

Hiking Blind

Helping a friend without sight tackle Cascade summits



No doubt some of you might think this article refers to being caught in a whiteout on the Muir snowfield (well, in a way it is, but more about that later). While that would certainly be an adventure, this story is about hiking with my co-worker Bruce, who lost his sight in his early twenties, more than twenty years ago. In the process of getting to know Bruce—who used to get outdoors a fair amount before his accident—I told him I would take him hiking some time. I figured it would take most of a day and we'd do something such as Annette Lake, a relatively easy 7-mile hike round trip. When he told me that he had already done Annette long ago and that it was a “wimpy” hike, I knew that I would have my hands full.

In addition to numerous weekends outdoors, once daylight-saving time rolls around, a group of buddies does a once-a-week evening training hike. We typically start out with Tiger Mountain in April and from mid-May through mid-July we tackle Old Si, Mailbox, Bandera, and the like. These all gain 3,000 to 4,000 feet in the course of about 4 miles. In order to do them after work, we have to move quickly and constantly so we return to our cars before dark. It just so happens that for our first hike in the summer of 2005, Bruce decided on the group trip up McClellan Butte. Considering the effort you have to expend to get up and down McClellan in about four hours, this seemed impossible. But I didn't know how to say no, so I figured we'd go until a designated turn-around time and call it good.

Once on the trail, I was in front with sev-

eral long straps attached to my pack. These acted as a tether for Bruce, who was two steps behind me, holding onto the straps. I called out obstacles as we went. Charlie was behind Bruce and tried to guide him from the rear. Since I had to pay close attention to all the obstacles in front, I couldn't spend much time looking back to Bruce. Otherwise I would be the one falling down. At the outset, Bruce seemed to yank on the straps all the time, and it felt as if I was dragging him along. My frustration mounted quickly. There was about a two-step delay between when I called out an obstacle and when Bruce encountered it. Until Bruce got the hang of this delay, he was often left out of synch. But with some practice he developed a lighter touch and I felt no tugging at all—a welcome relief.

Of course, I soon learned that what I considered a “reasonable” trail was more like a mine field to someone who can't see. Being Bruce's eyes really opened my eyes to a different reality. I did most of the talking, and it went something like this:

Tree root right, up about 8 inches.

Angle left across a transverse downed log—up and across about a foot.

Smooth sailing for about 10 feet.

The trail narrows to about 2 feet. You'll feel brush on your right side.

Duck left from an overhang.

Up left about 10 inches onto a slabby rock.

Step right across a creek to the tree root that's up 8 inches.

Now we're in a lattice of tree roots that are

The author (second from left) helped his friend Bruce (left) who is blind, hike and scramble to the summits of peaks throughout the Cascades. Here, they're at the summit of Eagle Peak. Ron assists by calling out obstructions and trail features along the way.

Photo by Charlie Soncrant

Ron Fleck

Ron Fleck is a WTA member from Renton.



Above: The author (second from left) with Bruce (second from right) inside the fire lookout at the summit of Granite Mountain.

Photo by Cheryl Drevecky

Below: Bruce hikes close behind Ron on the trail to Eagle Peak Saddle.

Photo by Charlie Soncrant



mostly parallel to the path.

Now switchback hard left, the trail drops off steeply left.

Etc.

All of the above could happen within just 30 feet of trail. Imagine doing 5 miles and 3,600 feet of elevation gain in this fashion to the top of McClellan Butte. It's just not going to happen after work. I hadn't realized how difficult a trail McClellan was. Then there were the difficulties that I could not easily sense behind me. On switchbacks Bruce had a tendency to swing wide, much like a car tending to drift in a curve, and he would occasionally slide off

and down the trail, pulling me with him. I soon learned to call out the edge of the trail, remind him how wide it was, and remind him that there was still a dropoff and how steep it was, on whatever was the downhill side. On this first outing, we went for about two hours until our turn-around time of 7 p.m., and by that time we had gained approximately 2,000 feet. Quite remarkable, I thought, all things considered. Even though Bruce was completely drenched in sweat, he wanted to keep going. I told him that we wanted to get back before dark. His immediate rejoinder was, "Ron, I'm not afraid of the dark," with just a slight twinge of sarcasm. I told him that I wasn't either (we always have headlamps along), but if I couldn't see well, then

neither of us was getting down very easily and it would quickly get dangerous. So around we turned.

