

# On Trail

## Northwest Explorer »



# Into the Pasayten

A backpacking trip into the little-explored central Pasayten Wilderness

In my twenty years as a *Washington Trails* reader I don't recall ever seeing a story about hiking the central Pasayten Wilderness. Having done long backpack trips on both the western and eastern fringes of the Pasayten, I'd always wondered about that big unknown country in the middle. I knew large portions of it had been burned over by forest fires in the past decade but hoped there were areas that were spared and worthy of a visit.

And so, in August 2008, my brother Keith, dog Pebbles, and I carefully planned a 6-day loop trip that took us from Billy Goat trailhead north to the Canadian border and back. We

found this area of the Pasayten to be incredibly open, vast, easy to travel, stunningly beautiful, full of panoramic views, and lonesome. We experienced a mix of sun, rain, snow, booming thunder and lightning along the way. While somewhat comparable to Horseshoe Basin in the eastern Pasayten, I found that I prefer this area even more; it's almost Alaska-like in its appearance and openness.

Our loop took us north on Billy Goat Trail over Billy Goat Pass, where it becomes Trail 502. We followed 502, with side detours described below, about 18 miles north to Peeve Pass where we did a counterclockwise loop on

**The author and his dog Pebbles hike west of Sand Ridge in the Pasayten Wilderness. Miles of open country and solitude await backpackers here.**

Photo by Keith Konigsmark

## Ken Konigsmark

Ken is a WTA advisory board member from Issaquah.



**Hiking a side trail to Corral Lake. High, open meadows give the landscape an austere, tundra-like appearance.**

Photo by Ken Konigsmark

Trail 533 and Trail 529 to Ramon Lakes and Park Pass and then Trail 506 back to Peeve Pass. On our return trip, we went cross country over Sand Ridge near peak 7567 to intersect the dotted line trail that cuts through Whistler Basin and Whistler Pass and then reconnected to Trail 502 for the return trip to the car. Another option is a loop back via the Ashnola River Trail 500 to Trail 514 over Diamond Pass, but this would have taken us down into a deep, burned-over river valley that required a steep climb back up to trail 502.

It was, as expected, very hot when we started up the Billy Goat Trail and, as we further expected from our review of maps beforehand, the trail climbed relentlessly for the first 2.7 miles to reach Billy Goat Pass. We were fully loosened up and covered with sweat by the time we reached the pass. After a welcome downhill walk we noticed a decent campsite about a mile after crossing the pass and other possible campsites in the mile-long, open notch of rocky Three Fools Pass, where a small spring offered water. We kept going to the crossing of Diamond Creek then descended into a basin where, in about a mile, we found an ideal campsite at the 8-mile point near a bridge over Larch Creek, near the junction with a side trail that connects to Trail 451A. Here we found a grassy, flat area, with a fire ring where we could enjoy the view, the stream and the stars. A log hung out over the stream and we sat there as we enjoyed happy hour and dinner in the setting sun along with the peaceful sounds of the wilds.

After a restful first night we were anxious to head north to more open country. The trail was relatively easy all the way to Larch Pass, winding through a mix of small larch and conifers,

rocky areas, and open meadows—very easy backpacking country. It was about four miles to Larch Pass—the sight of which caused our jaws to drop in awe at the scenery before us. The forest quickly gave way to vast, lush, open meadows, with a stunning view from the pass across McCall Gulch (nice campsites here) to Ashnola Mountain and narrow Whistler Pass. We rested at the pass while taking pictures and enjoying the view, then continued on another mile into the meadows to eat lunch in the bowl of McCall Gulch. From here, the trail winds uphill to a windy 7,500-foot pass where a large snowfield still covered the ground.

We dropped packs here at the signpost marking the trail to Corral Lake so that we could climb the ridge about a mile to the overlook above the lake. Wow, what a view! Corral Lake would, by itself, make a nice destination for a shorter trip or for an overnight stay. We took pictures and enjoyed the surroundings but then headed back to pick up our packs and continue northward. The 3.7-mile stretch from the 7,500-foot pass to Peeve Pass is wilderness at its best—open meadow country, rushing streams, snowfields and high ridge views. We enjoyed a leisurely walk through this magical world.

There were no campsites or water at Peeve Pass so we opted to head east on trail 533, intending to camp in the meadow country above. Sure enough, there were several campsites within a half mile that appeared to get little use. We opted for one that had some tree cover (which we were later thankful for), a nice fire ring, and open, panoramic views. The grassy slopes above the camp to the north were easily walkable and offered endless roaming options. We set up camp then explored a bit further

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along the trail to the east where we found an abandoned mine surrounded by discarded chunks of quartz. The wind began to pick up and clouds blew in as we walked back. By the time dinner was ready, rain began to sprinkle down. We retreated to the tent for the night but later were bombarded by bomb-like thunder blasts and nearby lightning strikes.

