

## The pleasures of hiking during the turn of seasons

Fall is my favorite time to hike the Cascades.

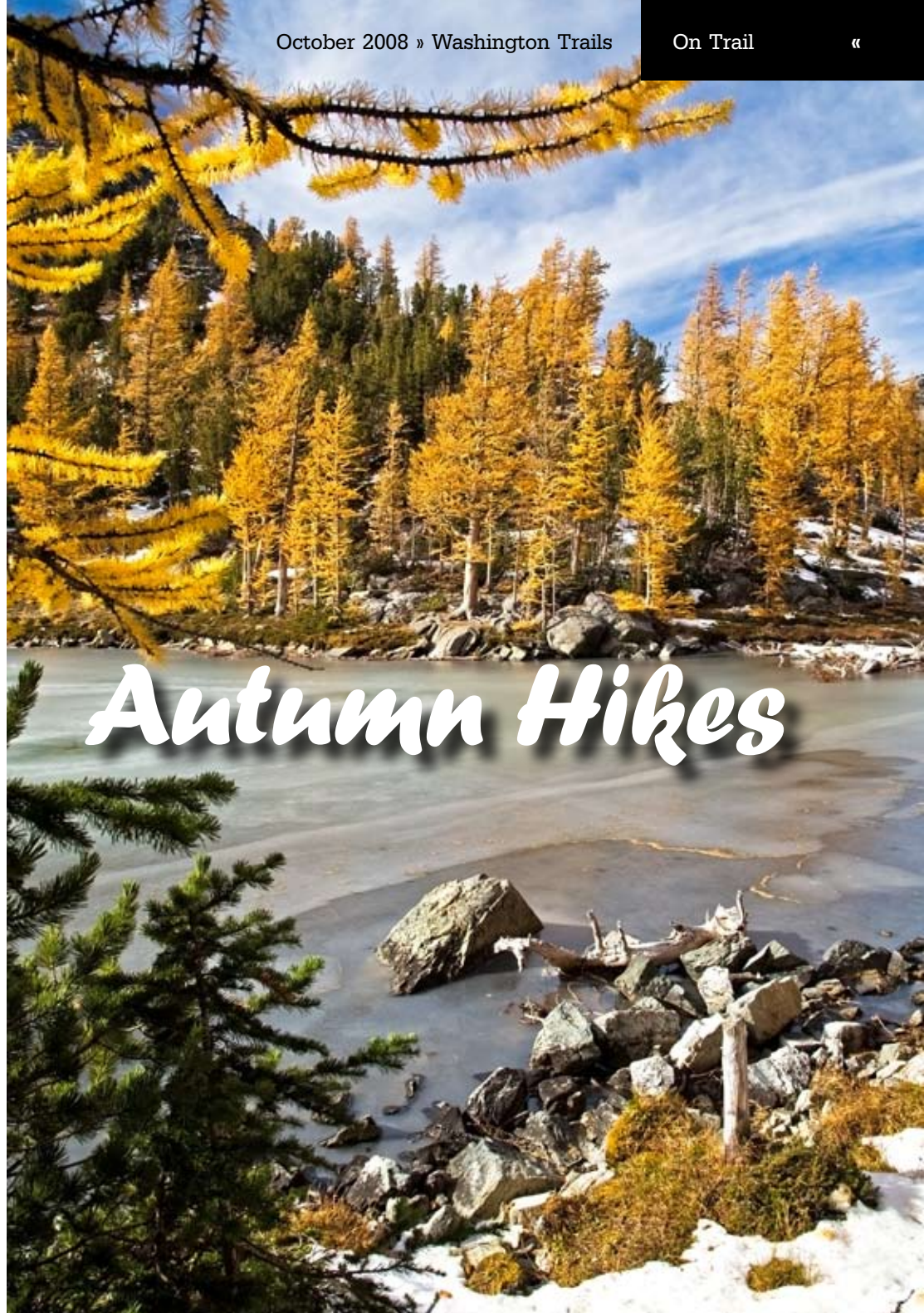
I'm convinced that the autumn colors that blanket the crests of the Cascades in September and October are any match for the better-known displays that make New England famous. Our mountains offer the most spectacular fall displays just about anywhere in the world. Larches, those odd-ball conifers that turn a sublime golden yellow in October, are simply not to be missed if you're a hiker in the Northwest. Nothing quite compares to the displays of Western and alpine larches in early to mid-October. But other deciduous plants besides the famed larches have something to offer, too—whether it's mountain ash or willow, vine maple or huckleberry. The cold autumn nights paint whole mountainsides in the Cascades an intoxicating mix of colors.

