



# On Trail

## Northwest Explorer » Confessions of an Alpine Junkie

High on Wiley Ridge in the Northern Picket Range

**I**suffer from a long-term fascination with wild places. Those untamed, uncultivated, infrequently visited pockets of wilderness suck me in just like the corner tavern does for the town drunk. I can't help myself. Inebriates can keep their no ice double shots of whiskey. Mountains are my drug. I photograph them. I climb them. I need to be close to them. As much as possible.

I am an alpine addict. I imagine a lot of us are.

For me, there is no substitute for experiencing mountains up close, in person, at their source. My ailment has forced me to rummage around all over the empty alpine spaces of the western U.S., western Canada and up into Alaska. I'm not sure what I'm looking for in all those places. I imagine I'll know once I find it. Until then, I'm content to keep looking. Last summer, I was looking about in North Cascades National Park. To be specific, one small corner of North Cascades National Park: the Northern Picket Range.

As national parks go, North Cascades National Park is big, but not heavily visited. As subsection mountain ranges go, the Pickets are compact, less than 7 miles long and, in that small space, there are nearly 30 peaks ranging from 7,000 to 8,300 feet in elevation. That kind of bang for the buck fuels an addict like me. I get withdrawal shakes just thinking about it.

Few people and lots of peaks make the Pickets a mountain junkie's paradise. While there are numerous ways to access the range, none of them are easy. All of them require off-trail travel and navigation. Add in jagged ridges, huge glaciers, deep valleys, steep ascents, steeper descents, thick bushwhacking, bridgeless river crossings, old-growth forests, high meadows, and you can see why unwell people want, or need, to go there.

Not surprisingly, the iconic climber Fred Beckey was an early explorer of the Picket Range. In Tim Egan's quintessential Northwest read, *The Good Rain*, you'll hear Beckey say, "Loveliness is paid for in the currency of suffer-

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text & photos by  
**Dave Schiefelbein**

Dave is a wilderness and outdoor recreation photographer based in Seattle.



### Hiking toward Mt. Challenger

“Grand plans of numerous summits and great distances of travel are the ambitious dreams of sick people like me.”

ing.” Fred is clearly sicker than the rest of us, but I empathize with his pain.

On a drizzly and overcast morning last August I, along with three equally ill people, boarded Ross Lake’s water taxi pointed toward the Big Beaver Trail. Yes, one can hike to that trailhead, but the boat ride cuts off 7 miles of walking. The currency of dollars slightly delays the currency of suffering. Our seven-day trip would offer plenty of time to suffer.

The well-maintained Big Beaver Trail eases hikers into the physical pain of a Pickets trip. It is 14 miles of gradual uphill hiking to Beaver Pass, our destination for our first camp, and the loveliness begins early. We passed through stands of centuries-old cedar and fir, some of the best old-growth forest I’ve ever seen.

The morning of our second day marked the true beginning of our time in the Pickets proper and the start of several days of trail-less travel. Beaver Pass is fully wooded with no views

of the “right” way to reach the Pickets. When traveling in the mountains, views are nice to have, but in this case all one has to do is pull out a compass, point west and head off the trail into the woods and uphill. We were looking to gain Wiley Ridge. Off-trail travel is what it is: ups and downs, through dry brush or wet brush, over downed trees, frequently uphill, often grabbing at roots or rocks to pull oneself up. Even after one breaks out of the trees and is fortunate enough to have unrestricted views of what lies ahead, the way is often less than certain. Backtracking from a cliff too steep to ascend or descend and looking for a better way is not uncommon. When traveling in country where there are no trails, I can hear Daniel Boone saying, “I wasn’t lost. I just didn’t know where I was for a while.”

Traveling off trail always takes longer than you think it’s going to take. I know that. And I relearn it every trip. Grand plans of numerous summits and great distances of travel are the ambitious dreams of sick people like me. The



**A week in the Northern Pickets offers a chance to travel at every pace. From top to bottom, here we are admiring old growth on the Big Beaver Trail, crossing the bergschrund on Mount Challenger, and taking a break to read and enjoy sunset from our camp beneath Mount Challenger.**



ability to rework the plan while on the trip is a good talent to possess.

Wiley Ridge in clearing weather was a magnificent place to be. The views of the saw-toothed Picket Peaks only get better with each step. By late afternoon after a steep descent on loose scree we stopped and made camp next to Wiley Lake, still frozen over long into summer.