If I thought the ascent was tough, the descent was even tougher. Imagine you're walking along a sidewalk, not paying attention, and you step off a curb, dropping 4 inches or so to the street below. Most of us stumble, perhaps almost sprain an ankle, and maybe drop whatever we're holding. Now imagine you have hundreds of such drop-offs, you don't know where the bottom is, and you are literally groping around with your foot for every nebulous and potentially unstable toe-hold. Such is the descent for Bruce. In order to prevent him from injuring himself or taking me down with him, whenever there was a step of more than a couple of inches, I came to a complete stop and let Bruce ease himself down the step. Then we could proceed until the next one, usually just a few steps farther. It was very slow going. The descent took as long as, if not longer than, the ascent. Imagine how much energy you expend when every step is uncertain. I'd be willing to bet that he burns double the calories I do.

Over the next couple of months we frequented West Tiger 3, since it has relatively few obstacles. We varied the route to keep it interesting. We hiked the cable line several times, but only when dry. After hiking the same trail more than once, Bruce knew and remembered where the obstacles were sooner than I saw them, and the need to call them out diminished greatly. His mental map seemed to be just as accurate as my visual one. Near the end of the summer, we got up the cable line in just under an hour—pretty amazing to gain 2,000 feet on what is essentially a rugged climber's trail with someone who cannot see.

For that summer's high point, I figured that we could go up Granite Mountain as an all-day event. It is more of a challenge than Tiger and has almost twice the elevation gain. There was the added incentive of tea and fresh-baked cookies provided by my friend Cheryl (affectionately known as the "cookie lady"), who staffs the lookout on various weekends. Several of the Wednesday evening hikers came along. Suffice it to say, Granite has many more obstacles than I had recalled from my numerous hikes there. I took for granted how easy it was for me to navigate the knee-high steps, the various boulders blocking three-quarters of the trail, and other normal trail hindrances. About two-thirds of the way up, Bruce banged his head on a sloping branch that angled across the trail. I had been watching my feet, and by extension his, but my ball cap obscured this branch from my field of view. Bruce was two steps behind me and one step right, and that slight diversion was enough to cause a bonk on the head. Had he been a mere 6 inches to the left, he would have passed underneath it, unscathed. Man, was I surprised and apologetic when he stopped suddenly and

I realized that I had overlooked what would normally be an easy thing to avoid.

It took us four hours to get to the lookout. Although pretty beat and sopping with sweat, Bruce was grinning from ear-to-ear at his accomplishment. Cookies and tea never tasted better. Our descent took an equal amount of time and that's where we realized Bruce needed to approach all the steep drop-offs sideways. In that fashion he could still have part of his body leaning uphill and could do an easier braking and weight transfer than facing directly forward. This was also a safety move to keep all of us upright. Still, he must have stumbled or slid off the trail a dozen times. But every time he did, he would get mad at himself for the mistake, always vowing to do better. After the 4-hour descent he was completely spent, but enthralled.

The following summer we did more of the same Wednesday evening hikes. My hiking and climbing buddies now "obstacle rated" various trails. One especially tricky obstacle: creek crossings. Think of how you have to cross a creek and step on just the right rock, at the right angle, and quickly move to the next. Otherwise you're getting your feet wet.

Our adventure for the summer of 2006 was Eagle Peak in the Tatoosh Range. On a May climb there, Charlie noticed how benign the lower trail was (at least before he hit tons of snow). We attempted it in August when it was completely dry. The trail stops at Eagle Saddle, but John, Charlie and I had climbed it several times and knew that the 25 feet or so of low fifth-class rock was very "clean," meaning that there was essentially no loose rock to knock onto people below. The approach went quickly. On belay at the base of the rock, Bruce joked that he climbed by the "grope" method. In a flash he was up and over the lip. Actually, the traverse on the ridge to the true summit seemed more difficult than the rock climb. Bruce thoroughly enjoyed his quick rappel, wishing the face was much longer.

In the winter of 2007, we tried snowshoeing up the logging road from the Gold Creek Sno-Park. I knew that it was safe from avalanches, and the road allowed a wide berth for him. For Bruce, this turned out to be quite a liberating experience. He did not have to be tethered to anyone and used ski poles just as we did. He navigated by sound and stayed close to us as we chugged up the road. Even with the shoes, we fell in as many postholes as he did, and having sight often proved to be little advantage for us. Heck, he may have had a better feel for the snow than we did, even considering that we have done hundreds of snow climbs; we just naturally take more for granted. The snow was a great equalizer and gave him a freedom from obstacles that a summer trail would not allow.

With this in mind, we set a climb to Camp

Muir as our goal for the summer of 2007. Even though there are quite a number of large, high, rocky steps on the trail up to Pebble Creek, we figured that once on the snowfield Bruce would be free again, could do something more challenging with the altitude gain, and could do more of what might be considered a "climb." The opportunity presented itself in late August with the BoeAlps summer barbecue at Muir. The idea was to take a hibachi, burgers, dogs, chips and all the trimmings to Muir and have a cookout at 10,000 feet. Not only was this an opportunity for Bruce to see how he would do at altitude, but also the novelty of a barbecue at Muir made it all the more intriguing.

