no charge. The plan was to fly in to Fairbanks, spend a couple of days in Fairbanks and then drive to Healy, a very small town just outside of Denali National Park. Based in Healy we would spend about two weeks day hiking, backpacking and camping in Denali before returning to Fairbanks for a few days. Fairbanks is a booming metropolis of 30,000 and is the largest city in interior Alaska. As a city Fairbanks has little to recommend it. It's a seedy town with no decent places to eat. It does have one good coffee house. The surrounding landscape is flat and uninteresting but it's only a two-hour drive to Denali.

We arrived at our accommodations in Fairbanks at about 3:00 in the morning Cincinnati time. I don't remember how we found the place. On the WEB I am sure, this was before things like VRBO and it was harder back then. At least that's my excuse. It was dark so it was hard to get a feel for the place and I was too tired to care but it seemed odd. It was a sort of B&B but with cooking facilities and no breakfast. The office such as it was, was piled with papers of an indeterminate nature and a disreputable looking proprietor who claimed that we had arrived several days early. We assured him we had not. The reservations had been made in my wife's name and after much back and forth he discovered that he had reservations for two Claudia Taylors and that we did in fact have a place to stay.

Things looked worse in the light of day. The place was a compound consisting of two buildings for guest accommodations and several out buildings all surrounded by a fence. The grounds

where muddy with pieces of farm and construction equipment scattered about. We had a suite of rooms including a small kitchen. There was nothing wrong with our rooms but the whole compound had an odd feel to it. Hard to put your finger on but definitely odd even by Alaskan standards. The proprietor looked even more disreputable in the light of day and seemed to be running another business on the side. I never figured out what. The staff seemed jumpy and skittish. But hell, there was nothing you could really point to and we were only staying briefly to supply up before heading to Denali. Groceries were scarce and expensive in Fairbanks but are virtually non-existent in Healy, which with a population of 1,000 spread over almost 700 square miles is a town in name only. What Fairbanks did have was Sandhill Cranes. Thousands of them, raucous, loud and everywhere and spectacular. Two week later camped at Wonder Lake in Denali we watched Sandhill Cranes, probably the same ones, spiral in the air as they worked to gain enough altitude to pass over the Alaska Range at 18,000 on their way to Georgia and Florida.

Given the general creepiness of the place we talked about finding another place to stay for our return but options seemed limited and in the end, we were just too lazy to do anything. We simply headed out for Denali. We mostly stayed in a nice cabin in Healy but, we had a backpack planned as well as a camping trip to Wonder Lake. There is only one road in Denali. The road runs 89 miles from the Wilderness Access Center to the abandoned mining town of Kantishna. It's a 12-hour trip to Kantishna and back but there are other stops and most people don't go as far as Kantishna. The road is unpaved and mostly one lane. Private vehicles are not allowed past mile 15. You have to take the bus. The buses are old school buses and not very comfortable but

the scenery and the wildlife make up for it. There are no trails in Denali. If you want to hike you just tell the bus driver you want off to hike. When you get back to the road you flag an outbound green bus down and hop on. Almost no one does, mostly people just stay on the bus. Maybe they are spooked by the lack of trails; maybe by the large number of grizzlies you see from the bus, maybe they just don't like to hike. You need a backcountry permit to backpack in Denali. The park is divided into sectors and the park service issues only a few permits for each section. You must camp in your sector and you must camp out of sight of the road. The park service works hard to maintain Denali as a trailless wilderness and to spread backpackers out so that you don't see anyone else on your backpack. You are supposed to walk side by side, not single file and to avoid animal trails, all to prevent the formation of small social trails. The system works. I have rarely seen other people even when just day hiking and most of park really is completely untouched wildness. In order to get a backcountry permit you must watch a safety video and talk to a ranger. The video covers bear safety and safe stream crossing. Everyone worries about bears but the big hazards in Denali are hypothermia and drowning. After the video came the talk with the ranger. It was after Labor Day so we had no problem getting the sector that we wanted and there were no special warnings for our sector. We heard another group being warned not to drink the water from a couple of creeks because of Arsenic contamination but they were going to sector near Kantishna where there had been mining in the old days and the contamination was apparently due to leaching from the abandoned mines. We were exploring one of the branches of the Toklat River where there had never been any mining so I was not concerned.