The following morning, day three, we continued up Wiley Ridge where we got our first unrestricted views of Mount Challenger and the grand Challenger Glacier, the focal point of our expedition. We made our way down off the ridge to a rocky outcrop on the edge of the Challenger Glacier and set up another camp in this true alpine paradise.

It was still early and with no other parties in sight, so we decided to do our climb of Mt. Challenger. We made our way up the Challenger Glacier, the largest glacier in this area of the North Cascades.



**This waterfall crossing in Luna Cirque called for steady feet.**



“At Luna Col, we met the only other people we saw and talked to during our week in the Pickets, three climbers headed back to civilization.”

Climbing parties are sometimes turned back high on the mountain by a moat or bergschrund, a gap where the moving glacier ice separates from the stagnant ice above, that is too wide to cross. Our bergschrund was fully melted out with no snow bridge to walk across, but fortunately the overhanging opening we encountered could be crossed with a long uphill step while on belay. The last obstacle to navigate on Mount Challenger is a short, but technical rock climb in the 5.5 to 5.7 range on the final summit tower. We all managed to get up this awkward stretch of rock and onto the tiny summit of Challenger. Pleased with our early success, we relished the 360-degree views of the Pickets and beyond to all the mountains of the North Cascades. It's one of those highs that a mountain addict wishes could last forever. Our descent back to camp was uneventful. We leapt easily over the open gap in the ice, even though it was larger after melting all this sunny hot day.

A thick fog moved in late in the day, but the next morning saw it lift quite quickly. We were tired and had planned to move camp, but we decided instead to stay one more night in our scenic spot.

We couldn't, however, sit around all day. Oh no, we needed another up-close mountain fix. Whatcom Peak, just a couple of miles away across the Challenger Glacier, seemed like a great choice, so off we went. Leaving the glacier, we crossed aptly-named Perfect Pass, a small green jewel set in between grey rocky

summits and white glaciers. The tarns and unending views here would make it an ideal place to camp. From Perfect Pass, steep snow and an airy traverse on a knife-edge ridge led up to Whatcom's summit where we ate lunch and looked off to the north at more wonderful peaks across the border in Canada. Back at camp by the afternoon we had plenty of time to cool off and clean up in the streams that flowed over our rocky outcrop from the melting glacier. That evening we spent time with maps identifying the surrounding peaks or just reading while enjoying a clear alpine sunset.

The following morning—our fifth already?—we set out on what became a difficult day of travel, starting with a long descent into Luna Cirque followed by an almost equally long ascent out of it. Travel on snow, steep and undulating side-hill traverses, a swiftly-flowing waterfall crossing where a slip meant bouncing down wet rock to certain death, steep loose talus, and boulder-hopping all added to the day's excitement. Luna Cirque itself is lovely and remote. The views up to Mt. Fury's steep north face impressed us, as did the rockfall that frequently launches off that face. We passed the beautiful Luna Lake and continued climbing up steep ridges to Luna Col by early evening. En route, we were treated to several private fly-overs by the Blue Angels, a day after their Seafair show in Seattle.

At Luna Col, we met the only other people we saw and talked to during our week in the Pickets, three climbers headed back to civiliza-

tion. The evening was stunning and moody as a storm moved through right at sunset.

Bright sunshine returned again by morning, and we had an easy recovery day. Our fix this day was the ascent of Luna Peak, a steep uphill walk followed by an airy and exposed ridge traverse to gain the tiny true summit. Unrestricted views of the Southern Pickets and Mount Fury from the summit were wonderful.

Our plan for the following day was to ascend Mount Fury from our camp at Luna Col. But, as I mentioned earlier, plans can change, and the best way to deal with change is to just roll with it. In the middle of the night, I was awakened by a distant but distinct low rumbling sound. Getting out of the tent in the dark it was easy to see what was happening: a lightning and thunderstorm was rapidly advancing in the direction of camp. The lighting flashed and the thunder grew louder with each successive crack. I quickly moved as many of our metal objects (ice axes, crampons, etc.) as I could find by headlamp away from our tent. I started setting up my camera in an attempt to photograph the advancing storm, but it arrived very quickly and I found myself back in the tent with my

into its own again as I realized I was experiencing another unique alpine moment. Wind and rain pounded for the next hour, but what was really remarkable and memorable was the deafening thunder and the close lightning strikes, the latter of which would light up the inside of the tent momentarily like soccer-field floodlights.

