

On Trail

Northwest Explorer »



Exploring Winter's Palette

A snowshoe sojourn to Mount Baker's Artist Point

Here in the ragged Northwest, we are both blessed and cursed.

We are fortunate to have some of the most dramatic mountains in the world within easy reach. The peaks are sharp against the sky, wild fangs of rock and ice. The relentless weather has had its way with them, and they are shaped and chiseled by it into these spectacular landscapes. This is the blessing.

Of course the same weather reduces the snow-free hiking season to a pitifully short span of months, in between the much-anticipated summer melting, and the first eager flurries of autumn. This all-too-brief season is far too short to satisfy the high country itch. This is the curse.

For those of us who love these mountains, this means only one thing: get out the snowshoes.

I am frequently amazed by the legions of summer hikers who relegate their hiking boots to the closet when the white stuff starts to fly. They are missing a great opportunity to explore the mountain landscapes of the North Cascades under truly magical conditions. With the right gear and an adventurous spirit, the mountains are at their best when snow covered—the sun sparkling on pristine white slopes, skies filled with stars, the chance to experience true solitude and peace in the

Border Peaks from Artist Point. Photo by John D'Onofrio.

John D'Onofrio

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Avalanches

Before any trip on snow, you need to check the avalanche report, in addition to checking the weather forecast.

Here are a few local resources you can turn to for more information about avalanches and safe travel on snow in the Northwest.

Friends of the Northwest Weather and Avalanche Center

www.avalanchenw.org

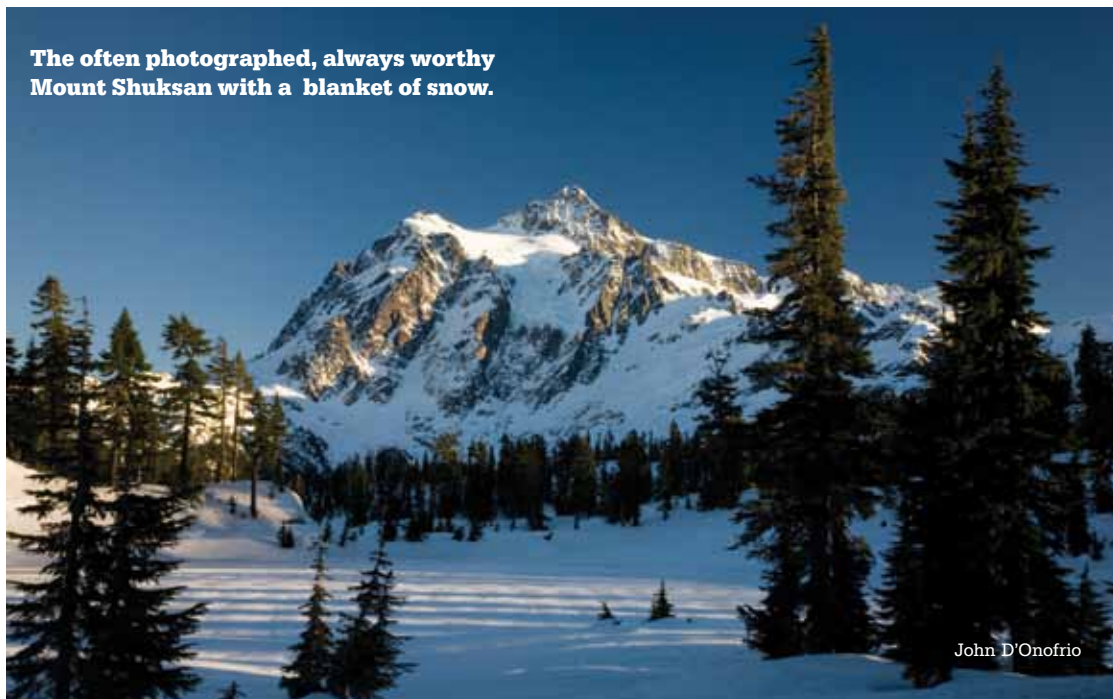
The Mountaineers
www.mountaineers.org

Northwest Weather and Avalanche Center
www.nwac.us

Washington Alpine Club
www.wacweb.org

Northwest Explorer articles describe backpacking trips in the Northwest and beyond. Want to write about your trip? E-mail editor@wta.org.

