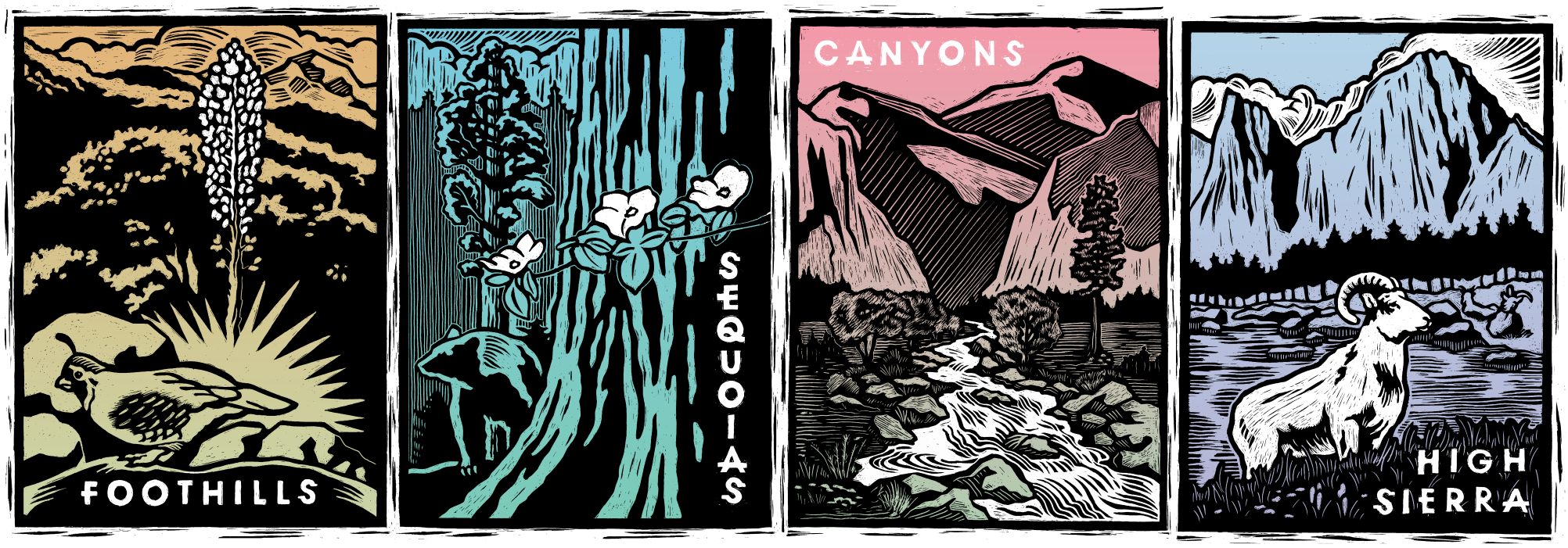

SEQUOIA & KINGS CANYON NATIONAL PARKS

& SEQUOIA NATIONAL FOREST/GIANT SEQUOIA NATIONAL MONUMENT

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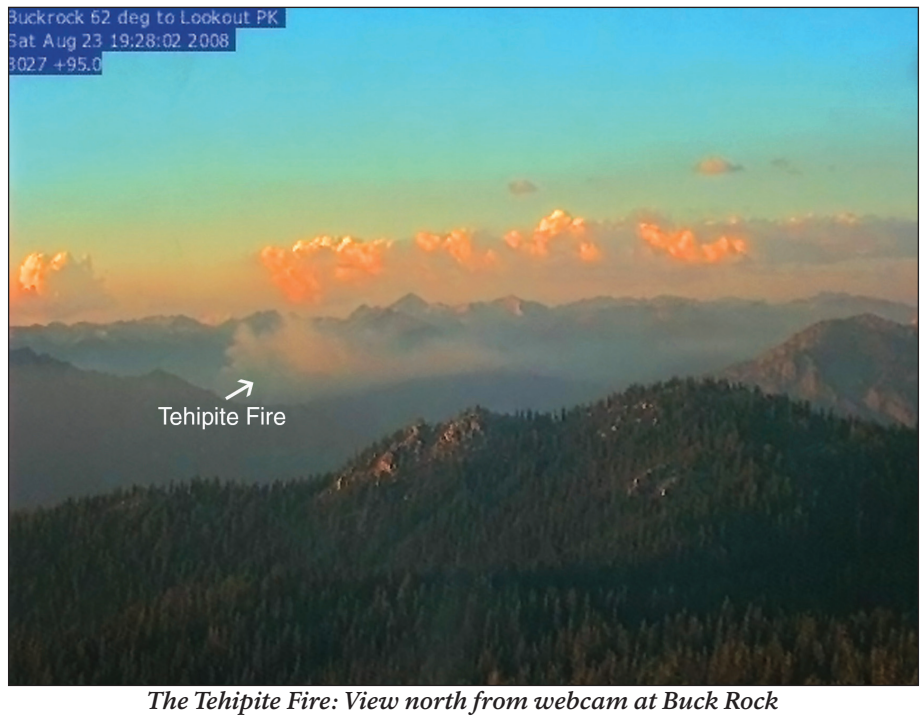
A tale of two fires

Two large fires started in these parks this summer. At first glance, they seemed very similar, but the parks used very different methods to respond to them.

Lightning sparked the Tehipite Fire on July 14th in the cliffs north of Tehipite Valley in Kings Canyon National Park. On September 10th, lightning ignited the Hidden Fire on cliffs north of Ash Mountain in Sequoia National Park.

An abundance of dry natural fuels in each location encouraged fire growth. The fires both started in areas preserved for their wilderness characteristics.

However, response to each fire is based on many variables: Firefighter and public safety, proximity to developments, elevation, potential for spread, the ecological benefits of fire, and the potential impact of smoke on people.



The Tehipite Fire: View north from webcam at Buck Rock (in Sequoia National Forest) on August 23, 2008.

When the Tehipite Fire started, smoke from large lightning fires in northern California was already contributing to poor air quality. To limit additional smoke, firefighters tried to slow Tehipite spread by digging fireling along its active northern flank.

Within a few days, seven professional firefighters had been injured in the steep, rough terrain, so the park abandoned that strategy. Firefighter and public safety are always the number-one priority, and the tehipite Fire did not threaten life or property.

