

Feature Story

Olympic Feats: Exploring the Queets Trail

By Mountain Man Dave

Our group had originally intended to do an eight-day trip with three layover days at a base camp 5 miles beyond Pelton Shelter, where the river canyon forms at Service Falls. We were looking to explore a route to the Upper Queets Basin, which would have necessitated getting above the impassable canyon.

However, in two days we were able to get only to Paradise Creek, 2 miles short of Pelton Shelter, and we weren't looking forward to crashing another 5 miles through the rain forest past Pelton Shelter with full packs, so we took two layover days at Paradise Creek and hiked back out in two days, thereby shortening the trip to a very enjoyable six days.

On a Saturday afternoon, we found 30 cars at the trailhead, which didn't augur well for obtaining a campsite 6 or 7 miles in. There is an ONP campground near the end of the Queets River Road, and some of the car owners may have been from there. The initial wide ford of the Queets River wasn't terribly difficult, although the river was flowing swiftly with a depth of two feet in the middle. Wearing hard-soled footwear for this ford is recommended, and if you won't be fording the river again near Tshletshy Creek, you can stash it for use when you come back out. This ford is potentially dangerous, and likely shouldn't be attempted early in the season or after major rainfall in the area. We were fortunate to have six days of sunny weather after clearing of morning fog.

Hitting the Trail

Our plan for Day 1 was to backpack 7 miles to a wonderful campsite across from where Tshletshy Creek flows into the Queets. We learned about this campsite from our housemate Bryant Carlin, a photographer who is planning to spend 15 months in the Olympics gathering material and pictures for a book on the seasonal migration patterns of the animals there. After fording the Queets, we soon reached a huge meadow where the John Andrews ranch had been. At mile 1.8, the foundation of the ranch building was to the left as the meadow is entered, along with many blackberry bushes in full bloom. Yummy! At mile 2.4, just before Coal Creek, a side path goes to the left to the Record Douglas Fir Tree which, as a 1996 Trail Report from Dennis & Pat stated, wasn't terribly impressive with its top gone, although its base was certainly huge.

We continued to walk on essentially level ground through sometimes-open forest, at an elevation of around 360 feet. Shortly after Coal Creek we came out along the Queets River, and then, right after crossing a small stream, saw a campsite above the trail, approximately 3 miles in. Then back into the woods only to emerge again along the Queets at mile 3.6. There is a small, but feasible, campsite here. We used this camp on our way back. The view of the Queets valley is excellent here, but it's a bit difficult to get down to the river for water.

Back again into the woods, and at 4.2 miles a signed trail goes right to the Lower Tshletshy Ford. The signed trail for the Upper Tshletshy Ford is reached at Mile 6.0, but first you come along the river in an area called Spruce Bottom. There are two adjacent, fine, large campsites here. The first one is on gently sloping sand extending to the river, followed by a small campsite just off-trail on the right. There presumably is more camping available where these two ford-access trails reach the Queets, but we didn't explore this area. The abandoned Tshletshy Creek Trail continues from the Upper Ford, as described by Wood's book, but Dennis & Pat reported being unable to find the Smith Cabin along that trail.

We would have taken one of the nice campsites at Spruce Bottom, but they were already claimed, so we continued to where the trail again came to the river opposite Tshletshy Creek, at 7.2 miles. Here was the wonderful campsite of which Bryant had spoken, and we were lucky to find no one there! It was spacious in open rain forest, with easy access to the Queets. We had been on the trail for four hours, and it was now 6 p.m., so we were happy to call it a day. We discovered the next day, there wasn't another good camping spot for over two miles further. Campsites along the Queets Trail really aren't plentiful in spite of the flatness of the terrain, for this is rain forest.

The next day we immediately crossed a large dry creekbed, and then, after crossing a stream, entered a beautiful large maple forest. The next stream was crossed quite a bit upstream from where the topo shows, and after crossing a dry streambed we finally came to good-sized Harlow Creek at 9.5 miles. Most of us were able to make all of these stream crossings along the Queets Trail on rocks or logs, but Cecile preferred to wade through the larger ones. Just beyond Harlow Creek is a good campsite at a small stream, and at 10.3 miles is a campsite with a bench and a fine view, where the trail comes close to the Queets River. After crossing a large dry gully, we shortly came to Bob Creek (mile 11.6), a small stream in the woods without nearby camping. How they could name a topographic quad after Bob Creek is beyond me!

Continuing in woods, we came back to the Queets at mile 12.8. Here, in open forest, we met a horse party, which had passed us earlier that day, but this was the end of the line for them. The true trail, which now was uphill to our left, was blocked by a rock fall. Presumably, we could have continued on it when but chose to veer right at a junction just before reaching the Queets. Anyhow, to get back onto the trail we had to scurry uphill a bit, and this is where the only major climb (about 150 feet) of the trip starts, as shown on the topo. If you don't know where to go at this point, you are doomed since your path just ends, and we were fortunate to get the advice of the horse party there.

After climbing and staying high for a long time, the trail comes back down to cross a stream before entering a huge area of open forest. This is another tricky place, for the trail is faint here at best. We didn't have trouble going in, for the route angles naturally toward the Queets, but reaching it much sooner than shown on the topo. However, we managed to lose it coming back, by staying left to the end of the open forest where a well-beaten path picks up and abruptly ends. Fortunately, I remembered that we had entered this area at its right, coming back, and with some exploration I was able to pick up the trail again. A well-placed marker would be invaluable here. This illustrates the danger in taking the Queets Trail beyond Bob Creek if you aren't adept at routefinding, for you could be lost out there forever!