By morning, the storm was gone. Some clouds remained, but our alpine start and therefore our climb were lost. A quick weather report garnered from our handheld ham radio alerted us to more storms arriving later in the day. According to our schedule, we would have departed the following morning. Rather than tempt fate two nights in a row from our high camp, however, we decided to descend a day early and make our way back toward the Big Beaver Trail. We packed up and began the steep and tedious descent down the valley of Access Creek. Access Creek, frequently referred to as "No Access Creek" by those who've climbed it, was not without challenges: steep terrain, stream crossings, brush, and more brush the lower one descends. At the valley bottom, Access Creek flows into Big Beaver Creek, a small river that is too deep and flows



tent mate getting ready to ride it out. We found out the next morning that our climbing partners camped uphill from us had prepared similarly. There isn't much else a person can do in the backcountry when camped high at night and about to be hit by a strong electrical storm. It's too late to descend to lower, safer ground. What happens at that point is left up to fate.

A strange calmness overcame me during that storm. Once one makes the decision to rely on fate or chance or destiny or God, take your pick, one can return to actually almost enjoying the danger at hand. My sickness was kicking

too fast to safely cross by wading. But cross it one must, so we needed to find a downed tree or logjam.

Sometimes an easy crossing exists. Sometimes it does not. For one or two or maybe more hours, we searched for a safe place to cross, thoroughly shredding ourselves on thick devil's club while we busted our way along the banks. We finally settled on bouncing across two young downed trees out to a small sandbar where another blowdown led the rest of the way across the creek. That second tree was too narrow to balance across upright, when

**Left: Luna Cirque**

**Right: A storm rolling in right at sunset, as viewed from Luna Col**



**Top: Climbing Mount Fury will have to wait until next time.**

**Bottom: Crossing the Big Beaver on a fallen log**

a fall into the rapid flow with a heavy pack could have been deadly. Instead, we scooted our way across on our butts, an exhausting chore at best, and a bit humiliating for someone like me who wasn't very good at it. Eventually we all made it across and then commenced to start looking for the real trail again. Ultimately, we found that, too, which was good because everyone tires of brush thrashing after a while. Several more miles of hiking as darkness descended brought us to Luna Camp, an established backcountry campsite on the Big Beaver Trail. We ate in the dark and fell exhausted into our tents. Awakened overnight by the sound of distant thunder from high in the Pickets, we

didn't second-guess our decision to hike out a day early.

On our final morning, we hiked the last 10 miles down the Big Beaver Trail to the boat dock. We hiked hopefully—hoping to arrive before the water taxi, hoping the boat would actually arrive, hoping that the ranger we had met at Luna Camp really had radioed in the call for that taxi when he reached a point high enough to have radio contact. This time all went as we had hoped and planned, and soon enough we found ourselves boating back down the lake.

And that was it. Suddenly a week had passed and we were on our way home to Seattle. Before we had even stopped for a beer and dinner on the way home, before I had washed off a week's worth of dirt, before I gained back the 10 pounds I had just lost, before the devil's club cuts on my legs and arms had healed, before my sunburned skin had peeled—before any of that I was already thinking about when my next trip to the Pickets would be. The thought then occurred to me, how sick was I? What was it about the wild places that pull me so hard? Author Gretel Ehrlich might have the answer when she suggests that the search for wilderness is really just the search for wilderness within ourselves. *The wilderness within*. It makes so much sense. Explaining our searches far and wide, rationalizing our aching muscles, figuring out the need that makes us keep going back. It's as much about what's inside of us as it is about the place we visit.

### Special Considerations

1) Any trip to the Pickets requires off-trail travel and navigation on multi-day excursions. Probably only really "sick" people or those with reasonable experience should try the trip.

2) The Pickets lie within North Cascades National Park. Specific backcountry rules and registration policies apply. Check out the regulations with the Park Service.

3) Thanks to the Internet, a multitude of trip reports exist on line for Pickets travel. While those are helpful, they are, like anything found online, susceptible to error. Be prepared to make your own decisions. Fred Beckey's *Cascade Alpine Guide, Rainy Pass to Fraser River* is also extremely helpful (and like any climbing guide also subject to the occasional error).

4) Things can happen while on long trips. Plans can change due to weather, fatigue or route-finding problems. It's a good idea to have back-up plans and escape routes in mind.

--- Dave Schiefelbein