



*Backpacking around Mount St. Helens has unique challenges: few water sources and no shade among them. But the chance to get a front row seat viewing the most active volcano in North America is worth the hardship.*

# In the Shadow of St. Helens

## A debut backpacking trip filled with discoveries and challenges

BY SOLO STEVE

My brother-in-law and I set out on a Saturday morning in August to attempt a loop in the Mount Margaret backcountry near Mount St. Helens. I had been planning this birthday trip for some time—the permit folks probably thought I was nuts when I applied in early March!

With the weekend's hot weather, and scarce water sources on portions of the trail, I knew water was going to be a major concern. I'm still learning backpacking, and getting lighter each trip. But I figured we would need 10 liters between the two of us to get to our first reliable water source midway through day two. So we filled our five bottles and two hydration packs, moaned about the weight, and kept telling ourselves that every sip would make us a little lighter.

We enjoyed clear skies and a bit of a breeze as we left the Johnston Ridge Observatory parking lot at noon on the Boundary Trail. (A ranger informed us that the gates here are not locked, in case you anticipate exiting after hours.) The trails throughout the trip had three

things in common—there was a plague of grasshoppers, tons of wildflowers, and sweet, ripe huckleberries everywhere. We dropped packs and went up to Harry's Ridge to get a better look into the volcano and Spirit Lake, then returned to the Boundary Trail to hike the steep ridge to Coldwater Peak and St. Helens Lake.

The lake is quite a stunner. It's much smaller than Spirit Lake, bowl-shaped and clear blue, marred only by the dead, blasted trees floating on its shores. The trail travels high above the lake, and there was no obvious access. We saw and heard a pair of marmots (my first sighting!), and an elk bolting up the hill. We arrived at Margaret Camp at about 6:30 and turned in at sunset. With visions of the elk and bear prints through the camp fresh in my head, I was absolutely convinced that there were critters scurrying around the campsite. But it was just the wind flapping the tent. It was a good first day of hiking, but a lousy first night of sleep.

FYI: Each of the camps has at least two level, framed tent pads, a gray-water sump, and a solar composting

toilet. The upper site at Bear Camp has awesome views of Rainier! The sites at Obscurity Lake Camp are not near the lake—in fact, we saw no easy access to the lake. The Panhandle and Shovel Lake Camps are near their respective lakes, but getting to them involves a steep, downhill trip from the Lakes Trail. You will receive small maps with the camp layout and nearby water sources with your permits.

We were on the trail again by 8:30 a.m. on Sunday. The Boundary Trail gradually gained and lost elevation until we reached the unsigned trail to Mount Margaret. The short trail up ends at a wide peak, and we soaked in the views of Mounts St. Helens, Adams, Rainier and Hood, each under a cloudless blue sky. A coyote darted along one of the lower game trails. We looked down on a golden eagle in flight! There were a couple of backpackers starting up as we reached the bottom, and we swapped details about our trips. They had come in via the Norway Pass trailhead and overnights at Dome Camp, and were returning to Mount Margaret to get a better view than they had the day before.



Mount Adams from the Boundary Trail near Mount St. Helens.

I had planned the water just about right. We were taking a break at Bear Camp when the couple caught up to us and said that there was a good water source yards away—very timely, since we were down to our last full bottle.

We arrived at Bear Pass and left the Boundary Trail, descending steeply on the Lakes Trail toward Grizzly Lake (no obvious access). We met a ranger coming the other way, who told us about trail conditions, reminded us not to make campfires, and described the descent to Shovel Lake Camp, our destination for night two. The Lakes Trail is in rough shape—overgrown, with near-washouts and narrow tread. It needs a lot more boots and/or a series of maintenance parties. By the time we arrived at Shovel Lake Camp via a steep, sandy path (which we probably would not have found had it not been for the ranger's bootprints), we had traveled about 9 miles in nine hours. The brookies were literally jumping out of the water, but neither of us had the energy to use the fly rod we'd brought. We were content to have dinner, take in the sunset and turn in early for a much better second night's sleep.