The key to hiking in Denali is to avoid brush. High willow thickets are the worst. They are hard to move through; your visibility is bad and bears like to sleep in them. Your cursing as you try to move through them will usually scare off any sleeping bears. The bus dropped us off and from the road we carefully scanned the willows for bears before moving through them. Once in the river valley we had good views and relatively easy walking. Relatively easy for Denali that is.

Hiking in Denali is never easy and you can never walk a straight line. Hidden gullies, unexpected brush, bogs and tundra hummocks make hiking and route finding difficult. The scenery compensates. As the day wore on we began to look for a campsite. There were lots of flat open spots suitable for a tent site but we had trouble finding a water source. That's ironic since Denali is generally wet and we were in a river valley. But most of the streams were glacier feed and the water was opaque and gray, laden with glacial flour. We could pump such water but the glacier flour is hard on the pump and clogs the filter. So, we sought a spot with clear running water and at last found one. What made me slightly uneasy was the strange orange color of the rock the water ran over. It looked a little like orange algae on the streambed but a little investigation confirmed that it was some sort of rock or mineral deposit. In any event we pumped water and set up camp. We cooked and ate dinner in the Denali approved manner; cook 100 yards from your tent, eat 100 from both and eat back to back in case a bear is sneaking up on you. As the sun went down so did the temperatures. I cracked ice off the tent in the morning and Claudia who had brought a light sleeping bag froze. It was only a one night backpack so in the morning after pumping more water we walked back to the road and flagged down a bus.

A few days later and now back in Fairbanks we happen to pass by the Alaskan Geologic Society museum. On a whim, we stopped in. There almost in the entryway was a case with a specimen that looked exactly like the rock our water had been flowing over. The label read "Arsenic Ore". Well that was worrisome but we were apparently no worse for it. We staying at the same place in Fairbanks on our return and it was still weird. The proprietor gave us the creeps every time we saw him, the staff acted oddly and the whole place had a bad vibe. But nothing we could put our finger on. In Alaska, you abandon nothing so when we left Fairbanks we still had extra food, include a partial bottle of Scotch. We left it in a box where I hoped the staff would find it first. Particularly the Scotch. On the flight from Fairbanks to Seattle Claudia struck up a conversation with the man sitting next to her. Alaskan towns are small and Fairbanks is no exception. Everyone knows everyone. Claudia told her seatmate where we had stayed and that the proprietor had seemed strange. "Oh yes" he replied, "he's a human trafficker, he hires illegals and he locks them in at night". Now it all made sense, and I really hope the staff drank the Scotch.

Our place at Duck Lake, just outside of Glacier National Park where we were hiking had much to recommend it. We had rented it on VRBO and it was spacious, modern and well appointed. There was a large well-equipped kitchen and two bathrooms with showers which is great when we are hiking in hot weather and both want a shower at the end of the day. The house had great views from the deck. Mountains in one direction and Duck Lake in the other. Looking out on Duck Lake we watched Pelicans, Ospreys, Eagles and Ducks while sipping wine. Pretty sweet. It did have a few problems. You couldn't drink the water for one. Well, you could, but you