The often photographed, always worthy Mount Shuksan with a blanket of snow.



John D'Onofrio

empty backcountry.

Although avalanche hazards restrict access in many areas of the North Cascades in the depths of winter, there are plenty of glorious destinations to explore in your snowshoes, ranging from casual afternoon strolls to multiday adventures. One of the very best easily-attained locations is found on a high ridge between Mount Baker and Mount Shuksan, officially known as Kulshan Ridge but widely referred to as Artist Point.

My wife, Susan and I had been planning an overnight visit to Artist Point for several weeks, hoping for good weather, low avalanche danger and fresh snow. Today we have all three: the weather forecast is promising, avalanche danger is low and a light snowfall has deposited soft powder on the slopes. Perfect conditions for an evening spent amongst the Mountain Gods.

Artist Point's proximity to the Mount Baker Highway (kept clear in winter to facilitate access to the Mount Baker Ski Area) and wildly scenic setting make it an ideal location for a winter sojourn, either for a satisfying day trip or—even better—a spectacular overnigher. Greeting the winter dawn from Kulshan Ridge has become an annual tradition for me, and I've seen the crystal-clear morning sun sparkle on chorus lines of peaks and also hunkered amongst gnarled trees in wind-whipped blizzards.

The route is straightforward and easy—about 3 miles and 1,100 feet from parking lot to para-

dise. We drive the Mount Baker Highway to the upper lodge at the Mount Baker Ski area, park in the lot and head south towards Table Mountain up the ski runs.

We shoulder our packs and start up through the busy ski area beneath cobalt blue skies. The journey that will eventually take us to the stillness and silence of the heart of winter begins, perversely enough, in the Mardi Gras atmosphere of the ski area, and we slowly climb through the hustle and bustle. Skiers and boarders whistle past us every few seconds. We are salmon, swimming upstream against the current of Gore-Tex, fleece and iPods.

The route steepens as we climb to the boundary of the ski area. A sign warns us that we're on our own now, which is the way we like it. The way to Artist Point generally avoids avalanche slopes, although fatal avalanches have occurred beneath Huntoon Point (the high point on the ridge) in the past. The trick is to head straight up the steep slope above Austin Pass rather than following the route of the summer road around a switchback. And of course to be somewhere else when the avalanche danger is high. Like your hot tub.

So up we go, leaving the noise and frenetic activity of the ski area behind us. We ascend to the wonderland of Austin Pass with its million-dollar view of Shuksan rearing up into the sky above the Swift Creek Valley. A good place to shrug off the pack, eat some cashews and contemplate our good fortune.

Onward and upward! The going is easier

here, on a well-established and well-compacted trail through picturesque snow-plastered trees and past rock faces displaying complex curtains of ice. We come to the aforementioned last big switchback below Artist Point and veer off the road, heading straight up the steep hill to avoid the potential avalanche slope below Huntoon Point. It's a stiff but short climb, and before long we find ourselves atop the slender ridge at the ever so aptly named Artist Point. Here is the marquee view of the magnificent North Cascades. Close at hand, Shuksan's snow-plastered face rises like a vision of alpine grandeur. Beyond it, the great Border Peaks crowd the northern horizon. But the undisputed lord of this high country wonderland is Mount Baker, its mammoth ice cone filling the southwestern sky.

The thing to do now is to maneuver the elegant bumps and grinds of the ridge upwards in search of a suitable place to spend the evening. We follow the well-stomped trail between precipitous drops on both sides, past isolated stands of lonely trees. We stop and drop our voluminous packs at the base of the final upward thrust of Huntoon Point. A few gnarled trees offer some (scant) shelter, should the wind come up.

With my snowshoes I stomp down a rectangle of snow on the reasonably flat ridge crest, and we pitch the tent so that we'll have a view of Shuksan in the morning. Wielding our trusty avalanche shovels we carve ourselves a dinette set—table and chairs—in the snow. We shovel some snow into the pot to melt on the stove for drinking water. The sun drops low in the western sky and aside from the hissing of the stove, a profound silence settles over the high country. We have the ridge to ourselves.

