



Forester

By Suzanne “Tailwinds” Finney



“There’s no snow on Forester.”

Yesterday we had received this good word from some young south-bound hikers. They told me just what I was hoping to hear. It seemed unlikely that we could be that lucky, but, after all, they had just come over the pass. As we broke camp and started hiking, I was hopeful despite a faint tightening in my stomach.

The morning hike took us through a basin surrounded by peaks. Snowfields many hundreds of yards wide obscured the trail, sun cups frozen in place. I doubted that the pass would be clear of snow judging from our present circumstances. It occurred to me that “there’s no snow on Forester” might really mean “I’m such a wilderness stud that snow doesn’t bother me.” Which is way different than there being no snow at all.

Once we entered the basin, snow slumped into arrays of sun cups that looked like rows of waxy, dripping candles. At first the snowfields were easily navigable. But as we kept climbing, they became more frequent and the trail became impossible to follow. There was much debate in our group about which tiny notch in the seemingly impenetrable wall of rock ahead was Forester Pass.

My thoughts alternated between vague worries and apprehension: Would I be able to handle the altitude? If I slipped on the snow, could I stop myself from falling down the mountainside? Quietly, I just followed the group. The ice ax I carried was no comfort. My experience sliding downhill headfirst on my back near Mount Baden-Powell had reinforced my fear that I was just a passenger on my pack. However, I kept my fears in check, as I did not want to waste any energy I needed to get over the pass. This pass represented a point of success or failure for me—if I could accomplish Forester then I could handle anything.

So I deferred to the experience of Blue Butterfly, who was almost giddy with excitement. She relished this type of challenge and clearly enjoyed the snow travel as well as the routefinding.

Finally we got close enough to the vertical wall of rock to see the switchbacks that had been blasted or chiseled into the side of the wall. They appeared to be clear of snow near the top, although the base of the mountain seemed completely snow covered. One vertical chute near the top was fairly narrow but very, very steep.

Blue Butterfly stayed with me, and her joyous spirit infused me with a sense of fun. I recalled that on the porch at Kennedy Meadows, sharing a cheeseburger with Squatch, a thru hiker, he had related his own experience hiking over Forester. When he reached the top of the pass, he said, hundreds of blue butterflies appeared out of nowhere and flew over his head through the pass. He called it a “magic moment.” I wished for a similar magic moment for our Blue Butterfly.

As we started up the steep switchbacks, heartened by how wide the trail was, I did not feel the panicky fear of heights that I had

been dreading. This climb would have terrified me six months ago, but experience on the trail helped temper my fear. As I looked back over the territory we had covered, I saw the large snowfields and barren ground that dotted the basin behind us. Ahead, the trail switchbacked precipitously up the vertical wall. Blue Butterfly stopped to photograph the delicate and hardy blue tubelike flowers that grew in the cracks of rock. As I labored uphill, taking short breaths, Blue Butterfly taught me pressure breathing and the rest step—both useful techniques to get me to the top. With each step my exhilaration increased—I was doing it! I was making it to the top! My initial apprehension turned to a comforting certainty that I would make it without mishap or drama.

Then we came to the vertical snow chute.

Snow and my fleeting sense of comfort cascaded steeply from the top of the pass across the trail and continued down at an angle that guaranteed a very long fall, were one to slip. There was no way around it, either above or below. We were close to the top of the pass now, and the walls appeared nearly vertical. I sneaked one small peek down the chute and was sorry that I did. My vision narrowed. It took all my self-control to deal with the immediate problem, which was to take that first step onto the snow and ice.

Hikers who had gone before us had made steps across the chute, but these had not penetrated far into the snow. Shade kept this chute from softening up much. On some level, I understood that the focus and concentration to take this step-by-step would keep my fear from turning into panic.

If I slipped, it was a long, long way down, with a sudden stop at the end.

Blue Butterfly called it a good chance for some ice ax training, and out came the ice axes. My heart was in my throat as I imagined the consequences of a slip and fall. The steep slope of snow was not far across, but the icy footprints looked pretty sketchy to me. Blue Butterfly told me to follow in her footsteps and to place my ice ax in the snow on the vertical wall. I faced the wall, twisted between the forward-facing footsteps and the wall of snow to my right.