didn't want to. The water came from a well and had large amounts of iron, which resulted in large amounts of hydrogen sulfide in the water. It smelled like rotten eggs. But, we had been warned about that and had supplied up with jugs of water, so it was a pain, but nothing more. There was the fatal bear mauling but that had several years ago and on the other side of the lake. The problems began when we noticed water in the basement despite the lack of rain. We spent a good deal of time trying to track down the source. The owner had told us that they had just installed a new water filtration system to improve the quality of the water. It had not worked or at least not enough, but since it was new, it was at the top of my list of suspects. But no leak there. We traced the pipes to no avail. Then one day Claudia was in the basement while I was showering and noticed water pouring into the basement. We quit using that shower, the other shower seemed fine. Investigating we found the problem, a large diameter pipe coming from the shower was simply placed above, but not connected to a smaller diameter pipe. So, when you showered water showered onto the floor. Shortly before we left we found a note on the basement floor, it was wet, had several foot prints on it, had clearly been there some time and had obviously floated some distance from its original position. It read, "leak directly above."

This year after Christmas we went to the UP in Michigan. We went to see winter birds and prices are very reasonable in the UP in late December, and early January. It was cold, even by UP standards with temperature's down to -16 F. We did see interesting winter birds including many Snowy Owls but the trip seemed cursed from the start. We took Claudia's two-year-old Subaru Forester which had just been into the dealer for routine service. On our way, we

stopped in Traverse City for two days. Leaving Traverse City road conditions deteriorated and the car started squirrelling around. It was terrifying. Claudia who was driving pulled over saying "You're driving. I know you think the problem is my driving but it's not." She was right on both counts. I drove for a couple miles, alternating between being afraid I would slide into oncoming traffic, or the ditch on the side of the road. Other cars seemed to be having no trouble. I pulled into a parking lot and got out to look at the tires. Almost completely bald. Recently rotated by the dealer but bald nevertheless. So, we spent a couple of hours in the middle of nowhere finding a tire dealer that could put on four new tires. That made all the difference in the world and we arrived at the house we were renting with out further incident. The house was large and overlooked a lake, now frozen. The Lake House as it was known was nicely laid out and had multiple bedrooms and bathrooms. But the place was a dump. Claudia nervously joked that she hoped we would not be gathering any lit club material. One reason Claudia picked the place was for the fireplace. The fireplace did not work, and had not worked for years. The walls were scuffed, in need of paint and much of the furniture was falling apart. There would be plumbing problems too although these were not immediately apparent. A few days into our stay one of the vents in a spare bathroom began to make noise. Noise that it had not made earlier. It sounded like the toilet was running but it was louder and coming from the vent, not the toilet. Claudia started to worry about carbon monoxide. The place had no carbon monoxide detector and only one smoke detector and it was defunct, the battery having long since died. Poking around inside reveled nothing and the noise just kept getting worse. Eventually I looked outside and found a large pool of water next to the house just on the other side of the wall from the vent. Temperatures were in the single digits during the day and below zero at night so the

water was clearly coming from inside the house and appeared to be seeping under the foundation. Hours later the drain from the kitchen sink sprang a large leak when the coupling between two PVC pipes failed. We emailed the owners and they promised to send their father-in law out to fix things. "he's very handy, he can fix almost anything." We were out and about the next day but when we returned the sink was fixed. The vent was not. I don't know if the father-in law couldn't fix it or decided it was nothing. In all fairness with new snow and even colder temperatures the pool of water outside the house, although still there, was much less visible. The real problem with the house was none of these things. The first night when Claudia and I got into bed we heard a loud cracking noise and after that both sides of the bed sloped toward the center. The bed was smaller than we were used too and the sloping did not help. There were mutual accusations of bed hogging and cover stealing and the next night Claudia decided to sleep in another bedroom. In the middle of the night I heard my name being called, loudly. "Richard, Richard, come here, there is something under my bed." I checked under the bed, no monsters. I checked the mattress, no monsters there either. We both went back to bed. I slept better than she did. The next couple of nights passed without incident. And then, there was no calling of my name this time. Just screaming. I got to her bedroom just in time to see a large black mouse run by me and into the bathroom. The mouse had been at Claudia's feet and then ran up under the covers and past her head. Upon inspection, there was mouse shit in the bed. Smearred mouse shit.