As the sun makes its exit below the horizon, the face of Shuksan is illuminated with rosy alpenglow. To the north the Border Peaks are silhouetted against the darkening sky. We eat a fine dinner beneath a sky bristling with stars and linger over cups of hot tea. The air is totally still. We find ourselves whispering.

For those of us who love the sanctuary of the mountains, a winter's night is the stuff that dreams are made of. Solitude, silence, a sky so clear that the Milky Way seems in danger of spilling over. The hushed white world seems so remote from the busy lives we lead down in the lowlands.

Dinner eaten, we relax on our snow loungers, exchanging stories and watching the stars. In our numerous layers of polypro, fleece and Gore-Tex, we're warm and comfortable. Life is very good indeed here on Kulshan Ridge. ♦



Pausing on the ascent to Artist Point to enjoy the winter spectacle. Photo by John D'Onofrio.

“ We are salmon, swimming upstream against the current of Gore-Tex, fleece and iPods. ”



Capturing patterns in the snow, Kulshan Ridge in winter. Photo by John D'Onofrio.

More Destinations Near Mount Baker

Hannegan Road – Trailhead elevation: 2,000 feet. Located 13.1 miles east of Glacier and 0.5 mile before the Salmon Ridge Cross-Country Ski Area, the Hannegan Road climbs safely for 3.5 miles, gaining 1,100 feet. This easy, accessible trail offers great views of the Nooksack River and Mount Shuksan. The first mile is an easy grade, then the road steepens for the last two miles. Beyond this point, significant avalanche hazards exist and travel is not recommended.

Twin Lakes Road – Trailhead elevation: 2,000 feet. Located 12.7 miles east of Glacier at the Shuksan Maintenance Shed, the Twin Lakes Road is 7 miles long with elevation gain up to 3,000 feet. Park along the side of the road (not in the maintenance yard). A steep uphill climb to a magnificent area, the route ends three miles before Twin Lakes, where an extremely dangerous avalanche area is encountered. The road is closed to snowmobiles.

Glacier Creek Road – Trailhead elevation: 1,000 feet. Located 0.7 mile east of the Glacier Public Service Center just inside the forest boundary, the Glacier Creek Road is 8.5 miles long (measured from the Thompson Creek Bridge) and gains 3,000 feet. Park along the road at snow line. One avalanche path crosses the road and runs occasionally. Although it is popular with snowmobilers, this route provides access to a variety of beautiful locales, including the Heliotrope Ridge Trail which is off-limits to machines. Visit midweek or at the beginning or end of the season.

Wells Creek Road – Trailhead elevation: 1,800 feet. Located 7.1 miles east of Glacier at the Nooksack Falls turnoff, the Wells Creek Road is 12 miles long, gaining up to 2,800 feet. Park on the highway or at the falls (a de rigueur side trip). The road crosses a frequent avalanche area 3 miles in. Closed to vehicles and snowmobiles at Nooksack Falls from November 1 to July 1, this road offers midwinter solitude and wildlife watching. Snow can be spotty due to the low elevation, but when the snowline is sufficiently low, the scenery and camping are great.

Deadhorse Road – Trailhead elevation: 1,000 feet. Located at the beginning of the Glacier Creek Road (#39), the Deadhorse Road climbs for 14 miles, gaining 3,000 feet. Park along the side of the road at snow line. A fairly level route along the Nooksack River leads into a long gradual uphill climb to the Skyline Divide at 13 miles. Skyline Divide (best done in early season, when you can drive much of the road) offers wide-open bowls and grand views. The lower sections of Deadhorse can offer great snowshoeing and skiing along the river but adequate snow pack at this elevation has been rare in recent years.

White Salmon Road – Trailhead elevation: 3,000 feet. Located at a switchback on the Mount Baker Highway, 18 miles east of Glacier. Park in a small turnout on the outside of a highway switchback. A relatively short outing, the route meanders for about 2.5 miles with an elevation loss of 300 to 600 feet. Here, the snow comes early and stays late. After a mile, enjoy gorgeous views of Shuksan and the Upper Nooksack Valley.