Upon waking, we found that temperatures had dropped dramatically and that flurries of snow were now falling all around us, in August no less! This was our day to do a loop around Sheep Mountain and, regardless of weather, we were determined to do it. Now wearing long pants and jackets, we headed eastward through the high meadow country of trail 533 until it began a steep descent through forest to a junction at Martina Creek with trail 529. There was a campsite at this junction that masked the connection of trail 529 so we missed the turnoff and instead kept heading downhill on 533 until reaching a large bridge and stream crossing. Recognizing our mistake we headed back uphill and found an obscure path on the opposite side of the campsite that was the route we needed. If looking for this trail junction remember that it is concealed by a campsite.

The faint trail climbed steadily uphill along Martina Creek until reaching rocky slopes where the trail turned north and wound its way over rolling ridges and through flower-filled meadows. We paused under trees as rain showers passed overhead. From here we could begin to see the distinctive clear-cut line that marks the US-Canadian border as well as the severely logged-over areas on the Canadian side where, sadly, no similar wilderness protection exists.

We eventually reached Ramon Lakes, pretty gems backed by a sheer rock face, and did a cross-country loop around them before climbing gently up to Park Pass. Here again the views are wide open and stunning and well worth the journey. It would have been easy to walk through the meadows to the Canadian border but we continued south on Trail 506 back towards our camp. This section of trail, too, is relatively easy and scenic, a pleasure to walk without difficulty. We'd hiked about 10 miles on that day's loop and it made for a perfect day in the mountains. Not content with that however, I opted to climb through the meadows behind camp to the ridge crest overlooking Sheep Lake. Views were gorgeous from this vantage point, not only looking down into the lake basin but across the entire central and eastern Pasayten.

We packed up on our fourth day to begin our journey back. After a short stretch to Peeve Pass, we climbed about another mile south on Trail 502 to a promontory on Sand Ridge where it's fairly obvious that one could keep climbing up and over the ridge instead of following the trail as it contours along the eastern face. The

entire ridge is open grassland, easily walkable but a bit steep as it drops off on its west face to where you reach the dotted line trail through Whistler Basin. We had no trouble maneuvering cross-country up and over the ridge to intersect the trail where we then continued southward into the basin.

Once again we were in awe of the beauty; Whistler Basin spread before us like a broad, green felt tabletop with rocky Ashnola Mountain looming over it to the west. We found a large, flat rock in the upper basin to eat lunch on, take pictures, and enjoy the view. After our break we had a fairly steep climb up to Whistler Pass which is a strange looking, narrow, slot-like gap in the mountain. From here we took an unmarked trail across McCall Gulch, through a lovely campsite, to reconnect to Trail 502. We backtracked to Larch Pass, where there is a faint but noticeable trail just to the south of the pass that veers off uphill to the southwest. We followed this trail to find a nice campsite in an open forest about a half mile off the trail.

After another restful night we continued southward on trail 502, passing the campsite we enjoyed on our first night at Larch Creek, crossing over Three Fools Pass and stopping to relax on our Thermo-rests under a warm sun, and continuing to the campsite we'd seen on our way in about a mile to the north of Billy Goat Pass. There is a large, flat, open area next to an avalanche debris field just below the north face of Billy Goat Mountain, a perfect spot for our final night. Little did we know that the deer love this spot too, to the point that they continuously walked into and through our camp oblivious to both us and Pebbles, who was most anxious to chase them but was kept restrained. After washing up, we relaxed on flat rocks in the sun for our final afternoon and evening, a perfect ending for our last full day.

Our final morning was, as always, greeted with a mix of regret and excitement to be heading back into civilization. We lingered over breakfast on a sunny rock, then packed up and climbed back up to Billy Goat Pass for the final 2.7-mile downhill trip to the car, an easy ending that allowed us to get back on the road toward home by 11:00 a.m.

In summary, we found this trip to be relatively easy compared to others in terms of steep slopes/elevation gain and overall ease of walking. There are portions of the route that pass through plain, eastern-side type forest, particularly on the segment between the trailhead and Larch Pass. But upon reaching the pass, the landscape quickly opened up to spectacularly scenic meadow country that offers easy roaming and big views. We saw very few people during our trip, even in the middle of August. If you desire a moderate backpack route offering lakes, meadows, views and solitude this is a good choice. ♦

## Hike Details

### Billy Goat Pass-Peeve Pass

**Total mileage:**  
47 miles

**Map:** Green Trails  
19 Billy Goat Mt.

**To get there:** To reach the Billy Goat trailhead, drive to Winthrop and on the western side of the bridge at the west end of town turn north on West Chewack River Road that, in 9.5 miles, becomes FS 51. Turn left on FS 5130 (Eight Mile Creek Rd) and follow this well maintained road 16.5 miles to the trailhead. A horse trailhead is reached first but after some very steep, narrow switchbacks up the hillside for about a mile, a separate hiker trailhead is reached that saves a lot of elevation gain.