

Gray Getaways

It was early September, and the plan was to show off our spectacular Northwest alpine scenery to a visiting hiker friend. Driving to the trailhead, wipers worked furiously to clear rain drowning the windshield. Viscous gray skies obscured any sort of views.

"Hey, do you want to stop for coffee?" I ask. "No," replies my passenger.

Fifteen minutes later, I mention, "There's a coffee place near the trailhead ..."

"No, I'm okay," my passenger responds.

Ten minutes later, my passenger has finally caught on and says, "You know, I really could use a coffee."

We sip our coffee. We wait it out. After twenty minutes in the coffee shop, my guest optimistically declares, "It's getting brighter," and we head for the trailhead.

Donning rain gear, I slip a pack cover over my pack and hand my friend a garbage bag to cover hers. (Northwest natives always have extra garbage bags in our packs.) Our trail that day meanders between forest cover and open talus. The forest cover is appreciated more than usual. Instead of naming surrounding peaks, I point out items of interest at ground level—bright green deer ferns, huckleberries glistening in the rain, and long slimy banana slugs.

In the Pacific Northwest, it can be 50 degrees and raining any day of the year. What's a passionate hiker to do?

Pack your rain gear, carry an extra layer (or two) of fleece or wool, and drive to the trailhead anyway. Sure, you can check the weather forecast and poke your nose outside the door at home, but my governing rule is to always drive to the trailhead.

Many hikes that would have been cancelled due to the weather forecast, or rain at home, have turned into days with reasonably decent weather. Other days ... well, one gets to test that expensive rain gear and stretch

those legs. With the right gear and an open mind, a day spent walking in the rain can be quite satisfying.

The perks? No crowds. Nothing like wet skies to keep all but the heartiest hikers at home. Diffuse lighting on rainy days creates a mysterious, intriguing ambience. Wildflowers seem brighter standing out against the gray backdrop. No complaints are heard of dusty trails. Even bugs are less prevalent.

How does one make hiking in rain tolerable? You've probably heard the saying, "There's no bad weather, only inadequate gear." Invest in good rain gear. Breathable fabric lessens sweating inside the garment. Armpit zippers allow venting. Some hikers opt for rain ponchos or umbrellas. A hat with a wide brim keeps rain from running down the back of the neck. On cool days, a neck gaiter (such as the type made by Buffwear) retains heat that can be lost from a bare neck. Light synthetic gloves keep wet hands warm.

An extra insulating layer and a sit pad make lunchtime more enjoyable. Store these inside garbage bags or lightweight nylon dry-bags in your pack. A heavyweight gallon-size plastic storage bag works also. A pack cover over all this adds one more layer of water resistance.

For extra comfort, pack some chemical hand warmer packets and a small Thermos of hot beverage. Hypothermia can be a concern when you are out in wet weather, so avoid cotton clothing. Put the rain gear on before you get wet. Wear waterproof boots with good lug soles as wet trails can be slippery. Hiking poles are useful. Put your map in a waterproof map case or a plastic food storage bag.

For rainy hikes, pick trails suitable for the weather, avoiding exposed ridge walks or hikes involving scrambling over slick rocks. Think old-growth forests.



Pam Roy

For WTA's Hike-a-Thon, Pam hiked 150 miles in one month, and only got rained on one time, but that was August.

One of my favorite wet-weather hikes is the Thunder Creek Trail in the North Cascades. You can follow the mostly flat trail in quiet forest for a few miles or continue on to the bridge at McAllister Camp for a full day. An optional side trip to Fourth of July Pass offers a chance get in some elevation gain.

Another trail that stays deep in the trees is the Carter Falls Trail in Mount Rainier National Park. Starting across from the Cougar Rock Campground makes this an easy short walk. Start at Longmire for a longer hike to Carter Falls. A truly hearty Northwest hiker, oblivious to the rain, can continue on the Wonderland Trail to Paradise for an enjoyable one-way trek of 6.9 miles.

Another trek that I have taken only in the rain is the hike to Goat Lake, a trail offering creeks, some old-growth forest, waterfalls, a pretty subalpine lake, and, reportedly, views of Cadet Peak. Of course, there's Wallace Falls, a reliably rewarding hike year-round. The trail is under forest cover most of the way and passes many waterfalls, two of which are quite breathtaking.

The most important ingredient for enjoying hiking in the rain? Attitude! One friend reminds me that it is never raining as hard at the trailhead as it seems when the rain is hitting the car windshield on the freeway. For me, the hardest part of rainy-day hiking is getting out of the car and putting on rain gear. Once I start walking, however, things get better.

Have I regretted any rainy day hikes? I can honestly say that I have not. Each sloppy, cloud-filled day has had its own gifts—good conversations, clear air, some exercise and an appreciation of another type of beauty that wilderness offers.

Fall colors enhanced by rain in Paradise. Photo by Pam Roy.



Rainy Day Hikes

Carter Falls

Mount Rainier National Park

Trailhead: Longmire

Distance: 7.2 miles round-trip. Elevation gain: 900 feet.

Goat Lake

Mount Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest

Trailhead: off the Mountain Loop Highway

Distance 10.4 miles round trip. Elevation gain: 1,400 feet.

Thunder Creek Trail

North Cascades National Park

Trailhead: Colonial Creek Campground, off North Cascades Highway, 10 miles east of Newhalem

To Fourth of July Pass

Distance: 10.2 round trip. Elevation gain: 2,600 feet.

Wallace Falls

Wallace Falls State Park

Trailhead: near Gold Bar off Highway 2

Distance: 5.5 miles round trip. Elevation gain: 1,200 feet.