Following our bootprints up and away from Shovel Lake, we reached the ridge tired and sweating about 9:30 a.m. on Monday (my birthday!). Here the Lakes Trail gains and loses elevation as it passes by Snow Lake. Herds of elk were sunning

themselves down in the valley, and we saw more eagles and a falcon. The huckleberries got more ripe and sweet the more we hiked. But the trail conditions worsened to the point where we lost the main trail and got sidetracked on a game trail. We started doubling back, took our time, checked our maps, and listened to each others' opinions on where to head next. We had just identified the main trail again when I took a bad step on some pumice pebbles. My left leg flew out, and my awkward center of balance had me landing my butt right on top of my folded right leg. I heard a loud POP and cursed like a sailor! The pain was on either side of my ankle, but it wasn't a break, since I could move my foot left and right and back and forth. I tried a hobble-step or two and determined I could probably walk, but very, very slowly—and without a pack.

It was decision time. Our night three camp was Ridge Camp along the Coldwater Trail, but that was three miles and 1,500 feet of elevation gain away. Since we had found the main trail again, I suggested we take the (mostly level) Lakes Trail all the way out to the Coldwater Lake boat launch, where we might find someone to help. Now, what to do with the packs? We left the tent and one of the sleeping bags, consolidated some of the other essentials we would need to overnight if necessary. We made our way

down to the junction with the Coldwater Trail, negotiating one washout along the way with a series of butt-slides. At the junction, we cut the other pack loose and my brother-in-law double-timed it over the 4.5 miles to the Coldwater Lake parking lot.

Thanks to the pair of hikers who gave him a lift from Coldwater Lake up to Johnston Ridge to retrieve our truck! I continued my hobble-step-hobble-step routine along the Lakes Trail until he met me about a mile from the truck. We were headed out about 8:45 p.m., twelve hours and 10 miles away from where we'd started that morning.

I was incredibly lucky to make it out under my own power, and to have a super backpacking partner like my brother-in-law. If I had this trip to do over again, I'd skip the Lakes and Coldwater Trails altogether, and just do a through-hike on the Boundary Trail. In my opinion, there are much prettier lakes in the Alpine Lakes Wilderness, with better trails leading to them! ♦

*Solo Steve (aka Steve Payne) is a WTA member from Federal Way. He recently hiked for WTA in the annual Hike-A-Thon event this August.*

## Trip Essentials

### Johnston Ridge–Norway Pass

**Hikable:** July–early October

**One-way trip:** 19 miles (car shuttle required between Johnston Ridge and Bounday trailhead on FR 26)

**Elevation gain:** 3,000 feet.

**Map:** Green Trails 332 Spirit Lake

**To get there:** Drive SR 504 to Johnston Observatory at road's end.

**The route:** Follow Boundary Trail east 2.3 miles; stay east at a junction and pass St. Helens Lake at 5.5 miles; continue east up Mount Margaret and to a junction at 14.3 miles; turn right and follow the Boundary Trail another 1.8 miles to Bear Pass and Norway Pass; descend 2.2 miles to the Norway Pass trailhead.

# Climbing a New Volcano

## Reopened after two years, Mount St. Helens is a changed mountain

DAVID B. WILLIAMS



*The new lava dome at Mount St. Helens in September. The dome is currently growing at a level of one dump truck load each four seconds.*

BY DAVID B. WILLIAMS

“For seven years nothing changed, and now this. It’s great, something different every time I am up here,” says Sharon Steriti, a U.S. Forest Service ranger on the summit of Mount St. Helens. We are looking down into the crater created by the 1980 eruption. Directly in front of us a massive fin of lava thrusts out of a rubble heap of light gray rock. To the fin’s east, another pile of darker rock dominates the foreground and next to that yet another mound of broken up lava covers the crater bottom. Two years ago when I was on the summit, none of these features existed.

I last climbed Mount St. Helens on September 23, 2004, the day before the Forest Service closed the mountain to climbers for almost two years. I remember sitting on the crater rim and marveling at the glacier and lava dome below. That dome rose 875 feet above the crater floor and covered an area equivalent to about 200 football fields. Seventeen eruptions had produced that heap of lava, the last occurring in October 1986. I was more impressed, however, with the glacier.

A snow and ice field started to become a permanent feature of the crater in 1990, and by September 1996 crevasses—the first signs of movement—had appeared.