I've been on many an October hike when the air has a distinct chill, and blazes of red and orange mountain ash or huckleberry burn through the misty gray air. Or where the nearly blinding orange of a grove of larches blazes in the low, autumn sunlight with a brilliant blue sky overhead.

Fall is a magical time for hiking. The bugs are gone, the sweltering heat is over, some few tasty huckleberries may remain, and the high country animals are scrambling to store up calories for the bitter mountain winter.

The air is crisp, and there are fewer crowds of hikers. It's a quiet, contemplative time. Fall always inspires me to think about time's passage and the cycle of birth and death (and it doesn't help that my birthday happens right as autumn is getting underway). It's a bittersweet time.

Don't power hike on an autumn trail. Allow time to linger. Slow down. Savor the alpine country and its subtleties before snows descend and our hiking boots have to hibernate for the winter. Ponder the vine maple and its many shades of autumn colors. Look at the carpets of



# Autumn Hikes

Photo by Arlo Smith

**Washington's alpine and Western larches display some of the world's most fabulous fall colors. Late September and early October are prime viewing.**

huckleberry, its fruits withered and its leaves as shockingly red as the sockeye salmon returning to creeks to spawn. Take time to notice the changes in the landscape.

I've wondered what evolutionary function these brilliant leaves perform for trees. I suppose it's just coincidence, and the loss of chlorophyll. I have a theory, though, that the true

**Andrew  
Engelson &  
Susan  
Elderkin**



Photo by Cindy Clark

**Larches on the Carne Mountain High Route. Remember to pack all the ten essentials when you hike in autumn.**

evolutionary function of fall colors is in humans' *reaction* to them. We as humans are deeply affected and moved by fall colors because they're a signal. Fall colors speak to us, and the message is something like, "This is an urgent time if you're an omnivore." A time to gather, to store up food before snows blanket all. A time to make plans, to get your fill and retreat to the lowlands before hunger sets in. A time to get ready.

Below, you'll find some suggestions for experiencing the wonders of fall in the Cascades. Remember that weather can be more fickle than summer when you're out hiking in autumn. As always, pack those ten essentials, including plenty of warm clothes and rain gear. Remember that the sun sets earlier, so allow enough time to get back to the trailhead before nightfall at 6 p.m. And remember that on national forest lands, hunting season is at its peak. Wear bright clothing, hike with a friend, or make noise to alert your presence to hunters.

But most of all, enjoy nature's palette of vivid colors. Bring the camera along or a notebook. Enjoy the high country's last burst of energy before the gates of snow close shut until next year.

### **Enchantments via Snow Lake**

**Mileage:** 20 miles round trip

**Elevation gain:** 5,400 feet

**Map:** Green Trails 209S The Enchantments

Many hikers dream about a trek to the Enchantment Lakes, only to be deterred by the permit system or the thought of crowds at the lakes. October, however, offers respite from both—as well as an awesome display from the electric larches in the lower basin. Permits are only needed until October 15 for the Enchantments, and oftentimes can be obtained easily at the ranger station before then. If you decide to go, do note that it is a long and difficult hike, the stretch from Snow Lake up to Lake Vivienne can be quite icy (take traction devices) and it definitely snows in these parts this time of year. But if you hit the weather right—wow!