“Place your ice ax in the hole, like this.” Thwack. Blue Butterfly’s ice ax went in about two inches and would go no further. I followed suit. Thwack. The handle of the ax made a nice lever that moved easily from side to side. I couldn’t imagine how this was going to save me if I slipped.

I progressed like this, methodically placing the ice ax in a hole, stepping into Blue Butterfly’s footsteps. She was exceedingly patient with me, as was Tahoe Mike, who was undoubtedly rolling his eyes at my hesitancy and fear. We progressed like this: step, ice ax, step, ice ax, step. Or was it step, step, ice ax, step, step, ice ax? I can’t remember. I only remember the numb fear and gratitude that I was being coached over this section.

Tahoe Mike, ever the consummate counterphobic, offered to take my picture if I cared to pose. I did not care to pose. I cared only for getting across this slippery slope. I wanted desperately to be safely across. Finally, I could see that we had it made, and with my feet back on solid ground, I flew up the last couple of switchbacks to

the clear-of-snow pass, where a sign marked the top: Forester Pass, 13,180 feet. Made it! Now all that was left was the descent on the other side.

“No snow on Forester?” Oh, now I get it . . . no snow on Forester. All the snow was on the ascent and the descent.

The entire north side of the pass was covered with snow, with a frozen lake at the bottom. Rather than following the obscured trail, previous hikers had cut across the slope to the southwest. Below, there was a rib of rocks and boulders, and below that the trail descended into a valley. Downward-facing footsteps led the way down the snow slope. No choice but to go for it.



I looked at my watch. Already 3:30 pm, so we obviously weren’t going to make it to Bullfrog Junction tonight. Our new goal became the campsites at Bubbs Creek.

The rib was not the official trail, so it was a matter of finding the best route to climb down the rocks. Luckily, the rocks were snow-free, but they were still a both-hands-and-feet exercise. Finally we regained the trail, which now had intermittent snowfields covering it. I continued on, with a mixture of pride and dread.

Blue Butterfly assured me that were I to slip and fall I would not be going anywhere because the snow was sticky. But I was still haunted by the turtle episode on Baden-Powell. A couple of times I froze on the snow, afraid of slipping to my death. I envisioned a long cartwheeling plunge down the

snow into the icy lake, never to be retrieved. No matter the reality and scope of the danger, my mind had created this fear and I had a full-time job controlling my imagination and my thoughts.

Blue Butterfly tried everything to keep me moving. She made little platforms for my feet. That worked for a few steps. My feet slid. My shoes had no grip. I was awkward and nervous. Then we tried glissading. We didn’t get much speed on the sun cups. Finally she taught me to plunge step and I relaxed a bit—this seemed to be something I could do.

I was no longer paralyzed by fright but I was still very slow. We would descend along the trail, then come around a bend, and there would be more snowfields to cross. Whenever I thought it was over, there was always more. But Blue Butterfly patiently stayed back, lending me her skill and experience to help me navigate safely through this dangerous terrain.

As we descended, the snowfields eventually disappeared, trees reappeared and the hike became easier and faster. Before dark we arrived at Bubbs Creek. At 6:30 pm we decided to camp, exhausted. All of us had underestimated the difficulty in making miles in this section. The combination of high altitude, route finding, snow travel, and rock climbing took its toll. We wearily chose camp spots and pitched our tents, with little energy for conversation.

Our home for the night offered a pink and amber-tinged view of the rock walls and mountains we had just come through. I set up my tent between Blue Butterfly’s and the creek so I could hear the soothing rush of water all night. I fell asleep quickly, happy to have Forester behind me and grateful for Blue Butterfly’s closeness, understanding, and patience. This happiness was combined with confidence and excitement . . . but also apprehension about what challenges Glen Pass would have to offer tomorrow. 🐦

Editor’s note: The PCT Communicator will print excerpts from The Pacific Crest Trailside

Reader books throughout 2012. The books are available online at <http://shop.pcta.org/>.

Author proceeds from the sale of these books will benefit the Pacific Crest Trail.