

High Sierra Run**John Muir Didn't See It Their Way**By ELLIOTT ALMOND,
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Naturalist John Muir, who explored much of the High Sierra during six years he lived in Yosemite starting in 1868, just poked along.

His joy was in studying the glaciers and the crags, the flowers and the redwoods, of California's major mountain range.

And the John Muir Trail—212 miles of scenic splendor—was meant for walking.

But not by everyone.

Last week Don Douglass of Bishop set off with six companions to run the Muir trail as fast as they could. And three finished—Douglass, Nicki Lewis and partner David Hermitage of Santa Monica.

Douglass' time for the trip from Whitney Portal to Yosemite Valley was 117 hours, 30 minutes. Lewis and Hermitage did it in 136 hours. Steve Smith of Carlsbad, Greg Laval of Sunland, Bob Hoteit of Manhattan Beach and Fred Copeland of Reno, didn't finish because of injuries, none serious.

Consider:

—The trail crosses 11 mountain passes; one at 13,777 feet, one at 13,200 and four at more than 12,000.

—After the first three miles, the elevation rarely is below 9,000 feet.

—A late spring storm left an unusually large amount of snow on the trail. Some normally lazy summer streams were ice-cold rivers.

—High-altitude runners risk dehydration, dizziness and hypothermia.

Backpackers make this trek in three weeks. Douglass ran it in under five days, traveling about 50 miles a day and averaging only three or four hours of sleep each night. He said he ran from 3:30 a.m. to 10 p.m. with rests along the way.

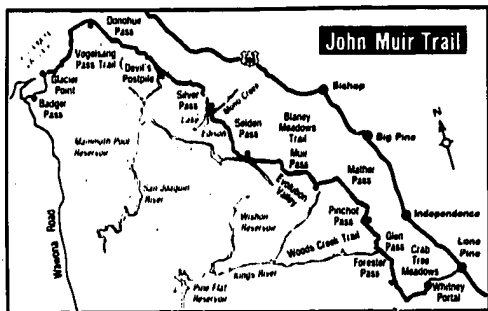
Douglass, 50, president of a backpacking equipment company, made it sound like a delight.

"There's not a more beautiful place in the world to run," he said in a telephone interview. "It's like running through a flower garden.

"It's an aesthetic experience. It's pleasing. I saw more deer than people. You're running free much like animals up there.

"It's so different from backpacking, where you cover little ground in a day. We were covering 12,000-foot passes in a day. You start to feel like a part of the whole terrain."

The Douglass group wasn't the first to run the



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The run, Whitney Portal to Yosemite Valley, is 212 miles.

In 1979, three Southern Californians in their 40s did it in eight days.

Douglass and friends set a goal of 100 hours. To prepare, Douglass ran for an hour and rode a bicycle for an hour each day for five months.

Nicki Lewis, 49, an experienced ultramarathoner who last year ran in the Western States 100 miler through the Sierra, worked out in the Santa Monica Mountains to prepare.

But as Hermitage noted, you really can't prepare for high-altitude running at low altitude. Douglass finished ahead of Lewis and Hermitage because of his mountain experience. Bishop, Douglass' hometown, is at the foot of the Sierra, 4,140 feet high.

"I'm the last person to believe that we finished," Lewis said. "It was a never-ending nightmare. It was like being in a fairy tale with continual challenges.

"It was like a survival test. You're out there alone. By the fourth day we only had one candy bar and a little water between us."

Indeed, running the trail is fit for ABC's "Survival of the Fittest." Douglass said he had to perform Class 3 rock climbing, which is simply traversing with hands and legs, over passes at night. With flashlight in hand, he negotiated the cliffs safely.

The runners carried as little extra weight as feasible. They had arranged for support crews to provide food at certain points. They wore running shoes, not hiking boots, and lightweight mountain gear.

"You'd be surprised at how fast the shoes would dry after going through a stream," Douglass said.

Lewis' shoes fell apart about midway through the trek, but a woman backpacker gave her an extra pair.

Lewis and Hermitage had difficulty finding the trail where it was covered with snow, which slowed them. One stretch of the trail was covered with snow for four miles. And at one creek-turned-river, Hermitage said, he and Lewis spent an hour deciding where to cross.

"We lost time wondering whether it was worth risking our lives to try to cross it," Lewis said.

Was it worth the chances? Yes, the finishers agreed.

After all, this was a vacation.