### **Harts Pass to Windy Pass**

**Mileage:** 7 miles round trip

**Elevation:** 1,300 feet gain and loss

**Maps:** Green Trails 50 Washington Pass, 18 Pasayten Peak

If you want to experience the loveliness of the larch trees with the least amount of effort, head up the long, winding and sometimes harrowing road to Harts Pass. Your car will have done the work for you—larches can even be enjoyed at the trailhead! But why stop there? This hike north along the PCT is one of the easiest and most picturesque places in the North Cascades. It starts high, stays high and offers expansive views of peaks and meadows. Make sure to press on to Windy Pass for its larch display!

## Ingalls Lake

**Mileage:** 9 miles round trip

**Elevation gain:** 2,600 feet

**Map:** Green Trails 209 Mount Stuart

This hike has always seemed the true classic hike in the Alpine Lakes Wilderness (and one of the first I ever hiked there). The well-graded trail leads to a classic icy-blue tarn nestled beneath a magnificent view of the highest peak in the Alpine Lakes, Mount Stuart. Alpine larch can be found in abundance, tucked amid the glacier-polished slabs of granite.

## Lake Valhalla

**Mileage:** 11 miles round trip

**Elevation Gain:** 1,100 feet, 400 feet out

**Map:** Green Trails 144 Benchmark

Looking for a hike ablaze with fall color? Try Lake Valhalla. You can reach the lake from the Smith Brook Trail or from Stevens Pass on the PCT. The Smith Brook route is shorter but less scenic than the PCT route. If you hike via the PCT (stats above), you will walk through meadows of fiery red huckleberry and elderberry. And at the lake you can't miss the dazzling vine maples. While you are feasting your eyes on the foliage, don't forget to look up and take in the other views.

## Larch Lake

**Mileage:** 23 miles round trip from Chiwaukum Creek trailhead, about 11 miles round trip from Scottish Lakes High Camp

**Elevation gain:** 4,175 feet

**Map:** Green Trails 177 Chiwaukum Mountains, 178 Leavenworth

One of the loveliest stands of larches line the shores of Larch Lake in the Chiwaukum Mountains. Whether or not this hike can be done in a day depends on where you start. If you're lucky enough to have booked a room at the Scottish Lakes High Camp (an old, rustic retreat tucked into an inholding with the Wenatchee National Forest) you'll have the luxury of doing this magnificent hike in a day. Otherwise, it's best done as a two- or three-day backpacking trip. To find out if the larches are at their peak, call High Camp at (509) 763-3044.

## Heather Pass/Maple Pass

**Mileage:** 7.2 miles loop

**Elevation Gain:** 2,000 feet

**Map:** Green Trails 49 Mount Logan, 50 Washington Pass

It's a great hike during the summer and a fabulous hike in the fall! The whole hike is a showcase of fall color but the highlight is the larch display between Heather and Maple Passes. Do the loop counter-clockwise or just head up to Heather Pass and return. You'll be glad you went!

## Perry Creek

**Mileage:** 8 miles round trip

**Elevation gain:** 3,200 feet

**Map:** Green Trails 111 Sloan Peak

Check out this trail in early October for a fabulous fall display of turning vine maple, ash, and willow, among others. The trail starts in old-growth forest, then at 2 miles reaches a falls and a nice rest spot. It climbs steeply after that into high meadows and views of fall foliage. The trail eventually turns into a more difficult scramble to the summit of Mount Forgotten. Don't try for the summit in icy conditions or foul weather.

## Granite Mountain

**Mileage:** 8 miles round trip

**Elevation gain:** 3,800 feet

**Map:** Green Trails 207 Snoqualmie Pass

A popular lookout summit hike in the I-90 corridor east of Seattle, Granite Mountain is probably best known for its views of Mount Rainier and surrounding peaks. But its hillsides of abundant huckleberries turn vibrant red and orange in late September and early October. The trail gains nearly 4,000 feet, so go prepared and watch the weather carefully. ♦

**The Enchantments area of the Alpine Lakes Wilderness is a reliable place to find the golden needles of larches.**

Photo by Dave Schiefelbein