As luck would have it, we started out at Paradise in the fog and mist, partially blind ourselves. But we decided that we'd at least go to Pan Point and then reevaluate. Fortunately, it slowly cleared, and we kept pushing higher. The steep and closely-spaced, chiseled stone steps on the Skyline Trail proved challenging but not insurmountable. Of course, there is a creek crossing at Pebble Creek even in August, and the narrowest crossing seemed to have the rocks that teetered the most. This



Above: Crossing Pebble Creek on the way to Camp Muir on Mount Rainier.

Photo by Bernie Knoll

Bruce plugs ahead at about 8,500 feet on the Muir Snowfield, Mount Rainier. Note that sunglasses are optional.

Photo by Bernie Knoll



was a group effort to get Bruce across and his borrowed climbing boots got only slightly wet. Given that it was late August, the snow was fairly firm and had mild sun cups the rest of the way. Even with guidance on the shallow, beaten path, it proved very difficult for Bruce to stay on the track in the snow. His feet slipped enough as it was, but he had to expend extra energy when he strayed out of the track onto the firmer, more slippery snow. And getting to Muir is all about conserving energy. Within ten minutes we realized he would need crampons after all. If he was slipping constantly during the next 2,500 feet to Muir, he'd be completely shot and it would be tough to get back down.



Bruce and hiking companions enjoy a barbecue at Camp Muir, elevation 10,188 feet. With patience, determination and a little help from his friends, Bruce has conquered hikes that are challenging to anyone. This year, he's considering an ascent of Mount Adams.

Photo by Bernie Knoll

The crampons provided more than enough traction to conserve his energy and keep us climbing.

Once above 8,000 feet, the skies cleared spasmodically and the wind increased. Because of the 20 mph wind and a warm hat over his ears, Bruce could no longer hear us, even though we were just 6 to 8 feet in front of him. To compensate, one of us stayed two steps in front, and one in back, to minimize his drifting as much as possible. Of course, Bruce has no concept of the undulating snow field and how Muir tempts you with its "apparent" proximity. It seems so close, but the times and distances are deceptive. Bruce did not have to suffer from such deceptions. Fortunately, he had no issues with the thin air and we arrived at Muir about five hours

after leaving the cars. Even though I've been to Muir at least 20 times, helping Bruce get there with the added bonus of smelling those burgers grilling when we arrived—was the high point of my summer.

We were hoping Bruce could plunge-step his way down, but the firm snow, combined with the sun cups, proved a bit too daunting for Bruce to tackle unaided. Further, the natural fall line kept him drifting errantly off towards the Nisqually Glacier. Even with crampons, he had to take hold of my arm all the way down so he could have a decent reference point. Heck, all of us slid and fell a couple of times under those conditions. The descent was not as easy as I had hoped, but we still got down the snow in half the time it took to ascend it. As is typical for Bruce, the descent on the trail portion equaled the ascent time. Back at the parking lot, everyone was tremendously impressed with Bruce's courage and fortitude. In fact, several people asked if he would like to try climbing the mountain and if so, they wanted to be along to assist. That is probably more than we could reasonably accomplish, but it got me thinking that Mount Adams' south side, being glacier-free, might be a good goal for 2008. All in all, it was a fabulous day.

In describing these experiences to others, the question I often get is, "What does Bruce get out of this?" Given that he can't see, he can't appreciate the mountains as we sighted people can. Still, Bruce did grow up here and has a good knowledge of the area. Thus he has a sense of where he is and what is around him. I also describe our vistas and do my limited best to give him a sense of place and the beauty around us. Certainly, getting out on a trail and into the mountains under most any conditions is better than just walking on a treadmill in your garage. Further, Bruce has a more acute sense for the smells and sounds that encompass him than we do and no doubt appreciates that more than we do. He has described the snowshoe outings as ones of "empowerment" and words fail him to describe the pure joy of "simply navigating."

As for me—this experience has literally opened my eyes to many of the things I take for granted. I doubt that I'll ever consider any trail "easy" again. I now tend to think in obstacle counts and whether a trail is "Bruce-friendly." It has also made me further appreciate the tremendous and unselfish efforts that so many have made—especially WTA volunteers—to not only create trails but also keep them in such wonderful shape. So the next time you venture outdoors, think of how you would do if you could not see the trail. Think of all the effort that goes into making the trails as good as they are, and what all of us can do to make them even more accessible for someone such as Bruce. ♦