The safest, most ecologically beneficial, and cost-effective action proved to be routine monitoring of the fire. Sierra National Forest joined the park in managing the Tehipite when it became clear that the fire would cross the agency boundary.

The tale of the Hidden Fire is quite different. The fire had the possibility of spreading into developed areas within the park. The smoky situation in northern California had eased, but this fire had the potential to cause significant smoke impacts to nearby residents and visitors, which caused great concern.

Therefore, firefighters tried to suppress this fire as quickly as possible. Hot, dry conditions and the very rough landscape made containment difficult, however, and the fire grew in spite of their efforts.

Fire crews from other areas and agencies came to assist the park. As the flames moved into steeper, inaccessible terrain, managers had to devise a long-term strategy that lessened the risk to firefighters. Fire crews relocated to nearby ridgelings and park roads, including the Generals Highway, to build fireling. They burned along these lines to consume forest fuels before the main fire could reach them. Once contained, the fire can safely and naturally spread within the fire lines.

Throughout this time, the Tehipite Fire typically had about ten firefighters assigned to it. At maximum staffing, the Hidden Fire kept 781 personnel very busy.

The tale of these two fires is not yet told in full. The Tehipite Fire totalled over 10,000 acres as of late September; the Hidden Fire stood at 3500 acres. Both will burn throughout the fall, and will eventually be extinguished by rain or snow. Both will result in healthier forests.

Two lightning strikes, two completely different responses — an illustration of the many factors that determine the story of how a fire is managed.

— Deb Schweizer, Fire Education Specialist