U.S. Geological Survey geologist Steven Schilling estimated the 1996 glacier’s size at 25 acres, smaller than any of the 11 named glaciers that covered Mount St. Helens in 1980. Within five years, the glacier had grown to 250 acres, larger than any pre-eruption glacier, and by the time of my visit, it had a maximum estimated thickness of 645 feet and a volume of 157 million cubic yards, roughly equivalent to about 46 Giza pyramids.

The glacier had formed against the southern wall of the crater and spread in two arms around the lava dome. It gleamed white, with clearly defined rocky ridges showing how the glacier advanced north toward the blast crater opening. With my binoculars, I could pick out a few crevasses. In addition to being the world’s youngest glacier, this mass of ice, named the Crater Glacier, was one of the few glaciers in the Cascades that was advancing; almost all others had begun to feel the affects of global warming and started to shrink and retreat.

And then on October 1, 2004, Mount St. Helens erupted for the first time in 18 years. Microscopic in comparison to the 1980 explosion, the 2004 event shot ash and steam thousands of feet into the air and punched a vent hole through the glacier. Ten days later, the lava dome cut through the glacier, eventually splitting it into two distinct arms.

Mount St. Helens has erupted continuously since 2004. Although steam and ash explosions occur rarely, the mountain expels two cubic yards (equal to about a phone booth) of 1,300-degree F lava every second.

On July 21, 2006, the Forest Service reopened Mount St. Helens to climbers. Although I would have loved to climb it that day, I had to wait until September 5. (The Forest Service gives out only 100 permits per day.) My wife and two friends join me on the climb.

When we pick up our permits the day before at Jack’s Restaurant & Store, the



*The lava dome as seen from the summit in 2004, prior to the new series of eruptions. The mountain re-opened to climbing this summer. The Crater Glacier, which surrounds the dome, is larger than any of the pre-1980 eruption glaciers on St. Helens.*

affable chap behind the counter quizzes us to see if we're ready. "Do you have a dust mask and goggles? It's been blowing real hard, and with all the ash it can get pretty bad. I know someone who just stopped and couldn't go further." We don't have masks or goggles but figure our glasses and bandanas will be fine. He also suggests that we get on the trail at 4:30 in the morning, to beat the wind and heat.

From Jack's we drive up toward the trailhead, Climber's Bivouac, and pull off on a side road and set up camp. We get up the next morning around 6 a.m. and hit the trail at 7:30. The first 2-plus miles climb up a gentle slope, through forest to the base of a 350- to 450-year old andesite lava flow.

The climb begins in earnest here, as we pick our way through blocks of lava, following wooden posts marking the route. Once on top of the flow, we continue up a gully, ascend several steep, ridge-like mounds, and pass by a USGS monitoring station. This is the steepest section of the trail. (We pass two dogs in this section. I do not recommend climbing Mount St. Helens with dogs; it is dusty,

travels over loose, sharp rocks, and has no water or shade.)

At about 6,800 feet, we leave behind the lava and enter an older, pyroclastic flow. The trail is still steep but now the terrain consists of unconsolidated, gravel-sized pumice. After climbing for 5 miles and gaining 4,500 feet, we reach the crater rim.

The view into the crater is stunning. (On this day, however, the views away from the mountain stink. Haze from fires has set in, and we can barely see Rainier and Adams.) The dome doesn't look like what lava should look like; instead of a black, broken, rugged surface, the dome is nearly white, smooth, and curved, as if the Sydney Opera House was rising from the ground. And like the opera house, the dome consists of several shells, except that these shells are broken or breaking up. (We watch and hear one massive rock fall, which sounds like giant dinner plates crashing to the ground.)

Geologists call these shells whalebacks. The rising lava acts as a piston, thrusting the whalebacks higher. This is the seventh spine of rock to push into the crater. As of April, the dome volume

totaled 106 million cubic yards and peaked at a height of 7,770 feet, about 600 feet higher than the 1980-1986 eruption dome, and just 593 feet below the post-eruption summit.

The growing domes of lava have squeezed Crater Glacier, cracking and splaying the two arms. Now covered in rubble and ash, they are hard to distinguish from the surrounding terrain of fractured rock and disintegrating crater walls. Looking down at the battle between ice and lava, I am reminded of a comment I heard from Andrew Fountain, a glaciologist at Portland State University, who told me in reference to the glacier, "I think it's history. This dome is growing really fast and it doesn't look good."

