

Northwest Explorer

Scenic Splendor on the PCT; Rainy to Harts Pass

By Ken Konigsmark

As is our annual custom for a dozen years now, my brother Keith flew out from Iowa for his annual fix of Seattle seafood, microbrews, and mountain backpacking. Our “to do” list had for some time included the stretch of the Pacific Crest Trail (PCT) from Rainy to Harts Pass, but the relatively easy distance of 31 miles had previously caused us to divert to more challenging trips elsewhere. However, as we’ve both aged, and following my knee surgery in April, a leisurely trip along this portion of the PCT began to sound just right as we finalized plans in June.

We planned a five-day trip in mid-August but the few reports available up until that time warned that this northerly segment of the PCT was still impassable due to the heavy snowfall from the prior winter. I called the Winthrop ranger station two days before we were to start and they confirmed that the trail had finally melted out and a crew had even cleared out the blow-downs that very week. We were set.

It took us longer than we’d hoped to drive two cars up to the end point at Harts Pass, where we parked a vehicle across from the summer ranger’s cabin. We then piled everything into the second car for a long ride back down the winding road and up State Route 20 to the Rainy Pass trailhead. Finally, at 3:00 we hoisted our packs and headed up the PCT accompanied by my two dogs, Spike and Koko.

It felt great to have a whole trip ahead of us on the PCT since, for several years, we’d opted for journeys on lesser known and lesser-maintained trails. We enjoyed the gentle climb up from Hwy 20 to the headwaters basin of Porcupine Creek, giving us an easy break-in for the longer journey. We began passing several desirable campsites once we got above treeline and opted to claim one with an open view of the snowy peaks to the south near the final switchbacks to Cutthroat Pass. After setting up camp, we climbed to the ridgeline above us to the east where we found a boot trail following the crest southbound. This ridgecrest offered giant views to Cutthroat Lake below and Silver Star Mountain to the east. A lone mountain goat scampered along the path about 200 yards in front of us and seemed irritated that we’d disturbed his resting spot. After finding a flat rock, we enjoyed our first-night custom of wine and crackers as the sun began to set. The guidebooks point out that a side trip along this ridgeline is well worth it for hikers visiting the Cutthroat Pass area and we concur with that suggestion.

Once back in camp, we enjoyed another first-night treat that we’ve discovered is both easy and quite tasty. We bring a package of yakisoba noodles and a container of frozen chicken and stir-fry veggies that can be fried up in no time to provide a gourmet dinner that tastes even better when high in the mountains. After our yakisoba feast and some cookies, it was soon time for sleep and we enjoyed the first of four nights being able to sleep out under the stars. The bugs were negligible throughout the trip.

However, it did cool down at night and we awoke to 34-degree temperatures in our shaded camp. We carried the stove and our dew-dampened sleeping bags over to a sunny rock, heated water, and soon discovered another special treat that I highly recommend. When shopping, we'd spotted a box of instant Chai Tea Latte packets at Trader Joe's and decided to give it a try. It was delicious, either in the morning or at night. Give it a try.

Since we had only 31 miles to cover in 5 days we took our time getting ready that morning and didn't hit the trail again until 10 a.m. We were up to the rocky Cutthroat Pass area in just a few switchbacks. Then, rounding a turn in the trail above Granite Pass, we were hit with the first dramatic view of Tower Mountain, Golden Horn, Mt. Hardy, the deep Swamp Creek valley, and the snowy peaks of North Cascades National Park to the west. This was also where a long series of switchbacks began descending from the pass to about 6000 feet elevation where the PCT then comfortably contours across the slope beneath Tower Mountain. It's an easy stretch of trail to walk while soaking in the scenery that surrounds you, however, this is also the area where snow lingers and routinely blocks passage on the trail until August due to the hazardous drop-offs.

We hiked to a grassy meadow beneath Snowy Lakes that offered the first water source since Cutthroat Pass. A large fire pit and campsite sits in the center of the meadow and we made camp here with the intent to explore the Snowy Lakes/Golden Horn basin lying above for the rest of the afternoon. It's a short, stiff climb up from the meadow to Lower Snowy Lake and another short climb to Upper Snowy. The lakes are fringed by heather, flowers, and rocky outcrops that provide great photo ops and numerous places to bask like a marmot on a sun-warmed rock. First, though, we climbed the ridgeline due south of the lakes, following its crest to a point directly above Methow Pass. We rested here for a while to enjoy the mountain views before a chilly wind drove us back down. Keith did his marmot act on a rock while the dogs and I climbed up to the shoulder of Golden Horn for a look to the north. We were finally ready to head back down to camp at about 4:30. This side visit to the Snowy Lakes area should be included on any trip along this portion of the PCT.

Once back in camp we found the meadow to be a quite popular camping spot, with several other parties coming along later that evening. We even had one PCT thru-hiker that had started at the Mexico border in May show up at our campsite at 8:30 after having come from Stehekin that day! Given the crowded conditions, he continued on to camp at Methow Pass.