We followed along a dry course of the Queets and then endured a series of annoying short ups and down as the trail hugged the river. Finally we crossed Paradise Creek (13.8 miles) after some five hours of hiking, and immediately found a beautiful, open, alder forest for camping. This isn't an established campsite, but there is plenty of flat space available between Paradise Creek and the Queets River. The area looked like it was used either by a herd of 50 elk, or by four backpackers in three tents!). We stayed at Paradise Creek for three nights, enjoying a gorgeous sunset on the Queets the last evening. Marty was quite successful in his fishing here and elsewhere along the river.

On Day 3 Cecile and I relaxed in camp while Bill and Marty followed the trail upriver toward Pelton Shelter, about 2.4 miles distant. However, the trail petered out for them in open forest along the Queets River, and they were unable to find the shelter. So the next day we packed lunches for an exploratory trip up the Queets! The trail soon crosses a stream, and somewhat later comes out into large open forest and grows faint as it is wont to do. Coming back, the trick is to stay well left in this area until the trail becomes distinct again. Then the trail comes out above the Queets at 14.7 miles, at a large blowdown. It's possible to circumnavigate the blowdown, but it's easier to pick your way right along the edge of the riverbank here, through the blowdown. At 15.2 miles, the trail crosses a stream in an open alder forest which should make for excellent camping. Farther on, we came to a junction of faint paths where we correctly veered left. It seems that Bill and Marty went right here the previous day. Finally we reached Pelton Shelter, up a bit in the woods. However, don't head up left to gain a bench, for that well-defined path goes nowhere. The open shelter was pretty dingy, but it looks like it'd be a godsend in the rain. We came back to the river for lunch in the open alder forest, and then walked back to camp in two hours.

On Day 5 we started back out, intending to stay at one of the fine campsites at Spruce Bottom at 5.3 miles in. However, I had marked them at the wrong place on my topo, as being at around mile 3.7, and shortly before we reached the actual Spruce Bottom, Bill took off on his way to where I thought these campsites were. So Cecile, Marty, and I had to pass up these beautiful campsites, which were unoccupied, and continue on to catch up with Bill. We finally reached the fair campsite at mile 3.6, where we stopped, and in due time Bill, who had gone even farther, came back to this campsite. I didn't remember passing any campsites before this one on our way in, so I didn't want to go any further, and this proved to be correct. The next day we hiked out in two hours including blackberry-gorging time, again having an easy ford of the Queets River. On a Thursday morning we found two other vehicles at the trailhead.

The Queets Trail provides a different, exhilarating backpacking experience. Because of the initial ford, practically no one goes there. But, it offers you hiking in beautiful, mostly level rainforest with occasional large areas of open forest, while gaining 500 feet on 16 miles of trail. Camping is somewhat sparse, but those campsites which exist are outstanding. However, the way can be tricky, and hopefully this article will enable readers to enjoy this wonderful area safely.

More about the Queets Trail

The Queets Trail runs for 16.2 miles through the Queets Rain Forest to Pelton Shelter, on the southwest side of Olympic National Park. Although the trailhead is only a four-hour drive from Seattle, the trail sees very little use because of the initial wide, deep ford of the Queets River. Commencing August 17, four of us took a six-day backpacking trip up the river; Cecile Disenhouse and I were joined by Marty Pfefer from Denver and Bill Holmes from Tucson. Although not exactly what we had planned to do, it was a wonderful trip in excellent weather, quite different from our usual fare of high ridges and remote lakes. This report describes our experiences, and provides detailed information on the route and campsites for others' use.

For more information on the Queets trail

There is precious little published information on the Queets River Trail, and some of it is inaccurate. These are the information sources we used:

1) Robert Wood's *Olympic Mountains Trail Guide* (third edition, 2000) gives a description of the Queets Trail (pages 285-287), which we found to be a bit sketchy and somewhat outdated, although it is the only serious attempt to provide such information. The distances given aren't quite right, evidently following an older survey by Olympic National Park and giving a total trail length of 15.4 miles.

2) The ONP's free map (reprint of 2001) also gives a trail length of 15.4 miles. Its main problem is in indicating a campsite at Bob Creek (as does Wood); the creek is flowing, but there's no real camping there.

3) The ONP's trail report of August 6, 2002, was the only one in the WTA online database. It gives a trail length of 16.2 miles, which seems to be correct. The trail was considerably better than described there. It wasn't brushy, and rather than ankle-deep mud for most of the first 7 miles, we encountered one major mud hole, shortly past the turnoff to the Lower Tshletshy Ford. Evidently it's worthwhile waiting until later in the summer to avoid the problems mentioned in that report, particularly the ford of the Queets River at the beginning.

4) The only other written report on this trail seems to be the one by Dennis & Pat published in the November 1996 issue of *Pack & Paddle*. This illustrates how little information is available on this trail.

5) The Custom Correct Queets Valley map is pretty accurate in depicting the whole trail, although at a scale of 1:62,500 it is somewhat lacking in detail. The distances of the trail segments given there add up to 16.2 miles.

6) Two 1:24,000 USGS topographic maps, Kloochman Rock and Bob Creek, give the whole trail except for its first mile. The route shown also is quite accurate, but the side trail to the Record Douglas Fir Tree is incorrectly shown as starting somewhat before Coal Creek is reached. These maps are the most useful ones for navigating the route.

7) Green Trails map Kloochman Rock, No. 165, gives the trail to Pelton Creek Camp except for the first 1.1 miles. The scale is 1:69,500. Mileage shown adds up to 16.0.

