

Mount Whitney, Eastern Sierra, CA

The Lower 48's Tallest Peak

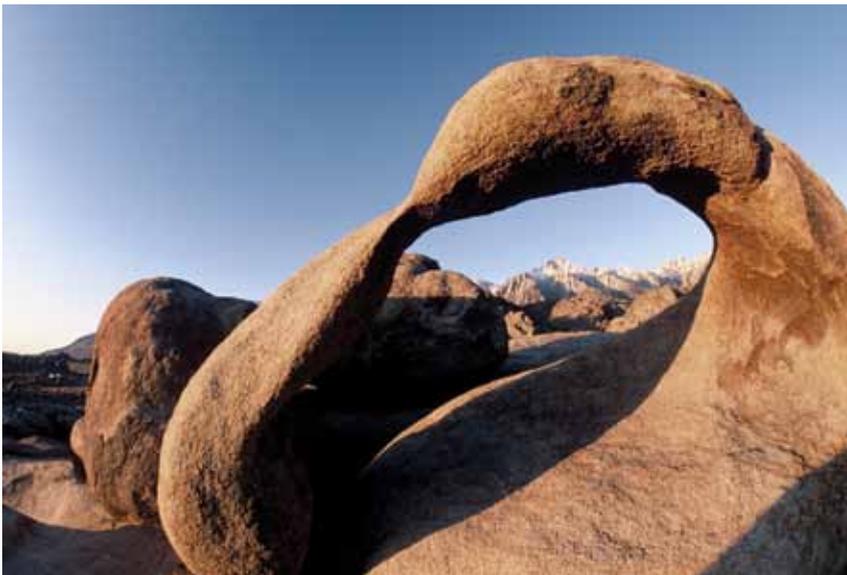
Mount Whitney, located on the eastern fringe of Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks, is the tallest peak in the Eastern Sierra and the contiguous United States. A four-hour drive north of Los Angeles, its lofty summit at 14,494 feet is sought after by hikers and climbers from all over the world. It's also a favorite of landscape photographers seeking to capture the right compositions as soft pink and orange hues soak into the gritty granite mountain at dawn. Depending on your desire and fitness level, photographic opportunities of Mount Whitney abound. They begin on the floor of the Owens Valley and the newly restored Lower Owens River at 4000 feet, to the stacked and clustered rock formations of the Alabama Hills and the hiking routes ascending to the summit of Mount Whitney.

My Location Choices

Lower Owens River: For a century the Lower Owens River lay dormant, a virtual wasteland of dried up cow patties and tangled tumbleweeds, the life source of the Eastern Sierra drained of its precious resource and diverted to the megalopolis of Los Angeles. That all changed in 2009, when the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power was court ordered to replenish the 62-mile Lower Owens River, the largest river restoration project in the history of the American West. Gone are the tumbleweeds and dusty, dry riverbed. Now fish populations have returned and dense thickets of cattails choke the river. Brand-new cottonwood trees attempt to restore a shady canopy, while wildlife like bobcats to great horned owls are reclaiming the serpentine flow of the Owens Valley. Adventure sports photographers will relish in the possibilities photographing kayakers, fishermen, and standup paddlers alike, possibly with a fresh dusting of snow on the largest peak in the Lower 48 as a dramatic backdrop.



Photos © Chuck Graham



Alabama Hills: It's no accident that hundreds of movies, especially westerns, have been filmed at the base of Mount Whitney. The high desert of the Alabama Hills offers a unique contrast to the sheer mountain peaks of the Eastern Sierra. From *Nevada Smith* to *Broken Arrow* and *Joe Kidd* to *Gladiator*, many classic flicks were filmed in this dry, high desert landscape, with Lone Pine Peak, Mount Whitney, and Mount Russell prominent in many scenes.

You can pick up a detailed map of the Alabama Hills marking many of its classic westerns at the Eastern Sierra Interagency Visitor Center just south of Lone Pine. To reach Movie Road, take the Mount Whitney Portal Road off Highway 395, and turn right on Movie Road. From there, meander on the dirt road, searching for potential photo opportunities, the massive clusters of gritty granite making for endless compositions.

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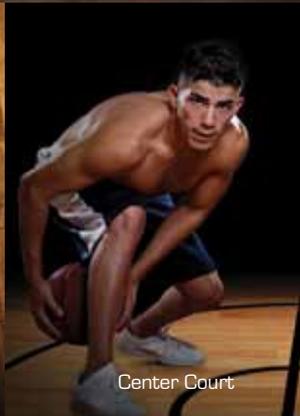
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Mount Whitney: If Mount Whitney is your photographic objective, you get exceptional light above tree line at 10,000 to 11,000 feet. You'll need to leave your car no later than 2am to reach that elevation by first light when the sheer granite faces of the Eastern Sierra, especially Mount Whitney, brighten in alpenglow.

The North Fork via the Mountaineer's Route is more physically demanding (11 miles round trip) and takes you directly beneath the East Face and East Buttress of Mount Whitney. Iceberg Lake is just north of there with the knife ridge of Mount Russell towering just north of

"A super wide-angle lens will encompass Mount Whitney and Mount Russell with Iceberg Lake in the foreground."

Mount Whitney. A super wide-angle lens will encompass Mount Whitney and Mount Russell with Iceberg Lake in the foreground.

The Mount Whitney Trail, the most traveled route in the Mount Whitney Zone (22 miles round trip), encompasses shimmering Lone Pine Lake, Outpost Camp, Trail Camp, views from the Pacific Crest Trail, especially of Guitar Lake, and the expanse of the Eastern Sierra to the west and the Owens Valley and Inyo Mountains to the east.

A stone hut and sign-in book await those who reach the summit of Mount Whitney, surrounded by exhausted yet jubilant hikers and climbers stretched out across the gritty granite slabs. For many, it's euphoria on the Lower 48's tallest mountain.

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Photos © Chuck Graham

If You Go

To gain access on Mount Whitney, hikers, backpackers, and climbers will have to apply for a permit, which is required year-round. A quota system is in place from May 1st through November 1st. A lottery beginning every February 15th assigns advanced reservations for the quota period on the mountain.

For a PDF of the Mount Whitney Lottery and more information, visit: www.fs.usda.gov/Internet/FSE_DOCUMENTS/stelprdb5347551.pdf. ■

Author Bio

Chuck Graham is a freelance writer and photographer living with his wife in Carpinteria, California. His work has appeared in Outdoor Photographer, Backpacker, Canoe & Kayak, Living Bird, The Surfer's Journal, and Patagonia catalog. His website is www.chuckgrahamphoto.com.