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ADVENTURES, TREKS & TOURS OF THE PACIFIC NORTHWEST



*Family in Town?
Corporate Event?
Winter Activity?
Meet New Friends?*

Celebrate Winter!

*Scheduled departures year round, from
Wine Tours to Snowshoe Adventures -
we have your Winter Escape Plan!*

ESCAPIST = CURIOUS. ADVENTUROUS. RESPONSIBLE.

Stay Warm, Stay Dry

The key to successful winter travel is, of course, staying warm. The way to stay warm is to stay dry.

Think of your winter wardrobe as consisting of two separate components: clothing to get you to camp and clothing to keep you warm once you reach camp. Beginners all too often make the mistake of arriving at their destination sweat-dampened and chilled without suitable alternate layers. It is essential that you have a bone-dry bottom layer to put on upon arrival. Polypro is great for banishing the chill, especially when layered with fleece. An **outer waterproof and wind-resistant shell** (jacket and pants) is mandatory and a **down jacket** beneath the shell will be much appreciated.

You'll want a **balACLava** (better than a hat, it keeps your neck and face warm) and gloves. Thin **liner gloves** are useful when it comes time to manipulate the stove, and insulated, waterproof outer gloves are necessary when the temperature drops. You'll want to have both in your pack. With the right clothing, you'll be able to enjoy both the journey *and* the destination on your winter sojourn.

Another important consideration is your stove. Canister-type stoves don't do well in freezing temperatures; you'll want a **liquid gas stove**. The stove is critical because drinking water is acquired by melting snow. A small piece of old **Ensolite pad** works well as a stove base and will prevent undue listing. Make sure that you bring enough fuel. Melting snow is a time- and fuel-intensive business.

Shelter options abound in the winter. Snow caves and igloos are possibilities, although I prefer to sleep in a tent. It's laborious and time consuming to dig caves or build igloos, time that can be better spent exploring or enjoying the scenery. Also by leveling out a tent platform with your avalanche shovel, you can situate your tent on a slope that would be impossible in the summer.

The tent itself should be a reliable **four-season model**, strong enough to withstand wind and accumulated snow and with adequate ventilation to ensure an ample supply of fresh air should snow bury the vestibule overnight. Your sleeping bag should be rated at a temperature well below what you expect to encounter—the ratings tend to be a little fanciful. You can augment your bag's warmth by sleeping in multiple layers of polypro and fleece. A good ground cloth or footprint is important to keep the floor of the tent dry. And you'll want to bring your boots inside at night to avoid having them frozen in the morning. Ditto for your water.

With good weather, the right gear and a little practice, you'll find that an evening spent in the winter alpine offers unique delights and lasting memories. ♦

—John D'Onofrio



Snowshoers exploring Guye Peak. Photo by Dave Schiefelbein.



Photo by Kirk Kirkconnell

Eat Well

Blustery Day Double Potato Chowder

Pack in first sandwich bag:

- 1 cup dried instant hash browns
- 1/4 cup diced dried onions
- 4 tsp. low-sodium vegetable or beef bouillon
- 1 tsp. dried parsley
- 1/4 tsp. diced dried garlic
- 1/4 tsp. dried thyme
- 1/4 tsp. ground black pepper

Pack in second sandwich bag:

- 1/2 cup instant mashed potato flakes
- 1/4 cup shelf-stable Parmesan cheese
- 1/2 cup fried onions

Also take:

- 1 Tbsp. or 1 packet olive oil

Directions:

Add the vegetable/seasoning bag and 4 cups water to your pot. Cover and set aside for fifteen minutes for the vegetables to rehydrate. Add the oil, stir well and bring to a boil. Lower the flame to low, cover and simmer on a low boil for five minutes. Turn off the stove and add the contents of cheese/potato bag to the pot. Stir well, taste for seasoning and add more pepper and salt as desired. Serves two.

—Recipe by Sarah Kirkconnell, author of *Trail Food Made Simple*.