Who knows if Fountain is right? The eruption could stop or become more explosive. My recommendation is to visit next year or even next week. Change is in the air at Mount St. Helens. ♦

*David B. Williams is a WTA member from Seattle and author of The Street-Smart Naturalist: Field Notes from Seattle.*



# St. Helens Day Hikes

Mount St. Helens offers plenty of day hiking opportunities, and each will give you a new appreciation of the earth's power and nature's ability to bounce back after cataclysm. Remember that most of these trails lack water sources and shade is minimal, so pack a lot of water, at least 2 liters per person. Hiking season for most of these hikes is July–September, although many of these hikes can be done in early October. Check weather and trail conditions by calling ahead to Mount St. Helens National Volcanic Monument at (360) 449-7800. Always pack the 10 essentials, including rain gear and warm clothes.

*Left: Hikers check out the views of the crater, lava dome and beyond from the Johnston Ridge–Harry's Ridge route.*

*Below: Boot print in the volcanic ash.*

*Despite the destruction, a thriving, diverse ecosystem has taken root 26 years after the 1980 eruption.*

## Johnston Ridge to Harry's Ridge

Round trip: 8 miles

Elevation gain: about 500 feet

Starting from the Johnston Ridge Observatory, head east on a very popular trail—numerous kiosks describe the eruption and landscape, and you'll have a front seat view into the mountain's steaming crater. Fireweed, lupine, paintbrush and other wildflowers grow abundantly in the deep volcanic ash and pumice. At 2.3 miles, stay left and cross a steep, exposed slope (many fainthearted tourists turn back here) then on into "The Spillover," site of a huge debris avalanche. After another mile turn right on spur trail IE

and 0.6 mile up to the top of Harry's Ridge for great views down to Spirit Lake and the crater. Doughty hikers can continue on after the trip up Harry's Ridge to a viewpoint above St. Helens Lake, elevation 5,000 feet (adding 500 feet of elevation gain and 3.2 miles for a total of 11.2 miles).

## Norway Pass–Mount Margaret

Round trip: 11 miles

Elevation gain: 2,300 feet

From the Norway Pass trailhead off FR 26, you'll find one of the most spectacular views of St. Helens and Spirit Lake with its cloak of thousands of floating logs.

Follow switchbacks through blow-down and new growth, arriving after 2.2 miles at Norway Pass and amazing views (a good turnaround for less experienced hikers, or later in season). The route passes Bear Pass and connects to the Boundary Trail, reaching the summit of Mount Margaret, elevation 5,858, feet after 5.5 miles.



# St. Helens Day Hikes

## Lava Canyon

Round trip: 3.6 miles

Elevation gain: 1,200 feet

This progressively more difficult trail offers a look at some of the unique post-eruption geology of the mountain, including endless series of waterfalls and a deep gorge. The first half-mile is a barrier-free, paved trail to views of a waterfall. The trail after is no longer paved and descends to a short half-mile loop, crossing Lava Canyon over a dramatic 125-foot suspension bridge. Beyond, the trail becomes even more rugged, descending steeply and crossing several steep faces, and a water crossing.

## Goat Mountain

Round Trip: 11 miles

Elevation gain: 2,000 feet

Though outside the monument, Goat Mountain offers views of the Mount Margaret backcountry and Mount St. Helens, meadows of huckleberries turning scarlet in the fall, and small lakes along the ridgeline. All this could be lost if Idaho General Mines, Inc. is allowed to locate a 3,000-acre copper and molybdenum mine on Goat Mountain. Let your representatives know this is no place for a mine and that the lands should be added to the Volcanic Monument. The hike starts on FR 2612, just off FR 26. The hike gains about 2,000 feet, traverses the summit of Goat Mountain until reaching Deadman's Lake at 5.5 miles.

## Ape Cave

Round trip: 1.5 miles

Elevation gain: 100 feet

Take a flashlight and warm clothes when exploring this popular lava tube on the south flank of St. Helens. It's the longest lava tube in the U.S., and can be visited March through November. The cave is 0.75 miles long and gets chilly. This is a great little adventure for kids almost any time of year.

*Above: In the 26 years since the explosive eruption, many plants have reclaimed the blast zone, including fireweed.*

*Right: Trails such as the Boundary Trail ring the mountain and offer views of ongoing volcanic activity.*



KERRI LETHER



KERRI LETHER