Likewise, not liking to be camped amongst a crowd, we woke early, packed up, and moved up to Methow Pass for breakfast. Clouds had crept in and were swirling up the Swamp Creek valley, blocking the views we'd hoped for. Mt. Hardy was totally engulfed in clouds as well, causing us to cancel a side trip up its flank that we'd planned. We continued on the PCT instead, dropping quickly into the forested Methow River valley. After about 3 miles, we found the bridge across the Methow River to be collapsed but it still enabled a nervous crossing. The campsite at this crossing turned out to be the only spot we saw along the entire route we covered that day. We had hoped to camp near the

junction of Brush Creek and the Methow River. As the name implies however, due to the brushy conditions and steepness of the slopes, there are really no viable campsites to be found. I scouted downstream a bit after reaching the junction with the Methow River Trail (#480) and found nothing there either.

We opted to continue up the Brush Creek valley on the PCT, hoping to find a campsite prior to the climb up to Glacier Pass. No such luck. Again, the brushy, steep, rocky conditions along the trail and in the creek valley precluded finding a useable site. We stopped at the spot where the PCT begins to switchback uphill from Brush Creek in order to get water before the climb. While Keith filtered water, I climbed all over the creek valley looking for a campsite but couldn't find one flat, useable spot anywhere. So, we continued on to Glacier Pass, finding the climb up to be not nearly as difficult as we'd expected. On the way, a whole family of grouse followed us along the trail, totally unafraid of us and the dogs (which we kept under tight control).

We were worried there wouldn't be a water source at the pass but were relieved to find that the side trails heading west from the PCT at Glacier Pass dropped down into a small stream basin with flowing water and excellent campsites. We began getting endless visits from the large deer herd that inhabits this area as soon as we set up camp at a choice site. Like the grouse, they seemed almost totally unafraid and routinely came within a few yards of the dogs and us. We ended up having the whole basin to ourselves that night.

In the morning, before continuing on the PCT, we decided to take a side-trip through a large rock field and downstream along the creek towards the base of Azurite Mountain. We went as far as a steep drop-off down to a secluded pond that doesn't appear on the map, but which seemed like a perfect spot for wildlife viewing.

By about 10 a.m., we packed up and began the next climb up the many switchbacks from Glacier Pass to Grasshopper Pass. The views kept getting better with every step of this three-mile climb and blocked out any pain my body may have been feeling. After reaching the ridgeline, we took a boot-path southward to the top of Peak 7125. This, too, should be done by anyone visiting this area. The 360-degree views from the top of this peak are spectacular and we took our time enjoying a nice lunch break, and lots of picture taking, before heading on.

We knew there was one year-round stream somewhere to the north of Grasshopper Pass and we found this basin almost equal distance between the pass and Tatie Peak. There are many nice campsites here, and it's about the only place with water for several miles in either direction on the PCT. We set up camp for our final night at one of the lower sites overlooking the Trout Creek valley. While Keith and the dogs took a snooze, I made sure I'd expended all my energy for the day by doing an off-trail scramble from the ridge crest near Tatie Peak southward along the ridgeline back to Grasshopper Pass. This probably isn't for everyone, given some of the steep drop-offs encountered along the way, but for me it was highly enjoyable. The ridgeline is totally open with views in all directions, reaching a high point of 7528 feet. I stopped here to sit in the sun, absorb the solitude and

views, and enjoy my final full day out in the wilds. After I got back to camp and explained to Keith what I'd done, he thought I was crazy.

After a final night under the stars, we woke with the usual last-day mixed feelings; a desire to avoid returning to the real world vs. an anxiousness to get back to the creature comforts we all enjoy. The weather was perfect, sunny and warm, so when we reached the Cascade crest ridgeline by Tatie Peak we were stunned to see a blanket of clouds covering all of the lower valleys beneath us far to the west. Only Mount Ballard and the upper portion of other peaks loomed above this puffy blanket of clouds. It felt like we were on top of the world.

After pictures of this incredible view, we continued at a leisurely pace along the six miles to Harts Pass and the car, arriving about 11:00AM. The friendly summer ranger who had greeted us five days earlier was still there and wanted to hear about our trip.

I'd never read a summary in *Washington Trails* magazine that described this stretch of the PCT in any detail so am hoping that this story will encourage others to make this same trip. Having done almost all the PCT in Washington, my assessment is that this segment is easy to do, highly scenic, and with views equal to those found in other, more remote portions of the PCT. This would be a good beginners backpacking trip, with a mix of mostly level walking and a few uphill climbs. With side-trips, we probably stretched the distance to 40+ miles, and this was easily accomplished in five days. The actual PCT distance of 31 miles could probably be done in two to three days, but it's well worth it to also visit the ridge crests, peaks, and Snowy Lakes basin that are within easy range of the PCT.